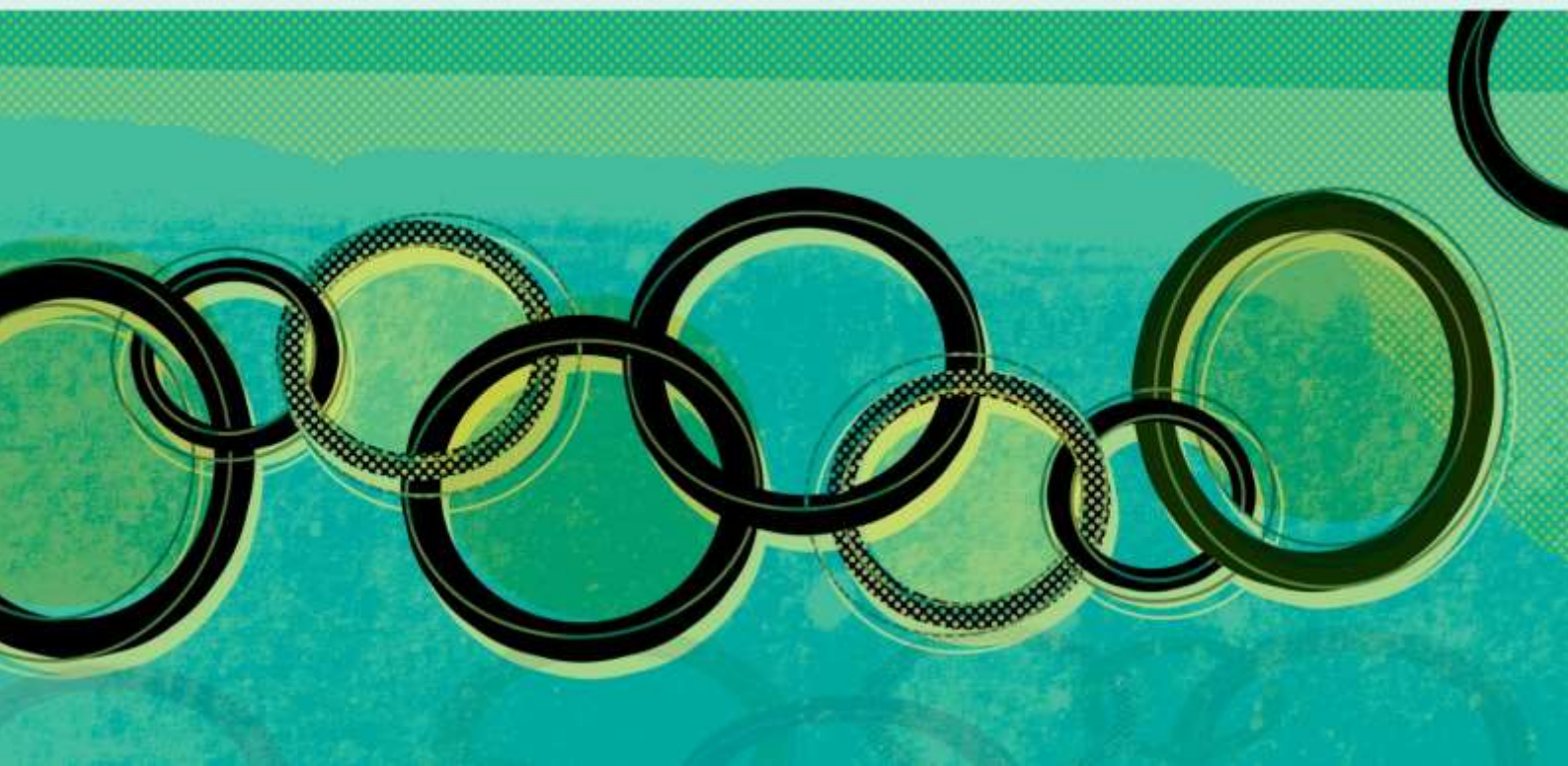


**Early Action**  
**Neighbourhood Fund:**  
*Learning and Evaluation*

July 2016



# Early Action Neighbourhood Fund: Learning and Evaluation

## *Year One Programme Report: Summary*

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## 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.