

## What is social prescribing?

Simply put, instead of a doctor prescribing medicine to a patient, a social prescriber 'prescribes' a social activity – gardening, walking, football, going along to a community café – or social support, such as a benefits caseworker or employment adviser.

Social prescribing has been around since the 1990s, but recently the NHS, local authorities and other government departments have funded social prescribing 'link workers': they aim to link people up with social activities or support that might help them with their wellbeing.

This might not sound like traditional healthcare, but a lot of research has shown that health, wellbeing and social engagement are strongly linked. Somebody who is more active, connected socially to others and feels secure in their community is likely to have better health, including mental health. Taking part in physical activities, even walking, also improves our health.



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This does not only help people who feel isolated, or are struggling with mental health, finding support through social activities; or people with, for example, high blood pressure, or heart issues, who will enjoy better health if they are physically active. Studies also show that people who are better connected to others are more resilient and feel better in general. One reason is because they can access more support to help with other external factors that affect our health – such as legal, finance or housing issues, or problems with friends and family. Another reason, it is thought, is that regular social engagement strengthens our immune system.



**INTRODUCTION  
TO SOCIAL  
PRESCRIBING -  
LIZ CARNELLEY  
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NEALE**

**MARCH 2022  
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In the Long Term Plan [NHS England committed](#) to "building the infrastructure for social prescribing in primary care:

- "there will be 1,000 new social prescribing link workers in place by 2020/21, with significantly more after that, so that
- "at least 900,000 people will be referred to social prescribing by 2023/24."

These link workers are being put in place by local health 'Primary Care networks'. Primary Care networks were introduced into the National Health Service in England as part of the NHS Long Term Plan. The 2019 General Practitioner contract gave the opportunity for GP practices to join networks, each with between 30,000 and 50,000 patients. The government have recognised that investing in this could save money in health care as well as improve people's health. However, although most social prescribers can be reached by the public through GP surgeries, they might be employed by a local authority or even a voluntary organization. Primary Care networks have a variety of different organisational structures and referral mechanisms for their social prescribing link workers.



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## How do faith and community groups fit in?

### NHS England say:

"Social prescribing works for a wide range of people, including people:

- with one or more long-term conditions
- who need support with their mental health
- who are lonely or isolated
- who have complex social needs which affect their wellbeing.

"When social prescribing works well, people can be easily referred to link workers from a wide range of local agencies, including general practice, pharmacies, multi-disciplinary teams, hospital discharge teams, allied health professionals, fire service, police, job centres, social care services, housing associations and voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations. Self-referral is also encouraged."

Alongside professional 'link workers' – who might have different job titles in your area, such as 'community connector', 'navigator' and 'health adviser' – there is also a recognition that social prescribing within communities can work well. Someone involved in care for another person, whether informally or formally, could pass on a leaflet or a phone number, saying – Have you heard of this? Might this be helpful? This person could be a teacher, rabbi, police officer, housing officer, a friend or neighbour. You don't need to be ill to benefit from social prescribing – building social engagement into your life can support your overall health, like eating healthily. Finding ways to engage with others is a good way to keep healthy too.

The government wish to widen the reach so that all kinds of voluntary, local activities can be known about and people referred to them. Therefore, many activities that faith-based organisations offer to all can be more widely promoted and known about – activities like parent and toddler groups, singing groups, craft activities, community cafes, walking groups, and [places of welcome](#).

Also, health can be affected by financial worries, so the kind of support commonly offered by faith groups (such as debt advice) could help. The quality and quantity of food might be limiting someone's health, too; cookery clubs and food banks, again often run by faith groups, are relevant. It might be a family or interpersonal problem that you just need to talk through with someone like a counsellor, a pastoral worker or member of clergy, or even just a new friend.



## How can you interact with your local Link Worker?

The way social prescribing works in practice, at least in 2021/22, differs widely across local areas.

We have found that in some places, our partners in Places of Welcome have made good links to social prescribing staff in their local area. In others, it has been hard to reach them or to discover them.

To find out what is happening in your area, try using a search engine to find social prescribing in your town ("social prescribing in XXtown"), investigating your local NHS Trust's website, asking the Local Authority, or the local voluntary and community umbrella organisation.

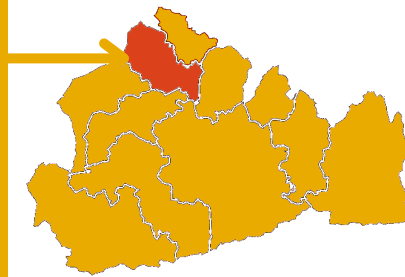
### Example 1: I want to contact a social prescriber in Egham, Surrey.

A local GP surgery signposts to the local authority. On their website, the local authority has an explanation of how to access social prescribing, which mentions that:

"Social Prescribing is delivered by Runnymede Borough Council and working in partnership with local Primary Care Networks."

This implies that the Borough Council employs the social prescriber and that non-patient enquiries should probably go to them. Patients need to seek a referral from a GP:

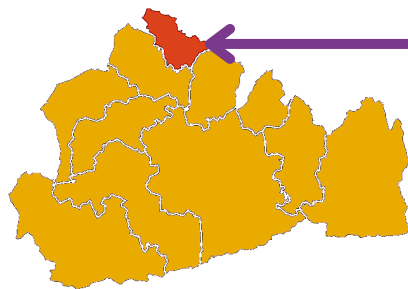
"Patients can only access the service via a health care or social care professional, who will refer them, for example, GP practice or social worker."



### Example 2: I want to contact a social prescriber in neighbouring Staines, Surrey.

Here, a local services information website says that social prescribers in Spelthorne do not require a professional referral. The local authority provides an email address and contact number for the social prescriber directly.

However, it is only through personal experience of the social prescribing service in these two places that I know that the same social prescribing link worker covers both areas, despite the different referral mechanisms.



## What do I tell a social prescriber about my organisation?

Sometimes faith organisations are not good at recognising the benefits of what they offer. Something as apparently simple as a lunch club can: (1) bring together those who are isolated, live alone or are lonely; (2) provide nutritious food to those without much money; (3) give opportunities for people to befriend and help one another from different backgrounds; (4) build a hopeful, connected and resilient local community.

Try to break down what seems to be a simple activity – say, community gardening – into its different aspects, and think about how they support wellbeing. Fresh air, sunshine, light exercise, low-stakes responsibility for living things, a sense of purpose, conversation, contact, community, a shape to the weeks and months: the wellbeing benefits of all of these things can be enormous to those who lack them.

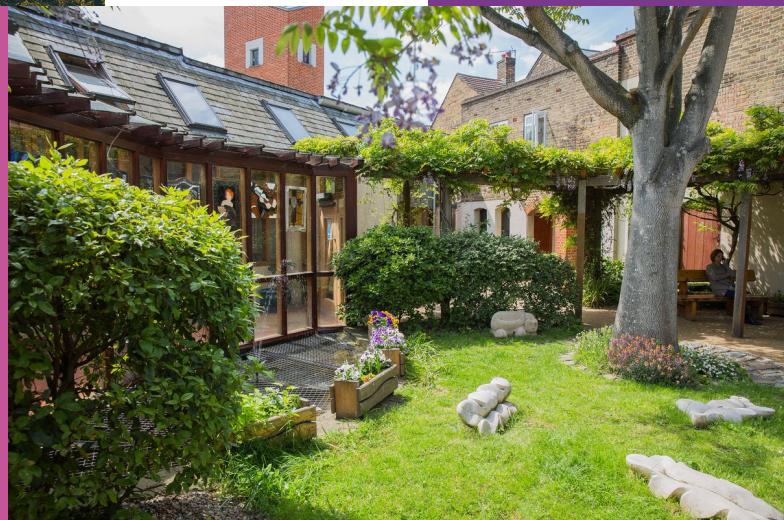
This kind of thinking can help you promote your organisation or activity not only to professionals but to the general public, in flyers you might put on noticeboards or in shop windows, in posts on local community Facebook pages, when reaching out to other local faith and community groups, and more.



### Case study: Bromley by Bow Centre

Bromley by Bow Centre, a local community hub, began their 'Health Living Centre' in 1997. In 2014 they received some NHS funding to serve their local Primary Care Network as social prescribers from their local CCG, and also works with Macmillan to pioneer a social prescribing approach that works across secondary care, primary care and community services to support people living with and beyond cancer. They are founding members of the National Social Prescribing Network. Their innovative approach is a clear model for other community hubs to get involved with health services through the social prescribing model.

[Read more here.](#)



## **For more information about social prescribing:**

[Zoe Williams: The future for general practice using social prescribing | The King's Fund](#)

[NHS England on Social Prescribing](#)

[What is social prescribing? | The National Academy for Social Prescribing](#)

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