

Supporting work in Remote and Rural Scotland

Competence tools used to create new rural support role

Meeting the needs of an ageing population combined with an agenda to care for people locally in remote and rural areas proved to be an interesting challenge for healthcare leaders in Scotland.

In a bid to support high quality care Skills for Health and NHS Education for Scotland commissioned a study into service provision for older people in Highland regions. The two organisations decided to fund jointly research and set up a project which called for a complete assessment of the current service in this complex area.

Working in partnership with researchers from Centre for Rural Health at the University of Aberdeen, the team used data methodology and Skills for Health assessment tools to determine what was available in terms of service provision, what was missing and to create potential solutions.


First, the project manager captured a picture of current provision. She interviewed several health and social care practitioners and a voluntary agency worker in one NHS Highland Community Health Partnership, to assess the existing range of competences. Feedback highlighted that skills of high value for remote and rural areas include autonomy, prioritisation, interpersonal skills and flexibility.

Using the Skills for Health role profile tool and team assessment tool, the project manager then quantified the gaps in service delivery and identified competences that were missing. She realised that by creating a new role of Rural Support Worker, gaps in service provision could be met and a better service offered for older people.

This role crosses the boundaries of health and social care by combining health care, home care and support care. By drawing upon a broader range of skills, instead of several different people travelling long distances in remote and rural areas, just one person with the right combination of skills will be able to provide support to older people in hard to reach places.

“ This study underpins ongoing work to support development of health and care services in remote islands and locations within Scotland. Having objective skills measurement tools ensures that we address educational issues for staff and equity of access to health and care for remote and rural populations. ”

Gillian Swan, Educational Projects Manager, NHS Education for Scotland.



Skills for Health has developed a bank of national workforce competences which describe the skills and knowledge required to carry out a task or function effectively. They are designed to underpin and be integral to accredited and non-accredited education and training programmes. Since competences describe what individuals need to know and do, whoever is performing the task, they can be used in many different ways.

The Benefits

- Improved service delivery for older people.
- An entry level role into health and social care careers.
- An effective management tool for team and service design.
- The role will contribute to sustainability of rural communities.
- A more affordable staffing structure for caring for older people.

The new role is competence based and will be mapped against the KSF and in the near future, it will be accredited to a formal qualification. This will improve recognition of post holders' skills, and should help to improve recruitment and retention of rural practitioners. A planned training module for development of potential rural practitioners will include a rural placement and a focus on personal skills.

Researchers report that using a competence based approach to role and service redesign is a useful way of shaping services and supporting service user groups in remote and rural areas. By creating more accessible provision of this kind, older people are more likely to be cared for at home. Skills for Health continues to bring real benefits to patients through the development of competence-based approaches to the design and redesign of roles and services.

Skills for Health is the Sector Skills Council for the UK health sector (the National Health Services, independent healthcare providers and voluntary organisations). Our purpose is to help develop solutions that can deliver a skilled and flexible workforce to improve health and healthcare.

Use our interactive guides to find out more about competences and how to use them at: www.skillsforhealth.org.uk

