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# St Austell Healthcare, Cornwall

## **Learning from the South West during COVID-19:**

Digital technology and  
partnership working  
through social prescribing.

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South West  
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# Summary

The repurposing of an existing mobile app, systematic prioritisation of people needing support and partnership working enabled St Austell Healthcare, a general practice in Cornwall, to respond rapidly to meet the needs of vulnerable people in the local community during the COVID-19 crisis.

This combination of digital technology, a combined volunteer team, and shared leadership has been central to the practice's successful delivery of support. A step-by-step protocol for staff to follow has ensured that digital technology, people and partners in the community work well together.

## Social prescribing in St Austell

In 2014, one of St Austell's GP practices collapsed, triggering a merger of the remaining three practices in the town. The newly formed practice, St Austell Healthcare, was able to preserve local primary care services for the local population. However, it still faced a chronic shortage of GPs. The team at St Austell Healthcare realised they needed a new way of providing primary care to the people of the town.

Following discussions with patients, GPs prioritised enabling easier access to community-based support to help address a range of non-medical issues that impact on health and wellbeing.

*"Parts of St Austell are in the top 10% most deprived areas in England."*

*"It's been fantastic to see the social prescribing service grow and build over the past four years."*

**Hayley Burgoyne**  
Head of Social Prescribing,  
St Austell Healthcare Group

This approach, known as social prescribing, has since grown from strength to strength at the practice. The practice invested in a social prescribing 'link worker', a person responsible for working with patients referred by clinicians to identify the right community support for them, but the team quickly grew to include three more part-time link workers.

Over time, other organisations have started working in partnership with the team and share a physical base in the surgery. This includes staff from local charity and two lifestyle support workers from Healthy Cornwall, a Cornwall Council initiative to encourage health and wellbeing.

For the original social prescribing link worker, Hayley Burgoyne, who now leads the team, the collaboration has been positive. "It's been fantastic to see the social prescribing

## St Austell in context

St Austell is a market town in south Cornwall, close to the coast and the Eden Project. It is one of Cornwall's largest towns, with around 30,000 residents.

St Austell has historically struggled to recruit general practitioners (GPs). There are currently around 3,200 patients per GP in the town, which is double the average across England.

Like the rest of Cornwall, St Austell has a higher proportion of people aged over 65 compared to the national average. At the same time, the number of children and young people under 15 is around the national average. Parts of St Austell are in the top 10% most deprived areas in England. Life expectancy in these areas this is reduced by up to nine years. 23% of people in St Austell have a life-limiting long-term health condition, compared to 18% nationally.

service grow and build over the past four years”, says Hayley. “We’ve long had an ethos of partnership working with the community and sharing a physical base with others in the surgery works really well.”

In addition to partnership working, over the last two years the team has been working with developers on a mobile app to provide link workers and people in St Austell with an up-to-date directory of services in the community.

Last year, St Austell’s social prescribing efforts were recognised when it became one of the leading test beds of the Institute for Social Prescribing, hosted by the South West Academic Health Science Network. By supporting St Austell Healthcare to test and spread its innovative approach to social prescribing, the Institute hopes to help other places with deprivation and health inequalities understand how it can be done.

## The challenge of COVID-19

As the impact of COVID-19 became clear, the social prescribing team in St Austell started to realise how much the pandemic would change their work. While social prescribing is all about bringing people together, as cases of COVID-19 grew and the lockdown came into force, the team realised that they could no longer deliver support physically in the way they had. This was hard for the team, and concern rose for local residents who rely on face-to-face community groups and volunteer-led services for their health and wellbeing.

*“It was obvious that our social prescribing team could help meet the social needs of the population whilst also supporting the wellbeing of their colleagues in primary care.”*

### Dr Stewart Smith

Medical Director and a GP Partner at St Austell Healthcare

The team could see that many other local organisations and volunteers also faced increasing difficulty in being able to provide support. St Austell Healthcare quickly realised that they had a role in providing support to the community. For Dr Stewart Smith, Medical Director and GP Partner at St Austell Healthcare, the solution lay in an alternative. “It was obvious that our social prescribing team could help meet the social needs of the population whilst also supporting the wellbeing of their colleagues in primary care”, says Dr Smith. “But to do this the team had to stop what they were currently doing face-to-face and restart something else.”

### How did the St Austell social prescribing team respond to COVID-19?

All existing social prescribing clients were contacted with the news that the existing

face-to-face services focused on improving wellbeing had to be put on hold. New workstreams were put in place to support the community.

### Repurposing digital technology

St Austell Healthcare has developed its own app, Help at Hand, to provide patients with easy access to the latest support services available in St Austell, by telephone and online.

At the time of the COVID-19 outbreak, the app was close to launch. Sensing that Help at Hand could be a useful tool to assist in their efforts to support colleagues, the team worked with the developers to hide all the live face-to-face services advertised on the app that were not currently running. They then thought afresh about what is relevant now and contacted local organisations to find out about new services they had on offer during the pandemic.

*“[The Help at Hand app] meant that pretty quickly we were able to share details of what support was out there with the town and provide a way for those providing support to get their information out there.”*

### Mel Bond

Link Worker, St Austell Healthcare

## Establishing new protocols

Volunteer Cornwall managed the recruitment and training of additional volunteers as they were needed and developed a volunteer pack to guide those involved. The St Austell Healthcare social prescribing team developed a protocol document for their staff to use. This protocol includes:

- An example script for a wellbeing call
- Details of how staff can add someone to the waiting list for support
- Information on how to use and update the log of people identified for a check-in
- The process for referring people to the right support
- Details about different pharmacy processes to organise delivery of prescriptions
- How to escalate a case if there is no response or other concerns.

These services included counsellors offering telephone counselling rather than face-to-face meetings, exercise providers streaming classes online, and pubs offering to deliver meals to the elderly.

On the 26 March, three days after the UK Prime Minister announced a national lockdown, St Austell Healthcare launched the revised Help at Hand app in the local community. The app was very well received. According to link worker Mel Bond, “[Help at Hand] meant that pretty quickly we were able to share details of what support was out there with the town and provide a way for those providing support to get their information out there.”

### Identifying shielding and vulnerable individuals

A second workstream focused on helping to identify and support the social needs of people in the town. The process for identifying people for support required some thought. UK government had produced an initial list of 513 people in St Austell that required shielding, but GPs and the social prescribing team at St Austell Healthcare knew there were many more people at risk. They worked together to discuss the groups of people they felt were disproportionately vulnerable and agreed different categories. This included people aged over 70, those with long-term conditions such as diabetes, cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), cystic fibrosis,

or visual impairment, as well as those who were isolated or have caring responsibilities.

The surgery’s data manager was instrumental in taking things to the next stage, creating a system of ten spreadsheets listing individuals according to each category and health condition. The spreadsheet triaged people and those that fell into six of the categories were flagged as the highest priority and agreed as the place to start.

The team developed a step-by-step process for how the 120 other staff working for St Austell Healthcare could flag a patient to a waiting list for support from the social prescribing team. These people were then added to those already identified as high risk, on the central government shielded list and the existing social prescribing case load. The social prescribing team then started to make calls to these people, to check on their health and wellbeing and need for support.

### Coordinating community support and partnership working

The delivery of support – whether to collect medicines, deliver food or supplies, walk the dog or provide telephone befriending – has been done in partnership with Volunteer Cornwall. Volunteer Cornwall had a new High Intensity User Coordinator in post, based at the practice, who was able to repurpose her role to work full-time on the COVID-19 response in partnership with the social prescribing team.

Volunteer Cornwall also repurposed their Flu Friends scheme for COVID-19. Flu Friends is a network of friends, relatives, neighbours and local volunteers who respond if local residents fall ill or are self-isolating during flu season. During COVID-19, Flu Friends volunteers worked alongside existing social prescribing volunteers. Many of these volunteers had previously provided face-to-face activities like walking or running groups and had asked to be redirected into other roles during the pandemic. Healthy Cornwall also repurposed the role of its Healthy Lifestyles Delivery Advisor so that she could support the team with prescription and food deliveries.

### What challenges have St Austell overcome?

The biggest challenge the team faced was responding to prescriptions and pharmacies. At the beginning of the lockdown it became apparent that the pharmacies could quickly become overloaded. The team used volunteers to liaise and pick things up but each of the five pharmacies in St Austell work in different ways with different systems for repeat prescriptions, delivery, sign off, and for people who cannot use email. It therefore took a lot of time and effort for the team to understand how each of them worked and, in some cases, who to speak to.

## Step-by-step summary of what was done in St Austell

- Existing social prescribing team clients are contacted about the service being put on hold.
- The Help at Hand app’s directory of services, in development at the time, is repurposed with details of local support during COVID-19.
- People at risk from COVID-19 are identified and prioritised according to categories agreed by clinicians and the social prescribing team.
- Health and wellbeing check-in calls are made by the social prescribing team according to priority lists identified.
- Time is spent on developing understanding of how the different pharmacies in St Austell operate.
- A partnership with Volunteer Cornwall creates an expanded volunteer team to help deliver food, medicines and other basic supplies along with friendly check-ins and phone befrienders.
- A step-by-step protocol is designed for the social prescribing team and practice staff to follow.

In the case of one pharmacy, the team found that using the same volunteer for collections helped to develop a closer working relationship to manage challenges as they arose. With another pharmacy, they agreed a clear daily process of emailing the details of the prescriptions in the morning for collection after lunch and delivery in the afternoon.

*"I have loved [Help at Hand] – it's such a great idea! As a family we're relatively new to the area and the app has been invaluable."*

**Anne**

Local resident

As the team's understanding of how to work with different pharmacies developed, this was set out in the protocol so fellow team members could see and understand it.

**What has been achieved?**

Between 30 March and 22 May 2020, the social prescribing team had called nearly 1,200 of St Austell's most vulnerable residents to check on their health and wellbeing and offer assistance if needed. Nearly 1,600 contacts were made, including some people who called back at a later date, after first saying they were fine.

Between the St Austell Healthcare social prescribing team and Volunteer Cornwall, a total of 36 volunteers have helped to deliver food, medicine, and other essential supplies.

One volunteer from Volunteer Cornwall makes hot meals for people in need, which are then delivered by the social prescribing team volunteers and the Healthy Lifestyles Delivery Advisor. Nearly 100 of these hot meals have been delivered to patients so far.

Volunteers are also supporting people with diabetes by facilitating a virtual support group online. Nearly 300 people are receiving their prescriptions delivered by volunteers. There is also a system in place where evening and weekend staff at the Carlyon Road Health Hub can call on volunteers to deliver urgent prescriptions.

For Sarah, a St Austell resident who is shielding along with her partner, the support has made a big difference. "I really appreciated the delivery of my medication. But more than that, the person I spoke to at the surgery seemed to really care. She asked me if I was okay and managing with other things like my shopping. It is little things like that that make a huge difference when you can't go out and are totally dependent on everyone else."

For fellow patient Anne, it was the Help at Hand app that helped her and her family. "I have loved [Help at Hand] – it's such a great idea! As a family we're relatively new to the area and the app has been invaluable."

As for the volunteers, for many it has helped to give them purpose during a challenging time. One of the volunteer walking group leaders, who is also part of the local running group, has been delivering prescriptions on foot. "It is a pleasure to be able to help and one of the reasons I retired. During this time, it is giving me an opportunity to run with a reason and help some of the people that need it."

The experience of working in partnership has been successful. According to Gemma Sutcliffe, the High Intensity User Coordinator at Volunteer Cornwall, working in partnership with St Austell Healthcare has meant that vulnerable and isolated members of the community are identified early on and the required support put in place quickly. "We have developed an effective system with local pharmacies to deliver medication quickly and work together to deal with urgent concerns as they arise", says Gemma. "This approach has meant we have supported hundreds of patients and word of the support system has spread in the local community."

*"Working in partnership with St Austell Healthcare means that vulnerable and isolated members of the community were able to be identified early on and the required support put in place quickly."*

**Gemma Sutcliffe**

High Intensity User Coordinator

## What lessons have been learned during this time?

- Being able to **work alongside professional data managers and mobile app developers** helped the team to respond quickly and accurately, and focus their efforts on those that needed their support the most – the people in the town. Whilst the planned launch of Help at Hand in March offered an element of fortunate timing, the COVID-19 response in St Austell has benefitted from the app because it means that information is organised, searchable, able to be updated, and stored in one place that can be easily accessed and promoted.
- The **relationships between people** have been the most helpful. Knowing that staff were there to talk to has been important to the team. The clinical links have been critical, meaning the team can link people easily to doctors, district nurses, pharmacists and more.
- Giving people an **option to call back later** was helpful. People identified as vulnerable by the team were given a direct number to the social prescribing office to call if they needed support, for whatever worry, even when they had said they were fine on the initial wellbeing check-in call. In a number of cases people did call back at a later date. When people were hesitant to bother the NHS at a time of crisis, the team felt this ongoing option of support via a line where people could speak directly to a member of the team was important.
- Having **one large GP practice** has helped in the coordination of support to the people that need it. Whilst coordination of support and services at this population size may not be appropriate in all local contexts, for example where there are smaller populations spread over a larger geographical area, for a town the size of St Austell it works well.

## What is happening now?

- The social prescribing team are beginning to think about what the 'new normal' of living with the risk of COVID-19 might look like. Ways to try to support people to remain fit and active, and eat healthily, as well support the younger working age population and families, are currently at the front of the team's mind.
- Together with the South West Academic Health Science Network, St Austell Healthcare is helping to share details of how its social prescribing efforts have helped to support the response to COVID-19 in Cornwall. The Institute is sharing details from its other test beds across Devon and Somerset.

[swahsn.com/institute-for-social-prescribing](https://swahsn.com/institute-for-social-prescribing)  
[staustellhealthcare.co.uk/social-prescribing.html](https://staustellhealthcare.co.uk/social-prescribing.html)  
[volunteercornwall.org.uk](https://volunteercornwall.org.uk)

If you or your organisation is using social prescribing to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, we would like to hear from you. Please share your story with us:



@sw\_ahsn



info@swahsn.com



swahsn.com