The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health

Supporting young people's mental health in the criminal justice system

The Youth Justice Service Development Project

Many young people in the youth justice system display a high level of emotional and behavioural difficulties and emerging mental health problems.

The Department of Health, Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health and Youth Justice Board are running a project to address the needs of vulnerable young people who offend by working with criminal justice and mental health services in the community and in custody.

It will support and disseminate effective practice and enhance evidence-based provision in:

- Diversion and court liaison,
- Prison Inreach services,
- Forensic Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS),
- The role of the Health Practitioner in the Youth Offending Team (YOT).

Diversion and court liaison services

Although diversion / court liaison and link worker services exist for adult offenders with mental health problems, they have not developed systematically for young people.

We will look at the effectiveness and practice of the services that currently exist and at ways in which young people are diverted into community or psychiatric secure care, or how their mental health needs are met if they stay within the criminal justice system.

Our investigations will result in a review of the literature on international best practice, a young person-centric model for diversion and information on promising practice and guidance for Youth Offending Teams on the implementation of systems of diversion.

Forensic CAMHS

Over the past seven years a number of Forensic CAMHS services have evolved. We are undertaking some work to understand this evolution and describe the function of these services and how they are fulfilled in each region.

We will work with Forensic CAMHS services to support plans for service development. These areas will be led by practitioner need. In Newcastle, for example, support has been requested to assess the feasibility of a local diversion scheme for young people with mental health needs.

The results of this project will overlap with the other areas of work outlined in this leaflet.

The role of prison inreach

Prison inreach teams were introduced into the Young People's Secure Estate following recommendations made by the Department of Health in 'Changing the Outlook' in 2001.

Given the lack of detailed information about the provision of prison inreach for young people, we will begin with an information-gathering exercise to build a picture of current practice and to pinpoint fruitful areas for development. It will include information on:

- Models of inreach, team size, composition and funding
- Continuity of care and resettlement management
- Links with court diversion / liaison / bail support
- Integration with wider case planning, particularly substance misuse work
- The cultural sensitivity of services to meet the needs of people from BME communities and young women
- Gaps, barriers, areas for development or unmet need

The project will produce effective practice and child-specific guidance for mental health services in the Young People's Secure Estate. The project may then be extended to include a phase of practice development to support services with development plans.

The role of the health worker in the Youth Offending Team

Both NACRO and the Healthcare Commission have identified that the health practitioner role in YOTs needs some development. They found that only 1 in 6 YOTs had a health practitioner in place and a third did not have a mental health worker. There was no guidance, no job description and no competencies for these workers and the service workers offered tended to reflect their personal skills rather than the needs of the young people.

To address these issues, this two-year project will produce a set of best practice standards to guide the work of the health practitioner in the YOT. It will also undertake practice-based work to support the introduction of health practitioners into at least five YOTs which are currently without this resource.

The youth justice project is funded by the Department of Health, the Youth Justice Board and the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health. The staff are based at the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health.

Contact Us

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