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Executive Summary

A qualitative evaluation of the Western Cheshire Community Weight Management Programme – *Step by Step* Healthy Weight and Lifestyle Programme

Interim report

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March 2010

Introduction

Overweight and obesity can be defined as abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that may impair health. The prevalence of overweight and obesity is increasing in both adult and child populations throughout the world and obesity prevention has become an international public health priority. From a local perspective, in the Western Cheshire Primary Care Trust (PCT) area, the total estimated number of adults (aged 16 years and above) who are obese is 49,842 (23%), with a further 79,295 of adults (37%) experiencing increased health risk due to raised waist circumference.

As part of its response to rising levels of obesity, in 2008 Western Cheshire PCT commissioned a community weight management programme, *Step by Step*, from the Trust's specialist Health Promotion Service. This free, referral-based programme was targeted at individuals at high risk of developing negative health outcomes as a consequence of obesity (as indicated by a BMI of $\geq 35\text{kg/m}^2$ or $30\text{-}34.9\text{kg/m}^2$ and at least one risk factor from a specified list [BMI of $\geq 27\text{kg/m}^2$ or $25\text{-}26.9\text{kg/m}^2$ and at least one risk factor from a specified list for members of the Asian population]).

Aim and objectives

The overall aim of the evaluation was to reveal the elements of the service that are most likely to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme.

The overall objectives were to:

- understand individuals' perceptions of how the programme has worked for them – what has worked well and why, and what has worked less well and why;
- understand individuals' perceptions of how they have responded to the programme and explore their accounts of why things have happened as they have;
- identify those service elements and processes that have been important in engaging and sustaining individuals' involvement from the point of view of those who have not started or have left the programme prematurely, as well as those who have had varying degrees of engagement;
- use the qualitative evidence to formulate a series of recommendations for developing the service in order to maximise its effectiveness and efficiency.

In order to provide some early findings from the evaluation to inform the ongoing development of the *Step by Step* programme, it was decided to produce an interim report. For the purposes of this interim report the main objective was to gain an insight into the process of participants opting in and opting out of *Step by Step*, and reasons for not starting or for early departures.

Study design and methodology

A predominantly qualitative approach was used in this evaluation of the *Step by Step* programme. The main data collection method utilised was semi-structured interviews, either face-to-face or over the telephone. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with participants who started the *Step by Step* programme (starters), participants who did not start the *Step by Step* programme but attended a welcome meeting (non-starters) and participants who left *Step by Step* before the end of the 12 weekly sessions (leavers).

With the consent of research participants, all interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then imported into NVivo software for analysis. Thematic analysis was carried out to develop a hierarchy of themes and sub-themes. The emergent hierarchy of themes was validated by a second researcher. Anonymous quotations are used in the presentation of findings to illustrate the themes and sub-themes.

Findings and conclusion

The objectives of this interim report were to gain insight into the process of engagement with the programme. This has been done by exploring the views of participants who have opted in or opted out of *Step by Step*, including those who either do not start, or depart early.

It is evident that the *Step by Step* programme is engaging with many people in the target group across the Western Cheshire PCT. There are many aspects of the programme that are valued and that different participants have found useful. It is also evident that it is a challenge for one programme such as *Step by Step* to meet everybody's needs and expectations. However, evidence suggests that if a programme can be sufficiently flexible to be able to provide a personalised service to individuals then it is likely to maximise its impact because people are more likely to engage with it.

By exploring issues raised by participants in the early stages of the *Step by Step* programme, both those who have decided to leave the programme and those who are continuing, a number of points have been identified and are listed below. These have the potential to inform future service development.

- Minimise the time between referral and commencement of a *Step by Step* programme.
- Promote active use of the waiting time, perhaps through activity packs and the website.
- Continue moves towards facilitating self-referral to the programme.
- Ensure that all referrers are clear about what the *Step by Step* programme entails and provides.
- Develop information about the programme that could be sent out to participants on referral, possibly as part of an activity pack.
- Contact individuals who miss weekly sessions, in order to encourage and support them to return.
- Continue to consider practical issues which may affect attendance at *Step by Step* sessions, for example timing of sessions, accessibility by public transport and availability of childcare.
- Consider the heterogeneity within groups and whether it is possible to put groups together of similar age, of people who have similar issues with their weight, or single sex groups and give people the option, where possible, of attending a group that they think best meets their needs.
- Consider increasing the amount and varying the timing of physical activity sessions for *Step by Step* participants and integrating physical activity into the weekly sessions.
- Consider inviting input on the weekly sessions from previous *Step by Step* programme participants who have successfully managed their weight issues.