

Link Up's relevance to a Healthier Scotland

Focusing on some of Scotland's most deprived communities, Link Up is making a significant contribution to the delivery of the Scottish Government's commitment to reduce health inequalities and improve health by:

1. Addressing the social determinants of health, widely recognised as key to addressing health inequalities and setting foundations for positive change
2. Growing individuals' self-confidence, rekindling a sense of self-worth and self-belief, and motivating their desire to live well
3. Offering skilled workers who have the capacity to support people through complex situations and health conditions
4. Providing a cost-effective way to reduce demand on health services

I. Addressing the underlying causes of health inequalities

Link Up is focused on building positive relationships and strong social connections in local communities, tackling social isolation head on. It stimulates social participation and community-led action that increase community empowerment and resilience. At its core, Link Up strengthens social capital and local support networks which are essential to enhancing individual capacity to deal with complex challenges, including around mental and physical health, and increasing 'copability'.

"Our connections to others, our networks of support and our ability to influence decisions affecting our lives all impact on our health. These social contexts matter and they can be enhanced or undermined by the way policy and public services are conceived and delivered.

Alongside the critical need to tackle poverty, we need to work with an understanding of these social contexts, to improve health and reduce inequalities."

Glasgow Centre for Population Health (2016) [Social Contexts and Health](#)

The creation of positive social connections is at the heart of addressing the social determinants of health and the foundations for tackling health inequalities. This has been repeatedly put forward by Ministers as a priority, not least by Shona Robison, Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Sport, who - responding to a Parliamentary Question in December 2016, stated the government's determination to improving social environments in order to reduce health inequalities.

"Much of what the Minister told us was concerned with the need to focus on 'social capital and related issues' in communities where there were individuals and families who had become 'isolated and excluded from the mainstream'. (...) The Christie commission argued that building personal and community capacity, resilience and autonomy should be a key objective of future public service reform."

The Scottish Parliament (2015) [Report on Health Inequalities](#)

As highlighted in the Scottish Government's recent document [Creating a Healthier Scotland \(2016\)](#), a lot of the factors that drive our health are non-medical; but they are central to Link Up. Link Up stands outside the traditional boundaries of health and social care, yet successfully delivers precisely what makes people feel well, supported, connected and engaged.

- Announcing the government's forthcoming mental health strategy, Maureen Watt, Minister for Mental Health, said that "improving prevention and early intervention to reduce the risk of people developing mental health problems in the first place" is an absolute priority, highlighting the importance of close community connections and peer support. In the

[analysis of consultation responses](#) a 10-year vision where communities as a whole will be healthier, more cohesive and more supportive of each other was strongly argued for.

- The Scottish Government's [Health and Social Care Delivery Plan](#) (2016) stresses the need to address the underlying conditions that affect health, recognising the key is "how best to support individuals, families and their communities and promote and maintain health and healthy living."
- Recommendations in the Scottish Parliament report on [Age and Social Isolation \(2015\)](#) highlighted the importance of social contact for everyone, of bringing people together across all ages and backgrounds, of creating social connections via a shared interest.

These aspirations chime perfectly with Link Up and its focus on fostering greater connectedness and sense of community. Link Up is the catalyst enabling individuals and groups to forge stronger relationships across the community, creating friendships and peer support networks. All of these have been highlighted as essential to health and wellbeing.

There is robust evidence that social contexts can help improve health and tackle health inequalities, both for adults and for children too, now and in later life.

"Social contexts can be understood as the relationships and networks of support that people experience, the interconnections within communities, and the involvement of people and communities in decisions that affect their lives. Research has shown that these relationships and connections all have important influences on health in a range of ways."

Glasgow Centre for Population Health (2016) [Social Contexts and Health](#)

The main components of health-promoting social contexts identified by GCPH are at the heart of Link Up:

Social networks of family and friends are crucial and links to wider networks are also important for health.

> In Link Up, the number of people reporting they had a lot of local contacts grew from 52% pre-involvement to 95%¹

Community cohesion: connections within a community and feelings of safety and belonging are important for residents' health and helps communities as a whole.

> The number of people who thought their community was a good place to live increased from 66% pre-involvement in Link Up to 89% once engaged.

Social participation: volunteering at or participating in activities supports individual health and can enable connections within communities and improvements to community life.

- > Over 15,500 participants in Link Up with 1000 volunteering (as of December 2016)
- > Over 80 different activities and groups established – all informed by what local people wanted to see happening in their community
- > 66% of those taking part in Link Up had not previously been engaged in any form of community activity prior to their involvement in Link Up.

Community empowerment processes (how residents are engaged and involved in decisions affecting their lives) and the changes that result are important for health.

> Number of people involved in community activity more than doubled from 34% pre-involvement in Link Up to 74%

2. Motivating a desire to live well, not simply survive

Link Up participants are not patients, long-term condition sufferers, service users, or welfare benefit

¹ Ref all: ODS, "Evaluation of the Link Up Programme", October 2014

recipients. They are people; multi-faceted human beings who are valued for who they are whatever stage they are at in their life journey, valued for what they contribute, for their ideas, their energy and skills. That positive focus on human potential is intrinsically empowering.

By creating a spark and providing the space for people to come together, to form positive relationships, to facilitate collective action, Link Up generates a sense of self-worth, of belonging and purpose, out of which comes the motivation to take control of one's life. Thus Link Up participants get energised to effect change for themselves, their family and their community. They learn to trust; trust in themselves that they can make a change, trust the workers that they will be there to support them, trust in one another to form a whole that is stronger than the sum of the parts. This creates greater self-belief and higher aspirations.

By providing support directly to individuals, but also creating ripples of support in the wider community, Link Up workers enable people to develop their own skills to self-manage their health and wellbeing, and the motivation to choose healthier lifestyle choices. For many, this has marked the beginning of a material shift away from what has been a chaotic lifestyle, and the start of transformational change for themselves, their family and the wider community. We have very many examples of Link Up participants who, through their journey with us, have successfully reduced their consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs (see annex). The impact of Link Up goes beyond triggering healthier lifestyle choices, it also enables people to re-engage with education, training and employment, all known to be social determinants of health.

3. Humane workers supporting people through complex issues

Link Up workers are central to the Link Up programme, giving intensive support to those amongst the most vulnerable in society. Link Up workers operate pastorally often helping to lift people out of 'dark places', supporting very many who are dealing with trauma, bereavement, abuse and/or trying to cope with mental health issues. The key to the success of the workers' approach is to genuinely care and be interested in people's stories which they take time to listen to. They empathise and bring practical and emotional support to deal with the hardship and toughest of challenges, and most importantly, they share in the joys and celebrate the successes.

The humanity of our workers' approach to the people and communities they work with and the exceptional care they offer have been illustrated time and again. What is often most striking is how our workers approach the most challenging of situations with huge humanity, reaching well beyond what would typically be expected of any workers. They have no blueprint as to what to do and negotiate very blurred professional boundaries with great care and respect; they naturally adopt a highly authentic and human response to reach the best possible outcome for the individuals concerned.

Building on that one-to-one work, the power of the Link Up workers' input is the positive knock-on effect it creates in the community. They enable people to connect and build relationships with others, thereby creating networks of support that empower people to help themselves and to help one another. This happens more or less explicitly and includes the likes of Link Up recovery groups established by / for local residents suffering from addiction.

Worth noting as the Scottish Government develops its approach to trauma-informed practice, that the evidence suggests that not only the incidence of complex trauma may be greater in areas of high deprivation such as those Link Up is present in, its impact is likely to be greater too. This might partly be explained by higher levels of social isolation, as it is well recognised in the research literature that social connectedness is one of the main protective factors against the deleterious

health effects of trauma. Link Up thus plays a key part in this area too.

Recognising the significance of the issues underpinning the complex health problems prevalent in the communities where we work, Link Up continues to invest in workers' training in:

- Suicide awareness and prevention
- Bereavement
- Trauma
- Addiction and recovery
- Mediation and conflict resolution
- Supporting a holistic approach to wellbeing inc. coping with stress, pain management, anxiety, anger management, and sleeplessness

Increasingly, we are also extending training in the above to members of the communities we work in.

4. A necessary and cost-effective route to a Healthier Scotland

Conscious of the value of Link Up, the Scottish Government has continued to invest in the programme to the total sum of £4.15m since its inception in 2011. SG Health Improvement has contributed significantly to that investment since 2014. Ongoing investment is absolutely essential to realise the social return sought. It is particularly critical in view of recent estimates revealing the cost of disconnected communities on the UK Health Services as £5.2 billion with £731m as the total societal cost for Scotland alone². Investing in Link Up continues to be a highly efficient use of public funds, that fits well with the Scottish Government's focus on prevention. An economic evaluation of Link Up indicated the economic and wellbeing benefits associated with Link Up up to end July 2014 amounted to £6m (at that point only £1.7m had been invested).

"Link Up's approach is rooted in the idea of 'salutogenesis' discussed by Aaron Antonovsky's work on health, stress and coping which argues that social support is one factor that can help people cope with and recover from various psychosocial stresses. Building individual and social resourcefulness and resilience can also help prevent people from defaulting into using public services as often when they encounter problems."

Matrix (2014) [Economic Evaluation of Link Up](#)

Constant monitoring and evaluation underpinned by improvement science have enabled the Link Up approach to be refined and further strengthened, resulting in a positive impact on an ever-greater number of people (15,500 people as of December 2016). Embedded in the local community, Link Up workers enjoy the independence and the full flexibility that enables them to reach across institutional boundaries and professional silos in whatever way is needed to support the people they work with. Link Up engages the whole population in a given locality, irrespective of perceived need or personal characteristic.

Primary and secondary health care teams as well as other statutory services such as Housing have been able to successfully draw on Link Up to alleviate pressures they face and better serve their patients. Link Up workers are readily available and provide that regular and consistent personal contact that allows trust to develop naturally, at the individual's own pace and without the interference of external targets or time pressure. That continuity of human contact and the open-ended, non-stigmatising support offered by Link Up workers make the programme particularly effective at engaging and retaining some of the most challenged local people.

[Creating a Healthier Scotland](#) recently published by the Scottish Government points out the need to help

² Centre for Economics and Business Research (2017) *The Cost of Disconnected Communities*

people recognise and use the human assets already present in the community that can benefit everyone and take the pressure off health and social care services. Link Up does exactly that: it understands and harnesses the wealth of human potential that exists in the most deprived communities and releases it to bring about positive change in people's lives. It operates upstream of primary care services, being ideally placed to spot the signs of people in distress and respond in a compassionate, holistic and person-centred fashion (identified as key in the Scottish Government's [Suicide Prevention Strategy](#)), thus alleviating pressure on the system further downstream.

Link Up is also increasingly working with health care teams, taking social prescribing referrals and offering a wide-ranging menu of options to meet patients' interests and needs as they evolve over time. The appendix provides further details of specific examples of NHS referrals who, through their involvement in Link Up, have enjoyed significant changes in their health and wellbeing with increased feelings of self-worth.

For further information about this paper, please contact:

Marie-Amélie Viatte, Link Up performance advisor

marie-amelie@inspiringscotland.org.uk

Annex: evidencing Link Up's impact

While we are conscious not to undermine Link Up's effectiveness with overly invasive surveying, we go to great lengths to understand and capture its impact, mostly through qualitative data collection focusing on Link Up's stated outcomes:

- Increased levels of social interaction with other community members (including outside of Link Up)
- Improved relationships with other community members (including integration and cohesion)
- Improved physical and mental wellbeing (including reduced isolation and anxiety and increased

confidence)

- Individual is proactively seeking to improve their circumstances
- New skills developed and/or knowledge acquired
- Heightened sense of belonging to community
- Increased capacity and/or motivation to positively influence what happens in community
- LU group members are developing a shared purpose (working together for members' benefit)
- LU participants are seeking to deliver positive change for the wider community

The quarterly reports we share with the Scottish Government have repeatedly highlighted the evidence of Link Up's positive impact. We therefore only reproduce some of the evidence specifically relating to health and Link Up's impact in a primary care context here.

Jim – referred from Primary Care team around a year ago. He was very isolated had little contact with anyone in the community often spending many days without talking to anyone else. He started off attending Link Up's Wednesday Waffle and, little by little, increasingly enjoyed going along to the local men's group. He now attends twice a week, sings in their choir and regularly goes on trips with the other members. Staff at the GP surgery have reported a vast difference in his appearance and a decreased need to visit the doctor. The improvement in his physical and mental wellbeing is obvious to everyone in the community too, with Jim having new clothes for the first time in many years and taking far greater care of himself.

Mary – referred to Link Up from the primary care team in an effort to find new ways to address her severe anxiety attacks, depression, and significant issues with alcohol. Initially she was interested in being involved in a Women's Group, but Link Up also gave her the chance to try out a cooking group which she found suited her better. Initially, she attended sporadically, but with her confidence gradually building, she now comes along to the group on a weekly basis and helps with cooking and organising events. Testament of the positive journey she's been on since connecting with Link Up, she is now keen to start a walking group and is working to get others interested in this.

Jane – referred with severe depression and a spinal injury which reduces her ability to walk. She's been cooking regularly for Link Up and has repeatedly reported that being part of Link Up has changed her life stating: 'my partner no longer worries about coming home to find me crying with the curtains closed... I just feel so much better since coming here... everyone can see the difference'.

Arlene – referred as she felt very isolated after the death of a close friend. She also suffered from a severe lung condition. She attends one of Link Up's women's groups on a weekly basis and has helped knit teddies, organise a bingo night and make items for the group's Christmas sale. She reports feeling far more positive about her life and is working to reduce her smoking along with another member of the group. She has also signed up to take part in a community development night course.

Mat - 42 years old, a heroin user for ten years, homeless for a period. He got involved in Link Up through the Link Up Open Café established for and by local people impacted by addiction. After 16 months, he has managed to reduce his daily methadone intake from 140ml to nil.

"I wasn't keen to engage with services or rehab. I went to my doctor and asked if I could reduce my methadone and do what's called a community detox, it actually took a fair amount of persuading of my doctor!! It has taken me 16 months to reduce from 140ml and I can now proudly say I am clean. I have been clean for 6 months now. The last 30ml were difficult and my body struggled to adjust on occasions and I needed to be really mentally strong".

Mat is now training to become a support worker helping those who are homeless and/or with drug

issues. He is also considering starting an Open university degree in psychology.

As well as qualitative analysis, we seek to also record change quantitatively where appropriate, focusing on more narrowly defined indicators. We are happy to share these figures below, for illustrative purposes. It must be noted however, that these only provide a narrow insight and are actual number of cases recorded, based only on a sample of Link Up participants. It is therefore not a true representation of Link Up's overall impact which is understood to be far more profound.

Indicator	Total no. cases since end 2012
Reduced Alcohol Consumption	41
Reduced Tobacco Consumption	42
Reduced Illegal Drugs Consumption	21
Reduced Daily Medication	37
Secured Employment	71
Secured a University/College/Traineeship position	52
Attained Other Skills/Competency Based Qualification	357

We also know from the independent evaluation of Link Up undertaken by ODS:

- 64% of people feel more confident since their involvement in Link Up³
- Almost three-quarters of the activities/groups established involve physical activity and / or skill development
- 63% of people have reported that they feel healthier since their involvement in Link Up
- 52% of people have reported that they feel better able to cope with life since their involvement in Link Up

³ Ref all: ODS, "Evaluation of the Link Up Programme", October 2014