# 02. The role of the keyworker

## Overview

- Keyworkers (job titles vary) are **the main way in which beneficiaries get the support they need**. This support might be provided directly or by keyworkers facilitating access to services provided outside of the programme.

- Where keyworkers focus on securing and co-ordinating services, this is known as **the navigator model**. However, they often also provide some degree of support as well.

- Keyworkers have **successfully engaged** those with the most entrenched needs and **built positive and trusting relationships**.

- The **flexibility** of the keyworker role allows staff to focus on activities that build relationships. The lack of performance targets, freedom from restrictive timescales and small caseloads all assist in providing this flexibility.

- **Consistency of support over the long term** and **persistence** are also important features successful support.

- Beneficiaries often benefit from the **advocacy** provided by navigators, who can also help achieve **flex in the system**. However, to be fully effective the navigator model needs to be part of a wider, transformed system.

- **Support for staff resilience is critical**. The keyworker role can be particularly challenging, and both formal and informal support mechanisms are needed.

Promising practice – review of local evidence

## What is it?

The keyworker role is at the heart of the support provided by Fulfilling Lives partnerships to people with multiple needs. Keyworkers, whose job titles can include support worker, link worker, personal development coordinator, service co-ordinator and navigator, are the main way in which beneficiaries get the support they need. This support might be provided directly and/or by keyworkers facilitating access to services provided outside of the programme.

## How are Fulfilling Lives partnerships delivering this?

Keyworkers fulfil two key functions in Fulfilling Lives. They:

- provide intensive support for beneficiaries, and
- guide beneficiaries through the system, securing and co-ordinating the package of services they need.

In some partnerships the role is very clearly focused on the second of these, with other organisations providing the support – this is often described as **the navigator model**. In other partnerships the role is much more like traditional support work. In practice, we see that there is often some degree of overlap between the two.

Some keyworkers have a specialist focus, this can be thematic (such as housing) or in assisting a particular type of beneficiary (such as women).

People with multiple needs referred to Opportunity Nottingham are assigned a Personal Development Coordinator (PDC). PDCs provide tailored support to beneficiaries and work with them to coordinate packages of services. This can involve arranging multi-disciplinary team meetings. However, the role goes far beyond just coordinating support. PDCs accompany beneficiaries to appointments and assist them to engage with services. They share social activities with beneficiaries to develop trusting relationships and make time and space to listen to beneficiaries' stories.

PDCs on the team come with a range of different qualifications and have prior experience in a variety of sectors including social work, housing support, criminal justice and mental health.

**Working at the frontline with adults with multiple and complex needs: A preliminary evaluation of the work of Personal Development Coordinators**

## What do the evaluations tell us?

Local evaluations describe the features of keyworkers in the Fulfilling Lives programme, how they work differently to other, mainstream services, and the perceived difference this makes to beneficiaries. Evaluations draw on a wide range of sources, including interviews and focus groups with keyworkers themselves, managers, beneficiaries, board members and other stakeholders, as well as reviews of case notes and observation of meetings and workshops.

Evaluations show how beneficiaries make progress on the programme. This includes reducing risky and negative behaviours, increasing self-reliance, improving engagement with services and undertaking positive activities. As illustrated by this report, partnerships provide a range of support and use different approaches, all of which potentially contribute to these positive results. What is difficult to measure is how much these results are due to keyworker actions.

However, there is a high degree of agreement across local evaluations that it is the nature of support provided by Fulfilling Lives keyworkers that enables positive change

for beneficiaries. Evaluation reports provide valuable insights into the aspects of the keyworker role that are effective and help us understand *how* they contribute to successful outcomes.

## What is the evidence of impact?

Partnership evaluations report positive impacts of keyworkers, and the navigator role in particular. Beneficiaries are overwhelmingly positive about the relationships they have built with their keyworker and how this has helped them.

Key impacts are summarised below.

| Fulfilling Lives keyworkers have successfully: | Navigators have: | This is said to result in: |
|---|---|---|
| **engaged those with the most entrenched needs**, including those excluded from other services, and<br><br>**built positive and trusting relationships** with beneficiaries.<br><br>Where employed, specialist workers have **engaged particularly 'hard to reach' groups**, such as women | advocated on behalf of beneficiaries, helping them to **express their needs**<br><br>achieved **flex in services**, and as a result<br><br>helped beneficiaries to **get the help and support** they need<br><br>given beneficiaries a **voice** | **Reduced risky and negative behaviours**, including offending and substance-misuse<br><br>**Reduced use of crisis and emergency services**<br><br>Beneficiaries taking **greater personal responsibility**<br><br>Beneficiaries feeling **more confidence, safe, stable, valued and hopeful** about the future |

However, **progress is often slow and incremental**, with relapses and periods of disengagement for many.

# Key learning

Evaluations suggest that it is the particular way that key-working is delivered in Fulfilling Lives partnerships that is the difference. Key ingredients of the Fulfilling Lives approach that contribute to better outcomes are:

- **Flexibility** that allows keyworkers to focus on what is important to beneficiaries and on building relationships. This flexibility is achieved in the following ways:

- **Freedom from restrictive timescales** allows keyworkers to work at the pace of the beneficiary. Beneficiaries appreciate that keyworkers persevere with them, even if they disengage or relapse.

  *One of the things that I remember that particular made me think well this would be really good was that they said GK was a longer term thing, we'll work with you for 5 years or something. That for me was a really positive point because [...] I'd worked with most agencies before, I'd been with some of them 2 or 3 times and stuff always, it always got messed up, probably my fault, sometimes not my fault but it's always stopping and starting.*
  **Beneficiary, Golden Key[1]**

- Similarly, a **lack of performance targets** or other agenda is important in allowing keyworkers to be flexible.

  *Beneficiaries realise that WY-FI is not 'regime orientated' and this can help maintain contact: "People with complex needs come looking for us. Every other service may have turned their back on them."*
  **Navigator Practice in the WY-FI Partnership**

- These features mean the support provided can be truly **person centred**. Beneficiaries are empowered to lead their own journey toward recovery. There is evidence that this is attractive to beneficiaries and it helps differentiate Fulfilling Lives from other services.

- As a result, beneficiaries are no longer passive recipients of services. They **work collaboratively with keyworkers** to achieve personal goals.

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[1] University of the West of England (no date) *Golden Key Local Evaluation Peer Research Discussion Paper: The Client Experience* University of the West of England

- Keyworkers also appear to work best with **small caseloads**. Both the flexibility and intensity of help provided mean this is important. The substantial funding of Fulfilling Lives makes this possible.

Local evaluations also highlight other important considerations for working with people with multiple needs:

- **First impressions count**. Much initial engagement is through street outreach and the initial approach is seen as essential in ensuring engagement. Keyworkers find a low-key approach is effective, avoiding pressuring people or asking too intrusive questions at first.

- The initial process of **engagement and trust building can take months**. The use of neutral spaces such as cafés and car journeys can be useful in allowing beneficiaries to 'open up'.

- **Consistency of support** over the longer term is said to be important. But many partnerships are also concerned about creating beneficiary dependency if a particular keyworker becomes the conduit for meeting all a beneficiary's needs.[2]

- Keyworkers seek to avoid developing dependent relationship by challenging attitudes that suggest dependency at an early stage, and **reducing the level and type of support provided over a period of time**.

- Some partnerships also **assign 'second' keyworkers** to beneficiaries – someone to cover absences who can also step in if there is concern about dependency on one person. Some provide additional support in the form of a peer mentor (see Chapter 3)

- **Support for staff resilience is critical**. The keyworker role can be particularly challenging – they regularly deal with demanding and difficult behaviour, beneficiary relapse and even death – with a risk of burnout. Support may be formal, such as clinical supervision and team psychologists, informal support of colleagues and self-care. Psychologically informed environments have also been found to help (see Chapter 5).

- **Offering clear progression opportunities** for keyworkers is also important to reduce high levels of staff turnover.

- Some keyworkers may need **additional help with advocacy**. This is a key part of the navigator role, but promoting beneficiaries wishes (rather than what the keyworker thinks is best) may be a new skill for some.

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[2] It has however been proposed that dependency is often misunderstood, and should be perceived as an essential step in developing the attachments necessary for well-being: a necessary life-long skill that makes autonomy possible. See Cockersell, P (2018) *Social Exclusion, Compound Trauma and Recovery*

- The **balance between navigation and support work may change over time** and differs from partnership to partnership. Beneficiaries may need more support in the early stages of engagement, with a greater focus on co-ordinating or navigating external services over time.
- Keyworkers are aware that they often engage in **unorthodox practice** to engage with beneficiaries such as sharing personal experiences, hugging, and meeting them even if they are under the influence of substances.

## How might this contribute to systems change?

Keyworkers fulfilling the navigator role are well placed to identify barriers, blockages and problems in the system and thus identify opportunities for change. There are examples of how, by advocating for beneficiaries, navigators have achieved flex in services. In this way, it is argued, the navigator model can help contribute to creating systems change. Negotiating with a service provider on behalf of a particular beneficiary may lead to changes in referral practice and provision more generally. Newcastle and Gateshead report a shift in the language used outside of the partnership to be more in line with the language and culture of Fulfilling Lives.

The navigator model cannot work effectively in isolation, but needs to be part of a wider, transformed system. In the context of mainstream services facing cuts, a navigation service can be at risk of becoming what one evaluation described as a "fall-back service". If navigators become a 'standalone service' and not a function that coordinates access to wider services, this could potentially be damaging when the programme ends if beneficiaries are left without support. Evaluations have highlighted that it can be difficult to move beneficiaries on if other services do not provide the required level and consistency of support.

To be a good navigator requires other services to be willing to provide flexible responses. Fulfilling Lives partnerships have a role to play in influencing this change, and an increasing focus on wider workforce development by a number of partnerships is reflective of this. Yet, the role of navigators is not always well understood by other services and it can take time to develop an understanding of its role and how it can add value. One evaluation highlights that other services questioned what particular expertise navigators brought; another reports that some regarded the navigation service as essentially a free taxi service to get beneficiaries to appointments.

Some reports suggest that co-ordinating care in the way envisaged by the navigator model can be challenging without a specific mandate to do this. When working across organisations and sectors there can be confusion as to who has ultimate responsibility and decision-making power over a beneficiary's support package. If a beneficiary is

accessing numerous services, who co-ordinates the care plans? To maximise effectiveness of the navigator model, wider systemic changes and improvements in collaborative working are needed. As one evaluation commented:

> *Without a clear mandate locally to act as the lead coordinating agency for the target client group there is a very real danger that FLIC will come to be viewed as 'just another' local support provider. Few of the external stakeholders we [the evaluator] spoke to described FLIC as a coordination service and when talking about 'joint working' this was often taken to mean the way in which services could complement each other.*
> **Fulfilling Lives Islington and Camden: A Realist Review of Programme Theory**

## What next?

Local evaluation evidence from a range of sources is consistent on the particular aspects of the keyworker role that are effective. As such, the evidence is reasonably strong on *how* Fulfilling Lives keyworkers make a difference. The evidence could be further strengthened by linking the role of keyworkers more closely to outcomes, but it must be acknowledged that this is extremely difficult to do.

Further evaluation and research into the added-value of the navigator model could be useful, and in particular how navigators can effectively contribute to systems changes as well as supporting individual beneficiaries.

## Further reading

Bowpitt, G. (2016) Howard, S. and Worthington, S. (2016) *Working at the frontline with adults with multiple and complex needs: A preliminary evaluation of the work of Personal Development Coordinators* Opportunity Nottingham / Nottingham Trent University

Broadbridge, A (2018) *Workforce development insight report: What makes an effective multiple and complex needs worker?* Fulfilling Lives Newcastle and Gateshead

Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (2016) *Navigator Practice in the WY-FI Partnership – April 2016 Briefing Paper* WY-FI

Cordis Bright (2018) *Blackpool Fulfilling Lives: Year three evaluation report* Blackpool Fulfilling Lives

Cornes, M. Whiteford, M. and Manthorpe, J. (2015) *Fulfilling Lives Islington and Camden A Realist Review of Programme Theory* King's College London

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Isaac, B. Bolden, R. Pawson, C, Gulati, A, Gasper, R. Plumridge, A. Kimberlee, R. Tischener, I. and Stern, E. (2017) *Building connections: Golden Key local evaluation phase 2 report* University of the West of England

Mason, K., Cornes, M., Dobson, R., Meakin, A., Ornelas B. and Whiteford, M. (2018) Multiple Exclusion Homelessness and adult social care in England: Exploring the challenges through a researcher-practitioner partnership, *Research, Policy and Planning,* Vol. 33, Issue 1: pp.3-14

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