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The role of the link worker in social prescribing: a protocol for a scoping review

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Background

A scoping review will be completed as part of a PhD which aims to explore and assess the impact of referral mechanisms involved in connecting people to community-based support.

Social prescribing comprises non-medical, community and social based activities which aim to empower an individual to take control of and manage their health and wellbeing (Husk et al., 2019). The NHS ten-year plan (2019) pledges that 900,000 people will be referred to social prescribing by 2023/2024 with the aim of reducing pressures on GPs and emergency departments across the UK (Polley et al., 2017).

While there are specific and ambitious targets for the use of social prescribing to treat and improve people's health and wellbeing, there is no clear definition of social prescribing. A definition is needed to describe and understand *how and by what route* people are referred into social prescribing. Additionally, from the literature it is not clear if social prescriptions always involve interaction with a *link worker*. A link worker's role is to support people to engage with community for practical and emotional support, with the aim of improving their health and wellbeing (All Ireland Social Prescribing Network, 2021).

To better understand referral routes to social prescribing, it is imperative to clarify the role of the link worker in order to enable clear assessment of referral routes and

their impact in connecting people to community based support. A scoping review has been identified as the most appropriate method as it is useful in identifying emerging evidence, as well as defining and clarifying key characteristics of a concept identified in the literature (Munn et al., 2018). In addition, Munn et al. (2018) note that a scoping review aids in identifying and analysing gaps in knowledge, making it an ideal method for this review where clarity and learning is required in this relatively newly emerging topic. Additionally, an iterative approach will be taken for the review which is supported in scoping review methodologies.

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analysis for Scoping Review (PRISM-ScR, 2018) framework will guide this scoping review. The checklist contains 20 essential and two optional reporting items to include when completing a scoping review (PRISMA-ScR, 2018).

Review questions/objectives

1. The review has been designed to provide clarity and better understanding about referral routes to social prescribing.
2. The review aims to clarify the role of the link worker in the referral process and the impact of a link worker, on those who receive support from community based organisations.

Inclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria were identified using the PCC (Population; Concept; Context) framework for scoping review inclusion criteria (JBI, 2015):

P -Link Workers

C- Role (of link worker)

C- Social Prescribing

The inclusion criteria for this scoping review are relatively broad as there is limited identified evidence on the topic. All identified data related to the role of the link worker in social prescribing will be included in the review initially.

Searches

There are a wide range of databases available for searching published literature. After discussions with team supervisors and an academic librarian, relevant studies will be systematically searched for using the following databases due to their relevance to the fields of nursing and social sciences which is deemed most relevant to this type of research: Cinahl (Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health Literature), MEDLINE, PsychInfo, Web of Science and Scopus. In addition, a review of the reference lists of identified papers will be carried out to assess if there are any other relevant papers to include which may be missed through other search methods. Relevant grey literature, including government reports and policy documents will be searched for through Google Scholar. Finally, reports from UK based Social Prescribing Networks and National Association of Link Workers reports will also be included.

Search terms

In order to gather the most relevant papers, specific search terms will be used. There are various terms used for a link worker (NHS England, 2021). To ensure that all appropriate literature is identified, a list of relevant search terms has been developed from discussions with organisations who use Social Prescribing, along with terms gathered from existing literature on the topic. These are summarised in table 2 below:

Table 2: Search terms

Link Worker
Social Prescribing
Community connector
Wellbeing advisor
Health advisor
Community navigator
Community Referral
Wellbeing
Community led organisation/CLO
Referral Routes

Selection process

In order to select relevant and appropriate papers for the Scoping review, a three step strategy will be used, as advised by the Joanna Briggs Institute (Peters et al., 2020).

Step one will comprise an initial search of databases relevant to the topic as outlined above. Step two will comprise analysis of the title and abstract of each retrieved paper and of terms used to describe each paper. A subsequent search using all of the identified keywords and terms will then be undertaken across all of the identified databases. Step three of the strategy will comprise the reference list of identified applicable articles and reports being searched to identify additional sources. Each title and abstract will be examined by two reviewers and its eligibility will be determined based on the specified criteria to ensure any irrelevant papers are excluded. The remaining papers will be examined in full to allow determination of inclusion in the Scoping review. Any disagreements will be solved by consensus or, if required, through the decision of a third reviewer. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for the review are outlined below.

Inclusion criteria:

Based on the initial scoping process, it was agreed that the inclusion criteria would include published journal articles; primary or secondary research; published reports and guidelines. This was deemed appropriate due to the relatively new nature of the subject topic to allow all relevant information to be included in the review. Sources to be included must be peer reviewed or from a reputable and renowned charitable or healthcare organisation, and the information to be included must contain information on social prescribing and the role of the link worker / social prescriber. This was deemed necessary to ensure that information gathered is reliable and dependable. Furthermore, it was decided that articles published in any language will be included, and that any population will be included in searches, as well as any type of review. Again, this was deemed appropriate due to the relatively new topic area. Additionally, it was decided that publications to be excluded include editorials and opinion pieces as well as matters outside of social prescribing and link working.

An iterative approach was used for gathering search terms, and will continue to be used during the review when identifying and selecting studies and extracting data. This is recommended to facilitate beneficial reporting and transparency (Levac et al., 2010).

Data extraction

The number of studies identified and selected for inclusion in the review will be reported and a search decision flowchart will be presented. Any duplicates will be removed. The title and abstract of the paper will be evaluated by two reviewers to ensure that they meets the requirements for the scoping review and subsequently for those meeting the criteria, the full text will be examined to confirm its relevance.

Data extracted from each included study will be presented in tabular form outlining key information, similar to the one outlined in table 1 below:

Table 1: Data extraction table

Author	
Year of publication	
Title	
Type of publication	
Country	
Main aim/objective	
Term used for Link Worker role	
Other job titles or roles mentioned for the link worker	
Definition of social prescribing including link worker	
Alternative terms used for social prescribing	
Definition/description of link worker role	
Context in which link worker sits (Primary care/community organisation)	
Referrals to link workers from:	
Link workers referring to:	
Population sample size	
Type of study	
Findings	

Data Analysis and presentation of results

The analysis of data collected using the data extraction table above will provide information on the existing literature around the role of the link worker within social prescribing to address the review question. With such broad inclusion criteria it is likely that there will be both quantitative and qualitative studies included in the review. In order to carry out the most effective data analysis, data will be tabulated using Microsoft Excel which will be shared with the research team to allow ease of discussion of findings and to allow iterative scrutiny. Additionally it is hoped that it will help simplify any required alterations to take into account any emerging findings.

Data will be synthesised using narrative syntheses to draw conclusions based on emerging findings/themes.

As recommended by the JBI (Peters et al., 2020), data will be extracted from the results and will be mapped into categories. This will include mapping the frequency of identified concepts and characteristics of the role of the link worker in social prescribing and any geographical differences in identified concepts.

It is hoped that the mapping and presentation in clear tabular and descriptive format will allow the well-defined identification of any emerging concepts and characteristics of the role of the link worker within social prescribing in order to clearly identify and assess referral routes in social prescribing. Additionally, and vitally as identified by Nyanchoka et al. (2019), it is hoped that it will allow any gaps in the existing research and directions for future research.

Proposed contribution

Scoping reviews have the aim of enabling a clear summary of findings to be identified in order to improve research planning and prioritisation, and to progress evidence informed policies (Nyanchoka et al., 2019). The aim of this Scoping review is to achieve what Nyanchoka et al. (2019) posit and it is anticipated that this review will provide improved clarity for describing, understanding and assessing the input

of a link worker within social prescribing. Additionally, Scoping Reviews allow gaps in current research to be identified (Nyanchoka et al., 2019). It is hoped that this review of the components of the role of link worker will also provide a useful resource for training and employment purposes and will identify areas where further research is required.

Ethics and Dissemination

This scoping review methodology aims to synthesise existing research that is publicly available. As such, ethical approval is not required.

It is proposed that the findings from the Scoping review will be submitted for publication to a scientific journal and presented at appropriate conferences. This Scoping Review is being carried out as part of a PhD project which is part of the Common Health Assets research study [Award ID: NIHR129118]. This wider study is researching how Community Led Organisations impact health and wellbeing of people in disadvantaged areas (CHA, 2021).

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