

## Finding our way through complexity

### Early Action System Change Thematic Briefing 5

February 2022

#### Introduction

This series of briefings focuses on articulating and sharing practice orientated learning from the eight Early Action System Change (EASC) partnerships.<sup>1</sup> Each partnership is adopting their own approach to system change, and the learning support activities are a chance to explore both the distinctiveness and common themes amongst the partnerships.

This briefing explores learning and insights from three online huddles held in July, September, and December 2021.<sup>2</sup> Each of these huddles had a different focus in response to the prevailing interests of the partnerships. Each time, a single partnership shared something from their practice to provoke discussion, usually followed by a short additional contribution or input from the learning support facilitators and open discussion. These sessions largely continued the dialogue started in early huddles which explored the desire to see tangible impacts of early action and the tension created by the realities of the inherent complexity and context of system change work.<sup>3</sup>

- **Shifts in mindsets, policies, and practices (July 2021):** led by Action for Children (West Dunbartonshire) with further input about thinking about going to scale.<sup>4</sup>
- **Adventures in Systems Mapping (Sept 2021):** led by Midlothian, with further input on System Convening.<sup>5</sup>
- **Three Resources from Anchor: early action methodology, resource implications, early action system of support (Dec 2021)** led by Shetland Partnership.<sup>6</sup>

#### Finding our way through complexity: An overview of our learning

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



@ClintAdair @Unsplash

This question arose from the earlier huddles, discussed in the last briefing, and continues to frame the recurring themes of discussions between partnerships. These might be characterised as having a focus on process, learning about *how* to navigate our way through the real-world complexities of seeking early action and system change.

- In general terms, there is a much more considered engagement with complexity and a developing understanding of the implications for the work of the partnerships.

- Placing importance on developing trust, relationships, and multiple perspectives, makes complexity seem less abstract and supports practical actions. This focus on relationships is rooted in the idea that no single person or partnership lead can have an overview, other people are also involved and have different and valuable perspectives.
- There is a richer understanding emerging of how system change happens and of roles within change processes, linked to changing perspectives on what it might mean to be an active participant rather than ‘a spectator’, a desire to enhance participation and what it means to adopt a convening role.
- Evaluation of system change is seen as an on-going, embedded practice to notice and track the smallest shifts in thinking and practice, articulating the ‘story of change’, both the outcomes and what has enabled those changes. There is greater comfort with being able to meet the accountability requirements of the Fund to provide a clear data-informed account of their system change work.
- Whilst there is interest in the financial implications of system change work, the assumptions that underpin the term ‘shift in spend’ are questioned in a climate of continuing financial austerity and hard political realities for local public sector bodies.
- Language is seen to play a pivotal role; there is a heightened awareness of the power of language and how power dynamics play out, for example, through the unreflective use of professional terminology. It was valuable to explore the question ‘what is help?’ with connotations of rescue and disempowerment. And more generally, whilst replacing nouns with verbs can be effective, there are often challenges to find better words.

*“...if we bring support into families at that earlier stage, their need to be ‘helped’, is lessened, which feels empowering of them, and also families are then not dominated, in the view of services, particularly statutory services, by the issues that are around for them.”*

*“Yes, I agree. We used the term ‘early help’ in year two, and then dropped it, because it’s not an empowering term, and didn’t reflect the ethos. But what is the best word?”*

- There are new insights about taken-for-granted ideas and practices, for example whilst sustainability remains a goal, it might be thought of as more about sustaining adaptable practices or mindsets, that can continue to be responsive to changing circumstances, rather than maintain an approach or project established some time ago.
- Ways of thinking about scaling-up or ‘going to scale’ have also shifted, with recognition that successful wider implementation is more about developing relationships, shifting underlying attitudes and tapping into values, rather than about mandating change.

## It is worth celebrating

There is no doubt that much learning has been produced in a relatively short time. Small scale interventions are seen to be able to have a greater effect. For some, there is a discernible ripple-effect as all the time to plan and establish relationships provided to be worthwhile, has paid off in changes in mindsets and in policies and practices.



@Artem\_Kniaz @Unsplash

For example, in West Dunbartonshire, evidence from initial tests of change in housing options for young people has informed on-going partnership learning. It has generated new awareness that certain tenancies and areas are unsuitable for young people and enabled discussions around the revision of the allocations policy for young people. Several young people have been offered new build tenancies in new developments within the area, an important shift in practice, alongside other

shifts in how young people are supported through any homelessness presentation.

More widely, for some, there are conversations about ‘shifting spend’ and reinvestment and some creative ways of talking about resource use. For example, Shetland Anchor have highlighted inputs in terms of hours, rather than money, which was felt to be much more immediately relatable.<sup>7</sup>

## Reflections on challenges and looking forward

This briefing illustrates the on-going challenges. System change is often experienced as a roller-coaster. For example, whatever the formal definition or understanding of what early action is, it is more nuanced and complex in practice and varies for different players in the system. Genuine collaboration and a willingness to ‘fail’ may be understood as a necessary element of system change work, but prevailing cultures and practices do not readily embrace this as a reality.

*“I wish we had invested more in establishing and nurturing relationships between partners and providers, rather than in taking some level of commitment and goodwill as sufficient to then make for good working relationships, and good outcomes.”*

There remains frustration, sometimes at the pace and scale of change. Many of the partnerships use participatory or inclusive processes to inform changes to their system and there is a desire to ‘engage with power’ more directly or deeply, for example, there is interest in how promoting ‘voice’ can be a lever for change, especially the voices of young people.

*“Regardless of how many young people you speak to, it will always be criticised for not being ‘enough!’”*

*“Some voices are heard and trusted more readily.... The value of 50 young people's insights may be considered too small a number, whereas two professionals' opinions carry weight... why is this?”*

Whilst hearing the perspectives of young people can give senior leaders confidence, ‘old models’ of service-led consultation and statistical representation can readily dominate.

## Reflections on sharing learning

The decision to take a more active facilitation approach and encourage the partnerships to share their experience, questions, and concerns at a deeper level in these huddles has proved worthwhile. There is a continuing need for protected spaces for practitioners of system change that enable recognition of progress, peer support and supportive challenge.

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) February 2022. Thanks to all the partnerships and to the staff of the Fund for their input.**

## Further reading and links

### Resources used in the Huddles

- Burns, D. (2015), Reaching for the stars: Nurturing participatory change at scale. Keynote speech, ALARA.<sup>8</sup>
- Riddell and Moore (2015) Scaling Out, Scaling Up and Scaling Deep: Advancing Systemic Social Innovation and the Learning Processes to Support It: October.<sup>9</sup>
- Sharp, C (2018) Collective leadership: Where Nothing is Clear, and Everything Keeps Changing, Exploring new territories for evaluation.<sup>10</sup>
- Wenger-Trayner, B, and E. (2021) Systems Convening A crucial form of leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> These were each 2 hours, largely following a similar format.

<sup>3</sup> These are explored in “Exploring our thinking about generating and using evidence in system change”, Early Action System Change Thematic Briefing 4 June 2021 <https://bit.ly/3JTmo9o>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.west-dunbarton.gov.uk/media/4318592/early-action-project-dec-19.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thirdsectormidlothian.org.uk/mva/projects-partnerships/midlothian-early-action-partnership-meap/> and <https://www.dartington.org.uk/midlothian-eap>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.shetland.gov.uk/family-support/anchor-early-action>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.shetland.gov.uk/downloads/file/3474/year-two-evaluation-report>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.alarassociation.org/pages/events/alara-world-congress-2015>

<sup>9</sup> [https://mccconnellfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ScalingOut\\_Nov27A\\_AV\\_BrandedBleed.pdf](https://mccconnellfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ScalingOut_Nov27A_AV_BrandedBleed.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> [collectiveleadershipreport1.pdf \(wordpress.com\)](#)

<sup>11</sup> <https://wenger-trayner.com/systems-convening/>