

Understanding Linkers



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Background

The Paul Ramsay Foundation invests in a broad range of initiatives intended to break cycles of disadvantage, including many of the most innovative programs in the field. A number of its partner organisations include roles intended to support individuals to navigate complex and hard to access service systems. Curious about this emerging 'Linker' role, the Foundation commissioned dandolopartners (dandolo) to undertake an initial examination of the Linkers in their portfolio. The project described in this paper has sought to: explore whether Linkers are indeed a distinct role and where they are situated in the broader social and community service eco-system; describe the work that Linkers do and the way they work; identify the professional backgrounds, knowledge, skills and attributes of Linkers; synthesise how Linkers are organised, supported and managed.¹

This analysis can help build visibility of Linkers' work and conditions that support them, help us understand what it takes to make service systems more accessible to the people who need them most, and provide insights for broader efforts to transform how service systems work.

IMPORTANT CAVEATS

Focus on workforce, not outcomes: This project is an exploration of the Linker workforce – not an evaluation of the impact of Linkers or participants in Linker-based programs. It cannot speak to the effectiveness of Linkers or provide evidence about the features of effective Linker-based programs.

Limited sample size: The analysis is exploratory and indicative, not exhaustive. It is based on five Linker-based programs and does not consider other Linker models or 'informal' Linker roles (where people may work in similar ways to Linkers, but it's not an explicit part of their role description).

Accordingly, we are not suggesting that Linkers are the solution to a fractured service system that isn't accessible to the people who need it most.² They are one part of a complex eco-system and potentially one contribution to an entrenched, multifaceted problem.

This project reflects the Foundation's interest in gaining insights across the sector, but is not an indication of its investment priorities or future directions.

¹ The programs we engaged with for this analysis use different names for these roles, e.g. Linker, Navigator, Mentor. For the purposes of this report, we will refer to all roles that perform this role as a Linker.

² While this paper is jointly published by dandolopartners and the Paul Ramsay Foundation, use of 'we' refers to dandolo as the lead on this project and primary author.

Summary

The use of Linkers by not-for-profit organisations is an emerging strategy for addressing the limitations of the service system, found in programs in areas including early childhood, education and justice.

Service systems are often complex, opaque and hard to navigate

People experience a range of barriers to accessing services

People often carry trauma or distress from their experience of the 'sharp edges' of the service system

The people who would benefit the most from support are consistently the ones who are missing out.

The systemic problems with social and community services are well known, entrenched and have proven challenging to shift despite efforts from within and outside of government.

Linker roles have emerged as a strategy to address these systemic issues, explicitly designed to help people navigate the complexity of the service system. They provide a way to operationalise the relational, client-centred, flexible support which evidence shows is more effective.

As an emerging role, not a lot is known about the Linker workforce – what they do, how they work, or what is needed to effectively manage this resource.

We set out to understand:

- Whether Linkers are a distinct role.
- What the scope and focus of their work is.
- The skills and attributes required to do the work effectively.
- How they are organised, managed and supported.

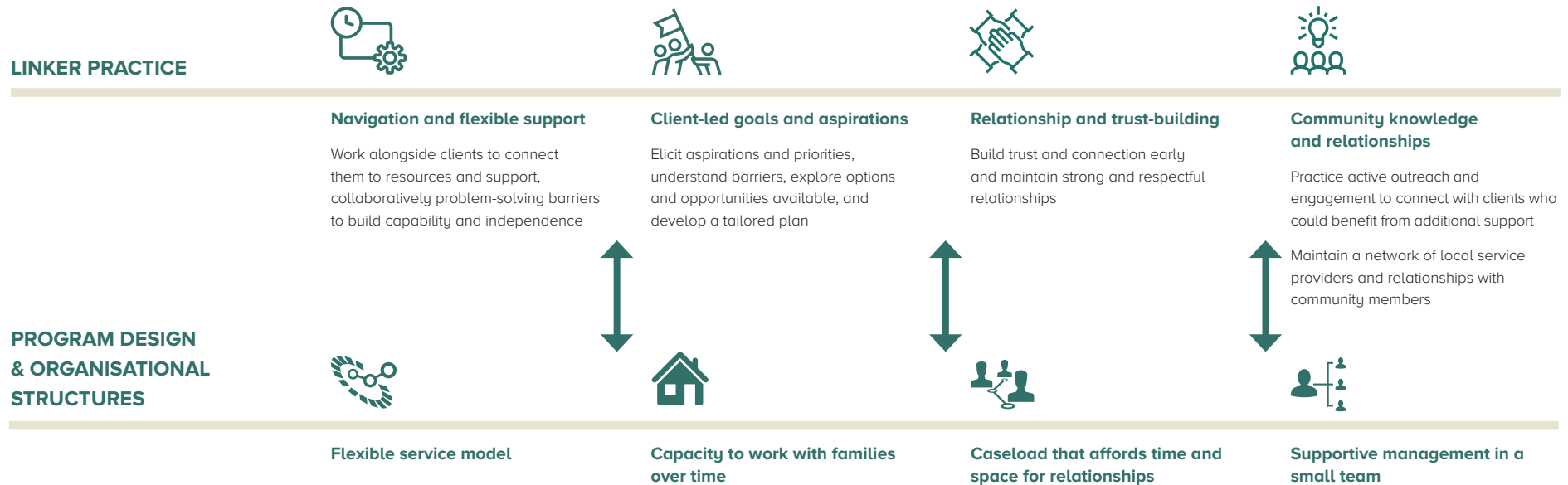
Our initial findings:

- Linkers are a distinct role.
- There are common characteristics to Linker practice.
- There is a core set of attributes that define how Linkers work.

Further questions arise from this analysis, with more work needed to explore the full potential of Linkers and how to sustain this workforce.

- **Are Linkers effective?** To what extent and in what circumstances are Linkers effective at changing outcomes for participants?
- **How can Linkers help systems change?** This work raised questions around the role of Linkers in changing systems, including opportunities to build feedback loops between Linkers and initiatives focused on structural change.
- **What do we need to know and do to sustain this workforce?** The limited visibility of Linker work impacts how Linkers are recruited and remunerated, effectively managed and supported.

What is a Linker?



WHY HAVE LINKERS EMERGED?

The limitations of the current service system mean the people who benefit most from support are most likely to miss out. Despite efforts to drive change, the system remains fragmented and poorly coordinated with the onus falling on people to make sense of services, navigate the system and ‘fit’ a program to qualify for support. A traditional welfare approach dominates, focusing on crisis support and stabilisation rather than building capability, anticipating problems and intervening to prevent them.

People experience a range of barriers to accessing services, such as knowing what support is available, capacity to pay and complex life circumstances like family violence or mental health challenges. Additionally, experience of the ‘sharp edges’ of the service system often leads people to carry trauma or distress, discouraging further interaction.

Linkers work around the gaps, limitations and insufficiencies of the service system. They help people access the services and support they need through individualised, relationship-based practices.

What is a Linker? (Continued)

HOW LINKERS DIFFER FROM OTHER SIMILAR ROLES

While Linkers, case managers and boundary-spanner roles all work to help individuals to navigate service systems, Linkers sit outside the system and are focused on participant aspirations and priorities. Relationship-building, client-led goal setting and service system navigation is the explicit purpose and focus of their role.



“Other roles are more ‘refer and close’ but in this role I still stay in the picture after referrals are made.” – Linker

WHERE LINKERS SIT IN THE ECO-SYSTEM

Linkers operate alongside – and sometimes within – a range of other initiatives aiming to change the way the system works to better meet the needs of families.

These initiatives tackle the challenge in different ways:

- At a strategic and structural level, e.g. intermediary organisations, advocacy.
- At a local level, e.g. place-based models, community hubs.
- Through service design, e.g. intensive family support, wrap-around models.
- Via the skills and capabilities of the workforce, e.g. the Family Partnership Model.

Linkers provide insights into priorities and possibilities for systems change, identifying the friction points within the system and able to provide feedback that informs change. Linkers also show how to operationalise a more client-centred, relational model of service delivery that changes how people experience the service system.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF LINKERS

Some participants in this work expressed a view that Linkers were a ‘band-aid’ solution to a broken service system – a role that will only be needed until structural changes are achieved. Others saw them as a necessary part of any complex service system and felt that personalised navigation will always be required for some. There is a clear need to better understand the circumstances and contexts in which Linkers are the most efficient or effective solution e.g., if some systems, places, or cohorts are more appropriate for Linkers than others.

What Linkers do and how they work – common characteristics

Linkers' practice is distinguished by how they use their advanced relationship-building and problem-solving skills to identify goals and overcome barriers for their participants.

COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Linkers proactively seek to know their community, what services are available, and how to get in. They:

- Use their relationship skills to forge a strong and broad network with local services.
- Actively maintain their network – cultivating relationships, providing reciprocal support.
- Leverage networks to get participants access to the support they need.

Core set of attributes:

Curious

Creative

Bold and persistent

Organised and systematic

RELATIONSHIP AND TRUST-BUILDING

Linkers build trust and connection quickly. They:

- Explicitly and intentionally project warmth, respect and genuineness.
- Listen and observe carefully and are responsive to body language.
- Work at the pace people are comfortable with – and take the time that's needed.
- Seek opportunities to make connection.

Core set of attributes:

Empathetic and respectful

Strategic

Attentive

Flexible



“We sit down, map out what their goals are, what they're passionate about, what they want to achieve. Then we look at the pathways of how we get to that.” - Linker



“Having that therapeutic and trauma informed background is important. I pick up the cues, observe, and see and hear the indicators about what's going on.” - Linker



“Sometimes I sit under a tree and just talk to the family. I need to talk to grandma, aunty or mum before I can talk to the young person. No case manager could sit there for two hours. The flexibility in our role is what enables us to be successful.” - Linker

IDENTIFY BARRIERS AND SET GOALS

Linkers draw out goals and aspirations of participants and focus on what matters. They:

- Elicit participant aspirations and prioritise them.
- Break goals down into achievable steps.
- Are flexible about what and how – working with small or big goals and what matters for each individual.
- Foster a sense of agency and hope.

Core set of attributes:

Strengths-based

Master communicators

Enablers

NAVIGATION AND SUPPORT

Linkers illuminate the path and walk with participants to access support and achieve goals. They:

- Develop plans to realise aspirations.
- Tailor the level of support to participant needs.
- Provide ‘wrap-around’ support to participants as they connect to services.
- Build personal confidence, capability and independence.
- Creatively problem-solve to address barriers.

Core set of attributes:

Knowledgeable

Relentless and creative problem-solvers

Adaptable

Capacity builders

Outcome-focused

“

“They have a goal that they come up with themselves. Then we plot out steps to achieve that goal.” - Linker

“

“Trauma-informed care, person-centred, and a strengths-based approach are really important. Acknowledging that the system is difficult, it’s not the families’ fault.” – Linker

“

(Linkers are) “Compassionate, empathetic, friendly, a bit of personality, approachable. All of us have different backgrounds. Qualifications aren’t as important as previous employment and skills they have developed.” – Linker

We found Linkers come from varied educational and professional backgrounds, including experience in social and community services, case management and early childhood education and care.

Program Design Features

Regardless of the target populations or the system they were operating in, the Linker programs we reviewed had closely aligned design features.

- Flexible service model, with scope for varied activities including assistance filling in forms, waiting with participants at a support service, or providing household items.
- Capacity to work with families over time, including remaining engaged with families for 12 months or more if necessary.
- Caseload that affords time and space for relationships.
- Supportive management in a small team. Most teams consist of 3 or 4 Linkers and a manager.

Collectively, these design features represent the conditions that allow Linkers to work effectively with families.



“Linker caseload is the most important thing... (The small team and management) is great, but we have a large caseload, and it’s hard to find the time for growing your network.” – Linker

Management of Linkers

RECRUITMENT

Linkers are difficult to recruit for several reasons. There is no consistent job title or professional community, and the core relationship/trust-building and problem-solving skills are difficult to search for and identify during the interview process. As a result, many Linkers have been headhunted.



“Skills and the role can be taught but being compassionate and being able to build strong relationships sometimes can’t (be taught).”

- Linking program manager



“They are self starters - there is no subcategory on Seek or way to describe what we’re looking for.”

- Linking program manager



“We could tell straight away who was best suited for this role. You can be any field, it’s about your approach, your outlook, your willingness to be flexible.”

- Linking program manager

MANAGEMENT, DEVELOPMENT AND REMUNERATION

We found most Linker programs had a relatively small team size, with three or four Linkers per manager. Fundamental activities undertaken by managers includes providing day-to-day support for Linkers, developing their skills (e.g. through coaching), developing and maintaining local relationships, and contributing to program development and quality improvement.

Most professional development opportunities for Linkers are content-based, covering areas that contextualise the situations of participants and families such as trauma, mental health, family violence and child development. However, all Linkers and managers who participated in this work felt that practice-based development was most beneficial. Lack of availability and heavy time requirements of coaching/supervision with managers exacerbates this need.

There is also currently very little opportunity for career progression, with most common progression being to manager/coordinator roles though this is likely on an as-needed basis rather than a structured growth pathway.

As at 2021, Linker salaries range between \$60,000 and \$80,000 per year, lower than many workers in related health and social care roles such as social workers (average salary in southwest Sydney \$89,409), case workers (average salary \$84,848) and community service officers (average salary \$87,457).



“I can’t think of any (external) professional development that would benefit the worker. I did look into it but I couldn’t find anything, but something should be put together to help a worker navigate.”

- Linker



“I’ve got a team that I’ve really had to grow - you have to figure out each individual’s learning style ... It’s more on the ground, modelling, talking them through step by step, close supervision at the start, monitoring as you go on.”

- Linker manager

Key findings

Our investigation has found that Linkers are a distinct role with a consistent way of working, but are currently an emerging workforce with limited visibility and recognition.



Linkers are a distinct role: Aspects of what Linkers do are found in a range of other roles, but what makes Linkers unique and interesting is that those functions have been pulled into a dedicated and focused role. Although they have different titles (linker, mentor, navigator) the purpose and scope of the role is consistent. (As outlined in more detail on p5-6).



There are common characteristics to Linker practice: Linkers target different cohorts, work in and across different systems, and prioritise different outcomes – but the way they work is consistent.



There is a core set of attributes that define how Linkers work: These are as, if not more, important than what they do.

The limited visibility of what Linkers do, how they work, or what is needed to effectively manage this workforce impacts:



How Linkers see themselves: Linkers were clear and consistent about how they worked and the skills required, but didn't always have a sense of themselves as a highly-skilled, uniquely capable and specialist workforce. This may impact their sense of professional identity, their remuneration expectations and their capacity to advocate for the value of the Linker role.



How Linker roles and teams are designed: The Linker roles and programs we investigated had mostly developed organically, in response to co-design or local needs, and in isolation from other similar programs and organisations. There isn't a strong shared understanding or 'best practice' approach to program design.



How Linkers are recruited: Finding the right people, with the right skills and attributes, is foundational for the success of Linker initiatives. But this can be challenging as there isn't an established job title or consistent job description for Linkers – or an easy way to describe what they do or what employers are looking for.



How the Linker workforce is grown and developed: While highly developed relational and collaborative problem-solving skills were hallmark features of Linker work, there was limited professional development or coaching opportunities available that focused on cultivating those skills. Some Linkers received strong support and coaching from their managers, but this wasn't always explicit or available. There are also limited opportunities for professional connections and learning from other Linkers, outside their teams and organisations, and current pay and conditions may not align with the specialist skills required for effective Linker work.

Future considerations

This exploratory project has validated some hypotheses about Linkers, how they work and how they're supported. It's also raised many additional questions – which have implications for Linkers and Linker-based programs themselves, but also for the service system and systems change initiatives more broadly.

ARE LINKERS EFFECTIVE?

More work is needed to build the evidence base about the effectiveness of Linker programs to understand whether – and/or in what circumstances – Linkers are effective at changing outcomes for participants. Building the evidence around this emerging role and practice can deepen our understanding about the specific ways of working that produce real impact, the conditions that support Linkers to be effective, and the communities and circumstances in which Linkers are a good fit. Breaking cycles of disadvantage is a complex challenge with many interwoven layers, so efficacy is a fundamental consideration for the Foundation as it looks to support partners with approaches that work.

WHAT INSIGHTS DO LINKERS PROVIDE FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE?

Our analysis raised critical questions around the role of Linkers in changing systems, including:

- Whether Linkers are a band-aid fix for a broken system or an enduring feature of effective system design.
- How to build feedback loops between Linkers and the people responsible for designing and delivering services.
- Whether it's possible for existing roles within the service system to adopt Linker ways of working, or if being outside of the service system is key contributor to success.

- If Linkers are optimised by being part of a broader systems change initiative, like a place-based model, or by targeting particular cohorts.

This work also highlighted potential insights for broader systems change efforts, including:

- Affirming the importance of relationships as enablers and drivers of change – and the necessity of creating space to build those relationships.
- That engagement comes when the work is oriented around the participant's goals, and growing the skills of individuals to navigate and advocate for themselves within systems is a valuable intervention.

WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW AND DO TO SUSTAIN THIS WORKFORCE?

Key considerations for sustaining the Linker workforce include:

- Clarifying the program design features necessary to support the work – including optimum caseloads and staff-to-manager ratios, scaffolding around building local networks, and how the flexibility of the program is managed in practice.
- Increasing access to professional learning opportunities that grow the underpinning skills and practice capabilities, as well as building content knowledge. Reflective supervision models may be most appropriate, but there are questions about how to systematise and optimise this support. Opportunities for professional connections and shared learning within and outside of their own organisations may also be appropriate.
- Understanding the type and nature of management support that gets the best out of Linkers would also be valuable, and how to build career pathways and leadership opportunities for the workforce.

Appendix 1: Methodology

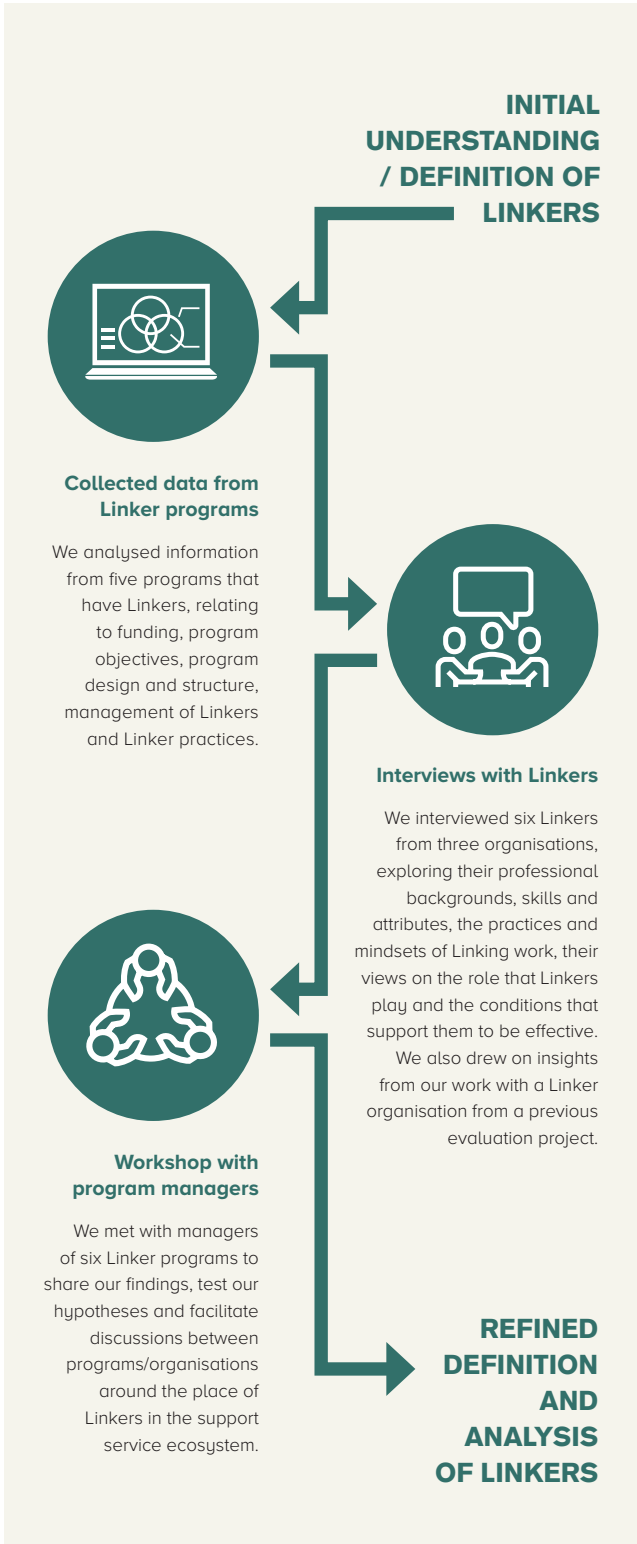
We started with a working definition of Linkers and some key hypotheses about their approach and what they do, testing and refining this through engagement with seven Linker programs funded by the Foundation.

We analysed information from programs with Linkers, relating to funding, program objectives, program design and structure, management of Linkers and Linker practices.

We interviewed six Linkers from three organisations, exploring their professional backgrounds, skills and attributes, the practices and mindsets of Linking work, their views on the role that Linkers play and the conditions that support them to be effective. We also drew on insights from our work with a Linker organisation from a previous evaluation project.

We held a workshop with managers of Linker programs to share our findings, test our hypotheses and facilitate discussions between programs/ organisations around the place of Linkers in the support service ecosystem.

This work culminated in redefining our definition of Linkers, our understanding of the workforce and developing potential areas for future exploration.



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