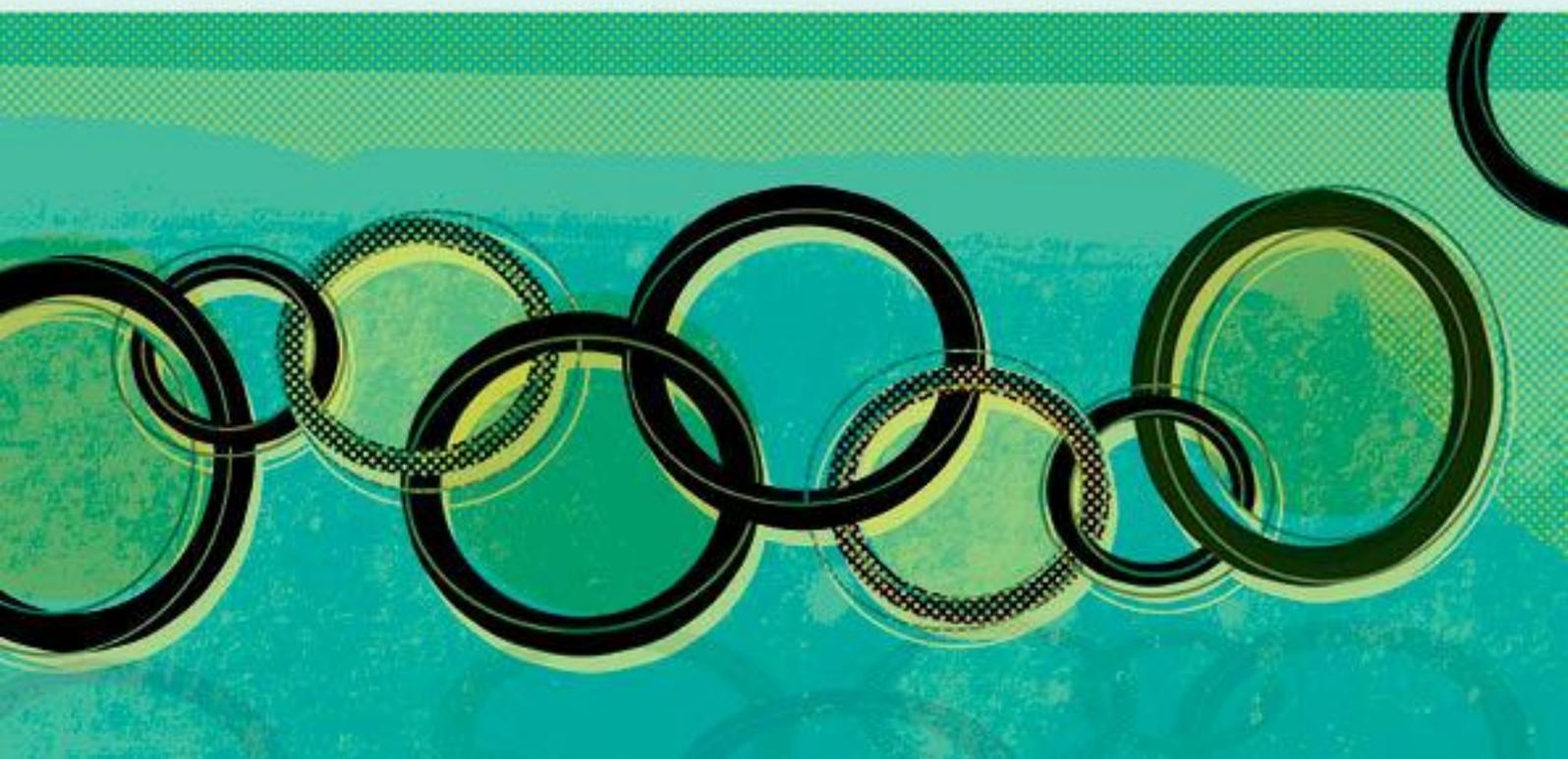


EANF Learning Report 2:
Building Alliances

July 2016



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1. Introduction

The report is an output from the first year of the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (EANF) learning and evaluation contract. This report is accompanied by a programme evaluation report and an additional learning report which explores another aspect of early programme delivery, namely evidence and data.

1.1. The Early Action Neighbourhood Fund

The Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (EANF) is a joint funding initiative emerging from the Early Action Funders Alliance, a collaboration of funders from different sectors with an interest in supporting early action approaches through their work. The Big Lottery Fund, Comic Relief and the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation are investing £5.25m to support three Phase One pilot projects (in Coventry, Hartlepool and Norwich) which are testing early and preventative action approaches in different areas of public service to develop a better case for early action amongst commissioners and funders. The Fund is overseen by a steering group which comprises the three funding organisations, alongside the Legal Education Foundation and the Barrow Cadbury Trust.

Further information on the EANF, including details of the funded projects can be found at: <http://www.earlyactionfund.org/>

2. Building alliances for early action

There is a strong consensus that effective early action and prevention is based on robust partnerships. Building alliances within, and between, agencies is necessary for the development and delivery of comprehensive early action approaches. As the NAO (2013) points out, early action involves 'aligning goals, working together, careful targeting and sharing data'. In addition, the Southwark and Lambeth early action commission (Community Links/ NEF, 2016) has identified the development of 'strong, collaborative partnerships where organisations work together and share knowledge and power, fostering respectful, high trust relationships based on a shared purpose', as a key objective of the commission (p.6). The Commission suggests that 'the first step towards early action is to establish an enduring dialogue between individuals and organisations in a local area, across civil society and public sector bodies'.

The three EANF projects are predicated on the assumption of strong partnership working. Indeed, the ability of voluntary sector organisations to demonstrate robust relationships with public sector partners was a key factor in the process of decision making for EANF grants. It is useful, therefore, to look at the approaches that the three EANF pilot projects have taken in the first year of the EANF programme to 'building alliances' to support early action, and to draw out lessons for other programmes and interventions which are seeking to develop similar approaches.

3. EANF pilots

3.1. Getting people on board

For the EANF pilot projects, the processes of building alliances to support early action have pre-dated the EANF programme. In all three areas, the lead voluntary sector organisations have a high profile within their areas, and a track record of working successfully with public sector organisations to deliver services to the local community. This has meant that organisations have had credibility and confidence when approaching senior leaders in public sector organisations. In all the pilot areas, dialogue about early action approaches has started with key individuals in organisations with which the grant holders have had previous experience of working. This has allowed the projects to build on personal relationships to introduce new ideas and concepts, and to explore opportunities for new ways of working.

There has been strong support from senior leaders in partner organisations in all three areas. These include individuals with responsibilities for commissioning and/or the development and strategic direction of services. The financial and demand pressures currently being experienced by public sector organisations have opened up opportunities for exploring different ways of delivering services, and for utilising early action approaches to meet the needs of local communities. At the strategic level, interest in early action focuses on the potential for more effective and efficient use of scarce resources. One representative of the EANF pilot project in Coventry commented on support from individuals in key roles in the local authority:

Really good buy-in from the new executive director of (named department A) and from the new director of (named department B), really good buy in from the executive director of (named department C) at the Council who keeps saying this is the only proposal that I've seen where I think we're likely to make a change and maybe save money...

Support at this level is important, as individuals in these key roles are likely to have access able to influence resource allocation and cultural and systems change. However, the pressures on public sector organisations have also generated a high degree of organisational flux: leadership teams have changed frequently, and transformational programmes have shifted roles and responsibilities, and realigned resources to new service priorities. The pilot projects have responded proactively to these challenges. In Hartlepool, for instance, Changing Futures North East (CFNE), the EANF lead organisation, has aligned its early action pilot, Healthy Relationships, with a programme of transformational change currently being implemented across children's services within the local authority. This has meant that CFNE has been able to have a key role in supporting and facilitating change within the local authority, and consequently keep early action 'on the agenda' when there might otherwise have been a risk that the pilot would have been swamped by other service priorities. It has also meant however, that here, as in the other EAF pilot areas, substantial resources have needed to be allocated to maintaining relationships with individuals in leadership roles. The pilots have needed to work hard to continuously reiterate key early action messages and ensure that they remain at the forefront of public organisations' thinking as individuals, roles and priorities move on. In this context, the significant resources and timescales of the EANF pilots have been beneficial: the EANF grants (which average £1.75m) and five year time horizon have provided enabled voluntary organisations to work with public sector providers to implement early action approaches which transcend the current financial and political cycles of local government. There has been time, within this first year of the programme, to

develop and grow these relationships as the foundations for changing systems and practices as the pilots develop.

The pilots have also sought to establish effective relationships with practitioners and managers, as individuals in these roles will implement new practices and processes required for early action. A challenge at this level has been demonstrating why early action approaches are beneficial, and a key message has been how early action can help managers and practitioners improve service outcomes. In Norwich, for instance, schools are a key partner in the EANF pilot which is seeking to improve social and emotional wellbeing outcomes for young people. The lead organisation, Mancroft Advice Project, has engaged local schools by exploring with them how early action can improve key accountability measures around attendance and attainment. In the longer term, evidence that the pilot is building through its work with schools around the impact of improved social and emotional wellbeing for young people will be used to influence wider change in the allocation of health resources. A representative of the lead organisation explained:

I started this with a focus on where does the money need to change hands? From where I was looking was from acute medical services to preventative medical services, (but) because you're then bringing in another whole set of people and cultures and methods and policies and politics ... so where I started to explore a bit more is the area of young people's attainment and young people's attendance at school 'cos that's what the schools want to see and they're willing to spend their money to do that and they have a bit of flexibility on what they do with their budgets and they have a bit of ability as a school and a school cluster to influence what the local authority spends their money on in order to improve attainment and attendance. So the easier win at this moment in time seemed to be let's prove to the schools that we can increase your attainment and attendance.

3.2. Building governance structures

The three EANF pilot projects have spent time in the first year of the programme developing structures for the governance and delivery of the pilot projects. In all three areas these structures have included a partnership board with representation from key partner agencies with the resources and expertise to influence change. In two of the three areas project partners are also represented on operational boards and tasked with the delivery of specific aspects of programme implementation, although in one area, delivery is undertaken almost entirely by the EANF grant holder, supported by a 'sub' board. Two of the partnership boards have an independent Chair, and one is chaired by the EANF grant holder.

In this first year of the programme the partnerships boards are functioning well, although there is further work to do to build the boards as entities in which the risks and responsibilities for early action are shared equally. In all areas the EANF grant holder organisations are driving the operation of these boards. Getting the 'basics' of good partnership working right has been important (good chairing of meetings, effective communication, sending information well in advance of meetings etc), it has taken time for boards in the pilot areas to identify as 'teams'. One issue, has been the need for organisations to step outside of their familiar roles (for instance as commissioners and providers) and to negotiate new relationships. Another has been the need to develop mechanisms for ensuring that all partners share responsibility for the progress of the pilot projects. In Coventry for instance, the EANF pilot project has been reviewing the operation of the partnership board with a view to key partners taking a 'less passive' role, and in Hartlepool the development of formalised accountability structures has been important in ensuring the progress of pilot work streams. Governance mechanisms will mature over time and in all pilot areas, EANF

grant holders have recognised the need to keep structures and processes under review as the programme progresses.

3.3. Keeping things going and widening influence

A final area for reflection is the need to continue to build (and strengthen) alliances, and to widen the influence of the EANF pilots beyond the immediate partners. As the pilots move into phases in which they are seeking to change systems and practices it will be important for them to reflect on the membership of partnership boards, and whether there is a need to build alliances with other organisations not represented in formal governance structures. 'Gaps' in representation have been identified in two pilot areas, and in these areas EANF grant holders are developing relationships with organisations that are not yet engaged. This can be difficult in the absence of examples of successful interventions or evidence of impact and as the evidence builds in the future it can be used as leverage to strengthen and maintain partnerships.

4. Lessons

From the first year of the evaluation a number of common lessons have emerged from the three projects funded through the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund. These lessons highlight the challenges the early action pilots have faced in developing alliances and partnerships and also the ways in which these are being overcome.

Individual relationships are key to effective collaboration between organisations. The EANF pilots have built alliances based on previous experiences of joint working. It has been difficult, however, in the context of continual public sector change, to maintain these relationships. **The EANF pilot projects have committed substantial time and effort to maintaining these key relationships, and will continue to do so as the programme develops.**

Organisations (in the public sector) have a range of priorities where early action is concerned. These range from strategic priorities around improving efficiencies and introducing cost savings to operational priorities around improving performance and accountability measures. **Early action interventions need to articulate how they will contribute to these priorities when engaging with individuals at different levels in public sector agencies.** Support from senior leaders is important, but successful implementation will often depend on middle managers and practitioners having a clear vision for how early action will improve outcomes for their clients and service users.

Effective governance structures will require mechanisms for accountability and the active participation of all partners. This has taken time to develop in the EANF pilot areas, and is still evolving. A process of continuous review has been adopted in the EANF pilot areas to ensure that governance structures remain fit for purpose and that partners remain involved. In the early stages partners may be committed to early action as goal but it will require effort to maintain vision and focus in the context of multiple competing priorities. In one EANF area, aligning early action with transformational change within the local authority has provided an opportunity to maintain the focus of activity. As evidence develops this will provide partners with reassurances in relation to project progress and impact and provide additional momentum for early action.

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