

Study update, December 2023

The link worker role in primary care

Welcome to our December 2023 (and final) study update, designed to inform our project partners, public contributors and other interested parties about progress on the research we are conducting to answer important questions about the role of link workers in primary care (sometimes known by other terms, such as social prescribers or community navigators). Link workers are employed to support people with their non-medical needs (e.g. loneliness, financial worries, housing problems).



The study, funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), is led by Stephanie Tierney and Kamal Mahtani, both of whom work at the Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine, Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, University of Oxford. It is focusing data collection around link workers based in seven different parts of the country (study sites).

Knowledge exchange events

As the study comes to an end, we have organised three knowledge exchange events across England. These have the purpose of bringing together link workers and other stakeholders, disseminating learning from our study and getting feedback on what we have learnt from the project.

One event was in Birmingham in September; as well as involving presentations and activities with a wide local audience it also involved link workers we worked with on the research. These link workers were with us for two days. During this time, they were encouraged to get to know each other and to share similarities and differences in their roles. Their feedback on this meeting showed they had made valuable connections and learnt from each other about different ways of working.



Our second event was in Exeter in October. It brought together researchers and a wide range of delegates from health, social care and the voluntary sector working in social prescribing.

A third knowledge exchange was held in November in Sheffield. It involved a varied audience, including link workers and their managers, a commissioner, members of the public and researchers. People at this event said they welcomed the space to reflect and discuss views on social prescribing and the link worker role.

These knowledge exchange events have been a stimulating opportunity to meet up with those involved in social prescribing across the country, to hear their views on our findings and to think together what they might mean for practice and policy. Concepts from the research that we have highlighted during presentations at these knowledge exchange events have resonated with delegates, based on feedback they have provided at each meeting. They described these concepts as useful areas to consider when developing recommendations about the implementation of link workers in primary care.

We have produced blogs from each of these meetings:

- [Blog on Birmingham meeting](#)
- [Blog on Exeter meeting](#)
- [Blog on Sheffield meeting](#)

Academic papers about the study's findings

The research team and co-applicants are writing three academic papers based on findings from the study. This is part of our commitment to our funder (the [National Institute for Health and Care Research](#)) to ensure our research is disseminated and recommendations arising from it are communicated to practitioners, policy makers and other researchers. These papers are around the themes of link worker 'holding', 'micro discretions' in link worker practice and a paper about patient outcomes of social prescribing. These papers will be submitted to academic journals for peer review and publication and should be available online during 2024. We will also be producing summaries of these papers – in the form of policy briefs and infographics.

Final public involvement meeting

Our final meeting with our Patient-Public Involvement (PPI) group was held in early November 2023. At this meeting, we invited those present to reflect on their role in the project. They had enjoyed being part of the team, stressing the importance of relationships with each other and with researchers as a key reason for their on-going involvement. They felt they had been able to contribute to our interpretation of findings via the variety of activities we developed for them over the seven PPI meetings we had during the project. Those in the group stated they had learned a lot about social prescribing over the duration of their involvement.

Meet a member of the research team: Kamal Mahtani



I am a Professor of Evidence-Based Healthcare at the University of Oxford. My research primarily focuses on how evidence-based research can improve patients' care and services. In addition to my research work, I continue to work as a GP in the NHS, which allows me to combine my clinical work with my research and teaching.

One of the topics that I love to explore in my research work is social prescribing. This concept acknowledges that many factors, including our physical health, mental

well-being, environment, and social and community networks, influence our health and well-being. Social prescribing aims to address some of these factors by connecting patients with community resources that can help them improve their overall health and well-being.

I am grateful to work with a fantastic team of researchers who share my passion for this important work. We get to meet many wonderful people in the community who are doing great things to improve the health and well-being of the community.

When I'm not working, I enjoy spending time with my family, taking coastal walks, and supporting Liverpool FC. I'm particularly passionate about gardening, especially lawn care. I take great satisfaction in mowing the lawn and admiring the stripes after a job well done.

Thank you

We would like to extend a huge thank you to our supportive stakeholder groups who have advised us for the duration of the project. We have been very fortunate to have a team of six dedicated and insightful public contributors who formed the study PPI group. They met with us seven times during the study. They have given us alternative perspectives on our findings and interpretation of data.

We also met, on two occasions, with another group of 10 public contributors with an interest in health research. In addition, our study advisory group, consisting of those delivering and/or funding social prescribing and voluntary-community sector organisations involved in social prescribing, listened and advised on our progress and thoughts during the study. We met with the advisory group five times during the project.

Our steering committee has had oversight of the study. They have met with us three times during the project to ensure that we were on track with data collection, to explore our thoughts about dissemination and to discuss with us any difficulties experienced whilst undertaking the research. We would also like to thank the practices, link workers, patients, staff and voluntary sector organisations who were involved in and helped us with data collection for the study. We have learnt a huge amount from being able to spend time with these individuals and talk to them about social prescribing in primary care.

New study on retention of link workers and factors shaping their intention to leave their job

Following on from our study around the implementation of link workers in primary care, we have [started a new project](#) on retention of this workforce. Being a link worker, although rewarding, can be difficult. They support people who are finding life challenging (e.g. because they are lonely, are worried about where they live or how they will afford food). Link workers may not always receive the training or supervision they need in their workplace to manage the stress that can come from the job.

The new research aims to understand factors that shape how link workers find doing their job. It will explore how these factors affect their wish to stay in or leave their job. We have asked link workers to complete an online questionnaire (this closed at the end of November). We will invite some of those people who completed the questionnaire (about 20) to be interviewed. Interviews will allow us to explore findings from the questionnaire in more detail. Before interviews, link workers will be asked to take photographs of things that reflect their experiences of the job. These photographs will be discussed as part of the interview.

The study will run until the end of 2024. It is funded by [NIHR School for Primary Care Research](#) (Award 678). Please contact Stephanie Tierney (stephanie.tierney@phc.ox.ac.uk), who is leading this study, if you have any questions about it.

Stay in touch

If you would like any more information about this research on the link worker role in primary care, please see our [project page](#) or contact the two leads on this study:

- Dr. Stephanie Tierney stephanie.tierney@phc.ox.ac.uk
- Prof. Kamal R. Mahtani kamal.mahtani@phc.ox.ac.uk

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of their host institution, organisations mentioned or the study's funder.