Five system challenges
affecting people who experience multiple disadvantage when accessing services and support in Bristol

GOLDEN KEY

Golden Key is an 8-year programme funded by the National Lottery as part of the national Fulfilling Lives programme. It is a partnership between statutory services, commissioners, the voluntary sector, and people with lived experience across Bristol.

We have learnt about system challenges over several years of working alongside clients who faced multiple disadvantage. The aspiration was to understand the types of barriers people facing multiple disadvantage experience when trying to get their support needs met by services and systems, and to use this learning to create change.

Where did the learning come from?

It was important to understand the system from the perspective of people accessing support. Practitioners who supported Golden Key clients documented 'blocks and barriers' that they perceived to be preventing people from making changes in their lives.

This work generated lots of examples. The programme worked to make sense of all this information and produced a list of fifty recurring issues. Further discussion between practitioners and Golden Key's Partnership Board identified five overarching challenges.

These five system challenges represent the most prevalent issues which have been observed across multiple parts of the system.

What do we mean by the word 'system'?

The word 'system' in this context describes the different organisations, services and processes that support people who face multiple disadvantage across Bristol.

In reality, this involves a lot of separately funded systems trying to work together towards common goals.

Context is important

Each challenge can look different depending on the context in which it is occurring and the circumstances and needs of the people involved.

Our experience is that people working within the system are already aware of these issues, but often find it difficult to identify what actions they could take to start addressing them. We can end up 'admiring the problems' because they often feel overwhelming, complex, and outside of our control.

Our learning about the system has highlighted that these five system issues are complex challenges that need to be **worked *with*** rather than treated as 'problems to be solved'.

Over the next couple of pages, we talk about the five challenges we've observed and suggest some things for you to think about in your own context.

Working in silos?

Silos are groups of tall cylinders often used on farms to store grain. The term is used as a metaphor to describe how parts of a system can become isolated despite being close together and providing support to the same person. When systems become siloed it means each part is mainly working within itself and not collaborating or communicating with others.

Siloed working can occur for lots of different reasons but is often largely due to services being separately commissioned to support individual areas of need e.g. mental health, substance use. They cause particular issues for people with multiple disadvantage who require joined-up support from several parts of the system at the same time.

1. Lack of appropriate options

There are not enough appropriate options available for people who experience multiple disadvantage. Siloed ways of working make it difficult for us to accommodate people with high levels of need in several areas. This mean there are often very few – or no – options for people who have multiple and complex needs.

The challenge here is that the system is currently set up for individuals to fit into processes, or rigidly defined services, rather than the system adapting to fit individual need.

People and organisations are very skilled at creating bespoke options or finding workarounds by flexing existing processes and bending (or ignoring) the rules. Sadly, a lot of this amazing work goes unnoticed because it wasn't supposed to happen in the first place. People fear the consequences of working outside of the status quo, or of being inundated with further requests for flexibility.

SPOTLIGHT:

The most frequently reported challenge of this type that we observed was around housing options: limited or no availability of appropriate housing stock, or housing provision/levels of care not matching client need.

Questions to ask in your context:

- How can you (and other agencies you work closely with) feel confident to adapt things for an individual? ('system flex')

- How can you share your learning (in your own organisation and with others in the system) about effective ways to work when there aren't enough appropriate options? Is there any data, or personal stories you can gather to support working in different ways?

- What one action can you take which would help you and/or others in your part of the system to ensure you provide enough appropriate options?

2. Assessment and referral processes

Accessing services and understanding different referral and assessment processes can be complicated. From an individual's perspective, thresholds can change or be confusing. Something serious often needs to happen to someone before an assessment can take place, and a single assessment meeting can only capture a person at a fixed point in time.

In addition, individuals can be retraumatised by assessment processes which require them to recount their stories repeatedly. This can create additional challenges to navigating processes that are already overwhelming to many.

Where commissioning or monitoring is too focused on outcomes / output measures, it can be difficult for organisations to work with multiple disadvantage clients, as they often require a bespoke offer. Organisations are under pressure to protect capacity, achieve throughput and deliver results, and this system structure creates a natural bias away from our ability to commit to the most challenging work.

SPOTLIGHT:

Someone experiencing multiple disadvantage might sit just below several service thresholds, but have high risk or safety issues. Their overall support needs might therefore be overlooked, as no-one see the whole person. We found this particularly true for people with protected characteristics or an undiagnosed learning difficulty.

Questions to ask in your context:

- Do you know from potential or existing clients how they experience your processes?

- How could the processes and routes into your part of the system be more accessible for people with multiple disadvantage?

- Could you work with other agencies to improve routes in and across aligned services?

- Who can you talk with (both within and external to your agency) about creating these changes? Are there any strategies that support your ideas?

3. Transitions

Periods of change and transition can be unsettling and destabilising for all of us. Even when the change we are making is positive and the transition is well-planned, it can be stressful to be detached from familiar places or people, routines or environments.

People facing multiple disadvantage can find transitions overwhelming and difficult because they have often experienced trauma and a lack of choice or agency in their lives. They need extra support at these times, but the reality is often the opposite.

Communication and information sharing, both across and within sectors, often breaks down during these transitions. Clients are expected to cope with rapid and sudden changes to their circumstances. Handovers between workers can be rushed and new support systems not implemented quickly enough. Even transitions that are seen as positive moves can end up causing people to disengage with all support and repeat old patterns.

SPOTLIGHT:

Some of the most difficult transitions we observed were when people were moving to or from secure settings (prison or secure hospital).

Questions to ask in your context:

- What transitions are you involved in? What do you notice happening?

- How can you create more possibilities to support smooth transitions? (What would you need in place? Who can you talk to about this?)

- How can you increase effective communication with people outside your organisation in ways that will help individuals during transitions?

- How could you reduce the need for the person to re-tell their story when moving from one service to another? Could you start within your own organisation, or is there another agency you could work with?

4. Shared accountability

Sometimes when things go wrong people can look for someone or something to blame (a rule, a system, a person or an organisation). This can block learning and draw focus away from the needs of clients. This system challenge results in people who face multiple disadvantage being passed around and not adequately supported because the system gets stuck in a cycle of expecting someone else to take responsibility or act first.

We have observed that collaborative work is most effective when there is a culture of shared accountability and trust between organisations. Where everyone holds some of the responsibility it enables us all to engage in changing things for the better. It is useful to have a shared approach to risk, a clear understanding of which statutory body is holding overall accountability, and clarity over who is leading any coordination process.

When there are multiple competing pressures within an organisation or system, and little opportunity for collaboration with and between services, it can make it more difficult to take responsibility for the most complex cases.

It is common for people with multiple disadvantage to have a fluctuating engagement with some services, and this can mean that it is sometimes difficult to keep the right professionals involved for long enough.

SPOTLIGHT:

We have noticed that professionals sometimes believe they need to wait for another organisation to act first before they can have any meaningful involvement with an individual.

In your context:

- How do you work with others to clarify and share risk and responsibility?

- Can you effectively communicate your assumptions and expectations about risk with other people or organisations involved?

- Can you talk with others about ways to balance the relationship between client risk, organisational risk and worker safety?

- Is there any work in your system about shared care planning, shared risk management or a 'one team' approach? Which other agencies could work with you to make improvements?

5. Culture and mindset

People who face multiple disadvantage have often experienced trauma, loss and adversity throughout their lives. It is important for us all to remember that no-one chooses to experience these types of issues: they develop as a result of things outside of an individual's control.

Clients experiencing multiple disadvantage are not always able to meet the requirements of a service, and this can sometimes lead to the system 'problematising' individuals, e.g.: *"the client needs to change before we can help"*.

We have observed that the best outcomes occur when services provide support that fits an individual's current need. To help us think about the reasons behind someone's actions it can help to ask: "what has happened to you?" rather than "what's the matter with you?". This approach can help us find person-centred ways to offer support, and it helps us to consider the ongoing impact of complex trauma on a person's ability to make decisions.

No-one should be viewed as too complex or 'un-helpable'.

SPOTLIGHT:

We have observed that change is not a linear process, and people facing multiple disadvantage often appear to experience cycles or patterns in their circumstances. Through working with people over longer periods we have noticed that there are often 'windows of opportunity' – periods of time within someone's cycle when they are more able to engage with offers of support.

Questions to ask in your context:

- How do people view and talk about individuals facing multiple disadvantage? How could this be improved? Can a more strengths-based approach be used?

- Can you create more spaces for reflection and sharing learning? Can you ask about the client's experience, and other agencies to understand their perspectives and build a more holistic picture together?

- Who can you talk to? (Within and across organisations, with funders/commissioners, who else?)

- Have you got a strong lived experience voice to support and challenge how systems and services operate?

What next?

Now we've learned about the most frequent challenges across the system, what can we do? Following the process below will help you to explore what's already working well, and what opportunities there are to do things differently:

1. **Have conversations and build relationships**
   Talk about these challenges, take them to team meetings, talk to colleagues. Use language that focuses on strengths and find ways to work with others creatively. Commit to building relationships in your agency and across the system, including with people with lived experience. Really invite others to talk about what's hard for their part of the system, and be vulnerable too: share where mistakes have been made or where you are struggling to deliver. Shared values and shared priorities will support you.

2. **Understand how these challenges might look in your own part of the system**
   We have seen them come up everywhere, but they look slightly different in different contexts. What does it look like from your perspective? Are there aspects specific to your area or system that help or hinder you in navigating these challenges? What other perspectives are there? Can you have conversations with others in the system to try and see the whole system perspective on one of these challenges?

3. **Identify your strengths**
   What do you already do to navigate each challenge? What actions could you take to improve? You can use the questions under each system challenge (outlined above) to help you identify what steps you could take to create further change. Where you have observed flex in the system, how could you move towards system change? How could you further embed and champion this change?

4. **Share your learning**
   We have observed that when people talk about their successes it has a positive impact in other parts of the system. Can you have a learning exchange with other organisations? Sharing also helps us to gain confidence and feel supported. Congratulate others on their successes too – that's always welcome! If we each take small steps, we can change things together.

Golden Key resources

A wide variety of resources have been developed from the learning at Golden Key. Some things which may help you in your exploration of the five system challenges include:

- The Three Pillars
- Golden Key Strengths Meeting Toolkit
- A Practical Guide to System Change
- Approach to Change

For further information and to access the resources listed above, please go to: www.goldenkeybristol.org.uk