

Embedding social prescribing link workers in primary care: Stakeholder insights from England and Scotland

Qualitative findings

**Dr Eddie Donaghy
Usher Institute
University of Edinburgh**



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

NIHR qualitative research

- **4 Regions:** Lothian, GG&C, West of England, North East
- 8 case study sites
- **130** in-depth interviews - Link worker stakeholders

Patients - **28**

Link workers - **36**

Referring professionals - **28**

Voluntary organisation leads- **24**

Strategic leads - **14**



- **Aim:** *to explore the roles, challenges, and effects of link workers (LWs) across a range of employment/management models in England and Scotland*
- Thematic analysis
- 6 key themes developed – full findings - *Lancet Primary Care* ⁽¹⁾
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanprc.2026.100128>.
- Focus on 4 themes today

Importance of context

British Medical Association (BMA) report 2022 “***The Country is Getting Sicker***” ⁽²⁾

“Billions of pounds have been cut from public services since 2010

leaving us without services essential for health

The GCPH linked 335,000 additional deaths to austerity in the five years before the pandemic.

The cost-of-living crisis is pushing ever more people into poverty.”

Scottish Human Rights Commission, **State of the Nation report: 2025**⁽³⁾ Professor Angela O’Hagan

“Economic, social and cultural rights are the foundations of a dignified life.

But for many people in Scotland these rights remain out of reach.

People are struggling to heat their homes, feed their families, or access basic services”. ⁽⁴⁾

Key theme - Changing roles of link workers

- Growing LW workload addressing basic social determinants of health- **housing, heating, welfare benefits, and food.**

*“Initially, I thought we’d be getting people out the house, into community groups
But a lot of what we do is benefits, housing, getting people equipment
for their homes”*

Link worker 3; North East & North Cumbria

*“We’re working with very stretched partners. It would be different with highly functioning
Local Authority, stable Social Work, suitable Housing, and accessible DWP.
People’s health suffers because those structures are not as good as they once were.”*

Link worker 5; West of England

Key theme - Therapeutic relationship- with boundaries

- Strengths of the LW service- **time**, building **trust** with patients via **listening & empathy**

“90% of patients have mental health worries. With long waiting lists and high service thresholds, LWs sometimes find themselves in situations they’re not trained for”

Strategic Lead 3; West of England

“People come in with the weight of the world on them. There’s regular conversations about suicide, trauma, historical abuse.... Feeling seen and heard is important to them.”

Link worker 4; Lothian

- **Importance of boundaries** – LWs not counsellors/therapists. Need good supervision and training to manage these stresses

Key theme: challenges and sustainability

- Link worker sustainability challenged by:

(I) Risk of burnout and limited career progression

*“In terms of a career, it’s low paid, there’s high stress.
Also, people are putting more and more onto link workers.”*

Link worker 3; GG&C

(ii) Short-term funding pressures

*“The biggest challenge is mainstream sustainable long-term funding for link workers.
That is essential.”*

Strategic Lead; GG&C

Key theme: Benefits of LWs to general practices

- LWs viewed core part of holistic primary care, especially in deprived areas

““As a GP I don’t think I can work without a links worker now. Not without that moral thing. Is it moral distress? I have less of those feelings working with a links worker”

Referring professional 2; GG&C

“One of the things that’s critical to this – what a links worker does—it keeps me working as a GP for a start..... Honestly”

Referring professional 5; GG&C

Key theme: Benefits of LWs to patients

- Link workers were described in very positive terms by patients

*“The LW got me a CAP card- back in the gym and swimming—a godsend.
Through a charity they got me access to a trained counsellor- once a week.
With another charity they got me funding for a short holiday. A game-changer.*

*That was the first time I’d been hopeful about my future....
I’m now trying to make plans.”*

Patient 5; Lothian

- The consistent support helped regain **purpose**, **direction** and **hope** that clinical care alone could not.

Conclusions

- Qualitative findings- can't say generalisable- but our findings struck a cord

“ This is a thorough and fair picture of how social prescribing works in primary care, which resonates with what we see in practice.”

Chief Executive, National Academy of Social Prescribing (England) (5)

“Increasingly, LWs are supporting patients with wider social determinants of health..... We should expand their availability and provide long-term sustainable funding.”

Dr Chris Provan, Chair RCGP Scotland (6)

- Need for sustainable, strengthened LW roles in primary care alongside a strong voluntary sector.

References

1. Eddie Donaghy, Stewart W Mercer, Heather Brant et al, Embedding social prescribing in primary care in England and Scotland: a qualitative study of experiences, roles, challenges, and sustainability. The Lancet Primary Care, Volume 2, Issue 4, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanprc.2026.100128>
2. British Medical Association (2022) The country is getting sicker: The urgent need to address growing health inequalities and protect our health in the face of an economic crisis. London: BMA.
<https://www.bma.org.uk/media/uvpd204n/bma-the-country-is-getting-sicker-september-2024.pdf>
3. The Scottish Human Rights Commission (SHRC). December 2025. State of the Nation: Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in Scotland. <https://www.scottishhumanrights.com/media/3238/state-of-the-nation-report-2025.pdf>
4. The Scottish Human Rights Commission (SHRC). Press release. 8th December 2025. State of the Nation warns that essential human rights are out of reach for many in Scotland.
<https://www.scottishhumanrights.com/news/state-of-the-nation-warns-that-essential-human-rights-are-out-of-reach-for-many-in-scotland/>
5. National Academy of Social Prescribing (NASP). New research highlights vital role of Social Prescribing Link Workers in supporting people with complex social needs. 21/04/2026
https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/resources/new-research-highlights-social-prescribing-link-workers-vital-role-in-supporting-people-with-complex-social-needs/#msdynmkt_trackingcontext=addb3d78-f556-4b89-9689-2dcab1c00000
6. Healthandcare.scot Community Link Workers reducing stress on GPs.
<https://www.healthandcare.scot/stories/4420/clw-community-link-social-prescribing-lancet-rcgp-provan>