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# Health Connections Mendip, Frome, Somerset

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

Using existing relationships  
and infrastructure to support  
the community response.

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**South West**  
Academic Health  
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# Summary

**When the COVID-19 crisis hit, the team at Health Connections Mendip, a Somerset-based social prescribing project, felt confident the community would lead the response locally. This confidence had grown over time, from years of relationship building and investment in community development.**

The team focused their time on building practical capacity and tools to support the community response when gaps were identified. This included publicising support on offer via their website, making wellbeing calls to the most vulnerable local residents, and delivering a booklet on maintaining wellbeing. They wrote a letter about community support, which was sent to all vulnerable residents and people being trained as community connectors, to aid signposting.

## Social prescribing in Frome

For a long time, Dr Helen Kingston, a partner at Frome Medical Practice, had been thinking about how she and her colleagues could deliver a more person-centred approach to health and care that went beyond just meeting people's medical needs.

In the surgery they saw the health implications of social isolation and loneliness. Finding ways to support people to reconnect with their communities and the practical, social and emotional support within them became a priority.

In 2013, with funding from NHS Somerset Clinical Commissioning Group, Frome Medical Practice developed a new model of care that was based on linking people into social networks and community-based support – commonly referred to as social prescribing by the NHS. They employed someone to develop understanding about what community-based support and activities already existed. In 2015, they employed health connectors to work with people to identify the changes they wanted to make in their lives, and trained thousands of volunteer community connectors to link people to the support they wanted.

The Health Connections Mendip team has since grown to include five full-time equivalent health connectors spread across ten practices that have supported thousands of patients a year to access groups, develop personal care plans, or train as community connectors. These active citizens - the community connectors - have an estimated 28,000 signposting conversations a year. There is also a dedicated **Health Connections Mendip website**, with an up-to-date directory of activities and services in the community. This is linked to the GP patient record system at Frome Medical Centre, where the support is coded and easily reported on.

## Frome in context

Frome is a town in the Mendip area of Somerset. The needs of the 30,000 residents are served by a politically independent and active town council, the Frome Medical Practice, and a vibrant voluntary, community and social enterprise sector.

Whilst it has an older population than England's average, Frome has one of the youngest populations within Somerset. There are more people in Frome aged under 16 than over 65. Life expectancy in the town is above the national average. Women can expect to live to 85 and men 81.

There is inequality and pockets of deprivation. Parts of Frome are considered amongst the 20% most deprived areas in England. People in the area are also considered to be at increased risk of social isolation and loneliness.

*"It is so important to have one foot in primary care and one foot in the community."*

**Jenny Hartnoll**

Health Connections Mendip

Where gaps in provision are identified, Health Connections Mendip has capacity to support the set-up of new activities and groups. In the past these have included a Stroke Support Group and a Macular Degeneration Group. The Frome Medical Practice building, with its café and atrium space, hosts a number of these, as well as groups and activities from other

organisations. For Jenny Hartnoll, who set up Health Connections Mendip, "it is so important to have one foot in primary care and one foot in the community."

*"By working with others across the region and nationally we can help more places with socially isolated populations understand how community building can underpin improved health and wellbeing."*

**Dr Helen Kingston**

Frome Medical Practice

Health Connections Mendip has been actively encouraging others to learn from their experience by sharing practical materials, hosting training sessions and more. For this reason, Health Connections Mendip in Frome is pleased to be one of the test beds of the **Institute for Social Prescribing – launched by the South West Academic Health Science Network in 2019**. For Dr Kingston, the hope is that "by working with others across the region and nationally we can help more places with socially isolated populations understand how community building can underpin improved health and wellbeing."

## The challenge of COVID-19

When COVID-19 hit, the Health Connections Mendip team quickly realised that all work in groups would have to stop, and that the directory would have lots of information about sessions that would not be running.

At the same time, the team had an inkling that the local community would be quick to adapt and respond. They soon learned that teams of people looking to support others in their community, at a very local street level, were springing up overnight. To compliment these street level networks, the Town Council set up a personal shopping and food box scheme.

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

After cancelling all their own face-to-face appointments and group activities, Health Connections Mendip started to look and see what was happening in the community. They found that there was a lot – at street level, village level, around pubs, by businesses and charities and the town, district and county councils. The speed with which the community responded, combined with the strong networks and relationships across organisations in the town, meant that Health Connections Mendip could pause, not make hasty decisions or go it alone. Instead, they decided to look to the community and their existing community-based partners first, and support this work rather than take the lead.

## Amplifying local health messages

The team realised that the best thing Health Connections Mendip could do was to help amplify what was happening in the community and share details of the support that was being put in place. The aim, according to Dr Kingston, was "to encourage people to link up with existing friends, family members, neighbours, charities and volunteers in the community, and then, along with others, to encourage those to then link with each other. Our existing relationships – with the food banks, volunteer drivers, befrienders and more – proved critical."

The team realised that their website – which is a go-to place for information and advice in the community – already provided the infrastructure through which to share relevant information across the community – with professionals, volunteers and residents. Therefore, a whole new mapping exercise began. They started with practical details about the street-based community response teams, shops doing deliveries, people who could pick up prescriptions and where to get things like wheelchairs and incontinence pads.

The Health Connections Mendip team continued to reach out to their current caseload, as well as people they had had contact with in the past who they thought would appreciate a welfare call. In parallel,

Health Connections Mendip worked with other practice staff and made welfare calls to those who had been flagged as potentially vulnerable from COVID-19 in Frome. This included those that been flagged for shielding by central government, people that had requested assistance through the county council website and those that had been identified at moderate risk by GPs and specialist doctors in the hospital. Discussions with GP surgeries about who they were calling direct took place to ensure there was no duplication. The practice also sent a letter with all the community support which Health Connections Mendip offers to all those in Mendip who were on the vulnerable lists.

*"I have always found Health Connections Mendip really supportive... they are always there whenever we have questions or need that extra support in finding more information, I would rate them 10 out of 10."*

**Mike**

Patient and active community member

## Supporting new capacity, community-led activities and local resources

As time went on Health Connections Mendip added more and more to their website. This included things like where to get masks, contact details for the 'Active and In Touch' befrienders, cooking for key workers, and local businesses delivering craft and colouring kits.

The next step was to launch an online Mendip Talking Café, once a week, for anyone who would like a friendly chat or to find out about local information and services. It was also clear that parents were feeling isolated so Health Connections Mendip worked with the town council and with local parent's groups to set up Parents' Talking Cafés, including one for parents of children with additional needs. These community groups were set up by Health Connections Mendip and then handed

over to those organisations that would usually support parents. In time, the usual participants of the Talking Cafés started to meet informally in person. Health Connections Mendip heard about this and set up socially distanced Talking Cafés on benches (Talking Benches) across town. For those who were out and about, this meant there was a person who could listen to them and, if suitable, signpost them to local support.

*“It was an act of the community acting for the community with volunteers across every town and village in the region distributing booklets to every single household. 47,000 booklets distributed... inspiring!”*

**Will Palmer**  
Volunteer

It became apparent that whilst online information and virtual support was a great resource for many, there were others who found it difficult to navigate or access. Health Connections Mendip set up some online community connector training for people to learn how to signpost friends, family and neighbours to support in the community.

The team also developed a Digital Community Connector training session to help with the issue that many people are either not online or need support accessing things that might help them to connect more. Health Connections Mendip is also setting up a pen pal project for people not online who would like to receive a friendly postcard once a week.

The team could see that finding ways to help people maintain mental wellbeing when in lockdown was going to be important. Rather than starting from scratch, the team got permission to replicate and adapt an existing resource from **Every Life Matters**. Based on this material they produced a booklet on ways of maintaining mental wellbeing during this period. 47,000 booklets were distributed in hard copy through the community response networks to every resident in Frome and also across Mendip. The booklet is also available to download from the **Health Connections Mendip website**.

### What has been achieved?

During the eight weeks of the first UK lockdown, thousands of welfare calls were made by the Health Connections Mendip team to people considered vulnerable or at risk from COVID-19. The Health Connections Mendip website had nearly 16,000 hits in March, April and May 2020 and 47,000 wellbeing booklets were delivered across Mendip. Scores of people have attended online Talking Cafés and undertaken training to become Community Connectors and Digital Connectors.

For Mike, a patient and active community member, it is the way that Health Connections Mendip work with people as a team that is appreciated. “I have always found Health Connections Mendip really supportive. They helped us set up our chronic obstructive pulmonary disease [COPD] peer support group and assisted us in finding out the extra information we have needed during this time of COVID-19, which has been quite worrying for some of our group members. I feel we work as a team with Health Connections, they are always there whenever we have questions or need that extra support in finding more information, I would rate them 10 out of 10.”

*“This partnership will become even more important as restrictions are lifted and the community need to identify people who have become anxious and worried about leaving their homes or are suffering from mental health problems.”*

**Dougie Brown**  
Active and In Touch Service Director

## Step-by-step summary of what was done in Frome

- In light of COVID-19 restrictions, Health Connections Mendip cancelled all their existing one-to-one appointments, face-to-face groups and activities.
- The Health Connections Mendip team looked at what the community was setting up themselves and decided to use their website to amplify and publicise the support being put in place by others.
- Their existing relationships in the community helped them to make links across different organisations to enable joining up of support.
- Wellbeing check-in calls were made, to their existing caseload but also people identified as vulnerable.
- Health Connections Mendip provided resources to the community where they identified gaps. This included a booklet on maintaining wellbeing, new Parents’ Talking Cafés, Talking Benches, Digital Community Connector training and a pen pal project.
- Health Connections Mendip moved some of their groups and training online, e.g. Talking Cafés and Digital Community Connector training.

## Working together, in partnership

Volunteers get a lot out of the way Health Connections Mendip work. Will Palmer worked as a volunteer with Health Connections Mendip on the distribution of the Mental Health and Wellbeing booklet throughout the Mendip region. He described the experience as “incredibly fulfilling. It was an act of the community acting for the community with volunteers across every town and village in the region distributing booklets to every single household. 47,000 booklets distributed... inspiring!”

*“Health Connections Mendip always ‘pulls it out of the hat’ when it’s needed, no doubt due to the great relationships they have with our partner agencies... It is so worthwhile to have forged the relationship and trust in each other that we have.”*

### **Gary Maule**

Avon and Somerset Police  
Community Support Officer

There are also many agencies, voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations, as well as community-organised groups that have benefitted from the partnership approach of Health Connections Mendip.

At the beginning of the pandemic, with many vulnerable people needing to shield, the pharmacy in Frome Medical Centre suddenly needed to deliver to over 2,000 households a month. They contacted Health Connections Mendip who directed them to Frome Community cars. According to one of the pharmacy workers, this made a big difference. They said that “within days we had several volunteer drivers delivering much needed medication to the vulnerable at home. It was great to be able to be signposted to an organisation that already existed with structures in place. We know the team at Health Connections Mendip really well and they were able to direct us to the most appropriate local volunteers.”

Active and In Touch is a local VCSE organisation that supports people who are feeling lonely and isolated. The number of people needing support doubled over lockdown with many referrals coming from the close partnership and collaboration between the team and Health Connections Mendip. For Dougie, the Active and In Touch service director, the two-way nature of the partnership is important. “We have been able to refer back any health concerns identified through our befriending volunteers. This has been a key relationship in helping the most vulnerable during the pandemic. This partnership will become even more important as restrictions are lifted and the community need to identify people who have become anxious and worried about leaving their homes or are suffering from mental health problems.”

Annabelle, a member of the community who was actively involved in the setting up of the neighbourhood support groups, has been heartened by the way existing organisations

like Health Connections Mendip have worked with new neighbourhood groups. “What’s important here is that the initiative and energy for this mutual support rests within the community. The role of organisations such as Health Connections Mendip is, in my mind, to work alongside these neighbourhood groups in ways that facilitate the development of stronger and more connected communities. I am happy to say that this is what is happening here in Frome.”

This positive experience also extends to other agencies, including the police. For Gary Maule, Avon and Somerset Police Community Support Officer it is the support, concern, empathy and knowledge that Health Connections Mendip give to the most difficult to reach in the community that is unique. “The help and support that you have given to myself and the team I am part of is unrivalled within the list of agencies that we work with. Health Connections Mendip always ‘pulls it out of the hat’ when it’s needed, no doubt due to the great relationships they have with our partner agencies. The Health Connections Mendip team are worth their weight in gold. It is so worthwhile to have forged the relationship and trust in each other that we have.”

## What lessons have been learned during this time?

- Health Connections Mendip felt confident that the community could lead the COVID-19 crisis locally. **This confidence has built over time**, from years of relationship building and investment in community building and supporting community activity.
- The community strength in Frome has meant that the relatively small Health Connections Mendip team could focus its resources on **building practical capacity and tools** to support the community response to COVID-19 where it identified a need or a gap.
- Central to social prescribing in Frome is the idea of the importance of reconnecting people to their social networks and with communities. Whilst Health Connections Mendip had to cancel all their physical groups they have seen how they have a strong **role to play in promoting the efforts of others** in the community and voluntary sector that are helping people to stay connected online and through the telephone.
- The team has also learnt that the impacts of isolation during the lockdown and general people's vulnerability to **COVID-19 changes over time**. The 'mood' of the community was also impacted by national announcements.
- The team has noticed a **shift in relationships, and working culture**, between Health Connections Mendip and other healthcare professionals as well as with patients. For example GPs started team meetings with a poem or showed their colleagues a new dance move learnt from their children at the beginning. Patients are asking Health Connections Mendip team members how they are getting on, as well as the other way around.

## What is happening now?

- When the situation allows, the Health Connections Mendip team hope to bring back their face-to-face work and group activity. At the same time, they feel that some of the virtual support and digital solutions put in place may have a longer-term role. Recognising that a virtual approach may not be ideal for everyone or every situation, the team are working to understand where the loss of face-to-face and group activity makes a big difference. This is with a view to prioritising bringing back this support for the individuals and issues that benefit from it most.
- Together with the South West Academic Health Science Network, Health Connections Mendip are helping to share details of how social prescribing has supported the community response to COVID-19 in Frome. The Institute has also shared details from other test beds in **North Devon** and **St Austell** in Cornwall.

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:



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