



# **‘My Health’ Project Report:**

**Raising awareness of annual health checks  
and determining the barriers to accessing them**



**#SpeakUp**



**July 2019**

## Introduction

There is national evidence that people with a learning disability have significantly worse health outcomes when compared to the general population. The life expectancy of women with a learning disability is 19 years shorter than for women in the general population; and the life expectancy of men with a learning disability is 14 years shorter than for men in the general population <sup>1</sup>.

The development of Annual Health Checks (AHCs) in primary care settings for people with a learning disability sought to address some of these inequalities by providing a preventative approach to health and well being. However, the uptake of these health checks in the city remains low. Current estimates by NHS England suggest that less than 50% of people with a learning disability have these checks <sup>1</sup>.

We have therefore run the 'My Health' project to work with people with a learning disability who use Sheffield Mencap services (and their carers where necessary) to understand that Annual Health Checks are available to them at their GPs, to explain the preventative approach that these checks have, and to determine any barriers that may exist in having these checks.

## The main aims of the project were to:

- Increase the awareness of the availability of annual health checks for people with a learning disability in primary care.
- Increase understanding of the preventative aspect of annual health checks.
- Gather the views of people with a learning disability regarding access to primary care for annual health checks.
- Explore any barriers that may exist in having annual health checks.

## What did we do?

As part of the project, we ran a short series of three workshops with our service users. These took place on the 12<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> of June 2019 with different people at different times of the day to ensure a range of our members. The workshops had a total of 25 participants.

These workshops were activity-based to engage the participants in a variety of ways to suit their different learning styles. This included a presentation, with easy read information and awareness videos created by Royal Mencap; a quiz, to get an idea of how much the group already knew about annual health checks and which participants may need more awareness, and then a role play exercise (for one of the workshops) to demonstrate the importance of the preventative approach of annual health checks (see *appendix 1*). The workshops finished with an arts exercise, in which pieces of artwork were made for a display board to raise awareness of annual health checks to the rest of Mencap. During this activity I spoke to individuals about their experience of annual health checks.

It soon became clear that many people participating in the workshops had a good awareness of annual health checks. It would seem that the people most likely to attend the workshops were people who already knew about them. Therefore, I decided to chat to individuals throughout the week, in the day, and evening at Sheffield Mencap and Gateway to reach a wider audience and promote awareness to our members who need it the most. Including the workshop participants, the project reached 40 individuals.

If someone expressed that they were not aware of annual health checks, I supplied them with easy read information on how to make sure they are on the learning disability register in order to get invited for annual health checks. I also offered these to anyone who took part in the workshops.

To receive carers' feedback of annual health checks, and to explore the barriers to accessing the checks, I sent questionnaires to the carers' network in Sheffield and talked to some carers who visited Sheffield Mencap. Overall, I received feedback from 14 parents / carers.

## Key Findings

### Raising awareness, and feedback of the health checks.

- 97% of participants said they either don't mind going to their GPs, or they enjoyed it. There was some really nice feedback from some individuals e.g. one talked of his GP very highly, said he jokes with him, and he enjoys seeing him for his AHC.
- Over half of participants at the workshops knew what annual health checks were beforehand and these participants said they attend them annually. More people expressed that they thought they attended health checks after we talked about what they are. There was a good awareness of what happens at them and why the checks are important. At the end of the workshops more people could tell me what AHCs are and why they are important than prior to the activity.
- Reasonable adjustments are very important to people when accessing their health checks. For example, one man who lives independently stated he finds it hard to understand the invitations but knows to go to his AHCs because of the phone call he receives reminding him.
- Two people mentioned they were unhappy with how their GP / nurse talks to their carer instead of them during appointments.
- All parents who responded to my questionnaire said the person they cared for attended their checkups annually, and generally had good feedback about their service. For example one parent said 'she gets well looked after by our surgery', and another said that it is very valuable for allowing her daughter to build a relationship with her GP, so she isn't so anxious when she has to go for medical

problems. However, there was mention of a lack of consistency in practice, and two parents mentioned that it needs to be more 'top to toe'. One parent suggested that GPs should use a top to toe checklist that she has heard some places use, but hers does not. Another supported this comment, stating 'they always forget his feet'.

## Barriers to accessing annual health checks

### *A lack of support*

- It became evident that it is very important for people with a learning disability to have someone with them to go to their annual health checks. Numerous participants mentioned that they go with their carer, even though I didn't ask this as a question. I received comments such as 'my mum makes me go' a few times, suggesting it is their carer that encourages them to go.

**Carers' feedback supported this evidence, with comments such as:**

*'when they ask him how he is, he will say "yes" even if he is not, because he wants to please them'*

*'the person with a learning disability needs a responsible carer to support with appointments, without that support it is difficult to get the right help or services'*

*'She cannot always explain her health issues'*

*'Language used is not always appropriate for him'.*

These quotes indicate the person with a learning disability has to rely on their carer to support them with communication in their annual health check. A lack of support could be a barrier to accessing the checks.

- 3 people were certain they had not been invited to an AHC and haven't been to the doctors in the past year. 2 of the 3 did not know what they were but said they would go if they were invited. The other person clearly knew what AHCs were but claimed he hasn't been invited to attend. He stated he would have to ring and make an appointment and he would find that quite hard. Two of these three people have limited or no support at home and only attend Sheffield Mencap one morning a week.
- A carer I spoke to at the evening Gateway club told me that there is a man who usually attends the group, who also has a mild learning disability, lives independently, and doesn't attend daytime provisions. He refuses to go to AHCs because he does not see the point of going to the doctors if they don't feel ill.

### *It isn't offered at all practices*

- Public Health England states that 'approximately one in seven people with learning disabilities are registered with a practice that does not appear to be offering AHCs' <sup>2</sup>. It could be possible that the man I spoke to who claims he has never been invited to an AHC, might be registered with a practice that doesn't offer it. Without support he is unlikely to question this or fight for the service that should be available to him.
- One carer said that it took 5 years of repeatedly asking for annual health checks at their practice before it was made available, quote 'they said, 'we don't do that sort of thing here''. Without the support and advocacy of their carer, this person would not have been able to access their annual health check, another example of how important it is for people with a learning disability to have support to access their AHCs.

## **Conclusion**

My findings indicate that people at our services have a good awareness of AHCs, but it seems to be the people who have limited, or no support, and who only attend our services a limited amount that need further awareness.

Remarks from parents support this, one stating:

*'It's crazy there are so many things that parents/carers are not told about. You have to search for it yourself. I often find out through work. Not everyone is that fortunate'*

Another explained it is because of attending learning disability services that she knows about things like AHCs. This indicates that the people who do not attend learning disability services are more likely to be the people who are not going to their annual health checks. More work needs to be done in the community to target these individuals to raise awareness where it is needed.

## Recommendations

### 1) Improve the consistency of AHC service throughout the city, to ensure equal opportunities for all.

- Consistency should run throughout:

#### a. *Quality of practice*

All practices should follow the same template for AHCs. Examples that include the National Health Check template, toolkits (<https://bit.ly/2OEefgL>), and for quality assurance measures the following audit tool published by Public Health England (<https://bit.ly/2Z68jyb>).

More GP's need to be trained in treating people with a learning disability to improve communication during appointments (currently 75% of GPs have no training<sup>3</sup>). If some practices are doing a good job as I have found from my research, others could be, and should be, learning from these practices.

#### b. *Accessibility*

All practices should be offering AHCs. If they are unavailable at any practice, alternatives need to be offered to ensure these people get the health care

they are entitled to. Reasonable adjustments also need be consistently offered as standard practice to ensure accessibility for all.

### 2) Provide more support for individuals who are known to have less support at home, to access primary health care.

- Learning disability services, such as Sheffield Mencap, could work alongside GP practices to help achieve this. We could also work more within the wider community and primary care services to spread preventative health care messages not just to our own service users, but also to the people who do not attend learning disability services and are more likely to need awareness.

### 3) Conduct further research that directly targets the DNAs (Did Not Attends) of AHCs, or gather feedback directly from these individuals to identify why they are not attending their AHCs.

- A report conducted for the Learning Disabilities Observatory found regular (three monthly) check-ups on DNAs helped GPs to alter their practice accordingly and helped to improve the uptake of health checks<sup>4</sup>. Easy read information about the importance of AHCs should be sent directly to these people when they do not take up an offer of a check-up. Phone discussions with these individuals could also be useful to get an idea of why they do not want to attend, and to raise awareness to them of their importance.

## References

1. NHS (2017), *Health and Care of People with Learning Disabilities: Experimental Statistics: 2016-2017*, <https://bit.ly/2KnYjZw> .
2. Public health England (2017) *Quality Checking Health Checks for People with Learning Disabilities A way of finding out what is happening locally*, p6, <https://bit.ly/2Z68jyb>
3. Mencap (2019) *What is a Learning Disability*, <https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/what-learning-disability> (accessed 26/07/19)
4. Turner, S (2013) *Improving the Uptake of Health Checks for Adults with Learning Disabilities Evidence into practice report no.6* , p4, <https://bit.ly/2Zj2lts>

## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Workshop slides and video links

Slide 1




'My Health' project



Slide 2

Question 1:

What is an annual health check?




a) A visit to the doctors to check your health

b) An appointment at the hospital when you are unwell.

c) A really fun night club.

Slide 3

Answer: A



- An annual health check is a visit to the doctors to check your health.




Appendix 1. Workshop slides and video links continued

Slide 4

Question 2:


How often should you go to for an annual health check?




- a) Every 10 years
- b) Once a year
- c) 4 times a year

Slide 5


Answer: B



- You should go for an annual health check once a year.



- You need to be on the learning disability register to be invited to annual health checks,




- If you are on the LD register, you should receive a letter from your GP telling inviting you for a health check.

Slide 6

Question 3:

Why should we go to annual health checks?



- a) Because you get free cake and biscuits
- b) Because our doctors want us to go to them
- c) To make sure we are healthy and happy, and to spot any early signs of illness.

Appendix 1. Workshop slides and video links continued

Slide 7

## Answer: C



It is important to go to your annual health checks to make sure you are healthy and happy.



Sometimes we do not know when we are ill. The doctor can spot early signs of illness that we might miss.



Many illnesses are easy to stop if you get to them early. Illnesses can sometimes be harder to treat if they are found later on.

Role play exercise ...

Slide 8

- Having your health check :  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5aylMC4U0a0>
- Health is everybody's responsibility:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8R\\_bJdLSQ&t=3s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8R_bJdLSQ&t=3s)
- Annual Health Checks easy read guide:  
<https://www.mencap.org.uk/sites/default/files/2017-06/AHC%20Easy%20Read%20Guide%20Final.pdf>

Slide 9

## Annual health checks help us to be healthy and stay healthy!



- Why is being healthy, important?  
How does being healthy make us feel?  
Discuss in two groups
- Make a piece of art to show people why it is good to be healthy and go to your annual health checks.



### **About Healthwatch Sheffield**

Healthwatch Sheffield is the city's local consumer watchdog for health and social care services. The organisation exists to help adults, children and young people to influence and improve the way health and social care services are designed and run in the city. Healthwatch Sheffield is completely independent from the NHS and Sheffield City Council.

### **About the #SpeakUp grants**

In 2018/19 Healthwatch Sheffield ran a small grants programme called 'Speak Up'. Sheffield-based voluntary and community sector organisations were invited to apply for a small grant of up to £1,000 to run consultation and engagement activities. Organisations were asked to relate their projects to one of the aims and priorities in the 2018 – 2020 Healthwatch Sheffield ['Together for Good' Strategy](#).

The programme was designed to enable local organisations and community groups to gather views and experiences of health and social care services from Sheffield residents, especially from those who do not traditionally have a voice. The aim is to ensure that health and social care decision makers in the city hear from a diverse range of people about their experiences of services.

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