

SCOTTISH COMMUNITY LINK WORKER NETWORK CONFERENCE SPEECH

I'd like to start by thanking Claire and Voluntary Health Scotland for inviting me here. I am delighted to be with you today and to support this event, which celebrates the positive contribution of Community Link Workers. It's great to see so many Link Workers from all across the country being able to gather together in one place.

I'm impressed by the progress that Roisin and others at Voluntary Health Scotland have made in developing and establishing the Community Link Worker Network over the past 18 months. Especially when you consider that the Network launched in the midst of a pandemic when we were all adjusting to new ways of working.

We all know that many of the forces that shape a person's health and well-being are their social and economic circumstances. I'd like to offer my reflections on where we are now and the changes over the last decade or so in Scotland which have seen the role of Link Workers really come to the fore of our effort to improve population health. I know – not least from having myself worked as a Pharmacist in NHS Highland before becoming an MSP – that medication is often not the answer.

I've long taken a keen interest in the role of non-clinical care and support – an interest which has run through my role until recently with the Population Health portfolio and now into my current role as Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing, and Sport.

We're all aware of the challenges being experienced by individuals and communities right now and the pressure that health and other services are under. I'm under no illusion that the work you do day-in and day-out can be really tough and there may be a sense of uncertainty about the future in such challenging times.

But it's important to reflect on and celebrate just how far we've come from the initial Community Link Worker pilots in a handful of disadvantaged practices, to having link workers included as one of the services which were deemed necessary to support the 2018 GP contract.

That has really solidified link workers as part of primary care. And now we have today's first national conference for link workers from across Scotland.

While multidisciplinary teams or MDTs have undoubtedly played a role in freeing up GP time to focus on those patients who really do need medical care and a GP's expertise, a key driver for creating MDTs has been to make it easier for patients to get the help they really need through their local practice, in their community. Even before the 2018 GP contract, we had committed in our 2016 manifesto to recruit at least 250 community link workers in general practices. That figure had been surpassed by March 2022, with over 300 link workers in post.

Bringing us back to the present, last month, the First Minister launched the Scottish Government's new *Policy Prospectus*, which includes missions on Equality and Community and commits us to sustain investment in General Practice through the Primary Care Improvement Fund and to invest more in practices serving disadvantaged areas.

In terms of funding for MDTs, we have committed a minimum funding position of £170 million for 2023-24 and future years, and we are making funding available on top of that to cover Agenda for Change uplifts. By March 2022, more than 3,220 whole time equivalent healthcare professionals (including link workers) had been recruited into multi-disciplinary teams since 2018 and we would expect that to increase further this year.

I want to be clear that the Scottish Government remain committed to the principle of having staff in place who can work with an individual to get to the heart of their needs and experiences, then identify and help them access the community support, financial help or practical guidance through the system that's right for them. This not only benefits that individual, but it helps us avoid trying to fix social issues with medicalised responses. Social prescribing and Community Link Worker programmes also support the Chief Medical Officer's vision for Realistic Medicine and can help us reduce the heavy environmental impacts of healthcare, by reducing unnecessary medicine prescribing.

In Scotland today, there are still unacceptable differences in life expectancy between our communities and in how wider societal factors impact on the health of certain groups - those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, minority ethnic groups and children have been particularly affected by COVID, austerity and the cost-of-living crisis. I imagine that bigger picture could feel quite daunting as you work through a day's appointments with people who may be in crisis or experiencing trauma. But it's because of your individual and collective efforts that we so often say that Community Link Workers are at the forefront of our efforts to tackle health inequalities.

You have shown yourselves to be adaptable to the changing and ways of working, proving yourselves invaluable in helping to assist people like those needing help linking to food banks, benefits advice and mental health provision. Link workers show empathy, ingenuity and persistence. You make the people you work with feel valued, listened to and respected. You work to create a health care system where people can get the right help at the right time and in the right place. These skills and qualities are needed in abundance right now.

Whilst recovery will take time, I believe that primary care is in a better place to respond to current challenges than it would have been if we had not introduced the reforms which came in with the 2018 contract. It also means that your role is more important than ever and fundamental to our efforts to tackle the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis. The Community Link Worker role has gone from strength to strength and that owes a huge debt to the efforts of people in this room today.

Your experiences and insights as Link Workers are crucial to future policy. That's why we want to support you and ensure you have access to the resources you need. It's why the Scottish Community Link Worker Network is so essential as a community of practice and why events like this conference are so important.

Before I close, I'd like to express my immense gratitude to all the link workers and primary care staff who work tirelessly to support individuals and families to cope with an array of challenging life circumstances. Today is a great opportunity to showcase the incredible work being carried out, share experiences and learning about what works, and to give thought to what else we can do, both individually and collectively.

Unfortunately, I have to leave now but I know you have some brilliant speakers and sessions to look forward to, so thank you for listening and thank you again for all your work.

Word count: 1132 words

Approx length: 8 minutes