

Study update, June 2023

The link worker role in primary care

Welcome to our June 2023 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 as social prescribers or community navigators). They are employed to support people with 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).

Data collection update

We are still conducting follow up interviews with patients we talked to about 9-12 months ago as part of the study's first work package. We have managed to follow-up 30 patients so far. We have also talked to 5 link workers again. In these follow up interviews, we are testing out some of our thinking that has come from analysing our data to date. This involves sharing ideas with our interviewees and seeing if they make sense or not to them.

In-person analysis team meeting

We had another in-person analysis meeting in May 2023. We talked about some of the key topics we are developing from the data. Our discussions included thoughts about discretion-boundaries around how link workers conduct their job, and the consequences of varying levels of flexibility within different aspects of the role. We also talked about the data we have received from patients – from well-being measures and self-efficacy scores, and interviews at two timepoints (9-12 months apart). We talked about the limitations of the link worker role in terms of how far they can change more structural circumstances of patients and realistic expectations of what link workers should be held accountable for helping patients to address in their life.

Blogs and publications

Here are some recent publications written by members of the team that might be of interest:

- Debra Westlake, Stephanie Tierney, Geoff Wong, Kamal R Mahtani (2023) Social prescribing in the NHS—is it too soon to judge its value? [British Medical Journal](#)
- Stephanie Tierney - [Holding, diversity and the link worker role: Reflections on a patient-public involvement meeting](#)
- Debra Westlake, Stephanie Tierney, Amadea Turk, Steven Markham, Kerryn Husk, Richard Blackwell - [Metrics and measures: What are the best ways to characterise our study sites?](#)
- Amadea Turk - [Understanding social prescribing in socially and economically disadvantaged settings: Emerging findings and future research priorities](#)
- Stephanie Tierney - [What does it mean for link workers to fit or belong in primary care? Reflections on a conference presentation](#)

Patient-public involvement (PPI) meeting in Sheffield



Project lead, Stephanie Tierney, returned to a PPI group in Sheffield that she first met in summer 2022. She had agreed to revisit the group to provide an update on how the study was progressing. She had a really productive conversation with the ten people who were present over the two-hour meeting. We talked about some of the key concepts we have identified from the data – holding, belonging, discretion and boundaries. We also discussed diversity in relation to the link worker role and patients who were engaging in social prescribing.

The photo above was taken at this meeting.

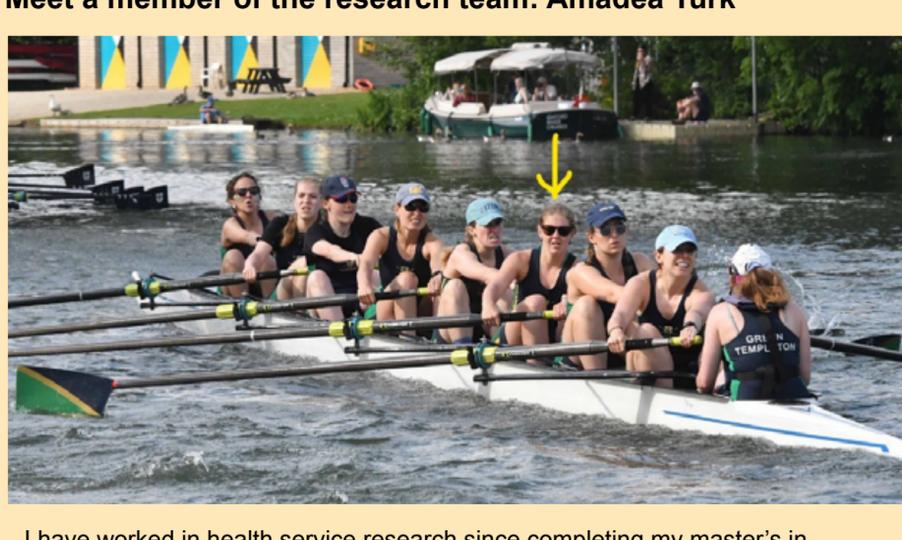
Presentation at the British Journal of General Practice

Stephanie Tierney presented some of the emerging ideas coming from our data at a conference held in London at the end of March. This was a good opportunity to get feedback from people working in and/or researching primary care. There was a useful discussion after the presentation with those in the audience.

We have published a blog on this event (see above).



Meet a member of the research team: Amadea Turk



I have worked in health service research since completing my master's in medical anthropology in 2016. I have worked on a range of different projects related to primary care and health service design and delivery, including projects on online patient feedback, developing online support for carers, patient-centred approaches to medication management, and social prescribing. As part of this project, I undertook fieldwork at three of the research sites used within the link worker study. I now lead my own project as part of my PhD, which focuses on how social prescribing is being implemented in socially and economically disadvantaged areas.

In my free time I like to stay active by attending group exercise classes at my local gym, running outside and attending ParkRun. This year I was also the women's co-captain of Green Templeton College Boat Club. Through rowing, I have been able to be part of one of the biggest sporting communities at the University and have been able to compete in regattas both within the University and outside of it. It has been a great way to make friends and build connections, as well as develop skills for managing teams and supporting people.

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.