

Blog Title:

Rethinking Prevention: Supporting Healthier Choices in Coastal Communities for Lasting Impact

Dr Sarah Flindall (GP Partner East Norfolk Medical Practice, Safeguarding and Audit Lead East Norfolk Medical Practice, Great Yarmouth and Coastal PCN Mental Health and Social Prescribing Lead)

Introduction

As healthcare professionals, we often focus on treating illness, but what if the key to better health lies beyond the GP surgery? At East Norfolk Medical Practice in Great Yarmouth, we're exploring a different approach—one that centres around **empowering people to make healthier choices** for themselves and their families. Rather than prescribing solutions, we're working with communities to help them take charge of their health by addressing the social factors that influence it. This blog shares how this approach is making a difference and where we hope it will lead.

Why Focus on Empowering Choices?

We know that health isn't just about genetics or access to medical care. As highlighted in much of the research we draw on, health is shaped by both **nature and nurture**. From early childhood experiences, like access to safe spaces for play, to later challenges such as unemployment or housing instability, **our environment plays a huge role in shaping the choices we make**. In coastal communities like Great Yarmouth, many people face barriers that limit their ability to make healthy choices—whether that's a lack of mental health support, social isolation, or economic pressures.

But our focus isn't just on identifying those barriers. It's about helping people overcome them by providing **practical, non-judgmental support** that empowers them to take control of their health. We don't believe in simply telling people what to do or labelling their struggles as "bad choices." Instead, we recognize that every decision is shaped by a wider set of circumstances, and we aim to **equip individuals with the mindset and knowledge** they need to make informed, sustainable changes in their lives.

How Does It Work?

At our practice, GP trainees and I dedicate time each week to **community outreach**. We meet people where they are, particularly those who might be disconnected from health services or overwhelmed by their circumstances. We know that **healthy choices don't happen in isolation**—so we work with patients to address the broader social and environmental factors affecting their health.

We collaborate with local charities, housing associations, mental health organizations, and addiction support groups. Through these partnerships, patients are connected to resources that go beyond medical care, such as **counseling, housing advice, and support for managing stress**. These resources help create the space and stability that people need to **make healthier decisions**, whether it's adopting better eating habits or addressing smoking and addiction issues.

We've found that when people are **empowered to make small, manageable changes**, they are more likely to sustain them. This can lead to long-term improvements in chronic conditions and mental health, and a reduced need for emergency services (which are costly). It's a collaborative, ongoing process that focuses on **choice, not prescription**.

Recognizing That Change Takes Time

One of the key lessons we've learned is that **healthy choices can't be forced**. We understand that many patients come from backgrounds where adverse childhood events or economic pressures have deeply shaped their relationship with health. For example, we often encounter patients who have

struggled with issues like obesity, smoking, or mental health for much of their lives, and **change doesn't happen overnight**.

We take a **supportive, non-blaming approach**, recognizing that choices like quitting smoking or adopting healthier eating habits are harder when people face significant stress or financial hardship. Instead of expecting instant results, we encourage small steps and **acknowledge every bit of progress**. By offering ongoing support, we help individuals build the confidence and resilience they need to make healthier choices, without feeling judged or blamed for their past.

The Challenges We Face

Of course, challenges remain. **Maintaining engagement** with patients who miss appointments or feel overwhelmed can be difficult, especially in mental health services. We've worked to address this by making our services more **flexible and patient-centred**, ensuring that appointments are tailored to the individual's needs and circumstances. We also strive to keep our focus on **long-term empowerment**, rather than short-term solutions.

Another challenge is **funding**. Ensuring that these programs have the resources to continue is essential for their long-term success. We are actively looking for ways to secure **sustainable funding** to support this work, recognizing that these community-based interventions are as crucial as medical treatment in promoting health.

What's Next?

Going forward, our focus will remain on **empowering people to make their own choices** when it comes to their health. We're also looking at **scaling up** our efforts and collaborating with research institutions to build a stronger evidence base, so we can better understand the long-term effects of this empowerment-based approach.

We believe that by continuing to work closely with the community, we can help break down the barriers that prevent people from living healthier lives. It's not just about medical advice; it's about **supporting people in discovering their own paths to better health**.

Conclusion

At the heart of our work is the belief that **empowerment leads to better health outcomes**. We're not here to prescribe or dictate; we're here to **support, guide, and encourage**. By focusing on the social determinants of health and working alongside our patients, we aim to help people in coastal communities like Great Yarmouth **make choices that work for them**. It's a slow process, but we're committed to making a lasting difference, one small choice at a time.