Written evidence from University Hospitals Birmingham Umbrella Sexual Health Service

At a time when headlines refer to sexual health services up and down the country as being at breaking point, we would like to draw the inquiry’s attention to the highly successful service that is being provided in Birmingham and Solihull, where costs have been driven down whilst service quality has been improved in all 10 of the outcome areas agreed with the Commissioners.

Prior to “Umbrella” (the sexual health service commissioned by Birmingham City Council and Solihull MBC), the two Authorities spent circa £20m p.a. on Sexual Health Services through multiple service providers. It was a fragmented system, largely Hospital-based. The focus was on treatment rather than education and prevention. It failed to meet the needs of key priority groups, and public health outcomes benchmarked poorly against the rest of the country.

The service was put out to tender by the two Councils, who had a clear and positive vision. Rather than focus purely on cutting costs, they identified the ten outcomes that they wanted to achieve and asked bidders to explain how they would be met in a cost effective way.

The UHBFT response was a complete service redesign, which turned the traditional sexual health service model on its head, moving services away from Hospitals and into the community, helping to reduce stigma, expand prevention and self-care and create access for groups that were previously excluded.

Removing fragmentation and pushing services out into the community has reduced costs, whilst the network of integrated partner organisations creates over 300 Umbrella locations across the city, creating ease of access to a wide range of services.

The Umbrella network includes 132 individual GP practices who provide access to LARCs and chlamydia screening, 175 individual pharmacy locations that offer a wide range of sexual health services including STI screening, emergency contraception and Hep B vaccination, and over 30 Public and Third Sector and partner organisations, each selected for the priority groups that they work with and provide access to.

The integrated network is held together through a number of strategies. These include a clinical Senate, which provides representation from the major organisations, a centralised training resource, consistent branding, a shared marketing strategy for all providers, a mandatory governance structure, shared resources and “partnership away days” to develop strategy. The Umbrella service also has a designated clinical lead and a business manager who work together as a point of professional contact.

The partnership work that is commissioned by Umbrella helps us to reach the identified key priority groups. A good example is the work commissioned from Birmingham LGBT. The partnership with Umbrella enables the charity to reach marginalised sections of the community, such as LGBT refugees, homeless people, isolated older people and victims of sexual violence. With Umbrella, Birmingham LGBT offers a wide range of clinical services for the community, including a Trans Clinic, the “Well Woman” Clinic for Lesbians, a Chemfidential Clinic for service users who are engaged in “Chemsex”, and a PrEP Clinic to monitor the health of MSM who are buying PrEP via the internet.
Because of the work that is commissioned by Umbrella, members of the LGBT community are able to access services 80 hours per week, providing an important point of contact that the community feels comfortable with. Over the last 3 years, over 24,000 people have accessed sexual health services through the Birmingham LGBT Centre.

Within the Birmingham LGBT Centre, Umbrella provides funding for 7 FTE permanent staff, in addition to a number of sessional staff. There are 2 BME workers, one of whom works with South Asian and Middle Eastern MSM and one who works with Black African and African Caribbean MSM. Umbrella also funds a Trans worker and a Lesbian and Bi-sexual worker. In addition, Birmingham LGBT receives support from another Umbrella partner, The Rape and Sexual Violence Project, who provide ISVA support from LGBT specialist ISVAs; posts which are also funded by Umbrella.

New technology, such as on-line STI testing has revolutionised self-care, providing privacy and immediacy of access. Prior to Umbrella, there was no online STI kit ordering provision. Now, Umbrella manages over 3,000 requests for STI kits per month and receives over 2,000 kits per month back into the UHB labs for processing.

Dialogue with the Commissioners and their support during the tender process enabled Umbrella to fund a Research, Development and Evaluation Programme to help inform the service delivery and disseminate learning. This research evaluates how clinical services are delivered, which feeds into a continuous improvement programme. Umbrella is able to develop new approaches to service delivery and test these within a research environment before making a decision on whether to adopt them into routine practice. Through its service evaluation, Umbrella develops the skills of the sexual health workforce, to encourage retention and improve patient care.

Umbrella has delivered a radical change to the way in which people are accessing Sexual Health Services in Birmingham and Solihull, and a demonstrable improvement in public health outcomes.

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