

Sheffield Mental Health Advice Service

OVERVIEW OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Among the numerous Health Justice Partnerships set up in Sheffield, one of the oldest projects in the city and the country is the Sheffield Mental Health Advice Service. Established as early as 1976 as an independent service before becoming a part of Citizen's Advice Sheffield in 2013, the Partnership provides welfare legal advice at two mental health hospitals for inpatients with severe mental health issues, as well as to those in the community using primary and secondary community mental health services.

How was the partnership set up?

Since its inception the Sheffield Mental Health Service has been funded by the local NHS clinical commissioners, now in the form of the Integrated Care Board. The aim of the service was to provide support to those with severe mental health needs, who are at higher risk of welfare problems while having less accessible resources due to stigma and lack of knowledge and awareness to deal with such problems. A recent report by the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute also finds that those with mental health issues are 3.5x more likely to have problem debt.

The service is provided onsite at the Michael Carlisle Centre and the Longley Centre, where specialist welfare advisors are trained in mental health to support inpatients, including those who have been detained under the mental health act. Set up with the support of healthcare staff, clients are screened by hospital staff for welfare rights needs on admission and referred to welfare advisors as necessary. In the case of ongoing cases when clients have been discharged from the hospital, welfare advisors continue to provide support at other locations, such as the client's home or in step-down accommodation.

What have been the key benefits and outcomes?

One essential feature of the Sheffield Mental Health Advice service has been the mental health training for welfare advisors, which has allowed them to effectively support a group with specific needs. It has also aided in the collaboration between welfare advice and healthcare staff, who can provide the necessary medical advice for clients. Moreover, colocation of both services has allowed a more efficient service for clients and staff.

The service supports around 260 clients per year, who are referred primarily for welfare benefits, debt advice, and housing. With the complexity of cases and training requirements for



advisors, cases take longer to resolve than typical welfare advice cases to ensure that clients are supported throughout their journey. Between 2022 and 2023, 304 clients were supported with 14 actions on average by the advisor for each client. Benefits through material gain included £309,470 of total income maximisation for clients through welfare benefits claims. These have not only been beneficial for the clients, but have also allowed for timely discharge of inpatients, thereby supporting the hospitals and hospital staff.

The service has also learned to adapt to ensure everything continues to run smoothly in spite of Covid restrictions, and was run entirely through telephone and digital appointments initially. Feedback showed that some clients preferred a digital service due to its flexibility, particularly those who were living at home or in supported accommodation and were referred by community and partner services. While it was a cost-effective method, for some it created yet another barrier to accessing support, and the service now offers a hybrid model tailored to clients' needs.

What lessons have been learned during implementation?

The cost-of-living crisis has created new complexities around how much support welfare advisors can give to clients; the increase in energy bills is especially difficult for those with severe mental health issues, who earn less than the general population on average. Even for those who are inpatients, there are likely to be debts accumulated for when they are discharged. For an advice service that requires more time for clients with complex welfare and health needs, the added pressures of the cost-of-living crisis have significantly increased the caseload and the need for more specialist advice services.

Informing and training hospital staff is also essential for ensuring the right clients are being given timely support with welfare rights. Due to the lack of a built-in induction for new staff, those who triage new clients have low awareness of what the welfare advisors can support with, and what requires support from other services. This can also impact the collaboration between both services, which has been crucial for the effectiveness of the service.

Any takeaway tips for similar partnerships?

Clear parameters for the service are key as is clarity of expectations about each partner's role. Close links and individual relationships between staff are important and worth investing in; it increases trust and confidence as well as maintaining the profile of the provision to ensure referrals are made routinely and in a timely manner.

References:

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Money and Mental Health Policy Institute Blog - <https://www.moneyandmentalhealth.org/citizens-advice-cost-of-living-support/>

Centre for Mental Health Report: Welfare advice for people who use mental health services - <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/welfare-advice-people-who-use-mental-health-services>

Money and Mental Health Policy Institute talk

Money and Mental Health Policy Institute Report: Breaking the Cycle – <https://www.moneyandmentalhealth.org/publications/breaking-the-cycle/>