

Liverpool Citizens Advice on Prescription

OVERVIEW OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Liverpool Citizens Advice on Prescription was established in 2015, though the practice of supporting Liverpool's primary healthcare patients with welfare advice started in the 1990s.

The service provides free welfare advice at all GP practices and mental health settings around the city, while also accepting referrals from community partner services such as pharmacies, the fire service, and various charities. With the introduction of Social Prescribing in primary care, Advice on Prescription now also provides further wellbeing support to clients, offering a holistic service.

How was the partnership set up?

Since 2012, the service has been funded by the Liverpool Clinical Commissioning Group – now known as the Integrated Care Board – and welfare advisors are provided by Citizens Advice Liverpool. Previously, funding was short-term and came from various places.

Advice on Prescription was initially piloted at five GP practices in 2012, and evaluation of the pilot found that those being referred into the service were affected by health inequalities such as low income, comorbidities, and mental health conditions.

Through regular evaluations, it was identified that patients being referred were disproportionately those with mental health issues, and the service expanded to deliver welfare advice at mental health hospitals in 2015. Furthermore, with the introduction of Social Prescribing, the service now provides wellbeing support to patients in secondary care settings; once individuals are supported with basic welfare needs, they are prepared to engage with activities that can further benefit their health.

What have been the key benefits and outcomes?

A report by the University of Liverpool on the service found that 90% of service users had long-term mental or physical health conditions and disabilities. A third of the referrals were also from the most deprived neighbourhoods, and 70% of the clients lived in poverty. Data collected showed that this group benefitted most from the service through improved psychological wellbeing as well as material conditions such as income maximization, housing, and employment.



Over a period of four years, between 2018 and 2022, the service received around 50,000 referrals. The report found that referrals increased by 100% during the pandemic, and have remained 50% above pre-pandemic numbers, suggesting that the service has increased its reach to those impacted by health inequalities. Moreover, the report found that welfare advice supports the healthcare service as well, with 60% of GPs finding a difference in the number of repeat visits from patients who received welfare support.

Clients are predominantly supported with welfare benefits, followed by debt management and housing. There has also been an increase in clients with children who need support with the increasing costs of childcare. Trends between 2018 and 2022 show that the increase in demand for welfare advice reflects the public's increase in need for support with things such as housing and cost of living. In 2018, welfare advice raised £4.2 million of income and helped reschedule or write off £1.8 million of primarily priority debts for the clients. The service also benefited local authorities, with data showing that welfare advice saved them £1.05 million.

Having the advice service provided by a well-known and trusted organization also allows clients to engage with the service; a report by Citizens Advice in 2018 found that 79% of the public were familiar with the service. With the service also being located at GP practices that the clients are familiar with, the service can engage with those most in need to support. Being based at healthcare settings also allows for better working relationships between the welfare advisors and healthcare staff, who can see the impact the service has on their patients.

What lessons have been learned during implementation?

Citizens Advice shares data every month with their commissioners, so they can fully understand the service's activities and see the benefits it is achieving. The investment has clearly achieved significant impacts for individual patients, the local economy and primary care. The data sharing has also led to some valuable research using linked health and advice service data.

Working with community partners is essential for supporting vulnerable individuals, but can often be complicated when receiving referrals from multiple streams. To ensure that partner services can refer clients with more efficiency and ease, Advice on Prescription introduced a web referral platform to create a streamlined referral pathway. Furthermore, to adapt to changes such as Covid restrictions and provide support more efficiently, welfare advisors can also support clients through WhatsApp, finding that 88% of clients contacted virtually did not need further support after getting advice through WhatsApp. However, the service is primarily offered face-to-face at healthcare settings or through telephone consultations.

Any takeaway tips for similar partnerships?

Welfare advice services located in health settings should be easily accessible to health staff and service providers should invest in developing relationships with referrers. Key referrers will act as service champions, spreading word to colleagues. Providers should also aim to offer regular service updates to referrers, including number of referrals and impact with generic case studies. Importantly, the service must be reliable and responsive to the needs of health staff, with short and easy-to-complete referral forms.

References:

Liverpool Citizen's Advice on Prescription Interim Evaluation Report (University of Liverpool, 2023)
Communities and Growth (Citizen's Advice Liverpool, 2019)
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