

Make the most of the ‘trusted resource’ of link workers, says organisation boss

Link workers are a ‘trusted resource’ for occupational therapists to work alongside, says Christiana Melam, the chief executive of the National Association of Link Workers.

Link workers featured heavily in the NHS Long-Term Plan in England, including a commitment from the government to fund 1,000 new posts as part of social prescribing projects. Scotland is also recruiting 250 new link workers, while Northern Ireland and Wales are also investing in social prescribing.

Says Christiana: ‘A link worker is a trusted resource that can help multidisciplinary teams, including occupational therapists, deliver seamless holistic services to patients. They work with people using key skills of active listening, person-centred skills and empathy skills to listen to them, identify solutions to build capability and resilience, and help them to access solutions.’

‘Together, meeting objectives like delivering personalised care and moving to a social model of health is so much more achievable.’

Christiana describes link workers as ‘glue in the system’ to build relationships for people with different organisations, with it being vital that link workers have local intelligence to understand the different community groups and assets available to work with.

She adds: ‘The people who are good at the job are really passionate about giving something to their community; they are good listeners, approachable and creative. No matter the qualifications you have, you need to be approachable so people can relate and open up to trust you.’

While much of the language around the emerging social prescribing agenda will be familiar to occupational therapists, Christiana differentiates the two professions by saying that link workers are experts in connecting and linking, as opposed to occupational therapists’ focus on interventions. ‘We’re talking about a generalist link worker who is excellent at working with pathways and making the right pathways. They can then escalate to other members of the multidisciplinary team when it’s needed,’ she says.

Paul Cooper, RCOT professional adviser, said: ‘We are seeing a fast expansion in link workers in the workforce and so if you haven’t already worked with one, you are likely to do so soon. It is encouraging that there is so much emphasis being placed on social prescribing and I would urge members to do all they can to support this area of work.’

‘Occupational therapists have a distinct role as experts in occupations to promote health and wellbeing, as well as a profession that can support link workers in local areas. RCOT would encourage members to actively engage with local link workers, in particular creating pathways for link workers to gain advice and refer on for people with the most complex needs.’

New research by the NALW has found that the main reason the vast majority of their 500-strong membership became link workers was to contribute to their community. The research also found that the biggest challenge in the role was a lack of resources.

For more information, visit: www.connectlink.org. For more on link workers in social prescribing, see page 40.

For more information on the occupational therapy role in social prescribing visit: www.rcot.co.uk/news/occupational-therapy-role-social-prescribing. If you have a good example of work you are doing with link workers to deliver social prescribing initiatives, please send it to: Paul.Cooper@rcot.co.uk.

Quote of the month

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Christiana Melam, NALW chief executive

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