



Richard Leonard MSP  
Convener of the Public Audit Committee  
The Scottish Parliament

7<sup>th</sup> March 2024

Dear Mr Leonard

Voluntary Health Scotland (VHS) is the national intermediary and network for voluntary health organisations across Scotland. Together with our member organisations we work to support people's health, tackle inequalities, build evidence and advocate for better health systems, policies and practice.

Since 2021, the Scottish Government Primary Care Directorate has provided project funding to VHS to establish and develop the [Scottish Community Link Worker Network \(SCLWN\)](#). The Network is a community of practice for community link workers in primary care settings across Scotland to share learning and to develop, network and support each other to improve outcomes for their patients and communities. VHS does not deploy community link workers itself and our purpose in running the Network is to help strengthen the multi-disciplinary team approach in primary care, help build primary care's capacity for addressing health inequalities, and strengthen collaboration between statutory healthcare providers and the third sector. Health and social care partnerships have to date commissioned over 300 community link workers, deployed in both urban and rural Scotland, with contracts predominantly held by third sector organisations at a local level, though in some areas link workers are deployed directly by the NHS.

We read with interest the Public Audit Committee's recent report 'Adult Mental Health' which was published on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2024. While we were pleased to see the role of community link workers referenced in the report, we felt it was important to make you aware of recent and planned developments in Scotland for the community link worker programme. We thought it was interesting that the Committee heard evidence from the National Association of Link Workers, as you were perhaps unaware that their work is very much England based and focused. Those of us involved in community link working and social prescribing in Scotland did not recognise the comments from the National Association of Link Workers in your report as accurately reflecting the current picture in Scotland.

VHS and the SCLWN recently published their research report entitled [Essential Connections - exploring the range and scope of community link worker programmes in Scotland](#). This report, the first of its kind to be published in Scotland, sets out to look at the range of community link worker programmes commissioned specifically to work with and within GP practices across Scotland. The report presents evidence from community link workers and programme leads from across Scotland on how programmes are designed and delivered as well as looking ahead to future service design and delivery of the programme.

The SCLWN works closely with another network, the [Scottish Social Prescribing Network](#) (SSPN) which is funded by the Scottish Government's Population Health Directorate and whose aim is to develop the strategic direction of social prescribing in Scotland.

As a direct result of this work as well as the feedback from our Network members, the Scottish Government is setting up a National Community Link Worker Advisory Group to look at the future strategic direction of community link working across Scotland. This group will report to the Cabinet Secretary for NHS Recovery, Health and Social Care at the end of this year. We are very encouraged and positive about the opportunity to work together with colleagues on the Scottish Government's advisory group to help shape a more sustainable future for community link working in Scotland.

We feel strongly that the Committee missed an opportunity by not seeking evidence from the SCLWN and the SSPN, and we are concerned that the NALW may have given you a distorted picture of the situation in Scotland. The two Scottish Networks' steering groups and members have a much better understanding of both the mental health challenges faced by people in Scotland and the overall position of link working and social prescribing. It may be the case that you were not aware of the two Scottish networks' existence, in which case we trust that this letter has alerted you to them and to their value, and that you might invite us to give evidence at future inquiries.

If there is a way that we can proactively ensure we keep abreast of your work and volunteer to support future inquiries, e.g. a mailing list we could be added to, we would very much welcome that. We would be more than happy to discuss this further with you if that would be of interest.

Claire Stevens  
Chief Executive