

# “We’re the conduit in an increasingly broken system”: A qualitative exploration of how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted the provision of social prescribing for older adults in the UK

Rachel Lawrence MSc, Hannah Frith PhD, Sarah Hotham PhD, Nicola Carey PhD, Lizzie Lowrey-Crouch, Nicola Freeman, Kimberley Smith PhD

## Project Background

Social prescribing helps to address the social determinants of health via engagement with community organisations. In England, the rollout of social prescribing coincided with onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which changed service delivery. Older adults are often the focus of social prescribing, and the pandemic had a disproportionate effect on this population due to their clinical risk, which resulted in a strict lockdown that negatively impacted their wellbeing. This study aimed to explore the UK-wide impact of the pandemic on social prescribing services for older adults (50+).

## Findings: Themes

- 1 Impact at an individual level
- 2 Impact at an intervention level
- 3 Impact at a system level
- 4 Impact on future provision

## Theme 1: Impact at an individual level

The pandemic impacted the wellbeing of older adults and social prescribing staff. Participants experienced both positive and negative outcomes, as staff adapted to provide valuable support but worked beyond their role and training. This overarching theme demonstrated that during the pandemic, **staff were balancing the demands of the role with their wellbeing.**

“The team's wellbeing suffered, especially with the feeling of the job not being what it should be, not getting people the support they need”  
- SP link worker

“Of course there are plenty of positives and I know I’ve made a difference to some very desperate people” - SP link worker



## Theme 3: Impact at system level

During the pandemic, social prescribing was viewed as a ‘stop-gap/bridging’ service which often received complex referrals for severe mental health. Therefore, social prescribing **was not always being used within its aims/scope.** The pandemic also amplified concerns about the sustainability of the VCFSE sector and emphasised the need for **funding to ‘follow the individual’.**

## Theme 4: Impact on future provision

Services are now implementing **a hybrid model which is flexible and can adapt to the needs of older adults.** Participants also highlighted that engagement with VCFSE organisations can support older adults to reconnect with their communities, with link workers being well-placed to help **facilitate reconnection.**

## Theme 2: Impact at an intervention level

The transition to virtual provision resulted in challenges for working with older adults and was only successful when they had **access to digital resources and good digital literacy.** During the pandemic, link workers took on a variety of new roles and adapted existing ones to meet demand. This created blurred boundaries surrounding the link worker role, **emphasising the importance of clear role boundaries.**

“I think as social prescribers we can assist [older adults] with regaining confidence to re-engage with their community” - SP link worker

## Conclusions & Implications

Social prescribing provided valuable support for older adults, but it did not always **align with the aims/scope of the intervention.** Pandemic-related consequences are influencing how social prescribing is delivered moving forward. The findings emphasise the need for **clear role boundaries, improved funding pathways and the continued implementation of flexible delivery models** for older adults.

This research was funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR Applied Research Collaboration Kent, Surrey and Sussex) and the Kent, Surrey, Sussex Academic Health Science Network.

The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

**NIHR** | Applied Research Collaboration  
Kent, Surrey and Sussex

**Kent Surrey Sussex  
Academic Health Science  
Network**