



FLIC's Guide to Co-Location



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Overview

Too often the voices of people experiencing multiple disadvantage are not heard. Fulfilling Lives was designed to support, serve and empower people experiencing multiple disadvantage based on their needs, experiences and hopes for the future. Our service is part of the national Fulfilling Lives 12-area learning programme launched in 2014 and funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. We have worked in partnership with statutory and voluntary agencies across both boroughs to improve services for people experiencing multiple disadvantage and drive systemic change, influencing how services are designed and delivered. FLIC's eight-year Lottery funded learning programme closed in May 2022. As part of our legacy of learning programme we embarked on a Co-Location project with partner services for six months from the end of 2021 until April 2022.

Co-Location, where practitioners from specialist services are sat within and work alongside a host team, is an increasingly popular model of service delivery. It is an efficient and creative way for different services to share knowledge, coordinate support, develop cross-sector networks and improve communication between client-facing workers and local decision makers. Most importantly, it enables people experiencing multiple disadvantage to have their needs met, in a holistic and coordinated way.

This is by no means an exhaustive guide. We have simply put together our learning from FLIC's own Co-Location project in order to share our experience and provide some guidance or inspiration for any services who want to introduce co-location as a model but do not know where to begin. The guide is written from the perspective of the Co-Location provider (rather than the Host Team).

FLIC's Co-Location Principles

Trauma Informed

Trauma-informed principles should be at the core of every stage.

Systems Aware

Understand challenges on an individual and structural level and what policies/practices impact them.

Vision, Values + Expectations

Have a clear understanding of shared vision, values and expectations.

Community of Support + Learning

Have a consistent shared space to share best practice, reflect and stay centered and grounded.

Strengths Based + Collaborative

Challenges are an opportunity for learning new ways of working and for people experiencing the problem being involved to collaboratively create solutions.

Four Phase Approach

Preparation

Discuss the goals, roles, expectations and ways of working

Relationship

Build relationships with host team to understand the personality, culture + experiences

Response

Work collaboratively with host partner to identify needs and opportunities

Legacy

Develop strategies to ensure that positive changes + learnings are embedded in the host service

Top Tips for Co-Located Practitioners

1

Be willing to prioritise goals and outcomes and have a flexible approach with the host project.

2

Commit to a weekly shared workspace, where the co-located practitioners return to their home organisation in order to retain their organisational identity and remain grounded in their approach.

3

Managers and the co-located practitioners to have weekly check-ins rather than monthly supervisions.

4

A proactive 'give it a go' approach works best in busy services.

5

Be prepared with resources to take in to host project but also be ready to adapt them or collaborate with Host to create new tools

FLIC's Co-Location Principles

Trauma-Informed

We believe embedding a trauma-informed approach across a system of support improves service engagement, access, experience (for both clients and staff) and outcomes. Bringing a trauma-informed approach to host teams means promoting safety, compassion, empathy, empowerment, choice and trust for both people who use services and staff. For a co-location project to be truly trauma-informed the principles need to be at the core of every stage.

We considered the following in our approach:

- Take time to build relationships with members of the host team, understand what's important to them - including their KPIs, their pressure points and what stays with them after work - and build trust and co-working alliances. Settle in and understand the prevalence of trauma in their client group, and the team and service (including vicarious trauma). Think about the level of stress, disorder and complexity they're managing.
- Be responsive to where the host project are e.g. in the middle of organisational change, including the level of trauma in the team and organisation, and all real-world matters such as sickness, COVID-19, anxieties and workload. How this may impact their capacity to manage change and uncertainty.

- Consider the emotional and psychological safety of individual workers and teams and encourage self-awareness. Noticing where workers do not feel 'safe'. Do people feel safe to share their challenges and anxieties? Is there openness? Or are the team quite closed off and disconnected?
- Consider the personalities, characteristics and skills of co-located staff and host projects, and align them where possible.
- Thinking, reflecting and empowering are the antithesis of trauma – healing cannot happen without these practices. Can we help create spaces for reflection? For example, FLIC hosted a Community of Practice for all co-located staff and services to come together, as well as developing a reflective tool that offered a framework for talking about stuck cases.

Systems Aware

There are challenges of working with stressed and overworked teams and managers. It is not a reflection on them but the system that they are operating within.

“We often describe people as complex, but actually, systems are complex. And you know, when there's so much going on for someone, and you can't join up and work in a way that actually works for someone.”

- Co-Located Partner.

Co-located practice does not happen in a vacuum, and nor should it. Co-located practitioners work with host teams and within a system of stakeholders such as other providers, service users, commissioners and communities. It's not surprising that there may be differences in understanding and perspectives across these roles as we all experience different parts of the system and are impacted by varying factors.

Being systems aware helped us to:

- Understand challenges on an individual and structural level and what policies/practices impact them.
- Remove room for blame and shame, instead looking for understanding.
- Meet the service where they are.
- Identify pressures on senior management and the wider team.
- Understand some of the working culture.
- Create room for shared learning and reflection.
- Understand constraints, adapt and be flexible with pace, approach and outcomes when necessary.
- Think outside of the box and be creative with problem solving.
- Consider the readiness and confidence of the host team to take on learning.

Shared Vision, Values and Expectations

Defining a shared vision, values and expectations was an important step in setting up and promoting the co-location project. As a team, we spent time together choosing language and agreeing on a role description. This felt like an important part of the Grounding Phase. The benefits of co-location seemed to be most effective and long-lasting when the vision and values were shared by both the co-location provider and the host team, or when there was scope for them to become aligned.

People who do the work, own the work. Working towards a shared vision is part of the work of co-location. Even if there is not alignment, there can be a great opportunity to bring together the unique strengths, perspective and ways of working from both sides to collaboratively create something new. Change brings challenges as well as opportunities. It is important to make a conversation about vision, values and expectations an explicit part of the setting up process with the host project management. It is then useful to check-in around this with the host project throughout the co-location process.

Also, it is necessary for the host project to understand from the beginning that having a co-location practitioner embedded within the service means that both parties will need to be open to learning and collaborating to make changes.

It is essential to create shared values and an understanding of the model within the co-location provider team. Ideally it is good to foster the same values with the host organisation, but it is important to be aware that there will be differences and this may impact the host's readiness.

Community of Support and Learning

There is potential for co-located staff to feel very isolated within a host team, especially if they are the only person from their home organisation. Sitting inside a host team, and participating in their meetings, practices and socialising can give the co-located practitioner a sense of belonging, identity and self-worth. However, both experiences risks them drifting into becoming a 'generic' worker in the host team; losing their purpose and home organisation identity.

It is therefore important for the co-located practitioner to have a consistent shared space with their original home team (or a version of a Community of Practice with other co-located practitioners) to share best practice, reflect, stay focused and grounded in their original identity/ethos rather than becoming institutionalised within the host team.

FLIC had three main approaches to this:

- FLIC Team manager assigned to each co-location host so that each co-located practitioner effectively had a partner from their home organisation in their co-location
- Co-located staff came together for specific reflection and practice development sessions
- FLIC hosted a community of practice for all co-location hosts and co-located practitioners.

FLIC co-located staff fed back that they felt supported and found it useful to come back together and reflect, share ideas and feel a sense of camaraderie. These feedback streams and reflective spaces were useful to identify blind spots in FLIC's approach to co-location and find the areas we could learn from and adapt.

“Line managers for the co-located worker both in the organisation they are co-located in and in the organisation the worker comes from, need to have quarterly meetings and be in communication about the progress of the worker and their needs and any issues that come up. So that the worker feels supported and knows who to contact for what”

- Co-Located Partner.

Strengths Based and Collaborative

“People who have experience of a problem [should be] involved in creating the solutions to those issues”

-Toynbee Hall.

It is helpful to frame the host service as the ‘client’, applying the same strengths based, curious and collaborative approach as you would when working with a new client. We took a holistic perspective and focused on keeping the host team at the centre of changes, encouraging their exploration of solutions and collaborative decision making. We looked at the context, abilities, circumstances and opportunities that add to a solution instead of focusing on deficiencies and gaps. With an ‘outside-in’ perspective, we viewed challenges as an opportunity for learning and identifying new, collaborative approaches.

- Hope and determination; recognising the host's values and efforts, as well as their struggles.
- Working collaboratively to decide how to respond as opposed to delivering solutions which we anticipated would work.

- Actively avoiding 'doing to' and 'doing for' and instead demonstrating or modelling a different approach, or way of relating and working.
- Not being afraid to witness and acknowledge the stressors of the host service (for example, being part of team handovers that are filled with trauma, listening to the workers about how difficult this space can be).
- Peer support through a Community of Practice, bringing others together so they see they are not in this alone, the newness is shared.

Four Phase Approach

We learnt as we went, but on reflection, we identified four phases of co-location which helped us focus and gave us direction as the project progressed.

Preparation Phase

- We acknowledged our own anxieties, as being co-located was a new challenge and required new (or adapted) skills.
- As a team, FLIC developed tools and frameworks to work with as a starting point. E.g. a mission statement to explain our role to host teams, a poster to outline/promote the project, a template for a 'Service Walk Through'. Developing these resources can be useful and reassuring even if they later change.
- Prior to starting we discussed the goals, roles, expectations and ways of working with the host senior and middle management. We also established shared language to provide clarity and consistency. Even small details like where our co-location practitioner would sit in the host office and getting new email accounts were discussed. This helped us work towards a shared vision and values of the project.
- We framed the host project and staff as the 'client', recognising that teams may carry trauma, for all to be approached with compassion, empathy, non-judgment and curiosity (trauma informed principles).

- We sought out training on Consulting, with the aim to improve our confidence and adopt a framework for providing support to staff groups where before our focus was on direct client work.
- We made space for co-located practitioners to figure out their communication preferences, unique strengths and styles. We felt it was important for people to be able to work in a way which honours these attributes.

Relationship Phase

- We focused on building relationships with host teams, as we had done in all of our effective client working practices.
- We gave space for the co-located practitioner to find their feet and establish their identity within the host project (this may be very informal; cups of tea and chats!). It may feel like there is not much action in this stage but it's crucial, there is so much value in the informal relationship building.
- We spent time observing and understanding the personality, culture and experiences of the host team and reflecting on how this impacts their confidence and readiness for change.
- We kept weekly notes to help focus our reflections.
- We recognised people and services can grow and change in environments of safety and trust.
- We role modelled positive responses and reflection within the host service.

Response Phase

- We worked collaboratively with host partners to identify their needs and opportunities. We suggested potential ‘mini-projects’ based on observations and conversations from the Relationship Phase.
- We drew on our previous expertise and experience to support these needs, whether this be with existing tools and resources or through developing new ones in partnership with host teams.
- We made time to reflect at each stage, ensuring there was the highest level of collaboration possible, avoiding a ‘doing-to’ approach.
- We adopted and maintained a tenacious ‘can do’ attitude, focusing energy on engaging the client-facing practitioners in the host team.

Legacy Phase

- We developed strategies to ensure that any positive changes made during the co-location were embedded in the host service and likely to remain or evolve further once the co-located practitioner had left.
- We aimed to empower and equip the host team so that if at any point we left tomorrow, the new perspectives and ways of working could continue without us (for example, gradual handover of facilitated stuck cases forum to host team members)
- We identified key individuals who were invested in change and ensured they could carry changes forward.
- We also explored ways to embed the changes organisationally, not just with key individuals.
- We documented strengths and recommendations including host projects reflections to share internally (with the host team) and with relevant external stakeholders

Case Study

Case Study: Busy hostel team

Relationship focus

Observed that client facing staff having to work within hostel formalities and processes which aren't necessarily trauma informed. Difficult to find time for reflection and creativity. Little space for frontline team to support each other.

Response focus

Developed and implemented tool to facilitate Fortnightly Stuck Cases Discussion tool which took in person with whole team. Tool encourages reflection, mentalisation and creative responses.

Legacy focus

Key team members who are passionate about the positive impact of the meeting identified. Gradual handover of facilitation from Co-located practitioner to team members. Fortnightly meetings scheduled moving forward

IMPACT: Frontline team gave very positive feedback about the impact of the fortnightly meetings, not only did they improve outcomes and actions for complex cases but also enhanced voice of the team and increased peer to peer support.

Do's and Don'ts

DON'TS

Go in being critical or judgmental about the service's process and what they are doing 'wrong'.

Make assumptions and judgements about the team

Get sucked into drama and gossip within the team.

Rely on emails as the sole communication method.

Wait or expect to be told what to do, or given instant approval.

Assume everyone has the same training, background knowledge, experience as you.

Frame yourself a consultant or expert.

DO'S

Identify champions and allies.

Focus your energy on the frontline team, where change is more tangible.

Aspire to have regular check-ins with host team and management (in what ever format works!).

Be as physically present as possible.

Find informal opportunities to chat e.g. water cooler moments, coffee, lunch.

Make yourself available to shadowing and proactively ask to be invited to meetings and activities.

Model the behaviours and values you hope to share as a way of creating new ways of working.

"I encouraged the co-location practitioners to draw on their competencies and strengths from their direct client-facing work and apply this to their staff-facing work. To adopt the same compassion, empathy, patience, co-production and techniques in motivating and engaging people as they had been practising for years. They did incredibly well to hold in mind questions like 'what's my role, and my goal?' before taking action in every situation, and balance this with principles like 'step back and reflect, be flexible and do what is helpful'. They made an incredible impact in such a short space of time (less than 6 months)."

- External trainer and practice development facilitator in consultation skills.

Reflections

"I have been supporting the host team in my co-location post and it was a fantastic experience. I was really scared to start with because I thought that they would think that I would just waste their time, but I have been able to make good links and I believe, a contribution. Everyone has accepted me as part of their team and I really enjoyed shadowing the shifts, having space for reflection about all different issues including stuck cases, systemic barriers, what they would like to improve in their service, links and they would like to establish with different services etc."

- FLIC Co-located staff member.

"COVID and staff sickness has made the co-location more difficult than expected, but also the nature of the outreach job has meant that members of staff are often in and out especially when the Severe Weather Condition Protocol is activated (SWEP) and during the night counts. During these two service provisions members of staff are hardly in or really busy and unable to talk to me. I have decided to join them in order to not be the only one idle in the service and it has been a really interesting experience."

MY TOP TIP: Encourage reflection. This can be informal, having conversations and supporting staff, or creating more formal spaces for reflection such as a stuck cases forum.

- FLIC Co-located staff member.

“When I first came to FLIC I was quite risk adverse, seeing things in black and white. My time at FLIC helped me to unlearn being overly risk adverse and instead think about how you can work with the risk. I also learnt that relationship breakdown is a natural part of the role, and that what is more important is approaching repair in a healthy way and talking it through with the client. In this role I have more flexibility to adapt my approach and have come to understand that it's not all about safety planning, but instead modelling a healthy relationship.

I helped FLIC with the MARAC process, identifying power and control, safety planning and options available to survivors and how it intersects with multiple disadvantage. Overall my experience was incredible and I grew as a worker. FLIC have a great culture and ethos and value experts of various things and different skills bases.”

MY TOP TIP: For everyone to recognise one another's value and expertise, be open and available to staff and vice versa. Being open to different practises and marrying them together to create great hybrid working. Co-location forces you to look at a client and their situation from each other's point of view.

- FLIC Co-located staff member.