

Mental Health Strategy for Scotland: 2011-15

Response from Lead Scotland (Specialists in Linking Education and Disability)

Lead Scotland is a charity that enables disabled adults and carers to access inclusive learning opportunities. At a local level, we do this by providing direct support to learners¹ through flexible person-centred learning opportunities and individualised guidance and support to help them plan their learning journeys. At a national level, we provide information and advice on the full range of post-school learning and training opportunities, as well as influencing and informing policy development.

Our response to this consultation

Lead Scotland has significant experience of supporting people with mental health problems in learning, volunteering and pre-employment support. There is a significant range of research which indicates the positive value of learning and volunteering on mental health and well-being, and our experience of working with learners with mental health problems confirms these findings.

Our response to this consultation therefore specifically focuses on mental health and well-being in relation to learning, volunteering and transition to employment. Consequently, our response primarily refers to the ways in which employers and learning providers can take action to improve support for people with mental health problems, as well as creating a more positive environment to facilitate mental well-being. The suggestions we have put forward are also likely to be relevant for other service providers and partner agencies.

Our response has been directly informed by the views of a range of disabled learners and carers, as well as relevant Lead Scotland staff and volunteers.

General comments

Lead Scotland welcomes the development of a mental health strategy for Scotland, however we would recommend that the focus should be wider than health and social care. Participation in learning and volunteering have been shown to lead to significant benefits upon mental health, including improved confidence, social skills, and general happiness and well-being. Taking part in learning and volunteering can also be rehabilitative for many people with mental health problems, often allowing many to take the first steps back into employment or other opportunities.

We would therefore recommend that the strategy includes a clear focus on education, and incorporates all types of learning including school education, further and higher education, as well as community learning and development and volunteering.

¹ We receive local authority funding to community learning and development services in Aberdeenshire, Dundee, Fife, Highland, North Lanarkshire, Moray and West Lothian.

Case study: positive impact of volunteering on mental health

Susan, who was unemployed at the time, contacted Lead Scotland as she was interested in volunteering with us. The Lead Scotland Learning Coordinator met with Susan, and completed the application and disclosure process. During her application, Susan disclosed that she had experienced mental health issues during her university course, and she was keen to take up a volunteering role to improve her mental health.

After completing training, Susan was matched with a learner, who required support in literacy and computing skills. Susan was also involved in a pilot project to support a group of literacy learners from a local college. These learners had attended groups in the past, but later disengaged due to lack of support.

Susan at all times demonstrated commitment, ingenuity and adaptability in supporting the learner to a positive outcome. At the end of her volunteering project, Susan gained valuable skills, experience and confidence, and went on to gain employment in an advocacy project.

Consultation questions

1. People and communities act to protect and promote their mental health and reduce the likelihood that they will become unwell.

What further action can we take to continue to reduce the stigma of mental illness and ill health and to reduce discrimination?

Many people with mental health problems are reluctant to disclose mental ill-health to potential learning providers or employers due to fear of rejection or discrimination. Many feel that employers/learning providers will take their mental health problems into account during recruitment and admissions, and that they make negative assumptions about the person's abilities and support needs.

Lead Scotland therefore recommends that employers and learning providers (as well as other service providers) are supported and encouraged to improve their disability disclosure procedures as a means of encouraging disclosure of mental ill-health. This should include a clear statement on why this information is being sought, and information on how the employer/learning provider will use this information as a means of putting in place the necessary support and reasonable adjustments required by the individual. Consideration should be given to language and tone to ensure that people with mental health problems do not feel that providing this information will be in any way held against them during recruitment or admissions.

We would also recommend that employers and learning providers have access to appropriate support and training around mental health, to help them avoid discriminatory actions and behaviours as well as providing them with a better understanding of mental health and well-being. Many public sector organisations are already likely to be engaging in work to promote disability equality as part of the UK-wide Public Sector Equality Duty. This is a useful means of helping public authorities take action to ensure that their services, policies and procedures have due regard to the elimination of discrimination, the promotion of equality and the fostering of good relations. Lead Scotland would therefore recommend that further guidance is

produced and disseminated to ensure that mental health is given adequate consideration among the more general concept of disability.

What other actions should we be taking to support promotion of mental wellbeing for individuals and within communities?

It will be important for the Scottish Government and other support agencies to utilise and promote a social model of disability in relation to mental health. Such a model sees the way our society is structured as the barrier(s) for the individual, rather than their individual impairment.

This can be a particularly useful model for supporting those with mental health problems, as it encourages support agencies (as well as society in general) to create an environment which is more conducive to positive mental wellbeing. It also moves the focus away from mental 'ill health' (which primarily includes those with mental health problems) towards mental wellbeing for all (which is concerned with the mental wellbeing of everyone). This approach is likely to reduce any stigma associated with mental health as it does not single out those with mental health problems. Although those with mental health problems will still require tailored support to meet their needs, this approach is a step towards mainstreaming mental health and wellbeing, and reducing stigma and discrimination for those who disclose mental health problems.

3. People have an understanding of their own mental health and if they are not well take appropriate action themselves or by seeking help.

What further action do we need to take to enable people to take actions themselves to maintain and improve their mental health?

Many people are likely to be unaware of the information and support available to people with mental health problems. It is therefore vital to ensure that appropriate and accessible information regarding mental health is widely available to allow people to find out more about their particular mental health problem, and take steps to seek appropriate support.

Many colleges and universities employ specific staff to support learners with mental health difficulties, as well as carrying out work to promote positive mental well-being among their student populations. Given that education providers engage with such large sections of the community, this is an important means of providing information and support to people who may not engage with (or be aware of) mental health services in the health and social care sectors. Lead Scotland would therefore recommend that other public sector organisations consider employing specialist mental health staff to allow them to provide similar services.

7. The role of families and carers as part of a system of care is understood and supported by professional staff.

How do we support families and carers to participate meaningfully in care and treatment?

As well as supporting disabled learners, Lead Scotland also provides tailored learning support for (unpaid) carers of disabled people. As well as tailored learning opportunities, this also includes learning about relevant care or treatment for the

person they are caring for. This is an important means of providing the relevant information (as well as signposting to other sources of information and support) which families and carers need to be able to provide appropriate care and to cope with their caring responsibilities. Lead Scotland would therefore recommend that information on this type of support is widely promoted to families and carers.

It is also important for carers to be able to access peer support as well as finding out about the experiences of other people who care for people with mental health problems. This can be an invaluable means of social support, as well as providing an opportunity to learn from other carers. In 2008, our Aberdeenshire Coordinator set up a group for young carers to share their experience of being a young carer with others, as well as a respite break from their caring responsibilities. The group produced a written report and a DVD which is a very useful resource for carers of all ages. The group received a Youth Achievement Award for their project from the Scottish Youth Parliament. You can read the 'Do I Care?' report on our website at http://www.lead.org.uk/article.asp?art_id=301.

What support do staff need to help them provide information for families and carers to enable them to be involved in their relative's care?

It is important for staff to establish relationships and appropriate protocols with relevant agencies to allow them to share information about the individual's needs (including the needs of the family/carer). This should allow them to obtain the most appropriate information and support for families and carers, as well as eliminating the need for the individual and their family member/carer to provide the same information to various support agencies.

Lead Scotland would also recommend that any information provided to families and carers is produced in a concise and accessible format to take account of young carers and those who may have reading or learning difficulties.

10. Mental health services work well with other services such as learning disability and substance misuse and are integrated in other settings such as prisons, care homes and general medical settings.

What else do you think we should be doing nationally to support NHS boards and their key partners to work together to deliver person-centred care?

Given that learning providers engage with such large proportions of the community, it is vital that mental health services develop closer working relationships with the education sector. In 2009-10, around 11% of the student population in colleges and 7% in universities in Scotland declared a disability. Within this group, around 8% of disabled college students and almost 9% of university students had a mental health problem². Although there are no national statistics on the number of disabled people who take part in community learning opportunities, we know that this is particularly attractive option for people with mental health problems due to the flexible and informal nature of learning.

² Statistics from Scottish Government and Scottish Funding Council

Case study: good practice in partnership working to support people with mental health problems

Between 2009 and 2010, Lead Scotland took part in a collaborative pilot project with NHS Integrated Mental Health in Moray ('Positive Lead'). The aim of the project was to:

- empower individuals with mental health problems to make well informed choices and engage confidently in lifelong learning;
- provide person-centred individualised support and mentoring to gain confidence and core skills;
- combat exclusion and develop socialisation and participation skills.

Over the course of the project, a number of learners with mental health problems met regularly with the Lead Scotland Learning Coordinator to plan their individual learning journey. Lead Scotland also arranged free laptop and printer loans, as well as assistive technology and software for those learners who required it. Learners met regularly with both the Lead Learning Coordinator and Occupational Therapists for ongoing support and guidance.

Participation in the project led to a number of benefits for those who took part, including:

- easier transition to learning;
- one-to-one support and mentoring;
- empowering individuals to make well-informed choices and to engage confidently in learning;
- improved self-confidence, self-esteem and social skills;
- learning new skills and enhancing existing skills;
- engaging with mainstream college courses

One of our learners told us "It gave me a focus, and a sense of worth. I've enjoyed getting back into education and learning something new. I feel like I'm achieving something."

In question 3, we noted that many colleges and universities employ specific staff to support learners with mental health difficulties, as well as carrying out work to promote positive mental well-being among their student populations. Lead Scotland would also recommend that mental health services provide advice, training and appropriate referral mechanisms for staff in colleges, universities and community learning. It may also be useful to develop strategic partnership agreements between mental health services and large learning providers in order to facilitate joint working and sharing of expertise.

What should be our national priorities over the next 4 years to meet the challenge of providing an integrated approach to mental health service delivery?

It will be important to formalise any partnership working arrangements between mental health services and other agencies, as well as promoting good partnership working practice.

In the education sector, the Scottish Government's 'Partnership Matters' guidance has been a useful resource for the various agencies involved in supporting learners

with additional support needs. This guidance has worked well in terms of helping to set up regional partnerships between various partner agencies, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and allowing agencies to share good practice with each other.

Lead Scotland would therefore recommend that similar guidance is developed for those agencies supporting people with mental health problems, and that such guidance should widely promoted and disseminated to all relevant agencies.

14. The legal framework promotes and supports a rights based model in respect of the treatment, care and protection of individuals with mental illness, learning disability and personality disorders.

How do we ensure that staff are supported so that care and treatment is delivered in line with legislative requirements?

It is vital that staff receive the appropriate information and training to help them understand both the individual's rights, as well as the agencies' responsibilities as a service provider. Lead Scotland would also recommend that further consideration is given to the way in which the Equality Act interacts with Scottish legislation regarding mental health. This is a key piece of legislation for people with mental health problems, specifically setting out their rights in relation to reasonable adjustments, as well as detailing the way in which service providers must not discriminate against disabled people.

Lead Scotland
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