

College of Medicine Beyond Pills Campaign feature

The community hubs – with walk-in health checks and funded by local businesses – that are helping a Cornish region

Flanked by the north coast of Cornwall, the Coastal Primary Care Network (PCN) incorporates four practices, serving over 29,000 patients with the highest number of over-65s for any PCN in the county. Integrated care is central to their aim to ensure the best possible care and a lynchpin of this is social prescribing.

Community psychologist Kevin Feaviour is Director of the Imagine If... Social Prescribing Team, with four fulltime workers working across health and social care. Working closely with the local GPs, their main approach is to connect people to their communities and local resources via regular community hub days. 'We want to bring people together and create a sense of belonging, with everyone looking after – and out for - each other,' explains Kevin.

'The hubs are a one stop place where people can come for a range of things: to socialise, have a meal, take part in a quiz, learn to sing, do armchair yoga or an exercise class. Some people want help filling out benefits forms, housing problems and, increasingly, financial support and advice,' Kevin says.

District nurses and community matrons offer health checks, such as bone density or blood pressure, in private rooms. They can also discuss issues with prescription drugs (they have access to patient records) or increasing frailty. While patients with more complex needs will still see their GPs, this takes some pressure off the surgeries. 'A nurse can see eight to ten people at a time. Plus patients don't have to wait on the phone or go to their GPs.'

Sharing problems is an important benefit: 'if you're at home alone, anxious or in pain, things can build up and up in your mind. Talking to others and getting practical support can really help,' according to Kevin.'

Four hubs are up and running, with four more in the pipeline. Kevin and his team organise the hub sessions, often in a village hall: 'every fortnight seems to be optimal, with people coming together of their own accord in between.' Volunteers – typically ten per session– do everything from bringing the 20 participants there to making food and drink.

Kevin is working with local businesses to fund the hubs. 'The idea is for a number of people and organisations to share the responsibility. People want to look after each other but not be over committed in terms of time or expense. So a local business could contribute, say, the food or rent for a year. Likewise volunteers may be happy to donate one or two days a month. No one has to do it all.'

The hubs are not places where the participants are 'done to', Kevin emphasises. 'It's about "doing with".' One 92-year old man commented that he'd 'never had a place like this before', where he could ask a nurse about his prescription as well as have a good chat. It emerged he has a treasure trove of old recipes and the group is now producing a cookbook based on them.

'It's about making the most of the human spirit,' says Kevin. 'There is such a lot of natural energy in a community that can be tapped to improve people's health and wellbeing – in fact their whole lives.'