



# The Future of Social Prescribing in England: Briefing

## What is social prescribing?

Many things that affect our health and wellbeing cannot be treated by doctors or medication alone - like loneliness, debt or stress due to financial pressures or poor housing. Social prescribing connects people to non-medical support to address these issues and other unmet needs.

This typically involves a GP or another health professional referring patients to a Social Prescribing Link Worker. Link Workers work closely with individuals to understand their needs and develop a personalised plan to improve their health and wellbeing. This could involve:

- Helping someone who is isolated to join a befriending group, an art class or a community gardening project, based on what matters to them
- Connecting someone struggling with financial stress to a service that helps them manage debt or claim benefits
- Supporting someone with dementia to join a dementia choir, enabling them to maintain a sense of social connection
- Working with someone with high blood pressure to take up a form of exercise that they're comfortable with.

Social prescribing involves understanding the complexity of people's lives, as well as the inequalities they may face. It means helping people to overcome the barriers that prevent them from having good health and wellbeing, based on their unique circumstances and preferences. It provides a bridge between the NHS and the voluntary sector, ensuring more people can access non-medical support that benefits their health and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup>

## Social prescribing in England

Since the publication of the NHS Long Term plan in 2019, social prescribing has become an increasingly important part of our health system. There are now more than 3,400 Social Prescribing Link Workers in post across England, addressing the social factors related to poor health and wellbeing. So far, almost 2.5 million people have been referred to Link Workers, and the numbers are rising fast.

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<sup>1</sup> See the internationally agreed definition of social prescribing: [Establishing internationally accepted conceptual and operational definitions of social prescribing through expert consensus: a Delphi study | BMJ Open](#)

Social prescribing has been incorporated in policy across Government, including in the Loneliness Strategy, the Suicide Prevention Strategy and the Major Conditions strategic framework. The cross-Government Green Social Prescribing programme and The National Academy for Social Prescribing's Thriving Communities Fund have demonstrated the impact of social prescribing on individuals, communities and the health system. The NHS Long Term Workforce Plan includes a target to recruit 9,000 Link Workers by 2036/7.

## The benefits of social prescribing

**Social prescribing improves individual health and wellbeing.** There is strong evidence to show the positive impact of social prescribing on a wide range of outcomes. These include reductions in loneliness, improvements in mental health, in social connection and in overall wellbeing, and benefits for people living with a wide range of physical health conditions.<sup>2</sup>

**Social prescribing seeks to reduce health inequalities.** Vast differences in the social impacts on health, individual health behaviours, illness, disability, availability of services and activities, quality and experience of care, proximity to accessible natural spaces, geography, and wealth mean that health outcomes are not the same for everyone, with marginalised and vulnerable people often experiencing the worst outcomes. Social prescribing may address both the circumstances that make an individual unhealthy and their symptoms by supporting individuals to address their unmet social needs.

**Social prescribing benefits the health system.** Social prescribing can lead to reduced health service usage within both primary and secondary care. For example, an evaluation of the social prescribing service in Shropshire showed a 40% reduction in GP appointments for people who had accessed social prescribing after three months.<sup>3</sup>

**Social prescribing is good for the economy.** Evaluations consistently show a favourable social return on investment, with a large study by the University of Sheffield showing a social return of £3.42 for every £1 invested.<sup>4</sup>

**Social prescribing is good for the environment.** By reducing the number of GP appointments and prescriptions, social prescribing can help the NHS to reduce its carbon footprint.

## The future of social prescribing

Social prescribing has grown rapidly and become a key part of our health system. In order to build on this progress, priorities over the next five years should include:

1. **Ensuring that every GP practice in England has a Social Prescribing Link Worker within five years**, by almost doubling the number of link workers to 6,500. This is in line with the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan and would support the health needs of two million people per year, reduce pressure on GPs and tackle health inequalities.

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<sup>2</sup> [Evidence - National Academy for Social Prescribing | NASP \(socialprescribingacademy.org.uk\)](https://www.nasp.ac.uk/evidence)

<sup>3</sup> [Economic evidence – National Academy for Social Prescribing | NASP \(socialprescribingacademy.org.uk\)](https://www.nasp.ac.uk/evidence)

<sup>4</sup> [Economic evidence – National Academy for Social Prescribing | NASP \(socialprescribingacademy.org.uk\)](https://www.nasp.ac.uk/evidence)

2. **Supporting frontline community organisations through Shared Investment Funds for social prescribing.** Funding for community activities and services accessed through social prescribing can be short-term and fragmented. Shared Investment Funds, open to public, private and philanthropic investment, strategically shaped and locally deployed, would help charities and grassroots organisations deliver more sustainable support, in line with local health needs.
3. **Improving data through a national hub to ensure social prescribing becomes business as usual in the NHS.** The evidence for social prescribing is almost universally positive, but we need better, real-time data to help drive continuous, system-wide improvements, and inform the design and commissioning of new social prescribing services. This could mean millions more people benefiting through secondary, specialist and proactive care.
4. **Establishing a world-class training and development programme for Social Prescribing Link Workers and social prescribing leaders working in the NHS and beyond.** The expansion of the workforce requires a comprehensive programme of professional development, skill specialism and clarity on the most impactful approaches.
5. **Making prevention a priority by embedding social prescribing in wider civic and community services - including in workplaces.** New 'upstream' programmes could prevent or delay the need for healthcare by keeping people active, connected and well in their homes, workplaces and communities. This could include a new social prescribing workplace programme.

## **The National Academy for Social Prescribing**

The National Academy for Social Prescribing was established as a charity in 2019 to champion social prescribing. Our work includes:

- Connecting the social prescribing system, through training, consultancy, resources and our Champions scheme for clinicians and health workers.
- Creating innovative partnerships, from local to international - including 'More than a Game', which creates links between the local NHS and community sport initiatives; and the Global Social Prescribing Alliance.
- Boosting investment for frontline organisations delivering social prescribing, including through our Thriving Communities Fund, our Power of Music Fund and the Green Social Prescribing Programme. We are currently co-designing a Shared Investment Fund model in partnership with the National Lottery Community Fund.
- Building the evidence base, working with nearly 300 academics and experts around the world and publishing 15 thematic evidence reviews.
- Raising the profile of social prescribing through national campaigns.

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