

Impact of the Sustain Rapid Appraisal on the working practices and approaches of the health visiting peer review team

Background

Sustain Improvement was commissioned by Health Education East of England to carry out a second wave of its Rapid Appraisals in 2013 to measure the progress which 13 health visiting services had made towards implementing the Call to Action. The refresh came following a successful initial programme of appraisals during 2012/13.

The process

To add an important clinical insight to the process, practicing health visitors were selected from services across the East of England to act as peer reviewers. The five-strong team was provided with appropriate training before starting the project, and ongoing support throughout.

To complete the reviews, a team from Sustain including the peer reviewer would visit each service, gathering evidence and consulting staff at every level during two days of enquiry and reflection. A week later, their findings were presented in a concise, yet thorough, progress report.

The peer reviewers played an integral role throughout, providing an essential clinical perspective and operational experience of working with children and families. The in depth knowledge they were able to provide into the realities of working within the health visiting profession also helped open up new avenues of enquiry during the process, in turn contributing to the overall quality of the final report.

Benefits to the peer review team

Feedback from the peer reviewers has been overwhelmingly positive, with all participants reporting changes to the way they approach their work as a result of the process, as well as significant benefits to their personal development. This included:

- **An insight into other trusts** – being given the time to step back and look in detail at another organisation was highly valued by the peer reviewers, who said they rarely afforded themselves the time to do the same in their own Trusts prior to taking part in The Sustain Rapid Appraisal. As well as opening their eyes to new things and providing ideas to take back to their own workplace, the peer reviewers said the insight also encouraged them to stop and think more about their own service and its impact on families.
- **An understanding of the different ways organisations had translated the original health visiting brief** – many of the peer reviewers were surprised at just how diverse the response to the national guidance had been. Their assumptions that each service would approach the Healthy Child Programme in the same way were

quickly eroded – however, the varied approaches taken to delivering the programme did provide further opportunities to learn from best practice.

- **An acknowledgement of the difference one person can make** – this was especially key in senior positions, where strong leadership inevitably led to good planning and successful delivery of the programme.
- **A greater appreciation of good practice** – and, conversely, recognition of the potential impact on families when a service is out of touch with what happens on the ground.
- **Further clarity as to the importance of good communication** – the process gave the team a great recognition that appropriate communication – and not overloading people with information – was essential in ensuring important messages reach the right audiences and are acted upon. This was further clarified during two day on-site visits, with the team quickly recognising the importance of asking the right questions in the right way.

Personal changes

Following completion of the Sustain Rapid Appraisal refresh, the peer reviewers met to discuss their experiences and the changes they had made as a result of their involvement in the project. The debate showed that all participants had taken similar gains from the process, all of which would further enhance their working lives and the care they were able to provide in the future.

When asked to pinpoint the most significant changes they had made as a result of the peer review process, their voices were unanimous:

1. Listening – only by ‘truly’ listening are you able to successfully process information and understand another person’s viewpoint. This is essential when working with children and families and picking up on sensitivities or potential issues. In addition, peer reviewers also pledged to listen more closely to team briefings as a result of the process.
2. Triangulation – double check the information you are given and remember there is always more than one viewpoint. This had led some of the peer reviewers to encourage more fathers to be present when they visit a family, for example, so that the voices of both parents can be heard.
3. Assertive – as a health visitor, you may need to represent different views at different points in your career. Being assertive is an important quality in helping to achieve this.
4. Evaluation – check that something has happened rather than just assume it has. As well as closing the loop, this can provide important evidence in future.
5. Improved communication – the whole process had led to an increased awareness of language and asking questions in the right way, being flexible and adaptive depending on the audience.
6. Approaching the change process – all of the peer reviewers said the project had given them a greater awareness of the varied approaches each organisation had to

changes, and an appreciation of finding different ways to tackle the same issues. To achieve this, support systems must be robust, they concluded, both to support new staff coming into the service and existing colleagues who may be acting as mentors.

7. Greater self-awareness and increased confidence – by looking in detail at other services, the peer reviewers not only found ways to further improve closer to home but were also prompted to reflect on their own achievements.

Conclusions

The increased use of peer reviewers added to the project's success. As well as shaping the line of questioning, the clinical perspective and operational experience they brought to the table enhanced the entire process.

The reviewers also valued the Sustain Rapid Appraisal as an opportunity for personal development and a chance to broaden their outlook, in turn enhancing their skills and experience for the wider benefit of the NHS and their own individual service in the future.

For more information, please contact Sustain Improvement on 01480 478230, email at info@sustain-improvement.com or visit www.sustain-improvement.com