Early Action Neighbourhood Fund Evaluation Learning Summary: The EANF journey

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1. Introduction

This report shares the experiences of the funders, projects and evaluators of the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (EANF) to surface learning relating to the enablers and challenges for early action from the perspectives of those involved in the design, delivery and assessment of this innovative five year programme.

It is one of a series of outputs from the EANF evaluation. Additional reports can be accessed on the Early Action Fund website.

2. The Early Action Neighbourhood Fund

The Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (EANF) provided over £5m over five years to support three projects to develop innovative models of preventative support. EANF grew out of the Early Action Funders Alliance, a coalition of charities, business and public sector organisations committed to making the case for early action, helping funders to embed it in their work, and support a shift toward a greater emphasis on early action in policy, funding and practice. Five members of the Alliance committed resources to EANF. Grant funding was provided by The National Lottery Community Fund, Comic Relief and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. The Barrow Cadbury Trust and Legal Education Foundation provided additional support and guidance.

The three EANF projects were led by local voluntary sector organisations, working in partnership with statutory agencies to develop and implement preventative approaches in support for children and families, young people's mental health and wellbeing, and legal advice.

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Ignite

The Ignite programme, delivered by a partnership of Central England Law Centre and Grapevine explored how to act earlier inside of children's services and Citizen housing in Coventry. It was embedded within public services to understand how these services and the people working within them can better understand and work to support families in Coventry. Using legal advice and improved social connectedness we worked to demonstrate how and when people can be helped to prevent crises.

We developed a blueprint for change built on 4 pillars that support earlier action namely: Doing It Together, What's the story, Purpose and Trademark and The Right Team. The work has developed beyond children's services and housing to look at the places and people who support families and individuals when they present with problems at any stage and what happens as they seek help.

Over the course of Ignite we identified poverty as a significant and limiting factor in successfully helping people. Living in poverty limits people's capacity to seek help, their readiness for it and their ability to accept it. This work has highlighted that those experiencing poverty encounter professionals (council tax officers, landlords, social workers) who fail to recognise that their circumstances are caused by poverty and that poverty limits their ability to engage.

Project outcomes included increased community capacity to develop organic solutions to local problems, increases in access to early help services in the pathfinder area, and the adoption of an early action blueprint for children's services.

Healthy Relationships

The Healthy Relationships early action project was led by Changing Futures North East (CFNE). The project aimed to improve outcomes for children and families and reduce demand on children's services by building capacity in local services and communities to prioritise better relationships between parents of children in families experiencing stress or at risk of intervention.

The project:
» Supported Children's Services to adapt risk processes to include an assessment of parental relationships and conflict
» Trained front-line workers to recognise and respond effectively to parental conflict, and to support parents to improve the quality of their relationships
» Delivered individual and group support to parents
» Shared good practice and resources through a Healthy Relationships Network and conference.

Data collated by the early action project identifies that:

The 'Parents as Partners' 16 session groupwork programme helped 34 parents solve problems, argue better or argue less, improve their relationships and helped children to have less problems:
» 65% of the people helped felt better and 53% were better at tackling problems head on.
» 79% of the couples that had used violent behaviours to solve problems used them less.
» 64% had better relationships.

It also suggests that the Healthy Relationships network which CFNE founded and hosted helped:
» 149 workers in Hartlepool train to support couples and parents who'd split up
» 16 agencies (including children's services, schools, health services and voluntary sector organisations) join forces to improve relationship support for families
» Four new agencies join the 'family relationships network'
» 80 professionals understand more about the way couple relationships affect children and how they can help, through our Relationships Matter conference.

Project outcomes included increased emphasis on early support for parents to improve their relationships, and improved outcomes for children and families.

MAP Early Action project

The Norwich Early Action project was led by the Mancroft Advice Project (MAP) who worked in three schools in West Norwich, two of which were in deprived areas and one in a better off area. This was in recognition that access to mental health services was limited across all areas. The aim of the project was to shift spending in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in Norwich toward earlier action, improve young people's social and emotional wellbeing, and reduce the number of young people who were NEET (not in education, employment or training).

The Early Action Mental Health Programme took a comprehensive approach, with the aim of enabling young people to maintain positive mental health whether they were experiencing problems or not. It offered:

» a support network and training for schools and local practitioners on promoting emotional wellbeing

» assistance in setting up wellbeing activities in local organisations such as youth clubs

» a PHSE wellbeing curriculum

» a participation programme to increase student engagement in school decision making.

» a general drop-in for young people to access to discuss issues

» a programme of activities to build confidence and self-esteem

» work with teachers to identify young people in need of additional support

» counselling and specialist advice for young people with emergent issues.

The project worked closely with the schools' senior teams to develop whole school approaches and embed early action in schools' strategies and systems.

Outcomes that the projects achieved included improvements in school engagement and wellbeing in the schools which the project supported and a reduction of acute mental health episodes for young people. The schools also reported that the project had facilitated a cultural shift, with greater emphasis on young people's wellbeing and more open and regular conversations about mental health across school. Some mainstream school funding was re-allocated to the mental health programme work. Learning from the Early Action Health Programme has contributed to the development of a similar programme which has been rolled-out to other schools in Norfolk.

A key feature of EANF has been a shared commitment to learning and evaluation. Regular learning events and workshops were held involving funders, projects and the evaluation team. The evaluation has been carried out by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University, and had four objectives:

» Understand the effectiveness of the EANF projects.

» Understand the impact of the projects.

» Generate robust evidence.

» Understand what has and has not worked in the design and delivery of the EANF programme, and the conditions of funding.

3. The EANF Journey

This section addresses the EANF 'journey' from the perspectives of the different stakeholders by looking at what has been achieved through the EANF programme, what have been the enablers, barriers and challenges to change, and what have we learned about the implementation and evaluation of early action?

What has been achieved?

PROJECTS

The EANF projects have developed effective local models for early action over the five years of the programme. For all the projects, it has been important that EANF has enabled them to test new approaches and to review and refine their interventions over time.

The projects have worked alongside services to develop models of early action

The Ignite project has worked with children' services and a housing provider in Coventry to develop a blueprint which embeds a locally responsive and whole system approach to early help.

In Norwich, the MAP early action project has developed a whole-school approach to improving young people's mental health and well-being.

The Healthy Relationships Partnership in Hartlepool has integrated a focus on parental relationships into child and family support services.

The projects have worked with communities to build capacity for local solutions

The Healthy Relationships Partnership has been working with parents to develop parent-led support, utilising community resources and facilities and connecting parents to on-line resources and other support services.

Ignite has grown the capacity of Children's Services hubs to understand better their local communities as well as how to spark and sustain informal responses such as uniform swaps, food clubs, walking groups, women's support groups, and homework clubs, helping local residents to help each other.

MAP has worked with pupils to constantly review the early action project ensuring that it is responsive to their needs. Outcomes from this have included supporting students to become positive contributors to school decision making, and the development of a positive language programme helping students to express themselves constructively and avoid exclusion for swearing.

The projects have worked with services to develop networks and skills to embed early action approaches

MAP has developed the Early Action Network for professionals working with young people in Norwich. The network offers regular networking events and free CPD around young people's mental health and wellbeing. The project has also delivered CPD and PHSE curriculum in the schools with which it has worked.

The Healthy Relationships Project has developed practice guidance and resources for professionals. The project also developed two networks: one for agencies committed to supporting parental relationships in their work with children, and one

for agencies working with families in Hartlepool. A 'Relationships Matter' conference held in 2019 also identified local Healthy Relationships Champions: individuals working in local organisations who have demonstrated excellent practice in supporting parental relationships.

In Coventry, Ignite have worked with partners to develop a blue print for effective early help across the system that includes: 'doing it together' building a better relationship with families, and 'the right team' on the skills and behaviours that all services need to support families early in their problems. Two annual events took place for the whole Early Help workforce addressing skills and confidence gaps.

The projects have worked in and with local systems to influence sustainable change

All the projects have been working in and with local systems with the aim of shifting systems towards the adoption of early action as an organising principle. This has involved working collaboratively, building coalitions of supporters around shared ambitions for early action, and connecting through values which emphasise the importance of trust and positive relationships in developing alternative service models. A commitment to constructive challenge and shared learning has been integral to this work, and all the projects have reflected on the importance of their work in holding the space for early action constant in the context of perpetual change. Ignite has hosted events using creative methods (e.g. drama) to engage services in conversations around how early action approaches can be adopted and to open up space for reflection on how the system might work differently.

FUNDERS

For funders, EANF has been a process of collaboration, growing out of early conversations around how the case for early action could be supported. The approach of working together to establish a programme, identify and fund projects through a close process of engagement with the projects, and share learning and ideas as the programme progressed was described by one funder as a 'pleasure', based on values-aligned collaboration which was thoughtful, open and sharing.

From the perspective of funders the achievements of EANF have included:

» The testing of trust-based models of funding, involving responsive and adaptive approaches

to grant-making, which have generated learning which has informed models of funding for early action and systems change programmes.

» Development of close relationships with funded projects, which has enabled understanding of local contexts and of opportunities, drivers and barriers across the five years of the programme and an appreciation of how change happens at the local level.

» Participation in learning and reflection which has been both thought provoking and challenging and which has demonstrated the importance to funders of understanding the local processes of change.

"The mind-set of a lot of people involved has been a massive highlight and learning curve. It has given hope and a blueprint for how relationships could be between funders and organisations. And what it really means to be learning as you go. Sometimes as funders, there's real appetite to test and learn, but, some of the expectations and processes haven't quite caught up with that reality. Being part of a programme where projects were very open and honest, but also where the funders were also (I hope) very relaxed about that. Walking the talk of learning. In some ways, to different extents – they saw that almost as the purpose."

EVALUATORS

The EANF Evaluation team worked with the projects and the funders to co-produce an evaluation approach which focuses on using different forms of evidence to understand the achievements and impacts of the projects. As evaluators EANF has challenged us to think hard about the evaluation frameworks we should use to understand early action. We have worked with a theory-based approach but have significantly revised an original programme-level Theory of Change because some early assumptions proved to be difficult to evidence. This included assumptions around the ability to attribute change to the projects, or to demonstrate that positive outcomes to which the projects contributed would lead to costs savings or to shifting of resource flows in favour of early action.

From the perspective of the evaluators a key achievement was the revised Theory of Change, which was co-produced by the evaluation team, the funders and the projects. The aim was to better reflect the experience of working in complex systems which are subject to constant change. This allowed us to develop a more realistic assessment of the changes happening at different stages of the projects and the impacts we were seeing for individuals and in local systems. The revised theory also highlights the importance of formal (evaluation data and research) and informal (experience and learning) evidence to the projects' models.

The process of collaboration with the projects and the funders has been a huge positive for the evaluation. The locating of the evaluation as one 'voice' or perspective, but also acknowledging that the different perspectives of other stakeholders in EANF, has generated a richer understanding of the programme's implementation and impact.

What have been the key enablers?

All stakeholders identified positive relationships as the most important enabler for EANF. This has been true at all levels of the programme including: relationships between the different funders; between the funders and projects; between the projects, funders and evaluators; between the local stakeholders in the voluntary and public sectors working in partnership in the project areas; and between projects and people and communities that they have been supporting. Relationships which have been based on trust, shared values, and a commitment to early action were supported by open and honest conversations and a commitment to change.

"The work is very value-based. Values are really important – working with people, working alongside people, rather than 'doing-to' is important."

The ability to reflect honestly on the successes and challenges that they faced was appreciated by the projects:

"One of volunteers had said to me, you know, we've basically tested it out, and I suppose that's the benefit of what we've done, we've tested it out so other people can learn from it, and they might do things a bit differently. And I thought, what a privileged position to be in, that other projects don't have with their funding, in terms of being able to be quite honest and say, we thought this was going to be the way to go. We've learnt a lot, and we would advise other people to do it differently. Being able to have that ability to actually use this as an opportunity for learning has been a big highlight. But I think at the same time, it's quite difficult to get yourself in that mindset, because other things are so different."

Further, a strong vision and shared commitment amongst funders was seen to be important in enabling the programme to 'hold fast' to its purpose, even when at times there was uncertainty around what could be achieved. Maintaining senior level, strategic support from funders has also been critical, as it allowed for flexibility, innovation and creativity which was not hampered by overriding procedural concerns around needing to prove that money had been 'well spent'. One funder suggested:

"The fact that it was a joint funding initiative helped. Having collaboration of different funders, steering group had a strong vision, and they really held to that. Guess that's testament to leadership and experience of that group of people. Being together maybe made them stronger, to hold fast to that vision. Individuals who are well respected, and well established. It made them able to say, "this is what we're doing."

What have been the challenges?

The programme's emphasis on a relational approach has been a source of challenge as well as an enabler. In evaluation and learning outputs we have reflected on the challenges that projects faced keeping their partners engaged and focused on early action. These included scarce resources in partner organisations, other risks from other agendas dominating. In addition, turnover in people and roles meant that new relationships often had to be established. Commitment to early action was not always easy to obtain when new people coming into leadership positions in organisations did not buy in to the programme's objectives or approach. A challenge then is that a programme like EANF relies on ongoing institutional commitment, which in practice means it relies on individuals within those institutions. In different ways, all the projects experienced significant setbacks when key allies moved on, or where commitment to early action was challenged by new leaders in public sector organisations. For the most part these challenges were overcome, through time dedicated to building new relationships, and the use of data and evidence to demonstrate the projects impacts.

It may also be true that stakeholders underestimated the complexity of the systems and organisations in which they were working. Many of the challenges that the programme has faced have been environmental and contextual, including austerity, organisational restructuring and budget cuts and welfare reform. One funder reflected:

'Just being able to get through the last five years and keep things broadly on course' was an achievement. *We started out with lofty ambitions – but became clear that it wasn't going to work quite how we'd anticipated. This has been a programme of work that has been delivered in exceptional times. So those are challenges that couldn't have foreseen."*

A key message for funders is that the outcomes of funding programmes which aim to support local systems change are unpredictable, not because of the actions of funded organisations but because when working in human and social systems the actions of others will fundamentally affect what can be achieved, and when. This needs to be understood, and perhaps clearly acknowledged by all stakeholders and the parameters of funder and grant holder relationships established accordingly. Although flexibility and the ability to adapt in response to learning was valued by all involved in EANF, the approach also generated uncertainty. One project representative reflected:

"We were always aware that the funders were going on a journey with us, and that they hadn't necessarily funded systems change projects before, so it was quite new for them as well. So I think a lot of that stuff, you know, we didn't expect them to really understand that as an organisation we probably had a little bit of the fear of are we delivering those outputs, and what happens if we don't. But I think obviously, going forward for them, in terms of delivering systems change work, that might be something that they want to articulate to organisations."

"What level of involvement does a funder expect to have? As a project its hard to know whether they should get in touch with funders. We need to establish what that relationship should look like. It's unnerving otherwise."

The complexity of both the programme – having three very different projects working in different contexts and with different objectives – and the contexts in which the projects were working, has also contributed to a challenge around communication and the potential for the programme to influence practice and advocate for change. All the projects have, in different ways, used EANF resources to successfully influence practice locally, but although all stakeholders shared a common starting point their different visions, experiences and programmes of work have meant that it has not always been easy to agree on or draw out common

messages to inform wider learning. Despite a shared commitment to learning, and many valuable events at which the EANF projects shared rich experiences of processes of local change, one funder reflected that in terms of wider advocacy and communications at the programme level EANF 'never really found what it wanted to say, or who to say it to'. For projects, clear guidance on funder expectations in relation to influencing would have been beneficial, and for funders there were reflections on the need to ensure that sufficient capacity and priority is given to a strategic approach to influencing change.

Finally, the projects faced challenges in accessing data from public sector organisations which could be used to help demonstrate their impacts. After much persistence there were some real successes in this area: MAP in Norwich were able to use data on pupil attainment and attendance to demonstrate the impact of their work in schools; and in Coventry access to data on outcomes for children and families accessing early help proved a turning point in Ignite's relationship with children's services and a catalyst for the adoption of an early action blueprint across the city. However, there were also frustrations relating to the inability or unwillingness of public sector organisations to share data, and challenges relating to the (lack of) capacity within partner organisations to use data effectively as a tool to drive service innovation.

4. What have we learned?

Perhaps the most important thing we have learned is to be comfortable with uncertainty and understanding that the complex nature of work which aims to embed early action principles into local systems means that we cannot foresee what will happen. We have revisited and revised the assumptions on which the programme was based at the outset, in light of collective reflection and learning, and in response to the evidence that was available to us.

As a result, we have learned a lot about what early action systems change looks like in practice. We know that sometimes whole departments, service areas or organisations can shift and that when they do this is invariably the result of long and messy processes of change which are built on many tiny changes in the attitudes, behaviours and practice of individuals. Recognising, and valuing, those small changes is important. We know that shifting the dial toward early action takes time and resilience and

that success comes from being patient and flexible. Sometimes however organisations don't shift despite the best efforts of many people, because they are dominated by performative accountability measures or because leaders have not been able to support their teams to work in different ways. We have learned the importance of working alongside people at all levels, and that funding which builds the capacity of organisations and individuals to think and act differently is as important as early action 'interventions' or delivery. Both are necessary, and for funders, this has important implications for thinking about how to fund processes and relationship building (and trusting organisations and individuals with the appropriate skill sets to deliver change) as well as focusing on outputs and outcomes.

The MAP early action project has reflected on its experience and learning to identify eight conditions for change (source MAP early action project).

The Eight Conditions for Change

1. Stability

It is impossible to work on influencing without stability. Five years of stable funding gave us the opportunity to have a long term commitment and use the resources flexibly. Charities can provide leadership on early action because they can work long term; working to a stable strategy. Schools and commissioners wanted to work with us when they knew we would be there for five years. The public sector is hampered by short term policy and silo budgets. Often all the public sector can do is respond to crisis: A&E targets, reducing children in care and school exclusions. Their culture is immersed in crisis.

2. Crisis

Crisis actually helped us engage with partners. Both our children's services and mental health trust were in special measures; under huge pressure to improve and change. As a result they were more open to change, consider new ideas, and improve. This appetite helped open doors. A crisis needs a plan, a change of direction and allies. It meant we could be a part of that, setting shared goals.

3. Goals

To influence strategy and culture you need to be very clear about what you want to change. We explain our goals at all opportunities. Working to change culture in schools required them to sign up to our goals. When looking for partners this made it much easier to find the right allies. A theory of change is important. A simple goal that is central to the organisation and easy to communicate is essential for this to work. It is not simply a project goal but central to our mission as a charity.

4. Organisations not projects

Early action has to be at an organisational level. Investment is for the organisation, not an isolated project within it. MAP's mission is to equip young people to be ready for adult life. We exist for Early Action. Therefore, when considering who to invest in, it is important to look at the whole organisation – what is their strategy, structure and values? Are they well run? Early action in our DNA. Sustainability does not exist within a project's "sustainability plan" but within the organisational strategy. We did this work before the grant and will do it after the grant. The grant allowed us to hugely increase our impact and do more than we have ever done before but it remains a focus of our work. Not all organisations see themselves as influencers. Being an influencer is a strategic decision for an organisation. A one-off project will not be effective. As an influencer we undertake campaigns, deliver training, take part in national research and talk at conferences. We strongly encourage funders to support organisations rather than fund short term projects. Foundations usually have investment portfolios. They may move their investments if they want to improve their returns. Foundations should consider funding organisations in the same way; providing funding until they feel they aren't getting the impact they want; an investment portfolio of organisations. This would lead to longer term and bigger impact. Early action requires a type of organisation: one that has a local connection; a community they are engaged with and one that is big enough, with the right structure and skills, to be influential. There is a sweet spot: big enough but local enough. We need to be credible.

5. Credibility

Organisations can't only do influencing. They need to have expertise in their area by delivering services. We have this credibility locally – known for providing excellent, well evaluated services. A good reputation is essential to be an influencer. Service delivery still needs funding as well as influencing work. They go hand in hand. We can develop evidence of success, train others, model behaviours all through the expertise of service delivery. This is why we are the Eastern Region Lead for the Centre for Youth Impact. It is only through our service delivery we engage with young people who are the biggest influencers of all.

6. Lived Experience

We have learnt a vital lesson: young people are the biggest influencers. They bring their expertise through experience and are seen by the system as neutral, without vested interest. We didn't focus on

this anywhere near as much as we should have in the beginning. Now we promote young influencers as much as we can and are supporting the development of the Young Activist Network. Young people demand earlier action. It is our relationships with young people through our service delivery that has been one of our major assets.

7. Good Relationships

We had excellent existing relationships with young people and partners when we started this work. We understood their needs, goals, pressures. This helped us develop shared work. With trust in place we can achieve so much more. This became a focus of our work. To further improve relationships we developed a new way of working: *"systemic conversations",* with our fellow mental health providers. This work was published in a public health journal. When common purpose and trust is established change can happen. It led to the development of our Commission that made recommendations that have been adopted for the new model for mental health services in Norfolk. Our Commission was a mixture of professionals (head teacher, psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker, funding manager, chief executive) and young people, independently chaired by a Mental Health Tribunal Judge. We develop relationships by expressing our values.

8. Values

Our values are at the core of everything. They ensure consistency and focus. They are early action values. We are young person centred; we are led by their ideas. We value each individual; understanding their strengths. We work for social justice; tackling the causes not just the symptoms. We are professional; working to high standards and evidence. Organisations need values that lead them to early action in their delivery and lead them to take on influencing. Values can be shared and aligned with partners.

Conclusion

We have learned the value of capturing and working with many different types of evidence and data from many perspectives. We also recognise the need for a stronger commitment on the part of all stakeholders to the intelligent use of evidence and data in supporting local systems change and of the resource implications associated with this. We have challenged assumptions around the ability of projects to demonstrate changes in area or population level outcomes resulting from their work. We have also increased our understanding of how we can generate robust and useful narratives using qualitative data to articulate the stories of individuals and communities. But we have also confirmed that 'hard' data is still important in influencing local public sector organisations and as such it is important that voluntary and community sector organisations are funded and supported to gather and use data

effectively. Co-design of evaluation and learning, involving all stakeholders at the outset of the programme helps to support effective approaches.

Finally, we have learned that for early action to gain traction in public sector organisations it is vital to have a strong and clear message and to keep repeating, repeating and repeating it. One project representative reflected: *"you can't assume everyone thinks the way you do. Be totally upfront about that and say the things that you think should be really obvious".* Effective communication, and taking every opportunity to speak to people, and to spread the early action 'message' through many conversations over many years has been necessary at the local level. Going forward, the challenge is to join-up the learning from EANF with other systems change and early action approaches to build a wider eco-system for change.

Contact

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