

“Learning As We Go”

Early Action System Change

NLCF Thematic Briefing 3

Introduction

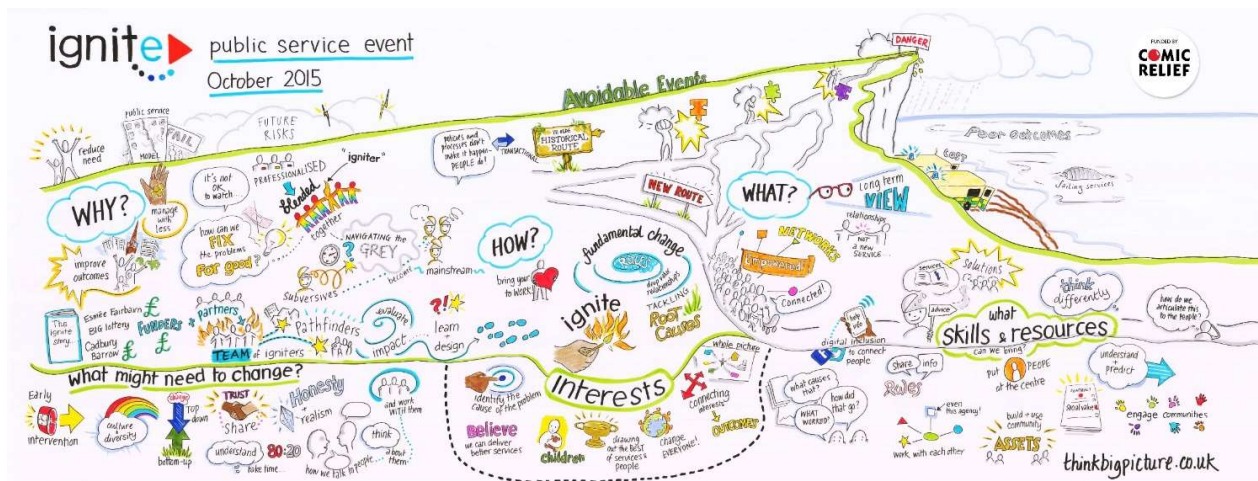
This briefing reflects on our Learning Support journey over the past year, highlighting the key activities, emerging themes and what people found valuable in taking up the opportunities to share knowledge and learn together.

We give a central focus to the inspiring presentation from ‘fellow early action travellers’ at Ignite in Coventry, which reinforces and builds on the key messages from earlier inputs from the EANF and Lankelly Chase. They encourage us to hang on in there, remain focused on our core purpose, take time to build relationships and knowledge, share risk, be accountable, stay curious and put learning at the heart of all we do.

There remains no shortage of topics for discussion and we conclude by inviting continuing engagement in deciding the content and shaping of the Learning Support activities.

The hard-won lessons of enabling system change: lessons from Ignite

At our recent annual event, our external speakers Emma Bates and Clare Wightman from Ignite¹ gave a very engaging presentation about their work in Coventry to support system change.² This summarises many interesting insights about turning a vision on paper into something real and engaging.



Here we have summarised what feels useful for the EASC partnerships to inform and inspire their work as they go forward.

¹ <https://www.centralelandlcf.org.uk/ignite>

² Videos of the talk are available to the EASC partnerships on the Knowledge Hub. <https://khub.net/group/early-action-system-change-scotland-nlcf/group-home> Well worth watching.

As you read this consider:

*What resonates with you?
What questions do they raise for your own work?
What do you want to explore in more depth or discuss at a future
huddle, webinar or in action learning?*

Be strategic and focused in the systems landscape

- Hold true and tight to your purpose and principles, based on your core strengths, but not so tight that you're derailed by change. Stay agile and flexible in how you work.
- Hold the space within the system: be prepared to recontract and renegotiate so all parties in the system have an understanding of purpose and progress.
- Work with people - explore what people tell you they need as a source of insight about service gaps, explore possibilities and ways of amplifying promising responses.

"... sometimes in the toughest slog, where someone is talking to you about what they're going to do, they're identifying a service gap or a problem they're working with that's really important to them."

- Pick and choose if, when and how you intervene in the light of the intelligence you have about possible levers for change.
- Ensure practical needs are addressed, but focus on learning and testing out new responses.

Open new avenues for learning

- Take time to understand what's really going on – in communities and within organisations.
- Suspend judgement and remain curious with everyone. Expect and welcome other perspectives.
- Treat the work as a learning experiment. Use Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) cycles or some kind of test of change to involve people in small-scale experiments and review together. Make sure you really understand what's going on inside of services and what changes when you try to do something different.
- Take time to understand what works or doesn't and involve participants in the analysis and in deciding next steps so that feedback and collective learning drive adaptation and people are supported to work in new ways. Keep your theories of change to the fore to continually test them out and be interested in developing insight, hindsight and foresight.

"The teams themselves had to think about, 'well what might I have done differently?' That was quite a new way of working for people used to delivering outputs really."

- Keep iterating – use 'deeper dives' to understand practice issues more fully.
- Be careful about language, how it will position you and influence ways of thinking.
- Encourage dialogue about learning rather than activities.

- Look out for signs of shifts in values and behaviours amongst the key players in the system – in their perspectives, participation and how they navigate power dynamics.
- Create opportunities and spaces to unearth underlying values, assumptions, resistance or barriers to change and enable these to be discussed in an honest and safe way that avoids blame, including system learning exercises, routine reflective practice. Treat insights as a reflection of something in the system: focus on what you do with what is voiced - rather than who said it.
- Don't redesign services in isolation from tackling underlying values, assumptions, resistance or barriers that will impede implementation of any new approach.

“We also discovered a sense that there were people deserving of help and others less so ... But the way I would look at that, is that with a system that is being cut and is under huge strain – how do you cope with the knowledge that you can't help everyone that needs help? You might then start to divide people ... These things are driven by other factors and we have to understand [them].”

- Ensure new service design reflects what the data tells you about need and appropriate responses.
- Be hard-headed: ask how people know that they are making a difference. Seek out and use data that can reveal patterns, challenge perceptions and encourage a dialogue about what's really happening.

“All along people had said anecdotally, ‘we've seen loads of people here to help. We're so busy. We're overrun at the front end of services.’ You could see from the data there that that simply was not the case. There was a perception that was held really tight, that people couldn't deliver the earliest help to people at the start of problems, because they were so busy. This data alone really unlocked that conversation ...”

- Use outside help from time to time to help you think through problems or facilitate group processes.

Build relationships, roles and partnerships

- Think about the conditions under which people collaborate in fast changing contexts and continue to invest time in building relationships at all levels – from frontline to Director.
- Help your own teams to understand and navigate their roles. Always be clear about your own role and share this with others so that they understand your role and boundaries.

“It starts with being really clear about what your role is. People will assign a role to you if you're not clear about what your role is.”

- Align community development and organisational development.
- Support the development of these kinds of system competencies amongst others – be deliberate about passing these on.

Be hopeful and ambitious to make it happen

- Develop a clear and shared articulation of your offer, focused on the world as it is and the future you want rather than exploring what went right or wrong in the past, and why.
- Continue to develop ‘the story’ – talk about your assumptions and how these are being challenged or affirmed and what you’ve missed or underestimated.
- Enable people with lived experience to become story tellers in their own right and become the catalysts for change. Work with care to create a restorative process that allows them to share their story in compelling ways without causing distress or damage.

“It’s tough. ... there’s a moral element isn’t there? ... when people are in their most difficult moments and accessing systems, that’s an amazing story – but are they able to tell it properly and navigate it? We just didn’t spend enough time on that, and we think we would now. ... because we think that’s an important part of making change, an important part of connecting services to the complexity of an individual, is them hearing from that individual.”

- Turn complex ideas into a simple to understand blueprint for action that describes your change methodology and help people navigate their way.

“It was about developing honesty; getting to grips with why families don’t come in the front door of Children Services early enough. We were trying to uncover what their problems were, design a team that could meet those problems and then engage families ... You could come early. You wouldn’t get judged and you would get the help. And that will change the trajectory of your family”

“It spoke to people who got interested. They could see where we’d been and what the next bit of the journey would look like.”

- Understand the needs of all your audiences – be prepared to compromise and if necessary, translate your ideas into more conventional forms of reporting or representations, without watering them down. This can help them to solve a problem they have that might derail your work.
- Don’t be content with an action plan as an end point. Activate it so that it happens with or without you as facilitators or enablers. Ensure that people at all levels are engaged. Don’t lose pace.
- Stay close to what’s happening on the ground and work to bring people with you.
- Take care of yourself, find allies and dedicate time to talk about how you are working together.

“You do need to be quite resilient. I don’t know what kept us going – doggedness and determination? - ‘we’ve started this and we’re going to finish it, and we’re going to have a decent story to tell at the end of it!’”

“If there’d been solid agreement and consensus amongst us, I would have thought that was a bad sign. Consensus doesn’t really help you do the right thing.”

A retrospective look at Learning Support

“I wasn’t sure what it would be because it is so different, but I am really glad to be part of it. I always leave action learning sets or huddles feeling reassured. I enjoy the time hearing about what others are doing and it makes you feel part of something bigger - squirrelling away you can forget there are others doing similar things – it’s really reassuring to have the support network there as well.” (Learning event participant, Oct 2020)

Over the last year we have provided a range of learning support activities, including:

An initial face to face gathering of the eight projects and TNLCF officers in October 2019 to get to know one another better, share progress and explore learning options.	Three webinars providing insights into: the successes and challenges of the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (a similar initiative in England), the Healthy ‘n’ Happy (Community Development Trust) approach to co-production, and how Lankelly Chase promotes ‘system behaviours’.
Two Learning Briefings focused on learning to date and anticipated challenges and approaches to evaluation and co-production (see https://bit.ly/3exOsA4 and https://bit.ly/3oTOSp3)	Two ongoing Action Learning Sets that explore current issues for members.
Eight “Huddles” enabling further sharing of progress and the responding to topics of interest to partnerships.	The provision of a practice sharing space on the Knowledge Hub.

Recent feedback confirms the value of the learning support and the scope to extend the network. Clear messages are that:

- Partnerships have much to give and share with each other – it’s not just about problem solving - sharing successes is helpful for all parties.
- Participation provides a helpful connection and validation of what people are doing and a chance to hear from other, sometimes unexpected, places.

“I wasn’t sure if (learning support) was going to be that valuable but actually it has become invaluable ... the beauty of this network is that it really brings us all of us out of ourselves to feel part of the wider programme ... and the themes across the partnership are so similar, gives me a sense of being better connected.”

- We would all benefit from reaching new people and places – bringing in more people and from across the whole range of roles involved in systems change work.

“We have been fortunate in having some external support in looking at some of the issues you have addressed too, but would have benefited from both so I think we should utilise it more and we will certainly try and do that over the coming year as our project takes a different direction again.”

- Some themes, like co-production and approaches to evaluation, recur and we expect them to continue to be rich learning veins. It is in the nature of this way of working that we will return to many core themes to share the ‘growing edge’ of our learning throughout our journey.

“I’ve never worked anywhere with this kind of provision for learning that is so specific to what you are doing and there has been so many topics we have covered in this first year and a lot of them come off the back of previous things we have discussed.”

So, what now?

Areas for future ongoing inquiry and Learning Support

The October 2020 event raised a number responses to the presenters and questions for our own practice, that could form the content of our forthcoming Learning Support, for example:

Our approach to change

- How can we work with difference without judging people?
- How can we help our partners to reach out to families/young people who would benefit from earlier support from us?
- How can we bring parents on board and develop a whole family approach to addressing the impact of trauma?
- How are we paying attention to the language we use to reach out and connect with our audience?
- What are we learning about what works online? What online platforms and approaches are we using to reach the people we support? What challenges are we encountering and how are we trying to overcome them?
- How are we approaching digital safeguarding?
- How do we engage with hierarchies and power structures in local authorities to effect change?

Learning and evaluation

- What are we celebrating? How can we use noticing what we value to further our work together?
- How can we build in time to think and process what we are learning and being challenged by as partnerships?
- How are we each approaching evaluation and what are we learning?
- What does success look like for us as a partnership? How are we measuring progress towards it?
- Where are we spotting changes in perspective, power and participation - system behaviours?
- How can we tell the story of system change to increase understanding and engagement?
- How can we use story gathering and telling purposefully? Are we paying attention to why we are gathering stories? How are we gathering them? How do we use them?
- Sharing our resources and what we are learning from using them. What are the key resources we are using? What insights are they giving us?

The partnerships have all been invited to a pre-Christmas celebration event. The Action Learning Sets are continuing to share and reflect together to support each other’s learning. We plan to host a Webinar in February 2021, and up to six further Huddles before the end of March 2021.

- We are looking for ideas – for a topic and speaker for the Webinar and for the Huddles.
- We want to build on and encourage partnerships to host and present issues of interest, and to ‘enable access’ to their wider knowledge and learning to maximise learning for us all.

Please get in touch to discuss any of the above, or anything else you are discovering or are curious about, so that together we can continue to enrich our collective learning journey.

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.

Briefing by Cathy Sharp (Research for Real) and Ian McKenzie (Animate) November 2020