

The Role of Suffolk Citizens Advice Services in Supporting Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategies

Executive Summary

The Citizens Advice Service in Suffolk has been delivering quality assured advice across Suffolk for more than 50 years. We offer holistic advice services that diagnose the client's social welfare/legal problems and any related legal matters; identify relevant legislation and decide how it applies to a client's particular circumstances, including identifying the implications and consequences of such action and grounds for taking action; providing information on matters relevant to the problem, such as advising on next steps; and identifying dates by which action must be taken in order to secure a client's rights. It includes advocacy and formal representation where appropriate to the client's situation.

The Health and Social Care Act (2012) and the Care Act (2014) placed a number of duties and responsibilities on local authorities and clinical commission groups to reduce inequalities, improve the health of the local population, and to provide or arrange services that improve people's independence and well being. The Care Act (2014) also requires local authorities to develop and implement a plan in relation to information and advice services that is integrated into the local joint health and wellbeing strategies. Early intervention, prevention and effective commissioning to meet identified local needs are common themes across both Acts.

The social determinants of health that give rise to health inequalities include low income, fuel poverty and debt, poor housing conditions and homelessness, (which in turn mean that children living in bad housing are more likely to have mental health problems, suffer long term illnesses, experience slow physical growth and have delayed cognitive development), a complex welfare benefit system that is difficult to access, and insecure or poor quality employment or unemployment.

The primary areas of advice offered by the Citizens Advice Service in Suffolk are debt and financial capability, benefits, housing, employment and relationship/family matters. We have a wealth of experience in tackling disadvantage and social inequalities through the advice that we offer and through prevention, early intervention initiatives.

Last year a total of **21,649** people living in Suffolk received help from the service.¹

The majority of the advice given relates to problems closely associated with social determinants of health. In 2014/15 residents in Suffolk were advised on the following problems by Citizens Advice:

- Benefits & tax credits **7,673** clients
- Debt **4,455** clients
- Employment **3,531** clients
- Housing **3,118** clients

Independent research has shown that timely advice has a positive impact on mental health, reducing and/or preventing primary depression, anxiety and stress; there are specific benefits to physical health such as reducing blood pressure, alleviating Irritable Bowel Syndrome and weight loss; and income gains that result from advice can reduce mortality and morbidity particularly among older and disabled people.

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Research has also shown that co-locating Citizens Advice Services within both primary and secondary health care settings facilitates early intervention thereby preventing the escalation of the problems facing patients and the consequent detrimental impact of these problems on individual's health and wellbeing.

In surveys conducted with GPs,

- 80% of GPs have reported that dealing with patients' non-clinical issues has reduced the time they have to spend on other patients, and that this is increasing;
- Significant reductions in the number of appointments and the number of prescriptions for hypnotic and anxiolytics; and
- that co-location of advice services did not produce a negative impact on other services.

The potential for savings within health budgets are further enhanced by findings in respect of CABx services in health settings. These savings have included:-

- £8,690 per annum in NHS staff time saved (Great. Ormond Street Hospital);
- 5 cases where patient discharge was prevented owing to unsuitable housing were resolved (Great Ormond Street Hospital);
- Reductions in in-patient lengths of stay (national average cost of £330 per patient per day (Sheffield Mental Health CAB);
- Prevention of relapse (approximately 40% for people with schizophrenia at a cost to the NHS of £18,000 per episode – Sheffield Mental Health CAB); and
- Prevention of homelessness which costs the public sector between £24,000 and £30,000 per person per year (Sheffield Mental Health CAB).

Conclusion

The CAB service, which spans the whole of Suffolk, can support Suffolk's Health and Wellbeing Strategies. The service has the expertise and we can demonstrate the value of our services both in terms of the impact on individuals and the significant cost savings we can realise for health and social care. Our impact, and the consequent benefits to individuals and the cost savings to health and social care can be significantly increased.

The research and evidence cited in the paper demonstrates the potential benefits of role that the CABX in Suffolk can play in addressing health inequalities. To optimise these benefits and the consequent savings to health and social care budgets CABx need to be fully embedded within the health arenas on a sustainable basis. The current provision is reliant on short-term project funding, a move to longer term contract funding would enable us extend our services and maximise the impact on communities across Suffolk. We would welcome the opportunity to engage with commissioners to co-design and deliver services which complement the health and social care provision in Suffolk.

Working in partnership with the Health and Wellbeing Board, the local authorities and the clinical commissioning groups we can reduce inequalities, improve the health of the local population, provide services that improve people's independence and well being and assist the statutory bodies to meet their responsibilities under the Health and Care Acts.