

Project information:

Social Prescribing Community of Practice pilot

What is the research project about?

We want to find out how social prescribing can lead to structural change in community wellbeing.

Social prescribing helps people to address the non-medical issues that affect their wellbeing by linking them to community-based activities and services. We see people's wellbeing as the outcome of multiple personal, social, economic and environmental factors that affect our ability to live a 'good life'. These factors often interact with each other and with particular locations, creating structural inequalities in people's and communities' capacities for enhancing their wellbeing. There is evidence that an 'asset-based' approach to social prescribing, which reinforces communities' strengths and resources, can enhance access to the things communities need for wellbeing. However, asset-based working is often not widely adopted because of a range of structural issues in the systems that perpetuate wellbeing inequalities. We can change these issues through joint inquiry: communities, social prescribing partners, policymakers and academics learning together.

Who is funding the project?

Research England's Participatory Research Fund has awarded us funding to do a one-year pilot project between April 2023-2024.

The full title of the project is 'Tackling Wellbeing Inequalities through Social Prescribing: Co-producing community-driven research and learning infrastructure'.

Who are the research team?

The core research team consists of three researchers from the Centre for Urban Wellbeing at the University of Birmingham and four members of [The Active Wellbeing Society's \(TAWS\)](#) social prescribing team. From the University, the Principal Investigator is Dr Koen Bartels, the Co-Investigator is Professor Jessica Pykett, and Dr Elizabeth Woodcock is the Researcher. Members from TAWS are Keiran McKenzie, Denise Gabriel, Hannah Wood and Eliza Choudhury.

What does the project aim to do?

Together, the research team intends to create a shared learning community for researchers, organisations and citizens involved in social prescribing in and around the Bordesley East area of Birmingham. We aim to create a partnership that builds on an assets-based approach to social prescribing characterised by 1) joint inquiry, 2) participatory methods for engaging communities, and 3) a commitment to reducing inequalities in influence on and access to the social determinants of wellbeing.

How will the project fulfil the aims?

We will interview and observe a number of people involved in social prescribing activities, delivery, funding and policymaking. This will improve our understanding of wellbeing inequalities, social prescribing and decision-making processes.

We will invite some of these participants to form a Community of Practice to share, reflect and learn together with the research team. A Community of Practice is a mode of social learning in which people with different areas of expertise come together to develop new shared ways to address an issue that affects them all. The social nature of the learning develops out of dialogue, joint activities and creating a shared language.

We will build this Community of Practice through four action research workshops during the project and a fifth workshop that will act as a dissemination event at the close of the project. Action research is a participatory approach to co-producing shared knowledge and action with the explicit aim of transforming inequalities by changing relationships and uncovering power.

We will use four action research methods to enable social learning that changes relationships and uncovers power. *Appreciative inquiry* is a way of identifying what assets we have and how we can change society. Drawing *rich pictures* help to visualise the situation we are in and what changes are needed. *Systems mapping* helps to articulate a shared vision of our future. Through *back-casting*, we will co-develop action plans and strategies to achieve the shared future vision.

We will use NVivo, software for qualitative data, to help us to draw out themes and patterns from our partner meetings, the interviews and Community of Practice workshops.

Why do we think this approach will change inequalities?

This project is part of the [Social Prescribing, Assets and Relationships in Communities \(SPARC\) network](#). SPARC includes academic researchers and practice partners from multiple institutions and organisations across the UK. The network combines assets-based approaches to social prescribing with participatory approaches to research, with a focus on reducing wellbeing inequalities. Our [guiding theory](#) is that putting community needs and assets at the centre of efforts to co-produce social prescribing is essential to transform systematic inequalities.

What will the project produce?

- An accessibly written report of key learning points for the research partners and others.
- A dissemination event for wider partners and stakeholders.

What will the project change?

- An inclusive space for ongoing learning in which different people's knowledge are equally respected and a shared practice of changing wellbeing inequalities is cultivated.
- Strengthen relationships between University of Birmingham researchers, community members and partner organisations.
- Demonstrate how assets-based approaches to social prescribing and its governance can transform wellbeing inequalities.

How can people get involved in the project?

- Access regular updates on the project on the [SPARC webpage](#) and [LinkedIn group](#)
- Attend SPARC Network meetings to engage in discussion of the research and practice approaches – email Koen Bartels k.p.r.bartels@bham.ac.uk



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- Sign up for our final report and dissemination event – email Elizabeth Woodcock e.woodcock@bham.ac.uk