

Real-life story - Alix Sheppard

Alix began her career in drug and alcohol treatment and prevention. She says there seems to be a perception that young people are risk-takers; but it's not so. It's very much down to taking the right approach in working together.

Alix Sheppard Youth health programme advisor

Employer or university Self employed

Salary range Unknown

How I got into the role

My background is in drug and alcohol treatment prevention (having trained in substance misuse, leadership and management, motivational interviewing, stimulant drug misuse, alcohol IBA). I worked for a charity based in the East of England for several years, working my way from being a practitioner to manager. I subsequently developed a lottery-funded outreach service for stimulant drug users in the region.

I was then employed by NHS North East Essex public health team. We were commissioned to provide a Health Trainer programme and develop a network of 750 community volunteers. We then developed and piloted the first Youth Health Champion programme. This helped me gain skills in project development, project management, training and staff management in a public health setting. Having a supportive manager at that time helped greatly and the team were encouraged to be innovative in their approach to health promotion.

This more generic health promotion role appealed to me rather than the defined substance misuse role and I undertook a degree in Public Health, followed by an MSc in Public Health in addition to my full-time job. From gaining this experience and confidence I set up my own company 'Health Talks' to provide support to other organisations wishing to replicate or develop their own 'Youth Health Champion' model.

What I do

Health Talks offers training and consultancy to a variety of organisations both in the statutory and non statutory sectors. Currently I am commissioned to provide consultancy to HEE to coordinate the East of England UKPHR Practitioner registration scheme as well as being commissioned by RSPH to provide project management and advice to the Youth Health Movement and Youth Health Champion programme.

My company is also commissioned by local authorities, schools, youth centres, and other organisations, such as the Prince's Trust, to deliver bespoke health-related training, and I have a team of trainers who contribute to the delivery of these contracts.

My company is registered as an RSPH centre to provide accredited training courses, and we are in the

process of developing new qualifications for alternative accrediting bodies.

The biggest challenge is in linking up and integrating the wider workforce and public health promotional themes and setting standards.?

Don't think that because you don't yet have a qualification in public health that you wouldn't be able to do this type of work.

Career plans and top tips for others

I consider that the current public health climate is an exciting one to be working in with so many changes and opportunities for supporting the development of innovative health promotion roles within communities.

Since becoming involved in the development of young people I have completed a public health foundation degree and teaching qualification, and am now undertaking my MSc in public health.?

I feel that I have come to public health through a non-traditional route, gaining a lot of very practical hands-on experience before taking my qualifications. But, on reflection, the order of career development may not be so important. Having a Master's degree in public health doesn't always mean you have the practical skills for doing the job.

My advice would be not to think that because you don't yet have a qualification in public health that you wouldn't be able to do this type of work successfully. Many of those with clinical backgrounds have a lot of qualifications but not the experience.

I have found studying for the MSc in public health to be relatively straight forward, mainly because I have been able to draw on examples from my knowledge and practical experience when I've needed to provide evidence to support the theories and underpin research.

There are so many openings now for a wider range of providers within the third sector especially in delivering the Youth Health Champion programme.

There is also the opportunity for public health practitioner registration, a path I am currently undertaking myself as well as leading the East of England scheme. Registration provides a more up-to-date way of proving 'fitness to practise' and means that public health practitioners have a voice and a sense of belonging to a professional body.

With so much public health responsibility now sitting with local authorities there's a wider variety of community development work with young people arising.?

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