

"I love working with close colleagues and that my job is so diverse."

Vanessa's specialist area is the sexual health and healthy relationships of vulnerable young people. Working closely with the school nursing team and a number of other local agencies, she helps provide a service to meet sexual health priorities.

Vanessa McFarlane

Health improvement coordinator

Employer or university

Nottingham City Care Partnership

Salary range

£25k-£35k

Vanessa McFarlane

How I got into the role

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I knew in university that I was interested in social issues such as health, race and education so when a friend told me about a job in health promotion I applied and was successful. My degree is in social policy and administration and I think this was a useful subject area for my role.

Most of my skills and knowledge since completing my degree have been acquired whilst doing the job, such as training skills, project development and specific courses on sexual health and leadership.

What I do

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My work is targeted at the sexual health of vulnerable young people and I work closely with the school nursing service to reach them. I spend quite a lot of time developing and providing training to other professionals on sexual health issues so that they are equipped to deal with issues as they arise in their day-to-day work.

I cover the age range of five years to 25 years so every day can be very different. Making sure that adequate resources are available is part of what I do, but creating services that meet the needs of vulnerable young people is key to them accessing the service and this is the priority.

Vulnerable young people may or may not attend school, college or work, they might be on benefits, and they may be living in very poor conditions, either with their families or other similar young people. They may also be vulnerable because of their age, as with teenage pregnancies, or their culture or ethnicity. Whatever the reason, it is my job to work with colleagues and other agencies (such as education, police and social services) to ensure that the sexual health and relationships of young people are supported by all agencies appropriately.

The working week involves a mixture of office work and travel across the city. Over time, sexual health priorities may change. For example, not so long ago the emphasis was on chlamydia screening and teenage pregnancy; currently child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a big issue.

The best bits and challenges

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I love the fact that my job is diverse and that although my day-to-day focus might change, it all still comes under the umbrella of sexual health. This means my knowledge-base is forever expanding and I get a lot of job satisfaction.

I love working with close colleagues and other agencies. One achievement for me has been to build on previous work developed by a colleague to raise awareness of CSE. This involved working with a local theatre group to develop awareness-raising productions around the topic of CSE and then touring with this around local schools and

other organisations. I was involved in managing the second tour, engaging more and more partners, and this has recently been re-commissioned.

Other achievements I'm proud of include the training I have developed and delivered over the years, and a project I ran for 12 years called "Awaradressers," which involved the distribution of condoms via barbers' shops and hairdressers' across the city. The project brought sexual health and access to condoms and information to groups of people who often would be reluctant to access mainstream services.

Demonstrating the effectiveness of our service for evaluation purposes sometimes presents a challenge as outcomes that can't easily be counted may not be considered valuable in the eyes of the commissioner.

Life outside work

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Having a family definitely helps me maintain a good work-life balance. I'm good at leaving work at work, and try not to bring work home. I really enjoy gardening and reading and think I'm quite a social person. I like new experiences, enjoy travelling and seeing new places and I'm also happy relaxing in front of the TV with family.

Career plans and top tips for others

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At the moment I'm quite happy in my job and have no plans to move on or up. I love doing the frontline stuff and don't have any desire to move into a management position but who knows? Being in the NHS means frequent organisational change and if this presents me with a career crossroads then I know I have various choices.

I am aware that my skill base and the body of knowledge I have is relevant to working in other settings too, such as the police or education so I feel confident that I will always have options.

My advice would be to get some experience in the area of health improvement or public health. This might be working in the community supporting local people or groups around health issues. Being self-motivated and organised is important as the role can be very self-directed at times. Look at the qualifications required by local providers and be guided by this.

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