

Exploring our thinking about generating and using evidence in system change

Early Action System Change Thematic Briefing 4 June 2021

Introduction

This series of briefings focuses on articulating and sharing practice orientated learning from the eight Early Action System Change (EASC) partnerships.¹ This briefing explores issues and questions from online huddles held in March and May 2020, which explored the evaluation aspects of early action system change. This was in part a response to findings from the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (EANF) in England that successful early action projects do not necessarily result in reductions in demand on public services or savings to the public purse.² Given the similarities in ambition, the March event was an opportunity for The National Lottery Community Fund to clarify their expectations that EASC partners demonstrate a *shift in resources* towards more preventative services and are able to use their evidence to ‘tell the story’ about their system change efforts.

Within the bigger context, a realistic and honest account of the enablers and barriers to system change must also contend with deepening austerity and rising unmet needs, hopes for recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic and the call from the Christie Commission for a radical redesign of public services, still resonant some ten years on.³

Evaluation – let’s keep talking

Our second briefing also explored the issue of evaluation and highlighted the need to have upfront conversations about generating and using evidence and what is realistic.⁴ The EANF found that these kinds of discussions were crucial for the credibility of the evaluation with their key partners, to build an evaluative culture amongst the partners, as part and parcel of the systems change work. This remains a live issue across the EASC partnerships. Key messages from The Fund are that EASC partnerships should seek to demonstrate a shift in resources towards more preventative services, and in the light of the experience from the EANF, wherever possible also:

- identify the conditions and mechanisms through which early action can be adopted widely; the changes in practices, behaviours, values, and norms that can create the conditions for services to act earlier and more preventatively, and
- generate their own credible, data-informed accounts of their contribution towards system change.

¹ In March 2018, The National Lottery Community Fund (The Fund) in Scotland awarded £5.9 million to eight multi-agency partnerships in an initiative known as Early Action System Change (EASC). EASC is intended to accelerate the shift to investing a greater proportion of public resources in effective, early action and re-focus efforts towards a longer-term preventative approach. The eight partnerships cover one of two themes: children, young people and families facing significant challenges and women and the criminal justice system.

² [Evaluation & Learning — Early Action Neighbourhood Fund \(earlyactionfund.org\)](https://www.earlyactionfund.org/)

³ [Christie Commission on the future delivery of public services - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/)

⁴ [From-Consultation-to-Conversation-TNLCF-Briefing-2.pdf \(tnlcommunityfund.org.uk\)](https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/)

Renfrewshire and South Lanarkshire partnerships made contributions about their work to kick start the huddle conversations. Whilst each partnership is adopting their own approach to system change, some of the shared issues that were explored are outlined below, with questions (in the blue boxes) prompted by the series of discussions which are worth exploring further.

How can we hold onto our hopes to see tangible impacts of early action & balance this with realism and honesty about the complexity and context of our work?

Using data to talk about our assumptions

The Renfrewshire EASC team shared a financial mapping exercise to chart the current level of funding in prevention and early intervention, intended to start a local conversation about re-investment in children's services.⁵ This found that only 3% of over £206m was invested in prevention. Whilst this was lower than senior managers had predicted, it illustrated that a relatively small decrease in demand for high-need support could release significant resources for prevention.⁶

The Renfrewshire team described this mapping exercise as 'a useful wake up call, but a tough exercise', due to the availability of data, the difficulties of disaggregating budgets and other barriers. Usefully it highlighted the significant potential of workforce development to promote prevention within universal settings, such as schools. It was also an example of using financial data, service level data on the size and focus of the service as well as data on staffing numbers and job roles, to prompt conversations, challenge assumptions and consider actions towards investing more in preventative activities.

Whilst not advocating that such a mapping exercise necessarily be replicated, the huddle participants highlighted that the term 'shift in spend' is not helpful: it is not as simple or realistic to think about shifting budget from one pot to another, particularly where most local public sector bodies are having to reduce spending regardless of demonstrable and rising need. The participants felt it was useful to 'hold the space for change' in this way, by creating opportunities for conversations about how the system works, the prevailing assumptions amongst people from different parts of the system that 'we didn't know we were making' and to talk about the cultural and behavioural shifts that we do hope to see.

How are we creating space for people to come together to talk about how they understand system change?

What do we understand about what influences how money and other resources are distributed so that we might mobilise resources in the right direction?

What would support us to prioritise learning about enablers and barriers to shifting resources of all kinds, over accountability for delivery of savings?

⁵ [Early Action Page — DARTINGTON](#)

⁶ [EA+fund+map+report+SHORT.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#)

Developing an account of our work together

South Lanarkshire (Inclusion as Prevention) shared some of their experience to help the EASC partnerships explore thinking about generating and using evidence in system change work.⁷ They see their work as a ‘relational way of doing systems change’ exploring what happens when the system focuses on including people and helping them to *do something*, rather than *preventing* something. Their system change methodology integrates engagement, improvement, and evaluation and their ‘embedded evaluation’ approach can respond fluidly to the needs of the project, recognising how the three strands of their work are intertwined, even more so than they originally anticipated.

For the EASC partnerships, this example raises an important challenge to thinking and practice in the evaluation of systems change, from seeking to evaluate the counterfactual (what we have prevented) to the evaluation of the systemic conditions that we have helped to create and how these are changing (or not): a focus on prevention can be stigmatising and inadvertently reinforce existing service-led responses, as well as being unhelpful in seeking to engage people in the evaluation and wider change process.⁸ There was interest in how evaluation can be responsive to the needs of a project, how changes in relationships and trust might be measured and the implications of a strengths or assets-based approach for decisions and judgements about the setting and measurement of outcomes, since the choice of measures are an expression of power.

In turn, this raised questions about influencing and what resistance might be expected; how evaluations can influence decision-makers so that changes are embedded and sustained and are achieved at scale. It was suggested we should be exploring what we understand about what kinds of evidence are needed within each particular system, recognising that this might not be the evidence we think it is. Again, these questions and issues highlighted the need for local conversations amongst the relevant people and agencies.

What shifts in practices, behaviours, values, and norms are we trying to create?

How can evidence and feedback be timely and feed into the work as it develops?

What is meaningful measurement for each of us in this situation?

What standards of evidence are ‘good enough’?

Reflections on sharing learning

There has been value in the conversations amongst the partnerships which have acknowledged the tensions and built trust and an openness to share and learn from one another, ‘even the thornier bits’. Anxieties remain about ‘getting it right’, getting wider ‘buy-in’ and what expectations persist. For some, these issues loom large as the end of their funding is not so far away. We encourage all partnerships to discuss the implications and questions prompted in this briefing with their local partners, so learning continues to shape what we all do. And we will continue to host further conversations of this kind.

Briefing by Cathy Sharp (Research for Real) and Ian McKenzie (Animate) June 2021

⁷ [Inclusion as Prevention - Children's and Young People's Centre for Justice \(cycj.org.uk\)](https://www.cycj.org.uk/inclusion-as-prevention)

⁸ [Info-Sheet-91.pdf \(cycj.org.uk\)](https://www.cycj.org.uk/info-sheet-91.pdf)