

Abstract

For a social prescribing intervention to achieve its aims, clients must first be effectively engaged. A 'link worker' facilitating linkage between clients and community resources has been identified as a vital component of social prescribing. However, the mechanisms underpinning successful linkage remain underspecified. This qualitative study is the first to explore link workers' own definitions of their role in social prescribing and the skills and qualities identified by link workers themselves as necessary for effective client linkage. This study also explores 'threats' to successful linked social prescribing and the challenges link workers face in carrying out their work. Link workers in a social prescribing scheme in a socioeconomically-deprived area of North East England were interviewed in two phases between June 2015 and August 2016. The first phase comprised five focus groups (n=15) and individual semi-structured interviews (n=15) conducted with each focus-group participant. The follow-up phase comprised four focus groups (n=15). Thematic data analysis highlighted the importance of providing a holistic service focusing on the wider social determinants of health. Enabling client engagement required 'well-networked' link workers with the time and the personal skills required to develop a trusting relationship with clients while maintaining professional boundaries by fostering empowerment rather than dependency. Challenges to client engagement included: variation in the volume and suitability of primary care referrals; difficulties balancing quality of intervention provision and meeting referral targets; and link workers' training inadequately preparing them for their complex and demanding role. At a broader level, public sector cuts negatively impacted upon link workers' ability to refer patients into suitable services due to unacceptably long waiting lists or service cutbacks. This study

demonstrates that enabling client engagement in social prescribing requires skilled link workers supported by health-care referrer 'buy-in' and with access to training tailored to what is a complex and demanding role.

Key words: Behaviour/lifestyle interventions, chronic/long-term conditions, community interventions, complex interventions, patient engagement, social intervention

What is known about this topic:

- Social prescribing of non-clinical services is an increasingly popular strategy for tackling the burden of long-term conditions
- A 'link worker' facilitating client engagement is likely to be central to successful social prescribing

What this paper adds:

- Link workers with sufficient time and highly developed personal skills are vital for engaging clients facing complex challenges
- Bespoke training and career progression mechanism are needed to prepare and retain link workers in what is a demanding and highly-skilled role
- Spending cuts to voluntary and community services pose a grave risk to social prescribing

1 Introduction

2 Social prescribing enables primary-care practitioners to refer patients with long-term
3 conditions (LTCs) into a range of non-clinical services within the voluntary and
4 community sectors (South & Higgins, 2008). These interventions provide an
5 individualised approach to health and wellbeing, with patients supported to identify
6 and achieve personalised goals (Social Prescribing Network, 2016). Social prescribing
7 interventions benefit patients by supporting them to address the wider psychosocial
8 determinants of health, enabling better health-condition management and the
9 adoption of healthier behaviours (Mossabir et al., 2015).

10

11 In a social prescribing intervention, patients must be 'linked' to appropriate groups and
12 services, with the linkage route likely to influence service uptake (Husk et al., 2016).

13 Linkage can be problematic (Dickinson & Glasby, 2010), with both practitioners and
14 patients identifying a lack of time and knowledge in primary care to facilitate access to
15 non-clinical resources (Wilson & Read, 2001). In addition, to effect change clients must
16 be supported to maintain their involvement for an appropriate period of time
17 (Brandling & House, 2009; Husk et al., 2016). For these reasons, social prescribing
18 interventions frequently involve a facilitator link worker (alternative role titles include
19 social prescribing co-ordinator, health trainer and community navigator) (Social
20 Prescribing Network, 2016)). The level of link worker support varies between social
21 prescribing models, ranging from 'light' (involving signposting to available resources)
22 through to 'holistic' support that provides an intense level of link worker and service
23 user interaction (Kimberlee, 2015).

24

25 The presence of a facilitator to link clients to community services “has been identified
26 time and again as key to successful social prescribing” (Keenaghan et al., 2012, p. 6).
27 However, knowledge is lacking of the processes by which social prescribing achieve its
28 aims and the specific mechanisms by which link workers successfully engage clients
29 (Bertotti et al., 2017; Mossabir et al., 2015; Rempel et al., 2017). An exception to this
30 is a recent realist evaluation of a social prescribing scheme, which found that a skill-
31 mix comprising excellent listening and empathetic skills appeared to build trust
32 between link workers and clients (Bertotti et al., 2017). A report by the UK Social
33 Prescribing Network (2016) also identifies effective link workers with the right skills
34 and appropriate training as key components of successful social prescribing. While
35 these factors are likely to be important there remains a lack of evidence on the nature
36 of the particular skills and training link workers need to effectively engage clients
37 (Hutt, 2016). This study aims to address this critical knowledge gap by exploring link
38 workers’ definitions of their role in social prescribing and the skills and qualities they
39 perceive to be essential for effective client engagement. This paper also explores
40 threats to successful client engagement and the challenges facing link workers.

41

42 **Background**

43 The ‘Ways to Wellness’ (WtW) service has been delivering link worker social
44 prescribing in West Newcastle upon Tyne, an inner-city area in North East England
45 (population n=132,000), since April 2015. The area is ethnically diverse and ranked
46 among the 40 most deprived areas in England (Department for Communities and Local
47 Government, 2013). A higher-than-average proportion of the West-Newcastle
48 population have LTCs, with over 27 per cent of residents reporting a limiting LTC

49 compared with an English average of 17.9 per cent (Public Health Profile, 2014). Rates
50 of receipt of sickness or disability-related benefits are also high, with 8 per cent of
51 residents claiming an incapacity benefit compared to a national average of 6.5 per cent
52 (McInnes, 2016).

53

54 The WtW service was developed over a period of years by the Voluntary Organisations'
55 Network North East with support from Newcastle West Clinical Commissioning Group
56 and ACEVO (Charity Leaders Network). At the time this study was conducted, the
57 service was delivered by four third-sector organisations who employ link workers and
58 receive referrals from primary-care practitioners based in 17 general practices. The
59 service is initially funded for seven years in which time it is expected to generate
60 savings for the Clinical Commissioning Group through reduced health-care usage
61 (Ways to Wellness Ltd, 2018).

62

63 In the WtW model, patients are referred by a primary-care practitioner to a link worker
64 trained in behaviour change methods. Referrals are targeted at patients aged between
65 40 and 74 with one (or more) of the following LTCs: diabetes types 1 and 2, chronic
66 obstructive pulmonary disease, asthma, coronary heart disease, heart failure, epilepsy,
67 and osteoporosis, with or without anxiety or depression. Following primary care
68 referral, link workers contact clients by telephone to arrange an initial appointment.
69 This could be at the GP practice, a community centre, café or, infrequently, at a client's
70 home. At their initial appointment, clients work with their link worker to complete a
71 'Wellbeing Star'™. This a proprietary tool that identifies target areas for improvement
72 across the following eight domains: 1) 'lifestyle', covering areas such as diet and

73 exercise; 2) 'looking after yourself', covering self-care and activities such as shopping;
74 3) 'managing symptoms', including pain management and medication; 4) 'work,
75 volunteering and other activities'; 5) 'money', covering debt management and welfare
76 entitlements; 6) 'where you live', dealing with housing issues such as adaptations and
77 improvements; 7) 'family and friends' covering personal relationships; and 8) 'feeling
78 positive', covering mood and outlook. Clients identify their current level in each
79 domain, ranging from 1: 'not thinking about it' to 5: 'as good as it can be'. Having
80 identified areas to target, a client works with their link worker to identify personalised,
81 achievable goals. Link workers assist clients to access community groups and services
82 that will support them in achieving these goals (e.g. weight-management groups,
83 welfare rights advice, arts-based activities, volunteering opportunities and support to
84 find paid employment). Progress and goals are reviewed every 6-months thereafter for
85 the duration of a client's engagement with the service. Clients remain with the service
86 for up to two years or, with link worker discretion, longer if needed. Over the course of
87 clients' engagement with WtW, face-to-face contact is also supplemented by
88 telephone, email or text, with meeting duration frequency decreasing or increasing
89 depending on need.

90

91 Method

92 Ethical approval for the conduct of this study was secured from Newcastle University
93 Faculty of Medical Science Ethics Committee (00868/2014).

94

95 Data collection

96 Fieldwork was conducted in two phases between June 2015 and August 2016. The
97 WtW service commenced in April 2015 and in this study's first phase link workers had
98 been in-post for between 2 and 4 months. Immediately prior to the commencement of
99 this study, link workers had completed a 10-day training programme, comprising an
100 established Health Trainer National Vocational Qualification, training in the use of the
101 'Wellbeing Star'™, motivational interviewing, and understanding of LTCs and mental
102 health issues. The study's first phase aimed to capture link workers' early experiences
103 of delivering what was a very new service and their perceptions of the recently-
104 completed training. The second-phase explored how link workers' perceptions of how
105 both the service and their role within it had developed over the course of a year. In the
106 initial phase (June to September 2015), all link workers (n=15) employed by the four
107 service-provider organisations were invited to take part in focus groups. All agreed to
108 participate, resulting in five focus groups (total participants n=15). Following the focus
109 groups, each participant was invited to participate in a one-to-one interview, which
110 covered perceptions of their role and their behaviours in delivering the intervention.
111 Individual interviews (n=15) were conducted to capture personal experiences free
112 from the presence of group dynamics that may have influenced focus group responses.
113
114 In the second phase in August 2016, all link workers employed by the four service
115 providers (n=17) were again invited to participate in focus groups. This resulted in four
116 focus groups (participants n=15). Four link workers who participated in the first phase
117 also participated in the second phase. One-to-one interviews were not conducted in
118 the follow-up phase due to resource constraints and link worker time constraints.

119

120 In both phases, fieldwork was conducted at provider organisations or on University
121 premises. Informed consent was collected prior to participation. Participation was
122 entirely voluntary and link workers were reassured that declining to participate would
123 not affect their employment with WtW. First-phase focus groups were conducted by
124 LP. Individual interviews were conducted by LP, MS and KB. Second-phase focus groups
125 were conducted by MS and CH.

126

127 **Transcription, Data Management and Analysis**

128 First-phase focus groups lasted between 58 and 87 mins (average 75 mins) and one-to-
129 one interviews lasted between 16 and 79 mins (average 41 mins). Follow-up focus
130 groups lasted between 75 and 92 mins (average 84 mins). All transcripts were digitally
131 recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymised, checked for
132 accuracy and entered into NVivo10 software (NVivo 10, 2010) to support data
133 management. Thematic analysis was used (Green & Thorogood, 2014). In phase one,
134 following close reading of the focus group and individual interview transcripts by all
135 members of the research team, a common coding scheme was developed, which
136 contained a-priori themes based on the topic guides as well as further themes which
137 emerged from the data. The coding scheme captured data relating to the role of the
138 link worker; intervention delivery; and the intervention's context and resources. The
139 coding frame was reviewed by all team members and modifications agreed and made
140 before being applied to all interviews. Phase two analysis proceeded in the same way,
141 with the development of the coding scheme to capture developments over time. In
142 both phases, line-by-line coding and constant comparison were used to code the entire

143 dataset (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Silverman, 2000). Deviant case analysis, where
144 opinions were sought that modified or contradicted the analysis, was used to enhance
145 validity (Barbour, 2001).

146

147 Findings

148 Participant characteristics in each phase are described in Tables 1 and 2. In both
149 phases, the majority of link workers were female. Employment tenure by phase two
150 ranged between 1 and 16 months, with an average tenure of 7.5 months.

151

152 [Table 1 about here]

153 [Table 2 about here]

154

155 Two key themes emerged from data analysis: 1) the realities and complexities of the
156 link worker role; and 2) barriers to performing the role. Analysis of data from the
157 study's first and second phases demonstrated how link workers' perceptions of their
158 role and its challenges had changed over time.

159

160 The link worker role

161 The WtW service specifies the importance of trusting link worker/client relationships in
162 order to motivate and encourage. Participants in the first phase recognised that their
163 role was fundamental to the service's success, explaining that the presence of a link
164 worker acted as a "*linchpin ... the person [clients] come back to*", offering "*consistency*"
165 (P9, Interview, Phase 1) over the period of clients' engagement with the programme.

166 Link workers stressed the importance of delivering a non-directive service, viewing

167 their role very much as co-producers of change: *“It’s an agreement between two*
168 *people ... It’s not an ‘us and them’ it’s an ‘us’, it’s got to be together”* (P14, Phase 1,
169 Interview, Phase 1). To achieve this non-directive enabling of goal-setting and
170 behaviour change, link workers identified the need to be empathic, non-judgemental
171 and use active listening skills to build trust and encourage honest self-reflection.

172

173 The WtW service is a holistic intervention (this is reflected in the varied domains
174 covered by the Wellbeing Star [™]). Participants in the first phase focus groups judged
175 that the multiple challenges many clients’ faced meant that physical health problems
176 formed a relatively minor part of a role that centred on supporting clients in dealing
177 with the economic, social and environmental determinants of health. By follow-up, link
178 workers’ experiences supported the contention that simply signposting to activities
179 (the principle underlying ‘light’ social prescribing (Kimberlee, 2015)) would be
180 ineffective in engaging clients and much more intensive support was required:

181

182 *The work that we do is quite in-depth with the client ... Some people say, “Well*
183 *we should just be signposting and that’s it.” But actually we know that our*
184 *clients, if we did that, they’re not going to engage ... So really we are quite*
185 *intense. (P2, FG1, Phase 2)*

186

187 In the first phase, some link workers reported that training had increased their
188 confidence in performing the role and their knowledge of areas such as confidentiality
189 and safeguarding. They particularly welcomed the opportunity to study for a formal
190 qualification. However, for others, early experiences of the role indicated that the

191 generic health-trainer training had inadequately equipped them with the practical
192 skills and knowledge required to fully implement what was a highly complex role. This
193 was confirmed at follow-up. A number of participants described their initial training as
194 overly theoretical and lacking the more practical elements that may have better
195 prepared them for the range and severity of the issues their clients faced:

196

197 *The training that I did, I thought it was very 'picturesque': "Let's talk about the*
198 *traditional female who sits at home and bakes. She would like to go to the gym*
199 *or join a walking group to have a couple more friends. Her health's good but it's*
200 *not great." You're not talking about 'Sally' who lives in a flat where the room's*
201 *caving in, she's got no money and she's got loads of family. You're not actually*
202 *talking about real poverty, which is what we deal with on a daily basis ... (P3,*
203 *FG4, Phase 2)*

204

205 The intensive levels of support required by some clients before they could focus on
206 health improvements, meant that by necessity, providing initial support relating to the
207 social determinants of health was proving to be a key part of the link worker role:

208

209 *[We are] support workers more than link workers ... I think you find when you*
210 *go in with a client and they've got massive problems, like they've got no money*
211 *for food, you can't just say, "Do you fancy going to the gym?" We have to look*
212 *at the problem that's affecting them at the moment. (P2, FG4, Phase 2)*

213

214 By follow-up, link workers had identified a number of further training needs, including
215 an increased focus on the wider determinants of health (e.g. giving advice on benefits
216 and housing), further training on behaviour-change tools such as motivational
217 interviewing and in-depth training on mental health issues and LTCs. Community
218 development training to improve knowledge of the availability of community
219 resources and how to access them was identified as particularly important.

220

221 Prior to their employment with WtW service providers, many of the participants in this
222 study had been working in support and advocacy roles. First-phase participants
223 reported that, beyond their formal training, valuable sources of knowledge and peer-
224 support came from their wide range of professional backgrounds that included family,
225 mental health and addiction support work; health training; and housing, welfare and
226 debt advice. By this study's commencement, this knowledge resource was already
227 being captured in a database by link workers in one provider organisation.

228

229 At follow-up, link workers continued to stress the benefits stemming from a range of
230 previous experience. For example, prior experience in youth work and weight-
231 management provided valuable motivational skills, while experience of support work
232 was proving useful as it closely matched the link workers' role 'on-the-ground':

233

234 *Personally, with my support worker background, I feel like that has helped me in*
235 *a lot of ways, like just building up a rapport with people and managing to*
236 *achieve things ... So that for me has developed my ability to be compassionate*

237 *but also to say, “I know you’re feeling like this, but what can we do to solve*
238 *things?” (P1, FG1, Phase 2)*

239

240 Varying skill-sets also enabled link workers to try different approaches with difficult-
241 to-engage clients. Mechanisms for career progression that recognised link workers’
242 abilities and credited their prior experience were identified as vital; for example, the
243 development of a supervisor role into which experienced link workers could progress.

244

245 **Barriers to performing the role**

246 Referral challenges

247 In WtW, and many other social prescribing initiatives, primary-care referrals are the
248 first link in the social prescribing chain. At this study’s commencement, WtW was a
249 new service and link workers reported some general practices as more engaged than
250 others. This resulted in considerable variation in the number and suitability of
251 referrals. In this study’s first phase, link workers identified three barriers to referral:
252 firstly, high primary-care workloads leaving little time for referral; secondly,
253 uncertainty over whom to refer; and thirdly, frustration with the WtW referral criteria
254 precluding referral of patients who practitioners felt could benefit from social
255 prescribing but were ineligible (for example, those outside the 40-74 age range). Due
256 to the low referral rates from some GP practices, link workers had to take an active
257 role in recruiting clients. A number felt uncomfortable with, and unprepared for, this
258 aspect of their role, while others felt it prevented them focussing on engaging with
259 clients

260

261 *I didn't anticipate there being a slow start in terms of GPs referring and that's*
262 *been difficult because it meant that marketing, promotion, selling, that has*
263 *become quite a big part of the role ... it's frustrating ... it's like the quality of the*
264 *work with the clients is running parallel and sometimes is side-lined by this*
265 *panic of getting referrals. (P13, Interview, Phase 1)*

266

267 An increase in referral rates by follow-up had created new challenges. Link workers
268 reported tensions between achieving what were viewed as high referral targets and
269 their ability to deliver the holistic, intensive support their clients needed.

270 At follow-up, some also noted that increasing targets were pressuring their employing
271 organisations to accept clients who were not necessarily ready to engage. Link
272 workers also reported increasing numbers of referrals of clients with complex physical
273 and mental health needs combined with multiple financial and social issues. These
274 clients could be at crisis-point at referral. Link workers felt they lacked the capacity
275 and/or expertise to offer these clients the high-intensity, specialist support they
276 needed. In response to managing increased targets, the four service provider
277 organisations had adopted a 'triage' process where link workers differentiated
278 between 'heavy' and 'light' and touch service users, respectively requiring more or less
279 intensive support.

280

281 Onward referral challenges

282 Bertotti et al. (2017) and Skivington et al. (2018) identify the lack of availability of
283 suitable onward referral services as a barrier to social prescribing . These deficiencies
284 were frequently highlighted by link workers, in both phases of this study, who

285 identified that *“a massive barrier is other services’ capacities”* (P1, Interview, Phase 1).
286 Specific gaps in onward referral services included a lack of affordable and accessible
287 groups and services for adults in their 40s and early 50s, especially those in
288 employment who did not qualify for cost concessions and needed after-work services.
289 Also lacking were flexible services that could be accessed on a drop-in basis according
290 to clients’ fluctuating health status and services tailored to the specific needs of Black
291 and Minority Ethnic clients. Public-sector funding cuts had reduced funding to the
292 voluntary and community sectors, leaving many services with reduced capacity to cope
293 with social prescribing referrals. Where good-quality popular services were available
294 for onward referral, link workers expressed concerns about services becoming over-
295 subscribed.

296

297 As reported above, before they could focus on their clients’ LTC management needs,
298 link workers often had to deal with crises around welfare benefit appeals, evictions
299 and debt. High demand coupled with decreasing capacity in services such as mental
300 health support, welfare rights and housing advice meant many clients found
301 themselves referred onto waiting lists in order to access services. At follow-up, lengthy
302 waits to access specialist support services meant that link workers were frequently
303 providing direct support with tasks such as welfare and housing applications. As their
304 case-loads increased over time, dealing with the intensity of client’s needs could place
305 link workers under strain:

306

307 *You've got medical assessments for benefits, it's a massive time consuming*
308 *exercise. It's mentally draining. You've got two hour appointments. You've got*
309 *elderly people who are facing homelessness because they've lost their benefit*
310 *when they were getting disability [benefits]. (P4, FG4 Phase 2).*

311

312 Boundary setting

313 In both phases of the study, link workers reflected that the intense support required by
314 some clients meant that it was vital to set boundaries around expectations of the
315 nature of support on offer. Perhaps the trickiest and most sensitive aspect of
316 boundary-setting was managing clients' expectations around relationships. A strong,
317 supportive link worker/client relationship is vital for successful social prescribing
318 (Moffatt et al., 2017). Nevertheless, relationship boundaries were not always easy to
319 set and required careful management, with link workers describing "*a bit of a*
320 *balancing act*" between being a "*friend but not a friend*" (P13, Interview, Phase 1). A
321 useful strategy for managing client dependency involved referring clients to specialist
322 services and utilising the multi-agency approach suggested in the link worker training.

323

324 By follow-up, link workers had established relationships with some clients over a
325 period of months. Dependency continued to be identified as an issue, with link
326 workers expressing concerns both over the risk of client dependency and of
327 themselves becoming "*too emotionally involved*" with clients who "*are not seeing you*
328 *as their professional worker but as their friend*" (P2, FG3, Phase 2). Additional
329 strategies for maintaining appropriate boundaries had been developed over time,
330 including regularly reminding clients of the limits of the link worker role, creating

331 distance by doubling-up, swapping link workers or running group activities and
332 reasserting the importance of empowerment rather than dependency.

333

334 Discussion

335 Hutt (2016, p. 94) observes that “if social prescribing is to be successful, it is imperative
336 that learning from projects is shared”. This study is the first to explore link workers’
337 perceptions of their role and its requirements. Broad definitions of the link worker role
338 and its requisite skills have been identified (for example, Brandling & House, 2007;
339 Keenaghan et al., 2012). This study makes clear what the role entails ‘on-the-ground’.
340 To foster the trust and open communication required for identifying and setting client
341 goals, link workers needed highly-developed interpersonal communication skills.
342 Indeed, the skills and qualities link workers identified as important in this study are an
343 excellent fit with Brandling and House’s (2009, p. 15) description of the putative ‘ideal’
344 link worker as “someone with highly developed interpersonal communication and
345 networking skills, with a motivating and inspiring manner to encourage clients to make
346 brave decisions or take up new opportunities”. There is a high degree of fidelity
347 between WtW link workers’ accounts of their role and skills and the accounts of
348 service users in an earlier study (Moffatt et al., 2017; Wildman et al., 2018).
349 Specifically, clients identified a close client/link worker relationship and link worker
350 continuity as important factors in service engagement and in making and maintaining
351 lifestyle changes (Moffatt et al., 2017; Wildman et al., 2018). In this study, we identify
352 a risk of dependency arising from this close relationship, with link workers sharing a
353 range of strategies developed over time to mitigate this risk.

354

355 It is argued that linkage underpins successful social prescribing. Our findings support
356 the contention that the presence of a link worker is necessary for effective social
357 prescribing (Keenaghan et al., 2012; Whitelaw et al., 2017). Primary-care appointments
358 in the UK are routinely allocated only 10 minutes (Oxtoby, 2010) and practitioners,
359 therefore, lack the time to support patients dealing with complex problems beyond
360 health. In contrast, link worker appointments tend to be considerably longer (WtW
361 initial appointments are around one-hour, with appointment length then varying
362 according to clients' needs), with link workers explicitly tasked with helping clients
363 identify and address issues beyond their physical health. Further, link workers were
364 clear that social problems were a severe impediment for many clients, preventing
365 them from effectively managing their physical and mental health. Without holistic and
366 intensive link worker support, clients could not engage effectively with the
367 intervention. Moreover, the rationale behind the link worker role is that identifying,
368 navigating and accessing community services can be extremely challenging, especially
369 for patients in socio-economically disadvantaged areas (Mercer et al, 2017). Primary-
370 care professionals are unlikely to have knowledge of the full range of community-
371 based resources and this study confirms that effective linkage requires link workers'
372 comprehensive community knowledge.

373

374 This study also identifies impediments to the effectiveness of the link worker role. Our
375 findings confirm the importance of primary-care practitioners' engagement with social
376 prescribing (White et al., 2010)(Whitelaw et al, 2017). In common with other studies
377 (Bertotti et al., 2017; Brandling & House, 2009; Mercer et al., 2017), we find that link
378 workers' experiences of primary-care engagement with social prescribing indicate that

379 practitioners can be both slow to identify patients who may benefit from social
380 prescribing and to refer. We identify as an additional issue the referral of patients with
381 severe and complex social problems who may be unable to engage with social
382 prescribing. Link worker capacity is also an important consideration, requiring realistic
383 referral targets that take account of the complexity of cases.

384

385 Onward referral groups and services are a further vital link in the social prescribing
386 chain. Our study supports the suggestion that access to high-quality and continuously-
387 funded community resources is central to the success of social prescribing (Whitelaw
388 et al., 2017). Areas of high-socioeconomic deprivation have been disproportionately
389 affected by prolonged austerity around public spending and the resulting cuts to
390 services in the public and voluntary sectors (Bambra & Garthwaite, 2015). This may
391 present an existential threat to social prescribing.

392

393 This study highlights the challenges and complexities of the link worker role and
394 suggests that both initial and on-going training should be a particular focus. In
395 common with a previous study (Bertotti et al., 2017), we identify the value of link
396 workers with backgrounds in health training, welfare rights advice and support work.
397 However, the development of 'bespoke' link worker training, perhaps including
398 elements to enable career progression and/or give credit for prior skills and
399 experience, could help to clarify and support the link worker role, enhance its status
400 and ensure service fidelity and consistency. As an additional benefit, standardised link
401 worker training would help to simplify at least one aspect of the complicated task of

402 evaluating the effectiveness of link worker social prescribing programmes (Rempel et
403 al., 2017).

404

405 Finally, if, as suggested, “the link worker has arguably the most important role in social
406 prescribing”, the role must be valued appropriately (Social Prescribing Network, 2016).

407 A number of social prescribing schemes use volunteers as link workers. However, the
408 high levels of skills and knowledge required and the role’s demands indicate the
409 necessity of a paid link worker role with career progression. A recent Social Prescribing
410 Network report (2016) identifies the challenges in finding skilled and networked link
411 workers, observing that, while the link worker person specification is demanding, the
412 pay is relatively low. Robust cost-effectiveness studies of social prescribing are lacking
413 (Polley et al., 2017) but are needed to identify the costs and benefits of link workers as
414 it may be the case that the role justifies higher remuneration, greater
415 professionalisation and scope for career development.

416

417 Strengths and limitations

418 The longitudinal nature of the data collection is a strength of this study. Two phases of
419 data collection captured link workers’ initial perceptions of the role and the nature and
420 extent of changes over time. The participation in phase one of all link workers
421 employed by the WtW service and the participation in phase two of a majority of link
422 workers means that the sample is a good reflection of link workers’ views. In the first
423 phase, individual interviews conducted after the focus groups allowed us to explore
424 link workers’ views free from the influence of group dynamics. The study is limited by
425 the lack of individual interviews at follow-up.

426

427 Conclusion

428 As social prescribing becomes more widespread, knowledge is building on the
429 components of effective practice. This study adds to the evidence base by reporting
430 the experiences of link workers delivering a social prescribing scheme during its first
431 and second years. Link workers were central to client engagement, demonstrating
432 reflective practice, willingness to learn and to share their learning, and commitment to
433 a complex role they performed with skill. This study's findings also provide direction
434 for commissioners and practitioners interested in developing link worker social
435 prescribing schemes. Firstly, perhaps most important is a properly funded voluntary
436 and community sector. Equitable allocation of resources between all the links in the
437 social prescribing chain will be vital for the long-term sustainability of social prescribing
438 (Bertotti et al., 2017; Brandling & House, 2007; Keenaghan et al., 2012). Progress is
439 being made in this area, with the Department of Health announcing a scheme to
440 provide grant funding directly to voluntary and community sector organisations to
441 develop social prescribing programmes (NHS England, 2017). Funding will only be
442 provided to schemes involving link workers in recognition of the pivotal role of link
443 workers in social prescribing. Secondly, although social prescribing is becoming
444 increasingly popular, there is still some uncertainty in primary care (Harrison, 2018).
445 Further research into the reasons for differing levels of GP engagement with social
446 prescribing is required. Finally, training and career development are likely to be central
447 to recruiting and retaining link workers. Work is being undertaken to identify core
448 competencies required by link workers. These competencies are intended to inform
449 the development of a bespoke qualification that builds on and develops existing skills

450 (Health Education England, 2016). This is likely to be essential for developing high-
451 quality link worker social prescribing to be delivered to people with complex needs.

452

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List of tables

Table 1: Phase one participant demographics

Table 2: Phase two participant demographics