



The national intermediary and network for voluntary health organisations in Scotland

Key Messages



Community Link Workers, Mental Health and Audit Scotland

January 2023

Late last year VHS facilitated engagement between Audit Scotland and Community Link Workers (CLWs), providing a platform for the latter to share their views on mental health services in Scotland and thereby contribute to the scrutiny body's current audit of services. A detailed note of discussion was produced for Audit Scotland after the meetings, and these Key Messages now aim to share the main points with a wider audience.

Audit Scotland is the independent body that works on behalf of the Auditor General and the Accounts Commission to give independent assurance to the people of Scotland that public money is spent properly, efficiently and effectively. Their work covers all aspects of public life in Scotland and they are currently conducting an audit to see how effectively [adult mental health services](#) are being delivered, including what impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had.

CLWs are embedded in primary care practices in order to provide non-medical assistance to those patients who need additional support to access resources and help at a community level. CLWs, many of whom are employed by third sector organisations, have publicly commented on the increased numbers of patients they are seeing with poor mental wellbeing, especially since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Audit Scotland was keen to hear the perspectives of CLWs, so in partnership with VHS two online focus groups took place on 10th and 15th November 2022, involving a total of thirteen CLWs from a range of primary care practices and geographic settings.

Getting people timely and appropriate mental health support

Straightforward referral processes were seen as essential to helping people get timely and appropriate services, but CLWs reported that referral processes are often difficult to navigate, the more so for people who have experienced trauma or who speak English as a second language, or have other challenges in accessibility. Working with primary care based mental health nurses, where they exist, is helpful to CLWs and therefore patients. In some areas of Scotland action is being taken to make referral processes easier, e.g. redesigning services to allow self-referrals.

Long waiting lists for services (up to two years) were also identified as a major barrier to accessing statutory mental health services. Whilst CLWs can help people with mild-moderate mental health issues in the shorter term, it is a different matter if a patient has complex needs. Some CLWs find themselves operating as a holding area for people waiting to access statutory services.

Referring people to volunteer-led and third sector services was often the most effective way of helping people to get timely and appropriate mental health support. Response times were often quicker and access easier. However, the lack of sustainable voluntary sector funding and difficulty in recruiting volunteers post-Covid were issues.

Finding the right type of support for people when they need it

A lack of services, particularly in rural areas was highlighted, as was the short-term nature of some. A current trend to deliver group services rather than one to one, for resource reasons, means that appropriate and personalised support for people isn't always on offer. Strict inclusion criteria for some services can be a barrier. Embedding their CLW programmes into community hubs and local Third Sector Interfaces is helping CLWs to keep up to date with services in their community, likewise using social media and WhatsApp.

Improving mental health services

There is no avoiding the necessity of increased, targeted, and sustained funding for services, including voluntary and third sector services. A more preventative approach to mental health and wellbeing, particularly educating young people, could help alleviate pressure on services.

The impact of Covid-19

A reduction of volunteers within the voluntary and third sector has had a detrimental impact on the availability of mental health support at community level. Numbers of people seeking mental health support increased, although the severity of the mental health issues didn't necessarily. However, some CLWs did find they were supporting people with more severe issues, with one participant stating that people were often "very close to crisis – two or three days away".

The cost of living crisis is having a significant impact post-Covid and CLWs are seeing more people seeking help for mental health difficulties exacerbated by financial problems. The number of people experiencing in-work poverty has increased; they don't often meet the threshold for support from statutory services. Welfare Advice Services, where CLWs had access to them, have been extremely helpful and provide a more direct route from GP practices to appropriate community services.

The introduction of and/or increased use of digital technology required to access services has impacted differently on individuals. For anyone with digital literacy or access issues it has been a barrier, but for people anxious about leaving their house it was often welcomed.

Wellbeing support for CLWs during the pandemic

Supporting people with difficult issues, the heavy workload and the isolation of the role had an impact on CLWs' wellbeing. Additional tasks like capturing data and evidence on interventions added to their stress. Working from home during the pandemic impacted their work-life balance. Some CLWs thought that the wellbeing support provided to them felt tokenistic, whereas others highlighted regular peer support sessions, reflective practice, and sessions with clinical psychologists, though these were not as often as some would like.

Scottish Community Link Worker Network

Follow this link for more information about the [Scottish Community Link Worker Network](#) or contact Roisin Hurst, Network Development Coordinator: roisin.hurst@vhsscotland.org.uk