

Reducing health inequities in London by improving access to social welfare advice through greater collaboration between the healthcare, local authority and advice sectors



Executive summary

October 2023



Strengthening access to social welfare advice in London through collaboration between the healthcare, local authority and advice sectors

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The opening lines to the Health Gap, written in 2017 by Michael Marmot and the Institute for Health Equity are:

"Why treat people and send them back to the conditions that make them sick?"

Background

This Executive Summary is drawn from a study and report on **Reducing Health Inequalities through strengthening the relationship between healthcare, social prescribing and social welfare legal advice in London**, which builds on years of work in this field by the Greater London Authority, Bromley by Bow Insights, the work of UCL's Health Justice Partnerships' team, Transformation Partners in Health and Care, and studies by the Low Commission, the Institute for Health Equity and others.

In the 2023 Bromley by Bow insights undertook an independent study, grant funded by the Mayor of London, on initiatives to strengthen the relationships, partnerships and referral arrangements between healthcare settings, social prescribing and social welfare advice across London, and improve access to advice for social prescribing and those who are socially prescribed.

What is Social Prescribing? Social Prescribing is when healthcare professionals refer patients to support in the community, in order to improve their health and wellbeing. The concept and practice was adopted by NHS England in 2018. Social Prescribing Link Workers are employed in every Primary Care Network in England to receive the referrals from the clinicians and meet with patients to support them in whatever matters most to the patient. Currently in London there are around 500 Social Prescribing Link Workers working in the Capital's 200 Primary Care Networks.

What is Social Welfare Legal Advice? Social Welfare Legal Advice is the information, advice and guidance given to a client by a Social Welfare Advisor which is based on their legal rights and entitlements. The areas of law that Londoners most frequently require support with are housing (including repairs and allocation), welfare benefits claims, and unmanageable debt. Other areas of law that people also frequently need support with include Immigration, Employment Rights (such as discrimination, unfair dismissal), family law, consumer law etc. Most Social Welfare Legal Advice providers hold a quality mark and are inspected and quality assured every two years.

The findings of the study contribute to the London Health Board's Cost of Living task and finish group's report which in turn informs the London Health Board's recommendation, that all Londoners should have access to free, accessible, professional social welfare legal advice. The London Health Board's recommendations call on London's ICSs to commit to action on strengthening the relationship between healthcare and social welfare legal advice, increasing access to advice and providing a viable referral pathway for social prescribing.

The implementation of the study's recommendations will contribute to reducing health inequalities through improving people's wider determinants of health in the most fundamental aspects of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

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The scope, aims and ambitions of the study

The study seeks to support an understanding of the need and opportunities for greater collaboration between healthcare provision, social prescribing and social welfare legal advice to meet advice needs, particularly of the most vulnerable patients and families struggling on low income. It focuses on the following areas:

- the effects on people's health of the issues supported by social welfare advice and the health benefits of people accessing timely, professional advice in their communities
- the growing need and demand for social welfare advice in London, particularly amongst those with the greatest levels of health inequalities and the current supply of welfare advice in London
- the challenges and opportunities for strengthening access to advice, what works and what needs to change, and how that change can be brought about,
- readily replicable examples of collaboration between healthcare, social prescribing and social welfare advice providers to improve access to social welfare legal advice
- the opportunity presented by the development of Integrated Care Partnerships to better co-ordinate approaches to increase access to advice provision in the Capital.

The negative health impacts of social welfare issues and who is most affected by them

Social Welfare problems such as accessing benefit entitlements, dealing with problem debt and damp housing conditions are impacting on health and contributing to worse outcomes among more vulnerable groups. These issues disproportionately affect people living on low incomes and in deprived households. Additionally, they are more likely to affect people with certain vulnerabilities and characteristics, for example: migrants and refugees, single parents, ethnic minorities, and those living with long-term illnesses, disabilities or mental health conditions.

These issues contribute to health inequalities by exacerbating the impacts of hardship among groups who are already more vulnerable to poor health outcomes and experiences. The impact of austerity, falling value of salaries and welfare benefits, inflation and the rising cost of fuel, food and other essentials on low-income households is leading to poorer living standards, increased poverty and widening inequalities in health.

The health benefits of social welfare legal advice

Advice services help ensure people's rights to support and protection are upheld. Many of the areas supported represent the most fundamental in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, for example, through: securing welfare benefits and income, addressing issues of poor housing and homelessness, supporting people to manage and address debt problems, immigration and employment rights.

And the Marmot Review into the cost of living and health inequalities in London determined,

"...it is therefore, logical to conclude that interventions that alleviate these conditions will help someone to live a healthy life"¹

Many studies, including the Low Commission report, The Role of Advice Services in Health Outcomes² demonstrate how social welfare legal advice positively impacts on health and wellbeing and particularly mental health outcomes. The research studies highlighted in the report demonstrates how welfare advice can improve health by reducing stress and anxiety through supporting people to access the benefit income they are entitled, manage their debts and exercise their housing rights in relation to homelessness and poor housing conditions. The

¹ <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/evidence-review-cost-of-living-and-health-inequalities-in-london/click-here-to-read-the-report.pdf>

² Low Commission, The Role of Advice Services in Health Outcomes, 2015

resolving of welfare issues and the reduced allostatic load can support better decision making, including about management of long term health conditions.

In addition to immediate benefit the improvement of some of the wider determinants of health through advice will support better health and wellbeing outcomes over the life course.

Changes in demand for and supply of social welfare legal advice in London

Changes to the welfare system, such as ‘digital by default’ and the cost-of-living crisis have led to increased demand for social welfare advice and support with welfare benefits, debt, housing and immigration issues at the same time as advice services are under threat due to lack of funding.

In the Citizens Advice report, A Very General Practice³ GPs estimated they spent 20% of their time on issues other than health. In a 2023 survey for this study, London’s social prescribing link workers report that 40%-80% of their clients need to be referred to social welfare advice.

Although the need for and value of social welfare advice is recognised, there is no commitment to long term funding and no statutory obligation to provide social welfare advice. Over the past ten years, advice providers have been squeezed by public expenditure cuts affecting local authority funding and cuts in the scope of matters that can be dealt with under Legal Aid. The Advice Services Alliance 2019 report⁴ for the GLA on advice provision in London showed that it was a postcode lottery for residents, and didn’t meet the level of need with some boroughs almost becoming advice deserts.

The report highlights the need for greater resourcing of social welfare advice including having dedicated welfare advice provision linked to social prescribing, as well as in other healthcare and community settings.

Promoting access to social welfare legal advice in London

Timely access to advice may prevent issues escalating and becoming acute, however people can face numerous barriers to accessing advice when they experience welfare rights issues. There is a need for coordinated activity to ensure people, particularly those with long term and multiple health or mental health conditions and multiple social challenges, reach the necessary services. Co-locating and integrating advice with other frequently accessed services (such as healthcare) presents an opportunity for improving access through both the “problem noticing” that takes place in the consulting room, and the referral by a “trusted intermediary”, being the clinician who makes the initial referral and the social prescribing link worker who then connects the patient to the advice service.

Models of good practice in London

Partnerships between healthcare settings, social prescribing and social welfare advice

The report identifies examples of collaborative working between healthcare providers, social prescribing and advice providers across London and presents case studies of a range of different service models that are in operation. These include:

- The securing of additional borough wide social welfare advice provision specifically to meet the needs of patients being referred by social prescribing.
- Social welfare advice provided in hospital settings, with referrals particularly coming from departments with a long term relationship with their patients. This service is also available to hospital staff.
- Borough wide social welfare advice provider networks with a single referral platform through which professionals can refer clients to a relevant advice provider. 60% of referrals coming through this platform are now from social prescribing link workers

³https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/Global/CitizensAdvice/Public%20services%20publications/CitizensAdvice_AVeryGeneralPractice_May2015.pdf

⁴ <https://asauk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Advising-Londoners-Report-30072020-1.pdf>

- Long standing 'health-justice partnerships' with welfare advice provided in GP practices, and with teams of social prescribing link workers integrated with welfare advisors and fuel-food poverty workers
- Benefits awareness training for social prescribing link workers and General Practice teams on social welfare issues, housing, debt and money issues to enable healthcare staff identify patients who may have advice needs.

Welfare advice provision in healthcare settings and with collaborative working with social prescribing, offers an effective, person-centred approach to tackling health inequalities, improving individual health and wellbeing and producing cost-savings for the public sector.

The opportunity the establishment of Integrated Care Systems and the Partnerships that will deliver them creates

The formation of Integrated Care Systems and Integrated Care Partnerships offers a significant opportunity to apply systems thinking and work towards a broader assessment of community needs and the services required to meet them. The evidence suggests social welfare legal advice may be considered a core service in the strategy to improve population health, the social determinants of health, and reduce health inequalities.

Developing integrated provision that includes social welfare legal advice will improve the wider determinants of health for the most disadvantaged communities within each ICS' population, and therefore influence health inequalities for people with the poorest health outcomes. This is complementary to the Core20Plus5 programme and can address the needs of social prescribing clients.

The London Health Board has recommended that London's five ICSs should commit to its residents having access to timely, professional, accessible social welfare advice, including where appropriate in person, linked to healthcare settings and social prescribing.

Recommendations

The report features a series of recommendations at System, Place (borough) and Neighbourhood (PCN) levels. The most fundamental recommendations are here, the full recommendations are in the full report and in a separate Recommendations document.

- At ICS level, to create a commitment that the residents of the ICS area should have access to social welfare advice and that ICP partners commit to funding a level of advice provision to meet their needs
- That each ICP should develop guidance for implementation of the commitment at Place (Borough) and Neighbourhood (PCN) levels.
- ICP guidance to include encouragement for the formation of Place (borough) level task and finish groups consisting of Local Authority, Healthcare, CVS/VCSE, and community to consider the borough level recommendations.
- To carry out Place (Borough) level assessments of the need for advice with consideration of demographic characteristics, levels of deprivation, etc, and current provision of welfare advice. To assess and secure the funding required to meet demand for social welfare legal advice in healthcare settings, coordinated with social prescribing, the high street and other relevant settings.

For copies of the report, subsidiary documents and further information

The full report and subsidiary documents, listed below, are available from Bromley by Bow Insights:

<https://www.bbbc.org.uk/insights/>

Report

- **Reducing health inequities in London by improving access to social welfare advice through greater collaboration between the healthcare, local authority and advice sectors**
 - Full report
 - Executive summary report (This document)

Subsidiary summary documents

- **Making the case for why Integrated Care Systems should include the provision of social welfare advice**
- **Recommendations for how Integrated Care Systems, Places and Neighbourhoods can increase access to social welfare advice, particularly for the most deprived communities**
- **Good practice, replicable, case studies from London**
- **Poster/infographic**

For information about the study and taking its recommendations forward, please contact:

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