

25 November 2010

Thinkingfit

– an Essex County Council funded programme to investigate outcomes of action designed to delay the onset of dementia

Essex County Council is currently working in partnership with the North Essex Partnership Foundation Trust on a 4 year project designed to save money and improve wellbeing by delaying the onset of dementia in people diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment (MCI).

Individuals with MCI are at increased risk of developing dementia - approximately 8 out of 10 people with MCI develop dementia within 6 years after initial diagnosis. As the average age of the UK population increases dementia affects an ever-greater number of people with a devastating impact on them as individuals, their families and on society as a whole. With an estimated 750,000 people affected in the UK the cost of £23 billion each year is set to grow inexorably.

To address this major health and social challenge ECC and NEPFT are implementing a research programme of multiple activities to stimulate fitness and well-being amongst individuals with MCI to determine if the further onset of dementia can be delayed.

The design and planning for the project began in September 2008 and has since developed into a effective partnership involving Adult Community Learning (ACL) Essex, staff from the North Essex Partnership Foundation Trust (NEPFT) and Essex Libraries. The work is funded by a grant from Adult Social Care Essex. At present the project is operating in the West of the county but has the potential to develop into other areas.

The project works with individuals who are demonstrating early signs of mild cognitive impairment and have been referred by their GPs to a memory clinic. These individuals are provided with information about the project and, subject to all appropriate requirements approved by the NHS ethics committee, are invited by the NEPFT research team to participate in a programme that stimulates physical, intellectual and social activity over a 12 week period. An initial assessment of each individual by the NEPFT research fellow gathers base-line data 12 weeks prior to the start of the planned programme of group- and home-based activities.

During the programme individuals undertake a series of physical, intellectual and social activities that have been designed, implemented and supported by ACL and NEPFT staff. Each stage of the programme aims to have one group of 8 individuals who meet in a single location twice a week as well as a further 8 individuals who are

home-based. To support the home-based participants a self-learning pack of resources, including a dvd showing demonstrations of each activity, is currently being finalised. These individuals also receive telephone and on-line support from the research fellow and the ACL tutors. At key stages of the programme physical and other data is gathered to monitor the effect on participants.

To facilitate replication of the actions beyond the research programme these activities are designed to be low-cost and capable of being carried out either in a group setting or individually. A key element of the project is to trial activities that are both financially viable and engaging to individuals in order to encourage more people to start and to continue with the activities.

The first cohort, based at the ACL premises in Rivermill, Harlow have completed their 12 week programme with very positive feedback from all participants and a great deal of data which is currently being recorded and logged prior to analysis. A second cohort, which started in mid-August, is underway, based in the Library in Epping.

The project is scheduled to work with a further 10 cohorts, with a planned end date in 2012, at which point the research outcomes will be written and published with, it is envisaged, a greatly increased body of knowledge on the beneficial effects of planned interventions for those identified with mild cognitive impairment.

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