Thought Piece – Considerations for Digital Mental Health Providers Seeking to Break into Scottish Local Authority Market

Introduction

The mental health landscape in Scotland is changing, with new resources and service providers seeking to bring a range of interventions into the space that seek to provide more creative options for individuals to support their own mental health and wellbeing that harness the power of new and emerging digital technologies. In addition, there are currently a number of funding routes (e.g. Community Mental Health Supports and Services grant to all 32 local authorities) available to support local authorities to think differently about how they can meet the mental health needs of their populations.

Local authorities are bureaucratic organisations however, and there are a number of issues that new providers need to be aware of when seeking to work within this space.

1. Context is everything – although Scotland is a small nation, each local authority area has it’s own particular profile in terms of demographics, urban/rural geography etc which impact on the types of services that are required to meet the needs of their own populations. In addition, each local authority will have different approaches to contracts, finances etc which require navigating – e.g. in some local authorities, procurement is handled by a specialist team, in others it is devolved to services. There are pros and cons to each, but identifying which system is operating in a local authority you are approaching helps you understand who you need to speak to for different elements of the on-boarding process.
2. Due diligence – part of the bureaucratic nature of local authorities is the amount of regulation that must be adhered to in relation to procurement law, GDPR compliance etc. These processes are often lengthy, requiring the co-ordination of a number of local authority officers across a number of teams (see point 1 above) and can significantly impact on the amount of time it takes to get a product to launch. Failure to adhere to these processes can however have significant consequences, so it’s important to make sure that time and effort is built in to navigate them effectively.
3. Communications & marketing – Dr Chris Wright, Scottish Government’s Advisor in Digital Mental Health, has stated that ‘you spend 25% of your time getting a product operational, and 75% of your time telling people about it.’ This may seem like an exaggeration, but services (particularly those that are universally accessible) are only as good as eligible users awareness of them, so finding ways to support local authorities with an effective communication and marketing plan is key to driving uptake and engagement. Most local authorities have, at best, a limited amount of support from a PR/Comms team, whose responsibilities generally cover the whole range of local authority functions, so ‘in house’ support is limited. Providing a range of ‘off the shelf’ assets and materials that can be easily shared is key, alongside, if possible, face to face engagement sessions with key members of the target population to increase awareness and boost usage figures.
4. Partnership working – spend time getting to know who your key contacts are within a Local Authority and developing your relationship with them to understand what their particular needs and requirements are. Where possible, personalise your approach/offer to meet these specific needs, including in relation to data, recording and reporting.

Conclusion

Scottish Local Authorities offer diverse and unique opportunities to develop new and innovative approaches to supporting mental health and wellbeing across the population. Understanding this diversity, both within the population and within the organisational landscape of each Local Authority, is key to building new, effective and sustainable partnerships for the benefit of Scotland’s population.

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