

North East and North Cumbria (NENC) Healthy Communities and Social Prescribing Programme

Summary Report

Six Funded Social Prescribing Projects
June 2026

Introduction

The Healthy Communities and Social Prescribing programme is part of NENC ICB's 'Healthier and Fairer' work aimed at reducing health inequalities across our region. This report summarises the work of six VCSE organisations that received funding totalling £127k for projects delivered during the period October 2025 to March 2026. Projects varied in their aims but shared common goals of working to improve health outcomes for marginalised groups and improving links to social prescribing.

These six projects were able to deliver some excellent results, demonstrating the sector's ability to deliver at pace and innovate. They have developed and delivered new programmes for underserved people, helped improve access to statutory health providers, strengthened links with their local social prescribing services, and tested new approaches to improve the quality of social prescribing impact measurement.

The work that is summarised in this report has already made a difference to the lives of those people who took part, and the learning and legacy from the projects will go on to benefit many more people through the continued work of these organisations.

Despite their clear successes, it is also evident that working within such short timescales is far from ideal, and all the projects would have benefited greatly from a longer, more sustained period of funding.

On behalf of the Healthy Communities and Social Prescribing Advisory Group, I would like to say a huge thank you to everyone involved in delivering these projects and congratulate them on their significant achievements.

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Programme Legacy and Key Learning Summary

Project	Legacy	Key learning
HAY Digital Tool Edbert's House	Platform remains operational across pilot sites, enabling continued data collection, outcomes reporting and evidence to support future commissioning and service planning.	Simple, intuitive digital tools can strengthen social prescribing if embedded into routine practice. Long-term funding and implementation time are essential for widespread adoption.
Help for Health WERS & Walking With	Peer Navigators, multilingual resources and referral pathways continue to support refugees and asylum seekers. The model provides a sustainable, community-led approach to improving health literacy and wellbeing.	Peer-led engagement builds trust, multilingual information improves access, and strong partnerships with health and voluntary organisations strengthen long-term sustainability.
Migrant Health in Sunderland ICOS	Integrated advice, advocacy and wellbeing model provides a strong foundation for future investment and continued partnership working to address complex health inequalities.	Holistic support addressing practical and wellbeing needs together is more effective than isolated interventions. Advocacy, cultural competence and long-term funding are critical.
Xtra Ingredients Men's Pie Club	Learning has informed the development of a longer-term food-based wellbeing programme, with continued member co-production through the Pie Panel.	Flexible, participant-led activities, practical support such as transport, and capturing wider personal stories help maximise participation and demonstrate impact.
Cultivate Northumberland Groundwork NE	Community volunteer groups continue to offer opportunities and referral relationships established during the project provide a basis for future green social prescribing.	Successful referrals require dedicated link-worker support, transport solutions and stronger collaboration between social prescribers and community groups to overcome confidence and access barriers.
Healing Roots to Rise Carlisle Youth Zone	Youth Public Livingroom sessions continue under Anti Racist Cumbria, with strengthened partnerships and plans to expand culturally responsive therapeutic pathways.	Building trust takes time. Black and Brown leadership, authentic co-production and culturally affirming practice are essential to engaging marginalised young people.

1. Edberts House – Pilot testing of the HAY digital tool

This project successfully piloted the HAY (How Are You) digital wellbeing assessment tool across three locations within the North East and North Cumbria region: Gateshead, Darlington, and North Cumbria. The project aimed to test a co-designed, person-centred digital tool that supports Social Prescribing Link Workers (SPLWs) to assess, record, track, and visualise wellbeing outcomes and wider determinants of health.

The HAY tool was successfully implemented and made operational across all pilot sites, providing a consistent framework for wellbeing conversations and helping practitioners and residents identify and prioritise areas of need. The tool enables the collection of meaningful outcomes data that can support service planning, demonstrate the impact of social prescribing, and strengthen evidence of the role of non-clinical interventions in addressing health inequalities.



Image courtesy of Kaleidoscope

Key outputs included the onboarding and training of users across all three sites, establishment of automated reporting mechanisms, and creation of ongoing technical support arrangements through the platform developer, Kaleidoscope. To date, Edberts House recorded 25 users completing 143 HAY evaluations, while Darlington recorded 10 users across two organisations completing four evaluations, and North Cumbria recorded four users completing 12 evaluations. Although data collection volumes were lower than initially anticipated, this was largely due to delayed implementation and the time required for practitioners to embed the tool into routine practice. All sites will retain access to the platform beyond the pilot period, enabling further data collection and analysis.

A key learning from the project was the importance of accessible and intuitive data collection tools in demonstrating the value of social prescribing. The HAY tool's simplicity and visual approach were positively received by practitioners and proved effective in supporting structured wellbeing conversations. The project also highlighted the importance of long-term funding certainty to encourage wider adoption. Several organisations expressed interest in participating but were reluctant to commit without assurance of the tool's sustainability beyond the initial funding period. The project team intends to continue using and, where possible, expand the use of HAY to support future service development and impact measurement.

2. Carlisle Youth Zone – Healing Roots to Rise

Healing Roots to Rise (HRR), delivered by Carlisle Youth Zone in partnership with Anti Racist Cumbria (ARC) and PAC, was a social prescribing pilot designed to support Black and Brown young people through culturally affirming, racially informed wellbeing provision. The project sought to create safe spaces where young people could openly discuss experiences of racism, build supportive relationships, and access wellbeing support that reflected their lived experiences. Originally designed around three interconnected delivery strands, the project evolved in response to participant feedback and learning during implementation.

A key achievement of the project was the development of the Youth Public Livingroom (YPL), which became the central delivery model. Through co-design with young people, the project adapted its approach to prioritise trust-building, representation, and culturally safe practice. Weekly YPL sessions were delivered over a 28-week period at Carlisle Youth Zone, providing a consistent and welcoming space for Black and Brown young people. In total, 44 young people aged 11–17 attended sessions, with 10 young people engaging regularly in the co-design and development of the programme. Bi-weekly partnership meetings also evolved into a collaborative community of practice, enabling learning, reflection, and innovation between delivery partners.

The project generated strong qualitative evidence of impact. Young people reported that the sessions provided a sense of belonging, safety, acceptance, and connection that had previously been unavailable to them. Participants described the space as somewhere they could relax, be themselves, and feel understood without fear of judgement or discrimination. The project demonstrated the value of creating dedicated spaces where Black and Brown young people could explore their identities and experiences in an environment led by people who shared and understood those experiences.

A key learning was that building trust takes significantly more time and consistency than originally anticipated, particularly among groups who have experienced marginalisation, racism, and exclusion. The project highlighted the importance of Black and Brown leadership within delivery, while also exploring the role of effective allyship from non-Black and Brown practitioners. It also reinforced the need for culturally responsive approaches to mental health and wellbeing support, as well as greater workforce diversity across youth and health services. The project has left a strong legacy, with Youth Public Livingroom sessions continuing beyond the funding period under the leadership of Anti Racist Cumbria, alongside strengthened partnerships and ongoing exploration of new therapeutic and social prescribing pathways for young people.



3. Groundwork NE & Cumbria – Cultivating Community in Northumberland



Volunteers at Peggs Wood reinstalling life rings to improve safety round the lake and putting up new fences. Photos courtesy of Jo Dennison.

This Social Prescribing Pathways project, delivered by Groundwork North East & Cumbria, aimed to investigate barriers to social prescribing and establish referral pathways connecting patients to community-based volunteering and wellbeing activities across Northumberland. Working with social prescribers, community organisations and volunteer groups in Pegswood, Ashington and Newbiggin, the project sought to improve access to activities that could enhance physical health, mental wellbeing and social connectedness, while also supporting volunteer groups to recruit and retain new members.

The project successfully mapped local social prescribing provision, consulted with patients, social prescribers and community groups, and developed pathways into five volunteer-led projects: Pegswood Community Park, Friends of Pegswood Community Woods, Friends of Ashington Community Woods, Talking Marras, and Newbiggin Community Allotment. Extensive engagement identified the main barriers preventing people from accessing activities, including transport difficulties, low confidence and self-esteem, travel costs, accessibility challenges, and limited awareness of opportunities.

Although the creation of formal referral pathways proved more challenging than anticipated, the project generated positive outcomes across participating groups. Pegswood Community Park saw the greatest growth, increasing from no active volunteers at the start of the project to 17 participants attending sessions over the winter period. Friends of Pegswood Community Woods welcomed a new volunteer through a social prescribing referral, while Friends of Ashington Community Woods developed innovative engagement approaches, including a tree adoption initiative that involved 78 community participants and strengthened links with social prescribing services. Talking Marras increased membership and established new connections with social prescribing teams, while Newbiggin Community Allotment continued to attract volunteers despite organisational changes and uncertainty around site ownership.

The project demonstrated the significant wellbeing benefits of outdoor volunteering and green social prescribing. Case studies and participant feedback highlighted improvements in confidence, social connection, mental health, skills development and recovery from illness, addiction and work-related stress. Participants valued opportunities to spend time outdoors, learn new skills, contribute to their communities and build supportive social networks.

A key learning was that successful social prescribing requires more than simply providing information about activities. Many individuals need practical and emotional support to overcome barriers to participation. The project identified a strong need for dedicated link-worker support, transport assistance and closer collaboration between social prescribers and community groups. It also highlighted the importance of building trust and relationships over time, particularly when working with vulnerable individuals. Groundwork concluded that, with longer timescales and continued investment, community volunteering can play a valuable role in improving wellbeing and creating sustainable pathways into healthier, more connected lives.

4. ICOS - Migrant Health in Sunderland (MHS)

The Migrant Health in Sunderland (MHS) project, delivered by ICOS and independently evaluated by Voluntary and Community Action Sunderland (VCAS), aimed to improve access to health services, wellbeing support, and wider social determinants of health for migrant communities in Sunderland. Running between October 2025 and March 2026, the project combined intensive one-to-one advice and advocacy with a programme of wellbeing and social activities, recognising that health outcomes are closely linked to factors such as housing, finances, immigration status, social connection, and access to services.

The project supported 74 individuals from 24 countries who collectively spoke 16 languages. Although the original target of supporting 100 clients was not achieved, the evaluation found that the project worked with a highly complex cohort requiring intensive, often long-term support. Ninety-seven per cent of clients had limited English language skills and 70 per cent required interpreter support, creating significant barriers to accessing mainstream services.

The evaluation found strong evidence of positive outcomes. Of the 74 cases supported, 54 (73%) were fully resolved and a further 15 (20%) were partially resolved or ongoing, resulting in a positive outcome rate of 93%. Clients received support across a range of issues including healthcare access, housing, welfare benefits, immigration matters, financial hardship, and social isolation. Wellbeing activities, including walking groups, sports sessions, rowing, day trips and community activities, complemented the advice service by reducing isolation, building confidence and strengthening community connections. Wellbeing outcomes improved, with 59% of participants recording increased SWEMWBS wellbeing scores and average wellbeing scores increasing by 1.48 points. User satisfaction was exceptionally high, averaging 9.56 out of 10, with 80% of respondents awarding the maximum score.

A key finding of the evaluation was the effectiveness of the project's holistic and integrated model. The combination of advice, advocacy and wellbeing activities enabled practical problems and emotional wellbeing needs to be addressed simultaneously, leading to stronger outcomes than either approach

alone. Advocacy emerged as a critical success factor, particularly for individuals facing language barriers, digital exclusion and unfamiliarity with UK systems. The evaluation also highlighted the importance of culturally competent support, interpretation services, community trust, and sustained relationship-building. Key recommendations included longer funding timescales, greater investment in advocacy and language support, enhanced partnership working, dedicated resources for participation costs, and increased capacity to support both staff wellbeing and intensive casework delivery. The evaluation concluded that the model is highly effective and provides a strong foundation for future investment and development.



ICOS weekly tennis club held at Silksworth Community Pool, Tennis and Wellness Centre, Sunderland, to bring migrant communities together.

5. Men's Pie Club – Xtra Ingredients

The Xtra Ingredients project, delivered by Men's Pie Club, aimed to improve men's wellbeing, health literacy, and life skills through a programme of food-focused social activities. Built around the Five Ways to Wellbeing framework, the project used shared food experiences to encourage social connection, learning, physical activity, and self-care while providing pathways into wider community engagement. Activities included cooking and baking workshops, food growing, foraging, fermentation and pickling sessions, and volunteering opportunities delivered in partnership with a range of local organisations.

The project successfully delivered 24 sessions, engaging 56 men, including 23 individuals who were new to Men's Pie Club. A total of 121 attendances were recorded, and a new evaluation framework was developed to measure changes in wellbeing, confidence, and social connectedness. The project also established the Pie Panel, a member-led steering group involving 30 participants from four Pie Clubs, creating a mechanism for ongoing co-production and member influence over future development.

The project demonstrated positive outcomes in relation to health awareness, confidence, and self-efficacy. All survey respondents reported feeling welcomed, included, and comfortable within the group, and found the sessions enjoyable and relevant. Evaluation data showed a 20% increase in participants reporting that they knew practical steps they could take to improve their health, a 13% increase in confidence to make positive life changes, and a 10% increase in the number of participants who felt able to influence their own wellbeing. Participants developed practical skills around cooking, food preparation, fermentation, food growing, and nutrition, with many applying these skills at home and sharing learning with others.

A key learning from the project was the importance of designing activities that are accessible, flexible, and responsive to participants' needs. Transport support and clear travel information were found to significantly improve attendance, particularly for activities in unfamiliar locations. The project also highlighted the value of capturing wider "ripple effects" through participant stories and feedback, helping to demonstrate impact beyond immediate outputs. While volunteering pathways proved more challenging to develop than anticipated, the project identified opportunities to strengthen this aspect in future delivery. Learning also highlighted the importance of clear referral criteria and strong communication with referral partners to ensure participants are ready to engage and benefit from the programme.

The success of Xtra Ingredients has provided a strong foundation for future development, with plans to continue delivering one-off wellbeing activities alongside a more structured food-based empowerment programme designed to support men who are not yet ready to engage in regular group activities.



Cookery class run by Nourish Food School at The Lighthouse Project in Byker, focussing on replacing ultra processed food choices with home cooked versions.

6. West End Refugee Service & Walking With - Help for Health



[Left] A hike in beautiful Allen Banks brought refugees and WERS community volunteers together to walk and talk - improving physical and mental health. [Right] A community meal being shared at Walking With.

The Help for Health project, delivered in partnership between West End Refugee Service (WERS) and Walking With (WW), aimed to improve health literacy, access to healthcare, and engagement with social prescribing among refugees and asylum seekers. Through a combination of educational workshops, wellbeing activities, peer support, and community-led engagement, the project sought to reduce barriers to healthcare and strengthen participants' confidence in navigating health and wellbeing services.

The project successfully delivered all planned milestones and exceeded several targets. Educational workshops and healthcare entitlement sessions became embedded within regular service delivery, reaching over 1,170 participants. Sessions focused on mental health awareness, healthcare rights and entitlements, access to NHS services, and understanding social prescribing pathways. Wellbeing activities significantly exceeded expectations, with 749 participants engaging in a diverse programme that included yoga, mindfulness, arts-based activities, nature walks, music sessions, and culturally appropriate wellbeing initiatives. The introduction of the "Safe Surgeries" initiative, created and developed by Doctors of the World UK, provided training and support to GP practices staff in North Tyneside to tackle the barriers faced by many migrants in accessing healthcare.

A key achievement was the establishment of a sustainable social prescribing pathway, enabling participants to progress from information and advice into wellbeing activities, peer support, community services, and preventative health opportunities. The project also successfully recruited and trained 18 Peer Navigators, surpassing the original target of 15 volunteers. These volunteers

played a critical role in outreach, signposting, workshop delivery, and community engagement, helping to increase trust and participation among harder-to-reach groups.

The project developed a wide range of accessible health information resources, including multilingual materials translated into nine languages and distributed through both digital and printed formats. These resources improved participants' understanding of healthcare systems and increased confidence in accessing support independently.

Key learning from the project highlighted the value of peer-led approaches in building trust and improving engagement, particularly among individuals facing language and cultural barriers. The importance of multilingual resources was also reinforced, ensuring equitable access to information and services. The project demonstrated that offering flexible and culturally relevant wellbeing activities increases participation and supports positive mental health outcomes. Strong partnerships with healthcare providers, NHS link workers, and voluntary sector organisations strengthened referral pathways and created a foundation for long-term sustainability. The project will continue through expanded Peer Navigator activity, ongoing wellbeing provision, multilingual resource hubs, strengthened referral pathways, and continued evaluation to support future growth and impact.

For more information about the Healthy Communities and Social Prescribing programme, visit our website.

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