

“From Consultation to Conversation”

Early Action System Change

NLCF Thematic Briefing 2

Introduction

This briefing focuses on some of the themes present in the learning support activities held since October 2019. These include a series of on-line learning activities, including two webinars, huddles and action learning and a short consultation undertaken to plan the next event. At our October 2019 event we learned that whilst people value the time and space for reflection, it is difficult to create and protect. It also highlighted different models of learning; there may be greater familiarity and comfort with the idea of sharing explicit knowledge and information, rather than on-going and emergent learning that arises through reflection on practice.

Evaluation - talk early, talk often and keep talking

The issue of evaluation is very much a live one, worthy of more exploration. We know from the experience of the *Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (EANF)* in England that:

- The initial ideas and assumptions expressed in our original theories of change may need revision. For example, one of the EANFs biggest ‘assumptions’ was that the demonstration of a reduction in need through early action would lead to savings being realised.
- They also learnt that it is important to think about two sets of outcomes; firstly, those for people and communities, such as health and wellbeing and secondly, those for systems which might include trust, shared understandings of issues and ability to prioritise early action, much that may be intangible and small, but important steps in systems change.

Given the complexities of this systems change work, the difficulties of attribution and of demonstrating cost savings, there is a need to have quite upfront conversations about what kind of evaluation people need or want and what is realistic. It’s important to consider your purpose in evaluation, which might be to improve or prove your impact and to think about who are your key stakeholders and how will the evaluation be used. Co-producing the design of the evaluation with evaluation users and stakeholders will help people to understand what it offers and how it might differ from, or dovetail with improvement methodologies, which some the EASC partnerships are using to support tests of change. Before people dive into thinking about evaluation methods, some sort of conversation or what might be called a collaborative ‘evaluability assessment’ would be appropriate to consider questions like:

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|  What might we feasibly expect to change and by when? |  How will we measure the costs and benefits in a meaningful way? Can we, or should we, try to attribute the benefits directly to our activities? |
|  What standards of evidence are ‘good enough’? | |
|  What is meaningful measurement in this situation? |  Do we or you have the data, and can you share it? |

The EANF found that these kinds of discussions were crucial for the credibility of the evaluation with their key partners and will help to build an evaluative culture amongst the partners, as part and parcel of the systems change work.

Coproduction - "why have a meeting when you can have a party?"

Coproduction is a second very 'live' issue. We have been able to draw on the experience of *Healthy n Happy* a community owned organisation, in Cambuslang and Rutherglen. At a recent webinar, one of the participants said: "they brought a sense of realism and willingness to give things a try. It was helpful to think of a 'continuum of coproduction' rather than it being single defined 'thing' and the need to have a dialogue about what it means in each context."

Healthy n Happy were clear that, for them, co-production at neighbourhood level begins with asking people what matters to them and what we can do together to make things better. This was in stark contrast to the experience of finding out you are a small-part player in a partnership, where the goals have already been decided and the resources are unevenly distributed. It is important to seek genuine partnership from the start, designing the approach around people in an inclusive way and not the given (formal) partnership structures. To do this will mean skilful naming and working with power differentials: your own and others; thinking together about who has it, what kind it is, how it can be used and redistributed, and what could be gained by giving it up.

Conversations rather than consultations are the heart of it. Perhaps a bit provocatively, *Healthy n Happy* ask "why have a meeting when you can have a party?" Their approach is much more about two-way processes, dialogues, characterised by much that might be counter to expectations:

- taking the time to notice where the energy is and really listening to the voices seeking your attention
- creating tangible opportunities to learn and work things out together
- sharing knowledge, methods and tools across organisations and sectors, something we don't do readily enough
- saying 'I don't know' and asking for help to find out.

Sustaining your endeavours for the long haul

We are hopeful that the various on-line and face to face learning spaces we are establishing offer valuable opportunities for reflection and learning. There is a need for new ways for working across the partnerships and it can be frustrating and tough to maintain momentum and work across boundaries of different organisations. A theme from action learning is that this is difficult work and it will take time to really see the difference it makes.

Learn to share, share to learn - we encourage all partnerships to discuss the implications of this briefing with their local partners, so learning continues to shape what we all do.

This is the second learning briefing arising from the work of the eight multi-agency partnerships funded by the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) in Scotland to promote Early Action System Change to accelerate the shift to investing a greater proportion of public resources in effective, early action. The eight partnerships cover one of two themes: children, young people and families facing significant challenges and women and the criminal justice system.

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