

Creating deafblind champions for older people

Working with trainers who are themselves deafblind, 72 personnel from across the Northumberland care sector trained to become deafblind champions. The results are directly improved care for elderly people with dual sensory loss, and significantly raised awareness of a national problem, and a DVD guide for other employers.

Background

- One of a number of problems of having an aging population is that of being able to communicate with and care for the growing number of older people who suffer dual sensory loss. There are approximately ten million people in the UK with hearing loss, notably among older people. Added to this, one in five people aged over 75 suffer sight loss and the numbers grow to half the population of people aged over 90.
- People fall into one of four types of dual sensory loss – deafblindness – including those who are born deaf and become blind; those who are born blind and become deaf; those whose congenital condition means they are

born with both disabilities; and those who lose their hearing and sight in old age.

- According to David Sutton from the Northumberland Care Alliance, who has long experience working with deafblindness, older people who lose both hearing and sight are faced with the greatest challenges. They lose faculties that help them communicate and engage with the world but they seldom have the experience or knowledge to cope with these disabilities. By contrast, other groups of deafblind people are usually well supported and learn to cope and communicate from an early age. As a result of their difficulties older deafblind people often become withdrawn and depressed and are increasingly vulnerable. Misunderstandings in communicating with them can often lead to the misdiagnosis of dementia.
- The Northumberland Care Alliance embarked on a project to train 72 care professionals to become deafblind champions, able to recognise the condition, provide guidance and communicate appropriately with deafblind people.

What we wanted to achieve

- The main aim was to provide intense mainly practical training initially to 72 staff who provide care for people experiencing dual sensory loss using qualified trainers who are themselves deafblind. The intention was to create deafblind champions who would

“ The presence of deafblind trainers on the course is crucial, at least in a course that can be accomplished in only three intense days, because deafblind trainers provide actual practical communication techniques rather than textbook approaches. They challenge trainees and are the means of ensuring that they learn communication techniques properly. ”

David Sutton, Project Lead

become a new type of worker, able to disseminate best practice and to advise and support colleagues in ways of caring for and communicating with older people who have dual sensory loss.

- The objective was also to produce a professional DVD and web training guide and to make this available to all care sector organisations, providing the opportunity for Skills for Care to share the guide widely.

What we did

- Northumberland Care Alliance comprises about 175 private, voluntary and third sector organisations involved in the provision of care mostly in residential and domiciliary settings. The Alliance set out to find candidates to train as deafblind champions from among senior support workers, team leaders and managers within these member organisations.
- When a course to train deafblind champions was announced the places were filled within two days and could have been filled several times over, such was the demand. However, the available resources were only sufficient to establish various training courses in a number of towns across Northumberland, eventually training a total of 72 candidates.
- The course was intense and highly practical in nature lasting approximately 30 hours across three linked days and also involving some homework and time spent practising new skills on people outside the classroom. The training led to a qualification at Level 2 awarded by the Council for Advancement of Communications with Deaf People (CACDP – now trading as Signature). It was split into two parts, the first focusing on the nature and condition of deafblindness at various levels and how to recognise it in older people; this part also explained the types of equipment and guiding skills needed to support this group. The second part focused on the tactics required to communicate effectively with deafblind people in this group. This was the challenging part of the course requiring candidates to understand and learn highly specialised communication techniques.
- What made the training possible and most effective was the use of qualified trainers who were themselves deafblind. Each candidate was carefully assessed by means of a combination of classroom observation, a written paper and by their ability to communicate effectively with the deafblind trainers.
- A professional film team was hired to produce a special DVD / web training guide using material edited together from the courses so as to provide key point information about recognising, guiding and communicating with this deafblind group.

What we achieved

Various highly positive outcomes resulted from this project:

- 72 trainees all received comprehensive, practical and skills-assessed training including 'Signature – Communicating and Guiding With Deafblind People' Level 2 qualification.
- the training and the course were unique and have made a significant contribution to raising awareness of the special requirements of a significant proportion of elderly people.
- the beneficial impacts were immediate for clients supported by the Northumberland Care Alliance's 72 deafblind champions who experienced an immediate improvement in the quality of their care, notably by gaining the ability to communicate more effectively.
- organisations employing deafblind trained staff have been able to 'increase their offer' i.e. caring for people with more complex needs to fulfil the requirements of commissioners.
- the DVD / web training guide is a unique tool for training and awareness and is a shared resource available to all care organisations supported by Skills for Care.
- the project has linked effectively to Department of Health Section 7 guidance which stipulates that people with dual sensory loss are entitled to additional support that meets their specific needs; deafblind champions can assist social workers by identifying clients who require a full Section 7 assessment.
- the deafblind champions can cascade their knowledge and support colleagues within their organisations.
- the project stimulated a separate programme involving the training of 140 'acquired communications disorder champions' and has led to a substantial pilot, funded by Big Lottery, involving the training of 200 community volunteers who are learning to recognise, guide and communicate with older people who are deafblind.

What we learnt

- The issue of deafblind older people is one that is likely to have an effect on everyone in the country, either as someone directly affected or as someone with a family member or friend who develops the condition.
- Thankfully, the awareness of DH Section 7 guidance is promoting local authorities to provide appropriate support in this group. However, according to David Sutton, Project Lead for Northumberland Care Alliance, "all the problems surrounding deafblindness in older people will not go away and the resources in terms of trained people to lead the way in providing good care and proper communication strategies is as yet minimal. We have developed a project which was a resounding success – particularly in terms of the immediate feedback we had from clients. But there needs to be a national roll-out of training of this kind."
- One of the problems of reproducing the training course which led to these successful outcomes is the scarcity of qualified trainers who are themselves deafblind. From his previous work in this field David Sutton was able to make contact and develop a training contract with all four such trainers who are widely dispersed in the country.
- Another key lesson from the project was the exceptionally high level of demand for this training from member organisations in Northumberland. If such a demand exists in Northumberland it is likely to be replicated right across the country further indicating the need to bridge the skills gap so as to be able to improve the quality of life for a great many older people requiring care.

For more information please contact

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Skills for Care Recommends

There are a number of qualification units that specifically focus on sensory loss.

Funding

For adult social care employers in England, our funding can help towards the cost of learning and development for learning disabilities.

www.skillsforcare.org.uk/funding

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