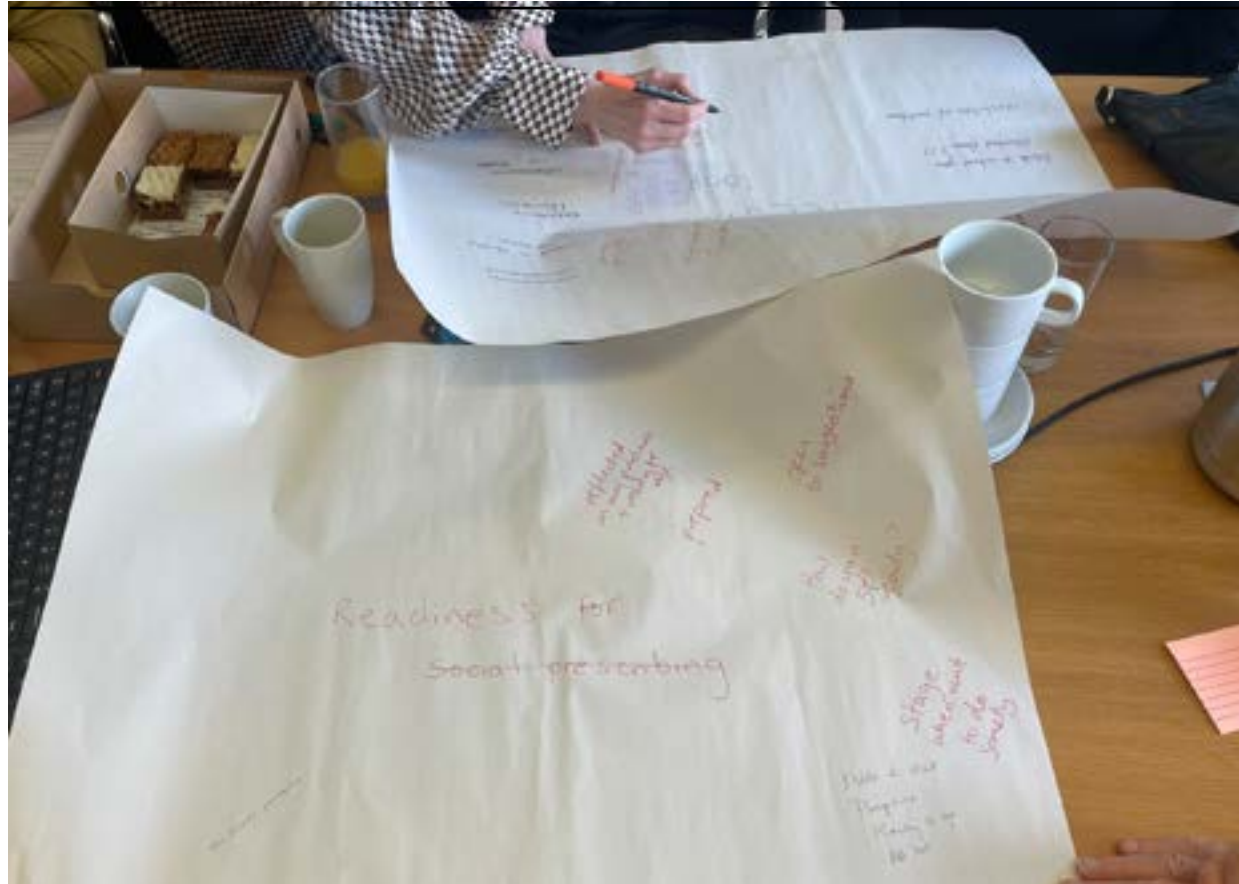


Study update, December 2022

The link worker role in primary care

Welcome to our December 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). 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).

Where are we in progressing the research?

We have completed work package 1 for the study. This has involved spending three weeks with seven link workers in different parts of the country. We have also interviewed people they work with (patients, healthcare professionals and voluntary-community sector staff).

We are now moving into conducting work package 2. This involves following up patients we interviewed in work package 1 about 9-12 months later.

In work package 2 interviews, we will ask patients about how they have been, whether they used any community services/support/organisations that a link worker connected them to and whether they felt they benefited from speaking to a link worker.

Meetings

During the autumn, we have had a number of meetings with groups who are supporting us with the study and its conduct:

- Steering committee – this group has oversight of the project. We discussed the study's progress and challenges we have experienced when carrying out data collection.
- Advisory group – we presented to this group, composed of people involved in delivering social prescribing, some insights into data collected from two sites involved in the project. We had some interesting feedback on measurements used to assess the link worker role. There was a discussion about the appropriateness of GP usage (specifically, a reduction in how often people went to their GP) as a measure; it was thought that this takes away from the central premise of social prescribing to support people with their non-medical needs. We also had a conversation about questions that might be asked in work package 2 interviews if we re-interviewed link workers.
- Patient-public involvement (PPI) group – we had our first face-to-face meeting with our PPI contributors; our other meetings with this group had been online. It was great to catch up and update them about the research. They also threw themselves into activities we had organised. We invited them to think about and comment on concepts we have been developing from the data. The photo at the top of this update was taken at the meeting and comes from one of the activities we ran with the group. Further details of this meeting have been outlined on our [study PPI webpage](#) and in a [blog](#) (see below).

Blogs

Members of the team have written some blogs related to social prescribing over recent months that you might be interested in reading.

- Steven Markham - [Who creates the interventions that social prescribing link workers refer to and what social programmes are appropriate for whom?](#)
- Stephanie Tierney - [Supporting people with lived experience of prisons through social prescribing: Reflections on a knowledge exchange event](#)
- Jordan Gorenberg - [Exploring the role of green spaces in social prescribing: A knowledge exchange event](#)
- Stephanie Tierney and Debra Westlake - [Stepping outside the screen: Reflections on our first face-to-face \(rather than remote\) PPI meeting](#)

Meet the research team: Debra Westlake

I joined the team in September 2021. How time flies! It has been a pleasure to be part of a friendly and welcoming group. I have really enjoyed being involved in the fieldwork for the project – going out and meeting staff, talking to patients about social prescribing and observing how it works on the ground in doctors' surgeries.

Previously I worked for the University of Plymouth on social prescribing research and other projects to do with person-centred care. I was a Researcher in Residence for Devon Integrated Care System. I worked alongside commissioners and service providers to understand what was working, and where any barriers were, in implementing social prescribing across the county. This post coincided with the COVID pandemic so I was actually a researcher in my own residence for a year, but was able to connect with social prescribing link workers using online platforms like Zoom. It was an interesting time to see how they found creative ways to work with people, many of whom felt very isolated during lockdowns.



I am still working with the University of Plymouth on a project that is designing a peer support worker programme for refugees. Features of this programme will overlap with social prescribing, but working with the specific needs of this population who are often excluded from services.

I originally trained as a Speech and Language therapist and have also worked overseas quite a bit. I founded two pre-school nurseries in shanty towns of Lima, Peru and ran a charity in the UK to support them for many years.

I feel very fortunate that hybrid working patterns allow me to continue to live in Devon and work remotely for Oxford.

Stay in touch

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

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Acknowledgements: This research is funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR130247). Thank you to all the patients, practitioners and voluntary sector providers who have taken part in the study.

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.