

Study update, September 2022

The link worker role in primary care

Welcome to our September 2022 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).

Link workers 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).

Where are we in progressing the research?

In September 2022, we started collecting data on the final case study for the project. Researchers are spending time with a link worker in a part of England we haven't yet studied. They will watch the link worker at meetings and with patients, and talk to healthcare professionals, voluntary sector organisations and patients from that particular site. This will add to our developing understanding of how the link worker role is implemented in different parts of the country. At the end of 2022, we will begin gathering additional data from our previously studied sites, to clarify and strengthen our knowledge on the topic.

Analysis team meeting

As a team, we meet monthly to discuss and examine the data as we're collecting it. In July 2022, we had an extended analysis meeting, at which we discussed some preliminary findings. We discussed boundaries, and their absence, regarding the link worker role in primary care. We also discussed how we manage and 'code' the collected data to help us make sense of it.

Research discussions with public involvement group

On 15 July 2022, one of our research leads, Stephanie Tierney, visited a public involvement group in the north of England. It consists of people from a range of backgrounds, with a range of life experiences. The group shared their understanding of the term 'social prescribing' and the role of link workers as part of this, whilst Stephanie explained our ongoing study. She invited the group to comment on who social prescribing might be relevant for, and what barriers and enablers there may be to accessing such services. They also discussed how link workers might experience their role and areas where they might need support. It was a valuable exercise to get their feedback, and the team are extremely grateful for the time they gave us. Stephanie plans to return to this group in 2023 to provide an overview of some of the study's findings.

'Knowledge Exchange' event: Connecting link workers with the cultural sector

Members of the research team held a 'knowledge exchange' event in June 2022. This event stemmed from some previous research they had carried out looking at how the cultural sector could support older people as part of social prescribing. A key finding from this research was that link workers and cultural providers did not interact that much. Therefore, link workers were not sure how cultural providers could play a role in social prescribing and cultural providers were not sure what social prescribing was about. The event allowed link workers and cultural providers to network and discuss their potential to collaborate as part of social prescribing. It also gave link workers the chance to try out creative/cultural activities in the afternoon (e.g. singing, dancing, knitting, origami, drawing). [Further details of this event can be found at our website.](#)

Publications

Members of our project team, including Stephanie Tierney, Jordan Gorenberg, Geoff Wong, Amadea Turk, Kerryn Husk and Kamal Mahtani have published new research papers. They report on work from a previous study, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, on social prescribing for older people involving the cultural sector. Although not an output of our current link worker project, these papers relate to social prescribing and might be of interest:

1. [Stephanie Tierney et al. 2022. Social prescribing for older people and the role of the cultural sector during the COVID-19 pandemic: What are link workers' views and experiences? Health and Social Care in the Community. 00:1-9.](#)
2. [Stephanie Tierney et al. 2022. Tailoring cultural offers to meet the needs of older people during uncertain times: a rapid realist review. BMC Medicine 20, 260, 1-12. about the study and its focus on the link worker role.](#)

Meet the research team

We want to use these updates to introduce you to various members of our research team. In this edition, we are pleased to introduce you to the newest member of our research team, Steven Markham. Steven has joined us to support data collection at our final case study site and to conduct follow up interviews with patients. He will also be involved in analysing data, and provides an insight into his interests below:

"I am delighted to be joining the team looking at the role of link workers and social prescribing in Primary Care. I recently completed my PhD at the University of Sheffield focusing on men's sheds. Men's sheds are community-based groups that provide space and facilities for men to work on woodwork projects. Whilst working on projects, men share skills, learn from each other and make new social contacts. Two of the groups that I studied take referrals from social prescribers. With no targets to meet and a focus on purposeful activities, men report enjoying how they spend their time and being able to meet other men like themselves.

Before I became an academic, I used to work in an NHS Public Health department designing and managing projects to improve community health and wellbeing. These are the types of social activities that link workers refer patients to. For example, with colleagues I developed a series of weekly, group-based health walks at local community venues across the region where I worked. People usually came to the walks to improve their fitness. They often continued to attend because they liked meeting old friends, new acquaintances and enjoyed a cup of tea (and maybe a biscuit) after their exertion. Some people also volunteered to lead walks and planning which routes to take. As with men's sheds, people have fun coming together and being involved in purposeful activities. I appreciate working on projects that positively influence people's lives and I am looking forward to drawing on my experiences to understand more about social prescribing."



Steven involved in teaching



An example of a Men's Shed

Stay in touch

If you would like any more information about this project, please see our [project page](#) or do not hesitate to contact our project leads:

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- Prof. Kamal R. Mahtani kamal.mahtani@phc.ox.ac.uk

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