

## Local Involvement Networks

### What LINKs Mean for: Local Authorities



***“Get LINKs to work and they could provide a one-stop-shop for engaging your community in improving services”***

## Background

Links will be set up in England from April 2008 to give communities a stronger voice in how their health and social care services are delivered. Independent networks of local people and groups, LINKs will find out what people want, investigate issues and use their powers to hold services to account.

## A Brief History

Health and social care professionals know that if they can find out what communities want they are better able to provide responsive services. In 2006, the Department of Health published plans to strengthen the ability for commissioners and managers to talk to communities by introducing Local Involvement Networks (LINKs).

Up to now, one of the ways that the NHS has talked to patients has been through Patients’ Forums. Attached to local Trusts, Forums helped to improve frontline care, but they have also faced barriers.

LINKs will begin to be set up from April 2008. They will build on the work of Forums but they will be open to anyone to join. LINKs will cover all publicly funded health and social care services in an area, no matter who provides them. They will make it easier for commissioners and managers to talk to communities and find out what they want. LINKs are part of the local accountability and scrutiny arrangements and they will have powers requiring health and social care managers to respond to them. LINKs will also be able to refer matters to Overview and Scrutiny Committees in councils that have social care responsibilities.

## Key Points

- LINks have the potential to make it easier to engage with the local patchwork of active citizen groups, voluntary and community organisations.
- LINks will also simplify the often confusing picture of patient and user engagement and make health and social care services more accountable.
- You have a statutory duty to make arrangements for LINK activity to take place from 1 April 2008.
- By planning now, you will avoid losing existing local expertise and help your LINK to realise its full potential.
- LINks will help local councils build peoples views into Joint Needs Assessments and the commissioning process.

## How LINks will work

The NHS and local government are increasingly working together to decide what health and social care services should be provided and how they should be run. Local people need to shape these services whether provided in hospital, the community or in peoples' homes. LINks have the potential to:

### **Provide a single approach to monitoring health and social care**

A LINK for every Local Authority with social services responsibilities will be tasked with finding out the views of people who use services in that area and holding both the Local Authority and NHS to account.

### **Provide a stronger, more independent voice**

Not run by any public or Government organisation, LINks will be truly independent. They will be hosted and supported by a community organisation (called a 'Host') with experience of engaging people.

### **Be more representative**

Expected to ask every section of the community for their views and experiences, LINks will not only amplify the views of more groups and individuals in the community, they should also provide a platform to those who might not often have their voice heard.

### **Make community involvement more convenient**

Many people who receive health or social care would like to influence services but may not have the time to join groups or sit on committees. LINks should provide more ways for more people to be heard. Communities should be provided with more opportunities – using the web, focus groups, events and other mechanisms – to express their views. While those who want to should have the chance to get more involved (for example by giving up time to work on a specific issue or joining a group that governs the LINK).

## What will LINKs mean for you?

You are under pressure to deliver services in a challenging environment. With competing interests and limited resources, it can be difficult to prioritise actions to improve the experience of people who use services. LINKs have the potential to help simplify this task. LINKs will result in services having to be much more accountable but they should make having an ongoing dialogue with the community easier. LINKs can help councils build community development into strategies to tackle health inequalities.

## What will LINKs cover?

- LINKs will cover most publicly funded health and social care services – no matter who provides them (NHS, council, private sector or third sector). There are some exceptions such as children's social services.
- To help them with their work, commissioners will be expected to provide LINKs with information when they request it and to respond to LINK reports and recommendations.
- As well as helping commissioners respond to LINKs, providers will also be expected to allow trained LINKs representatives to view services.
- New contracts with private, independent or third sector providers of NHS or Local Authority care will be need to reflect these expectations.

## What is the role of a LINK?

The role of a LINK is to:

- encourage and support more people to get involved in shaping local care services; from helping to decide what services should be commissioned, to influencing the way they are run;
- actively canvas every section of the community for their views and experiences of local care services;
- provide the community with a mechanism for monitoring and reviewing local care services and the ability to hold them to account; and
- tell those who commission, run and scrutinise local care services, what local people have recommended to help improve services.

## Who makes up a LINK?

LINKs are likely to be slightly different depending on the local structures that already exist but they are likely to be made up of:

- people from existing local community and voluntary organisations, carer groups and those who already campaign on behalf of the people who use care services;
- people from different sections of the community including groups which, in the past, have been 'hard to reach'; and
- Interested individuals who want to get involved in different ways, from those who have the time to help lead a LINK, to those who just want to regularly contribute their views.

## What are the powers of a LINK?

LINKs will be able to:

- enter and view specific types of premises where services and care are provided;
- ask for information and expect a response within a specific timescale;
- make recommendations and expect a response within a specific timescale; and
- refer matters to the local Overview and Scrutiny Committee and expect a response.

## How will a LINK be set up?

Each Local Authority (with social services responsibilities) will receive funding for LINK activities. Each authority will be expected to contract a 'Host' organisation to establish and support a LINK in the Local Authority area. The LINK will be independent of any government organisation with its own decision making and governance processes. The Host will be accountable to the LINK.

## How much money will a LINK get?

The Government will make £84 million available to fund LINKs between 2008–2011. The amount each area get will depend on their population and factors such as levels of poverty.

## What should You be doing now?

Local Authorities should be starting to raise awareness of LINKs in the local community, as citizens and local groups may want to get involved in helping to plan their LINK. Many authorities have set up groups that people can join and are holding meetings to raise awareness of LINKs.

### **LINKs in Action<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Responding to community needs**

Every three years, a PCT and a Local Authority review the health and social care needs of their local community to make sure that, in the future, they provide the right services. They are keen to make sure that the community agrees with what their research has told them and that they have not missed anything. The local LINK plays a key role in helping the local authority and PCT understand the needs of their community. Through its network of local groups and individuals, the LINK is able to go out and discuss the plans with different sections of the community. Through this outreach approach, the LINK discovers that access to health and social care is particularly difficult for older Asian women. The LINK is also able to help identify, through discussions with the community, the most appropriate solution. As a result, the PCT and Local Authority plan to recruit a number of community development workers to help older Asian women get better access to health and social care.

---

<sup>1</sup> These examples are illustrative only.

### **Social care commissioning**

The social care commissioning unit of a council asks the LINK to find out the views of people with physical disabilities who use a day centre about the activities being offered. There have been complaints from carers and families that the activity programme is quite limited and is based on what the staff think the users want. There is very little engagement between staff and people using the centre. Activities are not well attended and people are concerned that if the centre is 'under-used', it might be closed altogether.

Some people from the LINK who have been authorised to make visits, arrange to go to the centre and talk to people who use the day centre and their families and carers, together with service users who are also LINK members. They also find out that other LINKs have looked at this topic and conclude that staff and users have come together successfully elsewhere to agree stimulating and worthwhile programmes of activities. Furthermore, they conclude that the centre has potential to provide facilities and information to empower people to manage their own lives and improve their health and wellbeing. The LINK reports its findings and recommendations to the local authority and the day centre provider. The local authority reviews services with the provider concerned and develops and implements a user engagement strategy. The local authority gives notice that it wishes to vary the contract based on the LINK feedback to ensure that the provider takes appropriate action to ensure active staff/user engagement and the delivery of appropriate services.

### **Contact Us**

The NHS Centre for Involvement

Tel: 024 7615 0705

Email: [info@links.nhs.uk](mailto:info@links.nhs.uk)

[www.nhscentreforinvolvement.nhs.uk](http://www.nhscentreforinvolvement.nhs.uk)

A simple explanation of LINKs

[www.direct.gov.uk/localinvolvementnetworks](http://www.direct.gov.uk/localinvolvementnetworks)

Lessons from nine 'Early Adopter' projects around England

<http://www.nhscentreforinvolvement.nhs.uk/docs/EAPS%20final%20report.pdf>

Information about Government policy

[www.dh.gov.uk/patientandpublicinvolvement](http://www.dh.gov.uk/patientandpublicinvolvement)