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| Local Connections – A Social Prescribing Initiative  |
| Fact sheet for social prescribing trials in the first six Mental Health and Wellbeing Locals  |
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# A non-clinical approach used to support social connection

Recommendation 15.4 of the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System (Royal Commission) recommends that the Victorian Government establish one social prescribing trial per region in the new Mental Health and Wellbeing Locals (Local Services).

Local Connections is a social prescribing initiative being trialled in the first six new Local Services.

The Royal Commission recognised that communities play a critical role in supporting mental health and wellbeing, particularly in their role supporting social connectedness.

# Background

#### What is social prescribing?

Social prescribing is a way for healthcare services to connect people with non-clinical, community-based activities to support health and wellbeing.

Emerging evidence suggests social prescribing as an effective way to address some of the social determinants of health, in particular social exclusion and social support, to improve health and wellbeing outcomes.

Social prescribing recognises that some people need support to engage in local activities and groups. Social prescribing programs can support people to engage in a variety of activities, many of which are typically provided by voluntary and local community organisations. Examples include volunteering, arts activities, group learning, gardening, conversation groups, cookery, carpentry, games, healthy eating support and a range of sports. Some social prescribing programs have a particular focus, for example nature-based social prescribing.

Social prescribing is only as strong as the community in which it operates. Successful social prescribing initiatives rely on community groups and activities to be safe, welcoming and inclusive spaces for all.

Link workers play an important role in identifying and supporting inclusive spaces in local communities. Importantly, social prescribing puts the needs of the person at the centre, with activities and supports identified by the individual with the support of a link worker or connector. Link workers may work with someone to explore a new area of interest or support someone to explore an existing or past interest that the person has become disconnected from.

#### What is the aim of the social prescribing trials in Mental Health and Wellbeing Locals?

Local Connections – A Social Prescribing Initiative in the Local Services will:

* examine whether social prescribing can reduce loneliness and social isolation for adults and older adults (people aged 26 and over)
* test the skills and qualifications that are required for a link worker in the mental health and wellbeing context
* test social prescribing as a model for strengthening pathways between Local Services and non-clinical, community-based activities and initiatives that support community participation, inclusion, and connection.

#### Local Connections in Local Services

#### How was Local Connections designed?

Local Connections was co-designed by people with lived and living experiences of psychological distress, mental illness and/or addiction, including carers, families and supporters.

The Department of Health wishes to thank our co-design partners for developing the experience of social prescribing in the Mental Health and Wellbeing Locals and for defining the role of the link worker. These insights have been captured in the Social Prescribing Guidelines for Local Services.

#### How long will the trial run?

The trials will run from 2023 to 2025.

An evaluation of the trials will inform recommendations about the future of social prescribing in the reformed mental health and wellbeing system.

# Accessing Local Connections

#### Where will the trials be established?

Trials are being established in the first six Local Services, which are located in the local government areas of:

* Frankston (Wellways)
* Latrobe (Neami)
* Benalla, Wangaratta and Mansfield (Wellways)
* Geelong Queenscliff (Barwon Health)
* Brimbank (cohealth)
* Whittlesea (Neami).

Further information, including contact details, can be found at: <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/mhwlocal>

#### Who can access the trial?

Any person that is receiving care and support from a participating Local Service can access Local Connections. People may be referred or self-refer for the initiative.

Social prescribing may be one component of a broader support plan, complementing other interventions or treatments, or the sole way in which someone requires or requests to receive support.

Eligibility criteria includes:

* people must be aged 26 years and over (in line with Local Services eligibility)
* clients, carers, family members or supporters may access social prescribing. This recognises that carers, family members and supporters may also experience loneliness and social isolation and can benefit from this initiative.

# Glossary

**Social Connection** is a continuum of the size and diversity of one’s social network and roles, the functions these relationships serve, and their positive or negative qualities.

**Social Isolation** refers to having objectively fewer social relationships, social roles, group memberships, and infrequent social interaction.

**Loneliness** is a subjective unpleasant or distressing feeling of a lack of connection to other people, along with a desire for more, or more satisfying, social relationships.

**Lived experience** describes people who identify as living with (or has lived with) mental illness or psychological distress, or someone who is caring for or otherwise supporting (or has cared for or otherwise supported) a person who is living with (or has lived with) mental illness or psychological distress. People with lived experience are sometimes referred to as ‘consumers’ or ‘carers’. The Commission acknowledged that the experiences of consumers and carers are different.

# Further information

For further information about social prescribing trials, please visit the Department of Health website: [https://www.health.vic.gov.au/mental-health-wellbeing-reform/local-connections-social-prescribing-initiative](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/mental-health-wellbeing-reform/local-connections-social-prescribing-initiative%20)

For further information about the Mental Health and Wellbeing Locals:

* for services, please visit <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/mental-health-reform/local-adult-and-older-adult-mental-health-and-wellbeing-services>
* for consumers, carers, families and supporters, please visit <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/mhwlocal>

For any questions about *Local Connections – A Social Prescribing Initiative*, including to request a copy of the Social Prescribing Guidelines, please email MHWPO@health.vic.gov.au

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