

# A toolkit for co-designing social prescribing initiatives with older people





# Introduction



In 2023, the National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP), working in partnership with Independent Age, commissioned a programme of pilot work to understand how social prescribing can work as effectively as possible to support older people facing financial hardship and health inequalities.

One pilot was led by Hastings Voluntary Action (HVA) in Hastings, the other by Reaching People in Leicester.

In the first phase of this pilot work, HVA and Reaching People developed different methods and approaches for meaningful engagement with diverse groups and communities of local older people, to understand more about their experiences, needs and priorities in relation to social prescribing.

Together, they co-designed a range of social prescribing initiatives with local older people, that will be delivered and evaluated in the second phase of the pilot work.

The two sites have provided different tips and approaches about co-designing social prescribing initiatives with older people. Hasting's tips include how to find and engage older people in co-design. Leicester's tips include a practical coaching tool for effective co-design. The toolkit aims to be helpful to other organisations interested in doing similar work with their communities.





# Top tips for co-designing social prescribing initiatives with older people

## By Hastings Voluntary Action

### 1. Identify priority groups of older people to involve in the co-design

Read the area's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), Population Health Management strategy, or speak with Patient Participation Groups at neighbourhood GP practices to identify which local communities of older people may be at highest risk of health inequalities.

### 2. Raise awareness of social prescribing throughout the co-design

Communicate what social prescribing is, how it works, how it links to other statutory and voluntary services and how it can benefit health and wellbeing. It might be helpful to do some myth-busting, such as providing reassurance that social prescribing does not replace clinical or medical care.

### 3. Engage with diverse hyper-local community groups and networks

Build meaningful partnerships with existing community groups and networks, as they will have trusting relationships and established collaborations with diverse communities of older people. This will ensure work is not duplicated and that you are focused on what matters most to local communities.

### 4. Provide varied co-design opportunities that offer something in return

Ensure that co-design and engagement opportunities offer a beneficial hook for older people, such as food, socialising, information or a chance to ask questions. Also offer a variety of ways to engage, such as groups, individual conversations, online options, paper formats and multiple languages.



## **5. Talk with older people who are not currently accessing social prescribing**

Undertake outreach activities to meet older people who are not currently accessing social prescribing, such as advertising in and visiting food banks, housing associations, libraries, community venues and faith groups. Remove barriers to ensure co-design opportunities are inclusive and accessible, such as home visits or offering buddies to accompany participants.

## **6. Be specific about the aims of the co-design**

Be clear on the purpose of the co-design activities, for example gathering insights about unmet needs, personal priorities, community assets or day-to-day challenges. Provide details about how the feedback will be used, such as to develop and deliver social prescribing initiatives locally.

## **7. Engage with social prescribing link workers as part of the co-design**

Map the local social prescribing provision to understand referral pathways and where link workers are based in the community. Speak with link workers to incorporate their knowledge and expertise about local social prescribing for older people, including barriers, enablers, gaps and opportunities.

## **8. Produce social prescribing initiatives that are feasible and empowering**

Manage expectations about what social prescribing initiatives might be possible in relation to arts and culture, heritage, advice and information, natural environment and physical activity - with the overall aim of supporting health and wellbeing. Consider how initiatives will be sustainable and support older people to take on as much of a leadership role as they wish.





# How to co-design social prescribing initiatives with older people

*'services are hard-pressed, I don't expect anyone wants to see me'*

*'I'm entitled to access services that I need'*

By Reaching People, Leicester

## How to use approaches from positive psychology coaching

Positive psychology coaching aims to mentor and motivate individuals by focussing on their personal strengths and supporting people to believe in themselves.

Focussing on the inner world as a first step can empower individuals to make or imagine changes in their outer world, leading to more productive and innovative co-design conversations.

The positive psychology coaching techniques below could be used throughout the co-design process. Combine these with compassionate understanding and recognition of any challenges people are facing.


- Active listening and motivational interviewing can help to build genuine rapport and trust over time by understanding someone's circumstances in detail and giving them the space to be heard
- Clarifying what brings meaning and purpose into someone's life is an important step for connecting to the self and connecting to others
- Incorporating positive thinking tools such as mindfulness, visualisation and planning can allow people to tap into what they really want and need
- Offering new narratives can help to challenge internalised stigma and boost self-esteem, encouraging people to envisage a different future

For example, moving from thoughts like *'a smaller life is an inevitable part of ageing'* to thoughts like *'I deserve a rich and full life'*

Or moving from thoughts like *'services are hard-pressed, I don't expect anyone wants to see me'* to thoughts like *'I'm entitled to access services that I need'*

## How to facilitate focus groups for meaningful engagement

- Start with a warm-up exercise or ice-breaker activity. For example, invite people to share *'something I want to celebrate that has happened in my life recently'* and *'what I contributed to make it a success'*. This strengths-based approach can help to establish individual and collective agency.
- Introducing a third-party character as a focus for the co-design conversations, or using descriptive metaphors, can help people to feel more comfortable with opening-up and talking about their experiences.
- Using a blend of life satisfaction domains that feel relevant - such as health, income, relationships etc. - can be a useful way for people to identify what they want more of, and what they want less of.
- Encourage the group to reflect on *'needs that I can address on my own'*, *'needs that can be addressed with family, friends and groups'* and *'needs that can be addressed by lobbying decision-makers'*.
- Invite people to suggest an action they could take today in order to achieve greater life satisfaction in one of the domains. This can help individuals to start making positive changes.
- Provide everyone who attends with some information or resources that they can take away with them. This can ensure the co-design process itself is beneficial.



*'what I  
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to make it a  
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*'needs that  
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## Further resources



Different ways of working with people and communities from informing them to co-producing with them <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/working-in-partnership-with-people-and-communities-statutory-guidance/>

### Positive psychology coaching

Green, S. and Palmer, S. (2018). *Positive Psychology coaching in Practice*. Abingdon, Routledge.

Biswas-Diener, R. (2010). *Practicing Positive Psychology Coaching*. Hoboken. Wiley.

### Focused Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (FACT)

Strosahl, K.D. and Robinson, P.J. (2012). *Brief interventions for Radical Change*. Oakland, New Harbinger.

### Motivational Interviewing

Miller, W. R. and Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change*. New York City, Guilford Press.

### Metaphors

Lawley, J.T. and Tompkins, P.L. (2000). *Metaphors in the Mind: Transformation through Symbolic Modelling*. London, Developing Company Press.

Alberts, H.J.E.M. (2016). *The Sailboat Metaphor*. Maastricht, Positive Psychology Program.

Available online [here](#)





National Academy for Social Prescribing

