

## Ways to Wellness Link Worker Survey on Covid Impact: Findings Report

### 1. Background

Link workers were asked to complete a short survey about their perceptions and experiences about the impact of Covid on their clients and their work. It was designed to:

- a) understand their experiences of working in delivering Ways to Wellness during the Covid pandemic,
- b) gather their views and insights about the impact and consequences for their clients, and
- c) ask for their thoughts about how we might continue to best support clients in the future.

The survey was completed in the last week of September 2020. 16 Link Workers responded.

### 2. Survey results

#### Part 1: The impact of Covid-19 on your patient (client) group

Question 1: On the basis of your conversations with your clients, what do you think have been the biggest negative impacts on your clients as a result of the Covid situation?

A range of options were provided, and respondents were asked to rate them on a scale of 1 to 3: 1 = minor or rare negative impact; 2 = moderate negative impact for a number of people; 3 = significant negative impact for many people. A free text box was added in case respondents wished to add others.

Areas of 'significant negative impact for many people' were:

- social isolation
- emotional or psychological distress
- reduction in physical activity
- limited access to support / social groups

Areas of 'moderate negative impact for a number of people' were:

- employment issues
- access to food
- use of alcohol or other addictive substances
- access to medication
- digital exclusion

Question 2: On the basis of your conversations with your clients, have you found there to be any positive impacts or opportunities for your clients that have opened up as a result of Covid and its consequences?

We suggested a small number of possible positive impacts, namely:

- Increased interest or motivation to improve health or boost immunity
- Increased time to devote to hobbies, relationships or completion of priority tasks
- Reduced stress from a slower pace and less demands
- Increase self-awareness, insight or time/space leading to personal change/improvement

Respondents were asked to rate each on a scale of 1 to 3: 1 = minor or rare positive impact; 2 = moderate positive impact for a number of people; 3 = significant positive impact for many people. A free text box was added in case respondents wished to add others.

The majority of Link Workers (63%) feel there have been no positive 'side effects' of Covid for their clients.

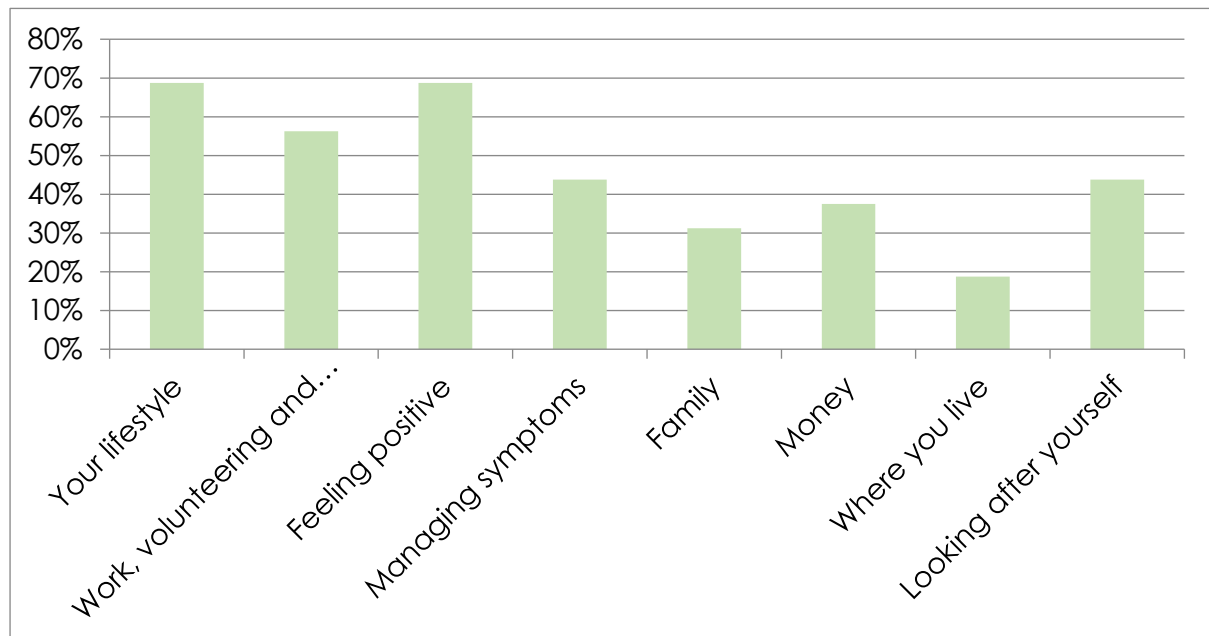
There was some recognition of increased time with loved ones:

“Some very socially isolated clients who never/rarely leave the house found an improvement in their mental health as family members were at home with them due to lockdown. Several clients commented that for the first time, lockdown meant they felt that others were in the same situation as them, i.e. were unable to go out.”

Question 3: In your experience, have you seen an increase in clients setting goals or requiring support in any of the following areas since the lockdown in March?

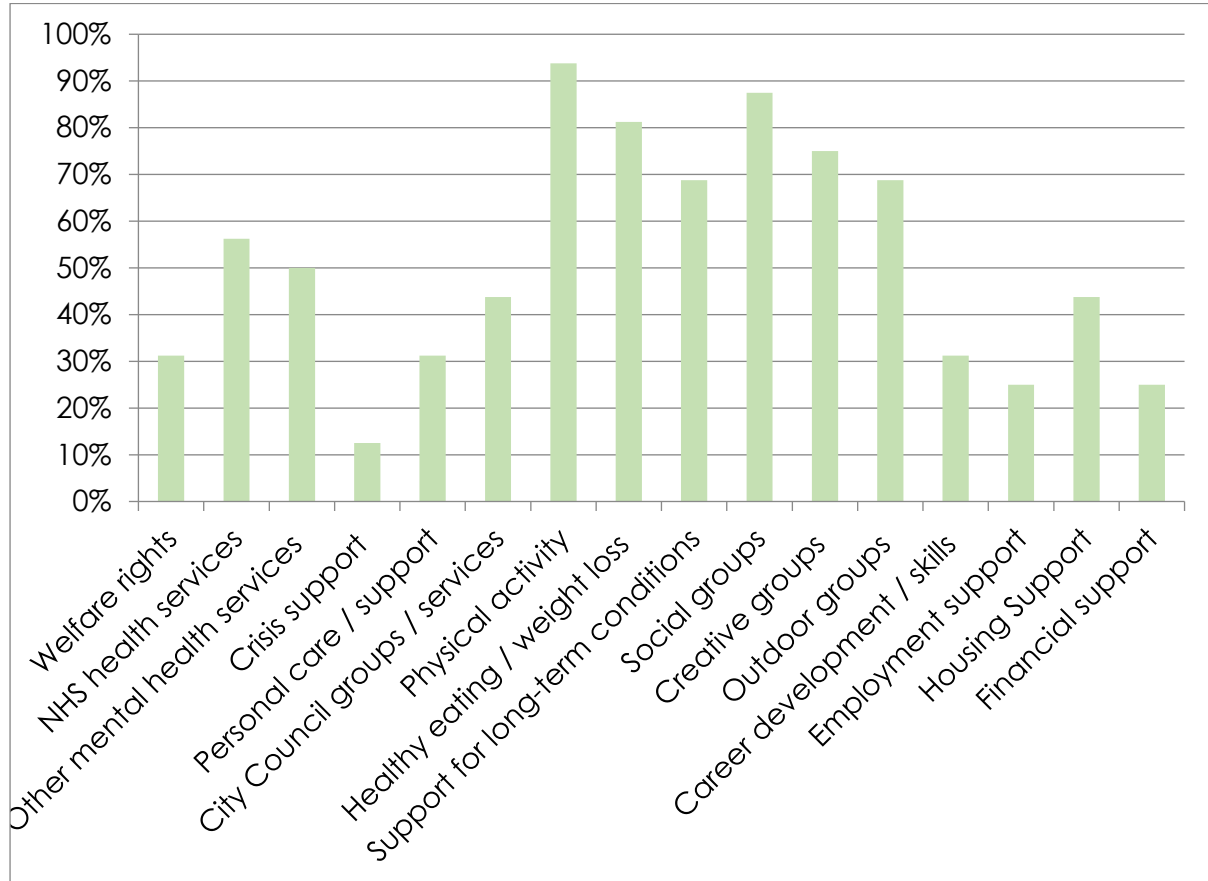
Respondents were given a list of categories based on the Wellbeing Star domains, and asked to tick all that apply.

Lifestyle and feeling positive were the highest increases. This was also the most common domain in which people set goals pre-Covid.



Question 4: In your experience, what types of services or activities to which you might previously have signposted clients have been limited or unavailable since lockdown in March?

A list of options was provided and respondents were asked to tick all that applied.



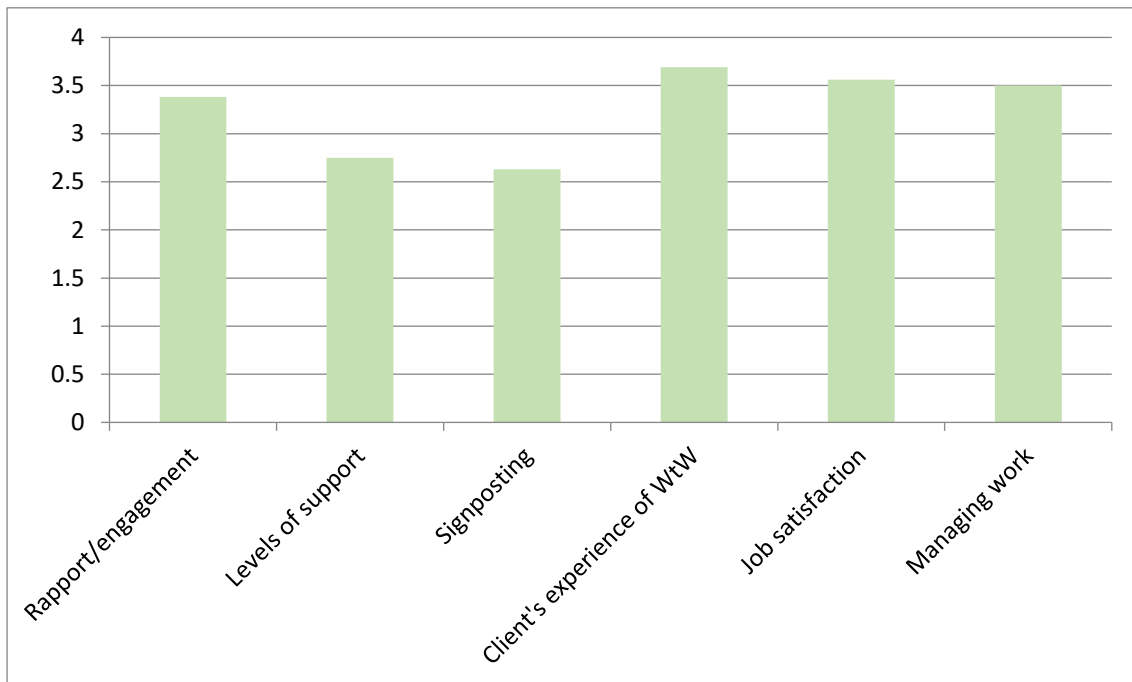
## Part 2: How has your service changed?

Question 5: With appointments moving online/via telephone, what impact (if any) do you think this has had on:

- (a) Your ability to build rapport and engagement with clients?
- (b) Your ability to provide clients with the previous levels of support in terms of goal setting, action planning and supporting behaviour changes?
- (c) Your ability to signpost clients to appropriate groups, activities and services?
- (d) Your clients' experience of the Ways to Wellness service?
- (e) Your job satisfaction (as a Link Worker)?
- (f) Your ability to manage work demands (as a Link Worker)?

A Likert scale was used (1-5): 1 = significant negative impact, 2 = somewhat negative impact, 3 = a mix of both positive and negative impact, 4 = somewhat positive impact, 5 = significant positive impact.

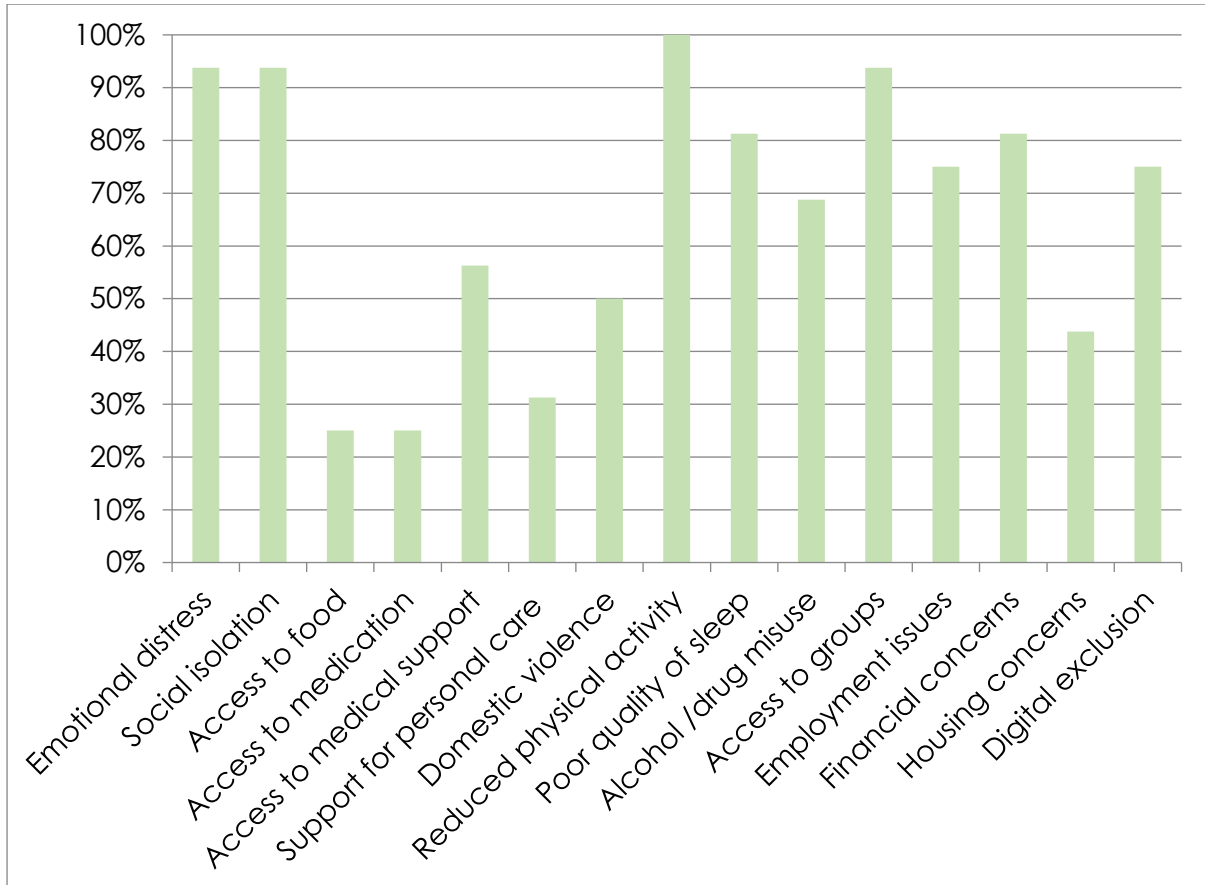
The chart below shows a weighted average for the responses.



### Part 3: The future impact of Covid on social prescribing services

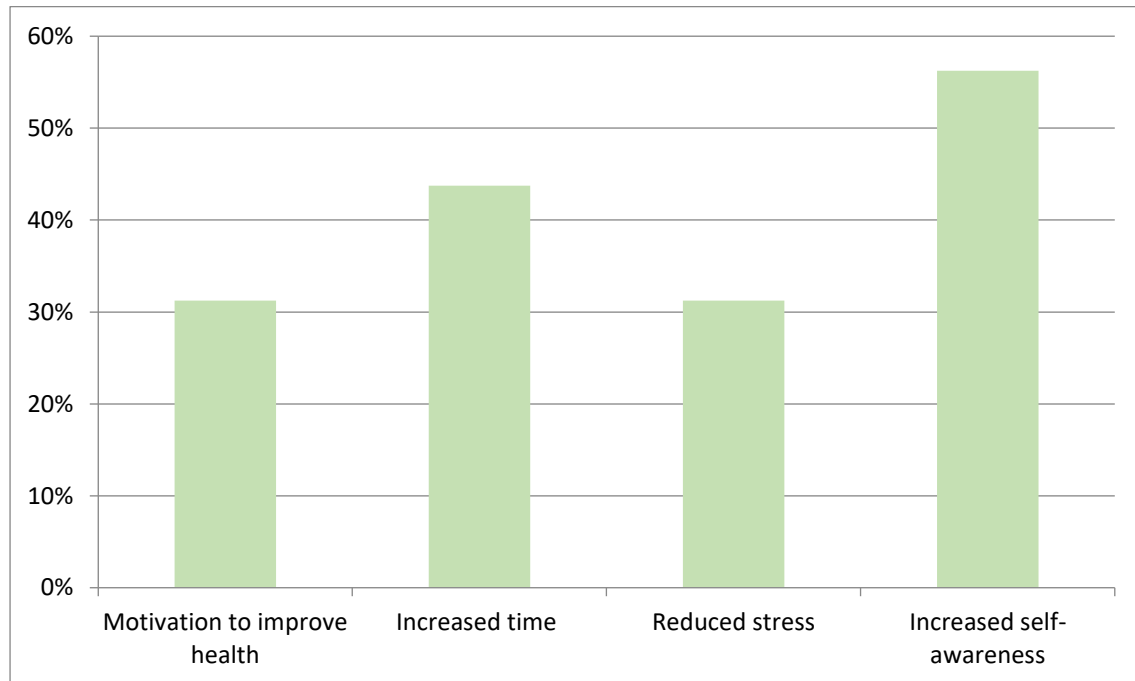
Question 6: Thinking about the impact covered in earlier questions, in the future, what negative impacts or consequences of Covid do you think will particularly persist in the next 6 months to 1 year?

A range of options were provided (repeating the list of negative impacts from Q1), and respondents were asked to select all that apply.



Question 7: Thinking about the impact covered in earlier questions, in the future, what positive impacts or consequences of Covid do you think will particularly persist in the next 6 months to 1 year (select all that apply)?

A range of options were provided (repeating the list of positive impacts from Q2), and respondents were asked to select all that apply.



"I think in the next 6m-1y the limitations will continue and people will not be in recovery yet. They will continue to be stressed, socially isolated and medical appointments will continue to have huge waiting lists. I don't see a recovery in attitude starting in the next 6m-1y yet."

Question 8: In what ways do you think the Ways to Wellness social prescribing service and you as a Link Worker can make a positive difference towards reducing the negative impact (and possibly increase any positive impact) of Covid?

A free text box was provided here, in order to allow respondents the opportunity to share their thoughts.

Many Link Worker responses highlighted the importance of providing a consistent support to clients, which clients can rely upon when other elements of their life are unpredictable or unstable:

*"Being able to offer time, empathy and a sense of hope. Providing a connection to someone who cares and has time to listen and help stay strong in the face of stress and tension."*

*"Continuing to keep in touch, offering support and taking care to be more vigilant with those we think are at higher risk"*

*"There is a background stress for everyone, if not for their own physical and mental wellbeing, then for that of their families and friends. This makes everything else seems more difficult and less easy to consider and access."*

*"I believe that our service is needed more than ever as we are seeing an increase in health conditions or existing conditions becoming unstable in the lockdown."*

### The future of virtual consultations

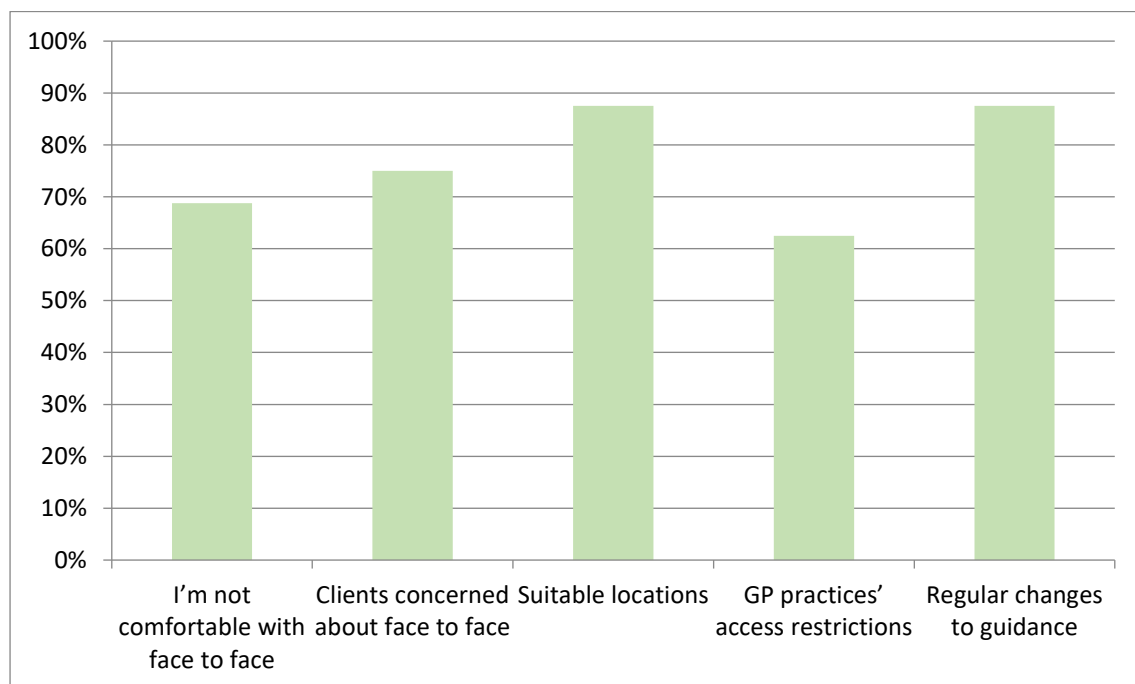
Question 9: What, if any, barriers are there to returning to face to face consultations?

The following options were offered, and respondents were asked to select all that applied:

- I'm not comfortable with face to face consultations due Covid risk to me or others
- Many/most of my clients have expressed concerns about face to face consultations or would otherwise prefer telephone/virtual appointments
- Having suitable locations for consultations, while social distancing and other restrictions are in place
- GP practices' access restrictions and news ways of working are a limitation
- Regular changes to guidance making planning difficult

Both Link Workers and clients seem to have mixed experiences about remote service delivery.

There appears to be a tension between the desire to return to face-to-face and the desire to stay safe and protect clients.



*"I think the majority of our work can be done satisfactorily over the phone and due to how vulnerable our clients are we should not go back to face to face appointments until a vaccine has been made and offered to them all."*

*"Many clients would love nothing more than to be able to meet face to face again, with restrictions in place. As a Link Worker I feel that we should begin to offer this as soon as we are able to and can offer it safely, personally I find providing telephone support less rewarding and miss seeing my clients. It also makes for a more difficult experience in building rapport and gathering that rich detail required at the first WBS, especially when you have not met the client before."*

*"I think working part remotely, part face to face would be the best solution for both patients and ourselves after C19 risks are over. For the moment due to the above reasons, I don't think it is time for face to face consultations yet."*

Question 10: Please let us know if you have any suggestions, feedback or insights related to the impact of Covid and Ways to Wellness' response in supporting clients that hasn't been covered in the questions above.

This was an open text box, to allow respondents the flexibility to introduce new ideas or emphasis other elements.

Amongst the themes that emerged, there was recognition of the importance of our service:

*"I believe that our service is needed more than ever as we are seeing an increase in health conditions or existing conditions becoming unstable in the lockdown."*

A couple of comments picked up on the challenges of digital exclusion:

*"[W]e work with many individuals on low income who do not have access to the technology required to be digitally included and/or may not be confident in using it, this has been a huge barrier."*

*"I would be interested to see a consultation specific platform we could use to undertake video consultations (currently via WhatsApp) - better assure confidentiality and give a more professional image. Most people are happy with phone consultations, but for some phone / video is much more difficult - deaf clients, learning disabilities, etc. Concern for those that are not digitally aware - increases isolation risk. There are some services that support with this, but they are limited (as are the funds)."*

Challenges of balancing workload and meeting targets at a very difficult time:

*"Our team have taken on many new roles and responsibilities to provide a COVID19 response to our clients as well as the wider population, this has been on top of our usual work - whilst we are more than happy to provide this additional service it has taken its toll. It has made prioritising work difficult to some degree as we have still been expected to maintain targets and KPI's whilst carrying out a wealth of other tasks. Additionally, we*



have seen a decrease in referrals and there has been an enormous push and an enormous amount of work gone into driving these- to some degree I feel that further discussions should have been held with GP surgeries to query why this was the case from higher management."

One Link Worker requested additional information/support:

"Ideas on how to support clients with social isolation, and health."

### 3. Conclusions and next steps

The survey results demonstrate that the Ways to Wellness service has provided critical support to many clients who are facing particularly challenging circumstances. It is also clear that staff and teams deserve recognition and credit for rising to the occasion during this difficult period.

In reviewing the survey responses, it is evident that Link Workers find that many of the services to which they would normally signpost clients are closed or restricted. Through communications with partners in the area, we know that the key public sector and voluntary sector organisations are aware of this issue and are looking to find solutions. We are keeping a close eye on the work that is being done to address this, to see where we can be part of the solution as well as update internal team information if/as different options become available for our clients. In some cases, this issue has arisen because NHS and council services have been deployed to put their efforts towards more urgent Covid responses. In other cases, it has resulted from VCSE organisations furloughing staff and shut their doors temporarily; some of these organisations may struggle to survive and the extent of that is likely to emerge over time. Some services may become overwhelmed once they do re-open, which could result in delays for our clients. Gaps in services may appear. This may affect our clients' ability to get the help they need and achieve their goals. We only have limited control over this but want to continue to understand how it is impacting Link Workers' delivery and will continue to stay abreast of joint health, social care and VCSE work in Newcastle, playing a part in the solution where possible.

Another issue that has emerged from this survey and other discussions with teams, is digital exclusion. We are currently looking into how we can join up with other public and VCSE sector organisations to help people to access support while restrictions prevent face to face meetings. When it is time to start planning for the transition back to face to face consultations, it will be important for us to consider how phone and online work will continue beyond the end of social distancing.

A third issue that was highlighted in the survey was social isolation for our clients. This is likely linked to the two issues above, i.e., restricted/reduced access to groups and services and digital exclusion. We will continue to share resources with all link workers, that might help them support clients with social isolation. Our Link Workers themselves, and the availability and support they provide our clients, will be part of this solution.