

The National Lottery Community Fund Early Action System Change - Learning Support

Final Report (March 2023)

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1. Introduction to Early Action System Change

In March 2018, The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF) 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.

TNLCF also funded a programme of learning support to work alongside the partnerships engaged in the EASC programme. This support has been undertaken by Cathy Sharp (Research for Real) and Ian McKenzie of (Animate) from April 2019 to March 2023.

Primarily intended to document the work for those with close interests in this programme, this report provides a brief overview of the nature and evolution of the support and participant feedback. It identifies lessons for the funders, partnerships and others seeking to effect early action and system change. It is accompanied by a short summary document for publication.

2. Overview of the learning support programme 2019-2023

The learning support approach has been to encourage ‘learning as we go’ through creating opportunities for people to explore their thinking, be stretched, and motivated in their continuing efforts to effect change. We have provided support for collaborative and peer learning, through a blend of face-to face workshops and different online spaces, adapted in the light of the experience and the evolving preferences of the participants.

“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)

It is noteworthy that most of the original programme was always intended to be delivered online. Despite initial reservations amongst some participants about the use of online platforms, the pandemic has made a significant difference to the willingness and ability of people to work online.¹

Annex 1 includes a timeline of the phases of the learning support, activities, and outputs. These activities include:

- Visits to the partnerships and interviews
- Established Knowledge Hub Group- online Early Action System Change Scotland with 32 members
- Two face-to-face events (Glasgow, Oct 2019 and May 2022)

¹ We have used Zoom.

- Three webinars and one online event with external speakers (Between Nov 2019 and Oct 2020)
- Two phases of Action Learning with four sets²
- 17 online huddles on different topics
- Six learning briefings
- An online celebration and ending event (16 Jan 2023)

Annex 2 shows the participation in the huddles and webinars between November 2019 and September 2022. The most consistently high attendance was during the height of lockdown when many people were working from home during 2020-21. Since then, there has been some turnover in staff amongst the partnerships and the loss of some regular attenders. More recently, some partnerships have now ended. This factor, together with the pressures most are working under, both in terms of the challenges of the work and adjusting to hybrid ways of working, have made it more difficult to match the previous levels of participation in terms of numbers. Despite this, all the recent huddles have had significant input from partnerships and have discussed some important enduring issues and challenges for early action system change.

We have always included live feedback in the online huddles and events and have conducted a short feedback exercise after each one. This process of feedback informed the decision taken in late 2020 to extend the time allocated to these sessions. It also encouraged us to adopt a more proactive approach to facilitation, including recording key insights emerging using an online Padlet, a whiteboard to which participants could contribute.

² Action learning helps people reflect on the real and practical problems that they are working with and consider what action they each may take to change the way that they work. It is an experiential learning process - it does not provide technical knowledge, content, or quick fixes, but a space and structure to support reflection and learning. An action learning 'set' is a small, dedicated group of practitioners that meets regularly over a period of months. This allows the members to get to know each other and build up the safety, trust and respect needed to support people to reflect and learn.

Learning themes arising and overview of Learning Briefings

Shifting preferences and familiarity with different approaches to learning

The initial interests and concerns of the partnerships largely focused on the primary task of mobilising partnerships to support early action and the challenges of co-production. Figure 1 illustrates the substantive preoccupations of the partnerships at the commencement of this work, based on the interviews undertaken in the Summer of 2019.

Figure 1: What's on our minds? (October 2019)



The learning support face-to-face event in October 2019 event endorsed these interests and highlighted different models of and preferences for learning. Feedback integrated into the design of the programme for the day, demonstrated that participants clearly appreciated the opportunity to meet with others across the EASC programme, get to know them, build trust and relationships. They enjoyed learning about the different projects and from others. The opportunity to try out the different learning approaches we proposed to use online to support 'learn by doing', was also valued. There was some uncertainty and apprehension about the different forms of learning opportunities being offered, with a webinar being seen as the best 'soft start' to online work. There was also

a frank, but positive discussion about power relationships between funders and projects in which Funding Officers present were invited to ‘take off their compliance hats’.³

The learning support programme set out to value the emerging learning about the work of early action system change and highlight different ways to learn through reflection and sharing with peers. At the start, there was greater familiarity and comfort with the idea of sharing explicit knowledge and information about each partnership and their progress. Acknowledgement of that general preference provides important context to what it has actually been possible to do with the partnerships and the extent of the shift in comfort, not only with being online, but becoming immersed in a community of peers interested in sharing and learning with each other through collective reflection on practice.

Learning Briefings

There have been six learning briefings issued, available on the TNLCF website, which focus on the substantive learning from the work.

No 1: Learning in New Territories, October 2019:⁴ This briefing reported on the learning support meetings with each of the partnerships. It shows that the partnerships were enthusiastic about the opportunities to work in a different way, as well as recognising the very real practical issues and challenges of this work. The issues identified formed an unofficial agenda for the learning support:

- Understanding of co-production in practice
- Hearing the voices of children, young people, and families
- Developing and maintaining trusting and mature relationships
- Testing and learning change the way we work
- Shifting financial and human resources
- Taking time to reflect together and review
- Understanding and measuring impact
- Developing skills for systems change

No 2: From Consultation to Conversation, March 2020:⁵ This briefing explored two emerging and enduring themes, drawing on webinars with external speakers and other activities:

- Evaluation - talk early, talk often, and keep talking
- Coproduction - "why have a meeting when you can have a party?"

No 3: Learning as We Go: Early Action System Change, November 2020:⁶ This extended briefing focused on the ‘hard-won lessons of enabling system change’,

³ A separate event report was provided to TNLCF in November 2019.

⁴ <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/Learning-in-New-Territories-NLCF-EASC-Briefing1.pdf?mtime=20191211103700&focal=none>

⁵ <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/From-Consultation-to-Conversation-TNLCF-Briefing-2.pdf?mtime=20200916103236&focal=none>

⁶ <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/Learning-As-We-Go-NLCF-EASC-Briefing-3.pdf?mtime=20210715180454&focal=none>

shared with the partnerships at an online event by Ignite, Coventry.⁷ It also took a retrospective look at learning support and refreshed the forward agenda.

No 4: Exploring Our Thinking About Generating and Using Evidence in System Change, June 2021:⁸ This briefing explored the evaluation aspects of early action system change. Partly a response to findings from the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (EANF) in England that successful early action projects do not necessarily result in reductions in demand on public services or savings to the public purse, our March 2021 event enabled TNLCF to clarify their expectations that EASC partners need not demonstrate a shift in resources towards more preventative services but use their evidence to ‘tell the story’ about their system change efforts.

No 5: Finding Our Way Through Complexity, February 2022:⁹ This briefing explores issues arising from the tensions inherent in the early action system change work, where there is enduring hope to see tangible impacts of early action, balanced with realism and honesty about the complexity and context of the work. It draws largely on online huddles held in 2021 where, on each occasion, a single partnership shared something from their practice to provoke discussion, usually followed by a short additional contribution or input from the learning support facilitators and open discussion.

- Shifts in mindsets, policies, and practices (July 2021): led by Action for Children (West Dunbartonshire) with further input about thinking about going to scale.
- Adventures in Systems Mapping (Sept 2021): led by Midlothian, with further input on System Convening.
- Three Resources from Anchor: early action methodology, resource implications, early action system of support (Dec 2021) led by Shetland Partnership.

No 6: Is it ever too late to think about sustainability? February 2023: This briefing was co-authored by members of the partnerships with support from the learning support facilitators. It built on a presentation by Inclusion as Prevention (IAP) partnership, South Lanarkshire, at an online huddle that introduced a practice-based theory of sustainability, known as ‘the four buckets’. This gave the partnerships a way to think about different types of sustainability in projects and programmes, and to collectively surface some deeper learning and challenges.

Reflections on action learning

Action Learning Sets have been offered in two phases: initially from March 2020 and then again from December 2021. Each set had between 3 and 5 members, reflecting our wish to enable people from the same partnership to be in a separate set from a close colleague.¹⁰

⁷ Ignite was a five-year programme led by Central England Law Centre and Grapevine to explore how to redesign public sector support to help people earlier and build resilience in those least able to cope.

⁸ <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/Exploring-our-thinking-NLCF-EASC-Briefing-4.pdf?mtime=20210715174617&focal=none>

⁹ <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/Finding-our-way-through-complexity-NLCF-EASC-Briefing-5.pdf?mtime=20220527111857&focal=none>

¹⁰ In one set there was continuity of membership over the two phases.

On-going feedback and an online review of learning support undertaken in February 2021 showed that people valued the small group space and time to get to know each other in more depth. The sets also provided an important, private space to talk about the realities of the work members were engaged in, as well as seeking alternative approaches and moral support.

It is notable that the relatively small set size made the viability of action learning vulnerable to absence or the departure from post of a small number of people. This has also been affected by changes in working patterns as many people returned to more hybrid ways of working, and space for learning competed with new demands and greater workloads in 2022.

Reflections on Webinars and Huddles

Webinars were initially seen as a more familiar and comfortable way into online learning amongst the partnerships. Hosting three webinars, we used these as a platform for external speakers extending this approach in a separate online event in October 2020. One-hour long webinars allowed time for a speaker to contribute and take a limited number of questions in a Q & A format. The two-hour online meeting provided a better format for interaction and engagement with the speakers.

The original huddle format of one hour offered a taste of a different approach to being online with others, with more interaction. Extending this to a two-hour slot allowed both for interaction amongst participants, some kind of content or contribution, discussion amongst participants and time for reflection and recording of themes. The huddle format also proved to be a more valuable and flexible mode of online learning, in which it is easier to drop in or out as workloads and availability permit.

The Knowledge Hub and use of social media

The Knowledge Hub is a private online space supported by the Local Government Improvement Service. The Early Action System Change Scotland (TNLCF) group is a restricted membership group that was established in August 2019, which had 32 members. Activity has been light: there have been 81 posts, by 11 different active participants, with the bulk of posts being made by the learning support facilitators. These posts have generally been to remind people to sign up to events, with only a few posts sharing external material.

We conclude that this platform has been a useful extra means to communicate with partnership members but has not played a significant part in the substantive work of the emerging network. The materials from the May 2022 event were posted to an online Padlet in an attempt to ensure accessibility.¹¹

It is not clear whether an alternative platform would have played a different part. The partnerships have not had a consistent or shared approach to social media use, for example, their use of Twitter varies, and it may be worth considering whether any future funding programme might seek to encourage and support such developments more explicitly.

¹¹ <https://padlet.com/ResearchforReal/2vwlglc9ol90wvo>

May 2022: reflections and an abridged timeline

The May 2022 gathering in Glasgow was a significant milestone in the life of the learning support programme. The event took place over two and a half years after the last in person event and so was an important opportunity to recognise and consolidate the learning and the community that has developed since that time. Around 30 people took part, including the NLCF Director of Scotland and other staff, including funding officers. This abridged timeline, taken from a live exercise at the event gives a reflective overview and flavour of the energy and preoccupations of the partnerships at different times.

The Beginning

"It was exciting to do something - this fund fitted. It has been a tense time - it had been 10 years trying to get the project off the ground. We had 3 potential bids and had to come together to achieve the submission. We needed to have constructive conversations. It took a year to get ready to go live with the test of change. On reflection that year was really important."

"When the money came we were attracted by the idea that you can change a rigid system that has been in place for so long. We had to plan in a methodical way."

"Our experience was similar ...We wanted to do everything. There was excitement when we got the funding and then we had a new challenge because we wanted to do everything. It took a lot of persistence to get to the vision."

"The project was exciting to me as a community learning person. It wasn't top down."

October event, 2019

"The bulk of learning support was always planned to be online. We wanted it to be experiential. This met with mixed response at the October event. After that, as we all know, we were in a different place and we had to go online, had to make the best of it. The circumstances helped us to do that."

March 2020:

"I started my job the day lockdown started. I was excited that it was working with young people to empower them to make change. But there was also panic - the job is about meeting people, but I can't leave the house."

"There was lots of change. Relationships were changing and there was lots of repairing. The Partnership was fragmenting."

"I was very new, and this was a time of real change. There were tensions due to funding decisions. The change journey and the learning journey were an opportunity to bring people back together and move forward."

"Covid hit and everyone battened down the hatches. The partnership started to react to other things. All of the effort to bring people together fell by the wayside. Online was sometimes great and sometimes hard. Some people couldn't turn up - the landscape changed a lot..."

May event 2022

"We're really grateful we're all still alive, that we've changed some things. I'm proud of creating a tipping point for serious long term system change."

"I'm proud of the fact that we're still here. Reflecting is tough. There was a lot of changes and new leadership at the start of funding. Tensions around what we should be doing. We have held on to challenging ourselves - would have been easy to do something without thinking. But we have tried to walk that line. We've been asking 'community engagement - how do we really do this and stay true to the principles and values?' If this doesn't challenge you, then you're probably not doing it right."

"We're at the point of thinking about our legacy and what can we change, what can be embedded, and what can we leave."

This opportunity to be in the room with people they largely hadn't met in person was highly valued. It was a chance to celebrate the work, to share, reflect, listen, network, and learn. The opportunity to hear from the TNLCF Director was important to people, as was the chance to discuss the role of the funder. The themes from the Open Space discussions are revealing about the prevailing issues and concerns:

- Factors making successful partnerships
- When do we do/share evaluations and evidence to deliver continuity?
- Legacy for service provision
- What needs to be in place for this to have been successful?
- How do you promote collective leadership and keep things moving? Stewardship v. leadership
- How do we make young people feel like their time spent was useful? Circling back to young people.
- What are the expectations on the funder as an ingredient in the soup?
- What needs to die in the system to make room for transformation?

An Unfolding Story exercise revealed the following 'words of the moment'

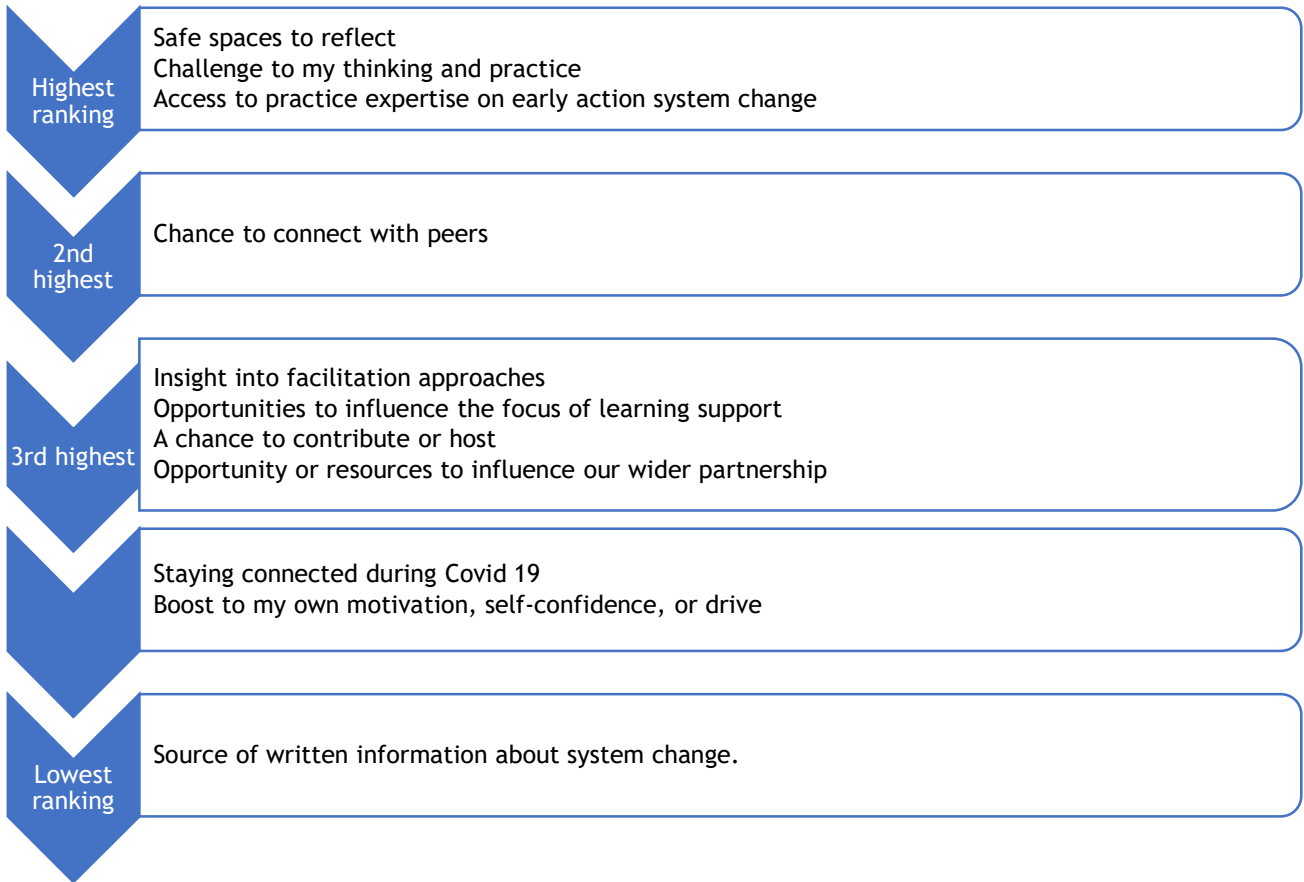
Our words of the moment (May 2022)



3. Participants Feedback

A closing online survey was conducted in October and November 2022 and received five responses from those with experience of a wide range of learning support offerings.¹² All of these respondents characterise themselves as regular or very frequent attenders and had experience of most of the learning support offerings.

Overall, they ranked different aspects of the learning support as follows:



Their responses indicated the importance of a safe space to reflect and connection with others:

“[I most valued] gaining a deeper understanding of early action system change leading to a confidence about implementing some of the learning into practice.”

“[I most valued] the sense of being connected, with other projects involved and in the wider learning of such an interesting, complex and varied systems change programme.”

¹² This is supplemented by a closing interview with one of the partnership leads.

“[I most valued] connection with others doing this work. It can feel very isolating at times.”

Respondents were asked to share examples of what feels most significant for their learning. These highlight the importance of establishing good relationships to enable an environment conducive to learning, build confidence and support different actions:

“I have learned that it can sometimes feel overwhelming when you are trying to change well established systems and structures, but that small incremental changes can make all the difference”.

“I learned ways to avoid overwhelm when working within a large-scale, shifting project and to find the places where I could add most value and effective ways to focus my efforts on these. I also learned about the challenges of working on a large-scale system change project and how to negotiate barriers within a system that is resistant to change.

“... I am not alone in this venture, and I have gained a lot of learning, knowledge and skills from our collective.”

“I have learned that the learning from a whole programme is greater than the sum of its project parts! Learning and sharing with others helps lift our collective focus from the detail of individual projects to the wider, strategic challenges that systems change can meet, and to consider ways of addressing such challenges.”

“... 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.”

They expressed surprise at the trust, openness and honesty of people that took part, their willingness to share knowledge, practice, and skills. Initial skepticism about being online did change, partly out of necessity, but it became enjoyable and useful given the format adopted which allowed people to bond, share, and learn.

“I think without this space we would have all fallen into reporting the good bits of the programmes and skirting around the issues.”

“[I was surprised] how much it was necessary to shift direction and strategy throughout the term of the project, how important continuous reflective learning is for effective progress, and how difficult it would be to maintain partner engagement over time.”

The support provided has clearly been valued and struck the right balance between the number and types of activity offered. In terms of what might be done differently, respondents would have liked more people to be part of the smaller huddles and more time to be able to engage with the support, which became more difficult over time. This latter issue was particularly true of the action learning sets:

“The Action Learning sets were of great value but accommodating 3 hours at a time was difficult. I would suggest blocks of AL sets with more sessions of shorter duration, e.g. 6 x 1.5 hour sessions over a 4-month period.”

Extending participation beyond those who were initially engaged was an enduring issue, made more difficult due to partnership preferences for emailed communications to go through the official lead officers, not all of whom were necessarily the most active participants:

“I would have liked] more guidance on what the support was. I didn't really know who was 'invited' to the huddles. In the end I was pretty much only me who attended from my partnership. I thought this was a great shame. I think this is probably down to my programme not having a lead for a long time so no one else leaned into the huddles.”

Another idea for doing things differently is to re-offer systems change expert input throughout the programme to reflect the turnover of staff, new understandings and challenges that emerge over a long-term programme.

The main messages for the funder are of gratitude for the support and endorsements of the value of the learning support in bringing people together under the ‘shared learning umbrella’, whilst being flexible to evolve with the group and for the facilitation of the space.

“It is hugely beneficial to bring together people involved in different, yet similar, funded projects to share, reflect and learn together with the support of specialist facilitators. This type of support reaps benefits that radiate much wider than the funded project, supports effective partnership working and helps to address barriers within our systems.”

“It takes a significant mindset and behavioural shift for people to tell you the challenges and ultimately the learning from their efforts. The third sector live in fear of having their funding removed. They are used to presenting the best picture, that can make it very difficult to hear what the learning is.”

4. Conclusions and implications for future learning support

Finding our way through complexity: An overview of our learning

The learning support programme has been highly valued by those that have taken part, with a relatively small, engaged group of enthusiastic and regular attenders. This has enabled important relationships and trust to develop, which in turn has created a positive environment for genuine sharing and learning. Whilst external input and expertise has been valued, the most significant element has been the connections forged amongst the partnerships, and the chance to learn together and from each other as a peer network.

System change is often experienced as a roller-coaster. Genuine collaboration and a willingness to ‘fail’ may be understood as a necessary element of system change work, but prevailing organisational and accountability cultures and practices do not readily embrace this as a reality. In this context, peer support and experiential learning are essential to support shifts in thinking and practice from a focus on ‘delivery’ of a specific intervention, to the co-creation of an approach or pathway, with on-going, live learning embedded into the approach.

These conclusions were discussed with and supported by the partnerships at a final online event in January 2023. The participants were very positive, excited, and hopeful when thinking about their own learning. Recognising that learning is a relational practice, they articulated some anxiety and apprehension about conveying the substance of that learning *to* others, rather than learning *with* others:

“If [learning is] about me then I feel excited, if it's about 'learning for others, from me' then I feel anxious that I might not 'take them with me' or 'create anxiety' or 'tell them something they already know but feel they can't achieve.’”

Acknowledging this conundrum this report attempts to convey the spirit, enablers, and content of their learning, with an expectation that others will take inspiration from it and be willing to seek out their own opportunities to learn with others. This might involve a shift in the way that TNLCF funds, and crucially supports, organisations and partnerships working on complex programmes and projects, and this learning will hopefully support TNLCF in its own journey.

Our learning by doing system change

The Learning Briefings chart the development of the interests of the network and remain as an archive of useful resources and links for further reading. Here it is worth noting these key points about the evolution of learning that:

- The interests of the participants have developed from one largely focused on sharing information about the work and its progress, to a wider recognition of the value and direct engagement in experiential, social and peer learning.
- There has been important, deeper engagement with the realities of early action, systems change, co-production, partnership working and evaluation. There is a much more considered engagement with complexity and a developing understanding of the implications for the work of the partnerships.
- Placing importance on developing trust, relationships, and multiple perspectives, makes complexity seem less abstract and supports practical actions. This focus on relationships is rooted in the idea that no single person or partnership lead can have an overview, other people are also involved and have different and valuable perspectives.
- There is a richer understanding of how system change happens and of roles within change processes, linked to changing perspectives on what it might mean to be an active participant rather than ‘a spectator’, a desire to enhance participation and what it means to adopt a convening role.

Further key learning includes:

Reframing Prevention

- Within a partnership, it is helpful to encourage a focus on what can be created together, rather than what you can prevent. This is both more motivating and easier to evaluate by shifting from seeking to evaluate the counterfactual (what we have prevented) to the evaluation of the systemic conditions that we have helped to create and how these are changing (or not).
- Allied to this, a focus on prevention can be stigmatising and inadvertently reinforce existing service-led responses, as well as being unhelpful in seeking to engage people in the evaluation and wider change process.

Implementing and growing

- Whilst mapping exercises can be difficult due to the poor availability of data, the difficulties of disaggregating budgets and other barriers, there is scope to use financial and service data to prompt conversations, challenge assumptions and consider actions towards investing more in preventative activities.
- There is a heightened awareness of the power of language and how power dynamics play out, for example, through the unreflective use of professional terminology, which may have connotations of rescue and disempowerment, although it can be challenging to find better words.
- Ways of thinking about scaling-up or ‘going to scale’ have also shifted, with recognition that successful wider implementation is more about developing

relationships, shifting underlying attitudes and tapping into values, rather than about mandating change.

- There remains frustration, often at the pace and scale of change. Many of the partnerships use participatory or inclusive processes to inform changes to their system and there is a desire to ‘engage with power’ more directly or deeply, for example, there is interest in how promoting ‘voice’ can be a lever for change, especially the voices of young people. Whilst hearing the perspectives of young people can give senior leaders confidence, ‘old models’ of service-led consultation and statistical representation can readily dominate.
- There are new insights about taken-for-granted ideas and practices, for example whilst sustainability remains a goal, it might be thought of as more about sustaining adaptable practices or mindsets, that can continue to be responsive to changing circumstances, rather than maintain an approach or project established some time ago.
- There was interest in how evaluation can be responsive to the needs of a project, how changes in relationships and trust might be measured and the implications of a strengths or assets-based approach for decisions and judgements about the setting and measurement of outcomes since the choice of measures are an expression of power.

Learning and evaluation

The issue of evaluation has been a recurrent theme, which presented several chances to review emerging lessons from other partnerships, such as the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund and direct engagement with The Fund. This has provided greater comfort with being able to meet the accountability requirements of the Fund to provide a clear data-informed account of their system change work.

- There has been engagement with and challenge to the initial assumptions and theory of change about system change made by The Fund, and they in turn, have used the opportunity to engage in a dialogue about these issues, outwith the usual reporting and accountability mechanisms.
- Evaluation of system change is seen as an on-going, embedded practice to notice and track the smallest shifts in thinking and practice, articulating the ‘story of change’, both the outcomes and what has enabled those changes.
- Whilst there is interest in the financial implications of system change work, the assumptions that underpin the term ‘shift in spend’ are questioned in a climate of continuing financial austerity and hard political realities for local public sector bodies.

The value of learning support

In terms of the learning support approach, after initial reluctance and unfamiliarity, the necessity to work online due to the pandemic has become an opportunity to ‘connect the

system to more of itself’, create networks and different learning spaces, which have enabled contributions that might otherwise not have been forthcoming if they had been in person. We note that:

- There has been value in the deeper, more private reflective space that has been provided through action learning sets, developing the skills needed for systems change work.
- The decision to take a more active facilitation approach and encourage the partnerships to share their experience, questions, and concerns at a deeper level has proved worthwhile.
- We are pleased to witness the greater participation of the partnership staff and teams in hosting and contributing to discussions, particularly in huddles, rather than relying on external experts. We consider the two-hour huddle format to be the most versatile and engaging, enabling a livelier dialogue than webinars and offering chances to participate at different levels of comfort.

Implications for future learning support

There remains a continuing need for protected spaces for practitioners of system change that enable recognition of progress, peer support and supportive challenge. Networking is important, but the provision of structured learning support helps to create a routine, sense of direction and trust, to deepen learning amongst that network. For any future learning support, it is worth noting:

- If longer-term funding becomes a feature of future TNLCF programmes, then this has consequences for the funder role as a *partner in learning*, as well as implications for relationship building and continuity, learning support and expectations about the measurement of impact.
- There remains scope to extend participation in networks of this kind to encourage greater numbers of partnership members to take part. There is also scope for greater use of social media and blogging to support sharing of learning and promote wider reflection.
- The choice of Zoom as an online platform offered good functionality particularly for facilitators, but may have been a limiting factor, particularly for staff based on local authorities.¹³ We also note that people generally found ways to manage access and that this is a situation that is still evolving.
- It is our experience that action learning flourishes wherever it is possible to establish the conditions for learning amongst a defined group or set of participants, able to meet up with reasonable regularity. A key concern is the viability and continuity of any group that may become a true AL ‘set’. In this work, viable action learning sets or groups have been difficult to sustain over this time, despite the enthusiasm of the participants.

¹³ We note that there were never any breaches of security.

- Sustained over time, the huddle format allowed relationships amongst the network to develop and was a more valuable and flexible mode of online learning, in which it is easier to drop in or out as workloads and availability permit.
- The involvement of Funding Officers remains an issue in any future similar programme; intentionally this programme only invited Funding Officers to events, including online activity in lieu of face to face events.
- The learning support facilitators were commissioned separately to offer expert input and workshop facilitation for Funding Officers on *Systems Change: Principles and Practices* in November 2021 and January 2022.¹⁴ This was seen to be valuable and timely and suggests both that there could be value in including Funding Officers in any future learning support as well as opening this kind of offering to partnership teams.

¹⁴ This was based on *Systems Change A Guide to What it is and How to Do It* <https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/systems-change-a-guide-to-what-it-is-and-how-to-do-it/> Lankelly Chase and NPC, 2015.

Annex 1: Timeline and overview of activities

| Dates | Focus of learning support | Key activities | Key outputs/comments |
|-----------------------------|---|---|---|
| April 2019-September 2019 | Getting to know the partnerships | Visits to the partnerships and interviews Developing and sharing our plans Established Knowledge Hub - online Early Action System Change Scotland (NLCF) Group (members=32) | Information on learning support package and technical pointers for Video Meetings Learning Briefing No 1 “Learning in New Territories”, October 2019 |
| October 2019-September 2020 | Creating a culture of collaborative learning amongst the partnerships | Face to face event in Glasgow (Oct 2019) Revision and confirmation of forward plans Webinars with external speakers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluating early action system change - practical insights (Sheffield Hallam University) (Nov 2019) • Coproduction (Healthy and Happy) (February 2020) • Working it out together - system behaviours (Lankelly Chase) (August 2020) Action Learning Phase 1 (from December 2019) Huddles - 7 occasions between January 2020 and July 2020, including a ‘double-huddle’ in April 2020. Topics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progress sharing • Evaluation • “Spring Gathering” - progress sharing | Event report (internal) Initial agreed ways of working Learning Briefing No 2 “From Consultation to Conversation”, March 2020 |

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| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using the Learning Briefing • Cost benefit analysis • Gie it a bash/ Coproduction • Having Difficult Conversations | |
| October 2020-March 2021 | Connecting and developing a learning community - greater contributions from each partnership | <p>Online event (Oct 2020) with external speakers from Ignite</p> <p>Further Huddles -3 occasions including double huddles in December 2020 & March 2021</p> <p>Topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celebrations - contributions from all partnerships (Dec 2020) • Investing in Relationships (Shetland led, Jan 2021) • "Spend to save"/cost benefit issues (March 2021) | <p>Learning Briefing No 3 "Learning As We Go" (Nov, 2020)</p> <p>Talk by NLCF outlining thinking about expectations of the EASC partnerships of their learning about demonstrating shifting resources to enable more preventative services. (recording available)</p> |

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| <p>April 2021 to Dec 2022</p> | <p>Deepening learning about the reality and practices of early action and system change</p> | <p>Further Huddles - 7 occasions (all 2 hours long, all with partnership input)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploring our thinking about generating and using evidence in system change (May 2021) • Evidencing shifts in mindsets, policies and practices (July 2021) • Adventures in System Mapping (Sept 2021) • Three Resources from Anchor: early action methodology, resource implications, early action system of support (Dec 2021) • Good endings (April 2022) • Open Space (August 2022) • Is it ever too late to think about sustainability? (Sept 2022) <p>Action Learning (Phase 2) from December 2021</p> <p>“Our May Gathering” Face to Face Event, Glasgow (May 2022)</p> | <p>Learning Briefing No 4 “Exploring our thinking about generating and using evidence in system change” (June, 2021)</p> <p>Learning Briefing No 5 “Finding our way through complexity” (Feb 2022)</p> <p>Learning Briefing No 6 (February 2023)</p> |
| <p>January-March 2023</p> | <p>Ending Well</p> | <p>Online celebration and ending event (16 Jan 2023)</p> <p>Completion of learning report (March 2023)</p> | |

Annex 2: Participation in huddles and webinars (Nov 2019 - Sept 22)

