

Supervision of Social Prescribing Link Workers – Review and Next Steps

Social prescribing link workers (SPLWs) are part of a new and growing workforce in the NHS. It would have been impossible to predict when the new roles were being introduced into newly formed Primary Care Networks (PCNs) in 2019 that a pandemic would cause the disruption to working practice and life in general that has been the experience this year.

The incredible supporting role that social prescribing link workers have played throughout 2020, especially in supporting the most vulnerable in society, pays testament to the hard work and effort of this new and growing workforce.

The Challenge

As with any new service, especially under the unforeseen and devastating conditions of a global pandemic, there have been some things that haven't developed in the way we planned. Over the last few months Regional Learning Coordinators (RLCs) and the NHS England Social Prescribing team have been gathering feedback. In addition to working with our partners we've been listening to link workers through surveys and [focus groups](#) to identify the key challenges they are experiencing. This has provided valuable insight to the pressures people are working under.

The range of issues identified by link workers corresponds with matching problems and pressures in general practice more widely. Not only are most of our link workers new in post, but social prescribing is a new concept for many GPs. Acknowledging this means that, as we look for solutions, both link workers and PCNs need support. This will involve working together as teams at national, regional and local levels, collaborating through learning and improvement to achieve sustainable progress.

Key Themes

The management and supervision of link workers has been a key theme of the engagement that has taken place. We received a common message about some confusion over the different types of supervision set out in the [contract documentation](#):

- A PCN's core network practices must identify a first point of contact for general advice and support and (if different) a GP to provide supervision for the social prescribing link worker(s). This could be provided by one or more named individuals within the PCN.
- A PCN will ensure the Social Prescribing Link Worker(s) can discuss patient related concerns and be supported to follow appropriate safeguarding procedures (e.g. abuse, domestic violence and support with mental health) with a relevant GP.

- In addition to the ongoing support received from the GP supervisor, the social prescribing link worker should have regular access to clinical or non-managerial supervision.

We will continue to work with social prescribing link workers, PCNs and regional and national partners to address the issues raised and ensure that contractual obligations are understood.

Looking Ahead

We recognise that link workers have faced unprecedented challenges throughout COVID-19 and with the NHS about to embark on the biggest mass vaccination programme in history, there will be additional challenges in the months ahead. It is vitally important therefore to ensure that link workers feel supported to maintain their psychological wellbeing during this time.

- As we work towards more permanent long-term solutions, we are seeking to secure a limited short-term offer of clinical supervision for PCNs who can demonstrate that they need support. Work has begun to identify those PCNs that would most benefit from an offer of time-limited clinical supervision and support a shared learning programme.
- As outlined in the regular [Social Prescribing Coronavirus Update](#), link workers can also take up [individual coaching support](#) that is available free of charge from the NHS Our People team. The offer provides rapid access, including outside of working hours, to tailored support that focuses on helping link workers to process experiences, develop coping skills, deal with difficult conversations, and develop strategies for self-management in challenging circumstances.
- Work is also continuing with the [Personalised Care Institute](#) around training, development and ultimately accreditation of supervisory roles.
- NHSE/I coordinate a support offer available to all social prescribing link workers. This includes RLCs who provide peer support networks in each NHS England region according to local needs. We will build on this support offer in 2021/22. For information on how to contact your RLC contact england.socialprescribing@nhs.net. We are also looking at what is required to support the two [Personalised Care](#) additional roles; Health and Wellbeing Coach and Care Coordinator.

Thank you

Once again, thank you for your hard work and dedication at this challenging time, we appreciate and value all your hard work and everything that you are doing to support others through this difficult period.