



Michael Austen

INTERVIEW

It's the vision thing

Hampshire Children's Trust, the only CAMHS trust in the country, was conceived as a new type of partnership organisation. Hilary Hickmore, who leads the trust, tells **Trina Wallace** how its unique structure is paying dividends

Sitting in a Basingstoke theatre among an audience of Hampshire CAMHS managers, Hilary Hickmore wasn't the only person feeling emotional. Hickmore and her colleagues were watching a play performed by some of the county's most vulnerable young people. Working with drama students from Winchester University, they were acting out traumatic experiences they had had to deal with.

The aim of the project, *Messing With My Head*, was to give young people with behavioural or social and emotional difficulties

(BESD) a creative way to express the impact of these experiences – and to convey what they thought of the way services had responded to their needs. It was conducted with groups from pupil referral units, young carers, supported accommodation and special schools.

'What was fascinating was the intensity and moving nature of what they were able to portray since many of these young people were unable to verbalise it in a normal conversation,' says Hickmore.

'They were saying that they'd really like easy access to services that could help them process that pain and distress they'd been through. There wasn't a dry eye in the building.'

The raps, poetry and plays of young people with experiences of CAMHS seem a million miles away when we meet Hickmore at Hampshire county council's Winchester children's services offices.

As head of the only CAMHS trust in the country, Hickmore plans to introduce arts programmes like *Messing With My Head* county-wide to encourage young people to have a say in how CAMHS is run. Indeed, Hickmore says one of the main achievements of the trust, established in April 2004, is its links with youth services, parents and carers to allow families to contribute views on service design and delivery.

'We have groups in all parts of the county to inform us on local needs and guide how we commission services,' says Leeds-born Hickmore. 'They tell us where there's a gap in service provision and we try to commission services to fill these. Then we collect

Hilary Hickmore – CV

Education: Surrey University; La Sainte Union Teacher Training College; Southampton University, Centre for Child Mental Health

1982-96	Educational psychologist; two years as middle school teacher
1996-2000	Senior specialist educational psychologist, Hampshire
2000-04	Manager, community team leader, Mid Hants
2004	Joined Hampshire's Children's Trust

data and see that services are doing their job. When they are, that's very satisfying.'

The trust was established by the seven primary care trusts (PCTs) then operating in the county, Hampshire social services and the county education department in a bid to encourage services across the county to work together in a more holistic and integrated way.

The trust is now funded by a pooled budget from Hampshire county council's children's services and a reconfigured, single Hampshire PCT. Hickmore, who joined the trust as commissioning and planning manager seven months after it was set up, says this structure makes it easier to ensure that new funds end up being invested in CAMHS.

Services are commissioned on 12-month contracts. Surpluses are invested in shorter-term projects like *Messing With My Head*. If services don't meet targets, they are decommissioned.

'What makes the trust different from the way other local authorities run their services is our broad definition of comprehensive CAMHS and the very inclusive nature of our partnership work,' says Hickmore. 'We define mental health services as all those services that promote and restore children and young people's emotional well-being.'

'The trust has set up 50 more posts and we want all commissioners and managers of services to be part of our planning and development. There's a greater sense of our providers being held within an overall strategy and plan.'

Hickmore accepts, however, that sometimes plans can be hard to get off the ground. Unitary authorities which involve fewer organisations and management hierarchies can be quicker and slicker at implementing services because they have a smaller infrastructure. Meetings, meetings and more meetings are, she admits, a feature of her role.

Indeed, Hickmore's job as strategy manager is currently a complex one as she has retained the responsibilities of her former post as commissioning and planning manager. Until this is filled, consultancy staff on fixed-term contracts will be brought in to provide additional expertise, as needed.

She says the CAMHS model for the county is comparable to the approach she adopted, on a smaller scale, when she worked as an educational psychologist.

'I have nearly 20 years' experience as an educational psychologist and I use the knowledge and understanding from my background every day in this job,' she says. 'The trust has a vision for youngsters, identifies the difficulties with getting there and then comes up with a plan. We then look at what resources we need, get them, put them in operation, monitor them. And if it doesn't work we start again and do something different. It's the same process as I'd use as an educational psychologist.'

Hickmore claims she has never come across any challenge which cannot be overcome by professionals working together to resolve it. 'We tackle developments as a shared challenge,' she says.

That said, Hickmore is realistic about the trust's future. She says it needs to enhance the capacity of services to respond quickly and intensively to children and young people in crisis. So the aim

Advantages of HCT structure

- Greater sense of system of providers being held within overall strategy plan
- Greater control over collective direction
- Enhancement of quality agenda: trust commissions and decommissions according to performance
- Enhanced equity of access
- Purchasing power of pooled surplus
- Funds protected for CAMHS.

Source: Hampshire Children's Trust

is to have fewer out-of-area Tier 4 placements and to reduce the number of young people admitted to adult mental health wards.

The trust also needs to get better at monitoring outcomes, says Hickmore. 'That's difficult to do meaningfully in the realm of mental health,' she says. 'How do you know when you've prevented a decline?'

Prevention has been one of Hickmore's key interests since she started studying psychology at Surrey University. She would like to see investment in ante and postnatal classes for new parents on how to manage their relationship after having a baby. 'There's new research from the USA which shows that the weeks following birth are risky periods for new parents because of the changing dynamic of their relationship,' she explains. 'This can create conflict which isn't good for the child.'

Indeed, Hickmore says that if she were a health minister she would 'start right at the beginning' and introduce ante and postnatal classes nationally. She says it would help society become more psychologically-minded about well-being. 'Youngsters don't behave badly because they want to,' she says. 'Their behaviour is born out of dealing with something that often you or I couldn't cope with.'

Having worked with young people, teachers and frontline CAMHS staff, it is obvious that Hickmore really believes in the positive potential of every child. She says you can read psychological theories on how to help young people with mental health needs, but it is not until you've had conversations with them directly that you can see how services can really help them. 'You can feel in the room their understanding crystallising, and them thinking "That's why I've been like that".' ■

“We have groups in all parts of the county to inform us on local needs and guide how we commission services. They tell us where there's a gap in provision and we try to fill these”



Trina Wallace is a journalist with ngo.media. www.ngomedia.org.uk