

Improving social and health care services



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The field of social care has made great strides in identifying its values and vision for the future and what needs to change to achieve improvements across a range of services. What is missing, however, are the specific actions needed to make these improvements a reality. Implementing change and improvement is both a multifaceted and dynamic process that takes time to come about, and specific change programmes are generally unique to individual organisations. Organisations embark on change and improvement programmes for different reasons and how close they are to the desired end state also varies.

SCIE commissioned this knowledge review to describe the processes and actions that have proven most effective in bringing about and sustaining improvement in social care services. The knowledge review comprised a thorough research review on key practices and processes needed to promote effective organisational change and improvement and a practice survey of four original case studies of social care agencies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

We found that the “bottom line” findings and messages elicited from our two methods were aligned and could be abridged into three action

points for organisations to consider at all stages of an improvement programme. The three action points include:

1. Leadership that propels change and improvement
2. Employee involvement and participation in change and improvement
3. Stakeholder involvement and participation in change and improvement

Action point 1: Leadership that propels change and improvement

At the centre of successful organisational improvement initiatives are effective leaders who enable improvements to occur. These leaders have the ability to presage the direction the organisation should be headed in terms of service delivery (e.g., greater service user involvement) and begin to move their organisations in this direction. Improvements should result from a need to align the organisation with an underlying purpose or ideology (that, ideally, should be developed together with employees and stakeholders). It is the top team's responsibility to set the scope and facilitate the improvements.

Transparency and effective communication are essential for leaders embarking on improvement initiatives, as is leading by example. By the same token, frontline employees need to be given

opportunities to embrace the new purpose or ideology and personalise it so they can alter their services accordingly.

Actions:

- There are three improvements stages: work out what the purpose of the organisation and the underlying need for improvement is; work out what changes need to be made to achieve this purpose; work out how to go about making the necessary improvements
- Be aware of the amount of guidance or leadership staff need to succeed: some organisations need a clear hierarchy while others would benefit from a more horizontal structure
- Ensure communication with staff is bi-directional and effective: make sure staff can use the communications methods you choose and make sure the method is appropriate to the topic and task
- Do not let the improvements be the “property” of an elite in-group
- Celebrate “successes” with your staff
- Be available to your staff: keep your door and mind open
- Recognise how the improvements might feel to staff and what they need to take them through it
- Do not be afraid to have people not like you some of the time
- Use your allies to garner support

- Do not be afraid to change direction if something is not working
- Know your local community and its distinct needs – make sure you have appropriate staff on board to provide the optimal support

Action point 2: Employee involvement and participation in change and improvement

Following from above, employees should be entrusted to take forward improvements in their day-to-day service delivery. It may not always be possible for staff to be involved in the “what” of the change, but there is a great scope for involvement in the “how.” If involved in the action planning stages, staff are more likely to accept and support the improvement process and feel a sense of ownership over the improvements. The key here is that staff members’ voices are consulted, heard, recorded and considered – including staff members who may not immediately warm up to the changes.

Actions:

- Allow and even encourage employees (or teams of employees) to make some decisions independently
- Allow workers to discuss, question and design improvement activities – the exercise must not be tokenism; listening and responding to suggestions must be visible and actions must be taken

- Use “resistance” to weatherproof improvements and solutions
- Experiment with different types of consultation and involvement to see what works
- Feedback to employees the results of consultation exercises or decisions made on the basis of their input
- Encourage teamwork – both inter- and intra-departmental – comprised of diverse group members
- Offer encouragement, praise and rewards to teams as well as to individuals
- Include all staff in participation efforts
- Expose employees to “hands on” development activities that they had a part in designing
- Give staff adequate time for involvement, participation and developmental activities
- If people are finding it hard to balance current commitments with time for service improvements, work with them to find a solution

Action point 3: Stakeholder involvement and participation in change and improvement

This final theme stems directly from some of the recommendations made in recent Green and White papers: service users, community members and other key stakeholders need to be central figures in any change or improvement initiative. There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to stakeholder involvement. The key

is recognising that service users should be a part of, if not at the heart of, service reform. Organisations need to be clear, however, regarding the process by and the depth to which service users will be involved in shaping improvements.

Equally, organisations should engage key community members and government officials. Even the most well-intentioned improvement programme can fail if support is not garnered from powerful decision-makers within the community.

Actions:

- Encourage service users to make some decisions about their needs – this does not have to be complex, but may require creative approaches
- Service user engagement techniques should build on frontline staff's expertise
- Involve service users in strategic planning and development, decision-making, evaluation and policy development; for example, encourage users to sit on boards, attend meetings, join a blog, serve in an advisory group
- Use an appreciative approach when engaging with stakeholders: get them to focus on what works
- Avoid bureaucratic language and jargon with service users and staff; it is exclusive not inclusive

- If people do not have the time for service user engagement, then make it a part of their job to do so
- Be aware of the needs within your community and make sure staff are aware too
- Know who your key stakeholders in the wider community are and make sure you engage with them

Evaluation emerged in both the research review and practice survey as an important part of the improvement process both to document performance and in some cases as a way of directly engaging service users in their care. Increasingly there are methods to incorporate service users and other key stakeholders directly into the research and evaluation programme before, during and after improvement initiatives take place. Further work is needed to identify how this works in practice.

This knowledge review summarised and synthesised a wide body of primary and secondary sources focusing on the key features of successful organisational change and improvement. Organisations with smart, innovative leaders who respect and value diversity, engage employees and involve stakeholders are likely to have the basic ingredients for successful change and improvement. Social care organisations are facing an exciting opportunity to refocus their organisations and ensure services are more

user-centric. While there is no prescribed “key to success” successful change initiatives consider each of the building blocks of change and improvement outlined above. These organisations are able to envision the big picture when implementing even the smallest change.

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This knowledge review explores the processes and actions that have proven most effective in bringing about and sustaining improvement in social and health care services.

The full knowledge review can be found at www.scie.org.uk

More information about SCIE's People Management Network can be accessed at www.scie-peoplemanagement.org.uk

This publication is available in an alternative format upon request.

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