

# Living Well, Social Prescribing Programme

Examples of Practice, The Student Mental Health Evidence Hub

The Student Mental Health Project is an Office for Students (OfS) funded project that aims to help higher education providers develop their student mental health interventions. The project has developed a Student Mental Health Evidence Hub, a free resource consisting of an evidence-based toolkit, evaluation guidance, examples of practice and the results of our sector engagement and student panel work. The project was led by The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) as part of a consortium with What Works Wellbeing, SMaRteN, Student Minds and AMOSSHE, the Student Services Organisation.

This document contains an example of practice to support student mental health in higher education. This is one of a number of examples which have been collated as a result of calls to the sector issued by TASO. Please note that the information contained in these examples is not endorsed by TASO, and TASO has not been involved at any stage of intervention development, delivery or evaluation. We are grateful to the participating higher education providers for sharing information to facilitate the development of these examples.

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## Overview

<b>Higher Education Provider:</b>	University of the West of England (UWE) Bristol
<b>Intervention Title:</b>	Living Well, Social Prescribing Programme
<b>Intervention Type:</b>	Recreational
<b>Target Group:</b>	Universal/ Non-targeted
<b>Date:</b>	October 2023

With thanks to Katie Rakow of King's College London in developing this example of practice.

## Brief overview of the intervention

The aim of the Living Well-Social Prescribing Programme is to reduce the number of students accessing clinical therapy from the UWE Wellbeing Service. It was developed in response to an identified need to reduce barriers to students accessing wellbeing activities and wider support services at UWE. A previous project scrutinising gaps in non-clinical support services at UWE also identified a gap in university provision relating to exercise referral and social prescribing. The intervention adopts a preventative strategy, providing opportunities for those accessing a student support service at UWE to learn how to create a healthy routine and connections.

A Living Well pilot in 2020 was based on a previous two-year pilot of an exercise referral programme. This was run in collaboration with UWE Wellbeing and UWE Bristol Sport in which a wellbeing referral pathway was created to understand if exercise could be offered as an additional support tool to students accessing wellbeing support at the university. It is an adaptation of the NHS Social Prescribing Model, part of the Comprehensive Model of Personalised Care.<sup>1</sup> Social prescribing is a non-clinical approach that connects people to activities, groups, and services in their community to meet the practical, social and emotional needs that affect their health and wellbeing. Living Well uses the social prescribing model with a particular focus on supporting student mental health and wellbeing to 'in-house' resources and services.

In 2020 an evaluation of the pilot Living Well programme found that student service users showed an average 9.2-point increase on the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS), moving out of probable depression scores (average of 37.4 in the pilot) and into scores not indicative of depression (average of 46.6 in the pilot). An increase of five points pre- and post-intervention is considered a meaningful change indicative of wellbeing improvement.<sup>2</sup> A total of 53% of participants in the pilot did not engage further with the UWE Wellbeing Service after taking part in Living Well; 47% continued to engage in mental health support and counselling. This outcome was anticipated as these students were already receiving this support on referral into Living Well. Analysis of qualitative feedback also ascertained that the majority of participants found improvements in their sense of belonging to a community, comfort in normalising and sharing emotional experiences, and improvement in motivation and mood.

Following the initial pilot and evaluation, Living Well was developed to build on this work, offering a wider range of activities for service users to experience (initially just music, art and exercise), as well as journalling throughout their time with the service. Living Well has continued to grow with the addition of Link Workers, further activities and additional referral pathways. The main aims of the programme are to support students to build confidence, connectivity and belonging, helping them feel able engaged in university life, to support

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, please see the NHS England website:  
<https://www.england.nhs.uk/personalisedcare/comprehensive-model-of-personalised-care/>

<sup>2</sup> In accordance with WEMWBS guidelines:  
<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/using/howto/>

wellbeing through bespoke programmes, and to increase service users' reported WEMWBS scores and sense of belonging at UWE.

## Intervention approach

The programme has been running for four years in its current format and was adapted from an Exercise Referral Programme which had been delivered for two years. The programme has been embedded within the university as an ongoing programme of support for students (with no end date). Living Well provides holistic wellbeing activities such as exercise, music, and gardening. Sessions vary in length depending on the activity, with multiple sessions delivered per week, students take part in whatever activity they are interested in or would like to try. The programme also delivers one-to-one support from a trained Link Worker via structured meetings between the Link Worker and service user. These sessions are student-led, following a structure of 'what matters to me' where the discussion is solution-focused and pays particular attention to the goals set by the student. Behaviour change techniques, motivational interviewing and coaching techniques can all be used within these sessions by the Link Worker<sup>3</sup> to help the service user achieve their goals. Students can access up to six one-to-one sessions with their Link Worker during their time on the programme.

Living Well runs throughout the undergraduate academic year (October-July), with weekly sessions, so students can access as and when they need. They do not have a set amount of activities to attend. Since the pandemic, there has been a hybrid model of both online and in-person delivery.

Between 40 and 60 students per academic year engage in the programme. Students are referred onto the programme and this can be done through multiple channels: Wellbeing Service, Student Support Advisors, Student Success Coaches, UWE Health Centre, UWE Accommodation Services, UWE Cares, Disability, Initial Response, Student Money Service and the Student Union (SU) Advice Centre. Living Well will support all students referred to the programme as long as they are assessed as low-moderate need and low-risk (to themselves and others), and there are no restrictions for participation based on their level. The programme does not accept self-referrals at this stage.

## Resources required

The programme was initially designed as a collaborative pilot project run by UWE Wellbeing, UWE Sport, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) Team and the Healthy University Group. These teams were involved in developing the programme from the NHS Social Prescribing Model (Universal Personalised Care). The programme continued to be developed by these departments alongside the contribution of student service users and placement student Link Workers from MSc Health Psychology and BSc Occupational Therapy.

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<sup>3</sup> Link Workers are trained placement students, providing service users with the opportunity to access peer-to-peer support via their Link Worker.

Living Well works with internal services to offer holistic wellbeing activities. These services include: UWE Grounds Team, UWE Catering, SU Green Team, UWE Bristol Sport, Centre for Music, New Wave Agency (student creative agency), English department, UWE Volunteering. All sessions are delivered by specialist staff within these teams and are offered to all students supported by Living Well. We ensure that groups are no larger than five service users per session, and each session is facilitated by a Link Worker.

We also work with Peer Support Link Worker Placement Students who provide wellbeing support to student service users. Link Workers attend sessions alongside the student service users until the student feels comfortable to attend on their own. This model removes barriers for student service users, making their attendance at sessions more accessible. These are a team of seven trained UWE students who are given a placement opportunity to work in wellbeing services. Placement students are studying BSc Occupational Therapy and MSc Health Psychology courses.

Approximately £3,000 of non-pay budget goes towards Living Well each year. Other cost implications include: Living Well Officer staff time (1.0 FTE), academic support (0.1 FTE), and Data and Impact support (0.1 FTE). There are also hidden costs including things like equipment, electricity, heating, activity items (e.g. ingredients for cooking sessions, art supplies). There are additional staff costs for facilitators running sessions which are not measured.

Data used in evaluation and analysis is gathered throughout the year when students are referred, registered and complete their time in Living Well. The Living Well team spends several hours a month collating this data. Analysis and evaluation of the programme is completed throughout July and August of each year.

## Intervention evaluation

A mixed methods approach to evaluation is adopted using pre and post measures. Pre-intervention data are collected at referral or registration, while post-intervention data are collected after programme completion. Measures include:

- Scales/questions: WEMWBS; a sense of belonging measure developed by the university; measures of current wellbeing (sleep, motivation, physical health, activity engagement, ability to cope); qualitative, open ended questions asking how students have been feeling recently and why they want to take part.
- Qualitative verbal feedback is also collected during one-to-one and group sessions. This is recorded where possible within case notes or anecdotal feedback logs. Qualitative data is also collected from student service user's journaling. Feedback is also gathered from student Link Workers. All the qualitative data are used within reports and programme development.

Statistical analysis is conducted using Wilcoxon signed-rank test to compare pre- and post-measures, analysing movement up/down scales and identifying statistically significant change. Thematic analysis of qualitative feedback is carried out, identifying key themes and frequency of theme recurrence.

Since the pilot of 2020, we have seen a large increase in WEMWBS scores for service users who have provided their data at completion (8-10 point increase in scores each year). Feelings of worth and belonging have shown increases following participation in the programme. The sentiment of words used by student service users to describe how they feel shifted from negative to positive. Students have reported greater confidence in building social connections and feel more able to engage in university life. In 2023, 85% of service users saw an increase in their sense of belonging at UWE following engagement in Living Well.

Information on student outcomes such as retention, progression and attainment in relation to the Living Well programme is not formally collected but there is anecdotal evidence from previous students who comment on these outcomes. For example, one user commented: “I would have dropped out if it wasn’t for your help on Living Well.”

## Recommendations

Students responded better to the use of support workers who are relatable figures outside of authority. This led to the development of the student placement programme. However, there is also still a significant need for staff Link Workers to ensure the programme can run efficiently. Some service users also require a figure seen as an ‘authority’ to best access the programme. Living Well offers both options to meet the needs of a larger population of students. There is a need for Link Workers who can provide medium-level holistic support not just low-level support.

## Next steps

UWE aims to increase the number of placement student opportunities available through the programme by working with Music Therapy and English Language Students. They aim to increase the capacity of the Living Well programme, bringing the number of places up to 100 students in the 2024/25 academic year.

UWE have identified a need to recruit additional staff Link Workers to deliver the programme to provide space for the Living Well Officer (who currently provides link working alongside coordinating the programme) to grow the service.