Service users can also be service providers

Gateshead and South Tyneside Sight Service, Angel Eyes Enterprise (North East)

Angel Eyes Enterprise is a successful social enterprise which offers peer advocacy for visually impaired people. A co-ordinator and trained volunteers help people to access support services, find voluntary activities and paid employment.

Skills for
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Background

Gateshead and South Tyneside Sight Service set up the peer advocacy project in 2009, with some start-up funding from Gateshead Council. The project is designed to tap into the skills and knowledge of visually impaired people and support other visually impaired people who need information or access to services. The ultimate aim is to improve the quality of their lives.

Accessing services and finding voluntary or job opportunities can be hard for visually impaired people. Sight Service had identified that their service users experienced difficulties when individual budgets were introduced. Initial assessments were completed by social care professionals, who often had no specialism in visual impairment and this was disadvantaging service users. Disadvantages included being unable to read information they were given or access web based self-assessment. Visually impaired people also faced risks at home and when out and about, since they were not getting mobility training, or support in cooking safely, for example.

Aims

The peer advocacy project aimed to:

- offer people with visual impairment support with their individual budgets
- provide a peer advocacy service to work with individuals and organisations
- provide training to raise awareness about visual impairment.

What was done?

A project co-ordinator and five volunteers were recruited. The co-ordinator developed peer advocacy by recruiting the volunteers, facilitating their training and setting up work shadowing for them. The co-ordinator assessed when advocates had developed sufficient expertise to work alone and monitored individual cases. The co-ordinator's role also extended to delivering IT training to people with visual impairment and to representing Sight Service at local networks.

"Angel Eyes moves away from the traditional model of a charity, where there is a distinct line between service user and service provider; Angel Eyes works on the premise that service users can also be service providers." **Sue Taylor, Chief Executive.**

Each volunteer had their training needs identified and a personal development log was set up for them. Once trained, the advocates helped people complete forms or support them during social worker assessments. They provided follow up advice and also helped with making complaints.

Outcomes

Positive outcomes include:

- the number of people wanting to take up individual budgets rose steadily
- 20 more volunteers were recruited to meet the demand
- a 10 week volunteer programme was established
- a short, but powerful, visual awareness DVD was produced, First Day of Work
- volunteers were able to gain a recognised vocational qualification.

Impact

The impacts from the Angel Eyes advocacy project include:

- increased ratings from service users after the advocacy support; these were their five 'personalisation' scores for choice, control, independence, health and wellbeing, and dignity and respect
- reduced delays in hospital discharge for people who were using the advocacy service, as a result of having their care needs reviewed and appropriate services reinstated quickly
- effective transitions by supporting people for longer in their place of choice
- effective use of resources through supporting people to access and use their individual budgets to purchase appropriate care or support
- volunteers reported an increase in their own skills and knowledge, following training.

"Doing computers with Christine, it's given me confidence and skills. I'm the secretary of the residents' association and it's opened so many doors, including peer advocacy. When you live alone you feel so disadvantaged by your lack of sight. You lose your confidence."
Advocacy partner.

The project has produced an evaluation, which uses the innovative 'star tool' (Cowen, 2010). This considers the five personalisation dimensions, cited above.

Learning

Take adequate time to recruit suitably skilled people as advocates. It is also important to brief applicants about the commitment that is required. Many advocates on the Angel Eyes project had underestimated the time and knowledge that would be needed.

It is also important that everyone involved shares an understanding of what is meant by the term 'advocate' as it has different meanings to different people.

Next steps

Sight Service is considering developing the 'star tool' to increase its relevance to the organisation.

Sight Service hopes that the Angel Eyes Enterprise will be commissioned to provide a range of services to statutory and other organisations on a fee basis to raise awareness of the needs of visually impaired people. Some additional developments include:

- selling user led services such as visual impairment training to other organisations
- buddying and mentoring support
- provision of visual awareness training to organisations and professionals, incuding hospitals, GP surgeries, Gateshead Council and housing employees.

References

Video   http://www.theunlikelylads.co.uk/2011/03/11/first-day-of-work-sight-service-commission/

Cowen, 2010   Cowen, Steve; *Independent Advocacy Monitoring and Evaluation Framework,* Sight Service, 2010.
http://www.gain.org.uk/documents/Visualimpairment.pdf

Links

http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/workforce_strategy/workforce_innovation_programme/personalisation/NToW78.aspx

http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.aspx?IID=6920&sID=1912

http://www.gvoc.org.uk/Advocacy/Advocacy.htm

http://www.gain.org.uk/

http://www.vonne.org.uk/home/

http://www.opaal.org.uk/

www.rnib.org.uk

Contacts

www.sightservice.co.uk/index.php/angel-eyes-enterprise

Further information

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