



CALL FOR TENDER

Equality Proofing and Evaluation Project of HSE Social Prescribing | Enabling Access to Women Who Need It Most

September 2025

Purpose

The National Women's Council, with the support of the Department of Health's Women's Health Fund and the HSE, is seeking an experienced researcher to undertake an Equality Proofing Study¹ of HSE-funded social prescribing services in Ireland. The goal of this project is to assess and enhance access to social prescribing for women – particularly women in midlife, young women, and those from marginalised communities, including Traveller and Roma women, migrant women, disabled women, lone parents, carers/supporters, and women living in rural areas. This work is part of a broader commitment to ensuring health services are inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the diverse needs of women across the life course. This includes supporting the HSE's obligations under the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty (the Duty).²

The successful researcher will deliver a comprehensive Equality Proofing and Evaluation report, grounded in research and stakeholder engagement. The findings will support the HSE in identifying and addressing structural and service-level barriers, and in embedding equality considerations in the future expansion of social prescribing. This work will be informed by six demonstration projects taking place in selected HSE-funded sites and will be guided by a Project Advisory Group convened by the National Women's Council.

¹ **Equality proofing** is a process that assesses policies and programmes for their capacity to address the needs of groups experiencing inequality. It ensures that mainstream initiatives can accommodate diversity, achieve equality outcomes for all, and support the development of infrastructure to promote equality and combat discrimination. The Equality Proofing Study in this context also includes an evaluation of six-specifically funded social prescribing demonstration sites.

² The Duty is a statutory obligation on public bodies to have regard to the need to: eliminate discrimination; promote equality of opportunity and treatment of its staff and the persons to whom it provides services; and protect the human rights of its members, staff, and the person to whom it provides the service. [Section 42 Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014](#)

Background

Social prescribing recognises that health is heavily determined by social factors such as poverty, isolation, and loneliness. Social prescribing offers GPs and other health professionals a means of referring people to a range of non-clinical community supports – with the support of a link worker – which can have significant benefits for their overall health and wellbeing. Currently, there are 48 HSE-funded social prescribing services across Ireland, with at least one in every county.

Social prescribing is one of six health and wellbeing initiatives delivered under the [Sláintecare Healthy Communities \(SHC\) Programme](#), which operates in 24 community areas nationwide, with 4 additional areas soon commencing. It is also identified as a priority in the [HSE National Service Plan 2025](#) and other national policy documents. A growing body of evidence shows that social prescribing can improve health and wellbeing outcomes and reduce social isolation and loneliness.

The [HSE Social Prescribing Framework](#) outlines a long-term goal of achieving national coverage, with a social prescribing service in each of the 96 Community Healthcare Networks.

In 2023, women accounted for 68% of service users in SHC social prescribing sites. The most common reason for referral, across all users, was social isolation and loneliness (60%). While adult women of all ages access the service, participation is highest among women aged over 65 (41%). In terms of ethnicity, most participants were White Irish (84%), with less than 1% identifying as Travellers. Among female service users, 20% reported having a disability and 4% were carers/supporters.

This data suggest that social prescribing may not be reaching many of the women who stand to benefit most – particularly those experiencing social isolation and lacking supportive social networks to sustain their health and wellbeing. Research highlights that, if not thoughtfully designed, social prescribing initiatives may inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities unless inequality is actively monitored and addressed.³

With the support of the Department of Health's Women's Health Fund, the HSE and the National Women's Council are seeking to better understand the barriers that prevent some women accessing social prescribing services. This will be pursued through an Equality Proofing Study, alongside six specifically funded demonstration sites – within existing HSE-funded services. These projects will be funded by the HSE, as one strand of this project, to enhance or create initiatives which are specifically designed to engage women from groups currently being underserved by social prescribing. Insights from this project will inform future development and expansion of social prescribing, with a focus on equality of access. It is also expected that this Study can support the HSE in giving effect to its obligations under the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty.

³ Brown, R. C., Mahtani, K., Turk, A., & Tierney, S. (2021). Social prescribing in National Health Service primary care: what are the ethical considerations? *The Milbank Quarterly*, 99(3), 610.

Methodology

The exact methodology to produce this Equality Proofing study is flexible, as we recognise the importance of the successful researcher having input into the design. It is expected that it would be a qualitative approach, which could include the following activities:

- A brief desk-based review of relevant national and international literature, policies, existing demographic data, and practices as they pertain to gender equality and social inclusion within social prescribing
- Development of qualitative research tools and a sampling strategy, with attention to inclusion of women from marginalised backgrounds. There is also the possibility of including a survey instrument to complement the chosen qualitative tools.
- Interviews and/or focus groups with key stakeholders, which could possibly include:
 - HSE staff
 - Link workers and service users
 - Project Advisory Group members and/or representatives of organisations working with Traveller and Roma women, migrant women, disabled women, lone parents, carers/supporters, and women in rural areas
- Analysis of qualitative data using a recognised methodology (e.g. thematic analysis) to identify patterns, barriers, and enablers
- Appropriate ethical engagement with all participants, ensuring informed consent, anonymity, and safeguarding
- Engagement with the six demonstration sites to evaluate how they are adapting or enhancing services using additional funding

Profile of Researcher

Experienced qualitative researcher or research team with a background in social science, equality and human rights, social policy, health promotion or public health.

The Researcher will be Responsible for:

- Leading the design, delivery, and oversight of the Equality Proofing Study.
- Considering and adhering to all ethical considerations and data protection measures.
- Developing a detailed work plan and timeline in consultation with the HSE and NWC.
- Coordinating and conducting all research activities outlined in the agreed methodology, ensuring rigour, inclusion, and ethical integrity throughout.
- Engaging meaningfully with the six participating social prescribing sites to support documentation of practice-based learning and lived experience.
- Liaising regularly with the NWC Project Lead and relevant Project Advisory Group to provide updates, incorporate feedback, and ensure alignment with the overall project aims.

- Producing a final Equality Proofing & Evaluation report with clear, actionable recommendations, grounded in evidence and stakeholder perspectives.
- Participating in a Showcase Event in 2027 to present findings to key stakeholders, including the HSE, NWC, the Department of Health, and community partners.

Output

A clearly written and accessible report (max. 45 pages), using plain, succinct language. The report should be structured in a way that supports its use by the HSE and other stakeholders involved in the delivery and development of social prescribing. The researcher is responsible for all editing, proofreading, and ensuring the final document is fully print-ready. The report should include an executive summary, review of key literature, findings from the evaluation of demonstration sites, and practical recommendations to equality proof social prescribing that reflect the broader Equality Proofing & Evaluation process.

NWC will be responsible for any requirements for the final report to be designed and printed. This will be done in line with NWC's branding guidelines.

Management

The project will be managed by a Project Lead based within the Women's Health Team of NWC. A Project Advisory Group will be established to provide strategic input at key stages of the research. The researcher will be expected to attend short 6-weekly review meetings with the NWC health team and present progress updates to the Project Advisory Group.

Budget

The budget for this research is **€30,000** inclusive of VAT and all other expenses. This research is an 18-month project, with key milestones from Q4 2025 – Q1 2027.

TENDERING PROCESS

Tender requirements

To apply, a Tender Proposal should be emailed to Doireann Crosson: doireannc@nwci.ie and marked "Tender for Social Prescribing Study" **by 5pm on Wednesday, 8th October 2025**. All information provided to NWC in response to this request will be treated in strict confidence.

Tender proposals should include the following:

Person/organisation details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The name and address of the tenderer • The organisation associated with the tenderer (if relevant) • The tenderer's CV and the CVs of any personnel expected to support with this project. CVs should include all relevant experience and have two examples of relevant research
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	projects with a separate contactable referee for each
Qualification, Relevant Experience & Track Record	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An outline of skills, qualifications, and experience in this area • A demonstrated track record in qualitative research; experience on a similar research project and/or of working with similar stakeholders and/or marginalised groups will be an advantage • Experience of adhering to research ethics – including the responsibilities of the researcher with respect to data protection
Proposed Methodology & Understanding of the Brief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A demonstrated understanding of the research aims and the researcher's responsibilities for this project • The proposed methodology for delivering the best results, in line with the conditions of this tender
Cost, Timeframe, & Value for Money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirmation of ability to meet the timeframe of the project, including a provisional outline of a workplan • A demonstrated proficiency in delivering results, including with respect to communicating with project stakeholders and ensuring research meets expected deadlines and milestones • An outline of the costs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Set out any issues which may impact on the cost ○ All costs must be inclusive of VAT and expenses ○ Demonstrate value for money ○ Breakdown of costs showing the number of days required to complete the task, the number of days for each person, if there is more than one person involved ○ The fee quoted should include travel and subsistence costs

Timeframe & Key Milestones

- Tenders to be submitted to Doireann Crosson: doireannc@nwci.ie and marked “Tender for Social Prescribing Study” **by 5pm on Wednesday, October 8th 2025.**
- Please note, potential researchers will be interviewed and may be asked to prepare a presentation. We expect that the successful applicant will be informed before the end of October 2025.
- The successful researcher is expected to be available to work on this project from Q4 2025 – Q1 2027. Some key milestones will be:
 - Conducting a review of the relevant literature and existing demographic data
 - Attending the first meeting of Project Advisory Group. There will likely be 4-6 online meetings during this project
 - Focus groups/interviews with key stakeholders
 - Data collection and analysis of the process evaluation for six demonstration sites
 - First report draft to be submitted to the Project Advisory Group for feedback
 - Attend and present at Showcase Event in Q1 2027

Project Budget

The total budget for the Project is **€30,000 inclusive of VAT and all expenses.**

Conditions of Tender

- a) Tenders that are delivered late will not be considered.
- b) NWC reserves the right not to award a contract if no proposal is suitable.
- c) NWC requires that tenderers treat all information provided pursuant to this Invitation to Tender in strict confidence.
- d) Information supplied by tenderers will be treated as contractually binding. However, NWC reserves the right to seek clarification on any such information.
- e) All material gathered and all outputs arising out of the proposed contract will remain the property of NWC and HSE. Tenderers must agree to this condition.
- f) All information and knowledge acquired by the successful tenderer during this project must be handled responsibly, ensuring compliance with GDPR standards and best practices.
- g) Contractors must retain records of tax reference numbers for any subcontractors, whose payments exceed €5,000 including VAT.
- h) Any conflicts of interest involving a contractor (or contractors in the event of a group or consortium bid) must be fully disclosed to NWC, particularly where there is a conflict of interest in relation to any recommendations or proposals put forward by the tenderer.
- i) NWC will not be liable for any costs incurred in the preparation of the tender.

- j) Payment for all services covered by this Invitation to Tender will be on foot of appropriate invoices. Invoicing arrangements will be agreed with the successful supplier(s), subject to the terms of the Prompt Payment of Accounts Act (27 of 1997).
- k) Payment of all services covered by this invitation to Tender will be based on the agreed contract price, completion of agreed stages of the work plan and upon the submission of the appropriate invoices.
- l) NWC – with support from the HSE – will have sign-off and editing rights to the final version of the research report ahead of publication. NWC and HSE will ensure the final report, and any subsequent use of the research materials gives due credit to the successful tenderer.
- m) NWC and HSE will own the completed research and will retain copyright.

Evaluation of Tenders

Tenders will be evaluated initially with reference to the following qualification criteria:

- Qualification, Relevant Experience, and Track Record – 30%
- Understanding of the Brief and Proposed Methodology – 50%
- Cost of Successful Project Delivery, Timeframe, and Value for Money – 20%

Only those tenders deemed to have sufficiently met the threshold for the above qualification criteria will be eligible for inclusion in the award process. Tenderers are advised that they may be required to make a formal presentation of their proposal.