Health Activist/ Health Trainer Programme – Update for Health Scrutiny Panel

1. Background

Health Activists (HAs) were developed by Slough PCT in 2004 in response to the need to address the public health needs of a diverse population. The concept behind Health Activists is to recruit from local communities and train them to educate, empower and support individuals and their communities to change lifestyles. In addition HAs engage with communities that are seldom heard on a wider range of issues such as promoting the ‘Choose Well’ campaign. The idea is that HAs should reflect the diversity of local communities and approach this work in a user friendly and culturally appropriate manner. Health Activists mainly work in group sessions but also support other events as detailed later in this paper. HAs report that they transfer a lot of their knowledge outside of these formal groups and on a day to day basis interact with individuals that they come into contact with providing them with information and support on a range of topics. Their strength lies in their knowledge of and access to local communities and they often engage with sections of the PCT population that do not generally come into contact with services.

An Open College Network Course was developed in conjunction with Thames Valley University with a basic entry level 1 course. Level 2 courses were developed in other areas such as community needs assessment, understanding the human body in health, substance misuse and smoking cessation. The majority of HAs were recruited from and work in Slough although they are now supporting projects across Berkshire East. HAs are employed as bank staff which means that they do not have a fixed number of hours that they are contracted to work.

The programme has been successful in achieving its broad aims although, as with all preventative work, it is difficult to quantify the long term impact on the health of the local population.

The programme has proved to be an excellent development opportunity for individuals within the community. Current and past Health Activists report that they have greatly gained in confidence. Several have moved into permanent paid work or further education which they would not otherwise have done. As a result of this and some HAs moving on for family or health reasons the number available for work has reduced. Initially there were 61 trained activists on the bank but only 15 remain. Thames Valley University the previous training provider is no longer providing the course.
Examples of work undertaken by Health Activists over the past six months are: Privacy and Dignity campaign, Healthy Walks, Breast screening initiative, Older Peoples information day.

Other bodies have commissioned work from the HAs e.g. the DAAT which has paid for HAs to train on the drugs and alcohol level 2 course and now is paying for sessions to support their work. This is a small income stream.

2. Taking the Programme forward

The programme was without a manager for an extended period due to recruitment difficulties and we now have an interim manager in place to build up proposals for the programme for the future. These proposals will take into account the PCT role as a commissioner of services, the public sector financial environment and the PCT Strategic Plan.

Nationally there is a drive to develop Health Trainers who are trained at level 3 to provide primarily 1:1 support for individuals in changing their lifestyles.

Over the past year the PCT has worked closely with Slough Borough Council, Thames Valley University & Dynamic Training Ltd in an initiative-funded by the Department of Work and Pensions to develop a role new to the NHS, the Work Health Trainer.

This initiative is part of a national programme comprising 40 “Testbeds” in 10 localities across the country. The service will be delivered by NHS Health Trainers already qualified both to build relationships in communities and to communicate and enable behaviour change to improve health and wellbeing.

As Work Health Trainers they will acquire additional competence in:

- formal, accredited training in the delivery of Information/Advice & Guidance (IAG)
- linking & targeting health/wellbeing support and advice to improving their employability and confidence in resuming work/employment
- providing concrete and managed referrals to services that will both give dedicated advice on the realistic work choices available to them
- support and facilitation in the return to work/meaningful activity

The delivery process will consist of:

- a programme of six 1-1 meetings in a secure and discreet setting
- the development of a linked health improvement/work action plans
- WHO validated before and after well-being assessments
- readying the service user at their own pace for a return to meaningful activity/work through empowering them to make the changes necessary to effect a return with confidence
Work Health trainers are likely to receive referrals through the following routes:

- Self Referral
- Health/Employment Community Workers and the Work Health Trainer Ambassador
- GPs
- Next step
- JobCentreplus including their Disability/Lone Parent Advisers and Occupational Psychologists
- Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) including their Personal Wellbeing Practitioners and Employment Service Co-ordinators
- Shaw Trust (in the Thames Valley) in their capacity as designated partner to JobCentreplus supporting ESA claimants

There are realistic prospects of continuation funding being obtained for this initiative-an application to the Fitness for Work Challenge Fund has been made jointly with TVU and the Slough Business Community Partnership. Also we are entering discussions to extend the pilot with SBC.

The Migrant Impact Resource Centre initiative led by Slough Borough Council will use Health activists to make contacts with newly arrived migrants,

3. Conclusion

The Health Activist programme is being reviewed in the context of the new PCT Strategic Plan, the PCT role as a commissioner of services and the public sector financial environment. At the same time options for future models to deliver the Work Health Trainer project will be explored.

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