

“Simply brilliant! I am extremely positive about my experience and the help and support I received through the Advice Service”.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since commencing delivery on the 1 July 2014 the Advice Service for Patients of Wandle GPs (the Advice Service) has been positioned as an innovative approach to prescribing CAB advisory support and community referral for patients presenting social needs to their GP, intended to help achieve resource savings for GPs and promote better patient health in the Wandle locality. The pilot project was intended to run for a period of 9 months and has been funded by Wandle Locality CCG under the Investment Budget, with performance management led by Wandsworth CCG.

The Advice Service was developed against a contextual background where comparatively little had altered in the way social support needs of patients was addressed and managed while the time and resource expended by GPs connected to patients' social needs and the effect on their health was increasing. The rationale for the project was rooted in a determination to redirect demand for social support for patients from GPs to appropriate community provision. By supporting patients with social support needs the Advice Service aimed to reduce the number of frequent attenders presenting to Wandle GPs, so achieving resource savings for GPs and providing a gateway to the myriad of community provision and health-ascpected support available.

Service delivery was led by Wandsworth Citizens Advice Bureaux (WCABx) using a directly employed a CAB trained Advice and Community Referral Assistant (ACRA) to lead patient engagement and advisory support activity. The delivery model has succeeded in providing timeliness of advice to patients through a range of channels including telephone support and more intensive appointment based advisory and casework, which is tailored to each patient's particular needs.

A New Offer

Wandsworth CABx helps over 8000 Wandsworth residents a year. The WCABx receive council funding to support local residents in Wandsworth, providing information and signposting guidance on a range of issues such as welfare benefits, debt, housing, employment, immigration and family and personal matters. Recent cuts to WCABx funding coupled with the Government's welfare reforms means that demand for these services far outstrips supply and drop-in advice sessions are heavily over subscribed, with individuals securing a follow-on appointment with an advisor typically having to wait up to a month before being seen. While WCABx also delivers some specialist projects, e.g. providing advice to cancer patients and debt advice to housing association tenants, unless an individual qualifies for this type of support it is not available to them.

The Advice Service offers the key advantages that it is open to any patient referred by their GP and provides individuals easy access to responsive and more in-depth help and advice from the outset.

Use of the Service

A simple patient referral process and eligibility criteria has served to minimise the number of inappropriate referrals to the Advice Service and help encourage GP engagement with the pilot. The Service has supported a total of 147 patients, equivalent to 74% of the original target to support 200 patients with CAB advice as part of a total target to accept 500 referrals overall.

The level of patient referrals has been lower than anticipated by WCABx and the CCG, owing to the comparatively low profile of the Advice Service among Wandle GPs, particularly at the start of the pilot, and limited awareness of GPs about the range of support offered by the Service

through social prescription. Consequently, a structured programme of outreach is being delivered by the ACRA to build better linkages with staff teams at Wandle practices that have had limited or no involvement in the Advice Service so far.

A total of 64% of the 22 target Wandle GP practices had used the Advice Service at the time of the evaluation. Overall, the frequency of patient referral across the complement of GP practices that have engaged with the Advice Service pilot has not been consistent. The long established relationships WCABx has with Brocklebank and St Paul's Cottage practices has helped these surgeries account for 36% and 16% of patient referrals to the Advice Service respectively, and there is a clear opportunity to utilise this success by inviting these practices to act as a conduit to help raise awareness among GPs more widely.

Taking the patterns of GP usage of the Service into account it is recommended that future outreach should be expanded to include the whole of the Wandle locality with a particular focus on those practices that have not engaged with the Service.

Social Prescription

The success of the pilot relies in part on GP awareness of the range of support accessible as part of the full social prescription offer. The extent of GP awareness in this regard has been limited; many patients referred to the Advice Service since July 2014 have tended to present needs for traditional CAB services, such as housing issues, debt advice and benefit and welfare support.

It is recommended that a description and examples of the full range of support services open to patients via social prescription should be embedded as part of wider promotion of the Advice Service to GPs. The Advice Service should also be positioned as the go-to service for social support for Wandle patients in order to realise the aspiration to remove the current demand placed on GPs to navigate the complex community based advice sector in order to help their patients.

Quality of Provision

Satisfaction with the quality of provision from the Advice Service is high: 80% of GPs regarded the quality of the service provided to their patients to be 'excellent' or 'good' and over 90% of patients stated they were 'very happy' or 'happy' with the service, information and advice they received. More than 93% of GPs indicated that they were satisfied with the outcomes delivered for their patients by the Advice Service, which is an important endorsement for the model and delivery by WCABx.

The significantly high overall satisfaction among patients and GPs with the Advice Service indicates that the pilot has been largely successful in meeting the overarching requirements to provide a high quality social prescription service giving Wandle patients access to WCABx help and community referral, as was embedded in the original aims.

Service Impacts

All GPs stated that since working with the Advice Service the resources they expend on patients presenting social support needs had decreased, and several noted the timeliness of care provided to their patients was a key attribute of the pilot. This helps demonstrate the effectiveness of the Advice Service at supporting General Practice teams including an increase in the number of patients being referred to social/community provision, showing a tangible benefit and achievement of the pilot towards the aim to provide a social prescription service that secures resources savings for GPs and helps them navigate the maze of community provision.

This is further emphasised by those GPs that indicated that the number of patients reporting positive impacts from non-medical interventions has increased since they started working with the Advice Service.

The evaluation identified a positive trend among patients of improved wellbeing, particularly mental wellbeing, after using the Advice Service.

The proportion of patients who measured their stress/worry at the highest level before using the Service reduced markedly after receiving support and the level of patients who stated they had no worries or stress increased more than four fold after using the Advice Service.

The result provides an indication of the positive impact being achieved by the pilot towards the original aim to provide social welfare advice and mitigate the negative effects of increasing living costs and rising debt, which have been shown to impact on people's health and wellbeing.

Furthermore, the evaluation also identified a significant proportion of GPs consulted have reported additional positive impacts since working with the Advice Service including:

- 80% considered the Advice Service to be 'excellent' or 'good' in supporting GPs respond to patient in need of legal help or community support
- Several GPs regarded the Service to have had an impact on the levels of frequent attendances to their practice, including reducing anxiety and improving patient mood which was credited with helping to reduce frequent attendances in Primary care

Drawing on the successes of the pilot and maximising the engagement with the full complement of Wandle GP practices is key to positioning the Advice Service as the lead social support vehicle that supplements wider healthcare provision, including primary care, that will be essential to ensure the Service remains relevant to healthcare providers and funders beyond March 2015.