Qualitative Evaluation of Better Connect's **Thriving at Work**: Workplace Support

Full Report

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1.0
Introduction

1 Introduction

This report provides a qualitative evaluation of Better Connect's Thriving at Work: Workplace Support initiative. Workplace Support was one strand of Better Connect's Thriving at Work programme, a 30-month project which ran from January 2021 to June 2023. The overall aim of Thriving at Work was to support more people to thrive in their employment, with a particular focus on supporting inclusive workplaces that can unlock the potential of staff who are neurodiverse, disabled or experience mental health challenges.

Thriving at Work operated across York, North Yorkshire and East Riding. It was part-funded by the European Social Fund and supported locally with match-funding from North Yorkshire County Council, City of York Council, East Riding of Yorkshire Council and HEY Smile Foundation. All aspects of Thriving at Work were delivered free to the individual and employers.

The Workplace Support component offered 1-1 coaching and mentoring for employed people who self-identify as being neurodiverse, disabled or experiencing mental health challenges. Workplace Support was delivered via nine delivery partners; all were locally-based specialists in mental health, disability and/or neurodiversity. Some delivery partners focused on a particular part of the region, but there was no postcode lottery; if a certain delivery partner had the right specialism and could feasibly work with a business/individual, then an appropriate match was made regardless of location. For example, Autism Plus (the only autism specialist involved) covered the whole region.

Participants enrolled on Thriving at Work: Workplace Support were assigned a 1-1 keyworker (variously known as a keyworker, mentor or coach) who offered individual and personalised support and guidance, to identify and address the challenges faced in their employment role. Support was highly tailored and flexible, and delivery partners had the autonomy to structure their intervention as best suited their organisation and clientele. This included the breadth, duration and location of intervention.

1.1 Research design

This research project evaluated the Thriving at Work: Workplace Support initiative. The research followed a previous collaborative project focused on Better Connect's flagship employability support programme: Action Towards Inclusion.

For the present project, the researchers worked collaboratively with the Thriving at Work programme manager, Emma Lyons, to design a qualitative evaluation that explored the experiences of programme participants and their keyworkers.

The research aims were as follows:

- To understand the experience of Workplace Support from the perspective of programme participants and 1-1 keyworkers
- To identify what elements of Workplace Support are perceived as most effective in maintaining a positive and productive experience of employment, from the perspective of programme participants and keyworkers
- To understand any challenges experienced, from the perspective of programme participants and keyworkers
- To contribute detailed evidence and practical recommendations to inform future project development for Better Connect and their wider stakeholder network
- To increase evidence on the 1-1 keyworker approach to employment support, building on findings of the qualitative study of Action Towards Inclusion (ATI) keyworker experiences

1.2 Research participants

All nine Thriving at Work delivery partners were invited to take part in a research interview, exploring their experiences of delivering the Workplace Support initiative and the types of impacts and outcomes they observed among participants. This invitation was circulated by Emma Lyons, with delivery partner staff responding to the researchers on a voluntary basis. Nine delivery partner staff (representing six delivery partners) offered to take part in an interview [1]. The majority of respondents were 1-1 keyworkers, whilst a couple had overarching administrative roles or were primarily involved in training provision for programme participants. For brevity, all staff interviewed for the research are referred to in this report as 'keyworkers'. Interviews with delivery partner staff were conducted via video call.

All of the interviewed delivery partner staff were asked (if they felt appropriate), to approach one or two of their Workplace Support participants, to see if they would be willing to share their experiences with the researchers. To support inclusion, a variety of modes were offered, including an in-person or remote interview, an email interview, or a written testimonial. This resulted in responses from eight programme participants, who shared their perspectives via in-person (n=2), video call (n=3), email interview (n=1) or written testimonial (n=2). Interviews took place between May and July 2023.

We explored the feasibility of including employers in the research design, but preliminary discussions with keyworkers indicated that employers were rarely directly involved in their work with programme participants. We are grateful to one employer who did spontaneously come forward to offer their perspective via a brief online conversation.

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[1] One delivery partner declined to take part citing a lack of capacity and two explained they had limited involvement with the Workplace Support strand of the wider Thriving at Work programme.

1.3 Analysis

Both researchers read all interview transcripts and written contributions, with analytic notes added to the documents. Following this, one researcher focused on the keyworker data and the other on programme participants to synthesise the data into themes. The set of emerging themes arising from this first stage were then shared with Better Connect as a draft report. The researchers met with Emma and Better Connect CEO Natasha Babar-Evans, for a collaborative discussion meeting to explore, expand and contextualise the thematic evidence. This fed into revisions and production of the final research report.

2.0
Programme Focus & Approach

2 Programme focus and approach

2.1 Programme participant circumstances and challenges: Employment, health and personal circumstances

Keyworkers described a wide variety of employment circumstances amongst Workplace Support participants, including people in public or private sector professions and people working in retail, leisure, caring or manual sectors. Programme participants included part-time and full-time workers and the self-employed. This diversity was also reflected in the group of programme participants who shared their experience for the research.

Workplace Support was designed to support people who are **neurodiverse, disabled or experience mental health challenges**. This latter category of 'mental health challenges' was broadly interpreted. Delivery partners had worked with participants living with long-term mental health conditions as well as people experiencing circumstantial stress and distress or low mental wellbeing:

> *"Quite a few of the participants have had a lot of mental health support before … but those challenges don't go away for them. So it's how to navigate the office environment, how to navigate social isolation when you're home working, things like that. How to navigate your anxiety, your depression or even people who are neurodivergent, how that translates to the office for them and their colleagues and their access to work passports, and things like that; how that's incorporated into their day-to-day work."*
> *(Keyworker 4)*

> *''For my people it's probably closer to the poor wellbeing … I would say most of our conversations, they don't feel condition specific … that's not the angle that we're coming at it … I would say predominantly it's struggling with mental wellbeing, and I guess we kind of deliberately don't really go into conversations around diagnosis, necessarily. We kind of keep it broader than that."*
> *(Keyworker 5)*

Whilst we were only able to hear directly from a small number of programme participants, this sample illustrated the range of neurodiversity and mental health experiences, and the variety of challenges people were facing, from work-related stress and anxiety through to complex life circumstances and levels of adversity that had at times brought them to a point of feeling suicidal. Keyworkers perceived that anxiety and low confidence were a common experiences across the wider programme participant cohort:

> "I would say that most of our participants, at the moment, tend to have mental health issues, lack of confidence, anxiety. Want to get on with whatever - want to go to college or get into work - but just have those barriers that are holding them back. And it does tend to be a lot of confidence, anxiety, lack of self-esteem. The ability is definitely there; it's just their self-worth maybe is not there. So I would say that that's maybe the common link through our participants, is that lack of self-confidence, lack of self-worth, definitely."
> (Keyworker 7)

Work-related and broader challenges

The challenges that programme participants were facing at the point they approached Workplace Support were diverse. Some were experiencing primarily work-related challenges, with particular **workplace issues causing stress and anxiety**. Difficulties that people were experiencing within their role included **bullying, feeling undervalued or disempowered** in the workplace, stress caused by **overwhelming workload** or **competing/conflicting demands, physical and emotional depletion** due to constant caregiving and support to others, **low confidence, lack of self-belief or imposter syndrome**. Given the timing of the Thriving at Work initiative, a number of challenges stemmed from the effects of working through the Covid 19 pandemic, particularly for those in people-facing and human services roles (e.g. NHS, education and social welfare). To give some examples as described by programme participants:

> "I basically wanted coaching, and somebody that would help me to separate out all the different strands of what I was dealing with, and would be able to take my perspective on it. Because I was juggling a lot of things, and they were pulling me in different directions, and I was getting pretty stressed … The job seemed too full. And I don't want to go and be as dramatic as to say, well, the job was breaking me, but I was struggling with competing demands … It was causing me a considerable amount of stress and difficulty, and I didn't know what to do."
> (Programme Participant 1)

> *"I have always been an anxious person, but since the COVID-19 pandemic began, my social anxiety in general has gotten worse. It had gotten to the point where it was affecting my work (panic episodes in meetings both in-person and remotely, for example). I started actively avoiding going to the office if I could help it and became fearful of interacting with colleagues face-to-face. I knew I needed to find some support to improve my wellbeing generally, and the Thriving at Work programme seemed well targeted at the situation I found myself in."*
> *(Programme Participant 6)*

For neurodiverse individuals, workplace challenges could include **broaching conversations with employers** around support needs and adjustments, or **skills to understand and navigate the social and relational elements** of the workplace.

Whilst there were aspects of workplace structures and processes that were challenging, people also recognised that their own **internalised ways of responding** - linked to their stress, distress or anxiety - were contributing to difficulties in the workplace and in their wider lives, and could benefit from being addressed as part of their engagement with Workplace Support:

> *"When things were getting on top of me, I would react - I'm not sure aggressively is the word - but I would go from nought to a hundred very quickly and the smallest issue would become huge and very overwhelming … I was becoming unbearable to work with. People were sort of avoiding me in a way, because I was reacting really over the top … And that was at home as well as at work … Something had to give because neither myself, my family or my employer could carry on the way that I was."*
> *(Programme Participant 3)*

There were also participants who were living through a wider set of c**omplex personal, social and economic challenges** which impacted them **in and outside of work**. These participants sometimes required a more holistic approach to support, to help address needs that originated outside of the workplace:

> *"The sort of referrals I was getting were people struggling with life challenges rather than work challenges. And also with maybe debt, housing, relationships, a bit of substance misuse maybe, mental health, anxiety, depression. But it was affecting their work. So it wasn't that their work was bothering them, but the issues going on in their life were affecting their work and preventing them from developing and having that improved labour status or confidence."*
> *(Keyworker 8)*

> *"I think there's been lots of personal circumstances as well, that we have people coming to us with, which essentially is not work-related but inevitably transfers into the working environment - which they feel a bit apprehensive about - about talking to their employer about it - because it's perhaps situations that are not relevant. Or they don't feel it's relevant, when the reality of it is that the employer should take that on board."*
> *(Keyworker 6)*

Identifying and shaping work-related goals

Keyworkers described how, for some programme participants, the aim was to **stay in their current role** and feel they were managing better. Notably, however, for a number of programme participants a **change of role** was the better way forward, either to remove themselves from a negative workplace situation, or in a more proactive search for change, to achieve greater fulfilment:

> *"There have been participants who have been unhappy in work or they've felt that their employer's not understanding them or bullying them or they're unhappy in their workplace. And it's been a case of, 'Right, well how do we change this? What can we do together?' And it might be to start looking for other positions."*
> *(Keyworker 8)*
>
> *"There's a couple that have been actually around jobsearching. So I had one client who was in a stable job, but not particularly happy, didn't really connect values-wise with the employer, and was always looking for something else. So our conversation was helping them to have structure around jobsearch, because it was a bit all over the place, and they weren't quite sure what to look for and where. So that was about creating structure and a real goal and aim around what they were looking for."*
> *(Keyworker 5)*
>
> *"I did have some people who were looking for another job when they contacted me, saying that either they were upset with how things were going at work, but they'd reached a point already before they contacted me, that they didn't want to resolve them, or they felt like they were either unresolvable or they didn't want to go through formal tribunals or anything. They were just down and they just wanted out."*
> *(Keyworker 2)*

These different objectives and drivers - coping better in a job they valued vs. seeking to move away from unfulfilling or detrimental work environments - were also reflected in programme participants' descriptions of why they approached Workplace Support for assistance:

"I knew I needed to find some support to improve my wellbeing generally, and the Thriving at Work programme seemed well targeted at the situation I found myself in … We worked through my problems methodically over a few sessions and figured out that my anxiety probably stemmed from long term Imposter Syndrome that had come to a head. I felt threatened at work, yet there was no evidence that my employer was anything other than very supportive to me … Through the following sessions, my coach continued to help me reflect and learn more about 'my imposter'"
(Programme Participant 6)

"I wasn't happy in my role. I was struggling. I'd not been very well for quite a long time, and in that time a new manager had come in, and I didn't really feel very valued, or that I could contribute or make a difference as I would like to … And it really was about not feeling valued in the job, it was affecting my confidence … And it was causing this anxiety, and there was other things going on with my health as well that I was trying to deal with. But it was causing me a lack of confidence and affecting my mental health really and the anxiety, worrying about things … I just didn't feel valued and I felt frustrated that I'd got all these ideas and there's things that we could, that they just didn't want to do … I wasn't happy really with the job and didn't feel fulfilled."
(Programme Participant 5)

2.2 Two approaches to support: coaching vs. keyworking

Interviews with keyworkers revealed two distinctive approaches within the Workplace Support programme. We describe these as **'coaching' vs. 'keyworking'**. Both approaches are **highly person-centred** and programme participants experienced both as incredibly valuable. The main differences were that the coaching model was more **structured and boundaried** whilst the key working approach was more **open-ended and holistic.**

Keyworkers taking a 'coaching' approach followed a more structured model, typically 6-8 sessions of a set one-hour duration. These sessions could be spaced flexibly, to fit the programme participant's wishes, but **parameters and expectations were managed clearly from the outset** about the number and length of sessions. Whilst recognising the interplay of work and home life stressors, generally speaking, the 'coaching' approach also stayed more closely focused on work-related issues:

"The people that I've worked with, they've all been very workplace-based issues … all of my questions, all of my focus is going to be around the workplace, and there's obviously a bit of crossover and a bit of personal life stuff that comes in, but it's predominantly work stuff … For me [the work focus] is definitely deliberate; it's part of that boundary setting that I do at the beginning."
(Keyworker 5)

By contrast, in the 'keyworking' approach, contacts could be more **fluid and responsive, less time-bound** (though some participants nevertheless only needed fairly short-term support), and could involve a wider range of support **encompassing issues outside of work**, as exemplified by the following case descriptions:

"Initially [the programme participant] came to me with some financial issues. But what happened then, it was relationship issues which affected his work … So I continued the work with him to a point where he moved out of the family home, he got his own flat. I got him furniture, food parcels, all the things, essential things he needed to sort of survive and live. And from that point, he was able to build himself up. It was the sort of turning point, the starting point for him to get his life back in check."
(Keyworker 8)

"Next month, I've got a tribunal date set with one of my clients where we're appealing his PIP decision … To be fair, it's a little bit above and beyond what Thriving at Work is all about but there is nowhere else for them to go, there is nowhere for them to go for support … Even one [programme participant] the other week, I took him shopping, I met him in town, we went shopping to Marks & Spencer and I showed him the meal deals and things that they had because he had this gift card [and] he didn't know what to spend it on."
(Keyworker 1)

Keyworking   Coaching

Keyworking:
open ended
Holistic
Fluid/responsive
Less time restraints
Flexible (encompassing issues outside of work too)

Overlap:
Tailored
Person-centered
Elements of both utilised in supporting participants

Coaching:
Structured
Boundaried
6-8 session, generally 1 hour
Clear parameters & expectations
Mostly work-focused
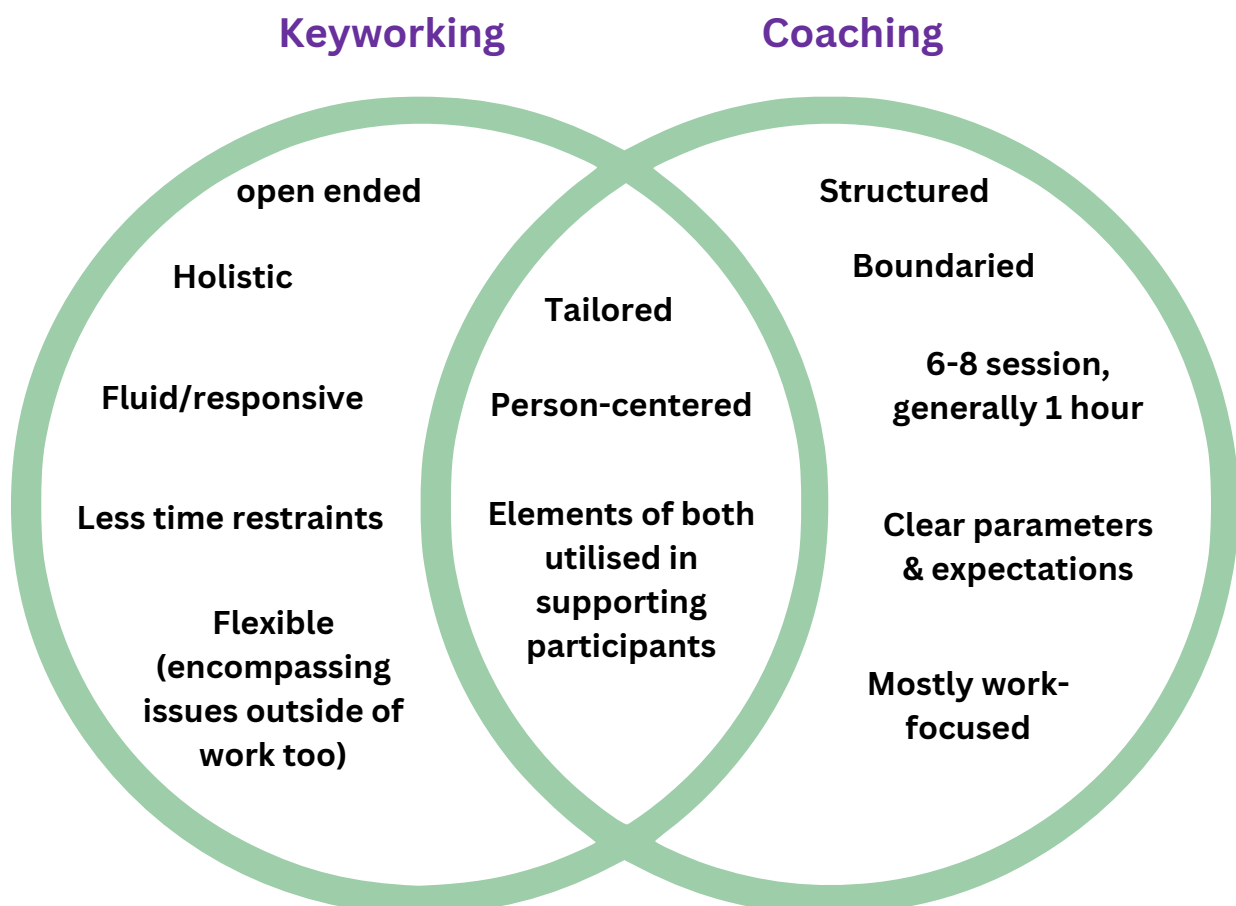
Whilst we have identified 'key working' and 'coaching' as two quite distinctive approaches, in practice many keyworkers combined elements of both, **tailoring their approach according to individual participant needs and circumstances**. Importantly, the techniques used by those taking a key working approach typically *also* involved coaching-style tools, but embedded within a more holistic and open-ended model of support. Likewise some keyworkers who followed a more structured coaching approach did occasionally offer more than the standard number of sessions, if a participant seemed in particular need and/or capacity permitted.

Recognising that some delivery partners had strengths leaning towards either the coaching or the key working approach, if referrals to Workplace Support came in via Better Connect, the programme manager would **triage participants towards the most appropriate provider**. For example, referrals that evidently centred around work-related stress in professional roles would be signposted to delivery partners skilled in professional coaching, whilst referrals that involved complex social needs might be directed to delivery partners with a skillset around a more holistic key working approach.

2.3 Location, timing and duration of support

It was notable that Workplace Support meetings relatively rarely took place physically within the programme participant's workplace. In the majority of cases, programme participants had met with their keyworker either **online or at the provider's base location**. As we describe further below (section 3.6), support that was independent from an employer was valued by many programme participants, and the physical separation from the workplace could be important.

One provider operated from a site located within a green space and offered participants the chance to meet in an outdoor structure or to 'walk-and-talk'. Keyworkers and participants alike noted the benefits of this:

> *"The lovely thing about being onsite is that you can walk and talk. So most of the time, the people who come to us want to do that … We just go for a lovely walk around the* [outdoor space]*, and talk as we're going, which I think makes a difference. I mean, there's known research around that, isn't there, that side-by-side by talking and how that changes interaction for some people"*
> *(Keyworker 5)*

> *"The setting was helpful. I had my coaching sessions at the nature reserve and I think it was the perfect setting to balance out talking through some challenging stuff."*
> *(Programme Participant 6)*

Online and telephone appointments were noted as beneficial for programme participants whose time was constrained. Virtual meetings also enabled keyworkers to **maximise the scheduling flexibility** they could offer. Some keyworkers offered provision through a flexible combination of online and in-person, and one worked entirely online. Online coaching was felt to work effectively where this fitted with individual participant preferences, underpinned by the growing familiarity and comfort with online communications post-pandemic.

A delivery partner that focused exclusively on skills training described how participants could work on their courses from home and/or make use of the provider premises for on-site support.

Depending on the nature of programme participants' roles and the extent of autonomy and flexibility in their schedules, keyworkers would meet with them either during working hours or on the participants' days off. The ability for programme participants to meet during their working hours could depend on their employer's willingness to allow for this time off. Few keyworkers offered meetings 'out of hours' but all were as flexible as they could be, within the parameters of their own working patterns.

The overall duration of intervention, regardless of the number of sessions, varied quite significantly. Some participants felt their needs had been met following sessions spaced out over a few weeks. Other participants spread their support sessions over a longer timespan and stayed with a provider for a year or more. The **flexibility of pace and scheduling** was viewed as a important feature of effective support as detailed in section 3.5.

2.4 Involvement of employers

Among the programme participants who took part in the research, **most said there had been no direct contact** between their keyworker and their employer. In some cases, this was a deliberate choice by the participant who did not want their employer involved - namely those whose difficulties stemmed from workplace tensions or conflicts - in a three-way conversation. In other cases, programme participants said their employer was aware they were receiving support but they did not feel a need to initiate direct contact with their keyworker:

> *"I'm quite fortunate in that I have a supportive employer- they knew I was taking part in the programme and encouraged it. We determined quickly that there was no particular reason I was feeling threatened at work, and that it was an internal problem for me. I don't think in this case it was necessary to involve them."*
> *(Programme Participant 6)*
>
> *"Would it have been beneficial for my line manager to liaise directly with* [keyworker]*? … Me personally, no way. To have it as an offer, I think, might be useful, because in some cases, it could be really helpful. For me, that would have put me off."*
> *(Programme Participant 1)*

Supportive line managers are often crucial to the sustainability of work and productivity throughout times of physical or mental ill health. Some participants had benefited from making their employer aware of their participation in the programme despite not seeking their direct involvement, as this had facilitated attendance during work time:

> *"I told her about* [Thriving at Work] *and the support that I got and how often my appointments were. And she was like, yeah, whatever time you need, just do it. There's been a few occasions where I've got quite overwhelmed at work and the first thing she says to me is, do you need to go and take a break and speak to* [keyworker]? *So she knows that the support that I get from* [keyworker] *is vital to keeping me at work."*
> *(Programme Participant 3)*

> *"I attended the sessions during work time, my employer was aware and supportive."*
> *(Programme Participant 6)*

Direct contact with employers seemed somewhat more common among neurodiverse participants, perhaps due to the support given to managing social interactions within the workplace and reflecting the specialist neurodiversity provider's model of intervention. One specialist keyworker described regular contact with employers, including some contacts initiated by employers seeking advice on how to support a neurodiverse employee. This delivery partner would offer **specialist guidance to employers** on how to understand a neurodiverse employee better and to support them in their work role:

> *"We can advocate on [the employee's] behalf. We can be that voice, we can be that person who can speak to the employer and say to them, 'So this is where this client is struggling' or 'These are their concerns; have you considered this, have you considered that?' We go in very much with an open mind. We are not there to insist on anything or any changes or anything. We're not there to tell them what to do or how to do the job or how to treat the employee … We're there simply to advise and we're there to listen as well, if they then come to us and go, 'So this scenario has cropped up, I'm not sure what to do about it - have you got any advice?' and things like that."*
> *(Keyworker 1)*

Not all programme participants who were engaged with the neurodiversity specialist partner wanted to involve their employer, and the delivery partner respected this wish for confidentiality. However, the keyworkers felt that where an employer *could* be brought into the conversation, this was beneficial:

> *"It can make it a little bit more tricky and a little bit more difficult, if [programme participants] won't let us engage with the employer. But if they do, then it does make it a lot easier because then we can just go in and we can just let them know that we're just here to help and to support."*
> *(Keyworker 1)*

An employer who offered to share their experiences for this research project described the value of having expert guidance and support from the specialist neurodiversity partner:

> *"I wasn't struggling, but I wanted to make sure that I was doing the right thing … So I got in touch with [keyworker], she came up, gave us some advice, took [employee] on board on her work programme, and worked really well with her, doing a lot of 1-1s with her … With the help of [keyworker], she really, really thrived. She absolutely shone, because she got somebody that could understand."*
> *(Employer)*

In terms of benefits to the employer, it had been reassuring to have access to a specialist who could offer advice in situations that they felt unsure how to approach:

> *"We just sat down and we just had a chat, and if I'd got any concerns, she'd be there to support me, if I'd got any questions about just what's going on. You know, like if [employee]- how to cope with when she has sensory issues, and things like that. It was just nice to know that there was somebody there, in case anything serious did happen, or something that I couldn't handle could come up."*
> *(Employer)*

The specialist provider had gone on to engage several of this company's neurodiverse employees in 1-1 support, as well as delivering training to the full management group, "*so it was more awareness for everybody, of how to help people with neurodiverse conditions.*" This increased understanding of how neurodiversity affected individuals had given the management team more confidence in how to address situations, and had led them to make adjustments, for example giving neurodiverse staff adjusted timetables, more explicit task instructions and more time to complete their duties.

For keyworkers based in other delivery partner organisations, it was relatively unusual to have direct contact with a participant's employer. One keyworker described how, on the rare occasions this had happened, their input was well-received and they had been able to move forward and offer guidance in putting together a workplace plan to support the employee. These cases of **employer contact tended to be where the relationship between employee and employer was already generally positive**, and so the intervention of the keyworker was building from this good foundation:

> *"It's interesting how many people don't want us to talk to their employer … There's not been a huge amount of situations where we've had any contact with [employers]. But when we have made contact with the employers, it's always been relatively positive, and well received. We've been able to open up the lines of communication internally and we've been able to then offer onward support to the organisation and to the individual … So it's always been really well received … But often when we have got involved, the relationship with the employee and the employer has been relatively okay, prior to that, it's been okay."*
> *(Keyworker 6)*

Echoing some of the programme participants, another keyworker attributed the limited amount of employer involvement to the fact that participants did not feel this was needed:

> *"[Participants] know that if they wanted to have those conversations and us be involved, then they could do that and we'd gladly be involved in those. But generally, they haven't needed that … How it's worked really, is people have come and shared what's been difficult, what they need a little bit of support around, what their manager's response has been, that kind of thing, and then we've had a chat about how that can be addressed … It often comes up as a possibility, should it be helpful. But I think the fantastic thing has been that they've generally had the confidence to go away and do it themselves."*
> *(Keyworker 4)*

Keyworkers were also conscious of some participants' reluctance to involve their employers due to concerns that this would make already difficult workplace situations worse. For instance, one keyworker described how she would always suggest contact with employer, but in the majority of cases, participants did not want this because they feared being seen as "*difficult*" "*moaning*" or "*creating an issue*":

"*There have been participants that I've worked with who have been unhappy in work or they've felt that their employer's not understanding them or bullying them or they're unhappy in their workplace … I'll always offer them for me to approach their employer if they're comfortable with it. And I'd say 98% of the time that they don't want me to do that because they're scared of the outcome, or they're worried that because they're getting support, that that's going to make a situation worse.*"
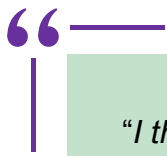*(Keyworker 8)*

One route for both employer and self-referrals onto the Workplace Support element of Thriving at Work was where employing organisations engaged in other parts of the programme offer e.g. diversity training. Through engagement in these wider workplace activities, employers/managers sometimes identified certain employees who might benefit from 1-1 support, or indeed recognised a need in themselves. As such, whilst an ongoing three-party dialogue around individual cases seemed relatively uncommon, engaging employers in diversity awareness training at the overall workforce level could prove a valuable route to connecting individual employees with 1-1 support:

"*What happens an awful lot is when anybody is engaged in our training - usually every single time - we will have somebody come to us to go, 'This is all me, that I didn't realise, and this is definitely me.' Or they will come to us and go, 'So I'm diagnosed with autism, I think I need support,' or the employer will come to us and go, 'I've got a staff member,' or, 'I've got a couple of staff members - can we have a conversation?' … When we see people face-to-face, delivering the training, that always opens people's minds and makes them see, 'Actually I've seen those traits in that employee and that employee and that employee.*"
(Keyworker 1)

"*There were a number of clients that actually came in* [via the diversity training strand]*, that originally were just interested in getting their own awareness about mental health developed. But actually, recognised they could do with some more one-to-one support themselves, so that was another route through, that came as a result of the training that we were offering.*"
(Keyworker 3)

Looking to the future of the programme, some keyworkers therefore felt that drawing more employing organisations into overarching diversity training would have the added value of, in turn, engaging more employees in 1-1 workplace support. Making a more general point, another keyworker felt that employer identification and referral of potential participants was a route that would lead to effective outcomes:

" *I think for future projects, it would be fantastic if we had employers reaching out to us with employees, who wanted to help support their employees. Because in the few cases where that did happen, I think it was very successful.*"
(Keyworker 2)

Looking back over her longer career in the employability sector, one keyworker commented that employers were notoriously difficult to engage. Yet she could see how employers could benefit greatly from more uptake and collaboration around Workplace Support provision:

" *It would take such a weight off the employers' shoulders to know that they've got somebody external to their normal [in-house] occupational support … It's like somebody more interpersonal coming in and working together … And it's going to reflect in work, potentially. So it's having that middle person, that trustworthy person out of work that can then feed back in, where appropriate and confidentially, to that employer … It doesn't affect any of their time or money or anything like that. But it's just getting employers to recognise that you're there to help and support, not there to make things more difficult or interfere in any logistics or any structure of the business. You're just there to improve that work-life balance.*"
(Keyworker 8)

Participant

TAW Keyworker   **Employer**
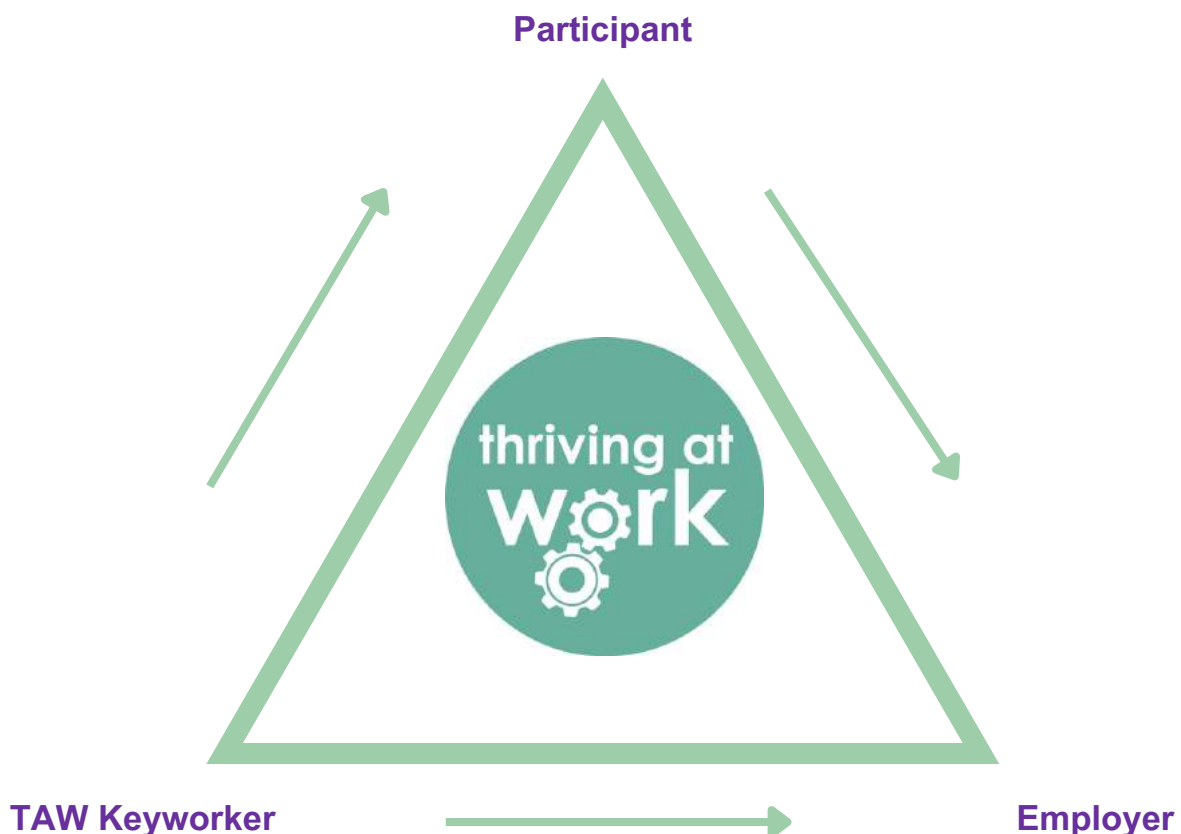
3.0
Features of effective support

3 Features of effective support:

3.1 Listening and holding space for concerns

Several programme participants mentioned the value of having **someone who listened to them carefully and with focused attention**. This contributed to a feeling of person-centred support but was also an important tool in the coaching process through enabling and encouraging people to **reach their own understanding** about what was troubling them:

> *"I think [keyworker] and who she was, and the fact that she was there for me, and she was holding the space for me. And she was so kind, respectful, wise, appropriate, relevant … The most valuable was that, being seen and heard and held in my struggle and being supported, not told what to do, but shown where the places might be to look, and then helping me to formulate what I'm going to do about that, and how I'm going to measure that, and am I going to carry that forward."*
> *(Programme Participant 1)*
>
> *"I was on the phone to him probably a good hour and 15 minutes. And I just felt like a massive weight had been lifted off of my shoulders because I finally felt that somebody was not just listening to me but was hearing me."*
> *(Programme Participant 3)*
>
> *"Just having a point of contact, and someone with whom I could discuss some of my challenges as an autistic person, has been hugely beneficial to me, and thanks to [my keyworker's] feedback, has helped me put things in perspective, process and adapt."*
> *(Programme Participant 8)*

A participant who was in the process of establishing a new business found it particularly helpful to talk through areas of worry and uncertainty with his keyworker, and use his keyworker as **a sounding board and sense-check** for his ideas. A neurodiverse participant described how she met with her keyworker once a week to *"offload what's going on"* and help her *"think about her routine"*.

Keyworkers also recognised this valuable aspect of their role, as being someone who could **listen, uphold and reassure** the participant as they clarified and worked through their difficulties:

> *"I think sometimes it's just that conversation with somebody else to say, 'You're going to be okay and I'm here, I'm not going anywhere, we'll work through it. You tell me what you feel you need me to do, I'll do that part while you're struggling.' So they can just get above that- I guess if they feel they're sinking, to just get back above that water level to a point where they go, 'Right, okay, I feel more positive now, I'm able to approach that difficult situation'"*
> *(Keyworker 8)*

Keyworkers also recognised the significant value of simply **being listened to non-judgmentally**:

> *"I honestly think the most important thing, if you asked my clients about it, would be just having someone they can talk to about these issues. Someone they can vent to, someone they can ask, you know, are they going crazy? Is how they're being treated fair? Is that what happens to other people? Just having someone who knows about the [neurodiverse] condition, who's not going to judge them, is open and is listening to what they're really saying and can offer some support and advice. I think that's been the most important thing to a lot of my clients. They often have very few other people, even in their personal lives, who they can talk to about things."*
> *(Keyworker 2)*

3.2 Identifying and clarifying areas of difficulty

Closely linked to the act of listening and holding space for concerns, keyworkers facilitated **a space for self-reflection** within which programme participants could **identify the crux of their difficulties** - what was the root cause of their stress or anxiety - and what were the aspects that needed to be addressed:

> *"The key thing was [my keyworker] drilling right down to the bottom to finding out what the cause was. That was the foundation to then, right, this is what we need to work on. There was a lot of self-reflection, there was a lot of looking in the mirror thinking, 'Gosh, I never saw myself like that.' … It was that intensive work that made me think, I've got a mental health condition but actually it doesn't define me. I have to live with it and what do I need to do to live with it?"*
> *(Programme Participant 3)*
>
> *"I was just all over the place … It seemed like too much for me to cope with. And yet, when I was talking it through with [my keyworker], I could see which bits I had agency over. And that was so useful, just taking that time out and taking that space to focus on me, my role, my job, what I wanted, what I didn't want, and so on."*
> *(Programme Participant 1)*
>
> *"Quite often you'd come up with the answers yourself but you don't realise until you talk to somebody else, so the coaching helped bring that out."*
> *(Programme Participant 5)*

> "*Gathering that evidence and seeing different options and choice …* [the participant] *felt empowered by the end of the session to be able to do things. Whereas before, the overwhelm was just like, 'I can't do anything, I just don't know what to do, I don't know where to start.' And often, when everything is overwhelmed, it's that: what is that first step and how do you just help that person get to that first step, which can be a game changer.*"
> *(Keyworker 3)*

Part of the Workplace Support model was that participants would set three goals, in collaboration and consultation with their keyworker. One participant described how this **goal-setting had been a useful activity** and had itself formed part of the process of starting to unpack and identify the nature of the problems she was experiencing:

> "*I found it helpful to come up with my goals, because it made it concrete, and it helped … Framing the goals in a useful way was almost part of the work; it was almost part of me coming out of this big mess into, 'Okay, what's doable, what's workable, what's concrete.' And so I found the fact that we co-created that, and there was time to actually explore that, was really, really helpful.*"
> *(Programme Participant 1)*

A number of examples were given of how keyworkers had assisted programme participants to navigate through periods of decision-making or managing change, for example, reaching a decision to pursue a new type of work, to start their own business, or to leave a toxic work environment.

3.3 Offering tools and strategies for managing work and wellbeing

The majority of keyworkers, whether they took a primarily 'coaching' or 'key working' approach, described a range of concepts, tools and strategies they would use with programme participants, to help them identify and then address challenges they were facing in work. These included:

- **Mindset techniques drawn from CBT**
- **Mindfulness-based approaches, acceptance practices and reframing exercises**
- **Focus on practical strategies for time management and organising workload, to reduce feelings of overwhelm**
- **Coaching around assertive communication**
- **How to broach workplace conversations around mental health or neurodiversity**

Many of the programme participants who took part in the research, particularly those who had engaged in more structured coaching-style support, likewise described how their keyworker had introduced them to a range of tools and strategies, variously focused on better management of workload, addressing workplace issues or dedicating time to emotional wellbeing and self-care.

Workplace strategies included **time management and workload planning** tools, **scheduling breaks** between meetings and **assertive communication**. Strategies for personal wellbeing included **emotional 'self-check-ins'**, pre-emptively recognising the need for **planned days off**, and attention to good **sleep, diet and exercise**:

> *"It's a case of, well if they're eating properly and they're sleeping better because they're not worrying as much, then they're going to be more productive at work, aren't they and they're going to be able to get up and they've got that drive to actually leave the house and go to work."*
> *(Keyworker 1)*

Keyworkers had also signposted people to **self-help books and online resources**, which gave further strategies around managing wellbeing and mindset.

> *"She would suggest things like reading materials, like books as well, or links to things, which was really helpful. She'd send a summary of what we've discussed and links to any books to read or any research or anything that was really helpful. And she was a fount of knowledge on different things."*
> *(Programme Participant 5)*

3.4 Active involvement and supportive challenge

Reflecting the core principles of coaching, participants highlighted the benefits of having an actively involved keyworker who would **gently challenge their perceptions** and **offer alternative ways of looking at situations**. One programme participant emphasised that the real value for her, over and above previous experiences of counselling, was that her keyworker went beyond listening and holding space, to actually offering strategies to try out, and then reviewing and trying something else if the first suggestion was not effective:

> *"It's that intervention that they do, rather than that offering a listening service. It's actively being involved. And if something isn't working, then thinking, right, okay, let's look at something else rather than, 'Well, we have to work within these parameters and I can't go outside of that.'"*
> *(Programme Participant 3)*

Similarly, another participant described how - alongside suggested tools and strategies - her keyworker would also offer a degree of challenge, which helped her to alter her outlook:

> *"She would challenge my point of view sometimes. She would challenge back [and] so I would think differently … And thinking about different things, so there were different ways of dealing with things. And I always felt like I'd got a plan afterwards, and I was keen then to meet up with her again and share what I'd put into practice, what had or hadn't worked, or those ideas. So that was really helpful …. She was empathic, in a nice way. Without being too soft, because she was doing the coaching as well."*
> *(Programme Participant 5)*

Perspective-taking was a tool used by some keyworkers. Programme participants talked about how their coach would ask them to imagine what they would tell a friend or colleague in their situation, or to take the perspective of another person who was observing their own behaviours or actions, and what that would look or feel like. Some participants mentioned the value of **accountability**, when done in a **non-judgemental and supportive** manner:

> *"It's that almost making me accountable, that's what they've done; they've made me accountable. And because I can't just keep saying, 'Woe me, woe me.' It's: Okay, what are you going to do about it? You can't carry on like this. You've recognised you can't carry on like this, so now we need to change it. But not being judgemental about it. But also saying, 'You're going to change it; it's going to be scary, it's going to be really difficult, but we're going to be by your side whilst you do it and we'll pick you up if you fall.'"*
> *(Programme Participant 3)*
>
> *"It was really gentle accountability. Because if it had been heavy accountability, I might have fought it … But it was so respectful and it was so relevant, and it was about me, and it was supposed to be about me and it actually was about me, and I thrived in that."*
> *(Programme Participant 1)*

A neurodiverse participant described how it was particularly daunting starting a new job as she found meeting new people and entering new environments challenging. Finding change terrifying, she described how having a keyworker **helped to push her to do things** and how *"she makes things seem less scary."* (Programme Participant 2).

3.5 Flexibility of location, pace and scheduling

Overall, the delivery of workplace support was **tailored to individual programme participants** with **a high degree of flexibility** offered to suit their specific circumstances. As noted earlier (section 2.3) the option of online meetings had benefits for participants and keyworkers alike. Where delivery partner organisations had granted keyworkers autonomy to work flexible hours, and to work remotely if they wished, this helped keyworkers to accommodate the scheduling needs of programme participants whilst also maintaining their own work-life balance.

Overall, **offering a combination of online and in-person delivery** maximised flexibility and resulted in the most effective use of keyworker and programme participant time.

Programme participants who engaged in a more structured coaching approach found that **time between sessions** gave them an opportunity to try out and implement strategies and tools, which they could then come back and reflect on at the next meeting:

> *"The duration and frequency felt good. I felt I needed a period of at least a couple of weeks to work on what we had discussed in the previous session. I think this helped me bed-in the techniques and ideas that we had developed."*
> *(Programme Participant 6)*
>
> *"I wanted to space them out, I didn't want to have six sessions and then get out the door. Because you do a lot of work between sessions … I mean, if I could have what I really wanted, I might have wanted more than six sessions. But the fact that I couldn't have more than six, being able to spread the six out was wonderful."*
> *(Programme Participant 1)*

3.6 Independence from employers

The **independence of the Workplace Support provider** from the programme participants' employer and workplace was highlighted as a key strength:

> *"Having an outside perspective on my problem was extremely helpful to me. I don't think I would've been able to talk as freely with anyone from my workplace (even in a mental health first aider role for example). Being able to talk freely, and having a coach that was able to help me reflect on my experiences really helped me get to the crux of the problem".*
> *(Programme Participant 6)*
>
> *"I had somewhere to offload all my stresses at work. I had somewhere to direct those thoughts and conversations to, and it worked … It was just good to have somewhere to offload that wasn't connected to work, where I could go and, I suppose, not complain, but vent and get things off my chest - about work, but not at work - if that makes sense?"*
> *(Programme Participant 7)*
>
> *"I think it was that I had the coaching done where the company didn't know, that it was just for me. And I felt really appreciative of that, and really supportive. I think if work could've known it would've made me feel more anxious, then they'd have wanted to know, and then I'd have had to discuss it. So it just wouldn't have worked."*
> *(Programme Participant 5)*

For some participants, direct contact between their keyworker and their employer had been extremely helpful. As noted in section 2.4, this seemed more common for neurodiverse participants who found social interactions very challenging. Specialist keyworkers helped employers develop their awareness and understanding. However, even where participants had found direct contact between their keyworker and employer to be beneficial, the independence of Workplace Support personnel remained an important factor. For example, a neurodiversity specialist keyworker described how their professional third-party intervention could add useful gravitas to requests for workplace accommodations:

"I think being that outside agency to contact employers, I think that's been really useful, giving that weight and gravitas, maybe, to the condition. Because my sense is with some employers, that they have an employee who's like, 'Oh, I have autism,' [they think] they're just saying it to have special treatment. And when I'm contacting them professionally, coming from [specialist organisation], obviously they can see they've taken that step to get that outside support and someone else is stepping in, I think that does add a weight to their claims and needs. So I think that has really been useful as well."
(Keyworker 2)

4.0

Impacts of Workplace Support

4 Impacts of Workplace Support:

4.1 Building self-confidence, self-belief and resilience

A key impact of Workplace Support was to **increase participant's self-confidence and self-belief** in their ability to thrive at work. The experience of supportive '*handholding*' and having a '*cheerleader*' in their keyworker helped to build programme participants' confidence and resilience. This was connected to the more fundamental processes of having had time to focus on themselves, and the keyworker facilitating a space for venting, reassurance, affirmation and clarification of their circumstances and needs. A keyworker described the various ways in which their clients were now more able to assert their needs in the workplace:

> "So it's things like having conversations at work about mental health, having one-to-one meetings with their manager where they can discuss these things, being able to ask for adjustments, having the confidence to ask for adjustments, being able to ask for changed working hours and days and adjust it accordingly … And even, you know, how to have conversations around workload and workload management and organisation skills and training. Because even just getting the appropriate training and the appropriate feedback, all of that feeds into quite a few people's confidence, and whether they're feeling good about what they're doing, in themselves."
> (Keyworker 4)

Programme participants reflected on how this created a long-term impact, as the tools and techniques gained had a **preventative effect for future scenarios** that might have previously affected participants' mental health and wellbeing. Participants spoke about how they felt **greater resilience** to handle future challenges, unexpected events and changes:

> "I have a new sense of confidence at work and an acceptance that I'm not perfect at my job. I give myself a bit more credit on bad days where things have gone wrong. When I'm faced with something that previously would've made me very anxious, I feel reassured that I have the tools we developed ready to go, and I've found that my anxiety has reduced significantly just knowing that. I feel better equipped to handle surprises too."
> (Programme Participant 6)

> "I'm definitely in a better place, and I'm in a better job and a more sustainable job. A lot of the issues haven't gone away. On a good day, my relationship to those issues is way better, but on a bad day, it's not as bad. I'm noticing me, and even if things are difficult, I'm noticing what I can do about it … [It] made me more aware of me and what I want and need at work, such that I think I'd probably notice sooner if there was something going wrong, and I'd try and fix it sooner, so I could keep things in line … I've got more resilience, I've got more ways of working around something that's not ideal … I think it is resilience that I've got more of … More self-respect, in a way, now. "
> (Programme Participant 1)

described how, being able to draw on the tools and strategies developed with her keyworker, she was more able to face the situation head on and move through it with resilience:

> "I think that was like a big help to me when, after that, I was then made redundant in difficult circumstances. And then obviously looking for another job and finding another job … and obviously it is upsetting and you take it very personally, [but] then it's remembering that I've been through this before … I've coped with difficult things before and that resilience kicked in of: What would you do? What did you do previously? How can you do it? And thinking of all the good things that I could offer … So even though [keyworker] wasn't there in that movement when it happened and I could've done with her, I managed to get through it with the tools and techniques that we'd previously talked about."
> *(Programme Participant 5)*

4.2 Job retention, progression and satisfaction

Keyworkers gave examples of participants who had been **supported to stay and thrive within their current role:**

> "We've had a lot of discussion around how to have mental health conversations, how to make their manager aware of what's going on for you, how to give them that key to you and who you are and what helps … So it's been how to phrase it, how to have those conversations … Even thinking through how to adjust working hours, working days, so that it better suits them, rather than having to go off sick, you know, if they just make those adjustments. It's meant that they've been able to stay in and keep their professional identity."
> *(Keyworker 4)*

As already noted, it was relatively rare for employers to be involved as part of the 1-1 Workplace Support intervention. However, one keyworker noted that when there was involvement and collaboration from all three parties, the employee tended to retain their current role. This likely links back to the observation that where employers were involved, it was usually from a more positive starting point. The employer who volunteered to share their experiences described how, with the support from the specialist neurodiversity provider, they were able to take **more informed approaches to supporting their neurodiverse staff**, which in turn **enabled those staff to sustain and thrive** in their roles:

> "I know that there is the support, if I've got a question. I know more about autism and how to work with people now, than I did before … because of the awareness and because of the information [keyworker] passed on - try this with them and try that with them, and finding different ways that worked - whereas I wouldn't have thought of things like that. It's given [our neurodiverse employees] more chance to be more employable, with the support."
> *(Employer)*

Keyworkers also described cases where the more appropriate action was to **help participants move into a different, more suitable job** with a new employer, if the workplace environment was irretrievably toxic or the type of work was not well suited to them:

> *"I think certain people we worked with are doing far better now than they were when we first met them … and perhaps it might not have been their original job but they're now contributing to another organisation and thriving and I think that's what's really important."*
> (Keyworker 6)

> *"Sometimes having that honest conversation, that that's not the right kind of work for them, and actually they're identifying that actually something else might be different for them. And sometimes that has happened where individuals have left."*
> (Keyworker 3)

Similarly, some of the programme participants described how **changing employer or pursuing their truer aspirations** had been the most appropriate decision for them:

> *"[My keyworker] said to me, "The thing that is the most detrimental to your health is your current environment; you've got to get out." … I'd been there for 19 years … and I was like, "No, oh God, I can't leave, I can't leave," because whilst it was detrimental to my health, it was my safety blanket. It was what I knew. And [keyworker] was like, "No, no, you've got so much more to give," and I was like, "No, no, I can't do it." So again, just through the work and support he did with me, I got the courage to start applying for- well, I started looking for other jobs … And he just did loads of work with me, to which I then started applying for jobs, I got some interviews. And then, thankfully, last March, I had an interview and was appointed to the job that I am in now. And it's been the best thing. It was taking that leap of faith, but taking it knowing that they were holding my hand and it was going to be okay."*
> (Programme Participant 3)

> *"Although [my employer] was aware of my being on the autistic spectrum, they had failed to make any reasonable adjustments. [My keyworker] provided advice and support during regular meetings which helped me to stay employed for a further year [in that role]. He also arranged for me to receive legal advice from a solicitor, and was invaluable during complaint and grievance procedures, attending meetings with HR as a witness and to provide guidance. I have since terminated my employment with [employer], and [keyworker] has aided in my search for work, particularly in suggesting new directions or careers that I hadn't considered. Overall, he has helped maintain my mental health during a very difficult year, and I am more grateful to him than I can ever hope to articulate."*
> (Programme Participant 4)

> *"While a conventional view of my employment outlook may look as bleak as ever, it is partly through the insights [my keyworker] encouraged me to find, that I have been able to look at my life in quite different terms. While accepting I do not have the spending power, social credit, respectability or any of the rest of the privileges I once enjoyed, I now have the greatest and most beautiful thing any person can possess: freedom. Partly through the time we have spent together, I have come to see all the positive aspects to my unique situation, in terms of employment, place in society etc. [My keyworker's] encouragement has helped me to look for different opportunities wherever they might present themselves, and have consequently been able to get my artwork out there a little."*
> *(Programme Participant 8)*

Thinking about the Workplace Support programme's outcome targets as set by DWP, it was notable that keyworkers gave relatively few examples of in-work progression in terms of increases in hours or income with the same employer. Indeed, some keyworkers emphasised the value of participants **maintaining the status quo but managing better** and feeling more happy in their current role:

> *"Just having that confidence sometimes to go for other jobs or do things differently, or just being good enough and actually that's okay. I think this is one of the hard measures of Thriving at Work, that it's like, you know, improve labour statistics. Often if I can get people to keep going to work, and then enjoying it and getting some purpose and meaning out of that, that's a win for me."*
> *(Keyworker 3)*

4.3 Preventing sickness absence and escalation of distress

Programme participants and keyworkers recognised the **preventive effect** of Workplace Support in terms of **reduced absenteeism** and the avoidance of what may have escalated to long-term sickness absence:

> *"Well, I might have…yes, I might have gone off with stress, I might have taken a considerable time off work with stress, potentially, I might have just quit my job. I might just have gone, 'You know what, I can't do this anymore'".*
> *(Programme Participant 1)*
>
> *"The intervention they do, I don't think companies realise how much they are actually saving that company money by people not having to go on long term [absence]. I haven't had long term sick since the day I started getting support." (Programme Participant 3)*
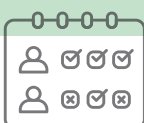
Workplace Support also offered a form of early intervention, that potentially **prevented the escalation of distress** to more serious mental health problems:

> "The number of people that are struggling or finding things tricky, in terms of presenteeism and the cost for employers is enormous. This I think is a halfway house which means it gets over some of the stigma stuff of mental health, it gives them real practical supportive tool, early doors in a proactive sense, that stops people getting to the point where they might need a more intense intervention. So, I think it has a massive place if we can get that right and in the right way."
> *(Keyworker 3)*

4.4 Benefits to family, friends and colleagues

The positive impacts of Workplace Support sometimes extended to others within programme participants' personal or professional networks. Within the workplace, one programme participant described how she was now able to **model coaching approaches**, applying the same techniques that she had benefited from in her coaching sessions to her interactions with other colleagues. She described this as "soft changes" that she as now trying to infuse within the workplace:

> "I can't say, oh, yes, [my employer] has changed this policy or this procedure, there's nothing like that. But the more resilient I can be, and the more present I can be, and the more I can model that, that does have ripples. So, I think there's been soft change."
> *(Programme Participant 1)*

Several people also mentioned how **programme participants' families had benefited** from the positive changes in their wellbeing, mindset or interactions, resulting from steps they had taken in the programme:

> "It saved my life and it saved my family's life as well. It's not just the person who suffers with mental health that is affected, it's everybody around them, whether that be personal or professional. It's a ripple effect. And I don't think people realise that mental health is a ripple effect, it's not just the person with the diagnosis that is suffering, it's everybody around them that's suffering."
> *(Programme Participant 3)*

> "Sometimes you'd be worrying about work when you're at home, whereas the Thriving at Work 'bubble' has allowed me to leave my work worries within that bubble, and then at home, I'm then more focused and present with my wife and children … To alleviate that stress at home, so that it's not - I wouldn't say 'taken out on' - but it's not vented to my wife and children, and impacting on her life."
> *(Programme Participant 7)*

> "One [participant] was really struggling with managing anger, due to personal circumstances … some really deep and complex things. He was going through some real psychological and emotional kind of trauma and challenge. That was impacting on his role significantly. As a result of that, we worked with him to look at the management of that and worked tirelessly with him, and consistently for a long period of time. And as a result, [he] became a version of himself where he was able to do that, which changed his world dramatically both in work and out of work. Enhanced his relationships with his children and so on."
> *(Keyworker 6)*

One of the youngest programme participants who took part in the research described how her keyworker had helped her to explain things to her family, and had provided practical support in helping her to gain an apprenticeship - the next phase in her employment journey. This was helpful as her family would not have a clear understanding of how to help her access this next step:

"If my Mum was here she would be crying and hugging [my keyworker]. *If you said two years ago your daughter would have a job she would have called you a liar".
(Programme Participant 2)*

4.5 Cultivating communities of support

Some delivery partners were able to facilitate a **broader ongoing community of support**, through which Workplace Support participants could continue their relationship with the organisation and with a wider group of peers who were engaged with the provider. This sense of community was beneficial to those taking part, and some found it a valued way to 'give back' through volunteering with the organisation.

"*I'm still very much involved … And whether that be the Thriving programme, or giving back to* [provider], *I'm very heavily involved in, sort of, any programme, and I always introduce myself to new people at* [provider], *as someone that's kind of been on every programme that they offer, because I like to gain from it, but I also like to give back … I just want to be involved as much as possible, because it does still benefit me, just the atmosphere and the people there. They're always there to give guidance and support and advice.*"
(Programme Participant 7)

A notable initiative set up by one delivery partner was a monthly **peer support** group meeting for those who had completed the 1-1 Workplace Support programme. This group was experienced as very positive, had sustained momentum and was highly valued by the participants:

"[Workplace Support provider] *recognises that it's actually about job retention and that it's okay to get you into a job but actually there's still support that's needed to keep you mentally healthy whilst you are still working. So they created the evening support group and we meet once a month. And it's for anybody who works during the day that wants to still keep connected. And it's just brilliant … We'd be lost without it, definitely.*"
(Programme Participant 3)

"*The evening sessions are good to get together, to see* [other people's] *experience of Thriving at Work as well, and also if they've got issues at work, how other people in the room might, "Oh actually, I experienced that," and then they can share their experience. But again, all because of Thriving at Work, and just* [Workplace Support provider] *has decided to take this and provide that extra support.*"
(Programme Participant 7)

The value of this type of ongoing community of support was also alluded to by a keyworker from a different delivery partner organisation:

> "I've got clients that I think, god they would get on really well with them, I wish I could get you together and introduce you because there you go, you've met a friend but I'm not allowed to do things like that."
> (Keyworker 1)

4.6 Improvements in mental wellbeing

The Workplace Support programme routinely gathered participant wellbeing scores at entry and exit, using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS), the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) and the Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7) standardised measures. Qualitative feedback from programme participants showed how these measures could themselves have a positive impact, as they offered **a visible marker of progress** over time and could give participants a sense of pride, further boosting confidence and self-reflection:

> "When I initially filled it out … I was so low at that point that I was just going through the motions. But it was only when I completed it a couple of weeks ago and then [my keyworker] showed me the comparison … When I did it a couple of weeks ago, it was, 'Gosh, look, look what you're doing now.'"
> (Programme Participant 3)
>
> "I think it's good to have them because it's a benchmark. I think you do need a benchmark, don't you. And I think it makes you reflective when you've filled them in, either way, at the start or at the end. Because at the start you realise oh, they're the things that are really bothering me or what I need to work on. And at the end you realise how far you've come. So I think it's really important to have that benchmark."
> (Programme Participant 5)
>
> "They were a useful way to look back on what I had learned by the end of the programme. It was interesting to see that I had progressed in all of the questions I had previously answered negatively."
> (Programme Participant 6)

One programme participant also emphasised how the **qualitative record of actions and progress**, which her keyworker had maintained in their programme 'handbook', was also a valuable reference and source of encouragement:

"[To look back and reflect on the change] was so useful. In fact, what [keyworker] did was, I asked her for this … she actually printed out my whole Thriving at Work booklet, so that I could look back on it. Because I may well have a wobble. And if I look at my trajectory through Thriving at Work, and read through the notes … if I was to read that through again, I would go, 'Oh, yes, you were here, oh, yes, you did this.' And I can see that having that record will help me, if I need the support again, because I can go back to the support I already have. So, I was grateful that she gave me that."
(Programme Participant 1)

5.0

Challenges & suggestions for improvement

5 Challenges and suggestions for improvement

All keyworkers and programme participants were extremely positive about the 1-1 Workplace Support programme. The only area which was consistently raised as somewhat challenging was around **timing and duration of the provision**. Keyworkers recognised that if they were limited to 9-5, Monday-Friday provision, this could be a barrier to engagement both for workers unable to take time off and also for shift workers.

As we have noted above (section 2.3), some programme participants who worked part-time could schedule meetings on their non-working days, and those who had autonomy over their work patterns could use flexitime. Where employers were supportive, some participants had been able to schedule appointments during their working hours. However, keyworkers recognised that **some potential participants had been unable to engage** in Workplace Support, because they **could not take time out of their working day** at times that were compatible with the keyworker's availability, be that due to practical reasons (e.g. teachers) or lack of employer consent.

Several participants - particularly those engaged in a more structured and time-bound coaching approach - said that they **would have liked to continue for longer** with the Workplace Support programme (i.e. more sessions), although they appreciated that resources were finite. Another suggestion was for there to be **a follow-up session after completing the initial programme**, either as a general opportunity to take stock, or in relation to specific challenges faced at a later point in time (e.g. redundancy):

> "[I was] a bit disappointed that it had come to an end. I found the coaching very helpful and would be interested in further support in future, even if it were at reduced frequencies."
> (Programme Participant 6)
>
> "I think it would've been nice if it was longer, but then nothing can go on forever, can it … If I could have worked with her again, I would've done. If I could've worked with her again at that redundancy stage that would've been really helpful."
> (Programme Participant 5)

Programme participants who had received a key working approach **appreciated the ongoing relationship with their keyworker** with an 'open-door' to return for support and guidance as and when needed. The ending of the Thriving at Work programme was a concern to some programme participants, who felt **a need for ongoing support**, even if light-touch:

> *"I do have a fear factor, because when he told me that the Thriving at Work programme was coming to an end, my first reaction was, 'Well, what am I going to do? I can't manage without you.' And he was like, 'No, no, we'll sort something out.' … Because whilst I feel I am probably strong enough now, the thought of not having them there just fills me with absolute dread. And I've had conversations with [keyworker] like this and it's almost just knowing he's there is enough to get me to keep going."*
> *(Programme Participant 3)*

Keyworkers also recognised that participants often had a longer-term need for support, as many were likely to face ongoing challenges and may move in and out of work cyclically. This implies a **need for recurrent in-work or transitional support**. Again linking to the more holistic and open-ended key working approach, it was felt that **keyworkers became an important social connection** for some participants, and there was concern at how these individuals would fare once this support was no longer available.

6.0

The future of Thriving at Work: continuity & evolution of the employment support provision

6 The future of Thriving at Work: continuity and evolution of the employment support provision

It is relevant to note that Thriving at Work sat alongside Better Connect's flagship pre-employment support programme Action Towards Inclusion. Action Towards Inclusion (ATI) pioneered the delivery partnership model, and involved several of the same providers who went on to concurrently deliver Thriving at Work.

Because of this connectivity, a number of Workplace Support programme participants already had an established relationship with their provider and, in some cases, with a particular keyworker who knew their personal circumstances well by the time Thriving at Work came on stream. In effect, some individuals moved seamlessly from ATI to Workplace Support, with continuity of keyworker, hence their status as a Workplace Support participant did not make a substantive difference to the positive support they were already receiving:

"I don't see it being ATI stopped - completely different programme - Thriving started. It was a fairly smooth transition, the way I felt anyway. It wasn't like, 'That's that, we can't talk about that anymore, we're only focused on this.' It was just all one kind of support system, and it just integrated seamlessly … I suppose there would be a set time where I started with the Thriving, ATI ended and Thriving started, I just can't remember it."
(Programme Participant 7)

Keyworkers from delivery partners that had also offered ATI likewise commented positively on the continuity of support and ease of transition from the ATI to Workplace Support:

"For the people that we supported on a one-to-one basis to secure employment after maybe being out of work for some period of time, we were then able to offer a bit of a safety net and say, 'Look, this Thriving at Work programme is available to you if you need that support.' And sometimes they needed it and sometimes they didn't. But it was a way of ensuring that the work that we'd put in - within the Action Towards Inclusion programme - it was ensuring that we could continue that support with them until they felt they were able to, sort of like, release the reins."
(Keyworker 9)

Describing the collaboration with of one of their ATI colleagues, keyworkers delivering on Workplace Support gave examples of how they had been able to make a smooth handover between programmes, at the point where a participant entered employment:

> *"Some of her clients that she has supported on the ATI project and she's supported them into employment, she's had the conversation with them and said, 'Do you want support to continue, because if so, there is [Thriving at Work] available. So, then we've had referrals from them, if they have said, 'Yes, I'd like that to continue.'"*
> *(Keyworker 1)*
>
> *"On her project [she] was helping individuals find employment. And then if they did need support post that, then we could take over, so that was a nice transition."*
> *(Keyworker 2)*

For delivery providers whose overarching remit is to provide vocational and social inclusion support, the overlaying of Workplace Support onto their pre-existing suite of provision was, in practice, something of a technicality, and was not necessarily apparent to the participant experience. Indeed, the continuity of these relationships, within familiar and trusted organisations, is a strength to be harnessed. As one keyworker emphasised, there would be clear value in deliberately building in this continuity from the outset, when designing future programmes:

> *"The thing of going from ATI to Thriving at Work … I think probably setting that up from the start would be better, so that people could then almost fairly seamlessly move into Thriving at Work. Because there's been thousands gone through ATI and that would have translated - it should have translated - to Thriving at Work and it just hasn't. So getting that set up in the first instance, I think would be better … Not that there's an expectation that people have to, but that it's built in, that then they can go into that."*
> *(Keyworker 4)*

The findings of this evaluation therefore support Better Connect's current proposals to combine and evolve the design and learning from ATI, its successor RISE (Reducing Inequalities, Supporting Employment) and the Thriving at Work programme into an overarching and comprehensive support offer.

RISE
Reducing Inequalities, Supporting Employment

7.0
Implications & recommendations

7 Implications and recommendations:

The overall conclusion of this evaluation is that there is a **high demand for continuity of Workplace Support provision** in light of the demonstrated benefits to programme participants and the recognised need for longer-term support in work. In order to sustain the high-quality and transformative provision delivered by Workplace Support, this qualitative evaluation highlights the following policy and practice implications:

7.1 The value and impact of individualised 1-1 in work support

Workplace Support has proved to be of immense value to programme participants in achieving **greater wellbeing in their current role** or **moving to more appropriate and fulfilling employment**. Keyworkers use person-centred approaches to provide a tailored balance of structured coaching and more holistic, fluid and responsive approaches, which enables participants to improve their confidence, self-belief, resilience and interpersonal relationships within the workplace and in their wider external context. The **benefits of seamless continuity of support**, as experienced by programme participants who had also been involved in Better Connect's pre-employment programmes (ATI and its successor RISE), supports the implementation of the proposed Rise 2 Thrive programme. Building continuity of support into the design of the new Rise 2 Thrive programme from the outset will offer participants a full journey provision from economic inactivity through to in-work support. Given the advantages of a seamless programme *and* the value and impact of individualised 1-1 in work support, Better Connect should ensure the in-work support as a standalone offer is still accessible and promoted. Continued triaging from the programme manager will remain valuable here.

7.2 Flexible modes of delivery to accommodate different work patterns

Flexibility in the timing and location of delivery is important to making workplace support accessible to people in different employment circumstances. Offering **a combination of delivery modes** (in-person, telephone, online) maximises accessibility and efficient time use for both programme participants and delivery partners. The more **flexibility in work patterns** that delivery partners can offer to those *carrying out* the keyworker role, the more opportunity there will be to support the range of potential participants. Delivery **need not be constrained to within a Monday-Friday 9-5 timeframe**. Delivery partners are encouraged to consider a more creative, non-standard offer in the "how, where and when" of delivery.

7.3 Independence from employers

A key finding of this research was the importance that both programme participants and delivery partners placed on the **independence of Workplace Support from employing organisations**. Even where employer-employee relationships were positive, participants valued the separate physical and psychological space within which to work through their difficulties and concerns. For those with unsupportive managers or breakdowns in workplace relations, it was critical that participants could seek support from a programme with no connection to their employer. Looking to the wider evidence base, many larger employers already provide access to **Employee Assistance Programmes** (EAPs) but **uptake can be limited and employees worry about confidentiality**. Independent 1-1 provision such as the Workplace Support programme are thus vital and offer an alternative to employer-funded EAPs.

7.4 Opportunities to revisit 1-1 support

Some programme participants will benefit from **ongoing access to a keyworker**, with the opportunity to return for support **on a more flexible and ad-hoc basis**. This may be infrequent or light-touch. For some **a follow-up session after completing the initial programme** would be helpful to take stock, consolidate tools and learning or in relation to specific challenges faced at a later point in time (e.g. redundancy). For other participants there will be a recurring need for support, because they continue to experience work-related challenges. Some are engaged in short-term or precarious work, so support around periodic work transitions will be valuable.

7.5 Engaging employers as a gateway to 1-1 support

Whilst the independence of Workplace Support from programme participants' workplaces/employers was highly valued, employers could be **a valuable gateway to engaging more individuals in 1-1 support**. The additional strands of the overall Thriving at Work initiative (Inclusive Workplace diagnostic assessment and Diversity Training for workforces) have proven to be important routes for referral to Workplace Support. Further activity around promoting the availability of Workplace Support via workplace training and business networks could be beneficial in raising the profile of this programme, thus increasing opportunities for individuals to engage and receive support. An important caveat is that this route will only be effective in those cases where the employer-employee relationship remains sufficiently positive. **An independent route for referrals remains essential** for those employees who do not feel comfortable with any employer involvement.

7.6 Promote and support complementary initiatives

Separately from the core Thriving at Work initiative, one delivery partner had found capacity to establish and facilitate a **regular peer support group** for participants who had completed the 1-1 Workplace Support programme. Another provider ran **complementary initiatives** through which Workplace Support participants could continue their connection with the organisation.

These social groups and networks became an important source of peer support, helping to sustain the impact of the Thriving at Work intervention. There is **a role for Better Connect in promoting and supporting these ongoing networks of peer support** among former participants as a route to longer-term impact and strengthening the local ecosystem of delivery partners. Future programmes could build in planning and resources to help delivery partners facilitate opportunities for ongoing networks of peer support among former participants.

7.7 Long-term funding for providers and programmes

The ability to provide longer term support to participants depends on **secure, long-term funding for delivery partnerships** (both the managing organisation and delivery partners). Short-term funding is detrimental to programme participants, when provision ends prematurely. It is also detrimental to providers, hampering the consolidation of expertise and effective management and delivery processes. Much time and resource is expended where programmes are in a constant cycle of renewal, restaffing and rebranding, to fit very similarly-targeted but disjointed funding packages. Long-term, dependable funding streams would enable:

- More **effective and sustainable provision** for programme participants
- The **retention of keyworker expertise**, collaborative networks and local knowledge within programmes
- More **efficient use of management resources** as the repeated cycle of rebidding, rebranding and redesigning management systems (for essentially similar provision) can be avoided
- More **sustainable employment for programme delivery staff**, thus supporting their own workplace wellbeing.

7.8 The critical role of a lead managing partner

The Thriving at Work delivery partnership builds on a tried and tested model of collaborative local provision that has been pioneered by Better Connect. Delivery partners are trusted experts in their communities and bring high-quality expertise in working directly with clients.

Better Connect as managing partner provides **essential coordination and wraparound support** for the partnership, bringing the **capacity and skills to coordinate funding bids, financial management, audit/reporting, evaluation and impact capture**. This local partnership model also facilitates **peer-to-peer learning and support**, which helps to inform continuous improvement, troubleshooting and theory of change, whilst also supporting delivery staff wellbeing.

Overall a managing partner is critical to supporting complementary programmes that as a whole can provide sustainable and effective support that can unlock the potential of staff who are neurodiverse, disabled or experience mental health challenges.