

A Strengths-Based Model for Evidencing the Impact of Prevention: Key Lessons from a Multi-Site Study of Local Area Coordination

Background

The growth of 'second wave' preventive interventions¹ has led to increased interest in strengths-based approaches, such as Local Area Coordination (LAC), Neighbourhood Networking, Place-based Wellbeing hubs. The transformative potential of these approaches lies in their perceived ability to relieve demands and financial strain on public services, while simultaneously developing more effective systems of support and empowerment for citizens and communities.

However, we currently lack a real understanding of how, why and under what circumstances second wave prevention strategies can improve the lives of people who access health and social care services and reduce the need for statutory services. There is an uncomfortable fit between existing evidence tools which assume a linear 'problem-activity-solution' process and fail to capture the outcomes and relational ways of working that underpin second wave approaches like LAC.

This NIHR-funded research project sought to address this gap, by exploring four locations in England and Wales with well-established LAC programmes. It concentrated specifically on LAC because it is a unique example of prevention, embodying a clearly defined national model and set of principles. The study investigated whether and how LAC can improve the lives of people they 'walk alongside' and bring benefits to the wider community and service system. The study adopted a Participatory Action Research approach (Bradbury, 2015), combining system and ward level research, alongside in-depth life stories, a Qualitative Comparative Analysis and a Nested Economic Study (Knapp *et al.*, 2010).

This policy briefing highlights key findings from the research and introduces a strengths-based model for understanding how and why preventive interventions provide effective forms of support.²

The Impact of LAC

LAC delivers key outcomes at three levels: for individuals; for communities; and for the wider system of services. Four distinctive wards were selected with differentiated socio-demographic profiles and contexts. Importantly, the findings were consistent across all four sites, suggesting that regardless of these distinct profiles, LAC's core operating principles produce consistent results.

¹ Second wave prevention approaches encompass broader commitments around the promotion of wellbeing and social connectedness and understanding the associated benefits for public services.

² This project is funded by the National Institute for Health and Social Care Research (NIHR) under its Research for Patient Benefit (RfPB) Programme (Grant Reference Number NIHR201855). The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

System Level Impacts

There is strong evidence that LAC acts both as a connector into communities for public services and as an advocate and conduit for individuals to engage with services. The positionality of LAC enables it to function as a bridge between public services, communities and individuals. LAC support has enabled people to better access services, rights and entitlements which have prevented people falling into crisis and requiring more high-level support. Part of LAC's strength is that participants perceived it to be neutral or even 'separate' from the council.

The study identified LAC's capacity to bridge gaps in the public services system, particularly in relation to preventing crisis through early intervention, supporting people who do not meet statutory eligibility, those 'trapped' in the system and those un-

We are able to refer into LAC, whereas previously that person would have probably been lost in the system ...they don't tick the right boxes for mental health, ... it makes... the local area Coordinator roles, invaluable. They're helping people who without help wouldn't be able to manage (Health Stakeholder).

known to the system. Key to this is LAC's ability to facilitate access to services, to navigate the system and to increase awareness of rights and entitlements. This significantly reduced individuals' stress and anxiety through increasing their income levels and service support.

Community Level Impacts

LAC is uniquely positioned to play a mediating role between the council and communities, building bridges and repairing

When you move into a community and you don't know anybody, and they bend over backwards and jump over really high obstacles to help you, that's really heart-warming and that makes you want to give back... It's like ripples in the water isn't it (Life Story Participant).

trust. LAC's strong presence on the ground was identified as a key resource by system stakeholders, who perceived it as extending their reach into communities and to individuals. There was strong evidence of Coordinators' active engagement in the community and of supporting individuals to participate. The research found that LAC supports people to engage more with their local community with evidence of the 'ripple effect' present in one third of life story cases. LAC connected people to community support with participants highlighting how this helped reduce isolation, grow personal networks and increase engagement with community groups.

Individual Level Impacts

Relationships established between Coordinators and individuals are central to how LAC works. Participants reflected on the value of time, availability and listening, as key to building a trusting relationship with their Coordinator. This was often defined in opposition to difficult and hierarchical relationships with public services. Through fostering these relationships, Coordinators help people to feel accompanied and less isolated. Increasing confidence and independence resulted from community engagement and/or the consistent presence of the Coordinator in their lives, creating a sense of

She took the time to understand me and my problems, which I wasn't getting from anywhere else (Life Story Participant).

being better able to cope with life's challenges. Enhanced community engagement provided a valuable resource, with formal service support remaining a significant part of many participants' journeys.

Drawing on activities across individual, community and system levels

A Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) was undertaken to explore the distinct pathways of activity through which LAC

achieves its aims. The QCA identified the activity 'Coordinators advocating for an individual' to be present in most con-

figurations of activities undertaken by Coordinators. However, this alone was not enough to achieve a successful outcome, requiring a combination of other activities alongside. The most positive outcomes were achieved through several activities being undertaken together, reflecting LAC's holistic, strengths-based approach. The data identified interactions

between system, community and individual level activities; and that underlying background issues (such as ageing, trauma and health issues) influenced the activities Coordinators undertook with individuals. LAC's success involves drawing on a range of potential activities most appropriate in walking alongside that individual.

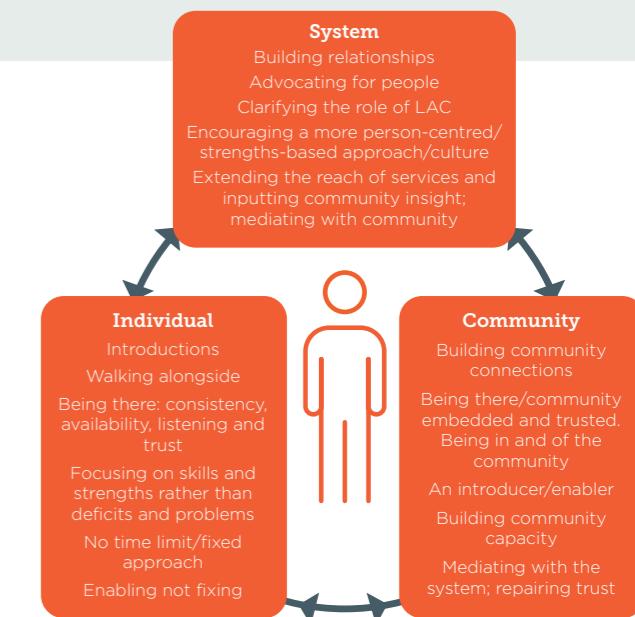
A strengths-based model

Evidence frameworks for prevention need to reflect a strengths rather than deficits approach, encapsulates how that an individuals' journey through LAC is not a simple linear progression of problem - action - outcome, but is far more cyclical and developmental. The research highlighted the importance of not only examining the presenting issues that lead to individuals being introduced to LAC but also the broader context of people's lives. Three main contexts were identified, reflecting the situations in which individuals are living on a day-to-day basis



Individual challenges and context

Many of the 'presenting issues' amongst LAC participants represent pressures, or 'triggers'. These pressures may trigger an introduction to LAC, but they are not necessarily the only, or even the primary, challenge facing that individual. Triggers impact at individual, community and system levels, are often multi-faceted and interactive.

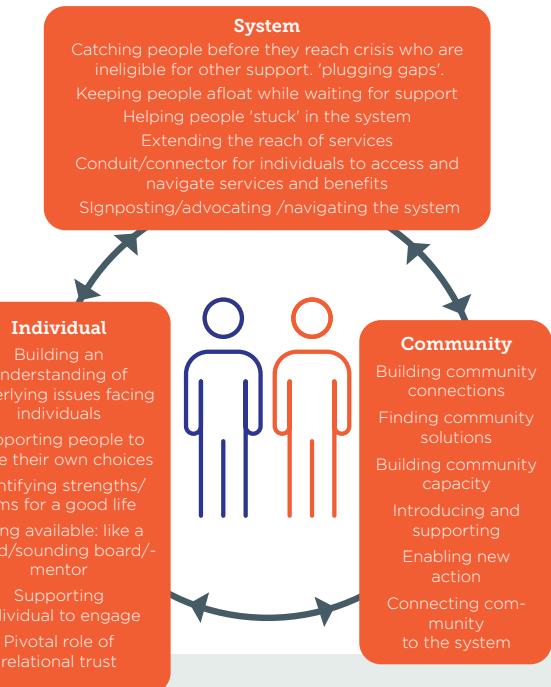


Role of Coordinator: ways of working

A key strength of the LAC approach lies in its positioning in the spaces *in between* the public service system, the community and the individual. Coordinators devote time and resources to develop relationships and trust across all three levels. In this way, Coordinators create a 'boundary spanning' function, building connectivity across and in between individuals, communities and the system.

Process of walking alongside

LAC's explicit focus on this capacity building dimension fills the *spaces in between* where connections get lost. This enables Coordinators to successfully 'walk alongside' individuals. People experience challenges in cycles rather than in neat linear paths. Life contexts such as ageing or living with a long-term disability are not situations that can in themselves be 'prevented', or 'solved'. What is important is whether the support individuals receive enables them to better respond and navigate the challenges they face.



Creating Insulators against Triggers

The research demonstrates how LAC's person-centred approach enables Coordinators to undertake a distinct set of activities for each individual. This supports them to better 'insulate' themselves against life's challenges. Individuals described being better able to cope with future potential challenges, feeling they have the necessary resources (with the underlying strength of LAC 'being there'). The unique positioning of Coordinators 'being there' alongside the services system, community and individual is key to LAC being able to deliver these benefits.

Policy Recommendations

These recommendations resonate equally for national and local policy decision-makers.

- **Investing in preventive approaches that bridge individual, community and service systems.** The positioning of LAC in '*the spaces in between*' the system, individuals and communities offers significant learning for creating effective prevention. Working with people often missed, stuck or lost from services and community support, reduces their risk of falling into crisis and requiring more extensive provision. By bridging the space, LAC provides resources to services, individuals and communities enabling better connections, insights and reach, and improved outcomes for individuals.
- **Investing in prevention is a strength not a risk.** Within the current economic context of rising service demand, increased complex needs and budgetary constraints, investment in prevention is at risk. Many initiatives are facing significant cuts and reduced coverage. Viewing strengths-based preventive programmes as a safe place to cut is highly problematic and risks diminishing the impact of programmes best able to integrate support across services and sectors, and reach deep into communities.
- **Using the right tools to capture the impact of and evidence for second wave prevention.** The research highlighted the limitations posed by traditional linear measures with limited applicability to social care outcomes. The strengths-based model developed from this research provides a frame for understanding how and why prevention works and what outcomes and impacts need to be evidenced.