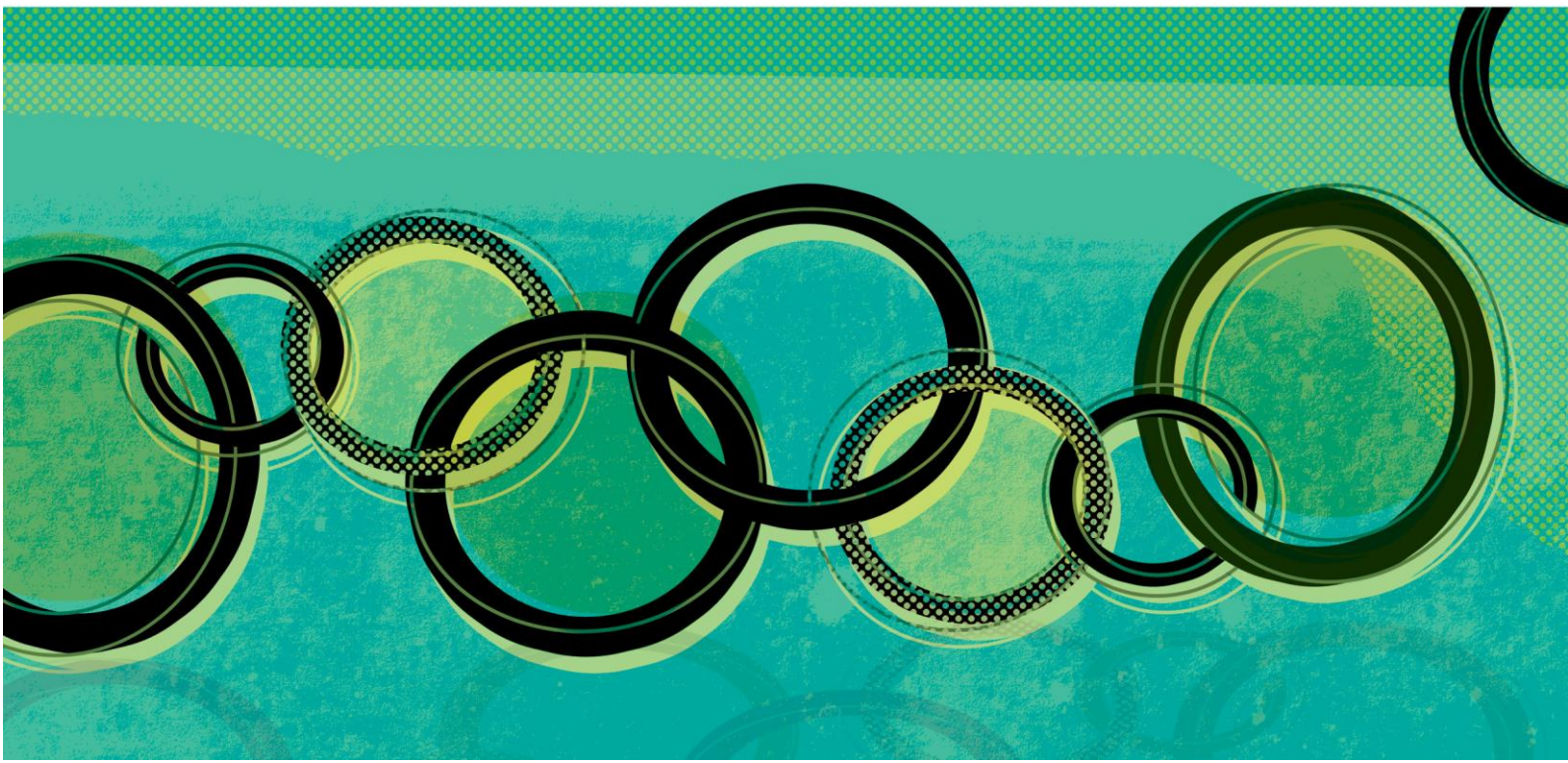


Early Action Neighbourhood Fund Evaluation Report

November 2020



EANF Evaluation Report

Author(s):

Ellen Bennett
Chris Dayson
Sarah Pearson

November 2020

Contents

Glossary of Terms	i
Summary	iii
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Findings	4
3. Conclusions and implications for future programmes and interventions	16
Appendix 1: Evaluation Methodology	19

Glossary of Terms

<p>Early Action</p>	<p>There is no standard definition of early action, and a variety of descriptions and definitions are used in practice. Many of these refer to action which ‘prevents problems from occurring’ rather than coping with the consequences. The NAO (2013)¹ identifies three types of early action:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevention: preventing or minimising the risk of problems arising, usually through universal policies like health promotion. • Early intervention: targeting individuals or groups at high risk or showing early signs of a particular problem to try to stop it occurring. • Early remedial treatment: intervening once there is a problem to stop it getting worse and redress the situation. <p>Often these definitions are backed by metaphors which refer to intervening ‘upstream’ (catching people before they fall into the water) or building a fence to prevent people ‘falling off a cliff’ rather than picking them up with an ambulance at the bottom.</p> <p>The EANF projects developed approaches which involved all three types of early action but focused particularly on early intervention and early remedial treatment.</p>
<p>Early Action Funders Alliance (EAFA)</p>	<p>The Early Action Funders Alliance (EAFA) is a group of UK funders who share a vision of a society that prevents problems from occurring rather than one that, as now, copes with the consequences. The purpose of the Early Action Funders Alliance is to create an active community of funders from across different sectors who are committed to using early action approaches in their work – continually challenging themselves and their grantees to act one step earlier.</p> <p>Five members of the EAFA supported the EANF:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Lottery Community Fund • Comic Relief • Esmée Fairbairn Foundation • Legal Education Foundation • Barrow Cadbury Trust.

¹ National Audit Office (NAO) (2013) Early action: landscape review, January, HC 683 Session 2012-13, London: The Stationery Office.

<p>Early Action Neighbourhood Fund</p>	<p>The Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (EANF) was the result of 12 months' work by the Early Action Funders Alliance to design a targeted pilot programme which could provide evidence for the value of early action.</p> <p>The EANF aimed to reduce future demand for public services (e.g. children's services, mental health budgets and housing support) by providing innovative models of support.</p> <p>The three funded projects were partnerships led by local voluntary sector organisations, working with statutory agencies to develop and implement preventative initiatives in family support, young people's wellbeing, and legal advice.</p>
<p>Early Action Task Force</p>	<p>The Early Action Task Force was established in 2011 as a group of leaders from across sectors committed to building a society that prevents problems from occurring rather than one that struggles with the consequences.</p>
<p>Systems Change</p>	<p>There is an increasing acceptance that seemingly intractable social problems are the result of complex networks of cause and effect, and that the way that these problems are addressed needs to pay attention to how systems work to support or disadvantage people in need.</p> <p>We can draw on the work of NPC to understand systems change as a way of addressing social problems through 'an intentional process designed to alter the status quo by shifting the function or structure of an identified system with purposeful interventions'².</p> <p>There are many types of system, and different people may understand them in different ways. NPC identify the characteristics of systems:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systems are composed of multiple components of different types, both tangible and intangible. They include, for example, people, resources, and services, as well as relationships, values, and perceptions. • Systems exist in an environment, have boundaries, exhibit behaviours, and are made up of both interdependent and connected parts, causes and effects. • Social systems are often complex and involve intractable, or 'wicked', problems. <p>In this report we talk about service systems. These are the multiple and linked components of the public service contexts in which the EANF projects were working and include people - service commissioners and funders, provider organisations, front-line staff, people supported by services. They also incorporate the processes, values and cultures and behaviours of the service. Each of the EANF projects also worked in a particular place, so these service systems also have spatial boundaries.</p>

² NPC (2015) Systems Change: A guide to what it is and how to do it.

Summary

Introduction

This report is the final evaluation of Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (EANF).

EANF provided over £5m over five years to support three projects to develop innovative models of early action support. It grew out of the Early Action Funders Alliance (EAFA), a coalition of charities, business, and public sector organisations. EAFA is committed to making the case for early action, helping funders to embed it in their work, and supporting a shift toward a greater emphasis on early action in policy, funding, and practice. Five members of the Alliance committed resources to EANF. Grant funding was provided by The National Lottery Community Fund, Comic Relief and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. The Barrow Cadbury Trust and Legal Education Foundation provided additional support and guidance.

The funded projects were led by local voluntary sector organisations, working in partnership with statutory agencies to develop and implement early action approaches in support for children and families, young people's mental health and wellbeing, and legal advice. The funded projects were:

- **Healthy Relationships:** This project was led by Changing Futures North East (CFNE), a voluntary sector organisation based in Hartlepool which provides support to couples and families across Teesside. CFNE led the Healthy Relationships partnership, working to build stronger family and organisational relationships in Hartlepool. Its overall aim was to reduce parental and family conflict, improve children's social and emotional wellbeing and school attendance and reduce spending on acute children's services.
- **MAP Early Action:** Mancroft Advice Project (MAP) is a youth charity providing support to young people aged 11 to 25 in Norfolk. The MAP Early Action project delivered support to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people in three schools in Norwich and build early action capacity amongst practitioners in the city. Its overall aim was to improve children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing, reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training, and reduce acute spending on Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) budgets in Norwich.
- **Ignite:** The Ignite project was a partnership between Central England Law Centre which provides specialist legal advice to people across central England and Grapevine, a voluntary organisation supporting people experiencing poverty, isolation or disadvantage in Coventry and Warwickshire. Together the Law Centre and Grapevine worked with public services and communities to build legal knowledge, skills, and confidence to enable people to deal with every-day related law issues and prevent them reaching crisis point. Its overall aim was to reduce demand on specialist services (in children's services and housing) in Coventry.

The EANF evaluation

The evaluation ran from 2015 to 2020 and involved 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 individuals, and in cost savings or efficiencies.
- Generate robust evidence to 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.

Programme delivery and evaluation was informed by a programme theory of change (ToC), which set out how the intended programme outcomes were expected to be achieved in the context in which the programme was operating. An original 'straw man' ToC outlined expectations for how the projects would deliver early action, leading to the generation of evidence of reduced service demand and associated cost savings which would in turn influence local service providers and commissioners to allocate increasing levels of resources to early action and prevention within and beyond the EANF pilot areas. Through a process of ongoing reflection and review the funders, projects and evaluation team realised that some of the assumptions in the original ToC were not supported by programme experience. As a result, a revised ToC was developed in year three of the programme. The revised ToC more accurately reflected the development, implementation, and impact of early action around phases, or elements of EANF. These were:

- Pre-funding: laying the foundations for systems change; early action track record.
- Project initiation and development: creating the conditions for systems change; piloting and refining an approach to early action.
- Project implementation: working within and alongside the system; modelling early action.
- Project outcomes: outcomes for the system; outcomes for people and communities.

Findings

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.

The EANF projects worked with different services and in different contexts. As such, their approaches to and conceptualisations of early action were also different and rooted in the opportunities and challenges within the service contexts in which they were working. Despite these differences the projects developed models of early action that were based on the common principles of earlier access to help and better-quality interactions between service providers and the people they were supporting. Factors which have emerged over the course of the evaluation that have contributed to the pilots' effectiveness in developing models to support a shift towards early action included:

- **Ongoing focus on communication and engagement.** Consistent and repeated engagement with partners was required to ensure continued stakeholder support. Ongoing resources for engagement were required to ensure that external priorities did not overwhelm the early action

approach. The projects needed to take every opportunity to restate their objectives and ambitions and all reflected that this had been more demanding than they had originally anticipated.

- **Holding the 'space' for change:** A key role for the projects has been in maintaining the focus on early action and not allowing it to be taken off course by other competing agendas. They described this as '*holding the space*' for early action in the context of constant flux and competing organisational and external pressures. In practice this translated into creating time and space outside of mainstream service delivery to enable reflective discussion, and decisions to be made about new service models and directions.
- **Modelling early action:** The projects highlighted the importance of being embedded in service contexts and working alongside service providers to develop and model early action approaches. This enabled service providers to see how they could respond differently. The projects also needed to resist being drawn into service delivery and did so by maintaining a strong focus on the aims of early action, as outlined above.
- **Supporting changes in service practice:** The pilots demonstrated the need to deliver training and resources to partner organisations to help them understand and implement early action approaches. Support from local leaders was crucial to maintain the profile and momentum of early action, but the pilots have also supported practitioners to link the abstract idea of early action to operational contexts.
- **Making connections and facilitating networks:** The development of early action networks involving frontline workers and practitioners was an important mechanism for sharing and developing best practice and the development of more widespread early action approaches across service areas.
- **Using evidence and data to support the case for change:** Good quality data and evidence from a range of sources was important in helping the projects to articulate their impact. It also provided the projects with credibility when advocating on behalf of communities with public sector services. Data from public bodies was a powerful accompaniment to project-level data when it could be obtained.
- **Responding to local contexts:** The evidence from EANF is that there is no 'ideal' context in which to develop early action approaches but learning from the projects confirms the need for them to understand, and be responsive to, the external and internal contexts in which partner organisations in the public sector are working. One lesson was the importance of 'stable' relationships as a key supportive contextual factor in enabling change.

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.

There were identifiable impacts from all three projects for both the people that the projects were supporting and in local services:

- In the MAP Early Action project schools there were reductions in crisis-led mental health episodes amongst pupils, and improvements in pupil well-being. One school committed to continue funding for early action, and the project's facilitation of an early action network provided a mechanism for widespread sharing of learning and good practice across Norwich.
- In the Ignite project there was increased capacity to address everyday legal issues in the Willenhall community in which the project worked, and greater levels of engagement with early intervention services in Family Hubs. Coventry City Council and partners adopted Ignite's blueprint for effective collaborative early action centred in local Family Hubs. This provides a solid foundation for sustainable systemic change across the city.
- In the Healthy Relationships project in Hartlepool a focus on parental relationships has become a strategic priority for local children's services. Parent-led support networks have built capacity in communities and a practitioner network is in place to continue the early action approach. Couples taking part in the early action project reported that their relationships had improved, and this had benefited them and their children.

The projects have not demonstrated cost-savings or efficiencies and over the course of the evaluation this assumption was revised. During the time that the projects were implemented there were widespread cuts to public service budgets. In this context, the maintenance of funding streams which supported early action was a positive outcome. In addition, although in all pilot areas changed models of service delivery enabled people to engage with services earlier, these did not necessarily lead to a decrease in demand. Other factors such as welfare reform and rising rates of in-work poverty meant that the stresses on people's lives were sometimes increasing. EANF confirms that improved service outcomes do not necessarily lead to cashable savings but changes which enable services to act earlier and more preventatively and to focus on improved relationships between service providers and the people that they are supporting are important. If implemented long-term and, crucially, at-scale they may well lead to reductions in demand and cost savings.

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.

The programme had a strong emphasis on learning and evaluation, including developing approaches to evaluating interventions of this nature at project and programme level. This included using multiple sources of data to tell compelling stories of change, using evaluation as a tool for understanding complexity and the mechanisms that contribute to change, and revising theories of change regularly to test and revise assumptions about how, why and in what contexts early action objectives may be achieved.

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.

Features that characterised the design and delivery of the programme included:

- A partnership of funders with a commitment to early action provided funding and support to the programme.
- A 'closed' approach to grant making involving close relationships between funders and funded projects which had been selected through proposals which demonstrated capacity to build on local partnerships to drive local change.
- A significant grant (in terms of value) awarded to a voluntary sector organisation to work in partnership with local public sector agencies.
- Funding for a period of five years.
- Focus on a defined local area.
- Flexible grant management, which enabled projects to shift their delivery mechanisms in response to changing local conditions and learning.

Learning highlights the importance of funding organisations which demonstrate values and ways of working which support early action, providing sufficient resources to support sustainable change, and prioritising and resourcing capacity for learning and project level evaluation.

Implications for future early action programmes

A shift to early action in public service systems is possible when:

- Funders, commissioners, providers, and wider system stakeholders invest in long-term relationships based on shared trust, understanding and accountability and with a shared commitment to early action.
- Sufficient time, space and resource is afforded to providers so that they can identify the needs of vulnerable individuals and populations and develop appropriate responses to meet those

needs. The development of services which respond to need is a valid outcome in and of itself as it is only once people's basic needs have been met that a shift to prevention is possible.

- Stakeholders acknowledge that longer-term outcomes are hard to predict and may occur at different time points (which may be beyond the period of funding).
- Systems are oriented towards learning and use evidence from a variety of sources to reflect on and adapt practice on an ongoing basis.

The evaluation findings have implications for future early action programmes:

- **External funders have a key role in providing resources and capacity to help systems move toward early action:** this capacity is unlikely to come from within public service systems. Funding enabled the voluntary sector agencies to provide the capacity and resources to support public sector change and, importantly, protect the early action interventions from being overrun or diverted by other service priorities.
- **Long-term funding is required:** It has taken a relatively long time for the projects to develop and implement their approaches and for local systems to adopt early action priorities. The projects confirmed that these outcomes would not have been achievable through short-term funding. Funders may also need to consider the length of time required in the early stages of projects to build partnerships and develop early action models, before 'delivery' can begin.
- **Partnerships between voluntary and public sector agencies are effective in introducing and embedding early action into public service systems.** Effective partnership working in this context was characterised by shared goals, trust, flexibility, being open to failure and a willingness to learn and adapt from experiences.
- **Early action enables people to access services earlier.** The EANF pilots developed models of early action based on building capacity in people and services which enabled people to access help earlier. This included young people accessing help for mental health in schools in Norwich, parents accessing help to improve their relationships in Hartlepool and families accessing help in community-based hubs in Coventry. In all cases these models emphasised the centrality of positive relationships between service providers and the people they were supporting as central to early action approaches. Better service quality based on positive human relationships improved people's experiences of services in the EANF areas and there is evidence from the projects that in these areas more people were accessing help earlier.
- **This can lead to positive outcomes for people and services.** The EANF projects contributed to improved outcomes for service systems (such as greater levels of access to early help) and for people. Outcomes included reductions in crisis-led mental health episodes in schools and improved parental relationships, thereby reducing the need for crisis-led support.
- **It is not always possible to predict the outcomes of early action.** The projects needed to revise their expectations around the outcomes that they would achieve, partly because they were not able to access relevant data but perhaps more importantly because they were working in complex and changing local systems. Being adaptable and having the ability to respond to changing circumstances and priorities in local services were important features of the EANF projects. This was supported by a strong emphasis on learning and review.
- **Successful early action projects do not necessarily result in reductions in demand on public services or savings to the public purse.** The projects worked directly with small numbers of people, and other factors outside of the project's influence (such as economic hardship or the impacts of welfare reform) meant that demand for acute, or crisis-led, services sometimes increased (or at best stayed stable).

Introduction

This report is the final evaluation of the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (EANF). It is one of a series of outputs from the EANF evaluation. Additional reports can be accessed here <http://www.earlyactionfund.org/evaluation>

1.1. The Early Action Neighbourhood Fund

The Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (EANF) provided over £5m over five years to support three projects to develop innovative models of early action support. EANF grew out of the Early Action Funders Alliance (EAFA), a coalition of charities, business and public sector organisations committed to making the case for early action, helping funders to embed it in their work, and supporting a shift toward a greater emphasis on early action in policy, funding and practice. Five members of the Alliance committed resources to EANF. Grant funding was provided by The National Lottery Community Fund, Comic Relief and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. The Barrow Cadbury Trust and Legal Education Foundation provided additional support and guidance.

The three EANF projects were led by local voluntary sector organisations working in partnership with statutory agencies to develop and implement early action approaches in support for children and families, young people's mental health and wellbeing, and legal advice. EANF as a programme was focused on both the development and implementation of early action projects, and on building evidence from those projects to orientate local service systems towards early action. As such it was about both delivery, and systems change. There are many definitions and concepts of both systems and systems change. Systems change can be understood for this programme as 'an intentional process designed to alter the status quo by shifting the function or structure of an identified system with purposeful interventions'³. For the EANF, systems change was defined in very loose formative terms as a shift toward early action within each of the service areas in which projects were operating, alongside recognition that this required transformation in service delivery.

The funded EANF projects were:

- **Healthy Relationships:** This project was led by Changing Futures North East (CFNE), a voluntary sector organisation based in Hartlepool which provides support to couples and families across Teesside. CFNE led the Healthy Relationships partnership, working to build stronger family and organisational relationships in Hartlepool. Its overall aim was to reduce parental and family conflict, improve children's social and emotional wellbeing and school attendance and reduce spending on acute children's services.

³ NPC (2015) Systems Change: A guide to what it is and how to do it

- **MAP Early Action:** Mancroft Advice Project (MAP) is a youth charity providing support to young people aged 11 to 25 in Norfolk. The MAP Early Action project delivered support to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people in three schools in Norwich and build early action capacity amongst practitioners across the city. Its overall aim was to improve children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing, reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training, and reduce acute spending on Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service budgets in Norwich.
- **Ignite:** The Ignite project was a partnership between Central England Law Centre which provides specialist legal advice to people across central England and Grapevine, a voluntary organisation supporting people experiencing poverty, isolation or disadvantage in Coventry and Warwickshire. Together the Law Centre and Grapevine worked with public services and communities to build legal knowledge, skills, and confidence to enable people to deal with every-day related law issues and prevent them reaching crisis point. Its overall aim was to reduce demand on specialist services (in children's services and housing) in Coventry.

1.2. The EANF evaluation

The learning and evaluation contract was delivered by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University. The evaluation aimed to support grant holders and the EANF steering group members to understand what has worked well and why in incorporating early action approaches into local services, so that successful approaches can be scaled or replicated. This has involved 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 (ToC) models that facilitate a shift toward early action.
- Understand the impact the projects had, why they worked, and under what circumstances, both in terms of improved outcomes for individuals, and in cost savings or efficiencies.
- Generate robust evidence to 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 ran from 2015 to 2020 and involved 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 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 were effecting change at the local level.
- Undertaking interviews with EANF steering group members to assess the degree to which project governance arrangements facilitated transformative change in the pilot project areas.
- Regular reporting to the EANF steering group and pilot projects to inform delivery.

- Annual learning events, developing shared learning and reviewing findings in learning and evaluation reports (<http://www.earlyactionfund.org/evaluation>)

Programme delivery and evaluation was informed by a programme theory of change (ToC), which set out how the intended programme outcomes were expected to be achieved in the context in which the programme was operating. An original ‘straw man’ ToC outlined expectations for how the projects would deliver early action leading to the generation of evidence of reduced service demand and associated cost savings which would in turn influence local service providers and commissioners to allocate increasing levels of resources to early action and prevention within and beyond the EANF pilot areas. Through a process of ongoing reflection and review the funders, projects and evaluation team realised that some of the assumptions in the original ToC were not supported by programme experience and a revised ToC⁴ was developed in year three of the programme. The revised ToC more accurately reflected the development, implementation, and impact of early action around phases, or elements of EANF:

- **Pre-funding: laying the foundations for systems change; early action track record**

Prior to funding the pilots developed evidence-led proposals for early action interventions, building on established relationships with public services and evidence of existing experience in change initiatives. Securing stakeholder buy-in from partner organisations during this phase was important for laying the foundations for future work and successful proposals were predicated on expressions of support from public sector partners. Close collaboration between the funders and projects to refine and develop project proposals in this period helped to build relationships of trust.

- **Project initiation and development: creating the conditions for systems change; piloting and refining an approach to early action**

The focus during this period was on growing capacity for long-term change through developing relationships and building partnerships. During this phase, the projects developed early action interventions as exemplars of approaches which had the potential to be scaled-up or implemented more widely across public service contexts. These continued to be refined and developed in response to learning and review throughout the programme.

- **Project Implementation: working within and alongside the system; modelling early action**

As relationships and partnerships matured the pilots focused on delivering early action interventions and engaging with and influencing local service systems. Relationships continued to be central in this phase, alongside access to data and evidence, and a commitment to continuous learning.

- **Project Outcomes: outcomes for the system; outcomes for people and communities**

In this phase the projects’ approaches matured, and they gathered evidence of changed outcomes for local systems and for the people and communities that the projects were supporting.

Further detail on the evaluation approach is at Appendix One.

⁴ See Evaluation of Early Action Neighbourhood Fund Learning Update: Revisiting the Programme Theory of Change <http://www.earlyactionfund.org/evaluation>

Findings

2

This section presents the findings of the evaluation in the context of the evaluation objectives.

2.1. 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

The EANF projects worked with different services and in different contexts. As such, their approaches to early action were also different and rooted in the opportunities and challenges within the service contexts in which they were working. The projects developed models of early action that were based on the common principles of earlier access to help and better-quality relationships between service providers and the people that they were supporting. This included young people accessing help for mental health in schools in Norwich, parents accessing help to improve their relationships in Hartlepool, and families accessing help in community-based family hubs in Coventry.

Each project developed its own local theory of change which provided a framework for developing and implementing approaches in the different contexts in which they worked. There were different interpretations of early action in the pilot projects but all sought to develop models which combined support for individuals and families in need with building capacity in communities and services to re-orientate towards early action and prevention. A key finding here is that a broad definition of early action is useful in developing approaches which respond to local contexts and priorities.

Ignite

The Ignite programme, delivered by a partnership of Central England Law Centre and Grapevine explored how to act earlier inside of children's services and Citizen housing in Coventry. The partnership sought to encourage transformational change in the way that public services in housing and support for families and children were delivered, to shift spending to earlier action and in turn reduce need.

It was embedded within public services to understand how these services and the people working within them can better understand and work to support families in Coventry.

Using legal advice and improved social connectedness the project worked to demonstrate how and when people can be helped to prevent crises. It developed a blueprint for change built on four pillars that support earlier action, identified by Ignite as: Doing It Together, What's the story, Purpose and Trademark and The Right Team.

The work was developed beyond children's services and housing to look at the places and people that supported families and individuals when they presented with problems at any stage and what happened as they sought help. Over the course of Ignite, poverty was identified as a significant and limiting factor in successfully helping people. Living in poverty limited people's capacity to seek help, their readiness for it and their ability to accept it.

This work highlighted that those experiencing poverty often encountered professionals (council tax officers, landlords, social workers) who failed to recognise that people's circumstances are caused by poverty and that poverty limits their ability to engage.

Project outcomes included increased community capacity to develop organic solutions to local problems, increases in access to early help services in the pathfinder area, and the adoption of an early action blueprint for children's services.

Healthy Relationships

The Healthy Relationships early action project was led by Changing Futures North East (CFNE). The project aimed to improve outcomes for children and families and reduce demand on children's services by building capacity in local services and communities to prioritise better relationships between parents of children in families experiencing stress or at risk of intervention.

The project:

- Supported children's services to adapt risk processes to include an assessment of parental relationships and conflict.
- Trained front-line workers to recognise and respond effectively to parental conflict, and to support parents to improve the quality of their relationships.
- Delivered individual and group support to parents.
- Shared good practice and resources through a Healthy Relationships Network and conference.

Data collated by the early action project identified that:

A 'Parents as Partners' groupwork programme helped 34 parents solve problems, argue better or argue less, improve their relationships and helped children to have less problems:

- 65% of the people helped felt better and 53% were better at tackling problems head on.
- 79% of the couples that had used violent behaviours to solve problems used them less.
- 64% had better relationships.

It also suggested that the Healthy Relationships network which CFNE founded and hosted helped:

- 149 workers in Hartlepool train to support couples and parents who had split up.
- 16 agencies (including children's services, schools, health services and voluntary sector organisations) join forces to improve relationship support for families.
- Four new agencies join the 'family relationships network'.
- 80 professionals understand more about the way couple relationships affect children and how they can help, through our Relationships Matter conference.

Project outcomes included increased emphasis on early support for parents to improve their relationships, and improved outcomes for children and families.

MAP Early Action project

The MAP Early Action project was led by the Mancroft Advice Project (MAP) which worked in three schools in West Norwich. Two of the schools were in deprived areas and one in a better off area in recognition that access to mental health services was limited across all areas. The aim of the project was to shift spending in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in Norwich toward earlier action, improve young people's social and emotional wellbeing, and reduce the number of young people who were NEET (not in education, employment or training).

The MAP Early Action Mental Health project took a comprehensive approach, with the aim of enabling young people to maintain positive mental health whether they were experiencing problems or not. The project worked closely with the schools' senior teams to develop whole school approaches and embed early action in schools' strategies and systems.

It included

- A support network and training for schools and local practitioners on promoting emotional wellbeing.
- Assistance in setting up wellbeing activities in local organisations such as youth clubs.
- A PHSE wellbeing curriculum.
- A participation programme to increase student engagement in school decision making.
- A general drop-in for young people to access to discuss issues.
- A programme of activities to build confidence and self-esteem.
- Work with teachers to identify young people in need of additional support.
- Counselling and specialist advice for young people with emergent issues.

Outcomes that the project achieved included improvements in school engagement and wellbeing in the schools which the project supported and a reduction of acute mental health episodes for young people. The schools also reported that the project had facilitated a cultural shift, with greater emphasis on young people's wellbeing and more open and regular conversations about mental health. Some mainstream school funding was re-allocated to the mental health project work. Learning from the MAP Early Action project has contributed to the development of a similar approach which has been rolled-out to other schools in Norfolk.

Factors contributing to the projects' effectiveness in developing models which supported a shift towards early action in services included:

Ongoing focus on communication and engagement

A strong emphasis on communication was core to EANF. Building relationships and supporting conditions in which there were opportunities to build early action approaches was time- and resource-consuming work. Consistent and repeated engagement was required to ensure continued stakeholder support in the context of flux in the public sector. Ongoing resources for engagement were required to ensure that external priorities did not overwhelm the early action approach. Leaders of public services in the pilot areas were committed to early action, but it was easy for other

priorities and distractions to take precedence particularly when services were under stress. This meant that the projects needed to take every opportunity to restate their objectives and ambitions and all reflected that this had been more demanding than they had originally anticipated.

Holding the 'space' for change

The EANF, as a five-year programme, recognised that the establishment of early action approaches in local service contexts is likely to take time. In all the pilot areas stakeholders reflected that the achievements of the projects (outlined below) would not have been possible within a shorter time frame. Implementation and progress for the projects was affected by the complex and changing contexts in which they were working, particularly where budget cuts or service restructuring led to changes in staffing and leadership within services. All three projects faced significant challenges to their progress arising from changes in key staff in partner organisations.

However, the EANF projects also provided strong evidence of the important role that they played in providing the opportunity and capacity for service providers to think differently about how they could orientate their services toward early action. A key role for the projects was in maintaining the focus on early action and not allowing it to be taken off course by other competing agendas. They described this as *'holding the space'* for early action in the context of constant flux and competing organisational and external pressures. In practice this translated into creating time and space outside of mainstream service delivery to enable reflective discussion and decisions to be made about new service models and directions. Important factors included service managers and front-line workers feeling that they had permission to work in preventative and relational ways and having the confidence and time to explore different options and challenge established modes of professional practice.

Enabling factors included:

- Being flexible and patient (understanding that practitioners were facing many competing demands), effective organisation of time and meetings, encouragement for openness and curiosity to learn about different approaches.
- Provision of training and support.
- Endorsement and encouragement from leaders.

The pilots in Hartlepool and Coventry found it beneficial to have independent chairs and in Hartlepool, the alignment of the early action partnership meetings with other regular service meetings was a useful practical way to encourage attendance and engagement from busy frontline workers.

Having the resilience to hold firm in the commitment to early action, and not allowing the early action resource to be subsumed into broader change programmes, or to 'shore-up' public services was critical.

"All of the individual people have got a huge amount of personal resilience and tenacity and emotional intelligence and political awareness, and they've worked so hard to make the work a success. And so much of it is about those personal relationships and having the right people in place to drive things forwards. So yes, there's a skill set I think that's really critical to success." (Funder)

"Working in this role you have to be so resilient. You have to constantly go in circles with things. You can have conversations with people, and nothing sticks. It's quite a unique role. It's quite frustrating. You get big highlights, and stuff happening, but sometimes not. People only change when they want to, not when you approach them. If you aren't resilient, you can take it personally – I haven't

done that well. That's hard. It's normal to want things to go well, but there are so many frustrations. This is where the team and supervision comes in." (Project)

Modelling early action

The projects highlighted the importance of being embedded in service contexts and working alongside service providers to develop and model early action approaches. This enabled service providers to see how they could respond differently but it also created a challenge for the projects in that they needed to resist being seen as an 'additional pair of hands' when services were under-resourced or over stretched.

"It's about being helpful and useful and relevant, but not being overtaken, and becoming another pair of hands. So, it's always about that course correction, and I think that's where those systems stewards are important. You can't have conversations with people unless you're delivering something that's of value to them. And then once you're doing that, you do then have enough skin in the game to open the door to these other conversations. If they hadn't of been delivering something, be it that relationship support in Hartlepool, the mental health in schools in Norwich, or the community connection and the children and family hubs in Coventry, then you have no legitimacy within the system to be able to argue for a different way of working. But if you're too much part of the system, you can't see the need" (Funder)

The projects needed to resist being drawn into service delivery and did this by maintaining a strong focus on the aims of early action, as outlined above.

Supporting changes in service practice

The projects also demonstrated the need for buy-in at all levels of an organisation and the need to deliver training and resources to partner organisations to help them understand and implement early action approaches. Support from local leaders has been crucial to maintain the profile and momentum of early action, but the pilots have also supported practitioners to link the abstract idea of early action to the operational contexts in which they were working. In Hartlepool, for example, the EANF partnership modified assessment tools for children's services, to ensure that a focus on parental relationships was factored into risk assessment. The project also delivered a programme of training and professional development to support local practitioners to understand the importance and practice of improved relationships in their own service area and in those they were supporting. These adaptations to service tools and policies to reflect early action priorities were an effective mechanism for gathering data and resulted in different conversations and service processes.

In Norwich, professional development focused on early action to support young people's mental health was provided to teachers and school leaders. In Coventry close working with service areas revealed that professional practices, values, attitudes, and behaviours sometimes prevented people from accessing early help or developing help seeking behaviours. The project supported professional development for newly qualified social workers, which provided training to help frontline staff to work in a more preventative way with families and communities by focusing on access to early help. A significant outcome for the Ignite project in Coventry was the adoption of an early action 'blueprint' for children's services which focused on the provision of family support services working in preventative ways in local family hubs.

Making connections and facilitating networks

In the Healthy Relationships project in Hartlepool and the MAP Early Action project in Norwich, the development of early action networks involving frontline workers and

practitioners were important mechanisms for sharing and developing best practice and the adoption of early action across service areas.

“The Early Action network just took off, that just seemed to hit a nerve, and people kept coming. There was obviously a need for that. The training we put on, it felt like a really precious thing. That’s not going to go” (Project)

The projects reported that it was important to work in an agile way, making connections and linkages and encouraging others to see opportunities for change. In these areas the focus on making connections, building coalitions and working with early action ‘supporters’ led to new agencies becoming involved in early action work. In the MAP Early Action project in Norwich, for example, the project has expanded the number of schools that it is supporting. In the Healthy Relationships project in Hartlepool one stakeholder reflected that the project had been surprised when local schools joined the network, as schools had been hard to engage in the early stages of the project.

Using evidence and data to support the case for change

There were significant challenges in all the projects in accessing service data which could help to demonstrate the impact of early action approaches. In all the projects there were (at least in the early stages of delivery) problems in obtaining data from local service providers who were unable or unwilling to share data on service outcomes. This was to some degree unanticipated. Over the five years of EANF public service providers made progress in working with partner organisations to share data to support improved service delivery and in the latter stages of the projects they were able to gain access to some relevant data which helped to demonstrate their impact. A key reflection here is that all the projects (and funders) were perhaps naïve in their original assumptions around access to data held by public sector agencies.

The projects also gathered project level data (both qualitative and quantitative). Good quality data and evidence from a range of sources was important in helping the projects to articulate their impact and provided the projects with credibility when advocating on behalf of communities with public sector services. Data from public bodies was a powerful accompaniment to project-level data when it could be obtained.

Responding to local contexts

A factor in project-level theories of change was the impact of local contexts in supporting or hindering project progress. The period in which EANF was delivered was characterised by a high degree of instability in the public sector in the pilot areas driven by austerity, service restructuring and the outcomes of inspection and regulation. This provided both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand leaders in service areas which were facing the challenges of decreasing resources, increasing demand and a drive for service improvement could be open to new ways of working and to some extent these contexts reinforced the imperative to develop early action as a way of responding to these issues. On the other hand, services experiencing these difficulties were also subject to high levels of stress and staff turnover meaning that there could be inconsistency in levels of support or engagement for the early action work. This was particularly the case where projects were working with large and complex service areas such as children’s services. One project described one of the roles of the EANF pilots working in these contexts to be ‘*an island of stability in a sea of chaos*’.

In contrast, more stable and bounded service contexts such as schools provided opportunity for rapid development and implementation of early action models. It could be challenging in these contexts to move from project delivery to more widespread systemic change, particularly if school leaders were resistant to changing practice.

The evidence from EANF is that there is no 'ideal' context in which to develop early action approaches but learning from the projects confirms the need for them to understand, and be responsive to, the external and internal contexts in which partner organisations in the public sector are working. One lesson was the importance of 'stable' relationships as a key supportive contextual factor in enabling change.

2.2. 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

There are identifiable impacts from all three projects for both individuals and in local systems.

In the MAP Early Action project there were reductions in crisis-led mental health episodes for pupils in schools where the project worked and overall improvements in pupil well-being. Schools and pupils valued the early action approach and it led to changed conversations and attitudes to mental health and wellbeing amongst teachers and pupils and widespread use of preventative resources. One school committed to continue funding for early action, and the project's facilitation of an early action network provided a mechanism for widespread sharing of learning and good practice across Norwich. Over the duration of the EANF project there was a national increase in interest in effective approaches to support positive mental health for children and young people and this was a supportive context for the MAP project. There was a shift in the local system such that there was a greater willingness in local schools and youth services to embed early action in their work. Local funders, including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) also reviewed their funding for early action work.

In the Ignite project there was increased capacity in the community in the Willenhall pathfinder area, and greater levels of engagement with early intervention support in the neighbourhood. Coventry City Council and partners have adopted Ignite's blueprint for effective collaborative early action in support for children and families, which will shape the delivery of children's services centred in community-based family hubs.

In Hartlepool a focus on parental relationships has become a strategic priority for children's services, providing the framework for embedding the early action priority across the service and reflected in changed service practices, including new risk assessment processes and the professional development of front-line staff. Parental-led support networks have built capacity in communities and a robust network to continue the approach. Couples taking part in the early action project reported that their relationships had improved, and this has benefited them and their children by reducing stress and conflict between parents.

The projects did not demonstrate cost-savings or efficiencies, and over the course of the evaluation this assumption was revised. During the time that the projects were implemented there were widespread cuts to public service budgets. In this context, the maintenance of funding streams which supported early action was seen to be a positive outcome. In all pilot areas there was evidence of changed models of service delivery leading to people engaging with services in different ways and improvements in individual outcomes. These did not necessarily lead to a decrease in demand however, as other factors such as welfare reform and rising rates of in-work poverty meant that stresses on people's lives were sometimes increasing. The evidence from EANF confirms that improved service outcomes do not necessarily lead to cashable savings. That is not to say that these outcomes do not have value to society. Changes which create the conditions for services to act earlier and more preventatively and to focus on improved relationships between service providers and people that they are supporting are important outcomes in their own right. If implemented long-term and,

crucially, at-scale these changes may well lead to reductions in demand and cost savings.

2.3. 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

Throughout the EANF programme there was a focus on the generation and use of evidence to support successful delivery. The projects developed local evaluations which involved surveys to measure data changes in outcomes for individuals and analysis of administrative data to capture changes to patterns in service use. This was used alongside rich data from case studies and action research with individuals, families, and partner organisations to tell the stories of change at a local level.

At programme level the evaluation looked at the implementation of the projects to understand what was working well from the perspectives of those delivering and working in partnership with them, and to capture changes in processes, relationships, and service delivery mechanisms.

Evidence from both these sources was discussed and reviewed at regular learning and evaluation events which aimed to support the projects to build best practice in evaluation. Two learning reports (<http://www.earlyactionfund.org/evaluation>) have addressed issues around evidence and data, and approaches to evaluation in the context of systems change⁵. Key messages included the need for proportionality in local data and evidence needs (all the projects were perhaps over ambitious in this respect at the outset of EANF), using established tools and resources, and the importance of having capacity in place to undertake local data gathering and evaluation work.

All three projects worked in highly complex local systems. It was very difficult to isolate EANF 'effects' and the projects focused on developing plausible narratives of contribution which highlighted how they had worked with partners and communities to bring about change. There are lessons for the evaluation of systems change interventions:

1. Theories of change – at the programme and project level – should be revised regularly and used iteratively to test and revise assumptions about how, why and in what contexts systems change objectives may be achieved.
2. Evaluators should work closely with projects and their key stakeholders to 'map' the system(s) and agree where the boundaries lie. This will enable evaluations to focus on identifying the key processes, values and behaviours that exist within a system, and the type(s) of inputs and activities may be necessary to facilitate change.
3. Evaluators should employ flexible methods and an adaptive methodology to capture a range of evidence linked to the theory of change. Projects should consider whether to adopt or adapt an existing system change methodology to guide their efforts which may also provide a framework for evaluating their work.
4. Evaluation methodologies should recognise that systems of public service delivery are highly complex and emergent – characterised by unexpected outcomes and events – which makes attributing change to individual initiatives

⁵ Sheffield Hallam University (2016) *EANF Learning Report: Evidence and Data*; Sheffield Hallam University (2020) *EANF Learning Report: Evaluating Systems Change*.

very challenging. Evaluation should be utilised as a tool for understanding this complexity and identifying the mechanisms that may facilitate systems change.

5. Locally embedded evaluators can be a key component of systems change evaluation at a project and programme level. This involves evaluation specialists working within project teams and contributing to systems change objectives. Funders interested in supporting systems change projects should ensure sufficient time and dedicated resource is committed to embedded local evaluation roles.
6. Evaluations should be co-produced between external evaluators, funders, and funded projects. The EANF Evaluation involved a process of co-governance, co-design and co-delivery which enabled us to combine shared learning and insights and project-level evidence with more formal evaluation activity. This approach produced a more rounded understanding of the programme than would have been possible through a more traditional 'arms-length' approach.

2.4. 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 design and delivery of EANF was characterised by:

- A partnership of funders with a commitment to early action provided funding and support to the programme.
- A significant grant (in terms of value) awarded to a voluntary sector organisation to work in partnership with local public sector agencies.
- Funding for a period of five years.
- Focus on a defined local area.
- Flexible grant management, which enabled projects to shift their delivery mechanisms in response to changing local conditions and learning.

Each is discussed briefly below.

Partnership of funders

The partnership of funders was viewed very positively by those involved who valued the opportunity to collaborate with and learn from others with a shared commitment to progressing early action.

“There’s a set of trust-based funding relationships, where we had a shared vision and a shared commitment to take that approach.” (Funder)

The small scale and ‘pilot’ nature of EANF allowed for greater flexibility in terms of programme management (when compared to larger mainstream funding programmes) but funders also reflected that ‘being under the radar’ meant it was not always easy to prioritise EANF in the context of their own organisations or to ensure that learning from EANF was widely shared.

The partnership of funders pooled their own knowledge and networks to identify organisations that had the potential to be influential and to support the development of early action pilots. This was particularly beneficial because the pilots worked across a range of policy areas and contexts.

“Used our collective intelligence as funders to identify twelve different core organisations which we thought could galvanise a partnership around themselves. And what that did was, by using that kind of funder intelligence, we probably came up with a different kind of list than anyone would have on their own. We then developed together an application process which I thought was quite thoughtful and different at the time... The fact that we arrived at three different sites of Coventry, Hartlepool and Norwich...those aren't the kind of places they tend to end up.” (Funder)

“That whole process really tested the strength of the partnership and actually really validated starting with conversations, starting with a shared interest in the subject rather than starting with a collaboration. Because the members of the steering group had spent that time getting to know each other, and building up that trust, it meant that, when we did come to various different bumps there was a shared commitment to resolve those and to get over it” (Funder)

“We're investing in a real emergent discovery process, with some people who we trust to be able to do that effectively. And that is a very different model of working and requires a whole different approach. And I'm pleased there was a commitment to making that work, both from the funders and from the local partnerships” (Funder)

Grant size and funding period

The significant size of the EANF grants was important in enabling the pilot projects to engage with public sector services in the first instance and projects reported that it helped to give credibility, and sense of importance to early action. There was consensus amongst the pilot projects that it was important that the resources available to the EANF pilots reflected their ambitions to effect systems change. The grants were large enough to engage public sector providers and it was unlikely that in the context of constrained public sector budgets the EANF pilots would have been as successful in engaging public sector partnerships had these resources been reduced or absent. Funding which ran over a significant period was also seen as necessary.

“The fact that someone would fund us for five years.... Just to be able to try out some new innovative things was very exciting” (Project)

Focus on a defined area

The focus on defined areas provided opportunity to utilise limited (compared to mainstream budgets) resources to achieve change and an important bounding of the local system(s) with which the pilots were working. In Coventry, Ignite had originally planned to work in two neighbourhoods but realised early in the project's development that this added an additional layer of complexity which was not manageable in the context of the project's resources. As with all place-based approaches there are important questions around how models which are developed in defined areas can be scaled up – or out – to influence change in other areas or at wider spatial scales. The EANF projects addressed this through establishing practitioner networks to share good practice and learning and through seeking to influence wider service models. Ignite's blueprint for the embedding of early action into children's services in Coventry is a useful example of how learning from a smaller scale pilot can be translated into broader service change.

Grant Management

The development of close relationships between funders and funded projects enabled the funders to develop a good understanding of local contexts and of opportunities,

drivers and barriers and an appreciation of how change happens at the local level. Flexible and responsive grant management enabled the EANF pilots to adapt and respond to contexts of rapid change. They were positive about the support they received from funders and reflected that it had enabled them to develop their own programmes and to draw out learning. For funders, this was a different approach, which emphasised funding for developmental learning, as opposed to adherence to a pre-defined delivery model.

“Find some people in the local area who are trusted and who have the skills, however defined, to make change happen, and give them the resource and backing, and indeed the credibility of having had the investment from the group of funders we brought together, over a sufficiently long period, that they can then figure out how best to make that change happen. I think it’s not a surprise that if you find the right leaders and give them really quite flexible funding, and the wider intellectual assets that come with that, that they will then figure out ways to make change happen. And I think that that points to a whole different way of doing funding”. (Funder)

There is a distinction between factors in programme design which are visible or tangible and can be built into funding models (such as the size and duration of grants, partnership models, expectations in relation to grant management and approaches to learning and evaluation) and those which may be less visible or tangible and more relational, experiential and context dependent (such as the quality of relationships, or responses to complexity and change). Funders and commissioners can control the former but less so the latter. The evaluation highlights the importance of funding organisations which demonstrate values and ways of working which support early action, providing sufficient resources to support sustainable change, and prioritising and resourcing capacity for learning and project level evaluation.

Conclusions and implications for future programmes and interventions

This report has looked at the implementation of the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund over a period of five years from 2015 to 2020. Over this period there has been huge change in the economy, in welfare provision and in the shape and scope of local public services. The EANF projects have developed and implemented local models of early action and have worked in partnership with local public services to orientate local systems toward early action approaches but at the time of writing this report the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented changes to people's work, home and community lives. Cumulatively these changes have worked against early action and already vulnerable individuals, families and communities may have become more so due to loss of income or restricted access to support. It is impossible to predict when (or indeed if) these systems will return to a post-pandemic 'normal' but the findings and lessons from EANF are highly relevant as funders, commissioners, providers, practitioners and communities seek new ways to respond to the immediate and long-term impacts of the pandemic.

The evaluation evidence highlights the challenges that the projects have faced in building and maintaining support for early action, in implementing change in complex and unstable public sector service contexts, and in accessing data through which to demonstrate their impact. It also identifies the enablers for early action approaches which include maintaining a strong focus on early action and communicating it widely and frequently, working alongside service providers to model early action and support practitioners to work differently, and supporting wider systemic change by developing the networks, tools and resources to implement change across services and communities. The evaluation also highlights the importance of resourcing voluntary-public sector partnerships appropriately to deliver early action and the benefits of bringing together organisations with shared values and commitment to early action to prioritise learning and service improvement.

Finally, the evaluation reports that the projects have achieved positive outcomes for individuals, families and communities, and the local systems in which they are working.

The conclusion of this evaluation is that a shift to early action in public service systems is possible when:

- Funders, commissioners, providers, and wider system stakeholders invest in long-term relationships based on shared trust, understanding and accountability and with a shared commitment to early action.

- Sufficient time, space and resource is afforded to providers so that they can identify the needs of vulnerable individuals and populations and develop appropriate responses to meet those needs. The development of services which respond to need is a valid outcome in and of itself as it is only once people's basic needs have been met that a shift to prevention is possible.
- Stakeholders acknowledge that longer-term outcomes are hard to predict and may occur at different time points (which may be beyond the period of funding).
- Systems are oriented towards learning and use evidence from a variety of sources to reflect on and adapt practice on an ongoing basis.

The evaluation findings have implications for future early action programmes:

- **External funders have a key role in providing resources and capacity to help systems move toward early action.** This capacity is unlikely to come from within public service systems. Funding enabled the voluntary sector agencies to provide the capacity and resources to support public sector change and, importantly, protect the early action interventions from being overrun or diverted by other service priorities.
- **Long-term funding is required.** It has taken a relatively long time for the projects to develop and implement their approaches and local systems to adopt early action priorities. The projects confirmed that these outcomes would not have been achievable through short-term funding. Funders may also need to consider the length of time required in the early stages of projects to build partnerships and develop early action models, before 'delivery' can begin.
- **Partnerships between voluntary and public sector agencies are effective in introducing and embedding early action into public service delivery and systems.** Effective partnership working in this context was characterised by shared goals, trust, flexibility, being open to failure and a willingness to learn and adapt from experiences.
- **Early action enables people to access services earlier.** The EANF projects developed models of early action based on building capacity in people and services which enabled people to access help earlier. This included young people accessing help for mental health in schools in Norwich, parents accessing help to improve their relationships in Hartlepool, and families accessing help in community-based hubs in Coventry. In all cases these models emphasised the centrality of positive relationships between service providers and the people they were supporting as central to early action approaches. Better service quality based on positive human relationships improved people's experiences of services in the EANF areas and there is evidence from the projects that in these areas more people were accessing help earlier.
- **Early action can lead to positive outcomes for people and services.** The EANF projects contributed to improved outcomes for service systems and for people. Outcomes included reductions in crisis-led mental health episodes in schools and improved parental relationships, thereby reducing the need for crisis-led support.
- **It is not always possible to predict the outcomes of early action.** The projects needed to revise their expectations around the outcomes that they would achieve, partly because they were not able to access relevant data but perhaps more importantly because they were working in complex and changing local systems. Being adaptable and having the ability to respond to changing circumstances and priorities in local services were important features of the EANF projects. This was supported by a strong emphasis on learning and review.

- **Successful early action projects do not necessarily result in reductions in demand on public services or savings to the public purse.** The projects worked directly with small numbers of people, and other factors outside of the project's influence (such as economic hardship or the impacts of welfare reform) meant that demand for acute or crisis-led services sometimes increased or at best stayed stable. However, the projects also provided evidence of the mechanisms through which early action can be adopted widely across services (through professional development, capacity building and sharing good practice) which, if developed at scale, have the potential to deliver a shift toward prevention.

Appendix 1: Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation was 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. This involved 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 had, 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 to 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 were most supportive and conducive to this type of transformation in service delivery.

The evaluation ran from 2015 to 2020 and involved a range of activities:

- Working with the three pilot projects to review their theories of change and to support the collection of local data.
- Working with the projects to analyse data which they gathered to assess local impacts.
- Undertaking interviews with representatives of grant holder and partner organisations to understand how and why the projects were effecting change at the local level.
- Undertaking interviews with EANF steering group members to assess the degree to which project governance arrangements facilitated transformative change in the pilot project areas.
- Regular reporting to the EANF steering group and projects to inform ongoing delivery.
- Annual learning events, developing shared learning and reviewing findings in learning and evaluation reports (<http://www.earlyactionfund.org/evaluation>).
- Capacity building in research and evaluation for the projects, including supporting them to use evaluation techniques (such as contribution analysis) to build robust assessments of the local impact of their work.

Data collection and analysis included:

- A rapid review of the literature relating to early action.
- Two rounds of semi-structured interviews (conducted face to face and over the telephone) with representatives of the EANF Steering Group.
- Annual rounds of 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.

Sheffield Hallam University

Early action neighbourhood fund evaluation report

BENNETT, Ellen <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3271-8757>>, DAYSON, Christopher <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2402-1183>> and PEARSON, Sarah <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5049-5396>>

Available from the Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/27920/>

Copyright and re-use policy

Please visit <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/27920/> and <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html> for further details about copyright and re-use permissions.