

BRIEFING PAPER



Scottish Community Link Worker Survey – Voluntary Health Scotland Briefing

May 2024

Background

Ahead of [Essential Connections](#), the 2024 Scottish Community Link Worker Network Annual Conference, Voluntary Health Scotland asked network members to complete a short survey.

Community link workers were asked for:

- Their top three reasons for referral.
- And the main challenge in their role.

87 of the 320 members of the Scottish Community Link Worker Network responded to this survey, representing 27% of the total membership.

The responses to these questions have been summarised below and will be shared with attendees in advance of the conference on 29 May. Discussion of the results will inform the afternoon's community link worker panel session, which will consider how we can ensure that community link workers' voices are able to influence healthcare policy in Scotland.

Reasons for Referral

Mental health was, overwhelmingly, the most commonly reported reason for referral into community link worker services, with 74 of the 87 respondents (85%) reporting this in their top three reasons for referral. Many respondents provided further detail, explaining that people had most commonly sought support for anxiety, depression, stress and low mood. One respondent stated that 'mental health and wellbeing takes up 60% of referrals.'

The second most commonly reported reason for referral was **financial advice and support**, with 47 of the 87 respondents (54%) citing this in their response to this question. Community link workers reported that many people had sought advice relating to benefits.

This was followed by **housing advice**, which was reported as a common reason for referral by 42 of the 87 respondents (48%), and **social isolation and loneliness**, which was reported as a common reason for referral by 38 of the 87 respondents (44%).

Other reasons for referral cited by community link workers included:

- Advice and information about services and groups in their local area.
- Support for a long-term condition or disability.
- Chronic pain management.
- Mobility.
- Carer support.
- Counselling.
- Trauma.
- Bereavement.
- Family issues.
- And support for people who do not meet the criteria for social work services.

Challenges

Community link workers reported a variety of challenges. The most common of these was a **lack of local services** to refer people onto for support. Respondents cited a lack of referral options for people who required advice relating to social housing, support for their mental health, counselling, therapy and befriending as particular gaps. Additionally, it was reported that gaps in services are far more pronounced in rural areas.

Where relevant services are available, a number of barriers can often prevent people from accessing the support that they require. A lack of **transport** can often be the key barrier in rural areas with bus companies, for example, running limited services in the evenings and on Sundays. One respondent shared that ‘this is when a lot of support groups are run.’

Furthermore, respondents stated that both third sector and statutory services are currently under incredible pressure, which has led to very long **waiting lists** for some services. A handful of respondents even stated that some services had chosen to close their waiting lists due to demand.

For the most part, when answering this question, community link workers reflected on the challenges faced by the people they support. However, respondents also outlined some of the challenges they face as individuals.

Community link workers shared how challenging it can be to inform people that a service that they want or need is not available in their area. They said that managing people’s **expectations** can often feel overwhelming, with one community link worker stating that there is an inaccurate perception that they ‘can fix everything.’

Respondents felt that more **understanding of the role of the community link worker** is urgently required, both amongst the public and within statutory services. It was suggested that GPs, in particular, could benefit the most from a greater understanding of community link worker services. A handful of respondents stated that this lack of understanding has led to pressure to reduce the **length of time allocated for appointments**.

As well as the time allowed for appointments, **demand for appointments** is also a key challenge for community link workers, with one respondent sharing that ‘we have too many referrals for the amount of time we are in each practice.’ It was noted by a

manager who responded to this survey that their main challenge is ‘keeping the link workers motivated and not overwhelmed during really busy periods.’

The lack of clarity around the long-term funding of community link worker services was also cited as a challenge, with respondents seeking greater **job security** in order to focus on the responsibilities of their role.

Lastly, respondents shared the challenging nature of lone working and ‘the isolation in practices’ that they sometimes experience. To enable community link workers to continue to carry out their vital role, it is crucial that they are valued and that their own **wellbeing** as individuals is given greater consideration. To ensure that this is given the attention it deserves, the Scottish Community Link Worker Network will continue to advocate on behalf of its members, raising awareness of community link workers’ experiences and needs.

About the Scottish Community Link Worker Network

The [Scottish Community Link Worker Network](#) is a national network for primary care community link working in Scotland.

The aim of the network is to create a space for community link workers in primary care settings in Scotland to come together to share learning and to develop, network and support each other in order to improve outcomes for their patients and communities.

About Voluntary Health Scotland

We’re passionate about what the voluntary health sector can achieve for people’s health and wellbeing throughout Scotland.

We are the national voice, intermediary and network for voluntary health organisations in Scotland. We work with our members and others to address health inequalities, to improve health related policy, systems and partnership working, and to help people and communities to live healthier and fairer lives. [Join us now](#).

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