



National
Academy
for Social
Prescribing



ACCELERATING INNOVATION
in social prescribing



7 steps to wellbeing through volunteering:

How to link to social prescribing



June 2022

What is this guide and who is it for?

We've created this guide to help volunteer-involving organisations support people who may come to volunteering as part of a social prescribing journey.

The advice and steps in this guide have been developed with practitioners from across the social prescribing movement, including local and national charities, volunteer centres and councils for voluntary services (CVS), link workers, volunteer managers, and volunteers.

The guide focuses on the aspects of volunteering that may require new ways of thinking and approaches on the part of the volunteer-involving organisations, to ensure someone's health and wellbeing are supported and nurtured as part of a social prescribing journey.

There's already a lot of great guidance on volunteering good practice, so this guide focuses mainly on what we think organisations need to know about what's different in social prescribing. The advice and principles are designed around the individual participant and their journey.

How to use this guide

In this guide we bring together 7 steps you can take to design volunteering programmes that work for people with health and social care needs who may come to you through social prescribing. It includes why these steps matter, and how you can think about acting on them in your organisation.

As well as the guide we've put together some simple infographics you can use to explain the steps to your colleagues or partners. On our [website](#) you'll also find additional resources and tools that can help you put the steps into action.

We'd like you to take the guide and test it out, check it against your own experience and that of your volunteers, and let us know what you think. You can send us your feedback, suggestions, stories and resources by filling out this [form](#).



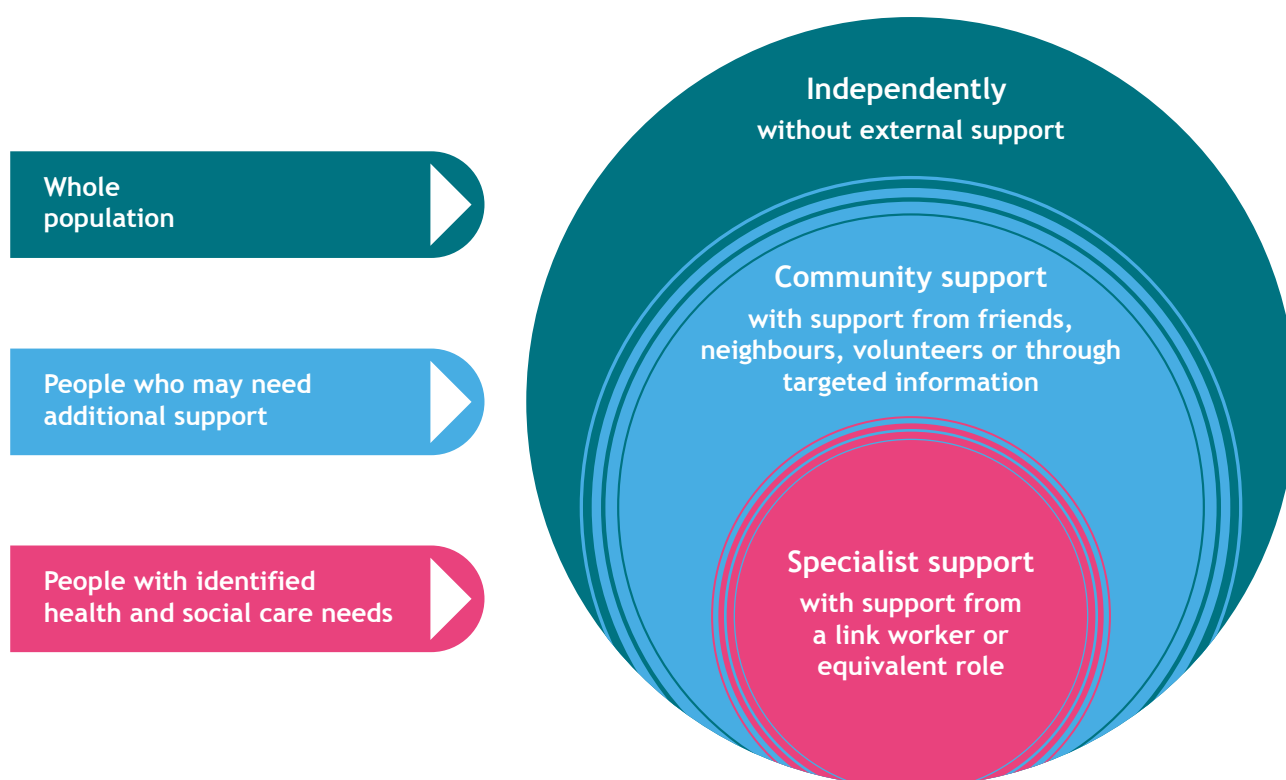
What is Social Prescribing?

At its most simple, social prescribing is a way to connect people to practical and emotional support in their communities and beyond. Many important health outcomes are not directly related to healthcare, so support and activities that address the social determinants of health can create a more lasting change in someone's life.

Social prescribing takes a personalised approach to someone's needs and circumstances. For people with identified health and social care needs, it all starts with a 'what matters to me' conversation with a link worker. Together they work on a personal plan that takes into account someone's aspirations and needs, and suggests ways to find support in local activities and other services.

There are lots of other ways for people to find activities and support for their wellbeing, including through friends and family, local community connectors, charities and groups. Often people find these activities independently, without formal support.

You can find out more about social prescribing [here](#).



Common routes to volunteering in social prescribing contexts

People make their way to volunteering in different ways, and for different reasons. When it comes to social prescribing the different pathways may look something like this.

Individuals find local volunteering opportunities directly, or with the help of friends and family. Local community connectors or volunteer centres can help people find the right opportunity for them. People with identified health and social care needs may find volunteering through their link worker.



Some link workers told us that people may not be open to considering volunteering at an early stage in their social prescribing journey. They may feel overwhelmed by other concerns, or low in confidence and time. However, volunteering can often come up during the latter stages of the social prescribing process, or as part of an ‘exit interview’ where people think about longer-term actions they can take on.

We also heard of many instances where people who were referred to social activities for their wellbeing stayed on to volunteer afterwards. Progression into volunteering might be the most common way for people to reach you.

What do we mean by volunteering?

Volunteering can take different forms, but is at heart a deliberate action to improve the world in some way. It should be carried out freely without coercion, and without being paid.

The [Vision for Volunteering](#) puts it this way:

A volunteer might not consider themselves to be a volunteer. Perhaps they think of themselves as ‘helping out’, ‘being neighbourly’, ‘taking part in my community or faith group’, ‘supporting a cause’, or undertaking ‘social action’ - or they use another term altogether.

Volunteering might be structured and organised through a group, club or charity. It may be more self-directed or spontaneous, like the plethora of mutual aid witnessed during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. It may be a regular activity, a one-off, or anything in-between.

Volunteering can involve anything from doing shopping for a neighbour, being a trustee or coaching a sports team, to acting with others to help tackle issues from climate change and racism to food and fuel poverty.

Can volunteering be part of a ‘social prescription’?

It might seem contrary to the basic principle of volunteering, that people shouldn't be told to do something that should be freely chosen.

This is largely a problem of terminology; link workers and other social prescribers don't actually ‘prescribe’ treatment the way a doctor would. Instead, they co-develop a plan of action with someone, making suggestions, recommendations and referrals based on local knowledge and other evidence. Like all forms of volunteering, there should be no coercion to any aspect of the plan, but a shared agreement.

However, when organisations welcome volunteers ‘on referral’ they should make doubly sure that they don't feel pressured to take part.

In many cases it may well be that becoming a volunteer in running a project can be a natural progression from being a participant, and this may be a common route for people coming through a social prescribing referral.



Why is volunteering a great option for social prescribing?

- Volunteering is associated with improved wellbeing, increased happiness and easing of depression and anxiety.^{1,2}
- Older people, unemployed and those with chronic ill health and low wellbeing gain more from volunteering than others.^{1,2} These are often the people who are referred to social prescribing.
- Volunteering also has a buffering role for those going through life transitions like bereavement and retirement.¹ These are also points in time at which people can benefit from social prescribing.
- Volunteers have reported feeling less lonely, and feeling that their physical health is better.²
- But people with the most to gain from volunteering face barriers to getting involved because of lack of opportunity, with ill-health and disability particular barriers for low-income groups.¹ These groups may benefit from the additional support provided by social prescribing link workers
- However, wellbeing is only associated if the volunteering experience is good. Feeling burnt out and unappreciated is a risk to wellbeing.¹

There are many reasons to consider volunteering to be a powerful activity to improve health and wellbeing. The guidance below will help you plan and design volunteering roles and journeys that work for people and maximise those benefits.



¹ Stuart, J. and Abreu Scherer, I. (2020) Volunteer wellbeing: what works and who benefits?. What Works Centre for Wellbeing and Spirit of 2012

² Smith, A. (2022) Volunteering – a powerful social prescription, Royal Voluntary Service

Challenges and benefits to your organisation

Whichever route brings them to you, bear in mind that you are likely to be working with a volunteer with a different set of needs, motivations, and capacities to those you might typically engage. They may need substantial additional support both to access volunteering and to have a positive experience when they start.

Many people coming through a link worker referral will be struggling with their mental or physical health, which may require additional knowledge and resources from you. They may have experienced a stressful or traumatic event in their lives or be dealing with very difficult ongoing problems.

However, these new volunteers can be key to extending your reach to more diverse communities, and help you connect to otherwise excluded groups. Their involvement can help you better understand the communities you serve and so make you more effective. People with lived experience can bring powerful testimony and insight to your organisation as trustees or advisors, helping you improve your practice.

Most importantly, setting up an environment and approach which supports people's health and wellbeing will benefit all volunteers, regardless of how they find their way to you.



This guide sits alongside a number of broader conversations about the future of volunteering. The 10-year [Vision for Volunteering](#), launched in May 2022, is one such important development. In focusing here on a strengths-based approach to volunteering in social prescribing, we think this guide echoes some of the wider trends consultees to the Vision felt were important in creating the kind of future they wanted to see.

“I’m delighted that this guide supports good volunteering in social prescribing and that it chimes with many of the Vision for Volunteering’s key themes - in particular, that volunteering should be accessible and welcoming, removing barriers from those who would most benefit. The strengths-based approach also reflects the Vision’s desire to see more power in the hands of volunteers, and the emphasis on building circles of support builds on what the Vision says about making collaboration and experimentation in volunteering more mainstream.”

Jarina Choudhury, Strategic Volunteering Lead, NCVO

7 steps to wellbeing through volunteering

Design principles and advice

1. Meet people where they are



2. Make it personal



3. Put wellbeing at the heart



4. Build circles of support



5. Make it social



6. Remember it's a journey



7. If you treasure it, measure it



#1 Meet people where they are

When welcoming volunteers as part of a socially prescribing pathway, it's important to acknowledge different starting points and contexts.

Volunteering won't be the only type of activity recommended through social prescribing, but it can be a good option if the person is likely to benefit from increased social connections, feeling a sense of belonging, having a chance to use their talents or lived experience or taking on a regular new routine with some commitment or responsibility.

However, volunteering may not be appropriate if they feel very uncertain or vulnerable, lack confidence, or are likely to require a lot of emotional support.

Why it matters:

- People may find their way to you via a number of different routes - through link workers, community referrals or independently
- They will come with different attitudes to volunteering, from enthusiastic and confident, to hesitant and unsure
- Volunteering might not be 'on their radar' - they may have other, more pressing needs to consider before they have the time or motivation to think about volunteering
- And even when volunteering is a good option for improving wellbeing, it may still need to be tailored or personalised to their individual needs.

What you can do:

- Be prepared for people to be unsure about taking on volunteering, especially if they are new to it or have barriers to taking part due to their health, mobility, time or income
- Make it clear that progressing from being a participant to a volunteer is possible, easy, and fulfilling
- Make sure the type and frequency of volunteering is appropriate to people's starting points - and that it can grow and adapt as people get more confident and involved
- Flexibility may be the key to involving people with complex conditions. Some will want the option of volunteering remotely or online, or change the intensity of their volunteering
- Think about whether there might be other volunteering opportunities in your local community that might be more suitable than those your organisation can offer and signpost to them.



#2 Make it personal

Social prescribing is a person-focused approach, taking a holistic look at what's going on in someone's life to help them achieve their aims. Bringing this approach through into volunteering will ensure that people's experiences are suited to their circumstances, motivations and potential.

Taking a 'what matters to me' approach is an opportunity for people to share and discuss their needs in the round. Using strengths-based approaches to find out what they really enjoy or how they can share their lived experience as part of volunteering are important for people coming through social prescribing.

Why it matters:

- Our wellbeing is affected by everything that happens in our lives, is unique to each of us and changes over time. Context always matters, so getting the whole picture is vital
- Through social prescribing people may develop a personal plan with a link worker, which sets out their aims and ways to meet them. Knowing how volunteering fits into this plan is important to make sure you can support people's wider aims and activities;
- Motivations for volunteering can vary but may include building skills, finding new friends, becoming more active or having a regular structure. Be aware that these can shift over time, meaning you may need to revisit 'what matters to me'. As people feel better their motives, energy and confidence can change.

What you can do:

- Continue to revisit 'what matters to me' conversations, so you can keep up to date with what's going on in people's lives and how you can adapt your offer
- Some people may need additional support to take part in volunteering, and this should be carefully planned and resourced
- Your local volunteering centre or CVS is an invaluable resource to help identify people's additional support needs and how you can work with others locally to meet them.



Case study: Betty* from Conal



Betty is a full-time carer for her husband who was referred to a link worker for anxiety and depression. The first thing the link worker did was help arrange social care for Betty's husband and respite for her.

Betty's experience with how health and social care worked led her to take up an offer of becoming a Health Watch champion for her local area. She also helped compile a database of local activities that could benefit others like her, and later set up a 'chatty café' model coffee morning.

Volunteering was not explicitly requested by Betty when first meeting her link worker, but by exploring options together this evolved naturally. The link worker's links to the local CVS ensured Betty could find the right volunteering opportunities to support her personal plan.

*Name changed for privacy.



#3 Put wellbeing at the heart

Volunteering is associated with a raft of wellbeing outcomes, especially for those with low wellbeing. This makes it a great candidate for a social prescribing activity.

Why it matters:

- Well-designed volunteering can help increase happiness, alleviate depression and anxiety - especially beneficial for those taking up social prescribing, who can suffer from chronic health conditions or low wellbeing
- Volunteering also has a buffering role for those going through life transitions like bereavement and retirement, who may be referred to social prescribing for connected reasons
- Social prescribing refers people to all kinds of wellbeing-boosting activities, such as art and music, exercise, being in nature, and social groups. When people feel welcomed and supported in those activities they often want to progress to 'helping out', giving them (and you) additional benefits
- Highlighting the wellbeing benefits is key in securing the commitment and resources from funders and commissioners to enable you to provide the support needed by the volunteers

What you can do

- Make use of the unique wellbeing-boosting aspects of volunteering: giving people purpose and meaning, creating shared identity and belonging, sharing and learning skills, and social connection and enjoyment
- As people's wellbeing changes your volunteering offer may need to change too. People may want to take on more challenging roles as they feel more confident, or then may need flexible volunteering as health conditions flare up or other demands on their time take priority
- Remember, those with the most to gain from volunteering often also face the greatest barriers (typically time, a disability and ill health, low income). Consider how you can support them in practical ways in getting to the activity and sustaining their involvement
- Check with funders and commissioners what measures of wellbeing outcomes matter to them and highlight how volunteering supports the delivery of these. Build into your funding proposals the resources needed to support volunteering.



#4 Build circles of support

Creating lasting wellbeing relies on a number of different people and organisations working together to support each other. That means understanding your role in nurturing a volunteer's wellbeing, preparing your staff and other volunteers, and knowing when to turn to link workers and local partners to bring additional help.

Why it matters:

- People's circumstances can be complex and changeable, and they may need support from a number of sources: health and social care, neighbours and friends, services and community groups
- People volunteering through social prescribing may need this kind of support more than other volunteers, and they may also have additional access needs, requiring greater resources than you may be used to
- Not only may new volunteers need support, so will your staff and existing volunteers - so that they can feel confident themselves
- People may initially be beneficiaries of a service or participants in an activity, perhaps starting to 'help out' as their interest or confidence deepens. At many points they may fulfil a range of different roles or personas, which could affect what they need from, or how they engage with, their circles of support.

What you can do

- Remember you are not alone - your staff team, existing volunteers, the link worker or community connector, local partners and CVS, the individual's friends or family may all be great candidates to bring into your circles of support
- Provide additional training to staff and volunteers - such as in Mental Health First Aid, safeguarding, or mentoring - to increase their confidence
- Include in your budget the costs of providing for the support needs of volunteers
- Invite people to reflect on their experience and check in regularly on their boundaries and expectations. Hopefully they will be having a positive experience and enthused about their role, but be aware that some concerns may remain or their support needs might still be quite high
- Buddy new volunteers with experienced ones to provide a bridge when they first join. They can gain confidence and get a taste of the experience from shadowing an existing volunteer before committing fully.



#5 Make it social

Social connection is a big part of the wellbeing gains associated with positive volunteering experiences, so consider all the different actors that can help it to feel welcoming and inclusive.

Why it matters:

- Many people who are referred to social prescribing are looking for friendship and companionship, and volunteering can ease loneliness and build strong connections
- Taking part in purposeful action alongside others can be a powerful way to build community, confidence and purpose
- Existing volunteers can play a pivotal role - either as peers who can relate to the person, or as buddies to help make them feel welcome, answer their questions and build confidence. Circles of support can help individuals to stay involved, but the social aspects can help them thrive.

What you can do:

- Find out the amount and type of social connection people are looking for when you welcome and induct them as volunteers. Some people may be shy or introverted, but others may be comfortable in larger groups.
- Once you've found the right role for someone, pairing them with existing volunteers can be a great way to start new friendships
- Good social connections don't always involve lots of people or fun activities. Some volunteers thrive working closely with one or two others in back office or administrative roles - or have used their lived experience and expertise to move into governance functions, such as becoming a trustee.



#6 Remember it's a journey

Someone's pathway through social prescribing is unlikely to be a straightforward journey. It could be quite linear with people progressing clearly to volunteering, or have circuitous routes through other activities and services. You may need to stay agile and open to the possibility of changing course.

Why it matters:

- Volunteering may be the main activity or element of this journey - or just one among several. It may also come in and out of importance for people as their circumstances change
- Link workers may focus on more pressing concerns at the start of their conversations, but may recommend volunteering later on, or during 'exit interviews' when people may feel more confident and interested in long-term activities
- As with all volunteers, motivations can change over time. What might have seemed like a natural role at the outset may now need to move in a different direction
- 'Progression' is often a key motivator - building on goals the individual identified in their 'what matters to me' conversation.

What you can do:

- Use personal plans in your management of volunteers, so you can spot and address changing circumstances quickly. If you have coaching or mentoring expertise within your organisation, such approaches might be helpful here
- If new or concerning challenges arise for people, bring in your circles of support to help you. This may mean referring someone back to a link worker to refresh their personal plan, or find additional help
- Stay in touch with link workers to keep them updated of someone's progress, especially if they were referred to an activity with you. That way you can let link workers know if you think some people may be ready to volunteer
- Remember people can easily get stuck in their routines and want to stay on even after their activity is finished or their 'user need' appears to have passed. Volunteering may not be quite right for them at this point. Be aware of this and build in next steps into your conversation with people.



Case study: Joe* from Dunbar



Joe was referred to a link worker by his GP to support his mental health. He developed a personal plan with his link worker, and identified five areas he wanted to work on, including: mental health support, social connections & joining local groups, getting benefits advice, and volunteering.

His personal goal was to “find my purpose”.

Joe was referred to volunteer at two local groups, Sustaining Dunbar and the Woodland Trust. Since he also wanted to retrain as a Ranger, this volunteering helped him gain valuable skills and connections. It also helped him to develop a work profile and secure a work trial in an environmental role.

Volunteering was just part of Joe’s personal plan. For example, he also received a benefits check and debt advice from the Salvation Army.

*Name changed for privacy.



#7 If You Treasure it, Measure it

Even though this principle is last on our list, the difference you want to make (and measure) should be something you consider earlier on.

Why it matters:

- In general we don't think of volunteering as a common way to build better health and wellbeing. So showing these impacts can help raise the profile of wellbeing and bring new partners together on common aims;
- Measuring the difference volunteering makes can be key to securing funding to provide the support needed to ensure successful volunteering for wellbeing.

What you can do:

- If you have a theory of change, look at it again through a social prescribing lens. What other outcomes or pathways may come into play when supporting people with health and social care needs?
- To show the benefits of volunteering on wellbeing, it's important to use robust, tested, and common measures. Many established 'distance travelled' subjective wellbeing tools are available to support this.
- But it's also useful to understand the outcomes that others in the wider 'system' may value, such as reduced GP visits and better reported self-management of health conditions.
- Think about what you may need to capture, at which stage and who is well-placed to help you.



This project is part of the Accelerating Innovation in Social Prescribing Programme which is a partnership between National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP), Royal Voluntary Service (RVS) and NHS England and NHS Improvement (NHSE&I).

You can find more information about [Accelerating Innovation](#) on our website.

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