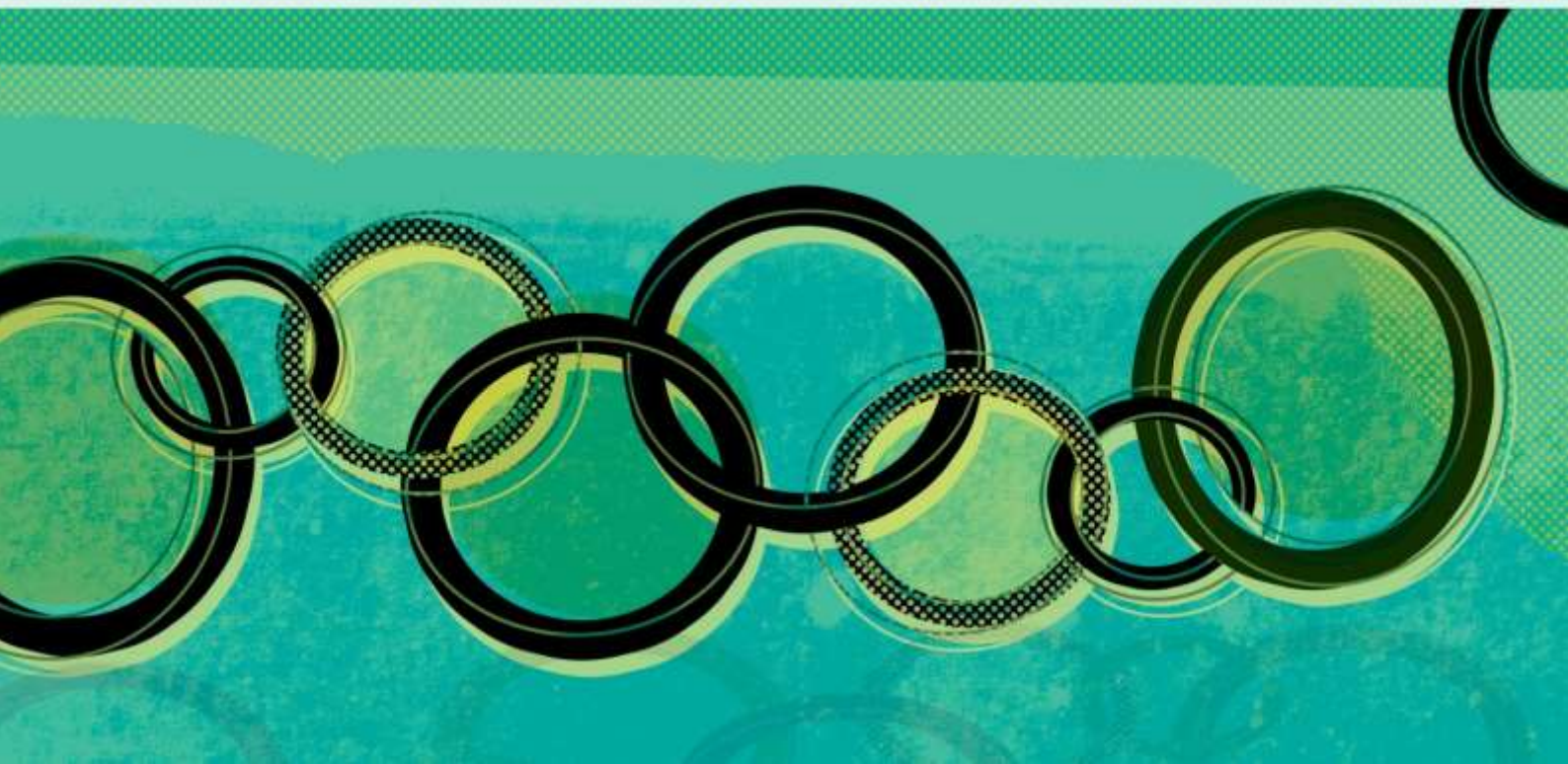


Early Action
Neighbourhood Fund:
Learning and Evaluation

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Early Action Neighbourhood Fund: Learning and Evaluation

Year One Programme Report

Ellen Bennett, Chris Damm, Chris Dayson, Sarah Pearson, Peter Wells

***Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR)
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Summary

The Early Action Neighbourhood Fund

The Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (EANF) has emerged from the Early Action Funders Alliance, a collaboration of funders with an interest in supporting early action. The programme is investing £5.25m in three Phase One pilot projects which will run from 2015 to 2020 and are testing early and preventative action approaches in different areas of public services. The Fund is overseen by a steering group which comprises Big Lottery Fund, Comic Relief, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Legal Education Foundation and the Barrow Cadbury Trust.

Further information on the EANF can be found at <http://www.earlyactionfund.org/>

Learning and Evaluation

Learning and evaluation is being led by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University. There are a number of objectives:

- Understand the **effectiveness** of EANF pilot projects.
- Understand the **impact** the projects have
- Generate **robust evidence**
- Understand what has and has not worked in the **design and delivery of the EANF** programme, and the **conditions of funding**

EANF Governance and Funding

The EANF steering group places emphasis on collaboration, reflection and flexibility and has been beneficial in supporting the successful development and early implementation of the programme. The resources given to voluntary sector organisations through the EANF grants have facilitated dialogue with public sector partners, even though in the context of budget cuts and reorganisations it has sometimes been difficult for those voluntary organisations to ensure that early action remains at the forefront of thinking amongst public sector partners. The pilots have confirmed that change within the public sector can be slow, and the five year timespan of the programme will be beneficial in providing time for new practices and ways of working to develop.

The EANF Pilots

There are three EANF pilot projects:

Coventry Law Centre, Coventry

Coventry Law Centre's Ignite project aims to reduce demand for specialised services and initiate a shift in how resources are allocated in Coventry. It hopes to raise people's aspirations for their lives and expectations of themselves, improve communities' ability to resolve their own problems

and ensure fewer people reach crisis point. It is seeking to do this by building legal knowledge, confidence and skills in people to help them deal with every day law-related issues.

Changing Futures North East, Hartlepool

Changing Futures aims to reduce spending on acute children's services in Hartlepool, as well as improving school attendance and children's emotional wellbeing, and reducing parental and family conflict. It will do this by improving the way its services and staff relate to each other and by building stronger family relationships through intensive support.

Mancroft Advice Project, Norwich

Mancroft Advice Project (MAP) aims to reduce acute spending in child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) budgets in Norwich and unlock a percentage of the future budget for preventative work, as well as improving children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing, and reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training. It will do this by targeting 13-14 year olds in three schools with a range of interventions, including mentoring and family support.

EANF learning and evaluation is taking a thematic approach. In year one the evaluation has looked at the processes involved in building relationships and partnerships to support early action, and developing capacity within and across organisations to support cultural and systems change. These have been key areas of activity for the projects in the first year of the programme. All the partnerships have put substantial resources into these activities which have been particularly challenging in the context of public sector service reorganisations and budget cuts. Support from senior staff in partner organisations has been strong but has not always translated into clear pathways for action at middle and practitioner levels. Coaching and training have supported staff to adopt early action approaches.

Discussion and learning

Although the programme is approaching the end of the first year, there remains a strong sense that progress is still at a very early stage, and the focus of the pilots is on growing capacity for long term change, as opposed to pursuing quick wins and early cost savings. The experiences of the EANF pilot projects in the first year of implementation highlight the crucial importance of developing, and maintaining, high quality individual and organisational relationships as the groundwork for cultural and systemic change. The pilots have confirmed that change within the public sector can be slow, and the five year timespan of the programme will be beneficial in providing time for new practices and ways of working to develop.

A number of learning points emerge from the first year of evaluation, at both programme and project levels:

At the programme level

Collaboration between funders has brought a range of skills and resources which have combined effectively to develop a robust programme and fund projects which are well placed to deliver effective interventions.

The steering group members have utilised knowledge and networks to support the development of early action pilots. This has been particularly beneficial because the pilots are working across a range of policy areas and contexts.

The significant size of the EANF grants has been important in enabling the pilot projects to engage with public sector services.

There was consensus amongst the pilot projects that it is important that the resources available to the EANF pilots reflect the ambitions to effect systems change. The grants were large enough to engage public sector providers and catalyse change. It is unlikely that in the context of cuts in public sector resources the EANF pilots would have been as successful in engaging public sector partnerships had these resources been reduced or absent.

The EANF pilots are working in a context of rapid change. Flexible and responsive grant management is needed to enable the pilots to adapt, and respond to, changing local circumstances.

The pilot projects were positive about the support they received through grant management and reflected that it had enabled them to develop their own programmes and to draw out learning.

At the project level

Building effective partnerships takes a lot of time and effort; this will be a key focus of early work which might mean that other activities which focus on changing systems and practice will take place later.

In future programmes it will be important to recognise in project planning that substantial amounts of time will need to be devoted to partnership and relationship building in the early stages, and this should be reflected in project milestones and outcomes.

It is important to maintain engagement and focus from members of the partnership; this will require continued resources to ensure that external priorities do not overwhelm the early action approach.

The importance of having active and committed boards was highlighted across the three pilots. This has been particularly critical in the context of change within the public sector. Budget pressures and external scrutiny amongst public sector agencies may mean that other pressures threaten commitment to early action. The projects have needed to work flexibly to accommodate these pressures, but also utilise clear terms of reference, and continuous review, to ensure that partnerships continue to be effective.

Consistent communication is vital. There is a need to reiterate the key messages about what the early action project is about. This can be a challenge in the early stages when there aren't too many project 'tangibles', but is important when working to support change in very large systems:

All of the projects have been affected by changes in staffing, and key individuals in partner and project lead organisations have moved on. Because early action approaches are not yet embedded in these organisations there is a need to keep engaging with stakeholders to ensure that they understand the aims and objectives of the work.

Early action is ambitious, and complex and requires action at multiple levels. Leadership is crucial but it is important for partnerships also support practitioners to link the abstract idea of early action to the operational context.

The pilot projects had all benefitted from support at senior levels in public sector agencies. However they have also experienced challenges in engaging effectively with practitioners and/ or recruiting staff with the relevant skills to implement early action. They have also acknowledged that culture change needs to happen within their own organisations as well as within their public sector partners. Resources have been allocated to coaching and training at multiple levels to ensure that practitioners understand how to operationalise early action.

Introduction

The report presents data from the first year of the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (EANF) learning and evaluation contract. This programme evaluation report is accompanied by two separate learning reports which explore particular aspects of programme delivery: building alliances for early action, and evidence and data to support early action.

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. The Big Lottery Fund, Comic Relief and the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation are investing collectively £5.25m to support three Phase One pilot projects (discussed in detail in Chapter Three) which are testing early and preventative action approaches in different areas of public services. The Fund is overseen by a steering group which comprises representatives of the three funding organisations, alongside the Legal Education Foundation and the Barrow Cadbury Trust.

Further information on the EANF can be found at <http://www.earlyactionfund.org/>

1.2. Learning and Evaluation

The learning and evaluation contract is being delivered by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University. The evaluation is designed to help grant holders and the EANF steering group members identify what has worked well and why in local approaches to early action and preventative services, so that successful approaches can be scaled or replicated. Over the longer term, the EANF's primary aims are to catalyse change and to influence the way that local statutory funders allocate resources towards early action. This involves collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative data to:

- Understand the **effectiveness** of EANF pilot projects, why they worked and under what circumstances, identifying key factors within the projects' theory of change models that facilitate a shift toward early action.
- Understand the **impact** the projects have, why they worked, and under what circumstances, both in terms of improved outcomes for service users, and in cost savings or efficiencies.
- Generate **robust evidence** that will help grant holders to deliver successful projects, and to demonstrate the case for early action as well as the transformation in service delivery required to achieve it.

- Understand what has and has not worked in the **design and delivery of the EANF** programme, and the **conditions of funding** that are most supportive and conducive to this type of transformation in service delivery.

The evaluation runs from 2015 to 2020 and involves a range of activities:

- Working with the three pilot partnerships to review their theories of change and to support the collection of local data.
- Working with the pilots to analyse data which the partnerships have gathered to assess the local impacts and value of the three projects.
- Undertaking interviews with representatives of grant holder and partner organisations to understand how and why the pilot projects are effecting change at the local level.
- Undertaking interviews with EANF steering group members to assess the degree to which project governance arrangements facilitate transformative change in the pilot project areas.
- Regular reporting to the EANF steering group and pilot projects to inform ongoing delivery.
- Annual learning events, reviewing findings outlined in an annual evaluation report.

This report, which is the first annual evaluation, draws on a number of data sources:

- A rapid review of the literature relating to early action.
- Semi-structured interviews (conducted face to face and over the telephone) with representatives of the EANF Steering Group.
- Semi-structured interviews with representatives of EANF grant holder organisations and partner organisations.
- Reviews of EANF project documentation, including funding application documentation, theories of change, data collection plans and grant management reports.

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 sets the context for the EANF by reviewing briefly the literature on the theory and practice of early action.
- Chapter 3 discusses the governance and funding of the EANF programme.
- Chapter 4 discusses the progress of the three EANF projects in the first year of the programme.
- Chapter 5 discusses findings thus far and draws out key learning points for the programme and remainder of the evaluation.

The theory and practice of early action

This chapter sets the context for the evaluation of the EANF by reviewing briefly debates on the theory and practice of early action in the context of public services. In doing so it outlines some of the questions and challenges posed by early action that the EANF learning and evaluation contract seeks to address.

2.1. The theory of early action

Enthusiasm for public services which support early or preventative action has recently gathered pace. The shift has coincided with austerity and the need to rethink public finances at a systemic level, but also with policy priorities which seek to promote choice in public services and improve efficiencies and outcomes through integration and collaboration. In this context, there is widespread interest amongst policy makers, funders and providers in the potential for new approaches to the design, commissioning and delivery of services which promote resilience and wellbeing in individuals and communities and prevent, or reduce, demand for acute and crisis led interventions. Early action is presented as fundamentally different to current public policy; and severely lacking in current practice (EANF, 2011; Gough, 2013; Coote and Bua, 2015). Coote (2012) suggests that almost all current services are responsive rather than preventative and Plimmer and Poortvliet (2010) argue that current preventative activity might even be being disproportionately reduced by public sector cuts

A variety of descriptions and definitions are used to encompass this shift. The Early Action Task Force (EATF) describes early action as a "fundamental principle" that "prevents problems from occurring" rather than coping with the consequences (EATF, 2011, p.3) and refers to the benefits of early action as the 'triple dividend'; '*allowing people to lead thriving lives that contribute less and cost more*'. The NAO (2013) identifies three types of early action: prevention (upstream); preventing or minimising the risk of problems arising, usually through universal policies like health promotion; early intervention (midstream) - targeting individuals or groups at high risk or showing early signs of a particular problem to try to stop it occurring; early remedial treatment (downstream) - intervening once there is a problem to stop it getting worse and redress the situation. More generally, most commentators agree on a broad understanding of early action, backed up by recurring metaphors (Robertson, 2014): catching people upstream before they fall in the water, rather than further downstream later on (Coote, 2012); building a fence to prevent people from falling off a cliff, rather than picking them up with an ambulance at the bottom.

The translation of early action approaches into policy prescriptions and interventions raises uncertainties however, in relation to both the goals of early action and the mechanisms through which it might be best implemented. For instance, consensus on the aims of early action requires some agreement about which outcomes are

considered negative. The views of policy makers, practitioners and service users may differ or coincide at different points. In addition, they may value different costs and benefits to different degrees (Freeman, 1999). The value of prevention is often described in terms of cost savings to the state (Gough, 2013; Allen, 2011a in Puttick, 2012) although there is no guarantee that early action should be cheaper.

The theoretical framework underlying early action relies on the potential for the state (or other actors) to effectively predict problems, act, and alter outcomes (Freeman, 1999). The reality is often more complex, raising challenges for understanding how best to enact early action. For instance, despite the best efforts of social researchers, we do not always have a very strong understanding of how social problems are caused or which factors might put people at risk. Are causes located at the level of the individual and their behaviour, or at the level of communities, geographies, structures or systems? (Gough, 2013) The answers to these questions are contested, and often intensely political, and can lead to differing views on how, and where, interventions should be targeted.

Another question is when to intervene? The EATF (2011) identify a number of critical junctions when intensive interventions can prevent further problems later on. These include moving schools, entering employment or retirement, leaving care, and illness. Typologies of different stages of intervention are often identified (Coote, 2012 in Gough, 2013; Freeman, 1999). Robertson (2014), for example, distinguishes between primary, secondary, tertiary and acute forms of intervention. Acute intervention occurs once a problem has fully developed, while primary prevention occurs before it develops at all. Secondary and tertiary preventions fall between these extremes. These typologies draw on the assumption of linear progression (Freeman, 1999) which contrasts with a model in which change is less predictable or characterised by periods of stability punctuated by sudden crises (Hay, 2002). Others reject a linear model at all, and argue that as change is both complex and relatively constant, it is largely impossible to successfully theorise (Marsh, 2010).

Finally, there is the issue of identifying who requires an intervention, given that not all individuals who are at risk will go on to develop more serious problems. Practitioners face a huge number of individuals who may or may not require (or want) assistance. And individuals may need a wide range of interventions which may or may not influence their ultimate destination. They oscillate between periods of high and low intensity needs and make forwards or backwards progress regardless of any external intervention. Insufficient targeting will result in wasted resources, a phenomenon known as 'deadweight'. There is a risk that this then makes an intervention prohibitively expensive (Plimmer and Poortvliet, 2010).

As the evidence outlined at Chapter 4 of this report demonstrates addressing, and building consensus around, these key theoretical parameters is a key early task for those wishing to instigate and implement early action approaches. All the three EANF pilots have developed theories of change for their interventions and have devoted significant resources in their first year of operation to building coalitions around theory of change approaches. The evaluation will review these theories of change as the programme progresses

2.2. The practice of early action

The literature also identifies practical challenges to implementing early action. Securing the necessary funding may be problematic. Although as the Committee of Public Accounts (2013) points out it can be possible to secure additional resources to support early action, particularly in a context of austerity (Puttick, 2012). Preventative interventions may be cheaper than acute interventions when successful, but the costs can stack up quickly when large numbers require the intervention (Plimmer and

Poortvliet, 2010). Some degree of deadweight funding is also inevitable, and because the shift to early action cannot occur immediately, and its effects will take time to be felt, increased investment is often needed without a concurrent decrease in more acute spending (Coote, 2012). Clearly, in providing funding for pilot interventions the EANF has injected additional resources into public services in the areas where the pilots are running. Over time, the evaluation will seek to address the extent to which this funding has catalysed the shift of local resources more generally toward early action approaches. A challenge for the EANF partnerships will be overcoming bias towards pilot projects that can be quickly proved effective (Plimmer and Poortvliet, 2010). As the EATF (2011) point out not all benefits are long term and there may be some short term savings that can be realised but often early action service outcomes are less immediately tangible, less certain and harder to measure compared to acting later on. The high investment costs and delayed payoff fits poorly with short term spending plans, budgets and political pressures (EATF, 2011; CPA, 2013; Puttick, 2012). The electoral cycle in particular relentlessly demands short term results (NAO, 2013). Showing how a preventative service will provide a return on investment is vital (Allen, 2011b).

The EANF pilots are also addressing structural and systemic challenges to early action. These may include poor commissioning processes and excessive price pressures (EANF, 2011), lack of appropriate skills, capabilities and resources amongst commissioners or providers (NAO, 2013), and lack of integration or commitment to joint working across departmental and organisational boundaries (CPA, 2013; NAO, 2013). This latter issue is a problem for services generally, but savings accrued from early action measures may be less likely to benefit the department that makes the initial investment (EANF, 2011; Puttick, 2012).

The barriers can also be cultural. Coote, (2012) claims that early action goes against the 'rescue principle' engrained in the public service ethos of the state and voluntary sectors (also Plimmer and Poortvliet, 2010). Professionals may have set ideas of their areas of responsibility and their roles, backed up by various hierarchies and existing incentives that they will defend against change (Coote, 2012). These issues are potentially more soluble if strong leadership is focussed towards finding solutions. This is particularly important to overcome organisational, departmental and professional silos (EATF, 2012).

There are numerous examples of successful early action, and a burgeoning evidence base, collated by Community Links and the What Works centres amongst others brings together exemplars of initiatives which have improved outcomes for individuals and communities and are viewed positively by commissioners, practitioners and beneficiaries (EATF 2014a, 2014b). But there is a dearth of robust impact evaluation, and value for money analysis, and much of the evidence that does exist is specific to the benefits enjoyed by particular groups in particular places at particular times (Curry, 2006; Corry, 2014). There is little evidence that considers the implications of implementing an early action approach at scale or the potential for replication across services or places. These challenges are in part what the EANF is seeking to address. By taking a test and learn approach the programme will explore the ways in which an early action approach can influence cultures, systems, practices and resources and to draw out widely applicable lessons in relation to what works (and what doesn't) in effecting change at the local level. It is hoped that the learning from this programme will help to clarify some of the theoretical ambiguities surrounding early action, and offer practical solutions to overcoming some of the challenges to implementing an early action approach that have been outlined above. Lessons from the UK's first early action commission offer some pointers here: recommendations for practical actions include preparing the ground, finding resources, changing systems and changing practices (Coote and Bua, 2015; also Allen, 2011a; EATF 2014a). The EANF evaluation builds on this, and other, evidence

to make a contribution to knowledge on the formation and implementation of early action policy.

This chapter has set the context for the EANF evaluation by reviewing literature on early action and outlining some of the challenges to early action that the EANF evaluation seeks to address. The following chapters present analysis of data from the first year of the EANF evaluation to review the progress of the programme thus far and to draw out learning emerging from the governance and early implementation of the programme and the pilot projects.

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EANF governance and funding

This chapter discusses the governance and funding arrangements for the EANF programme. It uses data gathered through semi-structured interviews with members of the EANF steering group and representatives of grant holder organisations conducted face to face and over the telephone.

As outlined in the introduction to this report, the EANF is a unique programme which is supported, both financially and in terms of expertise and resources, by a number of organisations with a shared commitment to early action and an interest in developing new approaches to grant making which support early action and prevention approaches. The programme is overseen by a steering group comprising the Big Lottery Fund, Comic Relief, the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation; the Barrow Cadbury Foundation and the Legal Education Foundation.

The programme has adopted a 'closed' approach to grant making in its pilot phase: selected organisations were invited to make applications, and a number were subsequently supported through development grants to formulate proposals from which the three final pilot projects were selected. Grants have been awarded for a period of five years. The grants are relatively large (when compared to most other grants awarded by the organisations concerned), with a view to testing the potential for resourcing a small number of voluntary organisations to 'disrupt' local services towards early action.

An early interest for the evaluation then is in identifying the initial impacts of this approach, both in terms of the governance model, and in relation to grant making and grant management processes. As the evaluation progresses, these issues will continue to be reviewed to draw out learning to inform programme development. The evidence emerging thus far is outlined below.

3.1. Collaboration between funders

As discussed above, steering group members came together with a view to working collaboratively to test out and build the evidence base for early action approaches. In interviews, representatives of all steering group organisations viewed early action as a complement to existing work, even where much of their grant making was usually directed to projects supporting individuals and communities already in crisis. Comments included:

(The organisation was having) persistent discussions about alternative strategies to alleviation - we think of ourselves as a funder that allows organisations to innovate. An unscientific 'snapshot' (of funding) demonstrated that we were nearer the cliff edge than we thought. There are no value

judgements in that, and we will continue to fund alleviation but it is about getting the balance right (Steering group member)

It's interesting because as a funder much of our funding has been at the acute end - it's to do with the nature of the funder we are and where we get our money from - but in the current climate of predictions of growing need and shrinking resources it's a no brainer to shift resources upstream (Steering group member)

The shared goals of the group have been important in developing a sense of momentum, and ensuring progress in developing the EANF:

Funders were asking is all we are doing crisis management and alleviation? It didn't take much to start the idea of an alliance. Funders were interested in having that space - they were open to debate and ideas and out of that came the momentum for a collaborative programme (Steering group member)

In interviews, steering group members contrasted their experiences with EANF to other collaborative models with which they had been involved, remarking that the 'tight knit' nature of the group, its clarity of purpose, commitment to the objectives of EANF, and the pooling of resources had facilitated successful joint working:

We are familiar with collaborative models (as a way of working). The difference here is that it is a tight group and we have pooled all our money (Steering group member)

I have never been part of a group where things have got done - there has been a lot of work but it has never felt like a huge task (Steering group member)

Although the programme is overseen collectively by the steering group, each of these organisations 'leads' on a particular aspect of programme governance, reflecting resources and expertise. This has the effect of bringing a range of skills to the EANF, meaning that programme governance is strong across all areas:

Yes we've got a mix of people, we've got people like () who's got very detailed understanding of legal services and subject expertise, me on influencing, someone else who's more a policy person, people who are very grounded in the community work, people who've got lots of experience of funding, coming from slightly different funding traditions, so it's a strong group (Steering group member)

Whilst this collaborative approach has had clear benefits in terms of programme design and start up, and the potential for shared learning to emerge from the different skills and focus of steering group members, it is not clear that the model adopted for this programme would be replicable at a larger scale. As a pilot programme, the EANF is a low risk endeavour for the steering group members in terms of organisational exposure to reputational or financial damage. However, roll-out to wider spatial scales or via a mainstream grants programme would place different demands on collaborating organisations, not least in terms of the requirements of trustees for programme management and scrutiny. Steering group members agreed that there would be a need to consider appropriate, and formalised, governance models for a larger programme, whilst still reflecting the benefits of the collaborative approach identified here.

3.2. EANF funding model

A second area of interest is the EANF funding model. As outlined above, the programme has invested significant resources in voluntary organisations in three

pilot areas with a view to 'disrupting' relationships between the voluntary and public sectors and testing new ways of embedding early action into services in these areas. In interviews, steering group members articulated a rationale that placed importance on awarding grants that were substantial enough to give the grant holding voluntary organisations a degree of leverage when engaging with public sector partners, and for the investments to be of sufficient magnitude to facilitate systemic change. One remarked:

We thought that putting the VCS in control of a significant package of money - enough to get the local authority interested - but we wanted to know how across the board this sort of investment could go deeper than just services. We have to fund non-statutory and not for profit organisations but there was an added incentive to give a substantial slug of money - enough to get heads turned. It's rare for the VCS to take delivery of that. (Steering group member)

Representatives of grant holding organisations agreed that the investment had facilitated relationships with public sector organisations. As outlined in Chapter Four, the EANF pilots have succeeded in establishing strong relationships with public sector partners, particularly at senior level, and although it is not clear that these have been driven by resources attached to EANF there is a collective recognition that, as the NAO (2013) suggested, austerity has opened up spaces for dialogue between the voluntary and public sectors about new approaches to service delivery. The injection of EANF resources into these spaces may well have provided an additional catalyst for change in the pilot areas, but it will be important over the course of the programme to track the impact that EANF resources have in driving cultural and systems change, and to assess the degree to which change is dependent on resources, or can be sustained and replicated without similar levels of investment. One steering group member remarked:

I had questions about whether we should give these small numbers of huge grants because my experience is that if you do that and you make a systems change then you've actually made a systems change that is dependent on the injections of large amounts of cash and we've had experience here of good systems change with a tiny amount of money - it's a fundamental question about the structure of the programme (Steering group member)

At this early stage in implementation, the evaluation has also reflected on the process of grant making. Again, there are a number of unusual features of the EANF programme that differ from the mainstream grant making practices of EANF steering group members. These include the closed nature of the fund, and the close process of engagement with the applicant organisations prior to awards. In part the closed nature of the fund was a response to concerns that funders did not have the resources within a pilot programme to deal with a large volume of applications, and a concern that an open programme would result in many organisations putting resources into applications that could not be funded. But it was also driven by a desire on the part of EANF steering group organisations to identify and work with organisations that had capacity to deliver innovative new approaches to early action. Key criteria for shortlisting (and subsequent awards) included robustness of organisations and evidence of partnerships with statutory sector organisations. Projects had also to be concerned with systems change. The programme identified a number of potential applicants who were awarded development grants to assist them to put together proposals. Applicants getting to the last stage of the process were also visited by steering group members.

The combined knowledge and expertise of the steering group organisations, working with an external agency which had a validation role, has been important in identifying applicants with suitable characteristics. One interviewee commented:

We needed high quality applicants. The spread, depth, and quality of applicants, and the expertise of organisations including those that don't commit money has been invaluable, their knowledge of the sector has been vital. Without it the quality and diversity of applications would have been one third of what we have ended up with (Steering group member)

The approach has allowed steering group organisations to work very closely with applicant and funded organisations. This approach has been followed into grant management processes, which are led by Comic Relief and which involve close collaboration with funded organisations. A grant manager at Comic Relief, for instance, sits on the steering groups of the EANF pilot projects, reflecting the learning ethos of the EANF programme. Collectively, the EANF steering group member organisations have worked hard to develop an ethos in which the funded organisations feel comfortable to share learning about what is and isn't working at the local level, and to be reflexive and flexible in their approach to grant and programme management to

Funded organisations were very positive about this collaborative approach, reflecting that flexibility in terms of grant management had allowed them to develop their own programmes and to draw out learning. One commented:

What's always been reflected in the conversations we've had with the funders, they are going through a parallel process as a group of funders working in partnership which is relatively new for them as well, it seems like there's parallels everywhere and I think that's reflected in people's attitudes towards it in a way that does encourage that learning (Grant holder)

There have been clear advantages to close collaboration between the EANF steering group and grant holder organisations in the context of a pilot programme. Nevertheless, steering group members also reflected that these aspects of the programme had implications which would need to be considered in any future approach. These included the closed nature of the programme and the resource-intensive approach to decision making. Comments included:

If we were doing it again I might want to think about the openness of the bidding - otherwise it's just who you know and we know a lot of good people but not everyone is good (Steering group member)

We don't normally spend a day looking at projects, understanding the nature of relationships and partnerships in areas. It's a very different process. It's manageable because there are three of them but the question is how does it really add value? Are we sure that it does always add value?

This chapter has reviewed early evidence in relation to the governance of the EANF programme. The evaluation will continue to assess these issues as the programme develops but this early evidence suggests that the approach adopted by the EANF steering group, which places emphasis on collaboration, reflection and flexibility has been beneficial in supporting the successful development and early implementation of the programme. It has also been resource-intensive, however, and the programme has engaged with a restricted group of potential applicants. It is unlikely therefore that the model would translate in its entirety to a larger programme and the EANF steering group could usefully reflect on whether there are aspects of the model which can be replicated.

The next chapter looks at the early progress of the three EANF projects and highlights lessons to emerge from the experiences thus far of each of these pilots.

The EANF pilots

This chapter looks at evidence on the early implementation of each of the three EANF projects. The chapter draws on evidence from semi-structured interviews with representatives of grant holding organisations and partner organisations conducted face to face and over the telephone.

In future years the evaluation will seek to assess the impact of the EANF pilots in delivering improved outcomes for individuals and organisations which are outlined in their separate theories of change. As discussed below, and in our separate learning report on data and evidence, it has taken time for the projects to identify relevant indicators and sources of data and to negotiate access to data with partners in the statutory sector. Whilst the pilots have begun to gather evidence which can be used to assess their impacts over time it is not appropriate at this early stage in the programme to analyse this data which is not yet robust enough to warrant scrutiny.

Thus this chapter utilises qualitative data to report on the processes of change in the pilot areas, and the ways in which the grant holding organisations are seeking to develop relationships, change cultures and shift systems towards early action approaches. The experiences of each of the pilot projects are discussed in turn, below.

4.1. Coventry Law Centre, Coventry

Coventry Law Centre's Ignite project aims to reduce demand on specialised services (children's services and housing) and initiate a shift in how resources are allocated in Coventry, as well as raising people's aspirations for their lives and expectations of themselves, improving communities' ability to resolve their own problems and ensuring fewer people reach crisis point. It will do this by building legal knowledge, confidence and skills in people to help them deal with every day law-related issues.

About the project partnership

The Ignite project has two key lead organisations: Coventry Law Centre and Grapevine. The two organisations have a history of working together, and share a commitment to understanding and learning from each other to make their respective work more effective in their work to support vulnerable people.

About the Ignite project

The project proposes that a joint team will work in deprived neighbourhoods, helping services to intervene earlier and prevent problems escalating, or people continually facing problems. The project will focus on building legal capability through legal advice and support alongside building resilience and social networks through work with individuals and families.

The project will employ a small team of 'igniters' who will play an active role in two pathfinder communities; focusing on housing and children's services. They will be immersed in communities, getting known, building knowledge and trust and understanding individuals and families. The idea is that the project mobilises strengths, and helps people to take their first steps. The key will be helping people to build relationships that might start to replace work of the igniters - i.e. supportive relationships.

Progress

Coventry Law Centre and Grapevine have focused in the first year on establishing relationships and partnership working with key strategic partners and in the pathfinder localities. They have also undertaken the recruitment and training of new staff.

A key achievement has been the degree of buy-in from very senior staff within partner organisations, such as key departments within the local authority. This has been the result of a significant amount of work by project staff to 'sell' the idea of early action, as one Ignite project staff member outlined:

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...so that's really positive (Grant holder)

As well as achieving support from senior staff within the local authority, the project team has been successful at building new relationships with staff within other areas of the public sector. As well as positive information sharing exercises, the project has recognised the need to have broader public sector representation on the project board so has expanded the board to include senior nursing staff as well as a chief inspector from the police.

The challenge of building relationships with public sector partners has been particularly complex for Ignite, which is seeking to build collaboration with two agencies (a housing association and local authority children's services) in two separate localities. In terms of project design there is a clear rationale to this approach, which seeks to test early action approaches across two areas of service by looking at a separate service in each locality. However, it has meant that the organisation is managing a range of relationships simultaneously and this has had implications in terms of project delivery.

As in the other EANF pilot areas (see below) interviewees referred to the complexity of the public sector context, and the challenges this is posing for the Ignite project. Public sector services that are important Ignite project partners are experiencing reorganisation, new senior staff, and additional external scrutiny, all of which are making it difficult to navigate ongoing relationships at multiple levels. One of the public sector partners has been subject to special measures and the project has been unable to make as much progress had been anticipated in this area due to pressures on the service. One interviewee explained:

The (second) pathfinder has been tricky for a different reason which is the thing about new senior leadership and the threat of an imminent Ofsted inspection...So lots of pressure on the service (Grant holder)

The degree of change within the public sector has also meant that although the Ignite project team has been able to secure buy-in at a senior level, they have faced a number of challenges in achieving the same degree of buy-in at different levels. As this member of the project team outlined:

So that's where we are with them, there's no hostility, just that classic thing where once it gets down below management level people are not clear...I think at various levels in the organisation there's less understanding (Grant holder)

A combination of a disrupted public sector context and the challenge of buy-in at all levels contributed to some delays in aspects of delivery, such as the establishment of locality teams. Although the project plan has been adapted, this represents a challenge of complex partnership working, and is an important learning point for future early action.

As outlined above, an additional focus this year has been on the recruitment of new staff and training of new and existing staff. There has been a significant amount of work needed to enable the staff team within the lead organisations to engage fully with the programme both in terms of their practice but also in terms of how they communicate with others externally about the early action programme. As one of the programme staff outlines:

We did a lot of work with our own staff about how we message what this programme is about, their role inside it, how it isn't just about them working with families or tenants, it isn't just about them doing case work, it's about them observing, thinking about how things could be better. It's a massive challenge for them. I don't think they've ever done anything quite like this before, and we're pioneering a new way of working which we're expecting them to be able to explain to people while they're still learning how to do it (Grant holder)

Finally, the project has developed its governance structures and has reflected on the operation of its programme board. Bringing partners together on the early action board for the project has led the team to reflect on how these meetings operate, and what engagement is needed from those around the table. The level of senior engagement has been successful at the board level, so the project team are keen

that the board meetings are active, and enable the project to benefit as fully as possible from those present, as an interviewee articulates:

We're going to try and see if we can think of a different way of running the board moving forward so those very senior people who are giving up two hours of their time don't just sit there passively and receive information but we manage to maximise what the programme can get from them. We need to do a bit more thinking about how we might make that work. How we see them is playing a keeping-us-on-track role, calling us to account, but also enablers who help make it work as best as it can (Grant holder)

Although staff and board members suggested that they weren't yet at the stage whereby they identified as a team, people referred to positive relationships which were forming and the increased levels of accountability between partners. A learning point from this first year is that there is more work to be done in order to build a sense of team, and encourage the group to be more interactive.

4.2. Changing Futures North East, Hartlepool

Changing Futures aims to reduce spending on acute children's services in Hartlepool by 10 per cent, as well as improving school attendance and children's emotional wellbeing, and reducing parental and family conflict. It will do this by improving the way its services and staff relate to each other and by building stronger family relationships through intensive support.

The Healthy Relationships project

The project aims to embed a relational approach to children's services in Hartlepool, and is seeking to support a shift in the culture of working with children and families in the borough by encouraging services and people to consider family, and particularly parental, relationships. Changing Futures North East is leading the project, along with project partners: Belle Vue Community, Sports and Youth Centre, Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships and Hartlepool Borough Council.

The project is working with services (such as social workers, children's centre workers, school staff and senior staff within the Council) to shift culture and working practices so that problems are identified earlier, referrals into preventative services (such as counselling) are increased, and child protection proceedings are reduced.

Mechanisms for effecting change include the recruitment and training of new staff (who will cascade early action approaches); coaching for senior leaders and programme managers, and 'change supporters' from across different agencies working to embed systems and cultural changes across services. Changes to practice include modification of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) in the Borough to include a focus on relationships.

The Healthy Relationships project is being implemented alongside Hartlepool Borough Council's Better Childhood initiative. Although these projects have different funding and delivery mechanisms they have similar objectives and are being delivered jointly by CFNE and the local authority under the banner Healthy Relationships, Better Childhood.

Progress

Progress has been made across all work streams of the Healthy Relationships project this year. A key focus has been on establishing the project relationships and a partnership and the establishment of a functioning partnership for the Healthy Relationships, Better Childhood intervention has been one of the key achievements during the first year of the programme. Interviewees referred to the proactive ways in which CFNE are working to establish and support a positive partnership, as is illustrated by the comment below:

I think it's testament to [project staff] and the people they've been working with and I think very considerable amounts of activity going on between meetings.. one of the great strengths is that the meetings will ensure that things are being done and will be holding oversight and accountability and scrutiny, but the work is definitely done in partnership and between people and with people so I sense it's progressing really well (Grant holder)

Those interviewed also referred to the importance of key relationships during this first year, as the partnership as a whole is developing. It has been necessary to develop, and build on, positive relationships as the foundations for effective partnership working to deliver change. As one interviewee from a partner organisation explains:

Actually relationships are good here, we're lucky from that point of view, it's just trying to get it formalised in a way that can then support change (Partner organisation)

A key theme in interviews with staff at CFNE, however, is the amount of time which has been spent during this first year on building and maintaining a successful partnership. Although relationships are described as very positive, and well established, there have been particular challenges associated with the work, and time, it has taken to establish the working partnership. An interviewee from CFNE described the amount of work that has been needed to conduct this kind of partnership building:

Partnerships aren't easy and they take a lot of work...partnerships are easily written about or spoken about, but they're far more difficult to make really happen and realise the potential of some of the ideas. And that takes work, and it takes time, and it takes effort (Grant holder)

Interviewees also identified a number of specific challenges associated with this work. These include the need to continually be articulating the idea and principles of early action to staff within partner organisations, particularly in the context of almost continual flux within the statutory sector. The challenge of trying to establish a shift in working practices and cultures has been heightened by the context within which the local authority is working: service budgets are shrinking, and senior members of staff within the local authority are working to retain services and improve quality whilst simultaneously reducing budgets. Whilst this has opened up space for considering alternative ways of working it also means that a great deal of attention is focused on the internal workings of the local authority. As one partner describes:

We cannot afford to continue doing what we do, we've got to have a huge change and linked to that is that kids get something better out of this than they do at the moment...It's not just a budget thing, things needed to happen, but as a council this has got to work for us because otherwise we'll fall off the edge of a cliff into an abyss of deficit (Partner organisation)

This particular challenge, then, intensifies the pressure on the early action project staff to ensure that the partnership retains its focus, and importantly remains a key priority for partners within the local authority. As a member of project staff outlines:

I have to keep drawing back senior leaders within the local authority and get them to focus on the outside world and not going to an organisational safety and internal focus 'cos they're shrinking (Grant holder)

This challenging public sector context is putting greater pressure on time of CFNE staff who are working to ensure that people across the partnership continue to focus on the Healthy Relationship work. This is a significant focus at both strategic level and operational levels.

In terms of my role it feels like that's what the critical thing is, to try and make sure that that partnership is maintained at that high level (Grant holder)

The local authority is currently undergoing a formal change programme leading to departmental reorganisations and the redefinition of roles. One interviewee from the local authority outlined the impact this is having on the broader partnerships that are being developed:

Everyone's in a state of flux at the moment in the public sector, they're all struggling with cuts, so we're going through a change programme but we're also within change at the same time so you're trying to marry it all up together (Partner organisation)

Whilst much of the focus of the work thus far has been focused on establishing and strengthening relationships at the level of individuals, the degree of change being experienced within the borough also impacts on the relationships between CFNE (as a voluntary sector agency) and the local authority. Whilst having a voluntary sector agency leading this kind of cross-sector partnership is recognised by partners as a positive element of the work, there has been a tendency, in uncertain times, to revert to the familiar pattern of voluntary sector-council relationships characterised by commissioner-service provider roles. These challenges were acknowledged by those interviewed in CFNE and the local authority:

...how we manage some of those more challenging relationships, more challenging in the sense that we haven't had to engage in work in this sort of way with director of [local authority service] before, we normally come to a table as a service provider that's commissioned to do things according to their specifications, but now we're there as a holder of a major investment for the town and we need to make sure that partnership's there on an equal footing because the temptation is, and this is certainly some of the experience of the last six months, is people revert to type, so the local authority, the council, everything can get dominated by talking about the council cos they're just so massive, so even inadvertently language can be dragged towards change process at the council, and [my colleague] and I need to be very mindful of the fact that we need to make sure that the lens is further back than that and there's a wider perspective on it. (Grant holder)

What's been difficult for me and [CFNE colleague] and continues to be a challenge, although it's got much better, is the political tension between us as a local authority who see ourselves as kind of the dominant player cos we feel ultimately responsible to Government on all outcomes for children... and that's about the local authority learning to loosen the reigns and having, I don't think trust is an issue, but I think it's just sometimes we feel like we need to keep hold of something and that way we know if anything goes wrong we're responsible

and what we can do about it. So the battle over the summer, if there's been anything, has been me and [CFNE colleague] trying to get people above us to say no it's fine, Changing Futures can run this group cos they're better placed to do it (Partner organisation)

One implication of these challenges is that some aspects of the work of the partnership have progressed more slowly than had been anticipated at the outset. As a consequence, there has been some re-profiling of activity to reflect the need to devote significant resources to relationship building in the early phases of the programme. This work has focused on cultural change within the partner organisations.

4.3. Mancroft Advice Project, Norwich

Mancroft Advice Project (MAP) aims to reduce acute spending in child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) budgets in Norwich and unlock a percentage of the future budget for preventative work, as well as improving children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing, and reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training. It will do this by targeting 13-14 year olds in three schools with a range of interventions, including mentoring and family support.

The Early Action Mental Health programme

The project will

- Develop an early action taskforce of professionals (teachers etc.) to share training and learning. The project will develop a training programme and will engage as many teachers and other professionals as possible.
- Work with existing youth provision (youth clubs etc.) to engage with five ways to wellbeing.
- Deliver advice and youth work in school settings.
- Provide counselling and specialist advice where required.
- Work with communities and families.

The project will work with three schools in West Norwich (covering four wards) to improve the social and emotional wellbeing of young people at risk of being not in education or employment (NEET). It will do this by working towards a culture shift amongst professionals and the institutions within which they work, prioritising a young person-centred approach.

The early action mental health project in Norwich has a particular focus on working with young people in schools and communities. The project has made significant progress in engaging stakeholders and developing robust governance and delivery mechanisms in the first year of programme activity. A key early success for this pilot has been the engagement from the three targeted schools. In particular, buy-in at the senior level has meant that programmes of activities have been understood and supported by the head teachers, and other senior members of staff. This has been seen to be crucial facilitating engagement and delivery, as highlighted in the following quote from an interviewee in the early action project:

The idea of the project is changing the culture and relationship within the school, if the head teacher's already there and sees what we do as a valuable tool for them and a valuable resource then that's really helped (Grant holder)

A further success has been the support and engagement of those who are members of the project's board. Senior staff from across the public sector are engaged at the board level, and their active involvement in the project has been a strength within this first years. Clear terms of reference for this group have been important in ensuring that members of the group are committed to supporting the project to facilitate change. One interviewee explained:

We've got some really good senior people...and they've signed up to the terms of reference, and they're very clear that they're not just there to steer but go away and troubleshoot, so if we're not getting what we need in terms of outcomes or anything like that they have signed up to use their days jobs as commissioners, CCG chairs, school head, to unblock those blockages if they occur (Grant holder)

It has also been clear engagement has been facilitated by the fact that the project has offered an opportunity to bring external resources to test innovative (and long term) approaches that would not otherwise have been viable in current public sector contexts. One interviewee reflected:

I think as well it's that opportunity, that five years in which their own organisation budget holders would never allow them to do that so it's their opportunity to have input and influence and also get data from us...the opportunity to be part of a long term project like this is really rare (Grant holder)

In contrast perhaps with the other pilots the Norwich EANF project has not experienced an unanticipated degree of challenge in engaging external partners in project governance. Interviewees within the partnership reflected that senior involvement was helped because of existing relationships and track record of working at a strategic level. Without these well-established links and relationships, the sense was that building this kind of partnership would have been far more challenging.

However, the project team also reflected that they hadn't anticipated the amount of work that would be needed internally - within the teams at MAP - in order to progress through the first year. Additional support and development work for staff has been put in place and this aspect of the project is now functioning well. One interviewee commented:

I think the perception of our staff as well, preparing them to work in a different environment to what they're used to working in. I think we again perhaps naively felt that counselling will just happen, and advice work will just happen...we perhaps didn't see it from the other two teams about giving that support, the difference it's going to be for them (Grant holder)

The core work being undertaken in the Norwich pilot is in partnership with three schools. Although the partnerships are functioning very well, with positive buy-in from all three schools, bringing together MAP's working practices, and associated systems with each of the schools' systems has been a challenge. This has in part been due to the difference in size and type of the schools involved, but also by cultural differences between voluntary and public organisations, as outlined by one member of the project team:

I think somewhere like a charity where a lot of the time we set our own rules or our own values or our own way of working, we can be a lot more open and transparent about what we do and really celebrate it. Whereas a school, it's the size as well, 120 staff members is the smallest staff team in one of the schools

and across the early action project we've got 17 staff members. So how do you get the message to every single person and get that buy-in? (Grant holder)

The struggle to achieve buy-in at all levels in the schools, from the senior staff team through to the teaching and pastoral staff, has been a challenge for this first year, with slightly different challenges posed by each school. Therefore a lot of time has been spent working to communicate across different areas of the staff teams to achieve that broader buy-in. This has meant that implementation within the schools, which was anticipated to start in September 2015, was slightly reconfigured. The period from September to December was effectively a start-up period in which activity within schools focused on information sharing, publicising the intervention and engaging with staff and pupils to explain the project and its approach. The early action interventions, in the form of counselling and support services, did not begin until January 2016.

This chapter has reviewed qualitative evidence on the progress of each of the EANF pilot projects in the first year of the programme. It has focused primarily on the processes of developing relationships and partnerships and capacity within and across organisations to support cultural and systems change, as these have been a key focus of activity across all three partnerships. The evidence suggests that all the partnerships have put a substantial resource into these activities which have been particularly challenging in the context of public sector change. Support from senior staff in partner organisations has been strong but has not always been clear pathways for action at middle and practitioner levels. Coaching and training have supported staff to adopt early action approaches. The last chapter of this report discusses the evidence presented in previous chapters and draws out learning for early action approaches.

Discussion and learning

This report has presented evidence to emerge thus far from the first year of the evaluation of the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund. This evidence has emerged from a brief review of the literature and qualitative evidence collected through interviews with representatives of grant holding and partner organisations. These interviews focussed on the processes of early implementation and in particular on the governance of the EANF programme and the ways in which the three pilot projects have established relationships and partnerships to support early action. The evaluation has not thus far addressed the impact of these projects on outcomes for individuals, or made an assessment of the value or cost-savings associated with these approaches as, at this early stage, there is insufficient data available to carry out this analysis. These issues will be addressed in future evaluation reports, and an associated learning output has addressed the issues and challenges associated with collecting data to evidence the impact of early action interventions.

The approach to programme governance (through the EANF steering group) has fostered a collaborative and open approach in which funders, grant holders and the programme evaluators are committed to shared learning in relation to the progress and impact of the projects. This is particularly beneficial in the context of a pilot programme. There is early evidence too that the resources given to voluntary sector organisations through the EANF grants have facilitated dialogue with voluntary sector partners, even though in the context of budget cuts and reorganisations it has sometimes been difficult for those voluntary organisations to ensure that early action remains at the forefront of thinking amongst public sector partners.

Partners have all provided positive feedback about the early stages of the programme, but although the programme is approaching the end of the first year, there remains a strong sense that things are still at a very early stage, and the focus of the pilots is on growing capacity for long term change, as opposed to pursuing quick wins and early cost savings. The pilots have also confirmed that change within the public sector can be slow, and the five year timespan of the programme will be beneficial in providing time for new practices and ways of working to develop.

The experiences of the EANF pilot projects in the first year of implementation highlight the crucial importance of developing, and maintaining, high quality individual and organisational relationships as the groundwork for cultural change within organisations. This has, perhaps inevitably, been the main focus of their work in this year and there is much to suggest that despite the challenges outlined in previous chapters, the EANF pilots have laid solid foundations on which to build future change.

A number of learning points relating to the overall programme and the pilot projects emerge from the evidence discussed in this report:

At the programme level

Collaboration between funders has brought a range of skills and resources which have combined effectively to develop a robust programme and fund projects which are well placed to deliver effective interventions.

The steering group members have utilised knowledge and networks to support the development of early action pilots. This has been particularly beneficial because the pilots are working across a range of policy areas and contexts.

The significant size of the EANF grants has been important in enabling the pilot projects to engage with public sector services.

There was consensus amongst the pilot projects that it is important that the resources available to the EANF pilots reflect the ambitions to effect systems change. The grants were large enough to engage public sector providers and catalyse change. It is unlikely that in the context of cuts in public sector resources the EANF pilots would have been as successful in engaging public sector partnerships had these resources been reduced or absent.

The EANF pilots are working in a context of rapid change. Flexible and responsive grant management is needed to enable the pilots to adapt, and respond to, changing local circumstances.

The pilot projects were positive about the support they received through grant management and reflected that it had enabled them to develop their own programmes and to draw out learning.

At the partnership level

Building effective partnerships takes a lot of time and effort; this will be a key focus of early work which might mean that other activities which focus on changing systems and practice will take place later

You realise something as big as this requires some proper time at the beginning, otherwise we'll regret it later. We're a tiny authority in a small town, but you're still talking about a lot of people that you need to take with you on this journey of doing things in a different way and you've got to do it carefully (Partner organisation)

In future programmes it will be important to recognise in project planning that substantial amounts of time will need to be devoted to partnership and relationship building in the early stages, and this should be reflected in project milestones and outcomes.

It is important to maintain engagement and focus from members of the partnership; this will require continued resources to ensure that external priorities do not overwhelm the early action approach

I will be looking for momentum and the enthusiasm to be maintained, and we don't let anybody fall away. At points during the five year span each agency will have difficult times...and I think the job of a really solid partnership is to support our colleagues when the going is tough (Partner organisation)

The importance of having active and committed boards was highlighted across the three pilots. This has been particularly critical in the context of change within the public sector. Budget pressures and external scrutiny may mean that other pressures threaten commitment to early action. The projects have needed to work flexibly to accommodate these pressures, but also utilise clear terms of reference, and continuous review, to ensure that partnerships continue to be effective.

Continuous communication is vital. There is a need to reiterate the key messages about what the early action project is about. This can be a challenge in the early stages when there aren't too many project 'tangibles', but is important when working to support change in very large systems:

Don't underestimate the size of the system. It's vast. Make sure that the structures around the project encourage the people who are absolutely working in the project to step back and look at that system regularly. Because the risk of being swept away if you are doing the activities is very, very present (Grant holder)

All of the projects have been affected by changes in staffing, and key individuals in partner and project lead organisations have moved on. Because early action approaches are not yet embedded in these organisations there is a need keep engaging with stakeholders to ensure that they understand the aims and objectives of the work.

Early action is ambitious, and complex and requires action at multiple levels. Leadership is crucial but it is important for partnerships also support practitioners to link the abstract idea of early action to the operational context.

You need to be steering how your staff deliver and understand what's different, understanding the interactions that are happening with other operational staff and challenge it, and also create a dialogue that looks and feels different and be able to absorb some of those case studies and things that are different to be able to communicate them in every layer of change. I think the systems leadership stuff that everybody talks about but nobody really does is really operational here, but it's extremely time consuming and really difficult (Grant holder)

The pilot projects had all benefitted from support at senior levels in public sector agencies. However they have also experienced have challenges in engaging effectively with practitioners and/ or recruiting staff with the relevant skills to implement early action. They have also acknowledged that culture change needs to happen within their own organisations as well as within their public sector partners. Resources have been allocated to coaching and training at multiple levels to ensure that practitioners understand how to operationalise early action.

Sheffield Hallam University

Early Action Neighbourhood Fund: learning and evaluation - year one programme report

BENNETT, Ellen <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3271-8757>>, DAMM, Christopher <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7355-3496>>, DAYSON, Christopher <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2402-1183>>, PEARSON, Sarah <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5049-5396>> and WELLS, Peter <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5200-4279>>

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