

Physical healthcare in adult community mental health teams

“Being invited to participate in conversations about how we approach physical healthcare, what impacts our ability to, and what we can do to improve it, is so reassuring...projects like this evaluation are so needed so the perspectives of staff on the ground can really be fed back in a way that helps us improve things for the future.”

Service evaluation participant who was involved in the project



The problem

Community mental health team staff have a role in identifying and preventing deterioration of physical health problems, by administering routine physical health checks for their patients and appropriately coordinating their healthcare.

However, little is known about how community mental health team staff at South London and Maudsley NHS FT perceive and approach their roles when providing physical healthcare to adults with a serious mental illness (SMI), or the potential barriers and facilitators they may face in everyday practice that can affect patient care. Additionally, we remain largely unaware of how service users and carers accessing community mental health team services experience physical healthcare as part of their journey, and in particular what barriers and facilitators may exist to receiving physical healthcare checks and support routinely.

Our response

This project set out to evaluate the attitudes and experiences of staff, service users and carers based within South London and Maudsley NHS FT's adult community mental health services. The project aimed to identify critical issues faced by staff, as well as areas of good practice, in the following areas.

1. The physical health approach and practice of staff
2. The use of physical health data, systems and tools by staff
3. The physical health knowledge and skills used by staff
4. Staff, service-user, and carer experience when providing or accessing physical healthcare, and related outcomes
5. Perceptions and attitudes of staff, service users, and carers towards the future of physical healthcare within South London and Maudsley NHS FT

We used a service evaluation framework to investigate these areas and consider common barriers and facilitators that impact on clinical practice and patient experience. From this service evaluation, the Trust will be able to use insights to inform local decision-making and improve future routine practice regarding physical healthcare at South London and Maudsley NHS FT.

What we did

The service evaluation was delivered over a 12-month period, which consisted of six main stages:

Stage 1: The team consulted staff within adult community mental health teams to identify key roles that work the most closely with service users with concurrent mental and physical health problems to be involved in the evaluation.

Stage 2: Established an expert by experience working group made up of service users, carers, and adult community mental health team staff to help us design and deliver evaluation activities.

Stage 3: Conducted 23 semi-structured interviews, 8 focus groups and 8 observations with a total of 50 participants. All interviews with conducted with staff currently working within South London and Maudsley NHS FT adult community mental health teams, focus groups included a mixture of staff, as well as current service users and carers.

Stage 4: Presented findings back to those community mental health team staff, service users, carers that participated in the evaluation, and worked with them to co-develop recommendations that would be presented back to the Trust.

Stage 5: Shared the final recommendations with wider adult community mental health team staff to identify recommendation priorities to be presented back to the Trust.

Stage 6: Developed a framework outlining key recommendations, ideas to implement, success criteria and benefits. This framework was then reviewed with key physical health leads from within South London and Maudsley NHS FT to refine a best practice approach for physical healthcare within the Trust.

Key reflections

Using a structured approach to delivering this evaluation ensured that the team had clarity from the outset about how to investigate experiences, and then consider ways to embed them back into the organisation following the evaluation. The benefit of doing so ensured the team maintained constant engagement with stakeholders, and experts by experience, and were able to consider throughout what would make a difference to how physical healthcare is approached in adult community mental health teams.

Main impact and findings

Key identified areas for improvement in relation to physical healthcare were:

- › Clear organisational vision and strategy for physical healthcare, supported by clear communication of this to staff, service users, carers, and partner organisations e.g., primary care.
- › Accessible policy that outlines the responsibilities of the organisation, community services and staff when supporting the physical health of adults with an SMI.
- › A comprehensive training programme that addresses generic and specific competencies for staff in key roles within community teams. A competency monitoring system that supports managers to continue to develop knowledge and skills of staff in practice.
- › Streamlined processes and systems that can appropriately support staff in their roles to be able to provide effective physical healthcare to service users and their families as well.

Key achievements

Overall, the service evaluation was identified as a successful approach to investigating barriers and facilitators that impede clinical practice. The findings were recognised by Physical Health Leaders within South London and Maudsley NHS FT as crucial evidence upon which interventions can be modelled to support routine practice of physical healthcare for adults with SMI accessing community services.

Presentation of the evaluation process at the Implementation Science Conference 2022 was an opportunity for the delivery team to promote the value of evaluating physical healthcare in community settings. The presentation led to wider interest from across the UK about the model used to deliver the evaluation, and accessibility of the framework upon completion of the project.

Key learning

Working with clinical staff when developing the design for the service evaluation ensured the questions we asked at interview were relevant, accessible, and ensured greater engagement with the process.

Building in opportunities to feedback to the adult community mental health team staff throughout delivery of the project ensured transparency of the findings and recommendations being developed. It was important for the Trust to develop staff confidence and buy-in to any recommendations developed, which this process supported.

Participating regularly in wider activities across the Trust regarding physical healthcare increased the stakeholder network of the delivery team, and ensured that support for the project was more easily obtained. This was especially helpful to increase the profile of the work, and when sharing findings, to be able to develop ideas to scale the framework to make it accessible or useable for other services, organisations, and Trusts.

Next steps

Use of an Implementation Science approach has enabled the team to go beyond the findings of the service evaluation, and to develop recommendations that can help to transfer knowledge into actions to support physical healthcare in the Trust.

The learning from this project will be used to inform a framework to improve physical healthcare practice within adult community mental health services across South East London and beyond.