Case study
Social prescribing in the Forest of Dean
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**About the scheme**
Forest of Dean Walking for Health is a well-established Walking for Health scheme run and managed by a constituted group of volunteers. Kim Spencer volunteers as the scheme coordinator to manage and develop the scheme, and is supported by around 60 others.

In 2016 the scheme successfully applied for a social prescribing kite mark, run by Gloucester VCS Alliance, which enables them, alongside other accredited organisations, to receive referrals from the social prescribing team. Through this the scheme felt it could engage with new participants who could improve their health and wellbeing through walking.

**About social prescribing**
Social prescribing is a way to link people with non-medical activities and opportunities in their community when clinical interventions are not appropriate. For example, if they need guidance or support with practical issues, such as housing or finances, or would benefit from improving their wellbeing and increasing social contact. GPs, nurses and other allied health professions can refer to social prescribing co-ordinators who link the person with an appropriate local activity or opportunity.

The social prescribing programme in Gloucestershire started as a pilot with the support of the Gloucestershire NHS Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) in March 2014; with Forest of Dean and the Cotswolds the two pilot districts within the county. An evaluation of the pilot programme resulted in continued funding and support from the CCG and a roll out of social prescribing across the county, with staff working directly from local GP surgeries since September 2015. All registered practices in the Forest of Dean are referring patients to the social prescribing team.

**Establishing a protocol: how does it work for the scheme?**
The kite mark is a mechanism that assures the social prescribing team that the organisations they are signposting to meet certain quality standards. It was a straightforward process for the scheme to complete, particularly as Walking for Health national accreditation standards require all walk leaders to be trained and the scheme has access to insurance.

When the social prescribing team signpost individuals to walks, the scheme coordinator may be told in advance or they might be accompanied on their first walk, but most of the time they will turn up at the walk as any new participant would. This is because part of the social prescribing approach is to enable people to do something themselves. A plan is agreed with the individual and, if needed, some amount of ‘hand holding’ into activities can be given, but it is generally a case of encouraging and facilitating the individual to do something they wish to do in order to improve their own health and wellbeing.
Benefits for participants
The Social Prescribing Team signpost people to Walking for Health who would benefit from focusing on their wellbeing or increased social contact.

For Gary Deighton, the Healthy Lifestyles Co-ordinator on the social prescribing team in the Forest of Dean District Council, the benefits of Walking for Health for those signposted is that there are a variety of walks on offer across the local area; it is inclusive so can accommodate people with a range of health conditions and fitness levels, and they are welcoming for new joiners:

‘It’s the people that make it. The volunteers are inclusive and welcoming; and as many of the volunteers started as walkers, they may have joined the scheme when they were in a similar position.

‘I remember I referred one lady to the scheme. At first she was a bit hesitant because she thought it would be a hike. But after I explained what it was, she went along and it went just as well as it could. Someone met her when she arrived and they got chatting straight away, then she joined them for coffee at the end of the walk.’

Benefits for the Walking for Health scheme
Being involved with the social prescribing service is a great way for the scheme to engage with a new audience who they may not have reached through other means: it is one of the biggest challenges for the scheme coordinator to promote the scheme to engage people who would most benefit from taking part, such as people with health conditions or who are currently inactive.

Another benefit for the scheme is that the protocols in place for the referral are straightforward: there is no huge demand on the coordinator’s time to facilitate it, and there isn’t a demand for monitoring data from the scheme as this is covered by the social prescribing team during their follow up sessions. It would be helpful for the scheme to have a better understanding of how many people have come from this route – but the current walker registration form does not easily allow it.
Furthermore, being involved with the social prescribing team is that it is a good access point for the scheme to reach GPs: rather than the scheme approaching GPs directly it is the social prescribing team that make links with local surgeries and ensure the Walking for Health leaflets and information boards are on display.

**Challenges for the scheme: walk leader capacity**

The walking group isn’t for everyone: feedback from some has been that the length of the walk hasn’t been appropriate (either too long or too short) or the walk doesn’t start at a convenient location. But for the scheme to address this challenge, they would need to increase their walk leader capacity to establish new walks or provide more options on existing routes.

It can be a challenge for the walk leaders to manage and support the existing walkers – who may be able to go faster and on longer routes – alongside new participants who might have specific health needs or different levels of fitness and require shorter or slower paced routes. This is particularly true when the existing walks are already well attended or at capacity.

**Learning for other schemes**

The social prescribing referral works in Forest of Dean because the Walking for Health scheme is well-known: it was set up in 2008 by the district council, where it still has strong advocates. In addition to her role as scheme coordinator, Kim Spencer is an active member of the community which helps with the scheme’s local profile. Among other things, she is a lay member of a sub-group of the local CCG, through which she has been able to develop good relationships with members of the CCG and promote the work of the scheme.

The Forest of Dean is a rural community and there is good coverage of walks, with a good variety of walks on offer. A successful referral or signposting service will only work if there are enough options for people to choose from, at convenient times and at convenient locations.

**With thanks to Kim Spencer and the Forest of Dean scheme and Gary Deighton, Forest of Dean District Council**

**For more information about the Forest of Dean Walking for Health scheme visit:**

www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/walkfinder/forest-dean-walking-for-health

**Get in touch with your local CVS**

www.navca.org.uk/about

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**Photos by Kim Spencer, Forest of Dean Walking for Health**