

# Learning in New Territories

## Early Action System Change      NLCF Thematic Briefing 1

### Background and context

In March 2018, the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) 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. Dedicated resources enable the partnerships to re-focus efforts towards a longer-term preventative approach through improved data, greater collaboration with local communities and a co-production approach. The eight partnerships cover one of two themes: children, young people and families facing significant challenges and women and the criminal justice system.

The NLCF have funded a parallel learning support programme seeking to foster a culture of collaborative learning with the eight partnerships, so that information sharing, innovation and problem solving are able to take place in a supportive safe environment. This is expected to enhance the effectiveness of each individual partnerships work, the impact of the investment overall and ensure learning from the programme can be shared with wider stakeholders.

The focus of work since funding was approved might be characterised as ‘establishing a basis for purposeful action’ and creating the financial, legal and operational structures to enable partners to work together. As they move into a new phase of work, this briefing focuses on the learning and anticipated challenges ahead based on discussions between the eight partnerships and the learning support partners during Summer 2019.

### Key messages

#### We have a shared and compelling purpose

The partnerships are enthusiastic about the opportunities to work in a different way that feels important and right. They know that there is a lot of interest locally and more widely about early action system change and there’s a sense of genuine common and compelling purpose amongst the partners, galvanising around the central importance of the voice of children, young people and families or women with experience of the criminal justice system.

They often talk about relationships being crucial to make this work. The relationships amongst them have been forged through the sometimes challenging process of compiling the funding bid and subsequent working agreements. This collaboration has relied on a lot of goodwill, commitment and local leadership of someone prepared to make every effort to ‘keep us all around the table’. This has happened in a context of public service cuts to funding and great uncertainty about the future of existing services and jobs. In the light of such difficulties, some say that they have been surprised and humbled by people’s evident commitment and determination to work together.

## We are all players in changing the system

There is a degree of reflective insight of the demands of the work, that might depart from established ways of working both individually and in terms of what it means for working together:

*“A lot of our ideas about everything are deeply entrenched within us - no matter how right-on or up to date we think we are – like how we work, also what we think is helping might not actually be the best or only way to help people. It requires time to think about what you’re actually doing....to make sure I’m not just making assumptions.... even if they come from the best possible intentions.”*

*“It takes time for new changes to begin to work, we need to be patient and courageous ... things are uncertain, and you have to sit with that. Working with the ambiguity of it all – holding back and being willing to listen, to collaborate and build relationships, and resist the desire to ‘fix stuff’.”*

This commitment, understanding and level of comfort with uncertainty is often supported by valuable insights from ‘beneficiaries’:

*“I’ve learned that young people know what they want and need to look after their wellbeing – and are willing to discuss and advocate for it. It’s been fun to do.”*

*“What’s helped for me is hearing women’s voices at every stage of the process. ...a woman said, ‘what a difference it would make if everybody that worked with me in the criminal justice system showed some compassion’.”*

Very often the early phases of work have taken place in a wider enabling policy and local context where there is a readiness and eagerness to do things differently. Even so, the early experience of partnership working has not been easy; the planning stage has taken more time than expected and at times, this process exposed the weaknesses of partnership working that had been assumed to be strong. One of the unintended consequences of historical funding practices has risked pitching local organisations into competition with each other and this can be part of a local legacy of relationships and lack of trust amongst different organisations. Getting through these kinds of challenges has ‘opened up new territory’ and coming back to ‘what actually matters here’ has been an important touchstone.

Working through these challenges can provide insight that enables better understanding of the position and challenges of people who work in other parts of the system:

*“To get a grasp of what people are trying to do, you’ve almost got to imagine what it’s like to be in the Health and Social Care Partnership - to show the complexity and difficulty of changing things. My learning is that it’s all very well for me to work in the voluntary sector and think that people have to do things differently – but that is a real challenge when you work within the statutory system.”*

## Doing early action system change

How to build and sustain real partnership working is one of the ongoing key challenges of this work as it moves into a more active phase of doing early action system change. The partnerships report that there is still a lack of understanding about what systems change is and some cynicism about it.

Some have experienced mixed reactions to the idea of the approach and had the response that ‘we already do that’. It can feel both a huge and daunting task and quite abstract unless it is narrowed down into feasible, specific local actions which show how each person can play a part. A shift to preventative actions amongst professionals can be difficult for those providing statutory services and there remain barriers of engagement such as stigma for children and families.

Figure 1 shows a selection of the kind of burning questions the partnerships are asking themselves at this stage of the work. These show the very real practical issues and challenges of this work.

**Figure 1: What’s on our minds?**



**Understanding of co-production in practice** is a major theme: what it is or is not, how we make it meaningful, what does it ask of professionals and what is real and possible in each context?

**Hearing the voices of children, young people and families** is a vital source of motivation and reality check that can bring fresh ideas and solutions: how can these voices be strengthened and sustained? How can we stay open to what we hear and avoid defensiveness?

**Developing and maintaining trusting and mature relationships** is one of the biggest challenges to continue the energy and commitment that has brought people this far. The repeated refrain ‘it’s all

about relationships' applies as much amongst professionals as between different organisations and the people that use their services.

**Testing and learning change the way we work:** people talk about the freedom to work differently, to try things out, test change and possibly fail and learn by doing. This opens-up thinking and freedom from the expectation that professionals will know what solutions are best. It needs to take place within a clear strategic vision so that efforts are not too diffused and brings a need for agility and adaptability that this not always present in public service contexts.

**Shifting financial and human resources** is a shared ambition: there are issues about how to make the case or leverage such shifts and how to take recommendations for systems change forward. This is an important issue that partnerships recognise needs attention now, rather than in several years' time, including how cost impacts will be understood. There are also questions about what assumptions and expectations underpin a desire to see a roll-out of successes and wider adoption.

**Taking time to reflect together and review** can be difficult unless it is prioritised: how can we make planned time to have good, honest conversations and learn together? The recent meetings on which this briefing is based were often the first time the group had had an 'non-agenda-ed' meeting where the focus could be on reflection and sharing learning, out of 'doing mode'.

**Understanding and measuring impact** brings a need to think about how to gather evidence of early successes and outcomes that give partners confidence to continue and recognise emerging impacts, however small. There is interest in making use of stories and other data as a way of building in learning. Such evaluative thinking needs to be established from the earliest stages, so that there is an understanding of what difference is being made and how. Some sound a note of realism in thinking about the pace of change and when changes might reasonably be expected to be measurable. Whilst some partnerships have evaluation arrangements in place, there remains a need to agree amongst the partners how they will notice and make meaningful measures of system change.

**Developing skills for systems change** is vital given all the above issues and challenges: this applies at all levels including Project Boards and frontline staff: a huge range of different skills and attributes are needed including agile project management, motivational skills, understanding authority, negotiation and relational skills, including facilitation and learning support.

### [Learning support for the partnerships](#)

Learning doesn't happen in a vacuum and relies on reflection and sharing with others. A recurring theme from the early meetings was that people do value the time and space for reflection and that it is difficult to create and protect. The ambition of the learning support package is help people to practice being 'early action practitioners' by learning from doing. It will encourage reflective dialogue across all eight partnerships as a means for achieving deep and practical learning. There is value in networking and hearing what others are doing and there is no shortage of topics for discussion and plenty of scope to influence the shape the support takes as the work unfolds. Learning cannot be mandated, but hopefully it is possible to create an appetite for it by treating it as much a part of the 'new territory' as seeking system change.

[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*) October 2019**