Is it ever too late to think about sustainability?
Early Action System Change Thematic Briefing 6
February 2023

Introduction

This is the final briefing in a series that focuses on articulating and sharing practice orientated learning from the eight Early Action System Change (EASC) partnerships.[1] It emerged from an online discussion held in September 2022, which looked at the theme of sustainability and was led by Inclusion as Prevention (IAP) partnership, South Lanarkshire.[2,3]

Sustainability has so many layers. We looked at how we understood sustainability; how it made us feel; what gave us hope that the learning from the work would be sustained; and what we needed from ourselves and others to sustain learning in the partnerships and the wider system both now and in future work. We explored what sustainability looks like for some of the different partnerships and road tested some early thinking on four sustainability 'buckets'. We are sharing this in the spirit of continued learning.

Different types of sustainability

The 'four buckets', a form of practice-based theory, gave us a way to think about different types of sustainability in projects and programmes, and to collectively surface some deeper learning and challenges.

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Bucket 1 - Environmental sustainability: Sustainability has long been synonymous with the environment, about meeting the needs of the current generation, without destroying the future of the next generation.[4] This goes back to the sustainable development goals and recognises the interconnected nature of environment, social justice, equity, wellbeing, economy.

Bucket 2 - Sustaining 'the thing': A common, taken-for-granted perspective, this makes sustainability about continuing to deliver a particular service or a programme and is what people in public services most likely think about. It's the easiest to measure, the thing that we can tangibly point to and say 'see, this is the legacy of the work'. It can apply, for example, to a new package of support that has been designed and delivered for a trial or pilot period, underpinned by a theory of change that evidence-based interventions will ultimately be picked up by a commissioner and

receive longer-term funding. It is notable that such thinking about a 'shift in spend' towards preventative interventions have been challenged by our experience of early action system change, operating in a climate of continuing financial austerity and hard political realities for local public sector bodies.

Bucket 3 - Sustaining individual learning: Sustaining individual learning is about trying to identify and understand the change we have experienced. It requires a commitment to continuous reflective practice. Although valuable, it is not enough for systemic change: unless processes and structures are created to embed, generate, and sustain the learning it is lost as people move on.

Bucket 4 - Sustaining collective or systemic learning: This is about sustaining the capacity of the system to generate and use learning. It's the processes and structures that allow collective learning between people within organisations and systems. Focusing on bringing about systemic learning is a more powerful form of sustainability than whether 'the thing' was successful or unsuccessful or continues to receive funding.

How this influenced our thinking

With these four buckets in mind, the discussion demonstrated that sustainability could mean very different things. In conversation, we expanded our way of thinking about sustainability, acknowledging that a single service can't reverse the rising trends of child poverty, or poor mental health. We are not going to see the sustained, systemic change needed across a disjointed landscape of services *trying* to work together whilst also competing for limited resources. Perspectives are shaped by how people see their roles and responsibilities, and this emphasised the importance of checking out the assumptions we make.

The conversation was lively and surfaced a critical challenge: current systems are actually very good at sustaining themselves. It is why they've been operating the way they have for so long. Public service systems are self-regulating systems that can run largely unaffected by the evolving needs of the community. Given this, the critical question became:

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> *"How do we change the goals of the system and structures of accountability so that it is no longer about sustaining existing systems, but about creating the conditions for change?"*

Our questions had an urgency about them, given that we are in an emergent, and rapidly evolving context: global pandemics, ecological disasters, political upheaval, and economic crises. We discussed the need for structures that create and sustain collective learning. This requires funders, and others involved in systems change to look beyond the focus on short term funding of projects and programmes and the success or otherwise of 'the thing' and ask:

"How is the capacity to generate and use learning being developed to bring about change?"

"How do we bring people together to identify a problem? How do we create enabling conditions that allow people to step into leadership, trial a change and be responsive?"

We acknowledged that when we think about sustainability, we often act as if discontinuity were not a fact of organisational and community life:

"There are assumptions that we don't share or test out openly with others - we continue in mutual misunderstanding, occasional defensiveness and face saving."

We talk about the importance of relationships, but people come and go, the circumstances in which we are working are constantly shifting. We tend to focus on the desire to sustain 'the thing', to keep a project or initiative going, whereas we might be better to focus on the learning and the embedding of relational ways of working, so that becomes how we work. Hearing diverse views is also important, not to make sure we get the 'right answer', but to influence direction and help us to be be clearer about what is important and meaningful.

What gives us hope

At times, the conversations felt quite dark, as if sustainability meant sustaining the status quo or finding some way to sustain a valued service or our own jobs without funding, but we became more hopeful as we explored our learning.

> ### Recurring themes – an exchange
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> *"I think we need to keep coming back to hopeful thinking, even when things seem tricky."*
>
> *"Yes, how do you sustain 'hope'?"*
>
> *"I think this is an important habit to acquire, otherwise we waste good energy worrying about things, instead of focusing on the possibilities."*
>
> *"We need to create the conditions that allow for failure, (not just lip service to it because the consequence are so dire)."*
>
> *"So, we might look for connections and strengths in making decisions about what to continue to support, rather than putting 'the thing' into a box of successful or unsuccessful?"*

Ultimately, we need to create the conditions that enable change to happen. Through our tests of change we are trying out new ways of collaborating and focusing on learning together what we

should 'adopt, adapt and abandon'. Adjusting our perspective to a humbler focus on what's real and possible, to develop less grandiose notions of what we can achieve is (perhaps paradoxically) a key system change behaviour. We are finding it helps us respond better to emerging and unexpected challenges like staff changes and the profound effect of Covid. And through establishing these approaches and process we are making it more likely that individual and systemic learning will be sustained, even if 'the thing' isn't continued.

Evaluation and evidence of impact are very much part of those structures of accountability that sustain existing systems and how to evaluate system change has been a recurring theme of the learning support programme.[5] Without good evidence it is hard to know what might be worth continuing in some form, and there remain challenges of implementing evaluation as an on-going, embedded, learning-focused practice, part of the 'how' of system change.

> *"… It's easy to get caught up in service provision all the time. Many tests of change were new services and so evaluations became focused on this. What I learned was that systems change is not all about this. The most recent huddle [about] different types of sustainability really highlighted this. It demonstrated that …we need to sustain the ways of working that even allowed a new service to be tried. Without these, we are in the realms of silver bullet thinking - that if we simply refine and refine and find the right service, we will fix the problem."* (Learning Support Feedback, 2022)

> *"How we think about change seems to be a bigger part of the problem than I'd realised. We expect 'big, visible on the ground impact, at scale'. We don't generally get it, so we 'assume' failure and move on or rebrand...."*

Endnote

We hope that this briefing stimulates your own thinking and practice. We conclude that it is never too late, or indeed, too early to think about sustainability.

Briefing by Kate Tobin with Janet Adams and Dee Kieran, and with support from Ian McKenzie (Animate) and Cathy Sharp (*Research for Real*) 2023. Thanks to all the partnerships, huddle participants and the staff of the Fund for their input.

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[1] In March 2018, The National Lottery Community Fund (The Fund) in Scotland awarded £5.9 million to eight multi-agency partnerships. Early Action System Change (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.

[2] https://inclusionasprevention.org.uk

[3] All quotes are from the huddle participants, unless indicated.

[4] Brundtland, G.H. (1987) Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development

[5] See https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/From-Consultation-to-Conversation-TNLCF-Briefing-2.pdf?mtime=20200916103236&focal=none and https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/Exploring-our-thinking-NLCF-EASC-Briefing-4.pdf?mtime=20210715174617&focal=none