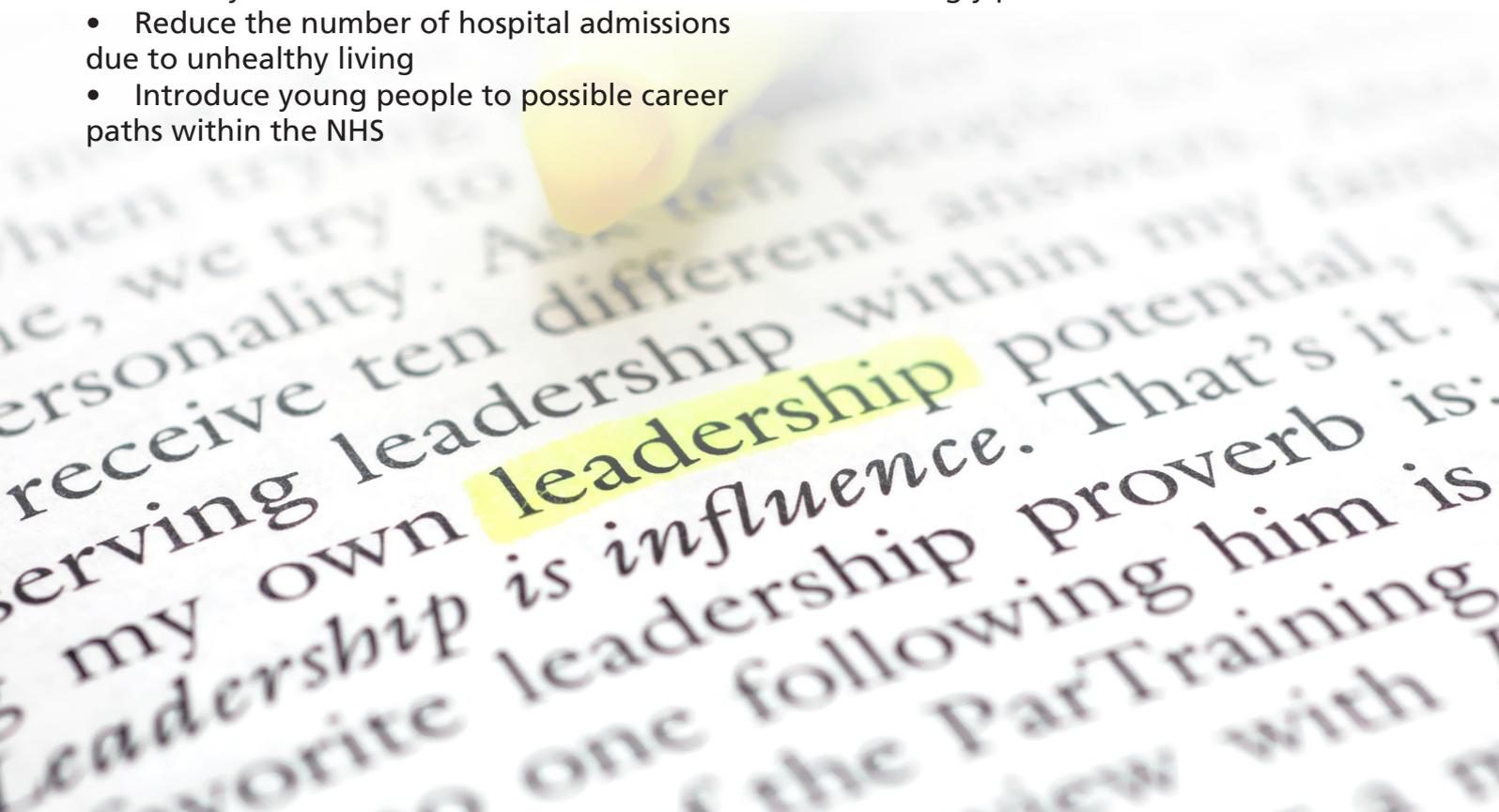


# Case Study: Youth Health Leaders in Blackpool Schools

Practice Development Sister Sharon Vickers was concerned at the numbers of young people coming to hospital with lifestyle related problems such as alcohol dependency, substance abuse and teenage pregnancy and wanted to do something to help these young people take charge of their own wellbeing and prevent hospital admission. She set up the Youth Health Leaders project in local schools to:

- Empower young people
- Give young people the knowledge to promote healthier lifestyles
- Improve the health of their local community
- Reduce the number of hospital admissions due to unhealthy living
- Introduce young people to possible career paths within the NHS

The project involves Sharon and a group of staff volunteering their time to go to schools, talk about health and wellbeing and recruit the children to become Youth Health Leaders – running their own projects and campaigns and educating themselves, with the help of Trust staff, about lifestyle factors and how these can impact health. The children have organised wellbeing days, invited staff to talk about a wide range of health issues, influenced school meals and networked with other schools in the area. This unique project is growing in scale and success as more schools join in and the reaction from children, parents and teachers has been overwhelmingly positive.



## Key Outcomes

- Six schools are now involved in the project, with more than 100 pupils acting as Youth Health Leaders (YHLs).
- The children have a more positive attitude, are leading healthier lifestyles and are showing better attention in class.
- Links between the schools and local healthcare organisations are strengthened as the pupils invite health professionals to come into school to get involved in their campaigns by giving talks. The health professionals invited so far have included doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, pharmacists and catering staff.
- School children are more aware of health issues. In one of the schools the Youth Health Leaders noticed that pupils were coming to school with bags of crisps for their breakfast, instead of taking advantage of the low cost, healthy breakfast options at school. They arranged a meeting with catering staff and explored options for making the healthy breakfast more appealing, rather than just offering pieces of fruit. The breakfast menu now includes healthy cereals and yoghurts as well as fruit and the YHLs created display boards showing the nutritional values of different foods and the harms caused by too much salt and sugar. The catering team at the school now ask the YHLs advice whenever they are reviewing their menus for lunches and snacks and pupils are making healthier choices with their food.

The Youth Health Leaders choose their own campaigns and these have included:

- The effects of poor diet on the body and mind
  - Mental Health issues and the link with alcohol consumption
  - Monthly seasonal initiatives, such as 'Sun damage to skin' or 'Depression'
  - Mental Health Issues
  - Young Carers
  - Work Experience and pupils expectations going into medicine
  - Effects of long-term alcohol consumption
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- Parents are also influenced by the programme. One parent wrote to the school after a talk about meningitis and said she knew nothing about this previously but was now going to ensure her daughter was vaccinated before she goes to university.
  - Children are learning about health issues and are influencing their peers to lead a healthier lifestyle, whilst at the same time learning some valuable life lessons around project management, communication, leadership skills and inequality and deprivation
  - PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic) teachers have developed communities of practice with their colleagues from other schools and now regularly communicate to swap ideas and discuss projects, and share the learning from these.
  - Children are learning about, and showing an interest in, the variety of careers in the NHS. One youngster had been quite dismissive of the project but, during a workshop on how to take blood samples using a mannequin, showed an aptitude for this skill. Sharon told her she had a genuine skill and the youngster later came to her and said, "I want to be a nurse when I leave school"

## Background

Blackpool Teaching Hospital provides a range of acute services to the 330,000 population of the Fylde Coast health economy and the estimated 11 million visitors to the seaside town of Blackpool. The Trust also provides a wide range of community health services to the 440,000 residents of Blackpool, Fylde, Wyre and North Lancashire. It was formed as a Foundation Trust in 2007 and became a Teaching Hospital in 2010. It has over 6,000 staff and 830 beds across several sites.

Blackpool has high deprivation, lower than average levels of educational attainment and declining levels of employment (Lancashire County Council, 2017). Health of young people in Blackpool is 'generally worse than the England average' (Public Health England, 2016: 1) with particular problems in the area of childhood obesity, teenage pregnancy, smoking and alcohol misuse. Sharon Vickers is a Practice Development Sister with experience of working with older people in hospital and was concerned at the number of young people coming into hospital with health conditions normally seen in later life. As a Staff Governor she approached the Governing Body with her suggestion to try to prevent these hospital admissions by improving youngsters' opportunities to learn about and improve their health and that of their community.

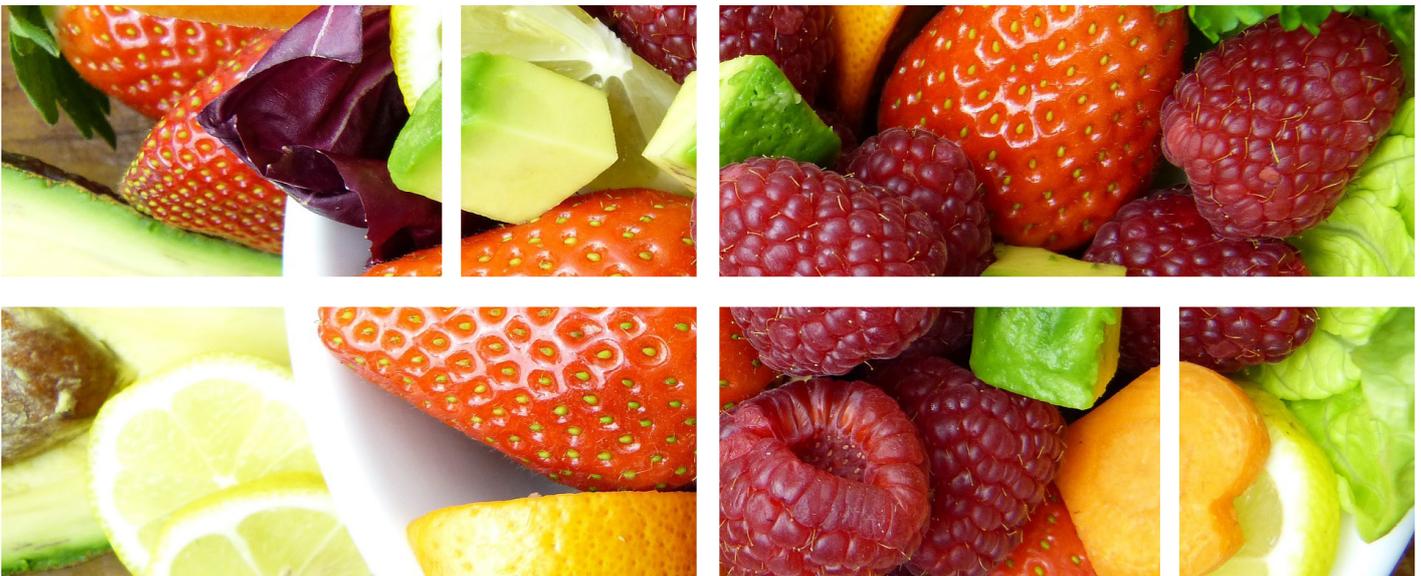
## Key Aims

**The aims of the programme are to:**

- Empower young people
- Give young people the knowledge to promote healthier lifestyles
- Improve the health of their local community
- Reduce the number of hospital admissions due to unhealthy living
- Introduce young people to possible career paths within the NHS

**With the desired outcomes being:**

- Awareness of local community issues
- Understanding of the impact on their local NHS
- Recognising the impact on their local community
- Facilitating a change in their own and their peers' lifestyles



## Key Stages of Set-up

The original idea was put to the Governors' Membership Committee in 2014, with the aim to pilot the project over a 12 month period in one school. The Governors were very supportive of the idea and Sharon's manager and the Associate Directors of Nursing were happy to allow Sharon time to get the project up and running. Sharon wrote to the head teacher of a local school and was invited to attend an assembly, where she spoke about the project, and explained that she wanted a group of 14-15yr olds to assist her in improving health awareness in the youth community. On the day, she received 93 applications from the pupils attending the assembly, all requesting to be involved in improving the wellbeing of their community.

And so it began, the selected YHLs started promoting healthier lifestyles during their lunch times, assemblies and classes. Those chosen as YHLs received First Aid Training from St. John's Ambulance and attended the Trust's annual Nurses Day event where they presented their work and ideas. They invited staff links from the hospital to give talks on subjects relating to health. The school and the hospital started working together well. Sharon realised the children were starting to take notice of their community and the welfare of their peers but also showing an interest in healthcare as a future career. This would be an optimal scenario, local people learning skills in looking after their own and taking pride in their community.

Following the success of the pilot at St. Mary's School, Sharon opened up the YHL's programme to other schools. There are now six local schools enjoying the benefits of working closely with Blackpool Victoria Hospital and promoting health. The children from each school come together to network and share their ideas. St. Mary's School have invited all YHLs to an event in July 2017, where they will promote their work and share their health initiatives. They plan an award for the YHL that has shown the most care and dedication to the programme.

## How it Works

The programme is introduced by Sharon, working closely with the PSHE teachers of the local schools, but all the work is done by the youngsters themselves. Once the YHLs have been recruited, usually at a school assembly, and the programme explained, they plan their own campaigns and events. Sharon keeps in touch through the PSHE teacher and is able to give contact details of staff who have offered their time to the programme. So, for example, Sharon heard that one school was interested in how lifestyle factors can affect concentration in class so she suggested they contact one of the trust's doctors, who is a sleep expert, to talk to them about the impact of late nights and computer games on sleep deprivation and concentration.

The children plan, co-ordinate and lead their own campaigns, thereby gaining valuable life lessons in project management, communication, leadership skills and, through collaborating with other local schools, are able to see inequality and deprivation across parts of the community.

Sharon is assisted in this work by Jacinta Gaynor, the Membership and Governors Officer and Simon Gupta, a hospital volunteer, who do a lot of the administrative work and maintain the close links with the schools; co-ordinating contact lists and event details. Sharon says:



**We are able to show the fun side of work. I love my job and really enjoy working at this trust and was able to share that with the children, who can now see that work in healthcare can be fun, despite the pressures and challenges.”**

## Key Challenges

- Getting an initial invite in to the schools to promote the YHLs initiative. This was achieved by perseverance.
- Finding time away from full time roles, for example as a Practice Development Nurse for the trust's Medical Division, 20 wards and departments must be covered. This was managed by gaining senior management support for the initiative.
- This is the first initiative of its kind which meant there was nothing to reference against. This was overcome through trial and error, and discussions with colleagues.

## Resources

The unique feature of this programme is that no funding is required. Staff may need permission to give talks during working hours but very often will do it on their days off. The Staff Governors' Membership Committee have given their support to this project and Sharon is very grateful to Jacinta and Simon for their work in driving this programme forwards.

## Key Learning

Starting a new initiative takes time and perseverance; you have to truly believe that your vision can be achieved and be of benefit once implemented. This initiative has shown that the NHS and Board of Education can work alongside each other to achieve a common goal.



**Your presentation to the group has really inspired them. I have had to email you as I am truly astounded at how they have embraced this programme. Please share this with the powers that be that young people do care and want to promote health issues with their peers.”**

*Helen Hotchkiss, Matron,  
AKS Lytham*



**The YHLs research health problems such as smoking, drinking, depression, anxiety and dental care. Attitudes towards smoking and drinking have improved. The move towards healthy eating and exercise has been slow, but it is definitely growing. We are certainly seeing improvements and a lot of that is down to the YHLs peer role models giving the message and evidencing the benefits, rather than this coming from teachers.”**

*Mr Simon Mitchell, PSHE  
Coordinator and Teacher of Business  
Studies, St Mary’s Catholic Academy*

### Next Steps

As well as inviting more schools to be involved the Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust now plans to further develop a Health Academy where school leavers are offered work experience, given support, advice and opportunities to get in to the career of their choice within the NHS. The two programmes should marry up well, hopefully encouraging youngsters to consider careers in their local NHS services.

For more information contact:

Sharon Vickers  
Practice Development Nurse  
[Sharon.vickers@bfwhospital.nhs.uk](mailto:Sharon.vickers@bfwhospital.nhs.uk)  
01253 300 000 ex 53862

### References

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