National Association of Link Workers

Rt. Hon. Wes Streeting, M.P.,
Secretary of State: Department of Health & Social Care,
39, Victoria Street,
LONDON SW1H 0EU

22 July 2024

Dear Mr Streeting,

Appointment as Secretary of State for Health & Social Care

On behalf of the National Association of Link Workers, we write to congratulate you on your appointment as Secretary of State for Health & Social Care. We look forward to working with you and your ministerial colleagues in supporting the agenda upon which you were elected.

The National Association of Link Workers is the only professional membership body that sets standards, supports, and represents social prescribing link workers across the United Kingdom. Our members are direct patient care staff who address patients' holistic needs requiring non-medical intervention. They provide the time and space for patients to discuss their issues in detail, making them a key generalist workforce with a broad perspective on the real challenges patients face. Consequently, we have significant insight into what is genuinely happening for patients, including unmet needs and systemic failures, and what is required to empower and support them.

This is a pivotal moment in efforts to transform healthcare: the appointment of Lords Darzi and Milburn to produce recommendations for you and your team has important implications for many people across England. We welcome your commitment to exploring different approaches to improve access to effective solutions for diverse populations. We believe that the continued professionalisation of Social Prescribing Link Workers (SPLWs) is crucial in supporting you to achieve this objective, and we are eager to accelerate this mission.

The NHS Long Term Plan initiated a decade-long journey towards an integrated health and care system focused on prevention and population health. Social Prescribing Link Workers have already played a vital role in ensuring that the target of benefiting two-and-a-half million people with personalised care was met within two years.

Furthermore, as you have emphasised the importance of shifting NHS resources towards prevention and population health, there is considerable potential for social prescribing link workers to further this goal.

Community health through social prescribing is essential to sustaining the NHS. Social prescribing must be respected as an independent care model, not merely as damage control or an additional option. To prevent ill-health and reduce health inequalities, action needs to be taken on the wider determinants of health, such as poor housing, lack of educational opportunities, community support, employment, racism, and discrimination. Additionally, the ongoing cost-of-living crisis has exacerbated social inequalities. A cross-government focus on these issues is critical, or else the Department of Health & Social Care and the NHS will be left to fix a broken system caused by environmental factors outside your immediate responsibilities.

The system continues to fail those who rely on it: there are high levels of unmet need, and providers struggle to deliver the quality of care that vulnerable people have a right to expect. This places tremendous pressure on families and carers, with mounting financial and human costs as the system struggles to cope.

While it is clear that reforming the system is one of your stated priorities, this will take time to design, implement, and deliver. Meanwhile, a commitment to social prescribing link workers is crucial to help to mitigate the effects of increased use of antidepressants, the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on health, the growing NHS backlog, and worsening health inequalities. Social prescribing has intrinsic value in its own right, working to prevent ill-health while supporting people to live well and independently, rather than merely serving as a pressure valve for overstretched healthcare services.

Social prescribing link workers are highly valued members of multi-disciplinary teams for the patient care they provide. We welcome the NHS Long Term Workforce plan's projection to expand their number to 9,000 from over 2,800 to which you have committed. It is vital that the NHS lives up to the promise in its constitution and delivers treatments addressing the whole person's needs. However, social prescribing will not reach its potential unless the right structures and systems exist to support it, which will also require political commitment and will. To deliver effectively, social prescribing link workers must be widely embedded across the health and social care ecosystem, contributing to and drawing on the work of the NHS and beyond.

We believe that the election of your Government provides a pivotal opportunity to narrow the gap in healthy life expectancy, and we welcome any commitment to deliver a cross-government strategy for social prescribing. Social prescribing is a significant component in achieving the success of your vision, and we look forward to working with you as we professionalise and embed the work of social prescribing link workers to make that vision a reality.

We would welcome a meeting to discuss how we can continue to work together. Your team can contact our Chair (chair@nalw.org.uk) to arrange this.

Yours sincerely,

Christiana Melam MBE
Founder and Chief Executive Officer

Robert Pettigrew
Chairman: Executive Board