Evaluation of the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund: Learning Summary

Funders Briefing

Sarah Pearson, Chris Dayson and Ellen Bennett
CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University

January 2020

This short briefing outlines for funders the key findings to emerge from the evaluation of the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (EANF).

What we have learned

Early action takes many forms, and the EANF pilots are embedded in and responsive to local priorities and contexts. **Building capacity in individuals, communities and services has been as important to the pilots' achievements as delivering early action interventions.**

This means that, in making assessments around which projects to support, funders should look for those which demonstrate values and ways of working (such as collaboration, building local capacity, focus on prevention and relationships, and sustainable change in systems) which are likely to support early action as well as (or instead of) particular models of delivery.

The substantial size of the grants to the EANF pilots differentiates these projects from other initiatives which seek to achieve transformational change with smaller budgets. **The pilot funding has provided resources for 'on the ground' delivery and capacity for systems change.** We do not have the evidence to assess whether project outcomes would be different if funding levels had been different, but in all pilots the award of a significant grant for early action was an important catalyst for bringing organisations together, and was seen to have empowered voluntary sector organisations to engage with public services on more equal terms.

Evidence from the EANF pilots suggests the early phases of project implementation are likely to be characterised by project development and refinement, and building relationships and momentum around shared ambitions and values. This takes time (and substantial amounts of energy and resources), especially when public services are facing cuts and other external pressures. Delivery (in the form of recognised interventions) may happen later and identifiable outcomes for both systems and individuals, later still.

Sheffield Hallam University | Centre for **Regional Economic and Social Research**

www.shu.ac.uk/research/cresr

1

This means that it is important for both projects and funders to consider the phased implementation of early action interventions, and to make sufficient resources available to support sustainable change in public services.

The focus in the pilots **on continuous reflection and learning means that change in delivery is inevitable, and expected.** This has important implications for grant making and grantee relationship management, which needs to be flexible and responsive and recognise that change processes take time and can move in unexpected directions.

For funders, this means prioritising learning about early action over accountability measures which focus on performance and delivery milestones.

Relationships between people have been identified in all the pilots as the most significant drivers for change. Where these have worked well, it has meant that early action has been prioritised in local services. However, it has also meant that the pilots have been vulnerable to changes in key roles in partner organisations and there are examples in all three where progress has been significantly hampered by the loss of a key supporter or champion.

There would be value in further research which identifies how (and when) relational working is embedded in systems and becomes resilient to institutional change.

The EANF pilots have generated useful **learning around approaches to evaluation.** Specifically:

» **It is difficult for projects to directly attribute impacts to interventions when they are operating in complex service systems.** It is better to focus on developing plausible evidence and data informed accounts of their contribution to outcomes.

» **Early action outcomes can be framed as those relating to people and communities and systems.** In terms of the former, these might include the availability of preventative services at the community level, which people know how to access and are comfortable and confident in doing so. They could also include improved levels of health and wellbeing, and reduced likelihood of crisis, unplanned or unnecessary use of acute services. For systems,

outcomes can be shared understanding of, and commitment to early action principles and values, prioritising early action whenever possible, effective use of scarce resources, high levels of trust, relational rather than performative accountability measures, and a shared understanding around the importance and use of local data. These outcomes can be reflected in funding applications and grant management processes.

» **It is unlikely that individual projects will be able to demonstrate significant reductions in public spending or increased flow of resources to early action.** In the context of large scale cuts to public budgets, spending on acute and crisis care may increase, and 'success' may be in the form of the preservation of existing early action funding or protection from future budget cuts.

Funding for a designated evaluation lead has allowed the projects to develop evidence and data-led approaches to evaluation and learning and this has been a powerful driver for collaborative working.

We recommend that resources to support local evaluation should be integral to all early action grants.

The Early Action (EANF) Pilots

The EANF pilot projects are different in terms of their models but there are common features of approach.

The pilots have worked alongside services to develop models of early action

The **Ignite** pilot has worked with children' services and a housing provider in Coventry to develop a blueprint which embeds a locally responsive and whole system approach to early help.

In Norwich, the **MAP** early action pilot has developed a whole-school approach to improving young people's mental health and well-being.

The **Healthy Relationships** Partnership in Hartlepool has integrated a focus on parental relationships into child and family support services.

The pilots have worked with communities to build capacity for local solutions

The **Healthy Relationships** Partnership has been working with parents to develop parent-led support, utilising community resources and facilities and connecting parents to on-line resources and other support services.

Ignite has grown the capacity of Children's Services hubs to understand better their local communities as well as how to spark and sustain informal responses such as uniform swaps, food clubs, walking groups, women's support group, and homework club, helping local residents to help each other.

MAP has worked with pupils to constantly review the early action project ensuring that it is responsive to their needs. Outcomes from this have included supporting students to become positive contributors to school decision making, and the development of a positive language programme helping students to express themselves constructively and avoid exclusion for swearing.

The pilots have worked with services to develop networks and skills to embed early action approaches

MAP has developed the Early Action Network for professionals working with young people in Norwich. The network offers regular networking events and free CPD around young people's mental health and wellbeing. The project has also delivered CPD and PHSE curriculum in the schools with which it has worked.

The **Healthy Relationships** Project has developed practice guidance and resources for professionals. The pilot also developed two networks: one for agencies committed to supporting parental relationships in their work with children, and one for agencies working with families in Hartlepool. A 'Relationships Matter' conference held in 2019 also identified local **Healthy Relationships** Champions: individuals working in local organisations who have demonstrated excellent practice in supporting parental relationships.

In Coventry, **Ignite** have worked with partners to develop a blue print for effective early help across the system that includes: ''doing it together'' building a better relationship with families, and 'the right team' on the skills and behaviours that all services need to support families early in their problems. Two annual events for the whole Early Help workforce addressing skills and confidence gaps.

The pilots have worked in and with local systems to influence sustainable change

All the pilots have been working in and with local systems with the aim of shifting systems towards the adoption of early action as an organising principle. This has involved working collaboratively, building coalitions of supporters around shared ambitions for early action, and connecting through values which emphasise the importance of trust and positive relationships in developing alternative service models. A commitment to constructive challenge and shared learning has been integral to this work, and all the pilots have reflected on the importance of their work in holding the space for early action constant in the context of perpetual change. Ignite has hosted events using creative methods (e.g. drama) to engage services in conversations around how early action approaches can be adopted and to open up space for reflection on how the system might work differently.

The EANF Evaluation

The evaluation team has worked with the pilots to capture different forms of evidence around their achievements and impacts. We believe that mixed-methods approaches offer the most robust and appropriate approach to evaluating social initiatives because they tell us both what has happened and why.

Each of the pilots has developed an evaluation strategy, involving surveys to measure data changes in outcomes for individuals and analysis of administrative data to capture changes to patterns in service use. This has been 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 a programme level, the evaluation has looked at the implementation of the pilots, to understand what has worked and what hasn't from the perspectives of those delivering the pilots and those working in partnership with them, and to capture changes in processes, relationships, and service delivery mechanisms. This is with a view to drawing out common themes and learning around whether, how and why the early action pilots are leading to transformative change.

This has led us to think hard about the evaluation frameworks we should use to understand early

Figure 1: Original EANF Theory of Change
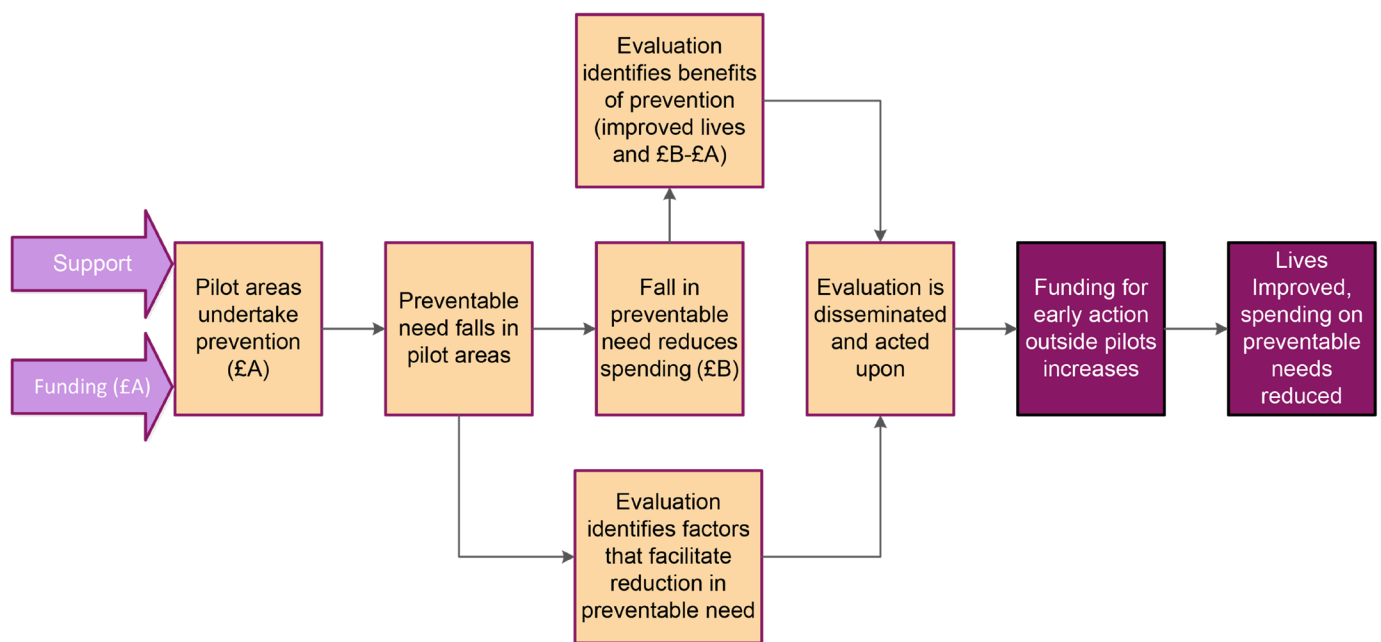
action. We have worked with a theory-based approach but have significantly revised an original programme-level Theory of Change (Figure 1) because some early assumptions proved to be difficult to evidence. This included assumptions around the ability to attribute change to the pilots, or to demonstrate that positive outcomes which can be attributed to the pilots would lead to costs savings or to shifting of resource flows in favour of early action.

A revised Theory of Change (Figure 2) was co-produced by the evaluation team, the funders and the pilot projects to reflect the experience of working in complex systems which are subject to constant change and allowed us to develop a more realistic assessment of the changes happening at different stages of the pilot projects and the impacts we were seeing for individuals and in local systems. The revised theory also highlights the importance of formal (data, evidence and evaluation) and informal (experience and learning) intelligence to the pilots' models.

The revised Theory of Change provides a model for future funding programmes which allows the capture project achievements around a number of phases.

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

The pilots developed evidence-led proposals for early action interventions, building on established relationships with public services. Securing early

stakeholder buy-in during this phase was important for laying the foundations for future work. The pilots found that working closely with funders to refine and develop project proposals was useful in this period.

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

The focus in the pilots during this period was on growing capacity for long-term change through developing relationships and building partnerships. Learning during this phase was that this was time- and resource-consuming work and that in the context of flux in the public sector consistent and repeated engagement was required to ensure continued stakeholder support. 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. The pilots also identified 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 their early action approaches.

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

As relationships and partnerships matured the pilots focused on delivering early action interventions

Figure 2: Revised EANF Theory of Change

Pre-funding
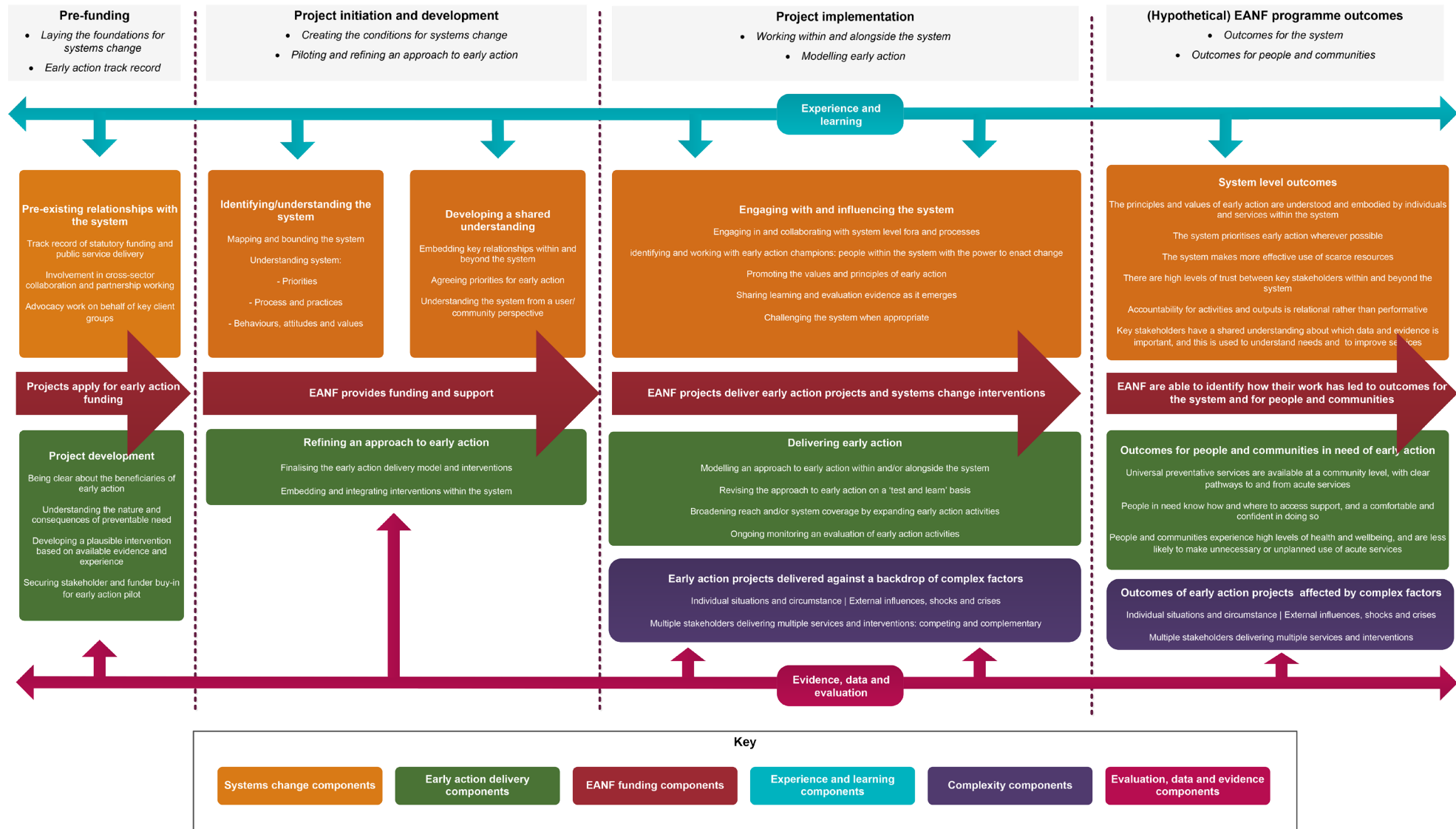- Laying the foundations for systems change
- Early action track record

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

(Hypothetical) EANF programme outcomes
- Outcomes for the system
- Outcomes for people and communities

Experience and learning

Pre-existing relationships with the system
Track record of statutory funding and public service delivery

Involvement in cross-sector collaboration and partnership working

Advocacy work on behalf of key client groups

Identifying/understanding the system
Mapping and bounding the system

Understanding system:

- Priorities

- Process and practices

- Behaviours, attitudes and values

Developing a shared understanding
Embedding key relationships within and beyond the system

Agreeing priorities for early action

Understanding the system from a user/ community perspective

Engaging with and influencing the system
Engaging in and collaborating with system level fora and processes

Identifying and working with early action champions: people within the system with the power to enact change

Promoting the values and principles of early action

Sharing learning and evaluation evidence as it emerges

Challenging the system when appropriate

System level outcomes
The principles and values of early action are understood and embodied by individuals and services within the system

The system prioritises early action wherever possible

The system makes more effective use of scarce resources

There are high levels of trust between key stakeholders within and beyond the system

Accountability for activities and outputs is relational rather than performative

Key stakeholders have a shared understanding about which data and evidence is important, and this is used to understand needs and to improve services

Projects apply for early action funding

EANF provides funding and support

EANF projects deliver early action projects and systems change interventions

EANF are able to identify how their work has led to outcomes for the system and for people and communities

Project development
Being clear about the beneficiaries of early action

Understanding the nature and consequences of preventable need

Developing a plausible intervention based on available evidence and experience

Securing stakeholder and funder buy-in for early action pilot

Refining an approach to early action
Finalising the early action delivery model and interventions

Embedding and integrating interventions within the system

Delivering early action
Modelling an approach to early action within and/or alongside the system

Revising the approach to early action on a 'test and learn' basis

Broadening reach and/or system coverage by expanding early action activities

Ongoing monitoring an evaluation of early action activities

Outcomes for people and communities in need of early action
Universal preventative services are available at a community level, with clear pathways to and from acute services

People in need know how and where to access support, and a comfortable and confident in doing so

People and communities experience high levels of health and wellbeing, and are less likely to make unnecessary or unplanned use of acute services

Early action projects delivered against a backdrop of complex factors
Individual situations and circumstance | External influences, shocks and crises

Multiple stakeholders delivering multiple services and interventions: competing and complementary

Outcomes of early action projects affected by complex factors
Individual situations and circumstance | External influences, shocks and crises

Multiple stakeholders delivering multiple services and interventions

Evidence, data and evaluation

Key
| Systems change components | Early action delivery components | EANF funding components | Experience and learning components | Complexity components | Evaluation, data and evidence components |

5

and engaging with and influencing the system. Relationships continued to be central in this phase, alongside access to data and evidence, and a commitment to continuous learning. Key learning to emerge includes:

» Good quality data and evidence, from a range of sources, provides projects with credibility when advocating on behalf of communities with public sector services. Data from public bodies can be a powerful accompaniment to project-level data in demonstrating impact, but it has often been difficult to access.

» Adaptations to service tools and policies to reflect early action priorities have resulted in different conversations and service processes, and ensured that useful data is captured.

» Building local networks has been important for shining a light on practice, celebrating achievements and good practice, and supporting the development of widespread early action approaches.

» Pilots have needed to work in an agile way, 'holding the space' for early action and making connections and linkages and encouraging others to see the opportunities. Reflection and learning have led to changes in delivery, but a key role for the pilots has been in maintaining the focus on early action and not allowing it to be taken off course by other competing agendas.

» Changing system behaviours takes time. Important factors include practitioners feeling that they have permission to work in preventative and relational ways, having confidence and time to explore different options, and challenges to established modes of professional practice (for instance in social work). Enabling factors include openness and curiosity to learn about different approaches; provision of training and support; and endorsement and encouragement from leaders.

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

The evaluation is approaching its final phase and will report on programme outcomes in spring 2020. At this stage there is evidence of improved outcomes for both people and communities and systems:

» In the MAP pilot there is evidence of reductions in crisis-led mental health episodes amongst pupils in schools where the project has worked. Qualitative evidence confirms that schools and pupils value the early action approach and that it has led to changed conversations and attitudes to mental health and wellbeing amongst teachers and pupils and widespread use of preventative resources and services. There has been a commitment on the part of schools to continue funding for early action, and new schools are keen to join.

» In the Ignite pilot there is increased capacity in the Willenhall community and evidence that there are greater levels of engagement with early intervention support in the neighbourhood. Coventry City Council and partners have agreed to adopt Ignite's blueprint for effective collaborative early action centred in local Family Hubs. It provides a solid foundation for sustainable systemic change.

» In Hartlepool the focus on parental relationships has become a strategic priority for children's services, providing the foundation for embedding the early action priority across the service system. Parental led support is building capacity in communities and a robust network to continue the approach. Qualitative work carried out by the pilot demonstrates that couples taking part in the early action project feel that their relationships have improved and this as has benefited them and their children.