

People, places, possibilities: progress on local area coordination in England and Wales

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Summary

This [report published by the Centre for Welfare Reform](#) in association with Inclusive Neighbourhoods describes progress in the last three years of implementing local area coordination in the UK. Local area coordination is an in depth, tested approach to building capacity in communities and individuals so that the need for more costly health or social care services is avoided.

Briefing in full

Overview of local area co-ordination

Local area coordination began in Western Australia in 1988 and has now spread across Australia and to various locations in Britain and New Zealand. Originally it was intended to provide support to people with disabilities, but now covers all groups of people with social care needs – older people, mental health, physical and learning disabilities.

Local area coordination was introduced in Middlesbrough in 2010 and is now operating in Cumbria, Derby City, Derbyshire, Gloucestershire, Isle of Wight, Leicestershire, Neath, Port Talbot, Suffolk, Swansea, Thurrock and Waltham Forest. The report is focused on studies undertaken in Derby City and Thurrock.

Local area coordination works by coordinators being embedded in communities, so they can form 'real relationships' and identify local potentials and solutions. Coordinators have a wide-ranging role which could involve supporting people to make life changes, representing their views, helping them to navigate the health and care system, developing support networks, being a catalyst for service reform, and

building community capacity. Coordinators must be accessible and visible in their community, meaning that people know who to go to. Examples of coordinator work includes:

- taking time to get to know someone whose behaviour means they are in danger of being excluded from community venues – helping them to get their finances and housing in more order so they can look to the future
- supporting someone recently divorced who is in danger of a mental health crisis to rebuild their confidence and take charge of their life
- helping someone with a learning disability, not known to services, to navigate changes to the benefits system
- setting up a gardening scheme which pairs owners of gardens who want help with people who want to garden.

Coordinators are not involved in statutory assessments and do not operate eligibility criteria. When more intensive support is needed they will provide a link to services. Their aim is to avoid building dependence or focusing on needs, so they approach their contacts with three main questions:

- what can you do using your gifts skills and experiences?
- what can your friends, family and community do to help?
- what role is there for services and funding?

The report describes local area coordination as an ‘innovation whose time has come’. Not only does it fit seamlessly with the national policy of personalisation, but it has a track record as a cost effective approach to diverting people from expensive services. The report indicates that local area coordination is growing slowly, and intentionally so, since it is important to maintain its integrity and coherence. Local area coordination is a formal programme with established elements such as a quality framework. It is designed to be fundamental to a health and social care system, not to be a stand-alone project or to be implemented by adding some extra tasks to existing roles or teams. It can start in small community locality and be developed on a locality by locality basis.

Learning from recent studies

The report indicates that local area coordination has been subject to a number of studies over a 25 year period in Australia and now in the UK. The results are consistent and show a range of benefits for individuals as well as overall cost effectiveness. Common results include:

- reduced dependency on expensive statutory services – eg costs have shown to be 35 percent lower in areas where LAC operates
- increased informal support networks and reduced isolation
- services better integrated and co-funded
- communities better resourced
- families and carers supported to continue to care.

The report describes two recent studies undertaken in Derby City and Thurrock. Derby started local area coordination with learning sites in two wards in 2012,

growing to seven LACs in 2014 and a further three in 2015. Thurrock started in three areas and has now grown to ten.

The Derby City study, carried out by the University of Derby, considered the first ten to twelve months of implementation in two localities in 2012-13. Although local area coordination was only working at 40 percent capacity, (still learning the job and building relationships) a cost benefit analysis based on real-life costed scenarios found cost savings of between £800 to £880 thousand. People reported improvements in the quality of their lives in terms of relationships, being in control, being better informed and connected, confidence for the future and making a contribution to the community.

The study in Thurrock evaluated the first 14 months of the programme. An independent social return on investment evaluation is due to be published shortly. The study found improved outcomes, and wider strategic impact through better links with services such as social work. 'As well as enabling rethinking the roles of existing specialist services, it is providing the opportunity to bring services back to core functions and principles and closer to the communities they serve.' 'Local area coordination has opened up a whole world of community resources that social workers didn't even know were there.'

Derby and Thurrock both pointed to the challenges involved in implementing local area coordination, and to the persistence needed. Derby identified the following critical success factors:

- strategic and senior commitment to front end prevention
- strong ongoing links and partnerships between the statutory sector, community services and local citizens
- a shared vision and understanding of local area coordination across services and commissioners
- strong focus on inclusive recruitment, retention, training and support of local area coordinators over time
- clear understanding of the role by the post holder, other statutory staff, service providers, individuals and families or carers
- the importance of being in a local accessible, non service location
- working with an optimal number of people in the local area.

Also key to success is developing the role of senior managers to consider strategic connections for system-wide innovation.

Comments

It is very welcome to see local authorities involved in studies to assess the effectiveness of alternatives to traditional services. The demise of the nationally led programmes to undertake this work was short sighted in light of their potential contribution to the financial crisis. For example, the successful LinkAge Plus pilot of

village agents in [Gloucestershire](#) was mainstreamed in the county and now operates in fourteen local authority areas.

Some of the contributors to the report are local area coordination enthusiasts who are totally committed to growing it across the UK. As partisans, some of the messages may not be entirely objective. For example, the statement that, 'The current system tends to see individuals, families, carers and communities as resources to exploit and exhaust – to asset strip', contrasted with local area coordination which is based on valuing people and coproduction, seems overly harsh.

It is clearly not for the faint hearted in terms of demands of implementation, while at the operational level the role of coordinator is demanding. The examples in the report show why an operational framework is needed. Coordinators undertake tasks which seem to embody a combination of 'old school' community work and social work, sometimes supporting people with complex and intractable problems who may have fallen out of mainstream services. There are many potential pitfalls involved in this, not least safety and boundary issues, and coordinators will need support and supervision.

However, local area coordination brings a body of positive research, and an operational framework which includes a new [collaborative network](#) to support development. Local areas seeking a tested method of working with local communities would benefit from exploring what it has to offer. It can also be implemented alongside other popular approaches to community development such as [asset based community development](#) which has many UK members in its Europe network – for instance, Derby City viewed ABCD as complementary to local area coordination.

For more information about this, or any other LGiU member briefing, please contact Janet Sillett, Briefings Manager, on janet.sillett@lgiu.org.uk