

Improving Mental Health Care for Homeless People in Suffolk

An innovative pilot scheme was created in July 2018 funded by Rough Sleeper Grant money from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government to reduce the number of rough sleepers in Ipswich. Part of this money was used to fund a specialist mental health practitioner to work with individuals who are either rough sleeping or at high risk of becoming homeless. The pilot has shown to have a positive impact on the lives of clients, helping to get people into accommodation and prevent people from losing their accommodation while at the same time having improved mental health.

This client group are known to have multiple and complex needs including to likely have suffered multiple past trauma and abuse, to use substances, have very poor mental and physical health and criminal behaviour often related to their substance use. This client group is well known to struggle to engage with traditional mental health services as well as other health services.

The senior mental health practitioner who was also a non-medical prescriber worked proactively on the streets and integrated with other services including the homeless drop in centre, hostels, night shelter, the police, probation and the health outreach service as well as other mental health teams. The practitioner provided support and treatment in a variety of areas including mental health assessment, medication, talking therapy and assisting clients to access support from a wide range of generic and specialist services to meet their needs, including mental health, physical health, social support, housing etc.

To evaluate the service a research study and a service evaluation was completed. This included questionnaires sent to service users and clinical staff, and a case study on client experience.

Clinical staff interviewed all gave positive feedback.

“Due to the transient nature of this community and the inability for them to attend fixed appointments, having someone in a detached capacity allows people to be seen that would have otherwise slipped through the net.”

“It is my experience that the service users I have worked with who have received this service have engaged better than ever and made the most progress in their substance misuse recovery.”

“The impact of the mental health practitioner has been massive, as many customers have had their condition diagnosed, thus understanding their make up, who they are and what support is required”.

All service user feedback was also positive about the role, one stated;

“When I came to the homeless drop in centre, I was homeless, alcoholic, with very bad mental health problems and ready to die, to kill myself. I had gave up on my

life. The centre made an appointment for me to see the mental health nurse, he was the only one who listened to me, prescribed me medication to take for my depression, anxiety and mood. It saved my life having someone who understood and cared for me, even though I was homeless. For the past 6 months, I have been seeing the mental health nurse every week or two. He is the only reason I have been able to stay sober and keep on my medication, he also got me into counselling for my childhood trauma, which is my main problem. The work he does for us people is amazing and life changing”.

The illustrative case study focussed on the experience of a client who had a long history of rough sleeping, use of heroin and crack, criminal behaviour and severe mental health issues but poor engagement with mental health services. The study documented the major improvements in multiple areas following the specialist mental health practitioner engaging with the client and helping them navigate through the web of agencies and services they required to enable their recovery. Interventions included diagnosing the client with a psychotic illness and accessing appropriate medication, which helped the client to manage his symptoms, enabling him to stop his drug use and therefore criminal behaviour. He went on to move into more permanent accommodation and continues to be housed a year later and has not since been arrested.

The case study and responses from service users and clinicians suggest that this specialist mental health role which is integrated both with mental health services and homelessness services has been very beneficial for the service users, the services supporting them and there is likely to be also increased benefits to the wider community. With improved mental health of the homeless population and increased mental health support for those at high risk of losing their accommodation, it is likely that there is a direct impact on the number of people who are losing accommodation and the number of people who are homeless. Increased mental health support for this client group may also bring additional benefits of decreased substance use, improved physical health, improved engagement with other services, decreased use of emergency services and decreased criminal and antisocial behaviour.

The scheme has been funded by Ipswich Borough Council who have commissioned this dedicated mental health service from Norfolk and Suffolk Foundation Trust. Funding has continued beyond the pilot, and learning from the scheme is being shared locally and nationally.

Links:

<https://www.nsft.nhs.uk/Pages/Ipswich-nurse-invited-to-speak-at-national-conference.aspx>
<https://www.nursingtimes.net/news/community-news/new-nurse-led-mental-health-service-for-rough-sleepers-in-suffolk-20-07-2018/>
<https://www.nsft.nhs.uk/Pages/Dedicated-mental-health-service-for-rough-sleepers-launches.aspx>

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Photo courtesy of Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust www.nsft.nhs.uk