



8 Use social prescribing

External service

Ways to Wellness in Newcastle Gateshead CCG

Ways to Wellness uses social prescribing to provide support to people with long-term health conditions. Non-medical 'link workers' are aligned to GP practices.

The idea

Ways to Wellness is the UK's first pay-by-outcome social prescribing service. During their 7 year contract with Newcastle Gateshead CCG, they will be paid for demonstrating better health and wellbeing outcomes for patients, and a reduction in these people's use of NHS resources.

Social prescribing is the use of non-medical interventions to achieve sustained healthy behaviour change and improved self-care. It is particularly impactful with people with chronic conditions. Up to 55% of GP appointments are with patients with one or more long-term conditions, and long-term conditions make up a high proportion of health and social care budget, particularly in deprived areas where people tend to suffer proportionately more, and earlier in life, from chronic health problems. Social prescribing supplements the support a patient gets from their health care professional, and can significantly improve health outcomes while decreasing dependency on traditional health services. Evidence indeed shows that good levels of social participation can improve the likelihood of recovery by up to 25%.

West Newcastle upon Tyne has some of the most deprived wards in England. Social prescribing had been taking place on a small scale for a number of years, but Ways to Wellness is the first organisation to deliver social prescribing at scale. Fully-operational since 1 July 2015, and supporting up to 3,500 patients at any one time, it aims to significantly improve outcomes for over 11,000 patients with long-term conditions (LTCs) over its first 7 years.

People with COPD, asthma, diabetes type 1 and 2, heart disease, epilepsy, osteoporosis, and any of the above suffering from anxiety or depression can be referred to the service by one of the 17 participating GP practices. A Ways to Wellness Link Worker, trained in behaviour change methods, then works with the person to identify health and wellness goals that are meaningful to them. Typically, this will include a mix of physical activity, healthy eating/cooking, increased social activity, welfare information and positive relationship advice, connecting the person to community and voluntary groups and resources in their area. The shared decision making process and supportive coaching relationship established with the link worker enables patients to be equal partners in managing their health. People are supported to develop sustainable healthy behaviours, and learn to confidently self-manage their conditions to live healthier and more fulfilling lives, while reducing their dependency on traditional health services.

GP practice patients are supported by Link Workers at no cost to the practices. Where possible, GP practices provide space in their practices for the Link Workers to meet patients, which helps with uptake of the service.

Impact

More than 800 patients were referred in the first ten months of the service (since April 2015). Improvements in well-being are measured every six months and early data is showing significant improvement for patients who have been with Ways to Wellness for more than six months.

Typical comments from patients are: "I do believe that knowing the Ways to Wellness team is like winning a lottery ticket in life." "It has helped to focus my mind and gave me belief that things can change." "I felt my Link Worker was on the same wavelength as me and I could trust her to help me." "I now have a totally different outlook." "I feel really proud of myself that I'm getting out and about more." "I feel so much better – happier and healthier."

Implementation tips

Allow time for a new scheme to get up to full utilisation. Clinicians often need repeated reminders and encouragement to remember to start referring patients. This is augmented by hearing from colleagues who have tried it. In this scheme, referrals continued to rise for the first 8 months or so.

This scheme is supported by social impact bond (SIB) funding. This requires a detailed and evidenced-based operational and financial model. In the case of Ways to Wellness, the development spanned four years, with the latter two years being more focused and intensive development. Support through consultants, for example in areas of financial and operational modelling, contract negotiations and procurement and service design, underpinned Ways to Wellness' success in reaching the delivery stage.

Rigorous data collection for outcome payments and analysis is a key characteristic of a service funded by a SIB as well as for outcome-based contracts. This involves overcoming hurdles related to Information Governance, access to NHS-generated data (GP practice and hospital episode statistics) and habits related to less rigorous data collection and reporting (for example, amongst some community and voluntary sector organisations). Ways to Wellness commissioned a bespoke management information system, to be hosted on the NHS N3 Network to overcome these hurdles.

Link(s)

www.waystowellness.org.uk