The Power of Trust and Relationship in Implementation

Learning from the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme

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Introduction

This publication is based on our seven-year study of the implementation of 36 projects funded under the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme by The National Lottery Community Fund. It also references the contribution of speakers, parents, and participants, at a webinar held in May 2022, to share and discuss learning from the Programme.

We found that the stand-out themes of the Programme are trust and relationship, and the connection between the two. We found evidence of this in our work on key components of good family support; in our study of partnership working across the voluntary & community sector and statutory sector; and again in studying the implementation of the Programme.

The learning from the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme also leads us to propose that families are a key partner in the implementation of change, not just the beneficiaries. Likewise, implementation efforts would be enhanced by taking the values and practices central to our work with families and applying them to our fellow stakeholders.

This is the third publication from the learning captured during the Programme. The previous two focused on key components of good early intervention family support practice and partnership working in the voluntary and community sector. These can be found at www.effectiveservices.org

The Reaching Out Supporting Families Programme

Programme Aim and Outcomes
Between late 2014 and 2016, The National Lottery Community Fund invested £25 million in 36 projects for a period of five years. One third of the projects received an additional two years' funding in a competitive process.

The aim of the programme was to build strong nurturing relationships within families as a way of improving children's' lives. Each project committed to work towards the following three outcomes:

- More children and their families will have greater skills, knowledge and understanding to overcome adversity
- More children and their families will come together to learn
- More children and their families will be part of the community that they live in

To achieve these outcomes, projects have provided a wide range of activities, programmes and supports aimed at children, parents, families, extended families, groups, communities and professionals. These can be categorised under five broad areas:
- Group based activities
- Family focused activities
- School based supports
- Therapeutic supports
- Support/capacity building for professionals

The role of CES
From 2015 until 2022, CES has been working with the 36 voluntary & community organisations, and their partner organisations. Our role was to build the projects' capacity to achieve their outcomes and evaluate and publicise their effectiveness to support sustainability. We did that through the development of a peer network and a co-designed annual learning programme.The programme focused on:
- **skills** in logic modelling, implementation, evaluation, storytelling, digital and social media, partnership working, engaging parents and hearing the child's voice.
- **knowledge** of the impact of trauma, self-care, relationship-based practice, engaging fathers and parents with a learning disability, amongst others.

We also conducted a 'capturing the learning' exercise to inform future practice and policy development related to:
- good early intervention family support practice,
- partnership working and
- the implementation of early intervention family services.

The methodology for this involved collecting data from annual self-evaluation reports submitted to the funder; interviews with project staff throughout the course of the Programme and, laterally, focus groups with project staff and funding officers. We also interviewed a small number of parents.

Learning from the implementation of the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme

We analysed the implementation related data from projects' self-evaluation reports, interviews and focus groups and found that how the programme was implemented impacted on the achievement of project outcomes. Trust and relationship were possibly the most important enablers of successful implementation. Other aspects included:

Staffing

Recruitment and retention of staff was significant. Funding the training of new staff was a challenge, as was maintaining continuity of service delivery with staff turnover. Staff retention was impacted by time-limited funding, early career staff moving for progression and the nature of the work impacting on project workers. Good quality staff supervision was recognised as an enabler. Conversely, lack of good quality supervision made staff feel less secure and confident in their role, potentially reducing staff retention. This was particularly significant as many projects worked with families facing more complex and diverse life experiences than their service was originally designed for. Feedback from families consistently referred to the personal qualities staff brought to their work – kindness, approachability, relatability, persistence, sense of humour, expert knowledge.

Engagement methods

Methods of engagement across the programme were diverse and there was rich learning about how to engage with families who don't come looking for help or would be reluctant to engage with services. Examples of the wide range of relationship building activities with families can be found in the body of this report. Projects reported that intentional relationship building was key to the achievement of positive outcomes with more marginalised families. Reduced isolation was one of the most significant changes observed across the Programme.

Flexibility and accessibility

Flexibility and accessibility of the services and project staff was perceived as a significant factor in the success of the programme and projects found that a 'one size fits all' approach to supporting families was less effective. They needed to be flexible and agile to adapt to individual families' circumstances and previous negative experience of services. Many of the organisations emphasised the value of flexible, longer-term funding in enabling them to adapt to unanticipated challenges, such as the increasing complexity of presenting need, or a sudden change in the external environment such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Implementation skills and competencies

There has been growing recognition in the last five years of the important role of people and all that they bring to implementation, where previously there was a greater focus on implementation constructs, frameworks and strategies. In 2020, Dr Metz, and international colleagues, developed the Implementation support practitioner profile: Guiding principles and core competencies for implementation practice (Metz et al 2020). Core skills and competencies were identified through an evidence-based methodology including a scoping review, documents review, interviews, and vetting and consensus building (Metz, 2016).

CES provided the Reaching Out, Supporting Families projects with implementation training and ongoing support. Participants reported the value of understanding implementation frameworks, barriers and enablers and the different stages of implementation planning. Despite this, there was little evidence that projects were fully adopting and using implementation frameworks to guide their work. However, we did see evidence across the Programme of project staff exhibiting behaviours that align with the competencies and principles outlined in Metz et al's work (see fig. 1). We also saw the positive impact of these on the implementation of their projects, namely building trust and relationship, broadening their understanding of other stakeholders' contexts and supporting partnership working.

Empathy – projects approached the change facilitation process with regard for others as legitimate, respected, and valuable contributors; sought mutual understanding within the context of relationships and understood how growth-promoting relationships between practitioners and stakeholders could support implementation of their services. This was a core strength of the Programme.

Curiosity – projects demonstrated authentic interest in how local actors and context would shape implementation of services; sought out different forms of evidence and information; tolerated uncertainty and ambiguity while seeking clarity.

Commitment – project teams brought patience, resilience, and willingness to challenge the status quo to the process; demonstrating flexibility and agility during implementation setbacks.

Advancing Equity – projects intentionally advanced equitable implementation by paying explicit attention to the language, cultures, histories, values, assets, and needs of different communities.

Using Critical Thinking – we found evidence of projects assessing context and root causes or contributing factors and making conscious choices that are informed by evidence, also exploring their own and others' assumptions.

Embracing Cross-disciplinary Approaches – many projects strived to use diversity of expertise across disciplines to bring about mutual learning. Successful partnerships across sectors brought significant benefits to many of the projects (Hanratty et al 2021).

Fig. 1   (Adapted from Metz et al 2020)

Trust and relationship

The stand-out themes of the Programme are trust and relationship and the connection between the two.

There were four parties involved in making the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme a success: the **families** – who both benefited from and shaped it; the **projects** – including grant holders and partners; CES, as the implementation support organisation, and The **National Lottery Community Fund** that designed and funded it. When we considered the relationships between these four parties, we found that they were characterised by similar traits:

- Being available and accessible
- Listening and adapting
- Investing time and resources in intentional relationship building
- Developing a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities that existed
- Enabling the other to bring their expertise to the work

- Having a flexible approach to delivering what was intended, whilst remaining focused on the desired outcomes

These together produced trusted relationships that became the hallmark of the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme. They addressed issues of equity and power between the different parties and placed a high value on the expertise and continuous learning of each party.

Trusted relationships between key stakeholders in the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme

The National Lottery Community Fund
In respect of The National Lottery Community Fund's relationships with CES and the projects, four key characteristics stand out. The funding team:

- provided a key contact who met with us regularly and was available at other times
- started with the agreed plan, but took time to hear what was being learned about the effectiveness of the original service design and delivery and what

adaptations were then required
- was clear they wanted whatever was best for the families
- believed in the expertise of the projects and CES.

These behaviours applied to large, national organisations and small community groups that had not previously been funded to do their work. The expertise of both was appreciated and there was equity in that ethos.

It's really worth mentioning this, the Lottery themselves, as a funder, are totally flexible, they are really interested in the story and the need ... I think having that flexibility and not feeling like you are having to jump through loads of hoops in order to do what the family actually needs, that has been really, really crucial for us as well as to why it has worked well. (National organisation)

We're lucky enough our funding officer has been X, the whole time with the Lottery. So then, even the link with Lottery has been a real clear communication the whole time… So (they) knew what it was we were doing and what we were hoping to do and what we aspired to do as well. And it's just been absolutely fantastic. (Local organisation)

CES
The 36 projects funded under the Programme were under no obligation to engage with CES, so we had to build trust and ensure the support offered was what they wanted, was carefully paced and aligned to the development of their teams and services. To achieve this, we made ourselves available, accessible, and easy to work with. We brought people together, served up a lot of tea and scones and talked about the challenges and what was going well. In the beginning, people found it hard to anticipate their learning needs, so it was this listening and reflecting that led us to identify common themes that we built the learning programme around. It took time. Projects' feedback suggests that our curiosity and non-judgemental tone enabled honest conversations about the struggles of doing early intervention family support work. One project described the approach taken by the team as,

non-judgemental, consultative/ listening, co-productive, stress releasing.

Creating a supportive, relational culture was foundational to providing more specific input when difficulties arose either in the work, the partnership or at an organisational level.

The approachable nature of staff, coupled with the CES' ready availability vs delay was very encouraging and motivating when challenges arose. The willingness and actual attendance of M in our 'hinterland' of Co Fermanagh was also very encouraging as it demonstrated our project wasn't being treated as a 'poor cousin' in relation to city-based projects. That in-person recognition was motivating.

This intentional building of trusted relationships also led to organisations bringing into the group their experience of what was working, what was tried and didn't work, and knowledge of useful resources. This was a notable outcome because the organisations were competing for limited funding.

My hand used to be falling off at those meetings, writing down everybody's tips and tricks and how to do this and what worked for us, and I literally just absorbed everything from everybody else, because I hadn't no clue what I was doing when I started.

In their systematic, integrative review of the research on mechanisms of implementation support, Albers et al (2022) found evidence that the building of trust between implementation support practitioners - like CES - and stakeholders created a sense of safety. This made it easier for stakeholders to share about their own practice, to experiment with new approaches and to give up part of their control. These relationships were described as requiring a sense of safety for stakeholders to share experience and engage in joint learning.

This mirrors the experience of CES in building a relationship-based network of project staff. The systematic review affirmed our approach, highlighting this as an area of focus for effective implementation support (Albers et al, 2021).

Projects demonstrated imagination and tenacity in engaging and building relationships with families. And during the pandemic, they went to great lengths to engage in new ways to maintain those relationships and develop peer support networks.

Since the pandemic, I have set up a WhatsApp group for parents who would have came to our coffee mornings. And I felt like at that stage in March last year, that parents felt lonely isolated, nobody to turn to nobody to talk to. So on the WhatsApp group, I have about maybe 20 families/25 families on it, and the engagement and the interaction and the support that is on that WhatsApp group is phenomenal. And it is so powerful. It is unreal.

We have been forced to change our service delivery... But, actually, we have had some really positive outcomes from that. So, for instance, we do online therapeutic group therapies that are all very small, for parents. But what we've been able to do by doing it online is it's much more accessible for parents. They don't have to worry about childcare or things like that, it means that we can have somebody in Omagh and somebody in Newtownards in the same group, two people who would naturally never have met under the circumstances, and all of a sudden have a shared common interest and a space online.

Many projects reflected that you don't just get the funding, open an early intervention support service and people start to come through the door, asking for help. Earning families' trust was key and that takes time. They developed activities that provided an entry point for those who might be less likely to engage with services. Some examples of these include family fun days, Zumba, baby massage, baby café, siblings' groups, homework and holiday clubs and dads & children fishing. Staff spent time at the school gate, providing drop-in sessions in schools, being visible in the community, even knocking on doors. One addressed the décor of the building to make it attractive to father-figures, another facilitated parents not yet ready to talk about their experiences of trauma to just lunch together for social connection for as long as they needed to before they were ready to talk; some provided alternative therapies.

All of these were designed to make it possible for families on the margins to come in and get the support they needed, to come together with others with similar experiences and to build trusted relationships. Outcomes data indicates that this reduced social isolation, built confidence and led to quality-of-life improvements for families.

"Oh, you're wasting your time on him. I mean, he's a lost cause - one of these days, he's gonna top himself." I thought, 'we have worked with this guy. And he had 22, 23 suicide attempts in the two years before he came to us and hasn't had a suicide attempt in the three or four years that he's been involved with the project. Now, he's taking his medication again, he is seeing a counsellor, he came very close to (naming his experience) for the first time ever a couple of weeks ago to his counsellor. He wouldn't even say that before.'

The first time I came to group, at the end I started crying and it was the relief of knowing I wasn't alone.

The investment in building relationships with families over time also led to the development or, in some cases, strengthening of parental involvement in co-designing service improvements or service redesign. In this respect the families were indeed active participants in the successful implementation of the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme. They also were instrumental in enabling other parents to trust the services. Some parents became volunteers, mentors, ambassadors, steering group members and board members.

In terms of effective implementation and its reliance on trusted relationships, some projects invested time in their partners and in new, informal partnerships to create a community infrastructure of support for families. A project that worked with families from minority ethnic groups spoke about having to address barriers and build relationships with wider organisations trusted by the families in order to get the information about their services to them. They said…

So, we had to break down some barriers and it's just also about, you know, convincing them, building up trust with centres that you're not there to do any damage to them, you're not there to take anything

away from them. You're there to give. But again, it took a while for them to believe it too. So what role they provided was, once they accepted us in the community, then they're able to introduce us to groups or just say, 'look, these guys have this programme, you might be interested, come and listen to them'. So, getting people into the room, listen to us, then to get to that stage where we could deliver. Like, with the Syrian women - just before we got there, by saying, 'these people are not here working with the police or anything'. So, announcing our presence, I suppose, in a trusted way, because people do trust in local communities and they do trust local community centres... So if they trust us, then they're going to listen to us. (abridged)

The projects' experience demonstrates how critical intentional relationship building was to their effective implementation. From research and by experience, we know that good service design is important, as is a trained, well supported and resourced staff team, supportive organisational structures and adaptive leadership. But in the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme, our 'Capturing the Learning' work indicates that trust and relationship was the critical success factor. In addition, lack of professional trust was identified as a barrier to the achievement of outcomes for families.

Fig. 2 below demonstrates some of the behaviours observed in the relationships between the four parties involved in making the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme successful.

Reaching Out, Supporting Families

Being visible and available, taking time to integrate into community & get to know families, shop-front/low-commitment activities allowed easy access to projects. Addressing barriers to accessing supports, through advocacy and equitable venues. Flexibility – listening to needs and adapting service, co-design. Recognising strengths, empowering parents, growing peer support. Building community infrastructure to respond to local needs.

Families / communities

36 Projects

Addressing power from beginning – 'all on a journey together'. Set a culture of learning and empowering. Invested in building relationships with as many projects as were interested. Reached out continually to the few that weren't. Made it easy to make a relationship with us – food! Listened to develop shared understanding of challenges. Intentionally non-judgemental. Used peer learning, recognising strengths within the group. Learning calendar based on needs of group – flexible and adaptive. Co-designed evaluation.

CES

Opportunity to build relationship with funding officer, listening to projects, developing shared understanding of the opportunities and challenges of implementing original plans, flexible approach to service review and redesign, funded CES to equip and empower projects. Funded large and small organisations – equitable approach. Maintained accountability.

The National Lottery Community Fund

Frequent meetings, one key contact, listening to CES, developing shared understanding of the opportunities and challenges within the plans (overarching evaluation), willingness to respond to CES learning and adjust plans, CES allowed to bring expertise to develop and adjust the contract. Maintained accountability.
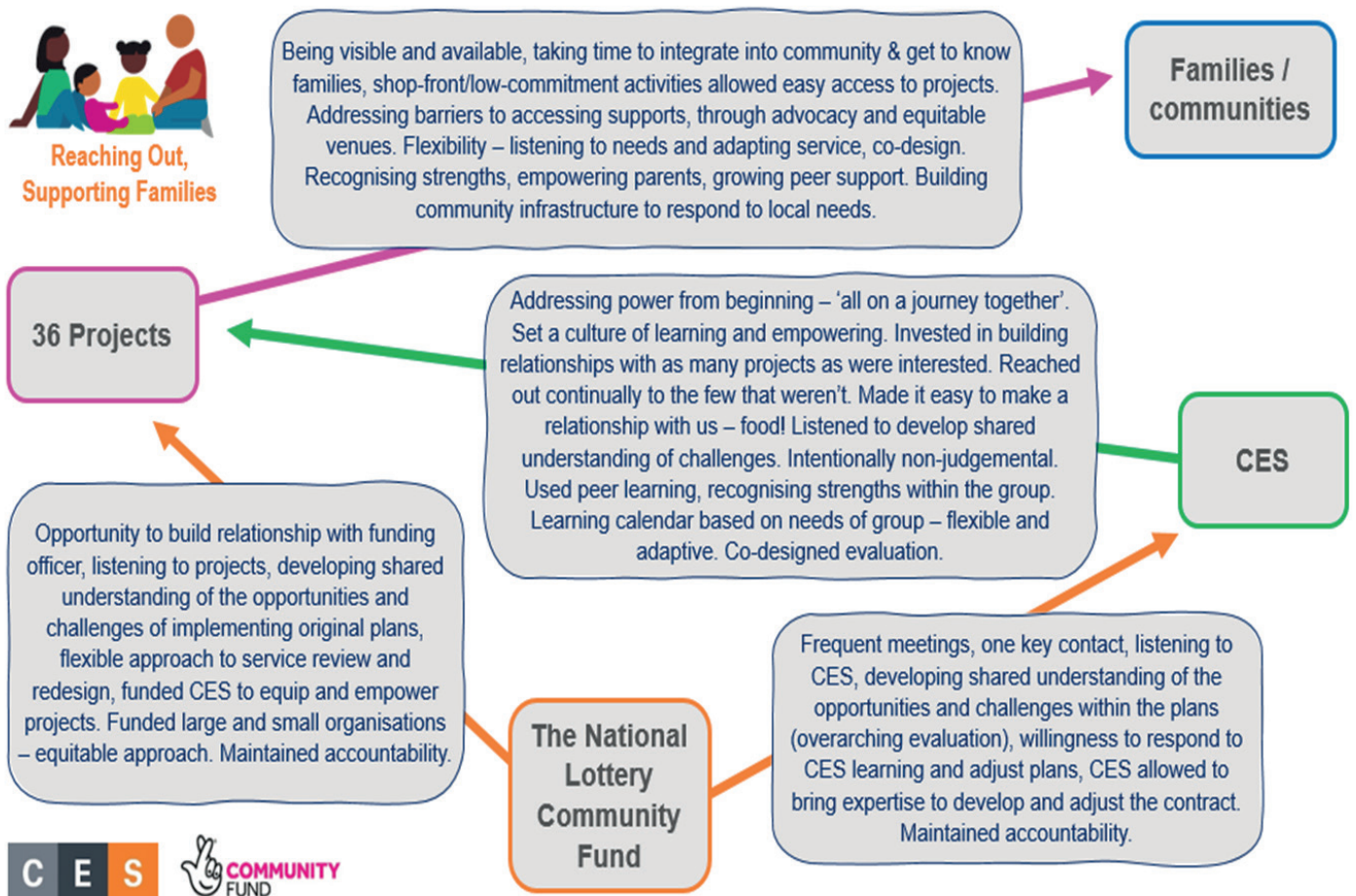
Fig.2

Why is building trust important?

Often, in our implementation efforts, we focus on things that are tangible, things that we can see, and measure. For example, the number of training sessions, the number of meetings, changes to our practices, increases in resources, development of policies that might enable those practices, data collection activities - things that are quite explicit. But it is often what we can't see, what we can't easily measure, that is really impacting implementation.

Trust and relationship are in this category of enablers of successful implementation that may feel intangible and hard to measure. However, evidence from the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme demonstrates that investing resources to build trust and relationship brings families from the margins into a supportive, helping environment; enables parents to trust services to protect their vulnerable children, and contributes to reducing isolation for people who live with stigma and to positive health and wellbeing outcomes for families.

Dr Allison Metz is Professor of the Practice and Director of Implementation Practice at the School of Social Work, University of North Carolina. In our webinar, *The power of trusted relationships in implementation*, Dr Metz spoke about her research on the role trust and relationship play in transformational change. She advocated that transformational change that sees socially significant outcomes requires not just the implementation of new practices or policies, but systemic change.

The **Water of Systems Change** inverted pyramid (Kania et al 2021) (Fig. 3) identifies the areas we often focus on to create change – such as resources, new practices or policies – and the areas that can go unacknowledged, but where transformational change is actually created – for example, power dynamics, belief systems, traditions.

SIX CONDITIONS OF SYSTEMS CHANGE

Policies | Practices | Resource flows — STRUCTURAL CHANGE *(Explicit level)*

Relationships & connections | Power dynamics — RELATIONAL CHANGE *(Semi-explicit level)*

Mental models — TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE *(Implicit level)*

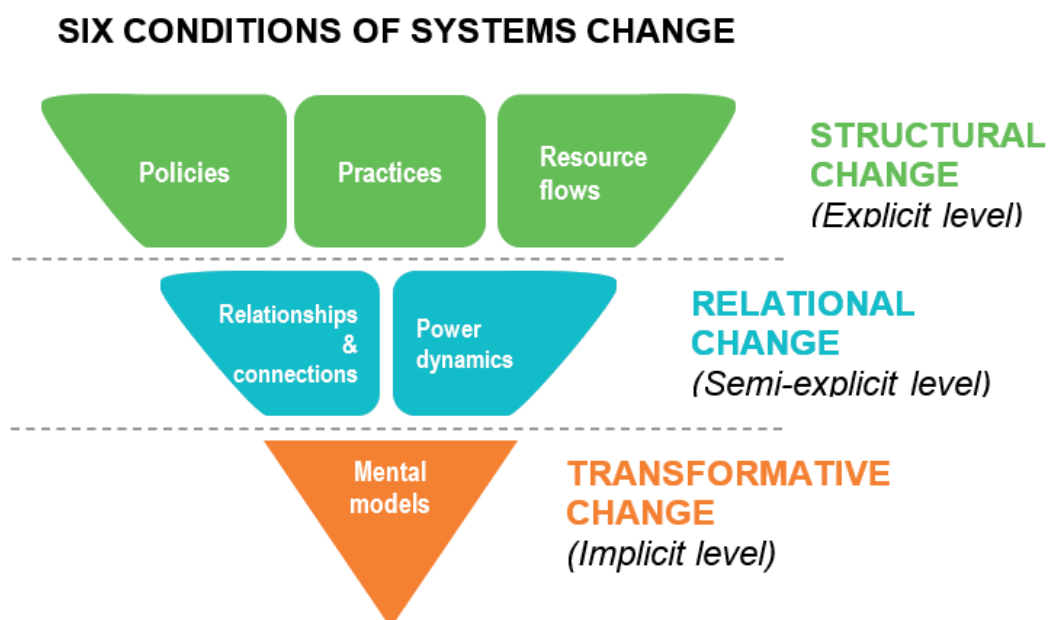Fig.3   (Kania et al 2021)

We focus mostly on the development of new ways of working, supporting policies and procedures and the resources required – these are explicit and easy to measure. We may be aware of power dynamics or power inequalities and relationships or connections that are helping or hindering the change process – these are semi-explicit. This was widely reflected on within the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme where power differentials between voluntary and community sector and statutory sector partners were challenging to overcome. In some cases, the power differential impacted on the achievement of outcomes for families.

One of the conditions for systems change proposed by Kania et al (2021) that we do not see immediately - and sometimes not for a long time - is people's mental models. Mental models represent what we carry with us and bring to anything we're involved in. They represent our assumptions about the work, our belief systems, the values that we hold. Mental models impact everything: how we interact with each other, how we interpret information and data, the relationships we form, the decisions that we make.

Illustrating how this is linked to trust, Dr Metz related a case example where child welfare authorities were working to transform their children's services. Using the Water of Systems Change model, the focus was directed away from structural aspects such as choosing evidence-based programmes and towards the conditions for truly transformational, sustainable change.

Stakeholders were asked, "What do we need to do to focus on the bottom of the triangle (mental models) and achieve transformational change?" The themes of trust, relationship, shared values, time, communication and vulnerability were reflected in the responses. When asked what might hinder their ability to focus on these implicit elements of transformative change, responses focused on fear, lack of trust, lack of time, being closed to learning from others and lack of engagement with those most affected by the changes. These barriers are often overlooked as we rush to choose a programme, get the resources in place, train the staff for new ways of working and start measuring the indicators of success.

Implementation inherently relies on collaborative learning, taking risks and failing because nothing we start immediately works perfectly. So we're in this constant learning mode. Implementation really relies on our ability to take risks, learn together and to see failure as opportunity, rather than a disappointment. At the centre of being able to do that is vulnerability and trust. It is inherent in our work, but it's often not what's made explicit; it's kind of below the surface and things that we're not often talking about. (A Metz)

Strategies for building trust

Dr Metz suggests that the starting point for trust building is addressing power differentials among implementation team members and stakeholders through co-creation and humility. This aligns with the assumptions of relational cohesion theory (Lawler & Yoon 1996) that productive exchanges occur when two or more people seek to jointly produce benefits they cannot achieve alone. Inherent in this assumption is that embarking on transformational change with humility and a commitment to co-creation will be critical for building the trusting relationships needed for successful implementation. Co-creation activities can address power differentials by putting service user experiences at the centre of decision-making and implementation activities, identifying the influence that different stakeholders may have on implementation. It develops a 'collective view' or 'shared understanding' of goals, rather than pushing for an artificial consensus that may perpetuate existing power structures.

Dr Metz proposed two equally important types of strategies that can be used to build trust. When we think of trust, we think of relationships, so we might think first about **relational strategies**. However, **technical strategies**, which are more transactional, are also important for trust building.

Relational strategies are undertaken to build trust through the quality, mutuality and reciprocity of the interactions. Relational strategies include vulnerability, authenticity, bi-directional communication, empathy-driven exchanges and co-learning.

Vulnerability is a comfort with uncertainty and risk; being okay with making yourself vulnerable to something that feels uncertain, to ask for help.

Communication that is credible and honest demonstrates **authenticity**.

Bi-directional communication is more than just a feedback loop and involves essential sense making because there is an affective or emotional component to all communication.

In an **empathy driven exchange**, stakeholders demonstrate empathy by:
- Affectively attuning to all stakeholders and community partners - not just hearing others' voices, but feeling what they are saying.
- Balancing flexible boundaries with role clarity.
- Demonstrating comfort in a relational context.
- Recognizing the impact all stakeholders have on implementation activities and decision-making.

Co-learning is listening for mutual understanding and the collaborative integration of different perspectives and types of knowledge. The role of the listener is to look for the point of connection, to look for the point of shared value and engage on that point. As implementation stakeholders engage in co-learning processes, they negotiate and build trust and respect for all perspectives, including those that may be at risk of being excluded from dialogue because of race, ethnicity, language, or status.

We need to recognize each other's skills and expertise; it will help us do our job better. Families suffer when it doesn't happen. (Project staff)

Technical strategies are about demonstrating competency, reliability, credibility and knowledge.

Frequent interactions reduce uncertainty as long gaps in interaction are filled in with what stakeholders think is going on.

Demonstration of expertise relates to the expertise of the implementing stakeholders and recognition and validation of the expertise of families and communities, which was evident in the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme.

Achievement of quick wins. Intentionally planning for early successes and celebrating quick wins are critical to building trust among stakeholders and, in turn, impacting future implementation success.
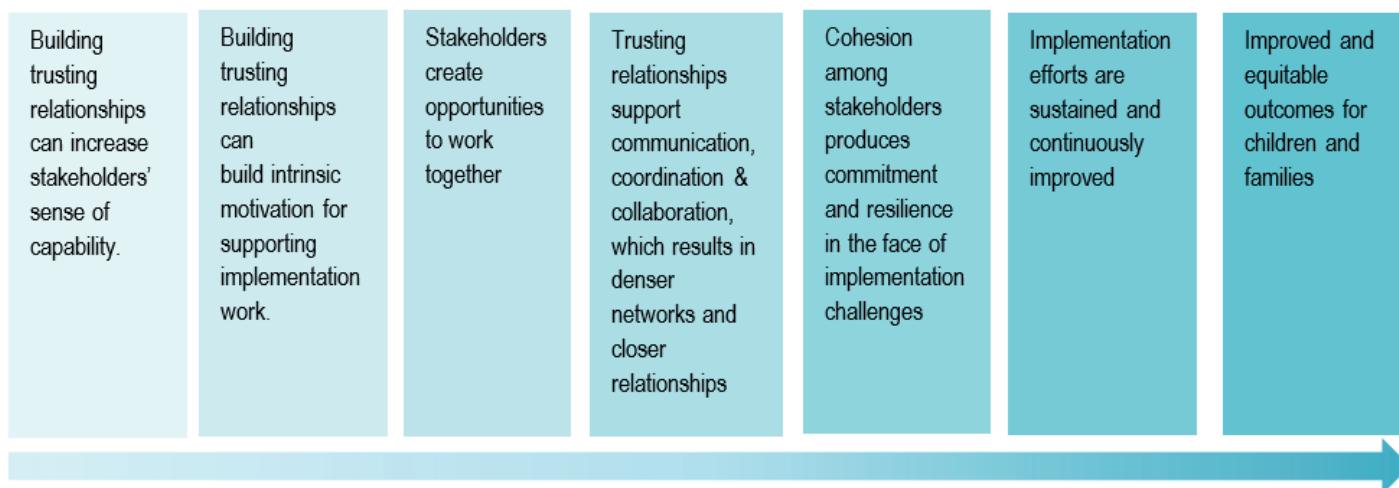
Responsiveness is related to frequent interactions. It promotes successful exchanges among team members, leading to more "asks" from those involved in the exchange, reinforcing positive experiences and leading to satisfaction, stronger relationships and eventually trust.

A dynamic, bi-directional relationship exists between trust and implementation outcomes – higher levels of trust impact implementation outcomes and the achievement of implementation outcomes builds trust.

What are the outcomes from trusted relationships?

Dr Allison Metz and her colleagues have undertaken extensive research in the field of implementation science. At *The Power of Trusted Relationships in Implementation* webinar, Dr Metz proposed that the empirical evidence on why trust matters so much in implementation is strong and outlined a theory of change for why building trust creates stronger outcomes for children and their families (Fig. 4):

Building trusting relationships can increase stakeholders' sense of capability.	Building trusting relationships can build intrinsic motivation for supporting implementation work.	Stakeholders create opportunities to work together	Trusting relationships support communication, coordination & collaboration, which results in denser networks and closer relationships	Cohesion among stakeholders produces commitment and resilience in the face of implementation challenges	Implementation efforts are sustained and continuously improved	Improved and equitable outcomes for children and families

People working to create change for families need to feel capable, they need to feel motivated, and they need to feel that they have opportunity. Trusting relationships contribute to people feeling more capable - when they feel a sense of trust, they feel more capable of implementing, they also feel more motivated. When people start to feel more trust, they communicate more and are more likely to coordinate their efforts to the extent of sharing resources and decision making.

Those types of behaviours result in denser networks. Research studies that look at social network analysis, tell us dense networks can be very helpful for implementation. The more siloed the work is, the less likely it is to reach success or to be sustained, but an outcome of trust is denser social networks. The cohesion that people feel from being a part of those

networks produces both commitment and resilience in the face of implementation challenges, which are inevitable. It's a huge protective factor at both an individual level but also a group and systems level, which leads to implementation being more likely to be sustained and continuously improved – and children and families more likely to benefit. (A. Metz)

Theory of Change in action

Our learning from the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme demonstrates that this theory of change could be applied to the work with families themselves. We have also found that it relates to the work of professionals and funders alike. In the following case study (Fig 2), the investment of project staff contributed to building an environment of trust in which parents felt capable of mixing with others from across a divided community who they would not usually meet, and motivated to develop their own learning. They developed in confidence and created further opportunities to meet together more often, increasing communication and collaboration with other parents. This resulted in the formation of a body that contributed to better outcomes for all.

The impact of building trusting relationships: a case study
An example of notable outcomes from a relationship-based approach is a schools-based project in Belfast that initially met with a parent group that was very reluctant to engage, distrustful and unwilling to go to their base.

The staff team found evidence that, for many families, the challenges facing them were very complex. It was not the case that families were struggling to deal with one specific issue, but were facing multiple pressures and "for the parents it can be very difficult to know where to start making changes". The parents did not feel able to engage with the team, even for a half day workshop.

Four years into the project parents became eager to sign up to courses delivered over a number of weeks, many with accreditation on successful completion of the course. They also formed relationships with other parents from across the sectarian divide, which they had never done before.

The CES team asked project staff what they had done to cultivate this change:
- **Staff visibility**, where parents are – the school gate, in this instance.
- **Consistency and reliability** – always follow through.
- **Investment in the relationships**, texting often and having a chat.
- **Demonstrating empathy:** there is no judgement, even when staff do not like a parent's behaviour.
- **Respect for the parent.**
- **Relatability:** staff relate their own experiences, laugh at themselves, which builds trust.
- **Collaboration** on all programme decisions.

Over time, parents became more receptive to what was on offer. Project staff told us,

They have skills that are being wasted and there is nowhere for them to go to use these skills… now they take the parenting skills, baking skills, writing courses (this latter with notable outcomes for at least one parent) and take those skills back into the home, which impacts their children's lives. When parents change, the lives of their children change.

It has taken the full five years for some to flourish.

When the Head Teachers of the partners schools invited parents from across the community divide to attend events, such as the Christmas Fair and school plays, the staff team noted that it was parents who attended their project that responded positively. They also noted an increasing confidence where their parents started to invite other new parents and to be ambassadors for the service. Parents viewed positively their children's opportunities for cross-community activities and the parents together organised their own camping trip. This was a significant development.

In 2018 parents first got together, facilitated by the project, to provide lunches and activities for pensioners in the area. The parents reported enjoying working together as a team. In 2019, the project team suggested they form a parent advisory group. The outcome of that was a raft of suggestions, many of which were incorporated into the project plan and an input to the application for extension funding. The final project evaluation report stated:

The (advisory group) parents have gained confidence and self-esteem; they have successfully achieved qualifications as well as attending non-accredited programmes; they engage with their children's schools and communicate confidently with teachers; and have embraced the cross-community element of (the project), which is now taken for granted. The parents are actively taking on roles within their community; and have a voice that is heard in terms of developing opportunities that meet the needs of themselves and other local families.

More broadly, we found that the projects involved in the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme referenced trust and relationship building as central to the success of their family support services. This included trust developed with families, with partner organisations and with communities. When we look at the key changes observed during the Programme, in the light of Dr Metz' proposed theory of change around trust and good outcomes, there is strong alignment.

Across all projects, the most consistently reported positive changes for parents and children were **increased confidence and self-esteem, increased ability to cope** and **reduced isolation** (Fig 6). These positive changes were reported across all three of the overarching aims of the Programme, with some overlap and interaction between them, as illustrated below. They can be mapped onto the stages of Dr Metz' theory of change in terms of their alignment to increased sense of capability, **increased resilience in the face of challenges** and **denser networks and closer relationships.** This supports the findings from the Programme that trust and relationship were central to producing good outcomes at every level from families through to the funder.

It is worth noting that our capturing the learning exercise also observed other positive changes including capacity building in the community, sustainability (of change and/or project supports) and systemic outcomes including the provision of training and awareness raising for other professionals/ services (Fig. 6).
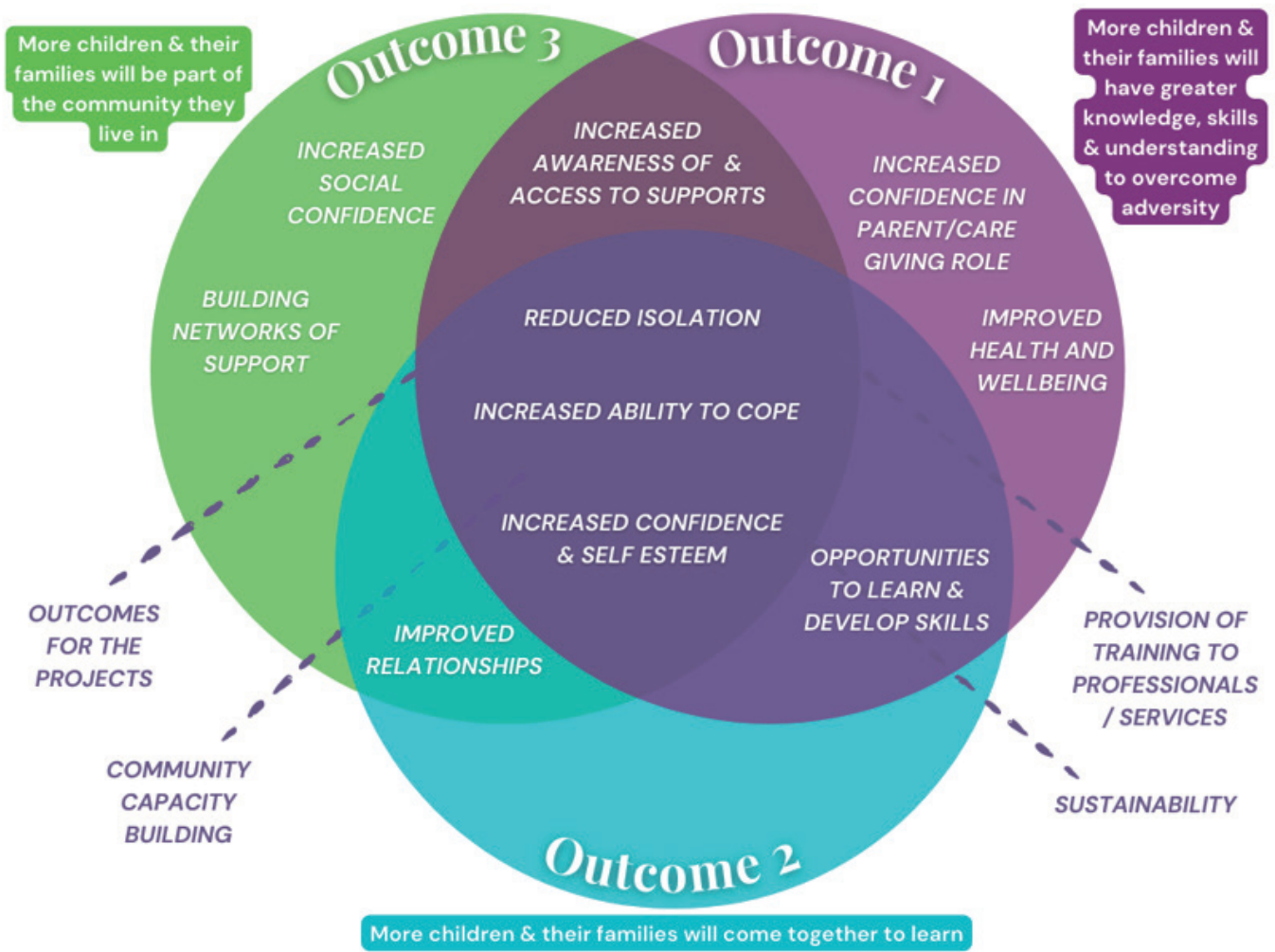
Fig.6

The learning from the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme leads us to propose that much of the evidence around key components of successful implementation of services by stakeholders applies to the work taking place with families and that they are a key partner in the implementation of change, not just the beneficiaries. Likewise, implementation efforts would be enhanced by taking the values and practices we hold dear to our work with families and applying them to our fellow stakeholders.

What did parents tell us about why relationship matters?

On page 12 of this report, Dr Metz outlined a theory of change for stakeholders' successful implementation of services. We would propose that this hypothesis applies equally to families, as partners in implementation (Fig. 7):
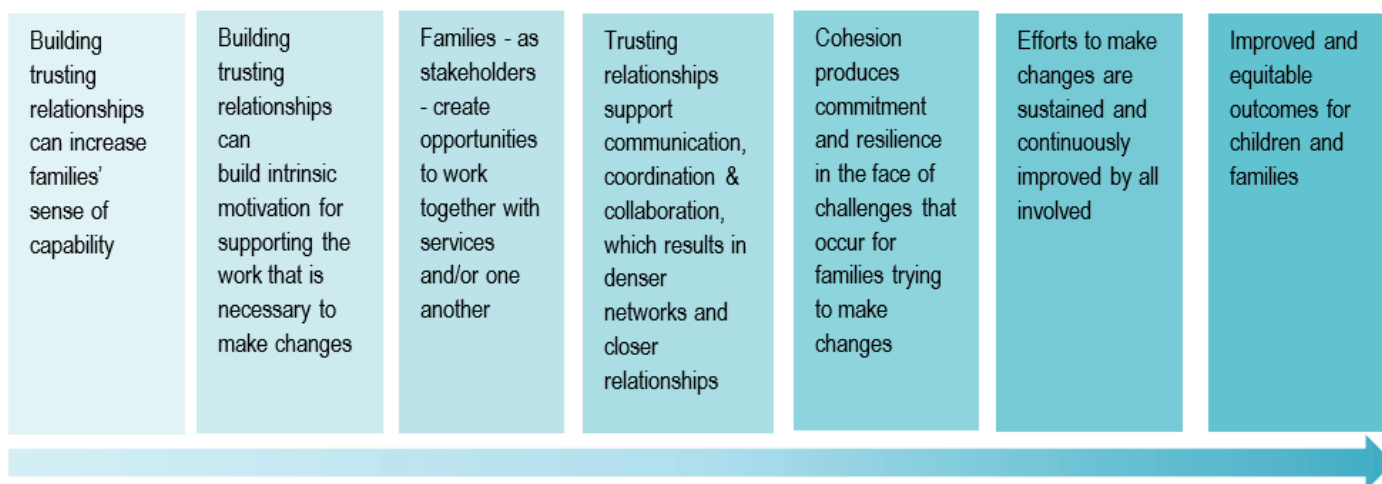
Building trusting relationships can increase families' sense of capability	Building trusting relationships can build intrinsic motivation for supporting the work that is necessary to make changes	Families - as stakeholders - create opportunities to work together with services and/or one another	Trusting relationships support communication, coordination & collaboration, which results in denser networks and closer relationships	Cohesion produces commitment and resilience in the face of challenges that occur for families trying to make changes	Efforts to make changes are sustained and continuously improved by all involved	Improved and equitable outcomes for children and families

Fig.7

Families working to improve their lives need to feel capable, they need to feel motivated, and they need to feel that they have opportunity. Trusting relationships contribute to families feeling more capable - when they feel a sense of trust, they feel more capable of implementing change, they also feel more motivated. When families start to feel more trust, they communicate more and are more likely to share with other families.

Those types of behaviours result in denser networks. The cohesion that people feel from being a part of those networks produces both commitment and resilience in the face of implementation challenges, which are inevitable. It's a huge protective factor at both an individual level but also a group and systems level, which leads to implementation of changes being more likely to be sustained and continuously improved – and families more likely to benefit. CES

If families are to feel motivated to make changes, capable of implementing those changes and able to sustain them, services must take the time to build trust and relationship, recognising them as genuine partners in the work of making life better.

When parents talk about what has made a difference to their families' lives, the vast majority focus on people rather than programmes, processes or places. Relationship with trusted people promotes feelings of comfort, confidence, not being alone and being able to change. We talked to parents about what worked for their family; this is what they told us about relationship:

Relationships create the conditions for change to take place

So, I did have support for 10 weeks with a (counsellor) fella called X and he was just unbelievable. He was just so supportive. So kind, so empathetic. Right away, I felt really comfortable with him. And he really drilled down to the nitty gritty of the problems that I was having or feelings that I was having.

[She was a] Really nice genuine kind person when we really needed kindness.

And do you know what, (the project worker) just made me kind of face it in a way. He sent me challenges and stuff every week and things that I would normally say 'Aye, I will all right, that'll do. No problem. Okay, talk to you later' and I would never do. But he always followed up on it. But you know, at the start, I was thinking 'this is a torture'. But you see, he knew exactly what he was doing. Because, you see, then I looked forward to our weekly sessions and I looked forward to it because I could feel it, I could feel a change in myself. But do you know what? I could feel the change in the atmosphere in the house as well. …It was the way they approached the things as well. You never felt judged.

Trusted relationships build confidence to change

[My son] grew very fond of a project worker and even when we came to do the 'Family Matters' and stuff, and there was activities, [he] sort of stuck beside the project worker because he was familiar with him. Sometimes he'd come home from school and say to me, 'he helped me do a wee checklist'. I think it was more a wee confidence boost for my son, it really helped with his confidence.

They kind of gave me the confidence to start getting out there and making changes and doing things.

The difference in [my son] is night and day, and it was all with support that he's received in the past couple of years - a massive change.

Building relationships creates a sense of being part of something bigger

It's opened up our horizons to so much more opportunities to meet amazing families, to meet people who want to help, to chat to people who've been in similar situations to us and just to get out there and enjoy family days.

It took away that feeling of being alone. Realising other people were going through the same thing.

For me, it's good to get out and speak to other people, because then I think I'm not on my own, it's that feeling of being part of something and you're not the only person who's going through depression, has difficulties, or is struggling with their behaviour. It's actually good sometimes to have a chat with somebody else.

Now what? How should we respond?

The team at CES set out to study the 36 projects over the course of five years – seven for those with extension funding – to understand the key elements of effective service implementation at different stages of their journey. The evidence gathered is significant in terms of the length of the study and its relevance to prevention and early intervention approaches across a wide range of service user groups. In this report, we have discussed a number of implementation enablers that were consistently reflected on. There is variability in the extent to which organisations can strengthen these enablers. They are dependent on internal ethos and values – or 'mental models' – and external factors such as flexible, longer term funding, resources to invest in staff professional development, power dynamics between agencies, over which they have less control.

From this Programme, there is learning about how services are funded and implemented that should not be ignored if we want the investment of our scarce resources and our services to be effective.

Key messages for funders, commissioners and providers of family support services.

1. Transformational change takes place at the speed of trust.
The building of trust requires time, investment of resources and patience. However, it supports the engagement of those families that services struggle to engage with until the point when they are required to engage with the authority of statutory children's or mental health services. This is expensive and further damages trust in the helping agencies.

Investment in accessible, relational, flexible early intervention services is less costly in human and financial terms. Longer lead-in times before services are expected to produce evidence of change will support greater success overall.

2. Build co-learning into funding programmes.
CES provided opportunities for project staff in the Reaching Out, Supporting Families programme to come together to share learning about what was working and what remained challenging in their work with families impacted by multiple adversities. All participants agreed there was great value in this co-learning approach.

In her discussion on trust and relationship, Dr Metz, pointed out that co-learning and co-creation require humility, vulnerability, respect for the other's expertise, addressing inequalities in power, and negotiation. Co-learning produces points of connection, shared understanding and values, trust and respect for all perspectives, including those that may be at risk of being excluded from dialogue because of race, ethnicity, language, or status.

Co-learning is critical for building the trust required for effective implementation in a multi-stakeholder environment, which is typical of the early intervention family support landscape

3. Families are an essential part of the implementation process, not just the ones being implemented for. We found evidence that when projects invested in building meaningful relationships with families, they gained the confidence to support one another through formal and informal peer support networks. Parents took a lead by encouraging others to use available supports; they influenced how services were developed and, in some cases, joined parent representative groups.

In this respect the families were full implementation partners, co-producers, not just recipients of services. Services designed to have an element of peer support intrinsically require the beneficiaries to also be co-producers, but even those where parents subscribe to an evidence-based programme or parent education group will not succeed without their full engagement and willingness to share their lives with strangers.

Co-production of services should identify and put service user experiences at the centre of decision-making and implementation activities, recognising the influence that they, as stakeholders, have on implementation. These activities address power differentials by developing a shared understanding of families' goals rather than pushing for an artificial consensus that may perpetuate existing power structures.

4. Implementation competencies are as important as strategies. Transformational change is created by people – families, communities, volunteers, and professionals – not by strategies. In the Reaching Out, Supporting Families Programme, we have seen that Implementation competencies such as empathy, curiosity, commitment, advancing equity, critical thinking and embracing cross-disciplinary approaches were employed by project staff to build effective partnerships in challenging circumstances, support resilience and overcome implementation challenges such as reaching families who do not typically engage with services.

Building implementation skills and competencies into the core operation of family and community services across sectors could support service providers to create transformational change.

This might be achieved by:

- building diverse relationships that will sustain the intended changes
- enhancing mutual learning between a wider base of stakeholders
- paying explicit attention to the languages, cultures, histories, values, assets and needs of different communities
- using evidence and understanding that might previously not have been considered.

Acknowledgements

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