

EARLY LEARNING COMMUNITIES TOOLKIT

AN EVIDENCE-INFORMED GUIDE TO IMPROVING
CHILDREN'S EARLY LEARNING OUTCOMES



WORKING
WITH



Save the Children



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

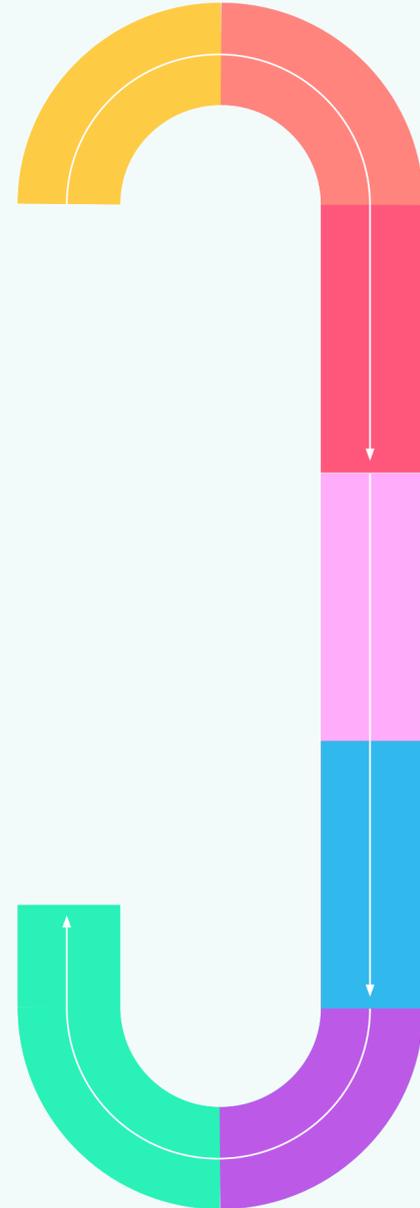
The Early Learning Communities Toolkit is a collaborative endeavour, informed by an accompanying **evidence review**, the Dartington Service Design Lab and extensive engagement with Save the Children staff and a diverse range of local professionals and people in each of the four initial Early Learning Communities: Feltham, Margate, Newport and Sheffield. We hope that it serves as a record of the dedication and shared ambition that all those involved have shown to improve early learning outcomes for children growing up in poverty.

We want to thank our partners whose broad knowledge base and contributions were indispensable in the development of this work. Particular thanks to collaborators Nick Axford and his team at The University of Plymouth, Kathy Sylva and Jane Barlow (University of Oxford), Dawn Hart, Jonathan Sharples (Education Endowment Foundation), Bianca Albers (Centre for Evidence and Implementation), Jonathan Bradshaw (University of York), Gill Main (Leeds University) and David Gordon (University of Bristol).

We are grateful for the feedback from partners across Save the Children UK, and for the experience shared by the families, professionals and leaders in each site - their considerable efforts have contributed so much to the Toolkit.

The Toolkit was written by Tim Hobbs, Maria Portugal, India Roche and Rosie Allen from the Dartington Service Design Lab. The authors take full responsibility for the final content of the Toolkit and, accordingly, for any errors or omissions.

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GOALS

- To understand the Toolkit's main principles and vision
- To understand the Theory of Change and how it will inform and shape your future strategy
- To gain clarity on how to use the Toolkit and the accompanying evidence review

The Toolkit is underpinned by an accompanying **evidence review** which summarises the best available evidence about:

- *What matters* in promoting positive early learning outcomes
- *What works* to improve these outcomes;
- Key elements necessary for the design and effective implementation of a place-based systems-change strategy.

Grounded in the evidence, the Toolkit provides guidance and resources to inform an effective approach to improving children's early learning outcomes. It identifies the importance of a holistic, system-led approach characterised by collaboration and inclusivity, which enables partnerships to understand the levers for change in their local early learning system.

Welcome to the Early Learning Communities Toolkit. The Toolkit has been created by the **Dartington Service Design Lab** and associates, Save the Children and its partners who share the ambition to improve early learning outcomes for children growing up in poverty.

The purpose of the Toolkit is to enable partnerships in Early Learning Communities to improve early learning outcomes for children growing up in poverty across their area, and support partnerships to develop and implement a strategy.

The Toolkit is intended to be read and used over an extended period of time. Each section builds on the previous one and can be revisited by Early Learning Community partnerships when they are looking to strengthen their strategies. It is intended that users will, after an initial read through and exploration, revisit and dive deeper into sections, as required.

Throughout the Toolkit you'll see words underlined - these link to glossary definitions in the appendix.



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0.2. EARLY LEARNING OUTCOMES

The focus of Save the Children's partnership work in the areas using this Toolkit is to **improve early learning outcomes for children living in poverty**. The foundations for lifelong learning, behaviour and wellbeing are laid during this period and are strongly influenced by early experiences.

For children growing up in poverty, their early years are particularly important as they are much less likely than their more affluent peers to benefit from experiences that support positive development. This can impact how they progress throughout their education and lead to significantly poorer life chances in adulthood.

The early learning outcomes of primary focus are:

- **Communication, speech and language development**
- **Pre-literacy and literacy**
- **Pre-numeracy and numeracy**

Foundational to these outcomes are children's **social and emotional development** and **physical health and development**. Building on these foundations is central to improving primary early learning outcomes and together represent the key dimensions of children's **readiness** for school.

These foundational outcomes are particularly important, as children who struggle in these areas are more likely to experience multiple challenges, including poorer educational performance (attendance, attainment, dropping out), behaviour, mental health and wellbeing.

Section 1 further explores a range of key factors on these early learning outcomes, including those related to parent-child interaction, the home learning environment, parent/carer characteristics, early learning and health services, and the wider social and physical environment.

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0.3. THEORY OF CHANGE

This section introduces an overarching **theory of change** about how to improve children’s early learning outcomes in a local area, informed by the evidence. This Toolkit outlines a set of stages and steps through which partnerships can develop a strategy which builds on a local version of the theory of change.

As illustrated at the top of the diagram to the right, the principal aim is to improve early learning outcomes, which may be addressed directly, or indirectly through promoting foundational social, emotional and physical health outcomes. The theory of change outlines a route to improving early learning outcomes, starting from the bottom and working up to these key outcomes at the top.



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Starting at the bottom of the theory of change, any work to improve early learning outcomes takes place within the **context** of a local **early learning system**. This local system has a set of characteristics which affect how it operates. Its assets, behaviours, infrastructure, leadership, resources and culture, including how it engages with evidence, create a set of local early learning **system conditions** which can help or hinder change.

The **local partnership** is an agent of change which exists within the local early learning system. It influences and is influenced by the wider **system**.

This partnership will engage in a range of activities and analysis - including engagement with the evidence about *what matters*, *what works* and comprehensive mapping of the local early learning system. This will help to inform priorities, activities and the use of evidence-based intervention, improvement and local **innovation**.

Efforts may be focused on a number of domains of intervention, all of which can impact early learning outcomes: in programmes & services, in the local community, in the early learning system or more widely. Some interventions will be closer to children (**proximal**) and have more immediate impacts, e.g. delivering an effective programme or improving the quality of an existing service. Others will be further from children (**distal**) and take longer to achieve, e.g. introducing new workforce qualifications or supporting **change management** in early years provision.

The various interventions targeting different domains will influence one or more intermediate outcomes, which form part of an evidence-based pathway to the primary early learning outcomes.

This overarching **theory of change** will be the basis from which each Early Learning Community will develop their own version, grounded in a deep understanding of the local context.

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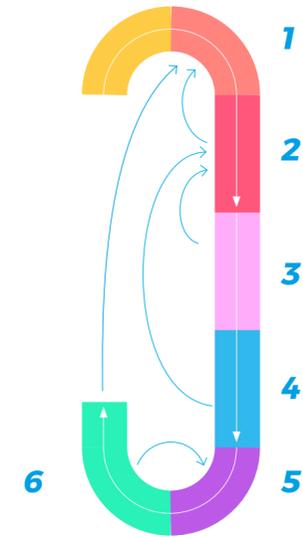
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0.4. STRUCTURE OF THE TOOLKIT

The Toolkit aims to enable partnerships in Early Learning Communities to improve early learning outcomes by providing a step-by-step guide to developing a local strategy, building **capacity** and infrastructure and continuous implementation, testing and learning.

In addition to the Orientation section, the Toolkit has six main sections:

- 1. What matters and what works?** This will enable the partnership to understand what the research evidence says about influences on early learning outcomes and develop a plan for exploring this in relation to **local need** and context.
- 2. The local system and partnership.** This section will introduce the partnership to **systems thinking** and enable it to explore the local early learning system, its boundaries and the readiness of the local partnership to bring about change.
- 3. Determining local priorities.** This will consolidate learning and insights from the first two sections to prioritise outcomes and types of activity. It will also help to strike a balance between evidence-based practice, innovation, improvement, and implementation.



4. Building capacity and infrastructure. This section identifies the necessary foundations for delivering different elements of a strategy, including training capacity, culture and infrastructure requirements.

5. Crafting a strategy. This provides a template and process by which the partnership may consider and bring together all of the above to develop a local strategy and theory of change.

6. Implementing, testing and learning. This will enable the partnership to learn, improve and iterate their strategy.

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Each section starts with an introduction of **section goals** and a **readiness check**: an indication of the time, resources and necessary conditions to undertake the work within the section. Each section contains a mixture of practical tools, guidance and further reading and resources.

Sections also contain a series of **reflective questions** to encourage the partnership to consider how concepts apply in its area.

At the end of each section is a **stock-take**: a set of questions that provide the partnership with an opportunity to assess its progress in each section. These are designed to help the partnership consider if it is confident enough to move on the next section, as well as identifying areas to revisit and strengthen over time. These are grouped as a whole in **Appendix 1**.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Have you explored how the relative importance of different influences on early learning outcomes may vary, depending on specific outcomes or a child's age? Did anything surprise you?
- Based on the evidence about 'what matters' in promoting early learning outcomes, in which areas do you think influences are positive in your area?
- In what areas do you think there is cause for concern? Are there particular areas that the evidence indicates are important, but for which things may not be so good locally?

1.5. STOCK-TAKE / WHAT MATTERS AND WHAT WORKS

This section poses a series of questions to help partnerships consider how well developed and confident they are in their understanding of what matters - both in terms of the research evidence and the local picture of need - as well as the evidence about what works.

Partnerships should consider the questions below, responding with either:

- Green:** high degree of confidence
- Amber:** moderate degree of confidence
- Red:** low degree of confidence

What to do with these responses? If responses to questions are green, then this will indicate that no further work is required in this area. Amber indicates that sufficient understanding and progress has been made to move on and make further decisions in later sections, on the basis of this work. However, these might be areas in which partnerships wish to revisit and strengthen in due course.

HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU...

In your understanding of what the evidence says is important for children's early learning outcomes?



That the local data you hold on child needs and influences is sufficiently robust, representative and fine-grained?



That you adequately understand the needs and important influences on early learning outcomes, locally?



In your understanding of the evidence-base about what works to improve children's early learning outcomes?



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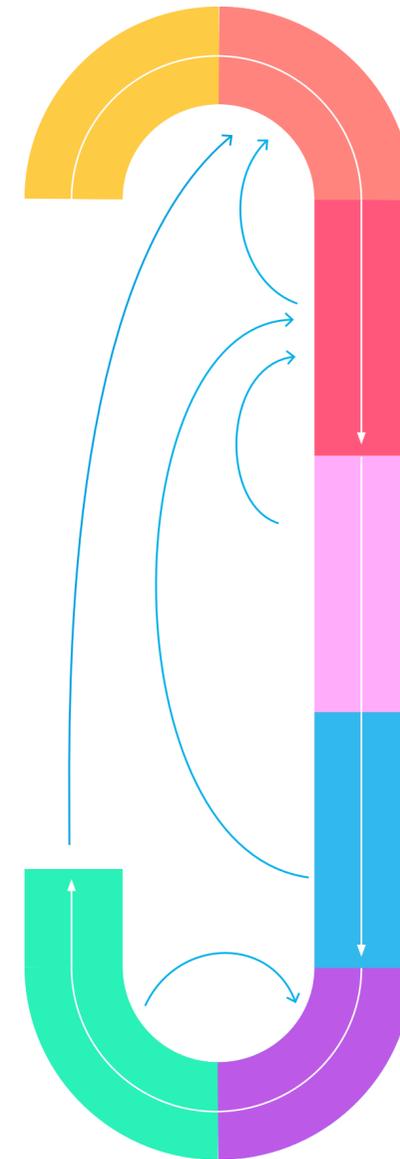
This Toolkit provides a process through which to consider, plan and act in a way that is informed by evidence and rooted in the local context.

The structure of the Toolkit is presented as a linear process, but the reality will likely be different. It is important to recognise that the recommended times outlined for each section can run in parallel and should not be 'back to back'. The partnership will need to plan different section activities in parallel with each other. The partnership may have done some thinking and work in certain areas, rather than starting from scratch. Stock-take questions in each section enable reflection about where work is well developed, and where it may be strengthened.

As such, the arrows in the figure to the right indicate how thinking and work in one area may cause the partnership to pause, reflect and reconsider work undertaken at earlier stages. For example, exploring and widening a partnership in **Section 2** may change what is considered important within **Section 1**.

This version of the Toolkit (v1.0) is a clickable, interactive PDF document. You navigate the document by:

- Clicking on the **'home'** button on each page to return to the main overview page
- Clicking on different section subheadings in the table of contents
- Clicking on **underlined words** to take you to the associated glossary definition.



1. **WHAT MATTERS AND WHAT WORKS**

1. WHAT MATTERS AND WHAT WORKS

1.1. GOALS AND READINESS CHECK

GOALS

- To understand the evidence about important factors for improving school readiness and closing the attainment gap for children in poverty
- To produce a needs analysis plan in preparation for collecting and analysing local data
- To consider the evidence about what works in relation to areas of local interest

READINESS CHECK

Recommended time
1-3 months

Resources

- Dedicated time together as a partnership to explore the evidence matrix and evidence review
- Capacity within the partnership to explore existing data on early learning outcomes and key local factors
- Financial and human resources to develop, commission and undertake a local needs analysis plan to engage with the local community on understanding needs

Conditions and preparatory work

- Preliminary partnership developed
- Information governance arrangements in place where appropriate

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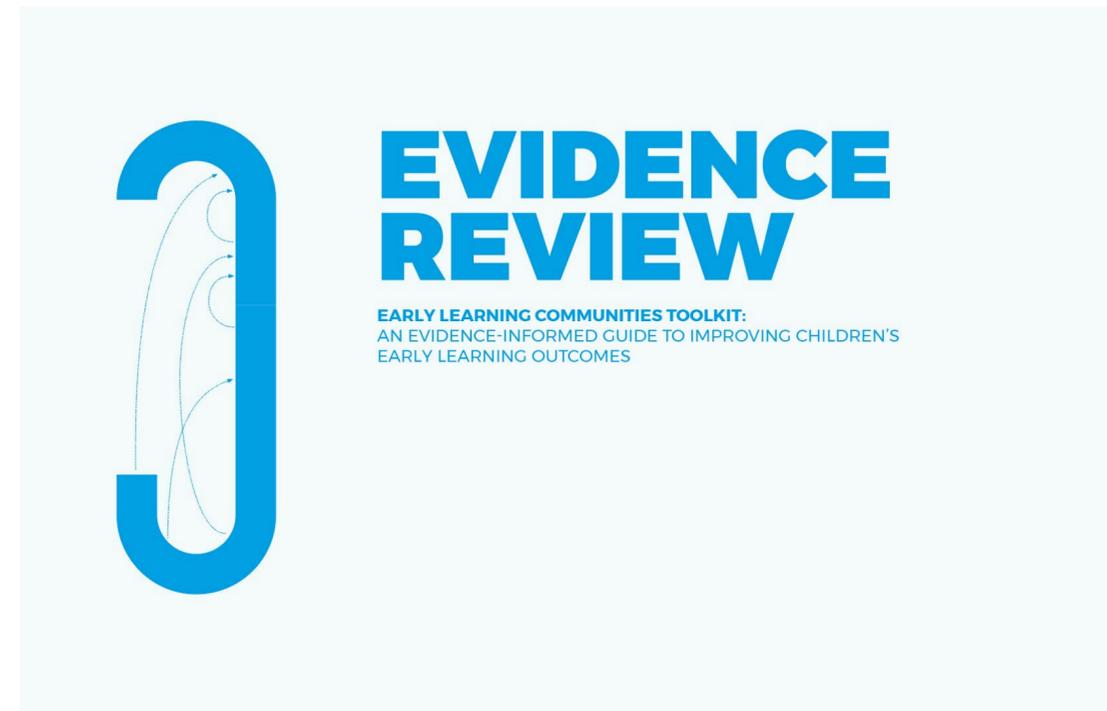
1. WHAT MATTERS AND WHAT WORKS

1.2. INTRODUCTION

This section of the toolkit explores the evidence about key factors affecting children's **early learning outcomes** and how factors vary depending on a child's age, or in relation to different outcomes. The **evidence matrix (Section 1.3)** provides a visual and interactive overview of this **evidence**, which is underpinned by the associated **evidence review**.

This section also provides the **partnership** with a set of tools and data to consider the needs of and factors upon children locally. This includes an analysis of existing data and the collection of new data, which will help to identify specific local issues and priorities.

This section also considers the strength of the evidence in relation to different areas of influence on early learning outcomes. This is overlaid with *what matters* to address these areas in the evidence matrix, helping partnership navigate what is a patchy evidential landscape.



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1.3. WHAT MATTERS

1.3.1. INTRODUCTION: EVIDENCE MATRIX

This section of the Toolkit visualises the evidence about what matters in promoting the early learning outcomes of children living in poverty.

This **evidence matrix** is an interactive tool which has been designed to allow the partnership to explore key factors on children's early learning outcomes by age and a specific outcome.

It is intended to form a backdrop against which to consider local data on needs, *what works*, and the **local early learning system** and the partnership (**Section 2**). These will be considered in relation to each other to inform local priorities (**Section 3**).

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Have you explored how the relative importance of different factors on early learning outcomes may vary, depending on specific outcomes or a child's age? Did anything surprise you?
- Based on the evidence about *what matters* in promoting early learning outcomes, in which areas do you think factors are positive in your area?
- In what areas do you think there is cause for concern? Are there particular areas that the evidence indicates are important, but for which things may not be so good locally?

There are four main steps to using the evidence matrix.

- 1. Exploration of the evidence about what matters**
- 2. Consideration against local needs data**
- 3. Consideration against evidence about what works**
- 4. Consideration against the local system and partnership priorities**

This stage of the Toolkit focuses on steps 1-3 above. **Section 2** considers how this evidence and local data relate to the local system and partnership priorities.

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1.3. WHAT MATTERS

1.3.2. EVIDENCE MATRIX: EXPLORATION

The first step is to explore the **evidence matrix**: a tool designed to help the partnership understand what the evidence says is important to promote early learning outcomes. The figure to the right zooms in on the **early learning outcomes** of focus:

- Communication, speech and language development;
- Pre-literacy and literacy;
- Pre-numeracy and numeracy

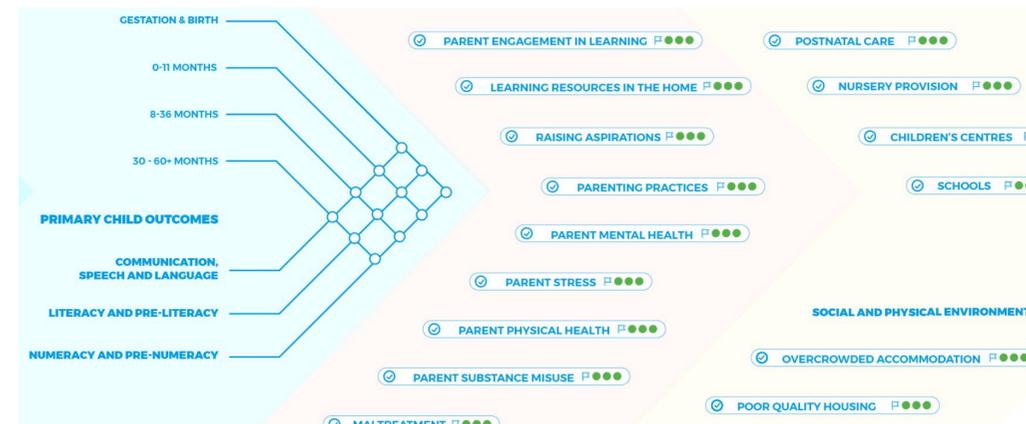
Underpinning these, to the left, are children's social, emotional and physical development as important foundations for the primary outcomes.

As you can see on the full matrix (page 19), there is a set of **proximal** factors the right of the outcomes. These are influences related to parents and carers or the home learning environment that research indicates are key factors.

Further to the right again are a set of (a) service and (b) more **distal** social and environmental factors on these outcomes.

The matrix allows the partnership to filter information by selecting a specific outcome and child age to highlight the specific factors that are more or less influential in relation to that particular outcome and age.

Flags indicate how important and influential each factor is. A flag with three green dots indicates a critically influential factor. Two green dots indicate a strong influence, and one dot a modest influence (no flags or dots means the research does not draw a relationship).



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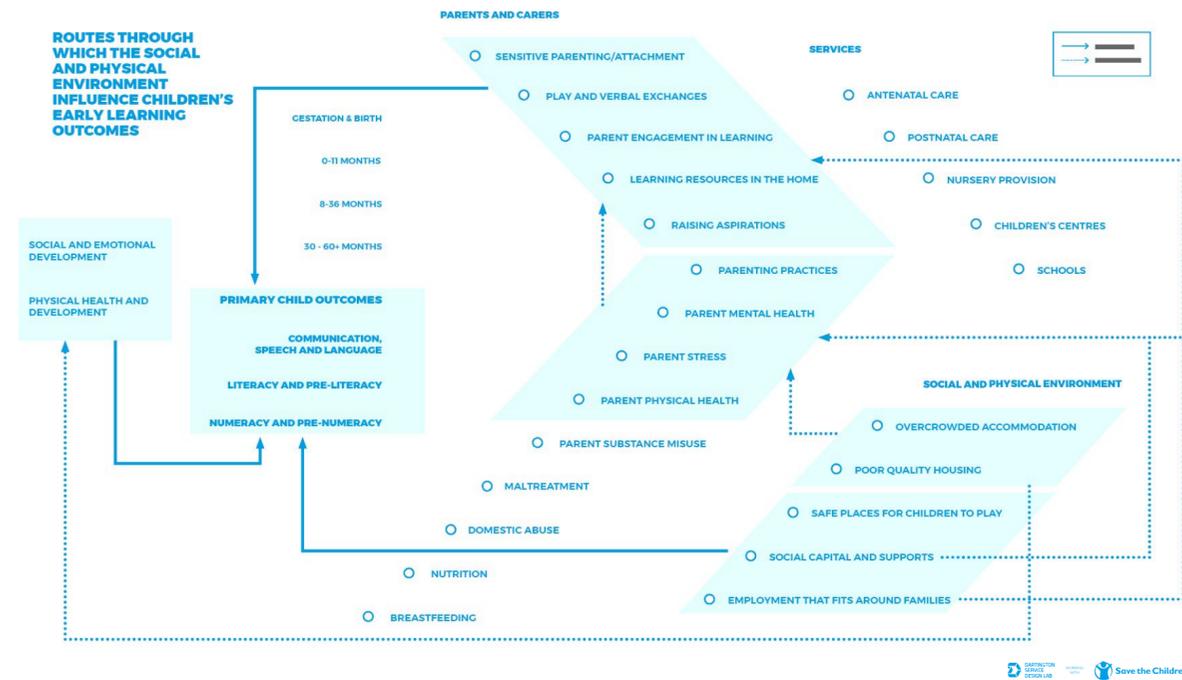
1.3. WHAT MATTERS

Direct and indirect factors

The research evidence indicates that some factors influence children’s early learning outcomes directly. These are typically proximal factors, such as parent-child interactions, nursery or schooling. These are factors or interactions that may directly influence and help develop children’s cognitive development and learning.

Other factors operate primarily through indirect means. These are often, although not always, more distal factors. For example, the figure to the right illustrates that over-crowded living accommodation does not directly influence children’s early learning, but it may do so through other routes, such as by increasing parent stress, in turn reducing the quality of parent-child interactions. The research indicates that the foundational outcomes - social and emotional development and physical health - are consistently important indirect routes through which to improve early learning outcomes.

Understanding whether factors are direct or indirect, and how different factors relate and interact, are important considerations when determining local priorities. This is because seemingly less obvious factors can exert a powerful indirect influence if the local conditions are right (i.e if there is room to improve these indirect factors to, in turn, help amplify the positive influence of more proximal factors).



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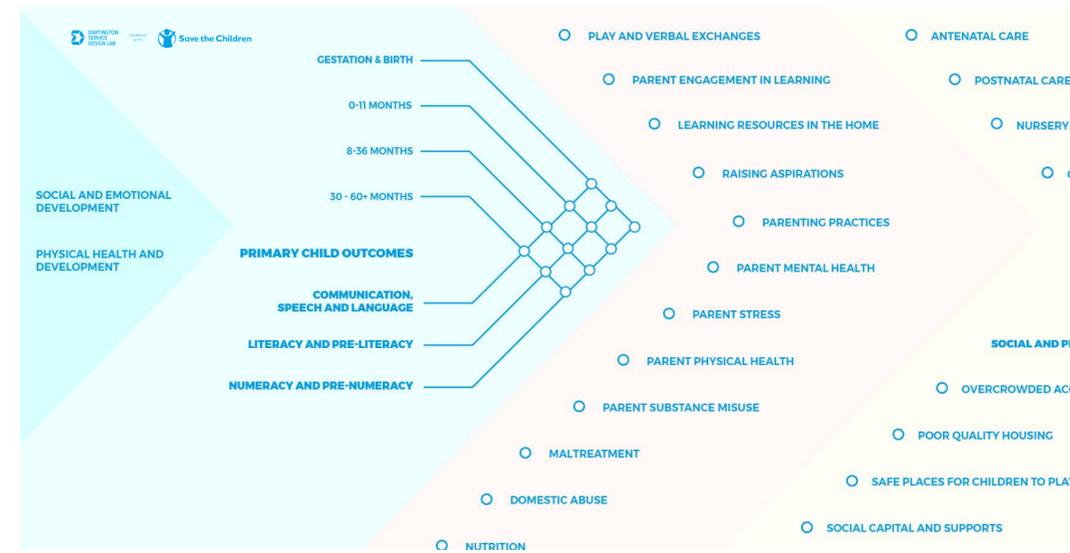
Understanding direct and indirect routes of influence is also important to inform a local **theory of change** about how to improve early learning outcomes. It will allow the partnership to develop an evidence-informed and locally relevant pathway through which to achieve change, which will be identified as the local strategy is developed (**Section 5**).

To help identify direct and indirect factors, the **evidence matrix** contains a series of 'pathway diagrams' through which the partnership can consider not only the strength of influence but also other factors that affect it. (**Appendix 3**). Separate pathways are illustrated for:

- Parent/carer factors
- Postnatal and antenatal services
- Nurseries, children's centres and schools
- Social and physical factors

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Are there factors that appear consistently important to different early learning outcomes and ages?
- What indirect factors are important in your local area?



Actions to initially explore the evidence about what matters:

1. Explore the *what matters* element of the matrix, selecting different primary outcomes and age ranges and considering which factors are highlighted as important for each.
2. Identify which specific factors appear to be consistently important, and which are related only to specific outcomes or ages: capture these insights in a log.
3. Explore the pathway diagrams in **Appendix 3** to identify the routes through which factors impact directly or indirectly on early learning outcomes.

In the next section, these factors will be considered in light of the local **context** and data and in **Section 2** the wider early learning system.

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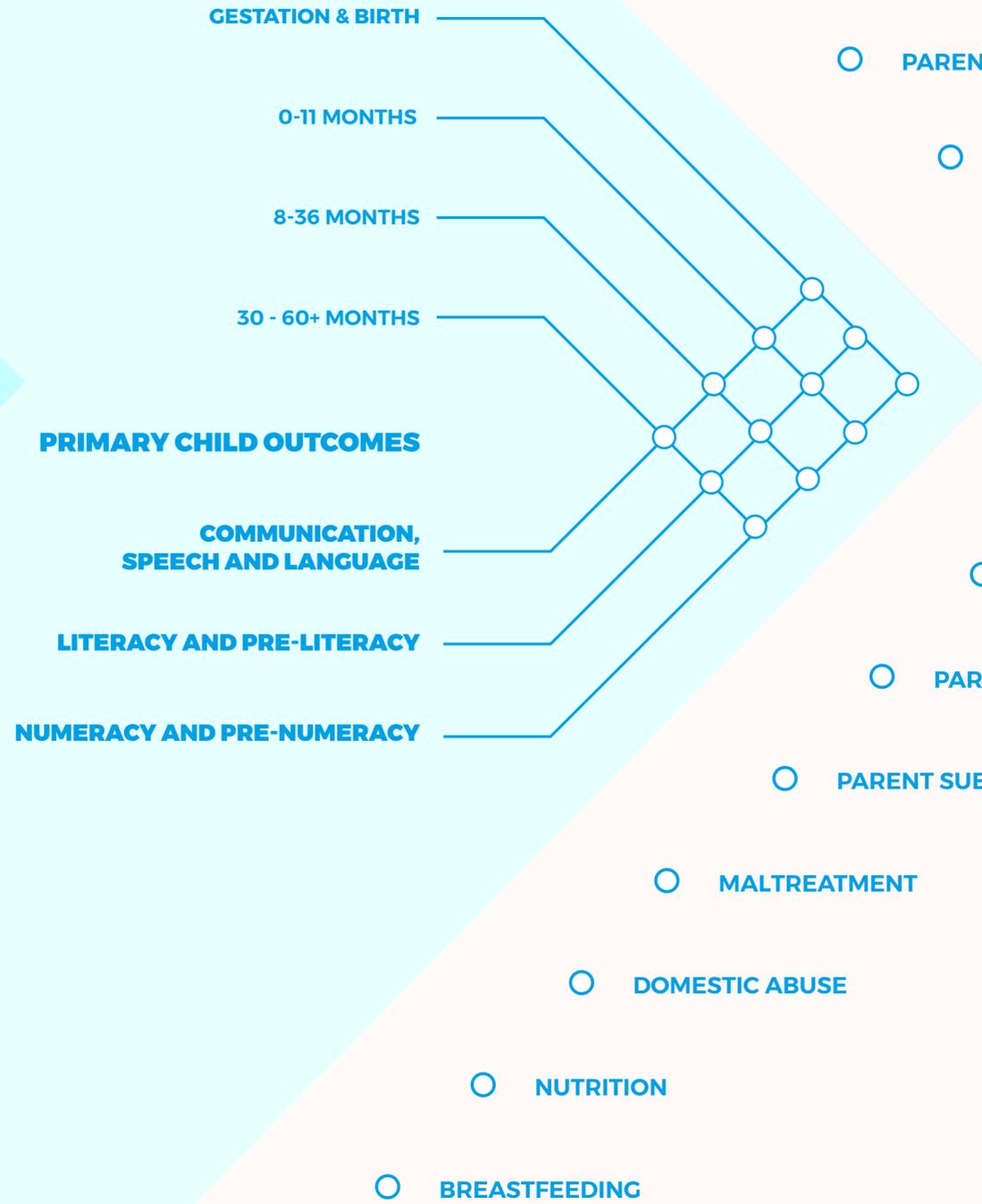
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SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL
DEVELOPMENT

PHYSICAL HEALTH AND
DEVELOPMENT



SERVICES



1.3. WHAT MATTERS

1.3.3. WHAT MATTERS LOCALLY

The **evidence matrix** is designed to help local partnerships explore what the evidence says about the relative importance of different factors on early learning outcomes. However, the **evidence review** also identifies the importance of understanding local needs when developing a strategy to improve outcomes. Research evidence should be considered in light of local children’s needs and data on the influences as indicated in the evidence matrix.

This section outlines four steps to identify local needs in relation to the evidence matrix.

- 1. Explore existing data.** Does the partnership have access to existing data that provides a sufficient level of detail to understand the local need profile? For those aspects of the evidence matrix that are highly influential, do you have sufficient knowledge of how these factors operate locally?
- 2. Develop a local needs analysis plan.** Based on an assessment of the availability or absence of existing data on key areas, develop a plan for collecting and analysing existing or new data.
- 3. If necessary, collect and analyse new data:** Build the **capacity** or resources to gather and analyse new data on early learning outcomes and key local factors.
- 4. Balancing the evidence and local data about what matters:** based on an analysis of existing and potentially new data, identify areas that may make good candidates for local efforts to improve early learning outcomes.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Do you need to bring in additional expertise to synthesise, analyse or collect new data?

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1.3. WHAT MATTERS

1.3.4. EXPLORE EXISTING DATA

The most efficient way to understand local profiles of need and influence is to draw upon local data that exists already. Some of this will be from publicly available data, others may not be publicly available but held by statutory or other bodies (hence the importance of strong partnerships with local agencies; see **Section 2**).

Linked to this Toolkit is a **public data library** made up of quality data sources related to early childhood for England and Wales. This provides descriptions, links to data, and considerations of strengths and limitations.



The partnership will additionally need to access local early years, education, health and relevant local authority-held data.

Actions to explore existing data:

1. Within the public data library explore Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) profiles to identify key aspects of early learning outcomes and how the local area compares to the national picture.
2. Consider the school **readiness** gap in EYFS profiles between those living in poverty and their more affluent peers.
3. Identify existing and local sources of data against the evidence matrix to map local data against the factors.
4. Create a document that maps data and key insights from local sources against key factors in the evidence matrix.
5. Identify key gaps or limitations in your local existing data (this will form a basis for the development of a local needs analysis plan).

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- What are the strengths and limitations of your existing local data?
- Are there gaps in existing data that you may wish to explore further?
- To what extent do local data on need align with what the research says matters, and where does it differ?

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1.3. WHAT MATTERS

1.3.5. DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A LOCAL NEEDS ANALYSIS PLAN

A good exploration of available existing data, coupled with an in-depth exploration of the local early learning system (**Section 2**) will provide a good starting point for beginning to understand the local picture of need and influences. However, data is often limited in terms of what is available, how specific it is to areas or in relation to people not accessing services.

A local needs analysis plan will identify what data and information is currently available and where the partnership may need to collect new data. It is important to consider what time, resources and capacity the partnership has to gather this information.

- [Surveys](#)
- [Listening sessions and public forums](#)
- [Interviews and focus groups](#)
- [Ethnographic explorations](#)

Actions to develop a local needs analysis plan:

The Community Toolbox is a comprehensive resource which includes guidance to create a local needs analysis plan. Use the Community Toolbox to develop and undertake a plan in line with the following actions:

1. Identify gaps or limitations in existing data
2. Identify the early learning outcomes and areas of influence that the partnership wishes to explore further.
3. Develop a set of specific research activities and questions, and the type of data you will need to gather for each one which may be qualitative or quantitative (e.g. school attendance data by defined area, or asking parents about their experience of local services).
4. Use the **Community Toolbox** to identify the appropriate methods and resources to explore these questions. The box and associated links to the left share some of the methods that may be suitable.
5. Drawing on the Community Toolbox, identify the resources and capacity required to undertake the local needs analysis plan, adjusting as time and resources demand.
6. Undertake the local needs analysis plan, capturing data alongside the existing data.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Will collecting new data add value to your local decision-making?
- Have you explored local data with local residents and professionals, to help understand or contextualise it?

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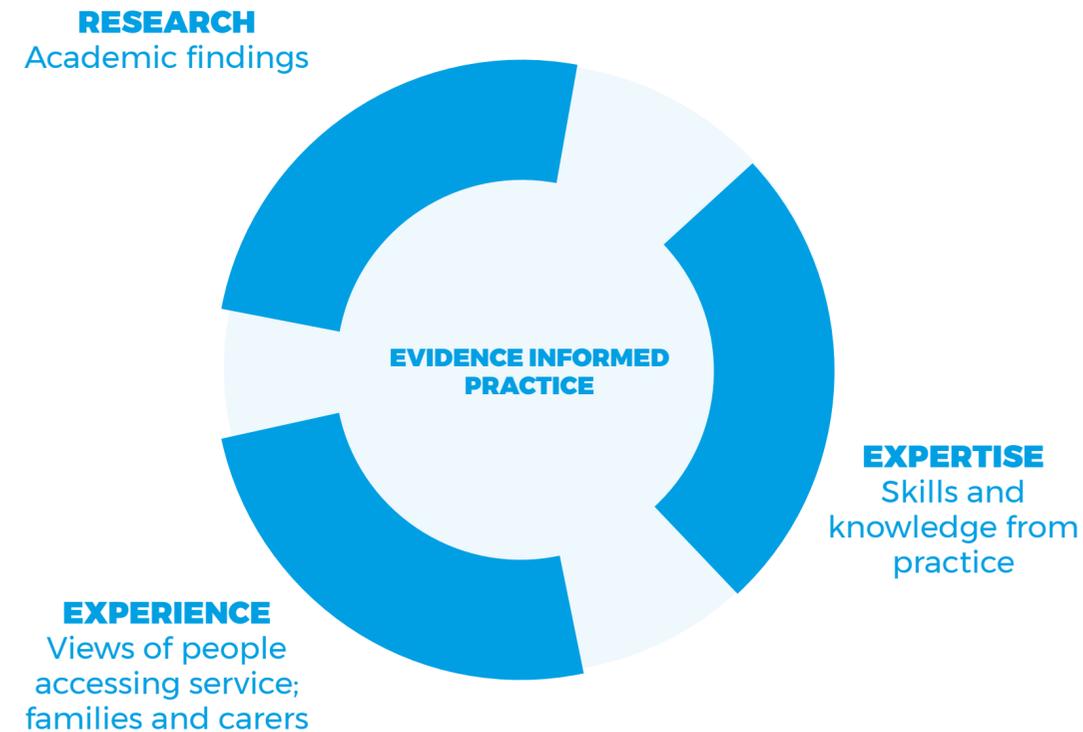
1.4.1. INTRODUCTION: A PATCHY EVIDENTIAL LANDSCAPE

When considering the evidence for *what works* to improve children's early learning outcomes, it is important to consider that it is often patchy and does not neatly align with the evidence about *what matters*.

The research evidence might suggest that a particular area of influence on early learning outcomes is highly important (e.g. attuned parent/child interactions) but the corresponding evidence base about *what works* to promote such interactions may be weak.

Conversely, just because the evidence is strong in a particular area (e.g. supporting parents to establish structure and routine), it does not necessarily mean it is the most predictive factor for promoting early learning outcomes.

In light of this, there is more to an evidence-informed strategy than the consideration of the evidence about *what works* alone. The Toolkit has been structured to first consider the evidence about *what matters* alongside local profiles of need and context (**Section 1.3**), before engaging with the evidence about what works, to which we now turn.



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1.4. WHAT WORKS

1.4.2. RETURNING THE EVIDENCE MATRIX

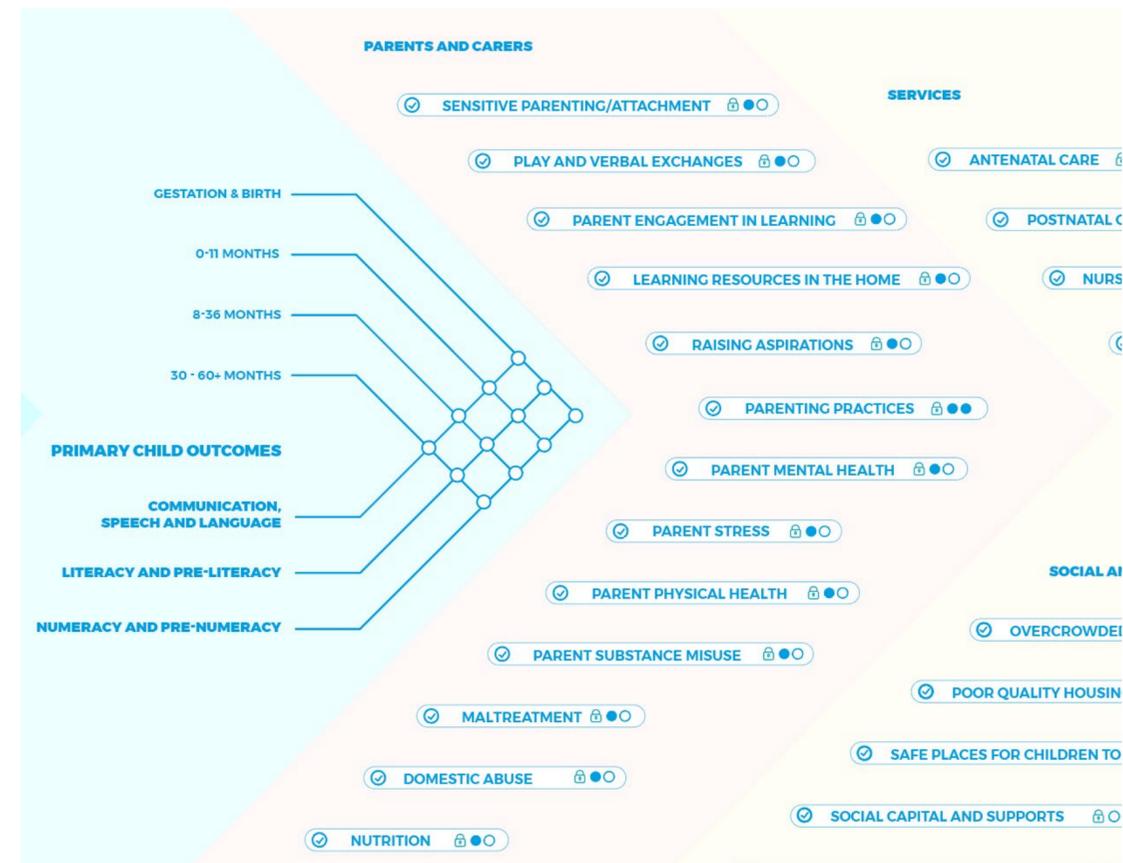
Section 1.3 introduced the **evidence matrix**, that summarised the evidence about *what matters* to promote children's early learning outcomes. In this section of the Toolkit, the matrix is overlaid with an indication of the strength of the evidence base on *what works* in each given area.

The purpose is to help the partnership consider:

1. If and where there is robust evidence for *what works* to draw upon, related to different areas of influence on early learning outcomes;
2. How the strength of this evidence relates to specific areas of need and influence in your area.

Section 2 explores how this does or does not align with local system priorities, service provision and capacity.

Section 3 guides the partnership to weigh up all of this - evidence and local data on needs and *what works*, existing provision, and the local system - in order to prioritise efforts, the balance between evidence-based practice and local **innovation** and improvement activities.



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1.4. WHAT WORKS

1.4.3. HOW TO READ THE 'WHAT WORKS' ELEMENTS OF THE EVIDENCE MATRIX

In the version of the evidence matrix on the following page, you will see the original symbols on *what matters* which were the:

- 🚩 **Flags:** indicating the importance of factors on outcomes:
 - Three green dots: factors that critically influential to specific early learning outcomes
 - Two green dots: factors that are strongly influential
 - One green dot: factors that are moderately influential

Where an influence is not highlighted within the matrix when a particular outcome or developmental stage is selected - this is because the research does not indicate a sufficiently strong link.

In addition to these flags indicating the strength of the evidence about *what matters*, the matrix on the following page also includes padlocks and blue dots:

- 🔒 **Padlocks:** indicate how secure the evidence is about knowing *what works* to improve outcomes:
 - Two blue dots: indicates that there is a strong evidence base for improving that influence
 - One blue dot: indicates that there is a mixed evidence base for improving that influence

As with the earlier matrix, you can select an age and area of interest to filter the information contained within it. Once you have explored the matrix and its recommendations you will then be able to consider how this relates to the other insights you have gathered in order to inform your strategy.

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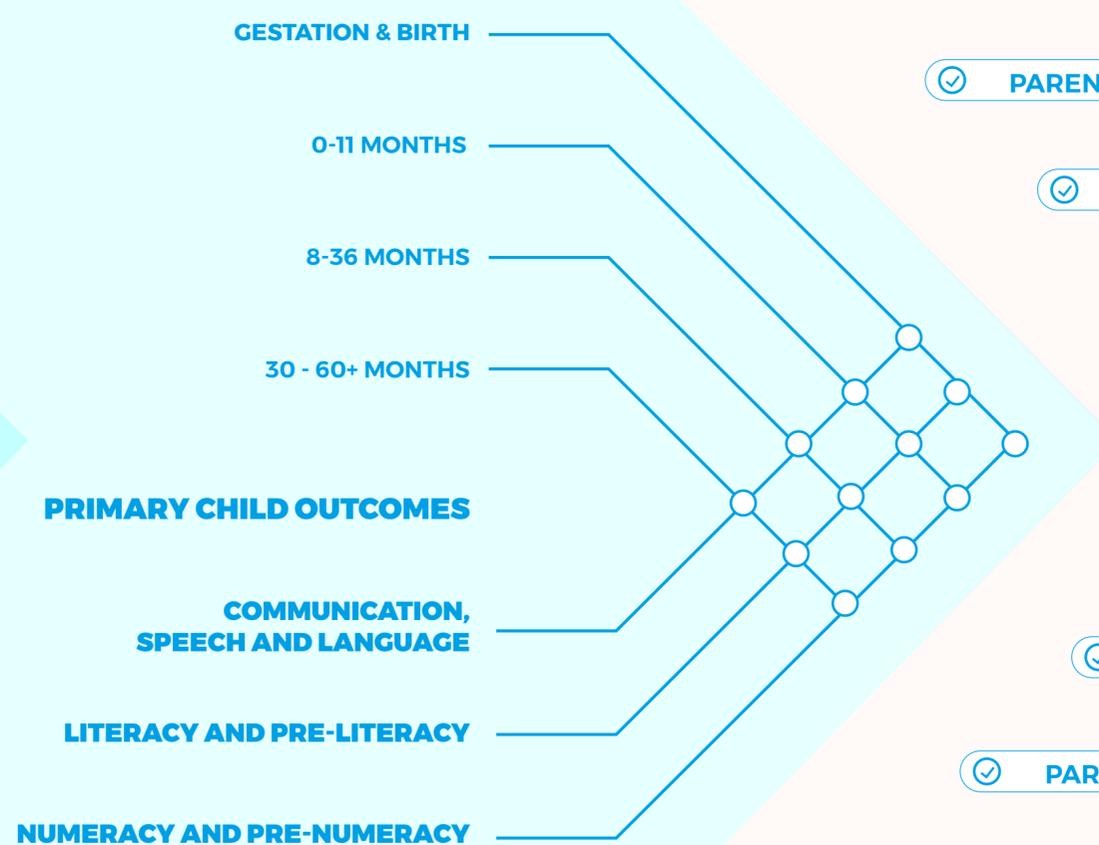


PARENTS AND CARERS

SERVICES

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

PHYSICAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT



PRIMARY CHILD OUTCOMES

COMMUNICATION, SPEECH AND LANGUAGE

LITERACY AND PRE-LITERACY

NUMERACY AND PRE-NUMERACY

SENSITIVE PARENTING/ATTACHMENT

PLAY AND VERBAL EXCHANGES

PARENT ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING

LEARNING RESOURCES IN THE HOME

RAISING ASPIRATIONS

PARENTING PRACTICES

PARENT MENTAL HEALTH

PARENT STRESS

PARENT PHYSICAL HEALTH

PARENT SUBSTANCE MISUSE

MALTREATMENT

DOMESTIC ABUSE

NUTRITION

BREASTFEEDING

ANTENATAL CARE

POSTNATAL CARE

NURSERY PROVISION

CHILDREN'S CENTRES

SCHOOLS

SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

OVERCROWDED ACCOMMODATION

POOR QUALITY HOUSING

SAFE PLACES FOR CHILDREN TO PLAY

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND SUPPORTS

EMPLOYMENT THAT FITS AROUND FAMILIES

strong evidence base for improving that influence
 mixed evidence base for improving that influence

1.4. WHAT WORKS

1.4.4. INITIAL EXPLORATION OF WHAT MATTERS AGAINST WHAT WORKS

You can jump in and explore the full matrix in the associated **evidence matrix** tool. The accompanying **evidence review** - which underpins this Toolkit - provides further details about the evidence, alongside links to further reading and sources of evidence that link to more detailed examples of **evidence-based practice**.

Actions to explore the evidence matrix:

- Identify the areas that 'matter' locally (**Section 1.3.3**) and consider the strength of the associated evidence in each area;
- Identify areas in which the evidence about *what matters* locally and *what works* either align or not.
- Summarise insights from exploration into a short brief. This will be reconsidered after **Section 2**, and before prioritising **Section 3**.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Where do you see particular gaps in the strength of the evidence base?
- How does the strength of the evidence base relate to those areas of influence that are emerging as potential priorities in your area?
- What is the appetite in your partnership for improving performance where the evidence is strong versus developing new responses to where the evidence is weak?

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1.5. STOCK-TAKE / WHAT MATTERS AND WHAT WORKS

This section poses a series of questions to help the partnership consider how well developed and confident they are in their understanding of *what matters* - both in terms of the research evidence and the local picture of need - as well as the evidence about *what works*.

Partnerships should consider the questions to the right, responding with either:

- **Green:** a high degree of confidence
- **Amber:** a moderate degree of confidence
- **Red:** a low degree of confidence

The stock-take questions are for individuals from across the partnership to answer and should be completed separately prior to coming together to reflect on the collective position.

What next? If responses to questions are green, then this high degree of confidence means that no immediate further work is required and this section can be kept under review. Amber responses indicate that sufficient understanding and progress has been made to move on and make further decisions in later sections, on the basis of this work. However, these might be areas in which partnerships wish to revisit and strengthen in due course.

Where any responses are red, this indicates that further work is required before moving on and making decisions in later sections.

HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU...

...In your understanding of what the evidence says is important for children's early learning outcomes?



...That the local data you hold on child needs and factors is sufficiently robust, representative and detailed?



...That you adequately understand the needs and important factors on early learning outcomes, locally?



...In your understanding of the evidence about what works to improve early learning outcomes?



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1.5. STOCK-TAKE



2.

THE LOCAL SYSTEM AND PARTNERSHIP

2. THE LOCAL SYSTEM AND PARTNERSHIP

2.1. GOALS AND READINESS CHECK

GOALS

- To introduce systems change and systems thinking
- To develop a good understanding of the local early learning system
- To assess and strengthen the existing partnership

READINESS CHECK

Recommended time
2-6 months

Resources

- Time and capacity to develop and maintain close working relationships with wider stakeholders
- Time to map services and stakeholders within the local early learning system
- Access to low-cost system mapping software (provided)
- Financial resources to enable wider participation (e.g. supporting things like creches, reimbursement for time or back-fill).

Conditions and preparatory work

- A shared focus across the partnership and wider early learning system to work together to improve early learning outcomes
- Strong and trusted relationships with wider stakeholders and the local community

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THE LOCAL SYSTEM AND PARTNERSHIP

2.1. GOALS AND READINESS CHECK

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2.3.2. Introduction to Systems Thinking

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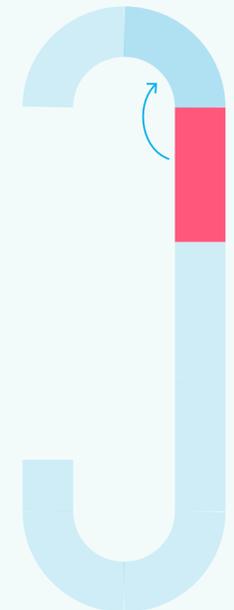
2.3.5. Mapping local services

2.4. ASSESSING THE PARTNERSHIP

2.4.1. Defining the core partnership

2.4.2. Exploring wider partnership arrangements

2.5. Stock-take



2. THE LOCAL SYSTEM AND PARTNERSHIP

2.2. INTRODUCTION

Section 1 provided an introduction to the evidence about *what matters* and *what works* to improve children's early learning outcomes. Yet evidence and data are necessary but not sufficient in crafting an effective strategy to improve these outcomes.

This section enables the partnership to set the evidence in a local context. The theory of change (**Section 0.3**) proposes that the local early learning system is made up of a series of elements (e.g. people, assets, leadership, infrastructure and culture) - that can help or hinder change including how people engage with the evidence. This section helps the partnership explore these.

It comprises two key stages:

1. Exploring the local early learning system by introducing systems thinking and tools to better map and understand it.
2. Enabling partnerships to situate themselves within this wider early learning system and to consider how the partnership itself can be strengthened.

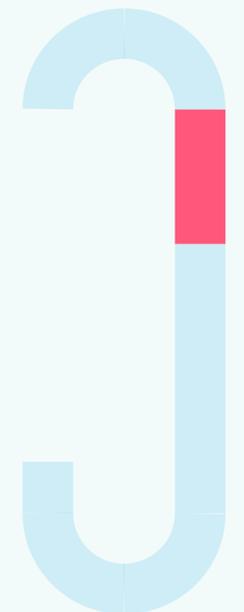
'An early learning system' and 'Introduction to systems thinking' outline key concepts and provide a range of resources for further reading and understanding. 'Setting system boundaries' and 'Mapping the system' are practically focussed and as such offer guidance on specific activities designed to enable the partnership to think differently about their approach and to inform strategic planning.

This part of the process will generate locally focussed insights that will complement the evidence and help you to build your local strategy to improve early learning outcomes.

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2.3. UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM

2.3.1. AN EARLY LEARNING SYSTEM

An early learning system

As explored in **Section 1**, children’s early learning outcomes are shaped by the environment in which they grow up. Factors include:

- The capacity and **capability** that parents have to provide a nurturing home learning environment, in part, determined by:
- Parents’ own learning experiences;
 - Their social supports and networks;
 - Financial resources;
 - Availability, accessibility and quality of a constellation of services;
 - The wider physical environment and infrastructure;
 - Values, laws and customs

As such, the stakeholders in an early learning system should include representatives from early years, education, family support, health and wider statutory and voluntary services.

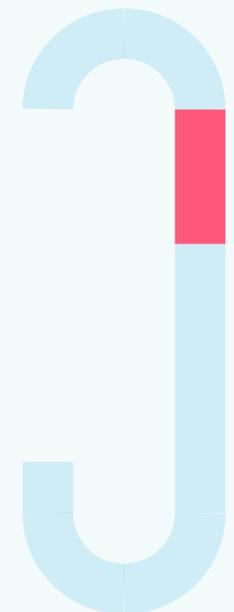
This system is captured by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory model, developed in 1979 and continuously revised. This is further explained on the next page.

All of this adds up to a complex and interacting set of factors affecting early learning outcomes: **the local early learning system**.

Local strategies designed to improve early learning outcomes - no matter how carefully considered or rooted in the general evidence about *what matters* and *what works* - requires an understanding of the different parts of the system, how they work together and the associated challenges and opportunities that exist within it.

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2.3. UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM

As the early learning system is not clearly visible or tangible, it can be helpful to visualise it.

As **Section 1** showed, there are a range of factors that affect children's early learning outcomes. Families, neighbours, services, organisations and wider society all have an **impact** on the development of each child.

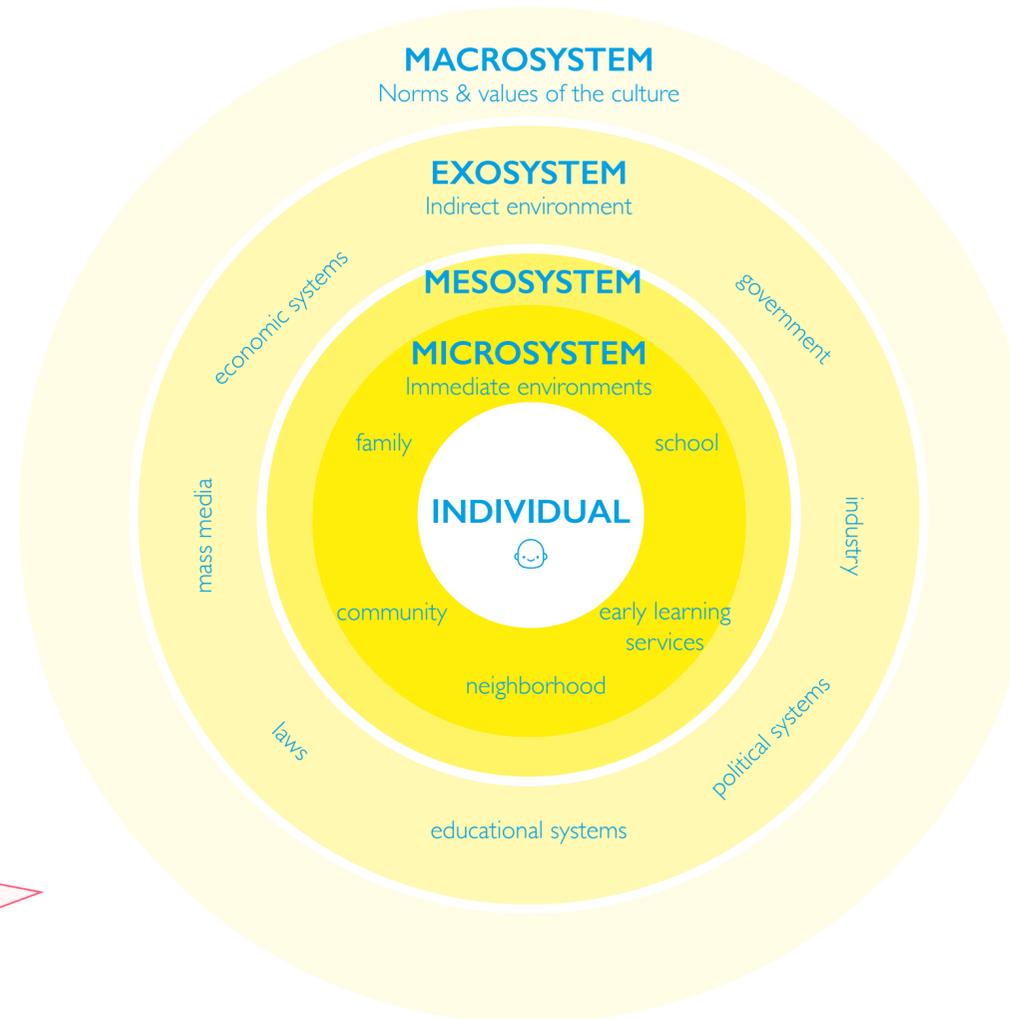
Some have a greater impact and others a lesser impact, and stronger relationships between different parts of the system have greater potential for positive impact.

The idea of a local early learning system is summarised in Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which was first published in 1979 and which has been continuously revised.

In order to explore your local early learning system, the next section will introduce key concepts of systems thinking.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Who are the individuals, services and organisations that affect early learning outcomes in your area?
- How well do different parts of the system work collaboratively in your area?
- How well is the early learning system represented in your partnership?



Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory
(adapted from Berk and Roberts, 2009, p28)

MACROSYSTEM

Social ideologies and values of cultures and subcultures

EXOSYSTEM

Systems that influence the individual indirectly through micro-system

MESOSYSTEM

Connection between systems and microsystems

MICROSYSTEM

Direct interaction in activities, roles and relations with others and objects

CHRONOSYSTEM

Time and historic factors

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2.3. UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM

2.3.2. INTRODUCTION TO SYSTEMS THINKING

This section of the Toolkit introduces some key concepts of systems thinking, which are important for developing a local approach to improving early learning outcomes. They would be helpful to read through, discuss as a partnership and use throughout the activities in this section.

Thinking about the whole, not just the parts: systems thinking considers the whole of a local area, not just individual parts within it. As **Section 1** illustrated, there are many interrelated elements and factors within a child's experience - ranging from parents to services and local environment and infrastructure. Viewing these elements or factors in isolation misses how they support or get in the way of each other and what outcomes the system is delivering as a whole.

Systems are responsive: given that people, organisations and issues are connected in an area, it follows that when a change is made to one part, it will have knock-on effects to another part of the system. Sometimes these effects are intentional, sometimes unintentional, for better or worse.

Contribution, not attribution: considering the wider system leads one to acknowledge that all outcomes are a result of a range of factors and that changes in an individual organisation and service can only ever be a contributor to a change in outcomes; with other elements within the system also contributing - positively or negatively.

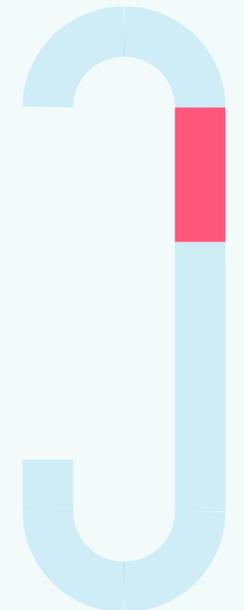
Systems leadership: Given the interrelatedness and complexity of a local early learning system, change demands a particular type of leadership. Rather than relying on the formal authority of single individuals, it is a collective behaviour developed through a shared understanding of common goals and principles.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Can you think of times or situations in which changes to one part of your local early learning system has led to unintended consequences?
- How aware are local partners of the wider system, and the role they play within it?

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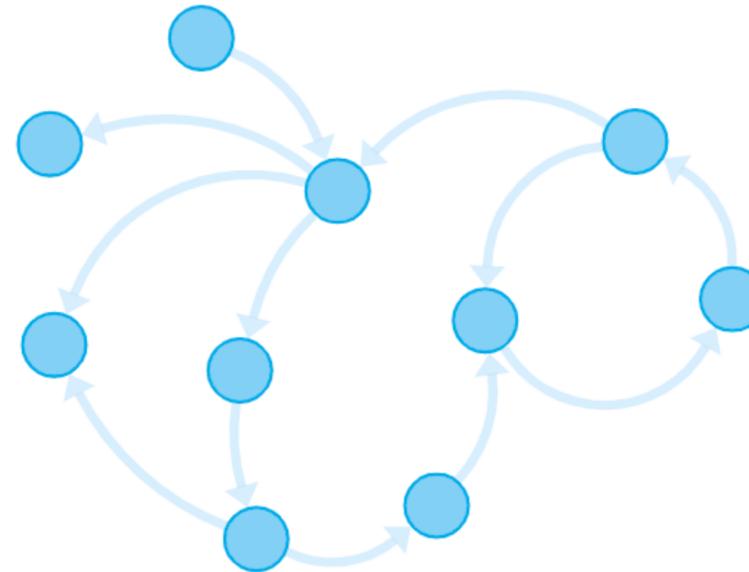


2.3. UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM

Further reading and resources:

Below are some recommended links to further reading related to local systems change and systems thinking. This is intended to be a jumping-off point for local partnerships to explore systems thinking.

- This [short piece](#) by **Leyla Acarouglu** provides a nice exploration of 'systems', and [this one](#) further explores the adaptive nature of systems.
- [This report](#) produced by **Collaborate** and the **Lankelly Chase Foundation** provides a clear overview of what systems change means in the context of public services and outlines the necessary 'building blocks' of systems infrastructure.
- This [short piece](#) by Tynesia Boyea-Robinson from **Living Cities** outlines four components of a collective impact approach that are important in efforts to improve outcomes of those living in a context of economic disadvantage.
- In the [Water of System Change](#), social impact consultancy, **FSG**, explore how powerful the less explicit components of a system can be when you're seeking to make fundamental changes.
- For a quick overview, [this article](#) outlines **Peter Senge's** 11 'laws' on systems thinking and [stakeholder engagement](#). You can read more on these [here](#).



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2.3. UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM

2.3.3. SETTING SYSTEM BOUNDARIES FOR YOUR EARLY LEARNING STRATEGY

This following section provides a set of tools for mapping your local early learning system. First, it is useful for the partnership to define the area within which they will focus - alongside considerations of capacity and resource - which will inform what is in and out of scope of the project. Initial boundary setting will help focus system mapping work, even if these are subsequently changed or refined.

Boundaries may be:

- 1. Physical:** Such as topographical, bounded by roads, estates, etc.
- 2. Administrative or financial:** Such as local authority and wards within, or health system boundaries (which may, but often don't align).
- 3. The reach of the partnership's service provision:** Catchment areas or referral boundaries for partnership members;
- 4. Related to community Identity:** A deeper sense of connection to a physical or social community; how people living in an area recognise the physical or social place, and their situation within it.

There is not a defined set of rules by which to determine boundaries. Typically, different boundary types - like those on the left - do not align well. As such, local strategies may be better framed as 'place-informed' rather than 'place-based' (see *this report* from Renaisi to explore further).

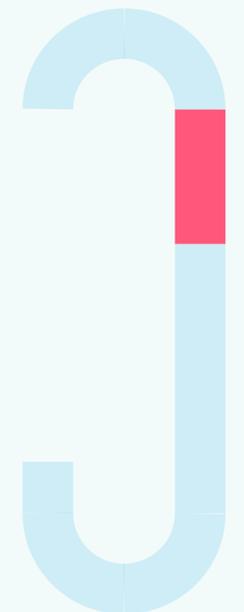
The boundaries of a local system change effort should, as far as possible, be specified within a local strategy (**Section 5**). Prior to this, develop a draft boundary of the local system within the partnership, bearing in mind the above types of boundary. During the mapping process, this will help to focus efforts, as well as identifying where the boundary should be changed.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Do you have a good understanding of the administrative and financial boundaries in your locality?
- How do these administrative boundaries relate to how residents view their community?

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2.3. UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM

2.3.4. MAPPING SYSTEMS

Mapping the local early learning system will help to deepen your understanding of the stakeholders, services and factors affecting early learning outcomes in your area.

It is recommended that an individual is identified to capture the data and maintain the maps generated through this section.

Stakeholder/actor mapping

A key step in bringing about change in a system is to picture who is within it. By 'seeing' the system in this way you'll be able to understand it in more depth. This section guides partnerships through a process of mapping the **stakeholders** within their local early learning system (Please note that stakeholder mapping and actor mapping can describe different activities. For the Toolkit, we have developed a single process which brings these together). The following section describes how to map existing local services.

Mapping workshop:

Who:

1. Representatives from your partnership
2. Representatives from your community

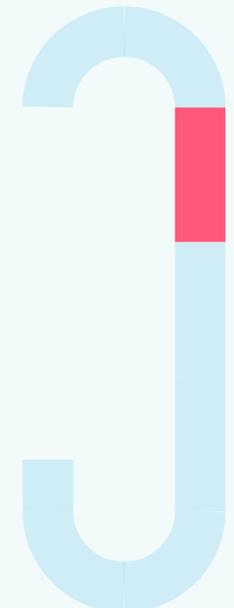
What:

- Flip chart paper and pens
- Post-it notes (variety of colours)
- Dot stickers
- Access to '**Kumu**' online mapping Tool



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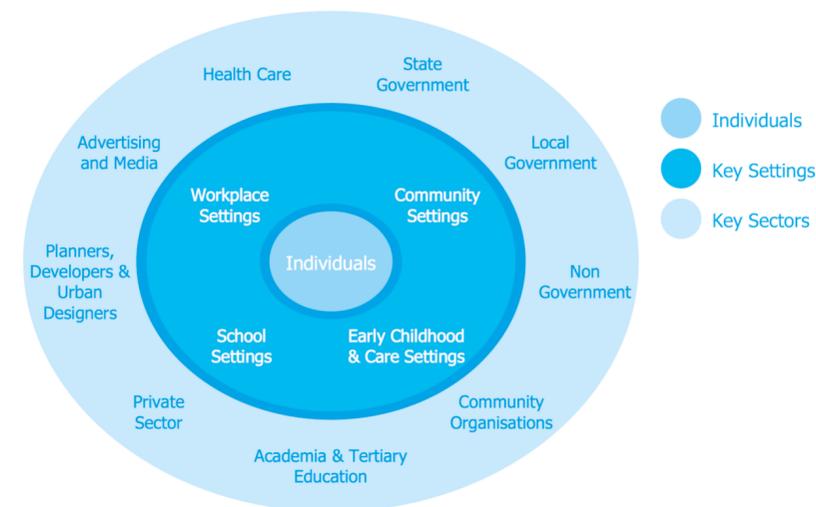
2.3. UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM

Stage 1 – Stakeholder Mapping:

This exercise is supported by the [Community Toolbox](#) section on stakeholder analysis. For additional detail on definitions (e.g. stakeholder types) and steps in the process, please refer to the online tool.

1. Begin by drawing a circle at the centre of a piece of flip-chart paper. Write the focus of your work in the circle: 'improving early learning outcomes for children in poverty'
2. Individually, write down a list of 'primary stakeholders': these are typically service users and groups who will benefit from the efforts of the project, for example, local parents or children growing up in poverty.
3. Allow 5 minutes for each participant to write their ideas on post-it notes. Discuss and compare who you have on your post-its and decide who to place on your flip-chart paper.
4. Repeat this process, using different coloured post-its, this time considering 'secondary stakeholders': these are those directly involved with or responsible for service users, or whose jobs or lives might be affected by the process or results of the effort.
5. Finally consider 'key stakeholders': these are individuals who play an important role within a particular agency or service (for example, in the secondary stakeholders) and/or key local influencers. This might include a local headteacher, community leaders or the local press.
6. Once you have generated a comprehensive selection of relevant stakeholders work together to decide on where they should be positioned on the paper.

7. Those who will be most influenced/ influential should be nearest the middle, going outwards as their influence decreases. You may wish to discuss any stakeholders you feel are less relevant at this stage and decide to remove them.
8. Once you have placed the post-its on the paper, spend time reviewing their positions. Individually, place a dot sticker on those you consider to be of most importance (giving a limited number of stickers to each person). This will help to prioritise which local stakeholders it is important to engage going forward.
9. Take a picture of your map as it is now, as you will change it in the next stage



Adapted from 'Active Living For All: A Framework for Physical Activity in Western Australia 2012-2016', pg 27'

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Remember to use the [Community Toolbox](#) if you require further information about stakeholder analysis.

Stage 2 - Stakeholder/actor mapping:

This map will build on the previous exercise to let you organise people and organisations according to the focus of their work. It will then allow you to look at how influential each of these entities is and what the connections between them are.

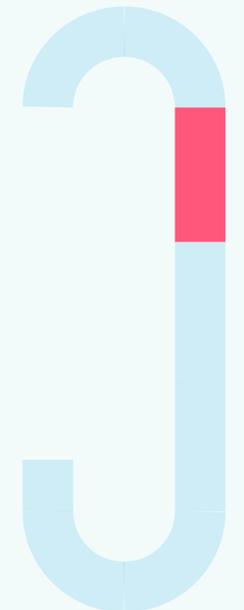
1. Using your flip-chart paper, cluster the post-its by sector or group, i.e. health, education, children and families, onto a new piece of paper. Draw circles around these clusters and label them.
2. Using your original piece of flip-chart paper if possible, or a new one with your focus written in the middle, divide the paper into sections to represent the sectors or groups shown in the clusters. You should have 4 to 6 clusters.
3. Taking the main stakeholders that you identified with dot stickers place them into the relevant sections on your new map.
4. The next step is to review and consider any wider stakeholders with a role in the system. Using the questions to the right, work together to consider this, using post-its to capture your answers.

Questions:

- What people or places do core stakeholders interact with on a regular basis? (I.e. schools, teachers, local faith-based leaders etc.).
 - What organisations support or influence those that interact with the core? (For example, a teachers association).
 - What types of local, regional, national, or international organisations influence the core's experiences related to the topic? (For example, the Local Authority, the Department for Education).
 - Who funds relevant people, places, or organisations?
 - Who conducts relevant research?
 - Who sets policy?
- Once you have populated a draft map the next stage is to reflect upon who you have identified and add anyone who you think is missing.
 - Capture missing people on post-its and add to the relevant section on your map (you do not need to build a comprehensive list, just try to identify the most relevant stakeholders).
 - Read through the full map again and remove any duplicates or those who you think are not relevant.

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Stage 3: engagement, relationships and connections

The next stage of the process is to identify levels of engagement of different actors. You can then analyse the strength of your relationship with them, and the points of connection amongst them.

A: Level of engagement of various stakeholders and actors

Useful for: Identifying assets and gaps

1. Looking at each section of your map discuss how engaged each actor is with your initiative
2. The level could be strong (S), moderate (M), weak (W), or no engagement (N)
3. Draw an S, M, W, or N on the relevant actors
4. These could also be depicted through colours if/ when the map is transferred to an electronic format (such as Kumu).

B: Representation of stakeholders in the partnership

Useful for: considering your partnership make-up

Again, considering each stakeholder, discuss your current relationship with them. It may be that one person or organisation in the partnership has a relationship with that individual, or that multiple people do. Use the dot stickers to indicate who you are engaged with.

C: Connections Between Actors

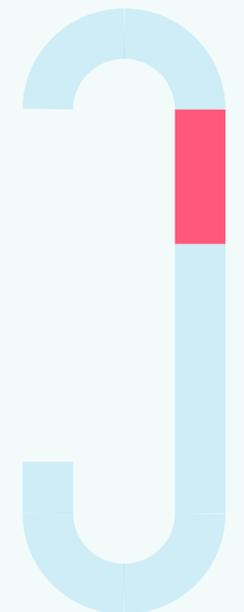
Useful for: understanding wider relationships and who may be affected by changes to the system

1. Looking at the map as a whole discuss the connections between the stakeholders on the map
2. Draw lines between relevant stakeholders on the map to show these connections
3. Use solid lines for strong or established relationships and dotted lines for weak or emerging relationships
4. Write the type of relationship above the line
5. For example, is it a funding relationship? A partnering relationship?
6. Again, it is not necessary to be exhaustive, but rather to capture the most important strong and weak relationships in the system

For further information on stakeholder/actor mapping, [this guide](#) from **FSG** provides more detail, including a comprehensive session plan and guidance on how to identify momentum, blockages and opportunities within the system.

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2.3. UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM

Creating a digital map

Once you are all satisfied with your map, it is recommended that you digitise it. This will allow you to see the connections you've identified with more clarity. It will also allow you to make changes and additions to the map as your work progresses. We'd recommend using the free mapping tool [Kumu](#) for this.

This [video](#) guide from [Kumu](#) provides a useful introduction to creating maps (which is expanded upon in the guidance on their website). By way of further illustration, the Hawaii Executive Office for Early Learning undertook a system mapping exercise also using Kumu tools. On [this page](#), you can find a couple of short videos introducing this work.

You may want to deepen your understanding of the local system by undertaking further mapping exercises, for example mapping local factors and factors on early learning outcomes in line with the evidence matrix. You are welcome to explore additional types of mapping exercise supported by Kumu and other resources ([Section 2.3.2](#), and via FSG and the Community Toolbox).

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Are you able to situate your partnership and its role within this system?
- Have you identified any key stakeholders or actors that may add value to your partnership work, that would also be mutually beneficial to them?

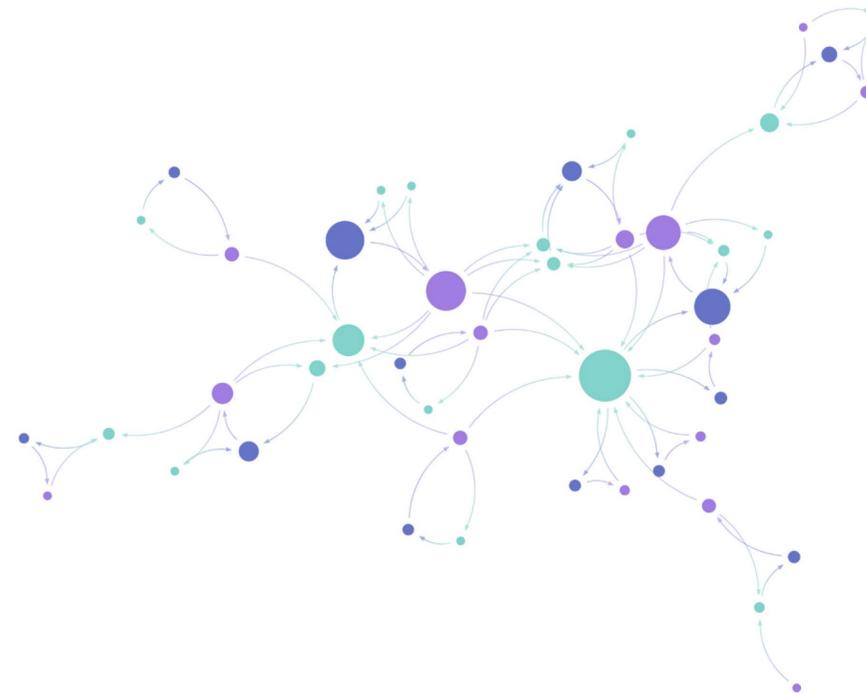
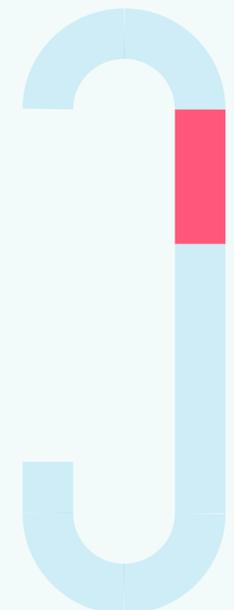


Image from Alex Vipond's blog at: *Introducing the "Mapmakers" series*
<https://blog.kumu.io/introducing-the-mapmakers-series-18f73cbeebe4>

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2.3. UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM

2.3.5. MAPPING LOCAL SERVICES

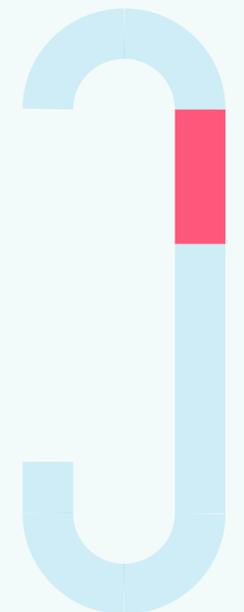
Your stakeholder analysis and maps will give you a strong sense of who is involved in your local early learning system. Alongside this map we also recommend you map the services in your area. This is helpful for you to be able to see what services are already involved in trying to improve outcomes for children in poverty. It will also allow you to analyse which of the factors from the [evidence matrix](#) existing services are addressing, and help inform the balance between [evidence-based practice](#), [innovation](#), improvement, and [implementation](#).

For this map, it is not recommended that you start with a paper version, as there are likely to be many services involved that you may not have the time or resources to research in one workshop. As **Kumu** is integrated with both Excel and Google Sheets the following steps guide you to co-creating a services map, with your partnership, electronically.

1. Decide on one person to oversee the mapping process. This person should create a spreadsheet with 4 columns: Label, Tag, Organisation and Description. Using a Google-sheet, as opposed to Excel, would make this more easily shareable and prevent duplication. The 'label' column is for the name of the service. The 'tag' is for what kind of service it is (e.g. health or education). 'Organisation' allows you to record the organisation who run the service. 'Description' should briefly say what the service addresses, preferably linking to the evidence matrix, i.e 'play' or 'nutrition'.
2. Share the spreadsheet with partners and ask them to populate it with relevant services that they are aware of, completing the information in the 4 columns. They can draw upon their existing signposting resources as well as their knowledge of services their organisation delivers or are partnered with. Provide a realistic deadline for this to be completed by, bearing in mind the map can be updated as your work progresses. If any of the participants are not aware of the links to the evidence matrix the coordinator should complete these.

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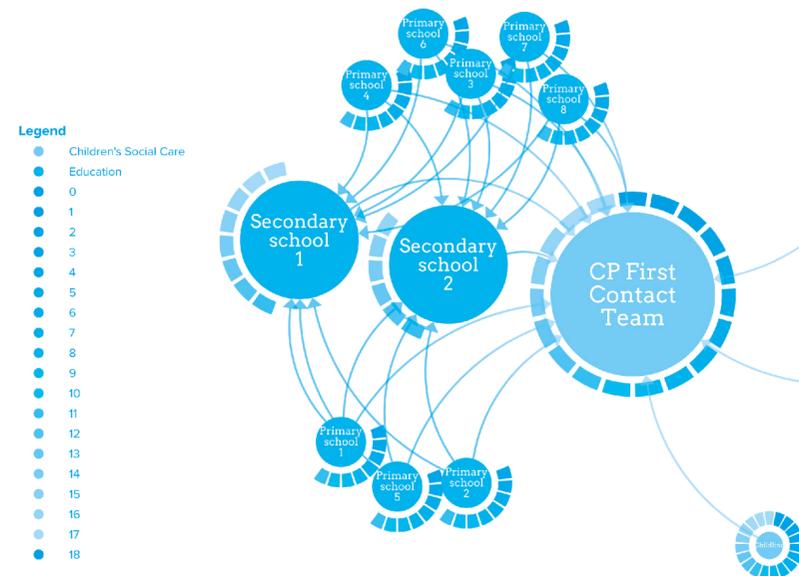
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3. Once the deadline has been reached the coordinator should assess whether they think the services listed give an accurate representation of those involved in the local early learning system. Referring back to your stakeholder and actor maps can help with this. Add any services that are missing.
4. If you are confident that this is a good initial representation, then you can merge the spreadsheet with Kumu. The software will guide you through creating a new map and uploading your spreadsheet. It will then automatically show the labels you have included.
5. If you are interested in seeing how these services are connected you can manually add connections on Kumu. Alternatively, on your existing spreadsheet, you can create a 'connections' sheet. To do this create 2 columns, one labelled 'from' and the other 'to'. Write the list of services in the 'from' column. Write who that service is related to in the 'to' column. Again you can automatically populate this onto Kumu by syncing/ uploading your spreadsheet.
6. As service provision changes regularly it would be sensible to add some other contributors to it so you can share the responsibility of updating.

For full information on how to use **Kumu** see their information page [here](#).

The maps created through this section should be used to:

- Identify where stakeholders and services are currently addressing the *what matters* and *what works* areas of focus (**Section 1**).
- Engage new partners and stakeholders to gather additional data and deepen understanding of what is happening in the local area.
- Inform activities in the next section (**Assess the Partnership**).



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2.4. ASSESSING THE PARTNERSHIP

2.4.1. DEFINING THE CORE PARTNERSHIP

Up until this point, **Section 2** has focused on the local early learning system. Attention now shifts to a consideration of your local partnership within this system, the role it plays and how it might be strengthened.

Research suggests that place-based approaches that take a systemic approach - **co-designed** with local communities - can achieve a greater impact on child outcomes than the sum impact of the individual services or programmes delivered. This is likely due to **local needs** and systems being well understood, alongside partnerships and conditions being created that ensure:

- There is trust and a shared accountability between agencies and communities for children’s early learning outcomes;
- Services are wanted, needed and accessible to families and communities;
- Evidence-based practice is valued, invested in and adequately supported;
- There is a culture of learning, improvement and local innovation.

This section builds on prior sections of the Toolkit, in particular, work around system mapping, to encourage the partnership to reflect on its partnership arrangements. It is focused primarily on the make-up of the partnership - and potentially a wider coalition. Consideration of the legal structures and **governance** arrangements are provided in **Section 4.4**.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Have you considered who else from the wider system might strengthen your core partnerships capacity and capabilities?
- To what degree are the voices of children and families in your community represented in your partnership?
- Do your partnership arrangements reflect the diversity of your local community?

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2.4. ASSESSING THE PARTNERSHIP

Revisiting the partnership

Your partnership will need to bring together partners to design and implement a strategy to improve early learning outcomes. The system mapping in **Section 2.3** should enable the partnership to reflect on whether this group holds the necessary support, influence and breadth of perspectives to bring about the change that is sought. The mapping should point to the value of bringing additional representation from the wider system into the core group.

Steps to define and refine core partnerships:

1. Explore the degree to which your partnership has direct reach or influence within the local early learning system boundaries that have previously been drawn;
2. Review stakeholder and service mapping: Given emerging local priorities, consider any gaps or areas in which the partnership may be strengthened to maximise ability and influence to bring positive change and impact, particularly across sectors and service users.
3. Consider if and how widening membership of the partnership may further strengthen the effectiveness of the core partnership group.
4. Revisit these steps once priorities are agreed (**Section 3**).

Further reading and resources:

The following guides and resources may be useful to your partnership as you explore and refine your partnership make-up:

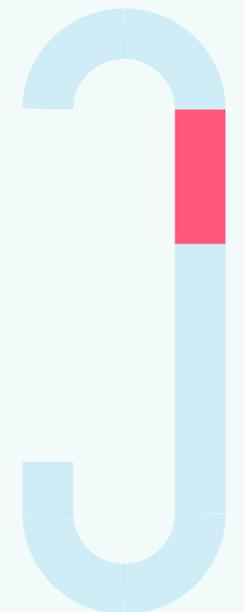
- This [toolkit](#) from the **Community Toolbox** provides guidance for creating a partnership among different organisations to address a common goal.
- This [guide](#) by **Living Cities** provides a set of suggestions and resources aimed at improving stakeholder engagement.
- Also by **Living Cities** is this [10 minute survey](#) to help those engaged in cross-sector partnerships think through the development and progress of their partnership. It provides immediate, tailored feedback, tools and resources to help partners get better results, faster.
- [Here](#) is a short guide on helping collective impact leaders unite their stakeholders and achieve success - focussing on four components that create enduring change.
- This [article](#) identifies the Five Stages of Project Team Development, providing a background and illustration for each stage.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Does the current membership of the provide a full range of perspectives from across the early learning system?
- How can the partnership ensure it hears the perspectives of families?
- Which stakeholders would strengthen the partnership and its work?

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2.4. ASSESSING THE PARTNERSHIP

2.4.2. EXPLORING WIDER PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS

Building a wider coalition

This section of the Toolkit - and the associated system mapping - has emphasised the wide and interconnected nature of a local early learning system. Whilst a core partnership is necessary to drive forward the development and implementation of a strategy to improve early learning outcomes, the effectiveness, reach, sustainability and impact of this group may be bolstered by the development of wider coalitions or partnerships around the core partnership group.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Can your local partnership alone achieve the change you wish to see?
- Does your partnership have the ability, influence and resources to mobilise a wider coalition?

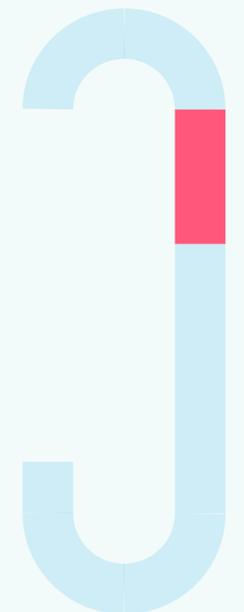
Some reasons for developing a wider coalition include:

- To empower others within your local early learning community - or the community as a whole - to take control of its future and therefore mobilise assets around your strategy;
- To enrich a partnership with additional skills, experiences, connections and resources;
- To create the foundations and infrastructure from which to deliver activities and services;
- To reduce unnecessary duplication of effort and align and pool resources.

As such, the service and system mapping should also be used to help identify key people, groups, organisations and agencies within the local area to form a wider coalition around the local partnership.

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2.4. ASSESSING THE PARTNERSHIP

Steps to building wider partnerships or coalitions:

1. Review stakeholder mapping to identify additional stakeholders or actors outside of the partnership that may be important to:
 - Have support or backing from to progress the work of the partnership
 - Align the work of your Early Learning Community to that of other local initiatives
 - Help deliver specific outreach, services or system change activities, as part of an emerging strategy.
2. Review partnership, coalition and governance arrangements in relation to the following areas (and where weaknesses exist, seek to address them):
 - Perceived and actual power
 - Diversity and representation
 - Competition;
 - Bad history between organisations
 - Insufficient organisational capacity or resources
 - Failure to provide and create leadership within the coalition.
3. Revisit these steps once priorities and the local system change strategy is agreed.

Section 4.4 will address how to operationalise the partnership.

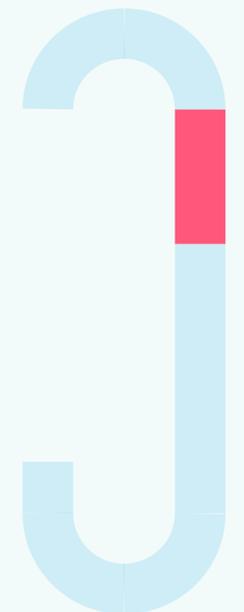
Further reading and resources:

The following guides and resources may be useful to local partnerships as you explore and refine your local partnership arrangements:

- ***This section*** of the **Community Toolbox** provides a set of considerations and resources related to coalition-building
- ***This*** is an excellent overview by the **Colebrooke Centre for Evidence and Implementation** and colleagues on systems leadership or leadership across multiple systems, and its relevance in current thinking and practice.
- This ***resource*** by **The Compassion Capital Fund (CCF)** provides a great framework for any organisation or coalition of organisations that want to know more about establishing and managing partnerships, working together and beyond.
- ***Here***, the **DFID Global School Partnerships** illustrates how to build effective partnerships and establishing the agreements. This is particularly useful to those in the education sector, but the stages and partnership cycles outlined has relevance to all other organisations.

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2.5. STOCK-TAKE / THE LOCAL SYSTEM AND PARTNERSHIPS

This section poses a series of questions to help the partnership consider how well developed and confident they are in their understanding of the local system and their partnerships.

Partnerships should consider the questions to the right, responding with either:

- **Green:** a high degree of confidence
- **Amber:** a moderate degree of confidence
- **Red:** a low degree of confidence

The stock-take questions are for individuals from across the partnership to answer and should be completed separately prior to coming together to reflect on the collective position.

What next? If responses to questions are green, then this high degree of confidence means that no immediate further work is required and this section can be kept under review. Amber responses indicate that sufficient understanding and progress has been made to move on and make further decisions in later sections, on the basis of this work. However, these might be areas in which partnerships wish to revisit and strengthen in due course.

Where any responses are red, this indicates that further work is required before moving on and making decisions in later sections.

HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU...

...In applying concepts of systems thinking to your local system change efforts?



...In your understanding of the services and supports that exist in the local area and where gaps or duplication exists?



...That the composition of your partnership can effect change within the local early learning system?



...That you have identified those in your local system or community that can help you bring about the change you want to see?



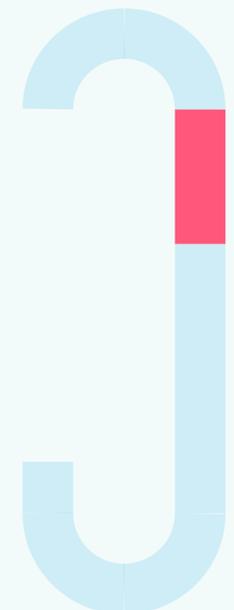
...That you are operating within a geographical area that your partnership can influence?



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THE LOCAL SYSTEM AND PARTNERSHIP

- 2.1. Goals and Readiness Check
- 2.2. Introduction
- 2.3. UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM
 - 2.3.1. An early learning system
 - 2.3.2. Introduction to Systems Thinking
 - 2.3.3. Setting system boundaries for your early learning strategy
 - 2.3.4. Mapping systems
 - 2.3.5. Mapping local services
- 2.4. ASSESSING THE PARTNERSHIP
 - 2.4.1. Defining the core partnership
 - 2.4.2. Exploring wider partnership arrangements
- 2.5. STOCK-TAKE



3. DETERMINING LOCAL PRIORITIES

3. DETERMINING LOCAL PRIORITIES

3.1. GOALS AND READINESS CHECK

GOALS

- To start to prioritise key outcomes and factors in light of *what matters*, *what works* and the local system.
- To determine the broad balance between evidence-based practice, innovation, improvement, and implementation.

READINESS CHECK

Recommended time
1-2 weeks

Resources

- The partnership has time together to determine preliminary priorities, ahead of wider strategy development work

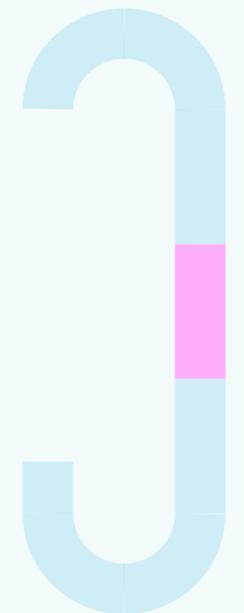
Conditions and preparatory work

- Significant preparatory work undertaken in relation to:
 - Engaging with the evidence about *what matters*, and the local profiles of need and influence (**Section 1.3**)
 - Engaging with the evidence about *what works* (**Section 1.4**)
 - Local stakeholder and service mapping (**Section 2.3**)
 - Local partnership development (**Section 2.4**)

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DETERMINING LOCAL PRIORITIES

- 3.1. GOALS AND READINESS CHECKS**
- 3.2. Introduction
- 3.3. Preliminary focusing
- 3.4. Balancing evidence-based practice, improvement and local innovation
- 3.5. Stock-take



3. DETERMINING LOCAL PRIORITIES

3.2. INTRODUCTION

This section is for the **partnership** to consolidate what it has learnt about *what matters* and *what works* within the **context** of its local **early learning system**.

There are two main elements to this section:

1. Preliminary prioritisation of **early learning outcomes** and the local factors affecting them.
2. Consideration of the broad balance of **evidence-based practice**, improvement and local **innovation**.

Section 4 will build on this work to help partnerships assess what **capacity** and infrastructure will be required to work in these areas. This will form the basis for an emerging strategy that should be further developed with **stakeholders** from across the wider early learning system (**Section 5**).



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3. DETERMINING LOCAL PRIORITIES

3.3. PRELIMINARY FOCUSING

It is a hallmark of a realistic and achievable strategy to have a sharp focus on a relatively small number of outcomes, and routes through which to achieve these. Trying to do too much tends to result in resources being spread too thin.

A consideration of what the **evidence** says about *what matters* in promoting positive early learning outcomes, considered in light of the local data and a deep understanding of the context, will help the partnership to select the areas of focus within a local strategic plan.

How many outcomes and factors should be targeted in a strategy? There is, of course, no simple or consistent answer to this. But as a general rule of thumb, a focus on one or two primary outcomes, to be achieved by addressing three to five related factors is a good starting point. This will depend on the breadth and depth of the partnership and its associated capacity and resources.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Do prioritised outcomes and factors have a logical and evidence-informed relationship?
- Are priorities a focal point of interest or relevance in the local community?
- Considering the partnership's position in the early learning system - are priorities within the sphere of influence?

DETERMINING LOCAL PRIORITIES

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[3.2. Introduction](#)

[3.3. PRELIMINARY FOCUSING](#)

[3.4. Balancing evidence-based practice, improvement and local innovation](#)

[3.5. Stock-take](#)

3. DETERMINING LOCAL PRIORITIES

Actions to prioritise outcomes and key factors, as a partnership:

1. Revisit your exploration of the [evidence matrix](#), [local needs](#) data and associated insight summary produced at [Section 1.3](#).
2. Review the direct and indirect pathways of influence in the 'evidence matrix pathways' tool ([Section 1.3.2](#)).
3. Based on evidence and local data about *what matters*, identify those pathways that are most contextually relevant. There may be numerous pathways that emerge.
4. From within those contextually relevant pathways, identify one or two primary outcomes and associated age-ranges alongside three to five direct or indirect factors to act as a focus of activities to improve early learning outcomes.
 - You should identify outcomes that are a cause for local concern at a specific age-range
 - It is recommended that at least one or two direct factors of local interest or causes for concern are prioritised (as these are primary routes through which to influence early learning outcomes)
 - Any indirect factors also prioritised should (i) be a focus of local interest or cause for concern, and (ii) help positively promote any contextually important direct factors.

5. Once priorities are identified these should be considered against the strength of the evidence about *what works* for each influence, as this will have a bearing on the likely balance of evidence-based practice, innovation, improvement, and [implementation](#) required (which may, in turn, have a bearing on prioritisation).

This initial focusing down will factor into the development of a local strategic plan, the process for which is considered in [Section 5](#). At this point, priorities are not yet fixed.

DETERMINING LOCAL PRIORITIES

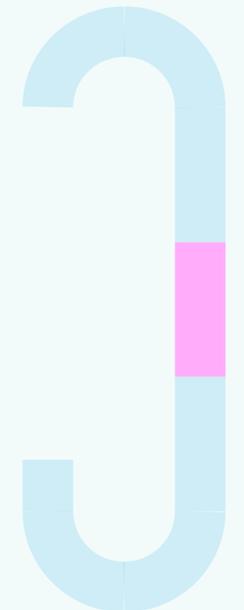
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3. DETERMINING LOCAL PRIORITIES

3.4. BALANCING EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE, IMPROVEMENT AND LOCAL INNOVATION

As an exploration of the **evidence matrix** and local prioritisation will illustrate, there are some areas in which the evidence base about *what works* to improve early learning outcomes is strong, and some in which it is weaker.

In what circumstances might local partnerships consider implementing evidence-based practice in their local area? In what circumstances might efforts to improve local practice (evidence-based or otherwise) be appropriate? When might the design of new practices or innovations be fruitful?

Prioritisation of outcomes and key factors will - alongside the state of the evidence and consideration of local **system** services and capacity - help inform the balance between evidence-based practice, innovation, improvement, and implementation.

The decision-tree on the following page provides a starting point for these deliberations. It starts from the premise of an identified factor that the general or local research evidence suggests is important in the area (determined in **Section 3.3**).

Where the evidence is strong and aligns with local priorities about *what matters*, whilst also having a good fit within the local early learning system; then a compelling case may be made for local implementation of evidence-based activities.

When evidence-based practice (or non-evidence-based practice) is already being implemented, but not as effectively as hoped - in terms of reach, quality of delivery, **impact** or cost - then a case may be made for local improvement efforts.

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3. DETERMINING LOCAL PRIORITIES

If no current practice is in place locally to address priorities - or when evidence-based practice does not have a good local fit or feasibility - then local innovation in that area may be considered.

Finally, the absence of an evidence base about *what works* does not necessarily mean that local innovation is either required or appropriate.

Actions: considering the balance between evidence-based practice, innovation, improvement, and implementation:

1. Taking each prioritised factor in turn, start at the top of the decision tree;
2. Work through the decision-tree - undertaking further exploration of the evidence base and local services as required.
3. Doing this for each prioritised influence should provide an initial sense of the balance between evidence-based practice, innovation, improvement, and implementation.

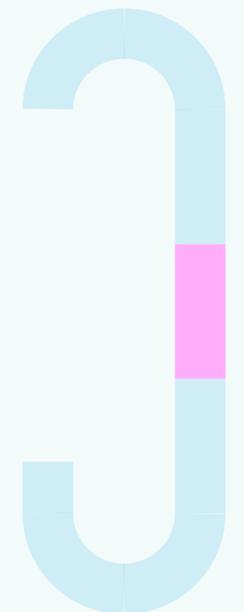
More often than not, a local strategy will include a balanced portfolio of evidence-based practice and evidence-informed, co-produced innovations at key **leverage points** within the local early learning system. This balance should be determined by a locally grounded consideration of the early learning system and locally determined priorities.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Have you identified gaps in your provision that evidence-based practice may fill?
- What opportunities exist to improve existing services?
- What might be good areas within which to innovate locally?

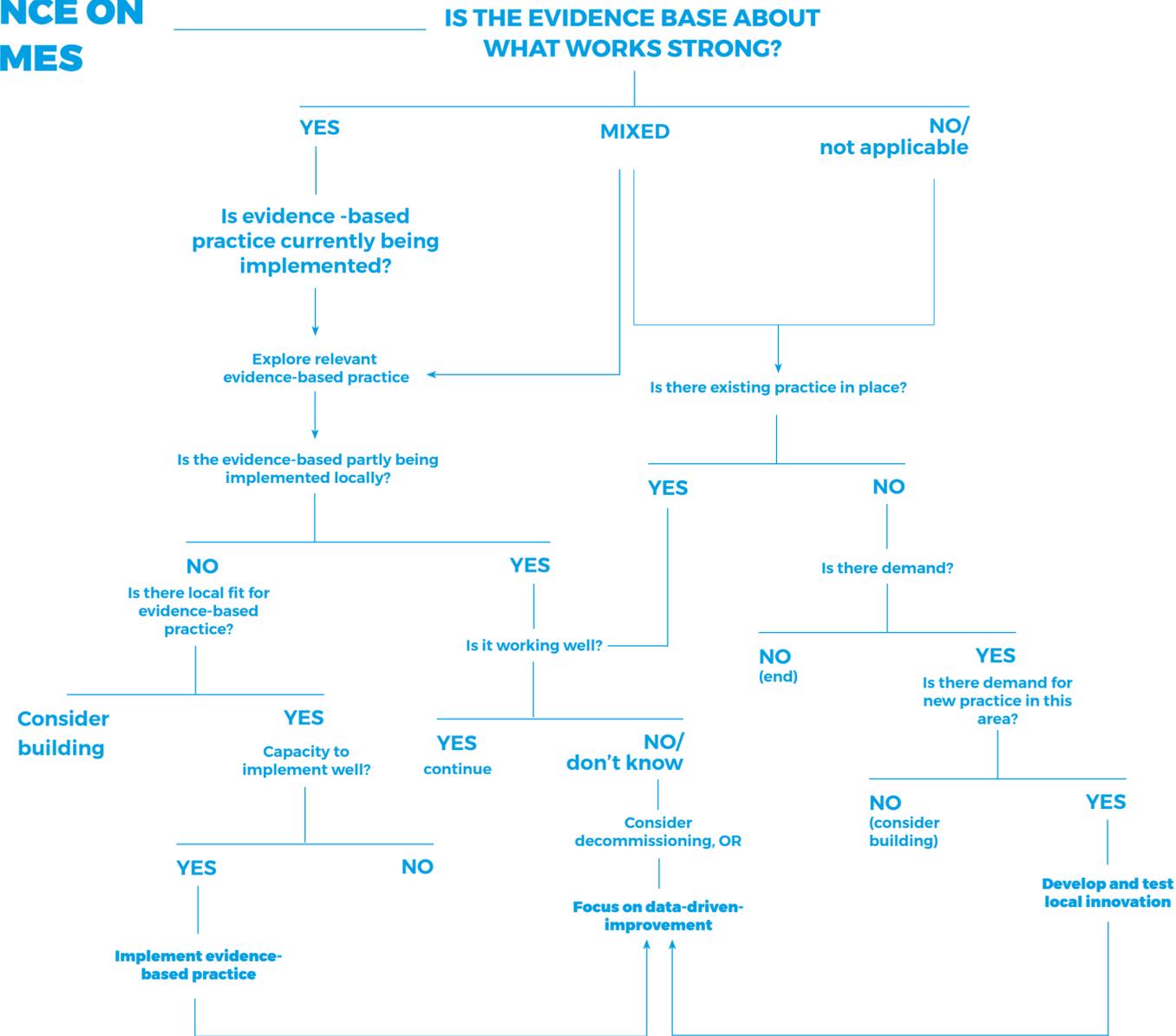
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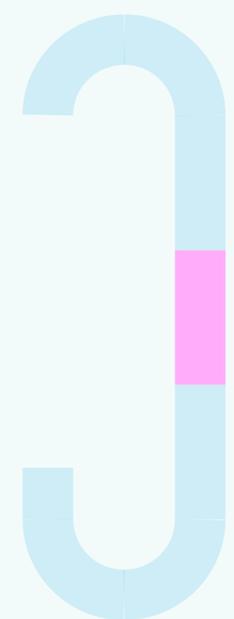
3. DETERMINING LOCAL PRIORITIES

FOR PRIORITISED INFLUENCE ON EARLY LEARNING OUTCOMES



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3.5. STOCK-TAKE / DETERMINING LOCAL PRIORITIES

This section poses a series of questions to help the partnership consider how well developed and confident they are in their local prioritisation of outcomes and factors, and the balance between evidence-based practice, innovation, improvement, and implementation.

Partnerships should consider the questions to the right, responding with either:

- **Green:** a high degree of confidence
- **Amber:** a moderate degree of confidence
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The stock-take questions are for individuals from across the partnership to answer and should be completed separately prior to coming together to reflect on the collective position.

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Where any responses are red, this indicates that further work is required before moving on and making decisions in later sections.

HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU ...

...That in your prioritisation of outcomes and factors you have the balance right between what the evidence says is important and what matters locally?



...That priorities will be shared by local families and communities?



...That your local partnership has the means and influence to affect change in prioritised outcomes and factors?



...That priorities will have buy-in across the wider early learning system?

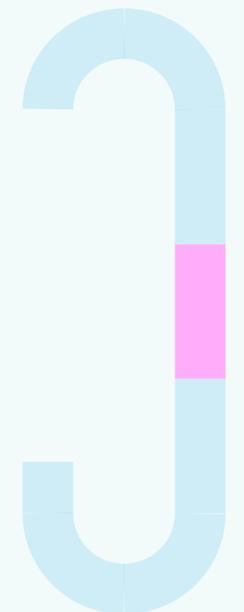


...That you have the balance right between evidence-based practice, innovation, improvement, and implementation?



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4.

BUILDING CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

4. BUILDING CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

4.1. GOALS AND READINESS CHECKS

GOALS

- To outline capacity and infrastructure requirements for the project;
- To identify where capacity building and infrastructure development is required

READINESS CHECK

Recommended time
1-2 months

Resources

- Partnership time to engage in assessments of current capacity and infrastructure development
- Legal support to consider formalising any partnership or associated legal structures
- Information governance and data system expertise
- Financial resources to support the development and delivery of capacity-building and infrastructure requirements

Conditions and preparatory work

- Partnerships and working relationships well developed
- Emerging priorities and broad focus for work identified

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BUILDING CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

4.1. GOALS AND READINESS CHECK

4.2. Introduction

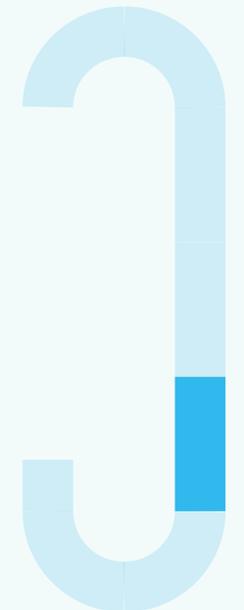
4.3. BUILDING CAPACITY

- 4.3.1. Creating conditions for learning and improvement
- 4.3.2. Supporting the role of co-design in improvement and innovation
- 4.3.3. Capacity to implement evidence-based practice
- 4.3.4. Change management

4.4. BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE

- 4.4.1. Governance and legal structures
- 4.4.2. Building data infrastructures

4.5. Stock-take



4. BUILDING CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

4.2. INTRODUCTION

The first part of this section focuses on **capacity** building within the local **partnership** and the wider **early learning system**. This includes:

- Creating the conditions for learning and improvement;
- Supporting the role of **co-design** in improvement and **innovation** efforts;
- Implementing **evidence-based practice**;
- Supporting a process of **change management**, emphasising the critical role of training bolstered by coaching.

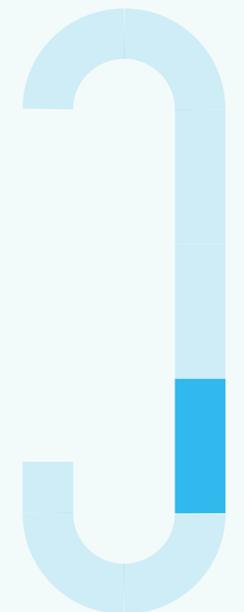
The second part of this section focuses on ensuring the necessary infrastructure is in place. This includes consideration of:

- The necessary **governance** and legal structures of local partnerships;
- The data infrastructure requirements (including data needs, management and sharing solutions and relevant legislative requirements).

These necessary foundations are considered at this stage, as an important pre-consideration before activities are set in stone within a strategy.

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4.3. BUILDING CAPACITY

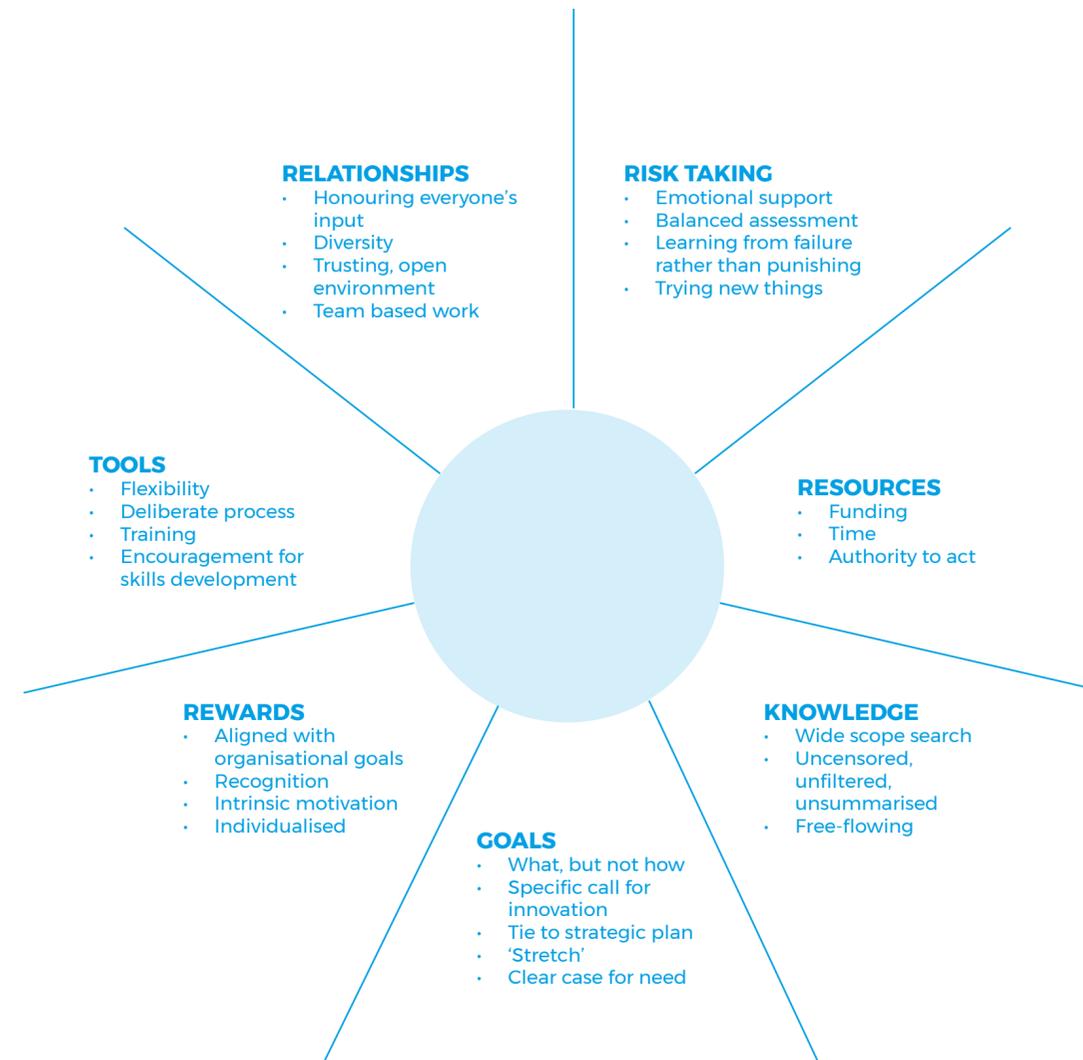
4.3.1. CREATING CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING AND IMPROVEMENT

Evidence suggests that there are several organisational or local **system** conditions that support the **engagement**, speed and **impact** of a local improvement or innovation process. If these conditions are not present, then it is less likely that successful innovations or improvement efforts will be developed, tested, refined, embedded and sustained.

The NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement - ***in this report*** - identified seven dimensions of a culture supportive of innovation and testing (summarised to the right). Also included in the report is a helpful self-assessment tool to help determine current innovation readiness within a team or system, along with 37 tips to help create a culture of innovation and testing.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- How comfortable is the partnership in trying new, untested things?
- Is there a predominant culture of accountability and performance or learning from 'failures'?



Adapted from 'Creating the Culture for Improvement: A Practical Guide for Leaders. NHS Institute for. Innovation and Improvement, 2010'

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4.3. BUILDING CAPACITY

Further reading and resources:

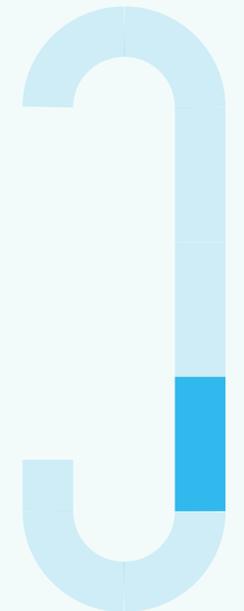
Equal Measure share their learning on cultivating systems leadership in cross-sector partnerships *in this report*; summarising the key skills, ways of working and dispositions required to be an effective systems leader.

The **Center for Creative Leadership** produced *this report* on leadership for innovation that nicely consolidates the learning around why innovation is important, the role of design thinking and how leadership for innovation builds upon this.

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4.3. BUILDING CAPACITY

4.3.2. SUPPORTING THE ROLE OF CO-DESIGN IN IMPROVEMENT AND INNOVATION

Supporting the role of co-design in improvement and innovation efforts is important as many evidence-based services have been designed purely by professionals, scientists or other ‘experts’. The evidence increasingly indicates that ‘expert’ or professionally designed services struggle to effectively replicate to new **contexts**.

This is partly because they are not necessarily grounded in the local system or designed with the wants, needs and practicalities of the end ‘user’ in mind. As such, there is an emerging consensus and evidence base for involving users in a design or improvement process. This Toolkit argues that this should also be supported by the best available evidence.

It is also important to involve practitioners or those who end up delivering a service in a design or improvement effort. This will help ensure that the resulting service is practical to deliver. Similarly, it is important to involve managers and **commissioners** in the design process to ensure that the resulting service is feasible and affordable to deliver within the local system.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- How might you create the conditions in which service-users have the agency and power to contribute to design efforts?
- What are the other elements of the project in which co-design and participation could be improved?

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4.3. BUILDING CAPACITY

In addition to the broad conditions described in the prior section, groups working in this way will include:

- Families (i.e. service users or intended beneficiaries)
- Practitioners (i.e. those responsible for delivering the service)
- Managers (i.e. those responsible for managing the resources of practitioners)
- Commissioners (i.e. those who allocate the resources and will pay for the ongoing delivery)
- Content experts (i.e. scientists, academics or other experts who bring specific expertise in the area of focus).

Groups should be made up from across a local system, depending on the fit between the area for innovation and individuals, related experience and appetite.

When preparing and planning for this work, it is important to consider not only if the conditions and capacity for innovation and service design are present and can be built, but also whether the necessary financial and other resources can be made available to support local co-design efforts (such as venues, creches, flexible timings of meetings etc).

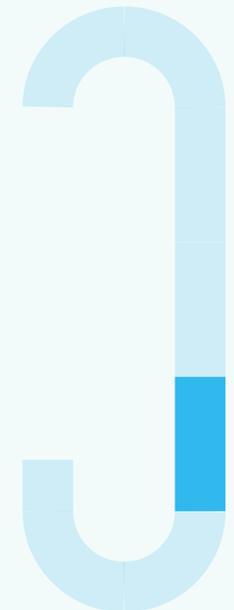
Further reading and resources:

This [Co-design Toolkit](#) was generated for an Australian audience but contains a comprehensive overview of the benefits of co-design and a helpful guide on attached processes and approach, including around building your team.

This [resource](#) highlights the key principles of co-design, for agencies and the community sector who want to use co-design to inform and improve the services that they deliver.

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4.3. BUILDING CAPACITY

4.3.3. CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

Identifying evidence-based practice in a given area is relatively straightforward; it may be considered a 'quick win' within a strategy. Yet failure to attend sufficiently to local fit, preparation and **implementation** support can undermine the effectiveness of evidence-based practice as well as that of an overarching strategy.

There are four broad categories of capacity building and preparation to consider when implementing evidence-based practice:

- Skills and expertise required to implement practice
- The necessary training and coaching
- Licensing or technical assistance considerations
- Monitoring implementation quality, fidelity and outcomes

Each varies depending on the specific type of intervention. As such, only a brief introduction to key considerations is provided.

Expertise required to deliver evidence-based practice:

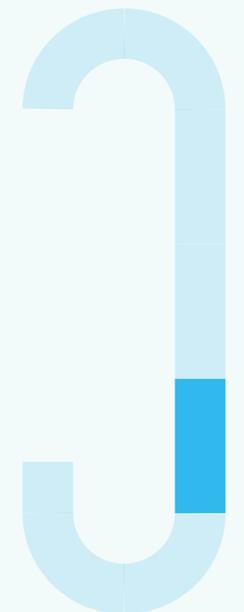
Some evidence-based interventions require different skills and experience to deliver and manage:

- **Specific service expertise** – including knowledge about the core and flexible components of delivery, and how to support effective delivery of **core components** of the intervention
- **Implementation expertise** – including knowledge and skills to support providers in their implementation practice through active problem-solving.
- **Improvement Expertise** – including building and maintaining systems to monitor and improve service delivery with a focus on outcomes.

With these three types of expertise in mind, building effective implementation capacity in teams requires a multidisciplinary approach. Capacity may be built and comprised by drawing upon and training existing people within the early learning system, or new experience or expertise may need to be brought in.

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4.3. BUILDING CAPACITY

Training, coaching and technical assistance

Some evidence-based interventions either provide or require as part of a licensing arrangement, specific training or coaching to support high-quality delivery of practice. This may be provided by accredited external personnel or through a cascading 'train the trainer' model. Some approaches also require or mandate further technical assistance - such as training in the use of specific data and monitoring tools. Partnerships should consider the capacity and infrastructure requirements of this.

Licensing or accreditation arrangements

Many evidence-based interventions involve some sort of licensing arrangement. This may involve a financial cost for use of associated materials. Often there will be some mechanism in place to ensure good quality delivery through accreditation. This may be through returns of data or video-based or in-person observations of practice.

Monitoring implementation quality, fidelity and outcomes

Many evidence-based interventions - as part of licensing arrangements - require the monitoring of implementation and outcomes. There may be specific measures or data collection/management systems that are required, as part of these arrangements. Partnerships should consider the capacity and demands to use these, alongside alignment to wider monitoring, learning and evaluation metrics.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- What support - internally or externally provided - do you think will be required to ensure effective delivery and fidelity to evidence-based practice?
- What training, coaching or other forms of support does your partnership require to support effective implementation?
- Have you explored and factored in any ongoing licensing or requirements costs - both financial and in terms of human resources?

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4.3. BUILDING CAPACITY

4.3.4. CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Implementing a new strategy requires change, doing things differently. Yet systems, and individuals, tend to resist change. As such, when designing and preparing for implementation of a local system change strategy, it is important to actively consider and plan to support change, and to help mitigate against reverting to prior system behaviours.

To help conceptualise change, and how to do it, Susan Michie and colleagues drew on extensive research to develop the COM-B Framework, and the associated ‘behaviour change wheel’. This framework contains three main conditions:

- **Capability:** an individual’s psychological (and in some cases, physical) **capability** to engage in new practice;
- **Motivation:** both rational and emotional drivers to engage in practice;
- **Opportunity:** the local system conditions that need to be in place before behaviour can change (including aspects of organisational culture, as well as concrete conditions and resources).

Behaviour change depends on the individual readiness of staff in the different organisations involved in the implementation of a strategy – be they early childhood educators, general practitioners, school teachers, social workers, volunteers, or others.

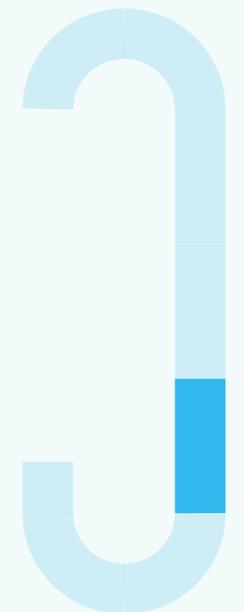
Coaching

Research is pretty consistent that training, on its own - be this implementing evidence-based practice or engaging in the process of design and innovation - often does not result in changes in practitioner and system behaviours. It can, without appropriate support, even be threatening or disempowering.

Coaching is one of several recognised implementation strategies designed to enhance the uptake of new skills and competencies by managers and practitioners. Often accompanying training, coaching involves experienced practitioners or peers providing ‘on the job’ training and support, in a supervisory capacity. It reinforces information learned in training, keeps it foremost in the minds of the practitioner, and provides open and timely feedback, reinforcing good practice and identifying opportunities for learning and improvement.

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4.3. BUILDING CAPACITY

Further reading and resources:

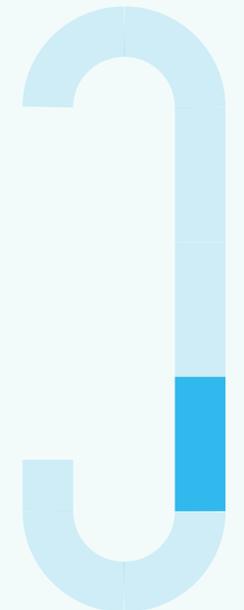
- You can read about the **COM-B behaviour change wheel**, and associated resources [here](#).
- ***This article*** by **Insights** gives a helpful overview of coaching and how it can help employees in times of change, as well as some practical guidance around facilitating this process. The website also has other resources around managing change.
- ***This article*** by **Kate Jones** outlines some of the experiences of change management from an organisational perspective and offers some tips around working with employees to overcome these.
- ***This article*** by **Emotive Brand** highlights four key elements they have identified to help increase the likelihood of change management success.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- What do you think will be the biggest barriers to changing workforce practice?
- What were the reasons any recent attempts to change practice might have failed?
- What are the behaviours and approaches the partnership and/or its members need to change to become more effective?

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4.4. BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE

4.4.1. GOVERNANCE AND LEGAL STRUCTURES

Section 2 explored the strength of the partnership and how it drives and supports change across the system. This section of the Toolkit is designed to ensure that **Early Learning Communities** are appropriately supported in terms of governance, risk management, roles and responsibilities of partners and any supporting legal arrangements. It considers how the membership and structure of governance should support rather than obstructs change.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Against which features of an effective local partnership does yours perform well and less well?
- How might the functioning and effectiveness of the partnership be increased?

Functions of a local partnership

There are a range of legal arrangements which can be used depending on the scope of the work being undertaken by the partnership as an entity. It is likely that at a minimum the partnership will require governance arrangements which support it to:

- Drive strategic planning and delivery across the local area;
- Ensure delivery and strategic partners are bought in and committed to the project and any activities they have agreed to;
- Ensure that partners who are participating in the project have the required policies and protections in place;
- Manage risks associated with the project, both around practice (e.g. the safe and effective delivery of programmes), supporting activities (e.g. financial management) and reputation;
- Take on partnership-wide monitoring and evaluation activities, which would require collating, holding and analysing data.

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Features of an effective local partnership

In addition to the activities which a partnership will need, effective partnerships will exhibit:

- **Accountability:** the partnership should be accountable first and foremost to local children and families for delivering outcomes, as well as to local partners and wider **stakeholders** (e.g. funders). It is important to develop an accountable culture and mechanisms by which accountability to those not directly participating in governance is embedded.
- **Diversity:** as outlined in **Section 2**, understanding the local early learning system requires a variety of perspectives. The strength of governance arrangements will reflect this diversity, which should include multi-agency perspectives as well those of local families and community members.
- **Equity & mutual benefit:** if local partners are expected to contribute resource (e.g. their time) to the development of the project, it is important they have a stake in its development and delivery. Governance arrangements need to ensure that partners have meaningful representation if they are expected to participate in and support the project.
- **Transparency:** the partnership should ensure that it operates in a transparent way, making itself visible and ensuring that the way in which it makes decisions is clearly documented and shared as appropriate. This is particularly important in addressing potential conflicts of interest, where members of the partnership could be seen to gain financially or strategically.

Steps to take:

There are two steps the partnership should take to consider its arrangements, which will feed into the development of a strategic plan:

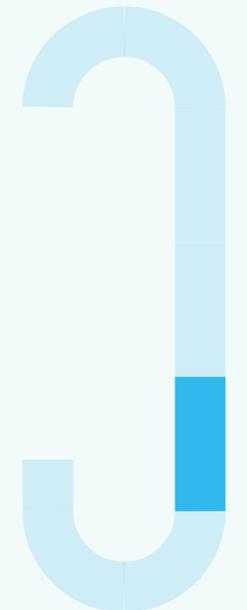
1. First, generate a list of headline activities the partnership wishes to undertake and consider what governance arrangements will be best suited to support these (see further reading below).
2. In light of the headline activities and necessary governance arrangements, consider what structures and approaches are most appropriate.

Further reading and resources:

- This overview from ***Collaboration for Impact*** provides a useful summary of key functions, roles and responsibilities of a backbone organisation. It also considers the advantages and disadvantages of different arrangements.
- The ***Partnering Toolkit*** provides a useful introduction to formal and informal structures for organising (see page Page 17 in particular).

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4.4. BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE

4.4.2. BUILDING DATA INFRASTRUCTURES

This section outlines some of the key data considerations that local partnerships will need to explore as they develop their approaches to implementing and monitoring a local strategy. Many of these considerations will also be related to evaluation plans as they develop (and therefore this aspect of the strategy development should be aligned with local internal and external evaluation planning).

The specific data infrastructure requirements will vary significantly depending on the nature of the strategy itself and with regards to the composition of the partnership (and its own data systems and information governance arrangements).

As such, this section provides an overview of key considerations that local partnerships should attend to as strategies become refined, in advance of implementation.

Management and Information Systems

Management and Information Systems (MIS) are a category of digital tools to enable partnerships to collect, manage, analyse, visualise, export and share data on outcomes, indicators and service delivery.

Such a system is important for local partnerships to be able to monitor the implementation of a strategy, specific activities or services and support improvement efforts and iteration (**Section 6**).

It is likely that different organisations and agencies that comprise a partnership will use their own specific systems. As such, at a minimum, it is important the information governance processes and agreements are in place that allows effective information sharing (see next section). Ideally, a shared system will be implemented that allows more efficient data sharing and coordination of activities.

Inspiring Impact provides a repository of different MIS tools, frameworks and management information systems. Many are stand-alone web-based systems, with varying degrees of customisation. Some allow a degree of interaction with other existing data systems.

In order to select an appropriate MIS, your partnership can go through the following steps. It is important to note that the infrastructure requirements for the partnership should support and align with the local strategic planning process (**Section 5**), so the timing of these activities should be planned accordingly.

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4.4. BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE

Data sharing arrangements and protocols

Effective delivery, monitoring and data-driven improvement will rely on effective data sharing between different organisations within the partnership, and in certain cases with those delivering activities or services. The management information systems described previously will facilitate this, yet any technical solution will require the appropriate data sharing agreements and information governance arrangements in place. These will, in turn, rely on appropriate grounds or consent for processing and sharing.

Steps:

- A. Review the management information systems currently in use by different organisations in the partnership
- B. Review data sharing agreements and protocols currently in place by different organisations in the local partnership
- C. Consider the monitoring and reporting requirements of your local strategy
- D. Assess to what degree existing data sharing agreements or protocols are fit for purpose
- E. If necessary, explore and specify new arrangements

Adherence to GDPR

In 2018 new data protection legislation came into effect. This new General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) - and associated UK Data Protection Act (DPA 2018) - outlines a series of legal regulations regarding the collection, processing and sharing of data about individuals. Any data that may - in any way or through any means - identify an individual is subject to this legislation.

A comprehensive guide to the legislation is provided [here](#) by the Information Commissioner's Office.

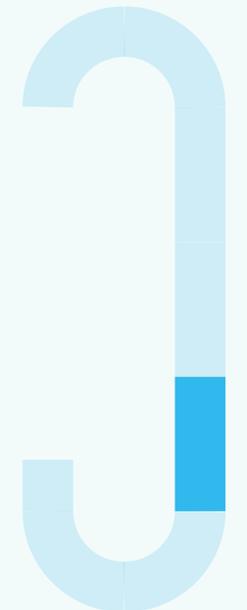
Each organisation or agency within the partnership will have updated their data collection and processing arrangements in light of this legislation. It is essential that any data commissioning or processing that takes place as part of a local strategic plan adheres to this legislation.

Steps:

- A. Review each item of data that will be analysed, collected, processed or shared. Does it fall under the purview of GDPR and the DPA 2018? I.e. Is data identifiable?
- B. If so, review whether the planned **lawful grounds for processing** are appropriate (and if not, ensuring process are in place to ensure they are).
- C. Assess whether management information systems and data sharing agreements are in alignment with GDPR and the DPA 2018 (and if not, ensure they are).

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4.5. STOCK-TAKE / BUILDING CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

This section poses a series of questions to help the partnership consider how well developed and confident they are in relation to building the necessary capacity and infrastructure to underpin a local system change strategy.

Partnerships should consider the questions to the right, responding with either:

- **Green:** a high degree of confidence
- **Amber:** a moderate degree of confidence
- **Red:** a low degree of confidence

The stock-take questions are for individuals from across the partnership to answer and should be completed separately prior to coming together to reflect on the collective position.

What next? If responses to questions are green, then this high degree of confidence means that no immediate further work is required and this section can be kept under review. Amber responses indicate that sufficient understanding and progress has been made to move on and make further decisions in later sections, on the basis of this work. However, these might be areas in which partnerships wish to revisit and strengthen in due course.

Where any responses are red, this indicates that further work is required before moving on and making decisions in later sections.

HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU...

...That your partnership and wider early learning system has a culture of innovation, exploration, testing and learning?



...That local partnerships can engage and involve a diverse range of potential service users in a co-design or improvement process?



...That appropriately skilled and experienced staff can be freed up from their usual role to engage in a co-design or improvement process?

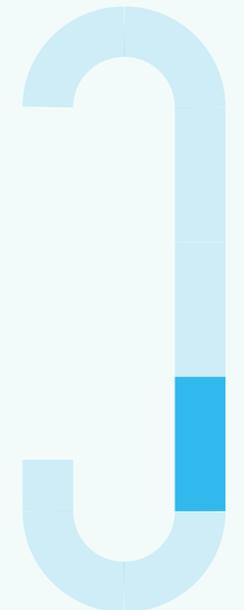


...That the necessary supports, investments and culture can be created to support a process of change management?



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5. **CRAFTING A STRATEGY**



5. CRAFTING A STRATEGY

5.1. GOALS AND READINESS CHECKS

GOALS

- To produce a local strategic plan for improving early learning outcomes, building on emerging priorities and involving wider stakeholders.
- Produce a local theory of change capturing the strategy
- To have outlined what the indicators of success are for your strategy going forwards

READINESS CHECK

Recommended time

2-6 months (incorporating other sections)

Resources

- Significant preparation and organisation for convening a local strategy development process (including any related costs, such as venue hire)
- Time commitment of the partnership and stakeholders from across the early learning system to engage in this process of local strategy development

Conditions and preparatory work

Significant preparatory work undertaken in relation to:

- Engaging with the evidence about *what matters*, and the local profiles of need and influence (**Section 1.3**)
- Engaging with the evidence about *what works* (**Section 1.4**)
- Local stakeholder and system mapping (**Section 2.3**)
- Local partnership arrangements (**Section 2.4**)
- Preliminary prioritisation of outcomes, consideration of likely balance between evidence-based practice, improvement or local innovation, and checking this against the current and required capacity and infrastructure requirements.

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5. CRAFTING A STRATEGY

5.2. INTRODUCTION

This section of the Toolkit is designed to pull together the insights that local [partnership](#) have developed about:

- *What matters* generally, as well as locally, to improve children's [early learning outcomes](#);
- The [evidence](#) about *what works* to improve prioritised outcomes;
- What the local [early learning system](#) looks like – and the partnership's place and influence within it;
- Consideration about when to implement [evidence-based practice](#), to improve on current practice or to innovate.

The intention is to shape these insights into a locally developed and owned strategy to improve early learning outcomes and help close the gap between those children living in poverty and their more affluent peers. By strategy, we mean a plan of action to achieve this longer-term aim. This will include a locally developed theory of change, building upon the overarching evidence-informed theory introduced in **Section 0.3**.

Section 5.3 outlines the main elements typically considered within such a strategy, many of which link back to prior sections of the Toolkit. This is followed in **Section 5.4** by an overview of a broad process by which local partnerships may go about crafting their strategy. **Section 5.4** shows how to produce a local [theory of change](#), and **Section 5.5** highlights the importance of clarifying [system](#) change indicators within a strategy.

[HOME](#)

CRAFTING A STRATEGY

5.1. Goals and Readiness Checks

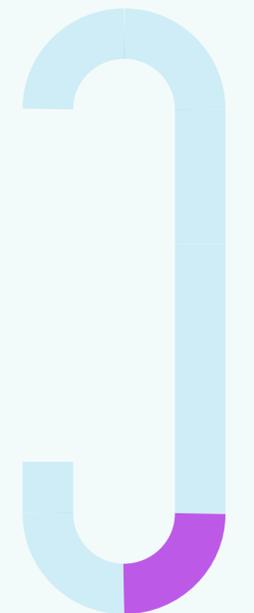
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5. CRAFTING A STRATEGY

5.3. A STRATEGY TEMPLATE

The figure to the right provides an overview of key elements that will typically feature in a local strategic plan. This is intended to provide a guide to the main elements of a strategy to be considered, and possible structure for capturing this in a document. Yet of course local strategies may not neatly fit this template, and it should be flexed as required.

Appendix 4 provides a further description of each element.

Vision

The local context

How the strategy was developed

What matters Our local priorities

- Local data on children's needs
- Connection to evidence about *what matters*
- Prioritised outcomes and factors
- Alignment of priorities to that of local stakeholders

The local early learning system and our boundaries

- Our early learning system and the partnerships' place within it
- Our sphere of influence and system boundaries

What we are going to do?

- Overarching strategy and system change approach
- Local Theory of Change
- Evidence-based activities
- Local innovation and improvement

How we are going to do this?

- Developing our partnerships:
 - Developing partnership, governance and leadership arrangements
 - Working with our community
- Developing our infrastructure:
 - Capacity-building and training
 - Technical infrastructure, e.g. data

What does local system change look like?

- How will we know we are making a difference?
- What are our indicators of local system change?

How we learn and adapt as we go?

- Ways in which we'll create an effective learning system
- Our approach to testing, learning and refinement

Next steps and timescales

Risks and mitigations

Financial and human resources

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5. CRAFTING A STRATEGY

5.4. A PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING A STRATEGY

Steps in developing a local strategy

This section outlines a set of steps through which the partnership can craft its long-term strategy. These steps build on the sections of the Toolkit up until to this point. As this is a guide, your partnership may want to deviate from this process as required, depending on work undertaken to date and in light of local conditions or constraints.

There are five main elements to the process:

1. Preparatory local partnership work
2. An official 'kick off' day with wider **stakeholders**
3. An intensive period of reconnaissance and analysis (drawing on Sections 1-3 of this Toolkit), taking place over a period of up to six months
4. A two-day strategy **co-design** session, with wider partners, actors and stakeholders
5. Strategy refinement.

This section outlines the key steps at each proposed stage.

Step 1: Preparatory local partnership work

- A.** Building on prior partnership work, convene the core partnership to review, refine and plan the process outlined in these pages;
- B.** Prepare agendas and invite list for the kick-off event;
- C.** Prior to the official kick-off session, within the partnership develop an initial vision and ambition for your planned work;
- D.** Undertake initial exploration of evidence about *what matters* and preliminary analysis of local data on needs (**Section 1**). Through this, identify emerging priority areas that will subsequently be refined with the wider partnership;
- E.** Summarise early insights in an 'insight brief' and short presentation.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Have you developed a local theory of change that broadly aligns with that of the Early Learning Communities (see **Section 0.3**) - yet reflects the local nuance of your system and priorities?
- How does the strategy align with other initiatives and strategies already in place?
- Is the strategy underpinned by both research evidence about what matters, alongside *what matters* locally?
- To what degree have local community members been involved in the strategy development process?

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5. CRAFTING A STRATEGY

Step 2: Official kick-off event with wider stakeholders

The partnership will likely have already developed relationships and conversations with wider stakeholders within the local **early learning system**. The function of this event is to officially start the process of local strategic planning. This should be a half-day to a full-day session which should include:

- A.** Sharing a vision and seeking input and refinement;
- B.** Introducing to partners the **evidence matrix** about what matters and your preliminary 'insight brief' on local needs;
- C.** Discuss as a group emerging avenues for exploration over the coming months (including fit with existing initiatives in the areas);
- D.** Outline next steps and seek wider partner buy-in and participation for these activities (including system mapping, partnership development, further analysis of **local needs** and subsequent convening to co-design a local strategy).

Step 3: Reconnaissance and analysis

Between the 'kick off' meeting and forthcoming strategy co-design days, the partnership should lead on preparatory work, including:

- A.** Building on the preliminary analysis of need, develop and implement a local needs analysis plan (**Section 1.3.5**);
- B.** System and **context** mapping (**Section 2.3.4**);
- C.** On the basis of system mapping, develop the provisional partnership arrangements and list of those to invite to the subsequent strategy co-design days (**Section 2.4**);
- D.** Consider the evidence base in relation to emerging priority areas (**Section 3.3**);
- E.** On the basis of the above, refine provisional priority areas (**Section 3.3**);
- F.** Identify existing practice and activities in relation to these provisional priorities;
- G.** Consider the potential for local improvement, **innovation** or new evidence-based practice (**Section 3.4**);
- H.** Synthesise this analysis and preparatory work into a series of short papers and inputs/presentations for the strategy co-design days.

In addition, the partnerships should plan well in advance the logistics, agenda and attendees for the strategy co-design days.

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5. CRAFTING A STRATEGY

Step 4: Strategy co-design days

The partnership should host a strategy co-design session over two (ideally) consecutive days. This may be internally or externally facilitated.

The first day of these sessions will include presentations, discussion/activities, feedback and refinement related to:

- A.** Provisional priority outcomes and factors (considering the evidence, local system and community priorities);
- B.** An overview of the local early learning system and opportunities for intervention;
- C.** Consideration of the balance between evidence-based practice, improvement and/or local innovation.

Between the first and second day, facilitators and/or lead partners will take stock on feedback and refinement and produce a draft local **theory of change** that will underpin the local strategy.

On the second day, facilitators and/or lead partners will:

- D.** Consider the balance between evidence-based practice, improvement and/or local innovation;
- E.** Present this draft Theory of Change;
- F.** Over the course of the day, facilitate a discussion and refinement of this Theory of Change (and its various components);
- G.** Towards the end of the day share back an iterated version of the Theory of Change to the wider group;
- H.** Agree on next steps in further strategy refinement.

Step 5: Strategy refinement

The partnership will take stock of the insights and refinements and develop the emerging strategy and Theory of Change into a strategy document, broadly following the template introduced in **Section 5.3**. In light of the emerging strategy this will include:

- A.** Development of plans to build the necessary **capacity** and infrastructure to deliver the strategy (**Section 5**);
- B.** Development of approaches to ensuring strategies and activities are implemented well, refined and adapted as required (**Section 6**).

This strategy will be developed and refined in partnership with Save the Children and other partners.

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5. CRAFTING A STRATEGY

5.5. INDICATORS OF LOCAL SYSTEM CHANGE

A central component of a developing strategy is to clearly define the change that is sought. Given the inherent complexity of a system, it is not always easy to attribute changes to one specific action or set of actions. Nonetheless, a strategy should specify how the planned activities - at multiple levels of the system - are expected to contribute to changes in the system.

Core to each local strategy will be an articulation of:

- How the early learning outcomes of children experiencing poverty will be improved (what specific outcomes, for whom, and to what magnitude of change).
- The means through which these outcomes will be improved locally (e.g. the specific factors affecting these outcomes, as shown in the evidence matrix) and associated indicators of this.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- What are your local indicators of system change?
- Have you specified these indicators in your local theory of change?
- How will you measure local system change?

In addition to these central indicators related to child and family outcomes and factors, a strategy will also include other indicators of local system change. These will vary, depending on the local strategy, but may include, for example:

- Shifts in local expenditure (towards early intervention, evidence-based practice or local innovation);
- Closer inter-agency working and trust;
- A better qualified or supported workforce;
- Greater trust between agencies and communities;
- Greater influence on local decision-making by residents.

The local **theory of change** and the different activities to achieving change it captures can be used to identify outcomes and indicators at both an individual level and system level, as well as in relation to specific interventions (e.g. a programme).

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5.6. STOCK-TAKE / CRAFTING A STRATEGY

This section poses a series of questions to help the partnership consider how confident they are in relation to developing a long-term strategic plan to improve children’s early learning outcomes.

Partnerships should consider the questions to the right, responding with either:

- **Green:** a high degree of confidence
- **Amber:** a moderate degree of confidence
- **Red:** a low degree of confidence

The stock-take questions are for individuals from across the partnership to answer and should be completed separately prior to coming together to reflect on the collective position.

What next? If responses to questions are green, then this high degree of confidence means that no immediate further work is required and this section can be kept under review. Amber responses indicate that sufficient understanding and progress has been made to move on and make further decisions in later sections, on the basis of this work. However, these might be areas in which partnerships wish to revisit and strengthen in due course.

Where any responses are red, this indicates that further work is required before moving on and making decisions in later sections.

HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU ...

...That the necessary groundwork has been done to enable the production of a robust strategy?



...That your strategy is clearly supported in a local theory of change?



...That the strategy has the buy-in and commitment from across the wider early learning community?



...That your strategy reflects and serves the diversity of your local population?



...That your strategy will lead to improvements in early learning outcomes for children living in poverty?



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6.

IMPLEMENTATION, TESTING AND LEARNING

6. IMPLEMENTING, TESTING AND LEARNING

6.1. GOALS AND READINESS CHECKS

GOALS

- To ensure indicators and means of monitoring the effectiveness of a local strategy are developed
- To build capacity within partnerships to routinely monitor and improve specific services and activities
- To ensure that strategies and services are iterated upon, as required.

READINESS CHECK

Recommended time
Ongoing

Resources

- Staff and financial resources dedicated to building the necessary data and local evaluation functions within local partnerships

Conditions and preparatory work

- A clear articulation within a strategy about indicators of local systems change
- A clear articulation within a strategy about the specific activities that will take place and their associated indicators of success
- A shared commitment to data-driven learning and improvement

IMPLEMENTING, TESTING AND LEARNING

6.1. GOALS AND READINESS CHECKS

6.2. Introduction

6.3. Continuous quality improvement and Rapid cycle testing

6.4. Monitoring indicators of change in the early learning system

6.5. Iterating on a strategy

6.6. Stock-take



6. IMPLEMENTING, TESTING AND LEARNING

6.2. INTRODUCTION

Section 4 emphasised the importance of adequately planning for implementation of the strategy, including:

- Creating the necessary culture for **innovation**, improvement, and implementation of **evidence-based practice**;
- Building the necessary teams, training and coaching;
- Developing the required data **systems** and infrastructure to support implementation and help understand where specific practices and the strategy as a whole are achieving their goals.

Yet even with good planning, **implementation** of a strategy and new practice can be a fragile process. It will typically involve new behaviours and routines and ‘unlearning’ old habits; this is just as true for individuals as it is organisations and a whole system.

Things will also change. Priorities and demands may shift over time. People within **partnerships** and the local system will move on and new people will come on board. Changes in the external environment - such as events, policies and resources - will have a bearing on the implementation of the strategy.

As such, a central part of any good strategy is to monitor, learn, adjust and improve as implementation gathers pace. This relates to both an overarching strategy, as well as to the implementation of specific services or activities within it.

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6. IMPLEMENTING, TESTING AND LEARNING

6.3. CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND RAPID CYCLE TESTING

A local strategic plan will specify a series of activities, services or programmes that may be implemented. These may include improvements or integration of existing services or programmes, new evidence-based practice or the design and implementation of local innovations.

Continuous Quality Improvement

Evidence from healthcare, education and beyond indicates that an intentional focus on quality improvement can drive up performance and **impact** on outcomes.

Quality improvement methods that encourage reflection help:

- Ensure that services or activities fit well within local systems;
- Local systems flex to accommodate new practice;
- Drive up user **engagement**, quality of delivery and outcomes.

Rapid cycle testing is one such approach to do this. Building upon the concepts and methods of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI), largely from healthcare, the main aims are to:

- Monitor the implementation of a particular practice;
- To identify barriers or challenges in the delivery of that practice;
- To identify and design opportunities for improvements to local systems or practice;
- To test whether designs or **adaptations** are:
 - Acceptable (to users, practitioners and **commissioners**)
 - Feasible to commission and practical for staff to deliver
 - Making a positive movement on outcomes.

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6. IMPLEMENTING, TESTING AND LEARNING

Rapid cycle testing rests on many of the foundations already described in this toolkit. It requires leadership and a culture that encourages innovation, testing and learning from failure. The approach also demands thinking and acting differently, and as such, an intentional focus on **change management** is important (**Section 4.3**). The methods also require the necessary data infrastructures from which to harness or gather information to guide improvement efforts (**Section 4.4**).

Approaches to rapid cycle testing should be aligned with local **evaluation** and learning efforts.

There are some common data points that are required to monitor implementation and guide improvement and testing efforts. These include:

- Information about the target population (who is being served?)
- What those people receive (in terms of frequency and intensity of provision and the extent of their engagement and retention);
- The outcomes of those being served (i.e. monitoring outcomes as service users engage and move through a service or programme).

Action:

1. Identify which of the above categories are relevant, as the specifics of activities, services and programmes become refined.
2. As design and implementation plans are developed, ensure data monitoring processes are integral to this planning process.
3. Consider what data systems will be required to capture, analyse and share these data (see next section).
4. Review further reading and resources in this section to design a proportionate and feasible approach to rapid cycle testing, working with any improvement and evaluation colleagues.

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6. IMPLEMENTING, TESTING AND LEARNING

Further reading and resources:

It is beyond the scope of this Toolkit to provide a detailed overview of how to put all of this into practice, nor is there one simple tool to operationalise the methods.

- A simple starting point for developing a local approach to monitoring and evaluation is to create a log-frame. **Better Evaluation** provides an introduction and set of associated resources [here](#).
- This [article](#) from the **Health Foundation** provides an overview of organisational approaches to quality improvement (the healthcare equivalent to rapid cycle testing). Whilst written for the general healthcare audience, it offers an excellent overview of underlying principles, and approaches to quality improvement.
- This [paper](#) from the **National Institute of Health Research** summarises evidence, again largely from healthcare systems, about how quality improvement collaboratives can drive up performance and outcomes.
- The **Institute for Healthcare Improvement** provides an overview [here](#) of 6 continuous improvement tools and techniques.
- The **Impact Management Programme** - written for charities and social enterprises - provides simple and engaging resources and diagnostics related to creating a culture of measuring impact, creating an impact management plan, and how to practically go about collecting and analysing data.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- What do you think are the key barriers to building a culture of quality improvement?
- Do you have in place the necessary expertise to guide the monitoring, learning and evaluation aspects of your strategy?
- Do you need to bring expertise in? If so, how will you build capacity within your local early learning system?

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6. IMPLEMENTING, TESTING AND LEARNING

6.4. MONITORING INDICATORS OF CHANGE IN THE EARLY LEARNING SYSTEM

Through developing the local strategy and associated theory of change in **Section 5**, the partnership will have specified key indicators of change in the local **early learning system**. These indicators should be monitored and will form the basis of efforts to (a) track success of the strategy and (b) inform iteration and refinement, as required.

1. Early learning and intermediate outcomes

A local strategic plan will specify the **early learning outcomes** that are the focus of the strategy, and the specific intermediate outcomes that will be addressed in order to achieve these outcomes.

Actions:

- A.** Revisit the **local needs** analysis plan introduced in **Section 1** and determine the sources of these data (ideally from existing data sources, or potentially developing approaches to gather data on these intermediate and primary outcomes, if necessary).
- B.** Based on your system boundary setting in **Section 2**, specify the populations from which this data will be drawn.
- C.** Determine how you will explore and measure variations in outcomes for children living in poverty.
- D.** Align monitoring of these outcomes to local evaluation activities.

In relation to early learning outcomes: the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) will be a central and consistent measure across each Early Learning Community (paying attention to the gap between those living in poverty and those not).

2. Wider system change indicators

In addition to children's early learning outcomes and associated intermediary outcomes, a local strategic plan will also identify a range of wider indicators of local system change. As introduced in **Section 5**, these may include, for example, shifts in expenditure towards early learning, closer inter-agency collaboration and trust or more devolved decision-making.

Actions:

- A.** Identify key system change indicators and develop a plan to measure these. Many of these system change indicators may require more **qualitative** rather than **quantitative** assessments.
- B.** Align monitoring of these outcomes to local evaluation activities.

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6. IMPLEMENTING, TESTING AND LEARNING

6.5. ITERATING ON A STRATEGY

A key function of learning, improvement and evaluation activities is to help local partnerships reflect on how well an overarching strategy is going, and course-correct where necessary.

In addition to indicators being well articulated within a strategy, evaluation and learning activities should also seek to measure any indicators. Once indicators are routinely measured, local partnerships may then determine whether the strategy is on track or whether course-correction is required.

A strategy should not be a document produced at the beginning of a process that subsequently sits on a shelf. Rather, it should be considered a dynamic hypothesis for change that is routinely revisited and refined, as local systems learn and change through partnership **governance** activities.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Is your strategy on course to achieve its key goals?
- If not, how might the strategy require refinement to help it do so?
- What things have or might change - internally or externally - that may have a bearing on the strategy?

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- 6.6. STOCK-TAKE

HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU ...

...That monitoring, learning and evaluation approaches are tightly aligned to both the overarching Early Learning Communities theory of change, and your own local variation?



...That capacity and capability can be built to ensure rapid-cycle testing is routinely built into service delivery?



...That the necessary data and feedback loops can be created to allow timely course correction of a strategy?



6.6. STOCK-TAKE / IMPLEMENTATION, TESTING AND LEARNING

This section poses a series of questions to help partnerships consider how well developed and confident they are in relation to their local early learning strategy development.

Partnerships should consider the questions to the right, responding with either:

- **Green:** a high degree of confidence
- **Amber:** a moderate degree of confidence
- **Red:** a low degree of confidence

The stock-take questions are for individuals from across the partnership to answer and should be completed separately prior to coming together to reflect on the collective position.

What next? If responses to questions are green, then this high degree of confidence means that no immediate further work is required and this section can be kept under review. Amber responses indicate that sufficient understanding and progress has been made to move on and make further decisions in later sections, on the basis of this work. However, these might be areas in which partnerships wish to revisit and strengthen in due course.

Where any responses are red, this indicates that further work is required before moving on and making decisions in later sections.



STOCK-TAKE SUMMARIES

STOCK-TAKE SUMMARIES

1. HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU...

...In your understanding of what the evidence says is important for children's early learning outcomes?

...That the local data you hold on child needs and factors is sufficiently robust, representative and detailed?

...That you adequately understand the needs and important factors on early learning outcomes, locally?

...In your understanding of the evidence about what works to improve early learning outcomes?

2. HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU...

...In applying concepts of systems thinking to your local system change efforts?

...In your understanding of the services and supports that exist in the local area and where gaps or duplication exists?

...That the composition of your partnership can effect change within the local early learning system?

...That you have identified those in your local system or community that can help you bring about the change you want to see?

...That you are operating within a geographical area that your partnership can influence?

3. HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU ...

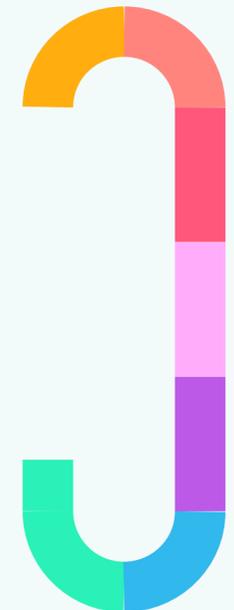
...That in your prioritisation of outcomes and factors you have the balance right between what the evidence says is important and what matters locally?

...That priorities will be shared by local families and communities?

...That your local partnership has the means and influence to affect change in prioritised outcomes and factors?

...That priorities will have buy-in across the wider early learning system?

...That you have the balance right between evidence-based practice, innovation, improvement, and implementation?



STOCK-TAKE SUMMARIES

4. HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU...

...That your partnership and wider early learning system has a culture of innovation, exploration, testing and learning?



...That local partnerships can engage and involve a diverse range of potential service users in a co-design or improvement process?



...That appropriately skilled and experienced staff can be freed up from their usual role to engage in a co-design or improvement process?



...That the necessary supports, investments and culture can be created to support a process of change management?



5. HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU ...

...That the necessary groundwork has been done to enable the production of a robust strategy?



...That your strategy is clearly supported in a local theory of change?



...That the strategy has the buy-in and commitment from across the wider early learning community?



...That your strategy reflects and serves the diversity of your local population?



...That your strategy will lead to improvements in early learning outcomes for children living in poverty?



6. HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU ...

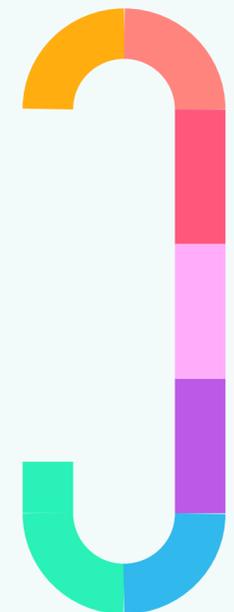
...That monitoring, learning and evaluation approaches are tightly aligned to both the overarching Early Learning Communities theory of change, and your own local variation?



...That capacity and capability can be built to ensure rapid-cycle testing is routinely built into service delivery?



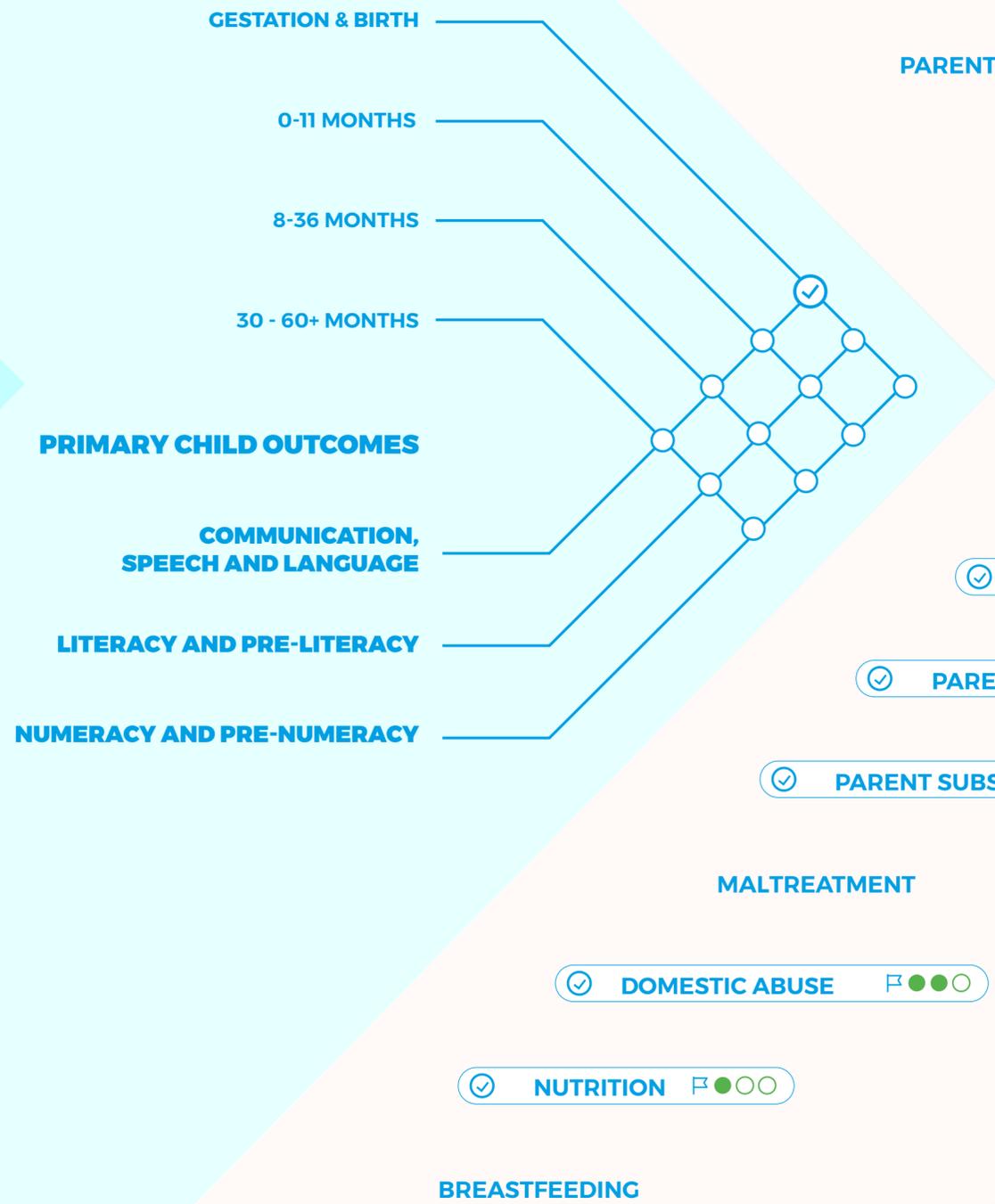
...That the necessary data and feedback loops can be created to allow timely course correction of a strategy?



EVIDENCE MATRIX OVERVIEW

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PHYSICAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT



PARENTS AND CARERS

SENSITIVE PARENTING/ATTACHMENT

PLAY AND VERBAL EXCHANGES

PARENT ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING

LEARNING RESOURCES IN THE HOME

RAISING ASPIRATIONS

PARENTING PRACTICES

MALTREATMENT

BREASTFEEDING

SERVICES

✓ ANTENATAL CARE P ●●●○

POSTNATAL CARE

NURSERY PROVISION

CHILDREN'S CENTRES

SCHOOLS

SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

✓ OVERCROWDED ACCOMMODATION P ●●●○

✓ POOR QUALITY HOUSING P ●●●○

SAFE PLACES FOR CHILDREN TO PLAY

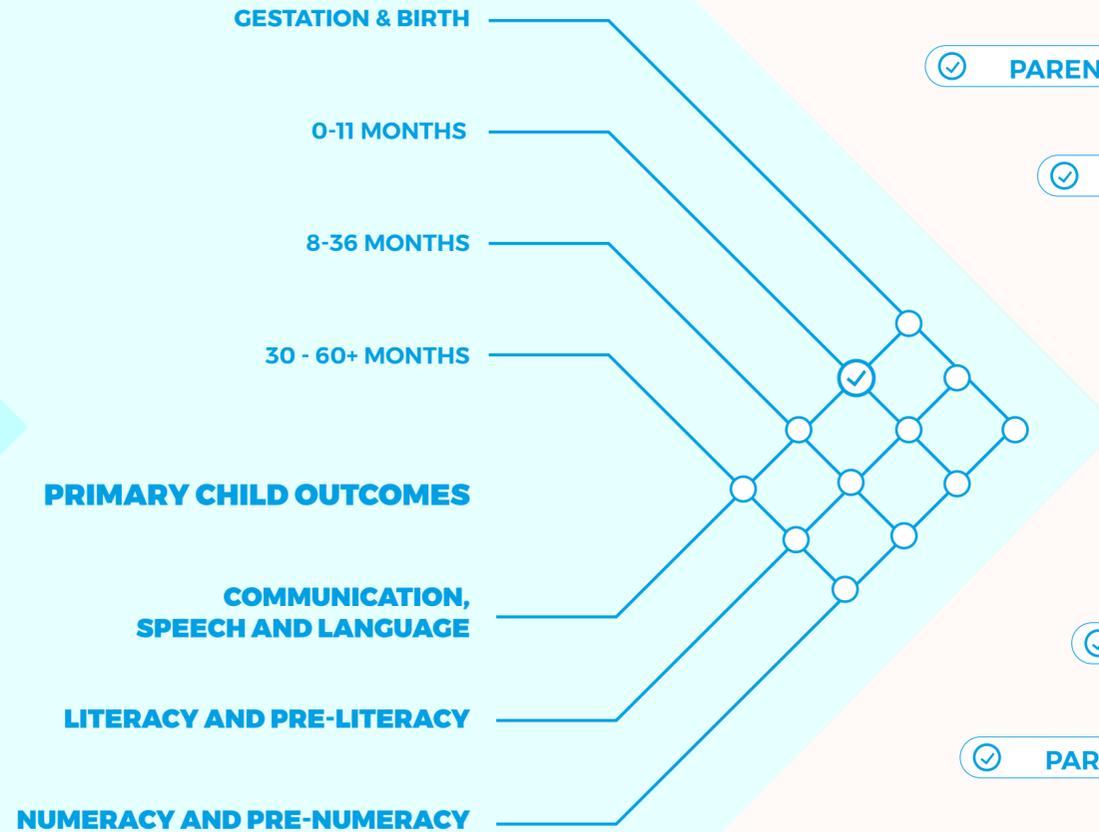
✓ SOCIAL CAPITAL AND SUPPORTS P ●●●○

EMPLOYMENT THAT FITS AROUND FAMILIES

P ●●●● critical influential on early learning outcomes
 P ●●●○ strong influence on early learning outcomes
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PARENTS AND CARERS

✓ SENSITIVE PARENTING/ATTACHMENT P ●●●●

✓ PLAY AND VERBAL EXCHANGES P ●●●●

✓ PARENT ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING P ●●●●

✓ LEARNING RESOURCES IN THE HOME P ●●●●

✓ RAISING ASPIRATIONS P ●●●●

PARENTING PRACTICES

✓ PARENT MENTAL HEALTH P ●●●●

✓ PARENT STRESS P ●●●●

✓ PARENT PHYSICAL HEALTH P ●●●●

✓ PARENT SUBSTANCE MISUSE P ●●●●

✓ MALTREATMENT P ●●●●

✓ DOMESTIC ABUSE P ●●●●

✓ NUTRITION P ●●●●

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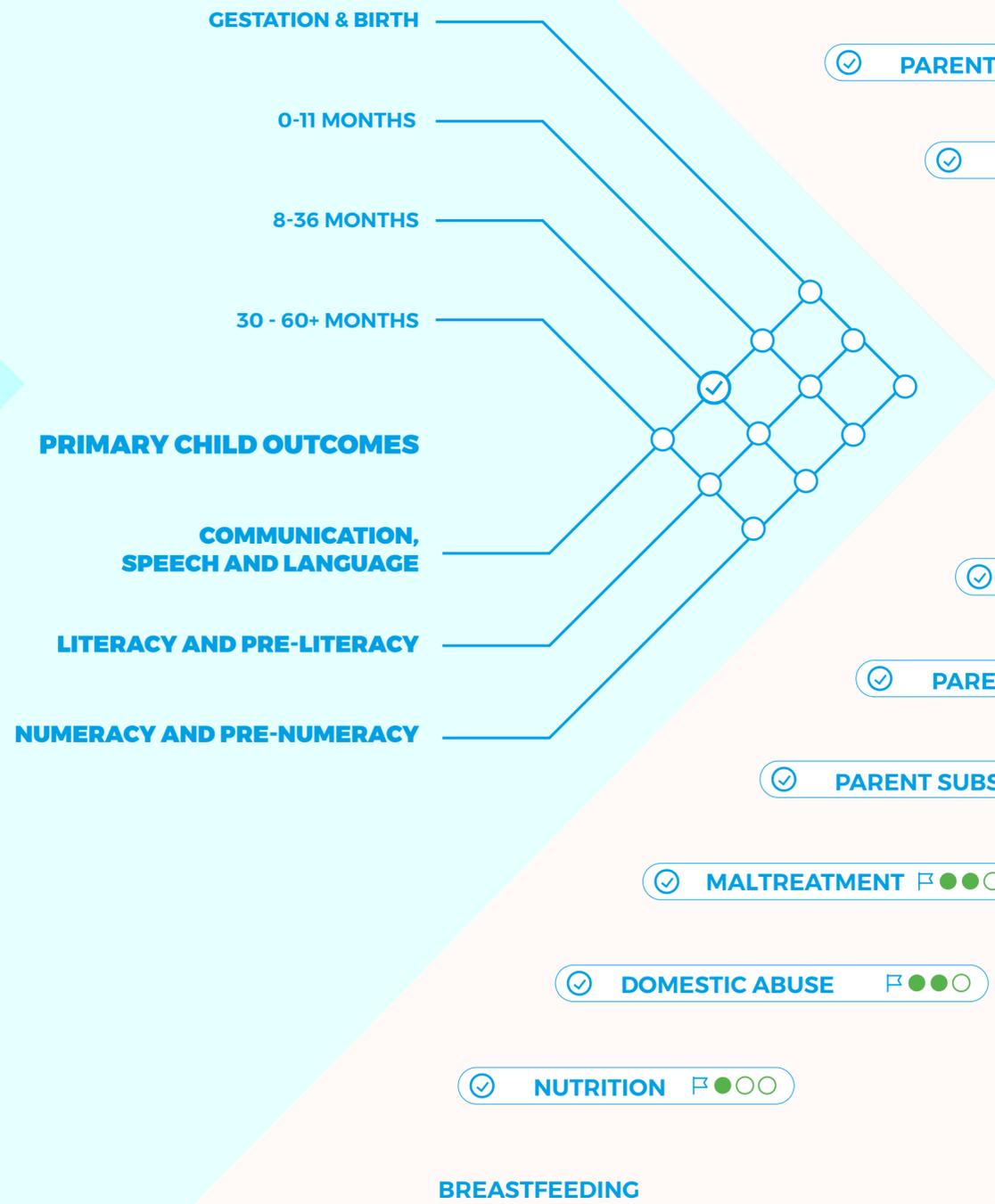
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✓ NUTRITION P ●●○○

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✓ CHILDREN'S CENTRES P ●●●●

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COMMUNICATION, SPEECH AND LANGUAGE

LITERACY AND PRE-LITERACY

NUMERACY AND PRE-NUMERACY

GESTATION & BIRTH

0-11 MONTHS

8-36 MONTHS

30 - 60+ MONTHS

✓ **PLAY AND VERBAL EXCHANGES** P ●●●○

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✓ **MALTREATMENT** P ●●●○

✓ **DOMESTIC ABUSE** P ●●●○

✓ **NUTRITION** P ●●●○

BREASTFEEDING

✓ **NURSERY PROVISION** P ●●●○

✓ **CHILDREN'S CENTRES** P ●●●○

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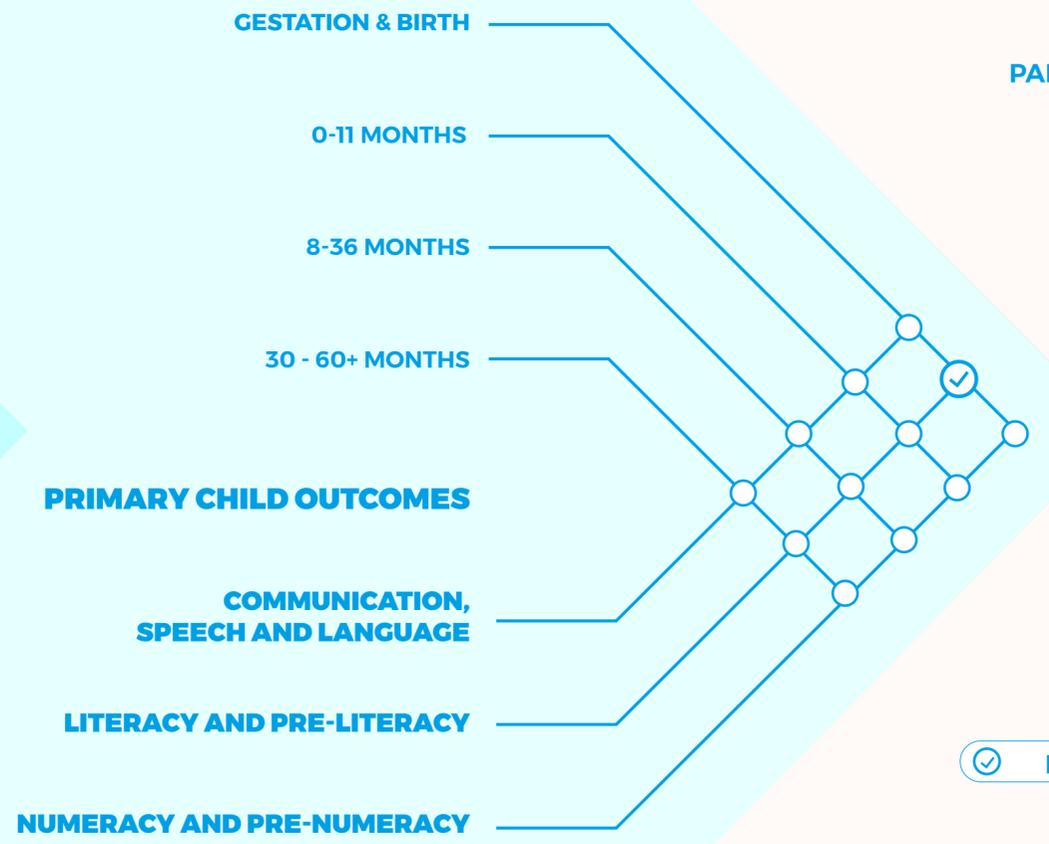
✓ **SAFE PLACES FOR CHILDREN TO PLAY** P ●●●○

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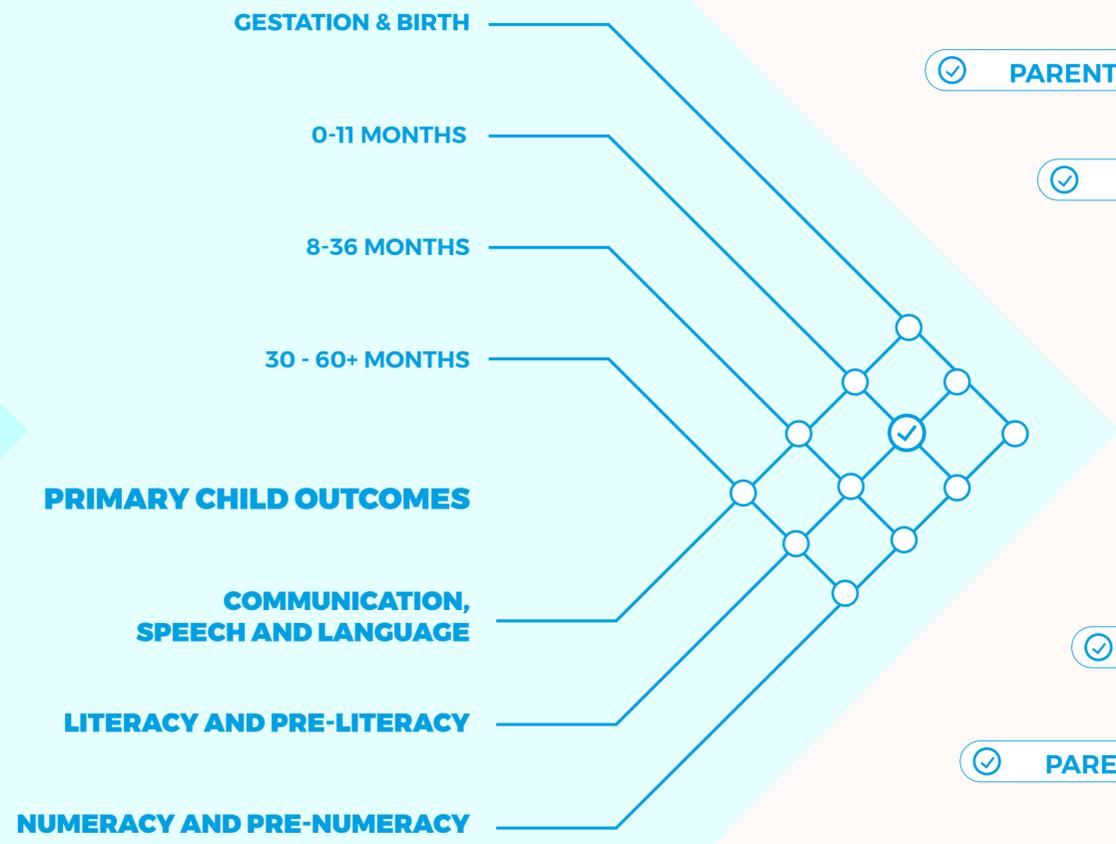
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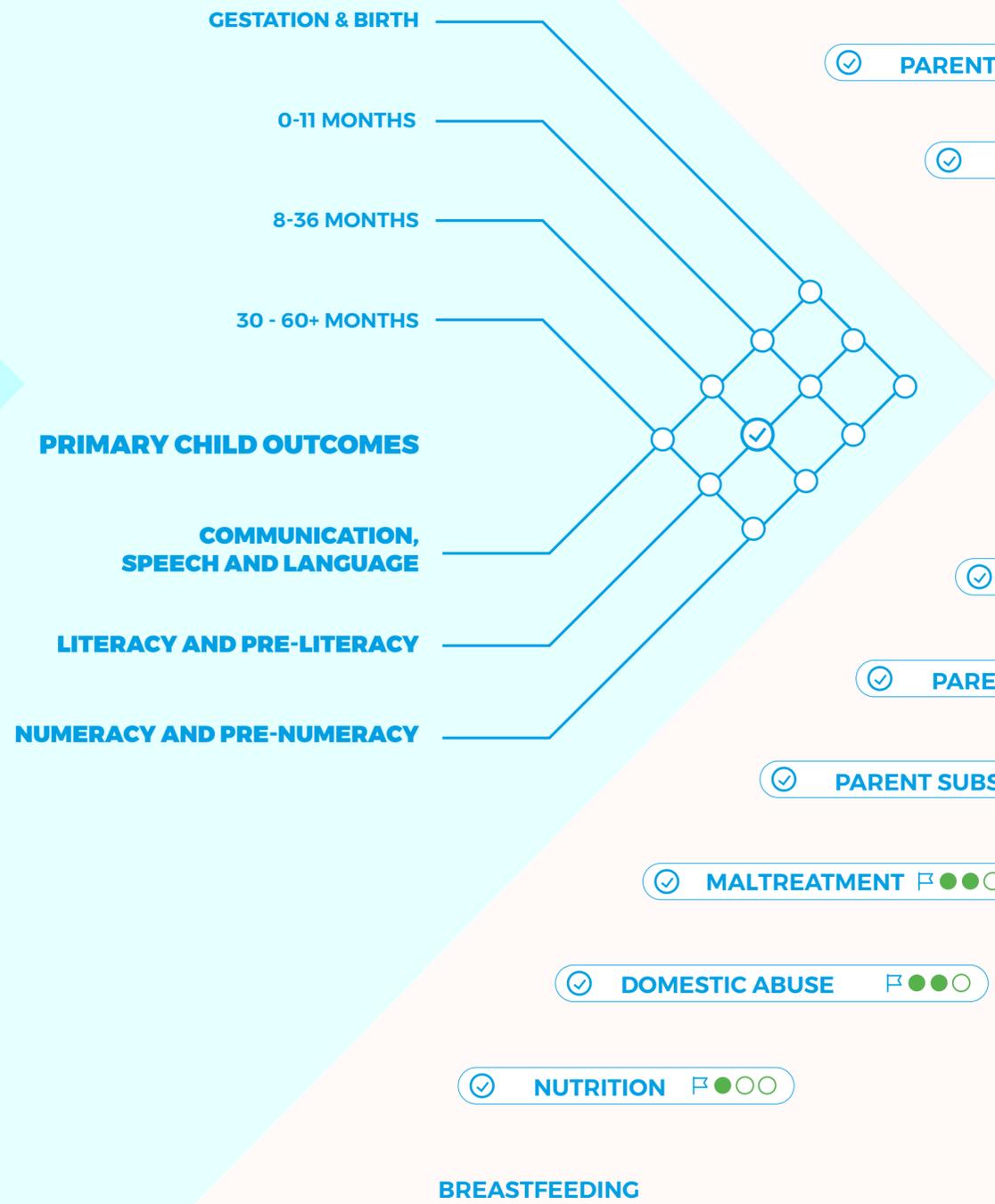
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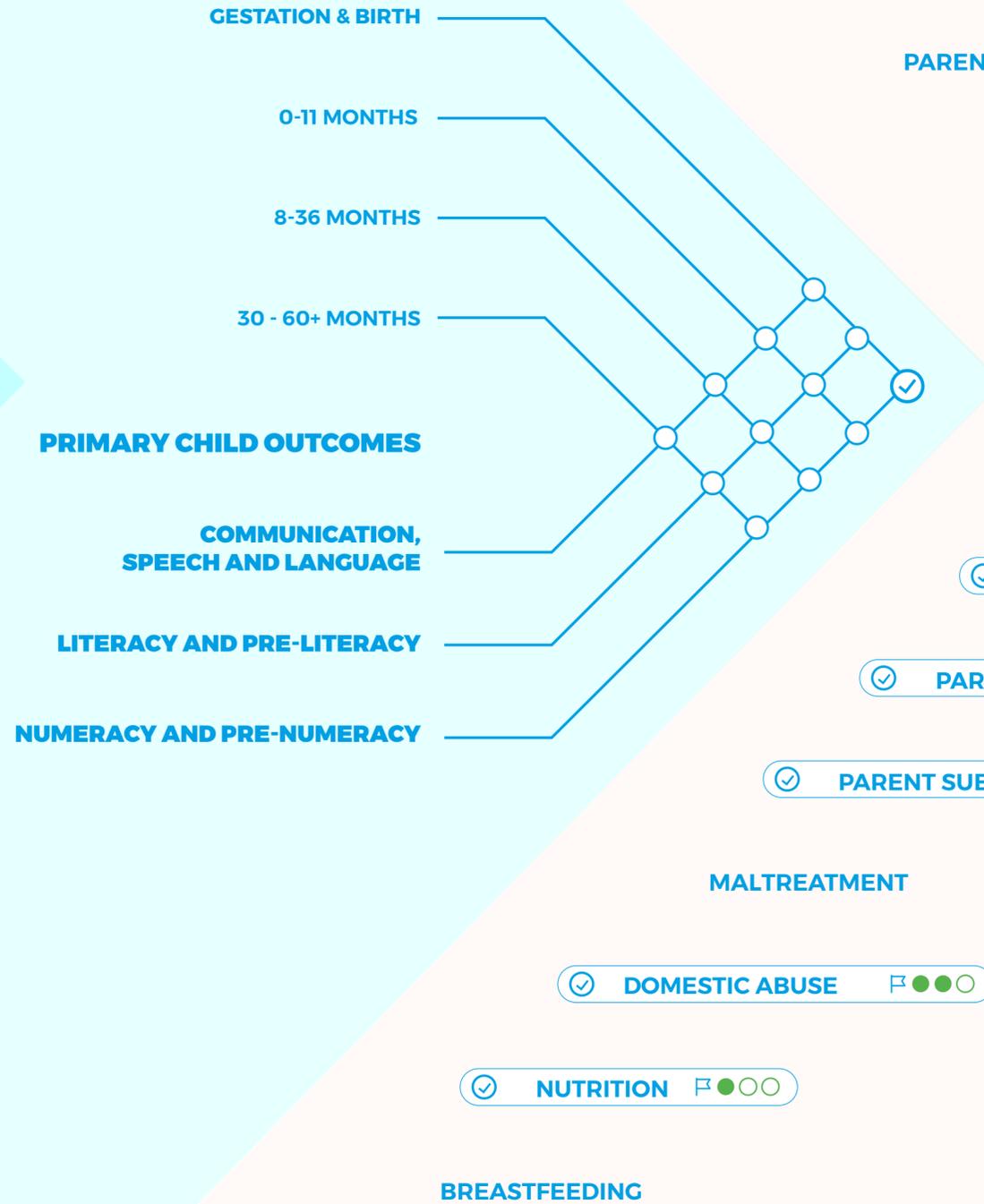
✓ SOCIAL CAPITAL AND SUPPORTS P ●●●○

✓ EMPLOYMENT THAT FITS AROUND FAMILIES P ●●○○

P ●●●● critical influential on early learning outcomes
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SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

PHYSICAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT



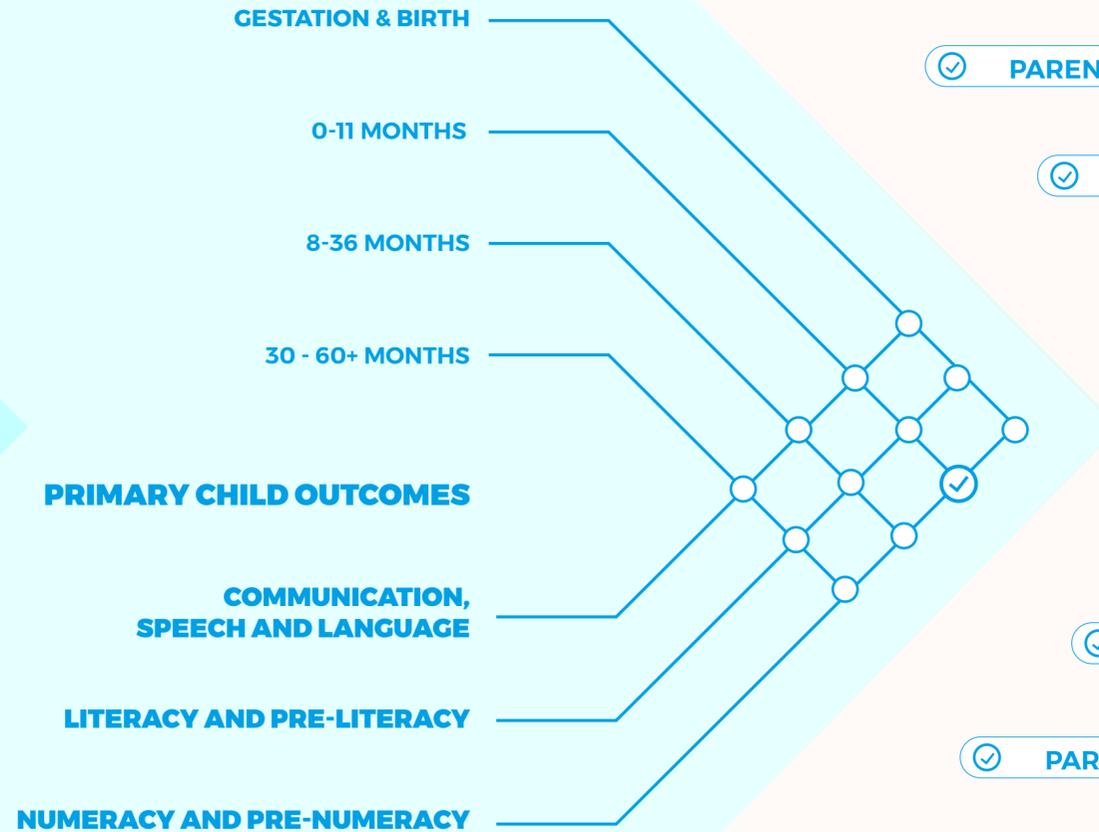
SERVICES



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SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

PHYSICAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT



PARENTS AND CARERS

✓ SENSITIVE PARENTING/ATTACHMENT P ●●●●

✓ PLAY AND VERBAL EXCHANGES P ●●●●

✓ PARENT ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING P ●●●●

✓ LEARNING RESOURCES IN THE HOME P ●●●●

✓ RAISING ASPIRATIONS P ●●●●

✓ PARENT MENTAL HEALTH P ●●●●

✓ PARENT STRESS P ●●●●

✓ PARENT PHYSICAL HEALTH P ●●●●

✓ PARENT SUBSTANCE MISUSE P ●●●●

✓ MALTREATMENT P ●●●●

✓ DOMESTIC ABUSE P ●●●●

✓ NUTRITION P ●●●●

✓ BREASTFEEDING P ●●●●

SERVICES

ANTENATAL CARE

✓ POSTNATAL CARE P ●●●●

NURSERY PROVISION

CHILDREN'S CENTRES

SCHOOLS

PARENTING PRACTICES

SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

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✓ POOR QUALITY HOUSING P ●●●●

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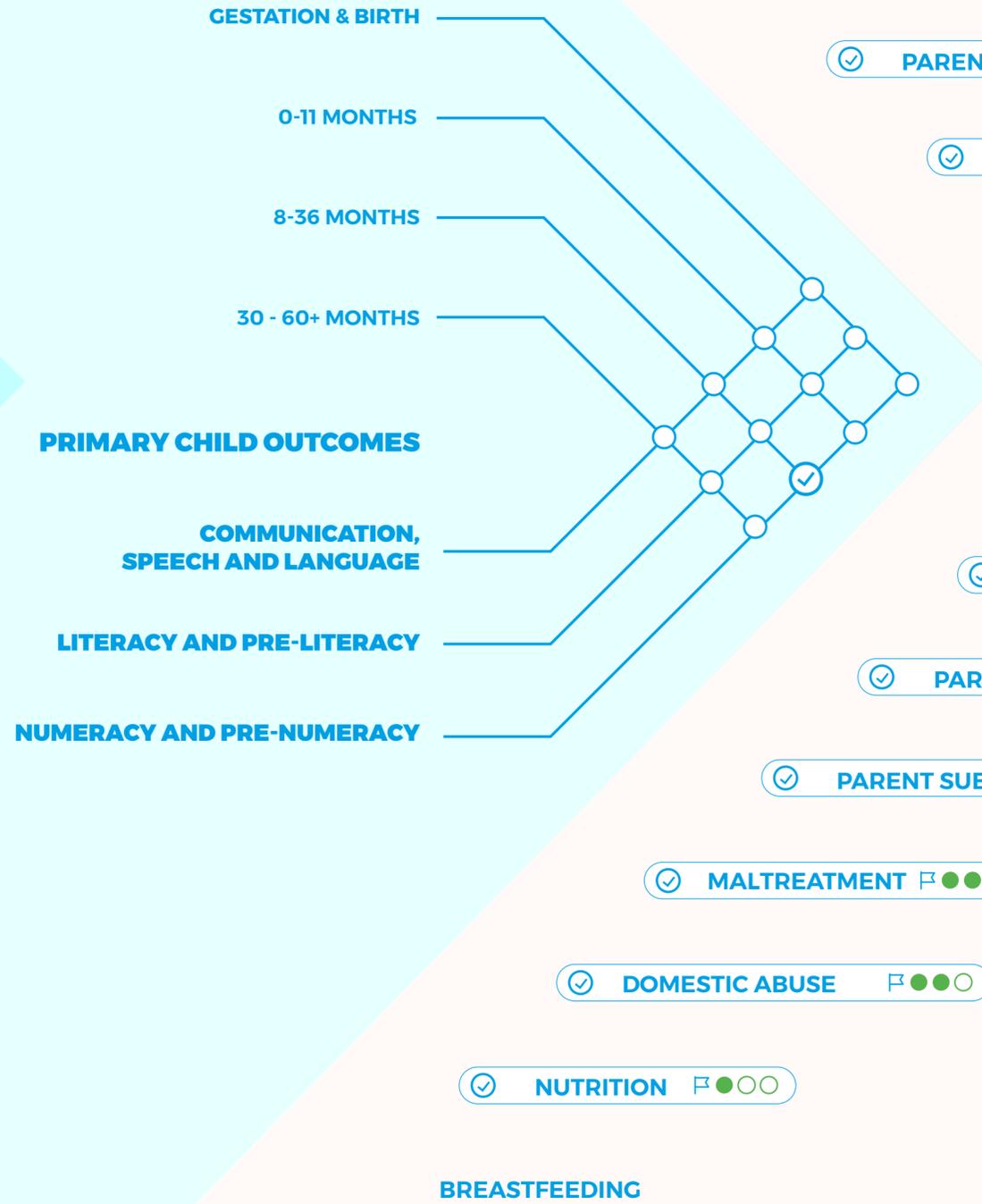
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SERVICES

ANTENATAL CARE

POSTNATAL CARE

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SCHOOLS

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PARENTS AND CARERS

SERVICES

SENSITIVE PARENTING/ATTACHMENT

ANTENATAL CARE

POSTNATAL CARE

SCHOOLS

SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

PHYSICAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT

PRIMARY CHILD OUTCOMES

COMMUNICATION, SPEECH AND LANGUAGE

LITERACY AND PRE-LITERACY

NUMERACY AND PRE-NUMERACY

GESTATION & BIRTH

0-11 MONTHS

8-36 MONTHS

30 - 60+ MONTHS

✓ PLAY AND VERBAL EXCHANGES P ●●●●

✓ PARENT ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING P ●●●●

✓ LEARNING RESOURCES IN THE HOME P ●●●●

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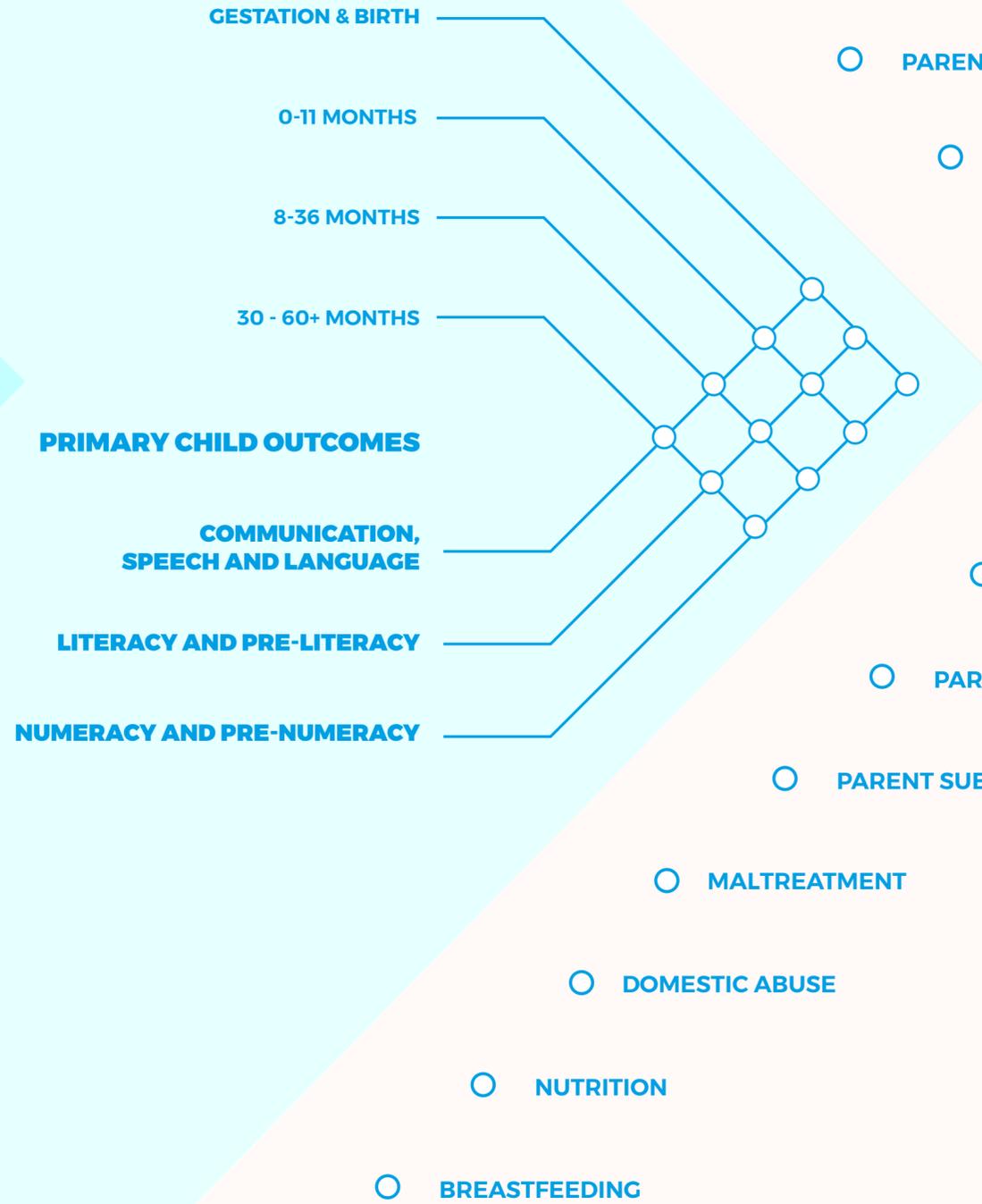
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SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL
DEVELOPMENT

PHYSICAL HEALTH AND
DEVELOPMENT



PARENTS AND CARERS

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- PLAY AND VERBAL EXCHANGES
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SERVICES

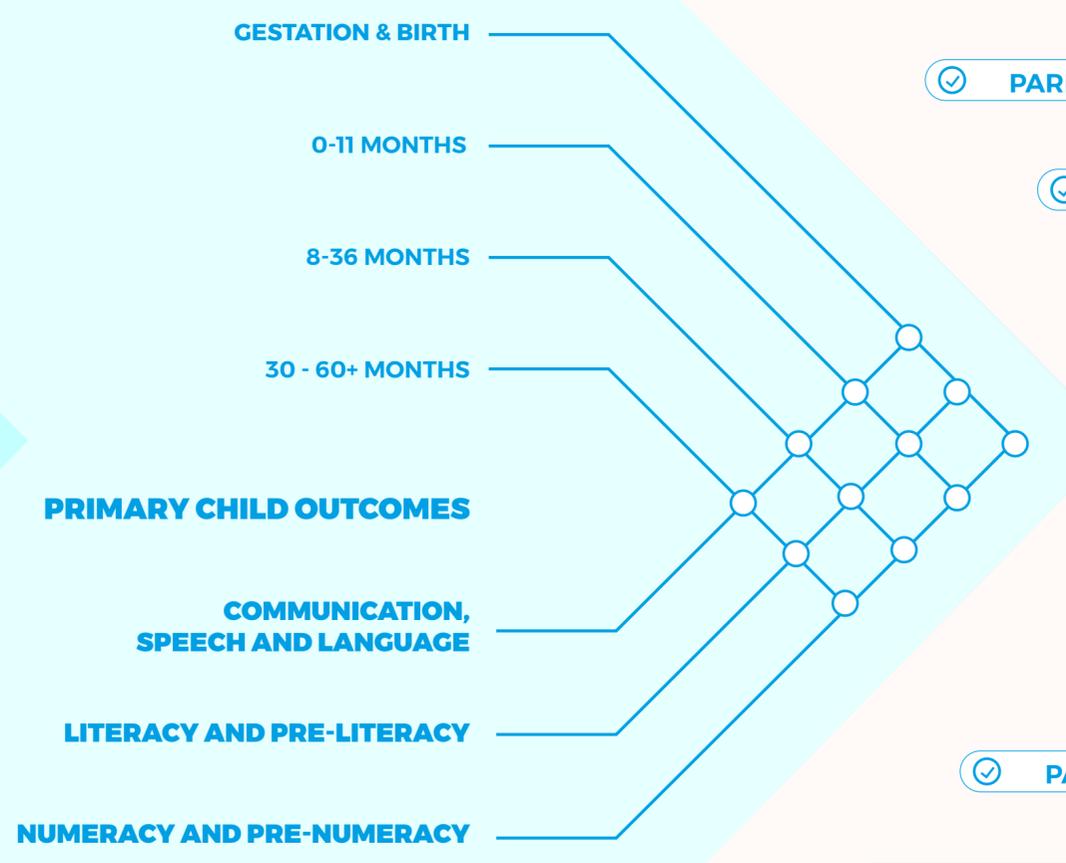
- ANTENATAL CARE
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- SCHOOLS
- SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT**
- OVERCROWDED ACCOMMODATION
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- SAFE PLACES FOR CHILDREN TO PLAY
- SOCIAL CAPITAL AND SUPPORTS
- EMPLOYMENT THAT FITS AROUND FAMILIES

PARENTS AND CARERS

SERVICES

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

PHYSICAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT



GESTATION & BIRTH

0-11 MONTHS

8-36 MONTHS

30 - 60+ MONTHS

PRIMARY CHILD OUTCOMES

COMMUNICATION, SPEECH AND LANGUAGE

LITERACY AND PRE-LITERACY

NUMERACY AND PRE-NUMERACY

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PARENTING PRACTICES P ●●●●

PARENT MENTAL HEALTH P ●●●●

PARENT STRESS P ●●●●

PARENT PHYSICAL HEALTH P ●●●●

PARENT SUBSTANCE MISUSE P ●●●●

MALTREATMENT P ●●●●

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NUTRITION P ●●●●

BREASTFEEDING P ●●●●

ANTENATAL CARE P ●●●●

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NURSERY PROVISION P ●●●●

CHILDREN'S CENTRES P ●●●●

SCHOOLS P ●●●●

SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

OVERCROWDED ACCOMMODATION P ●●●●

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SAFE PLACES FOR CHILDREN TO PLAY P ●●●●

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND SUPPORTS P ●●●●

EMPLOYMENT THAT FITS AROUND FAMILIES P ●●●●

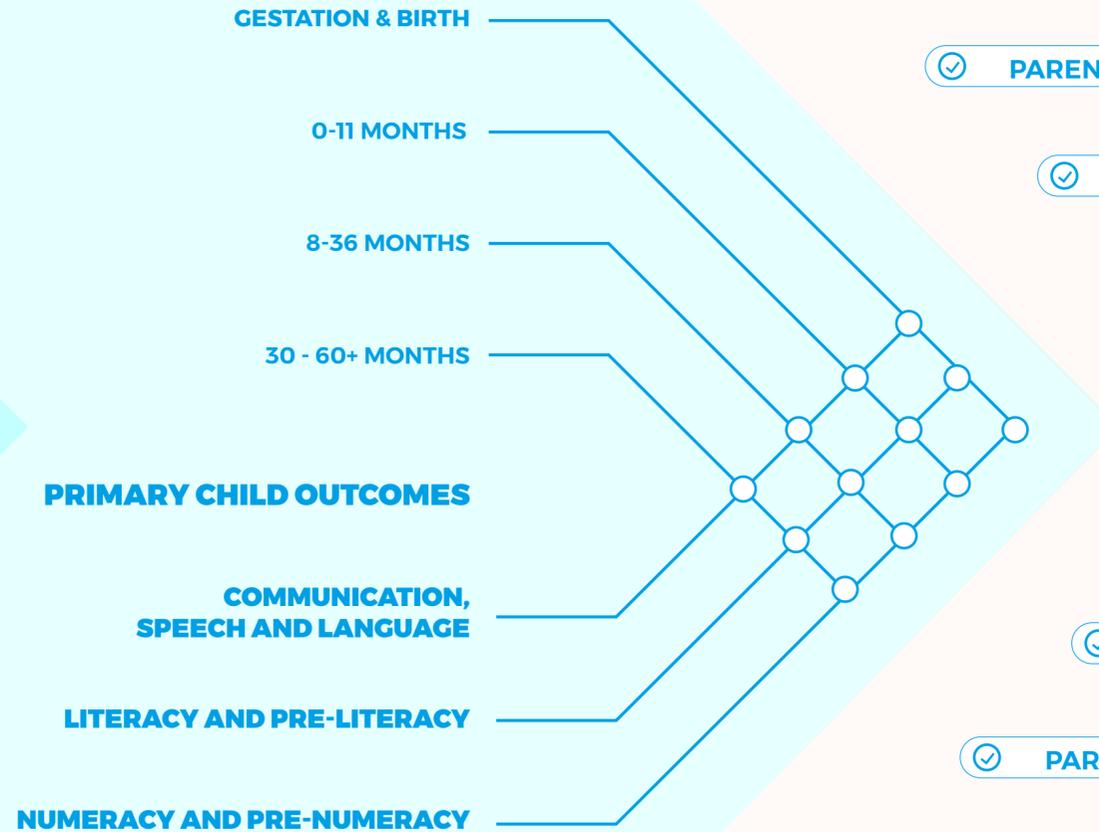
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PARENTS AND CARERS

SERVICES

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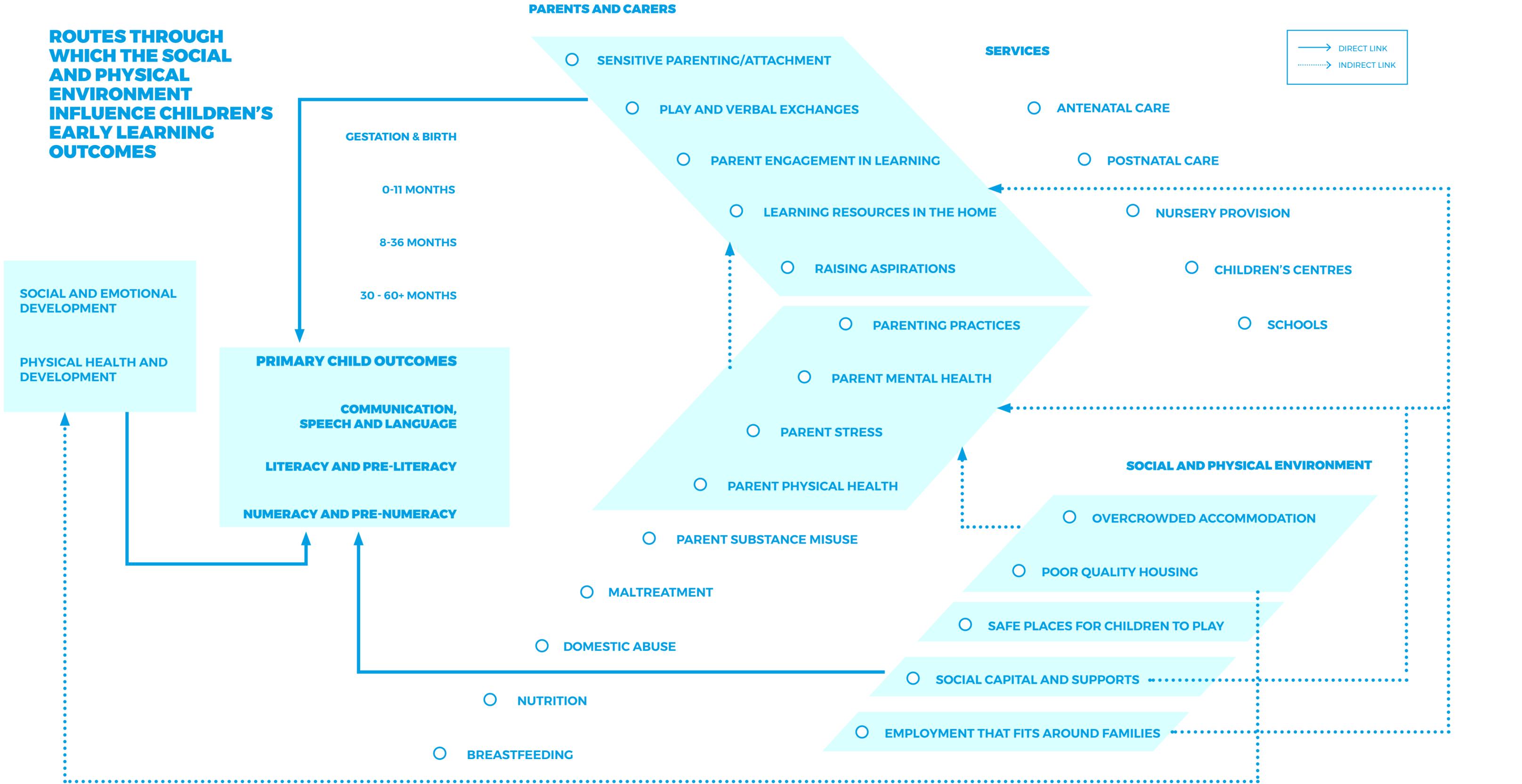
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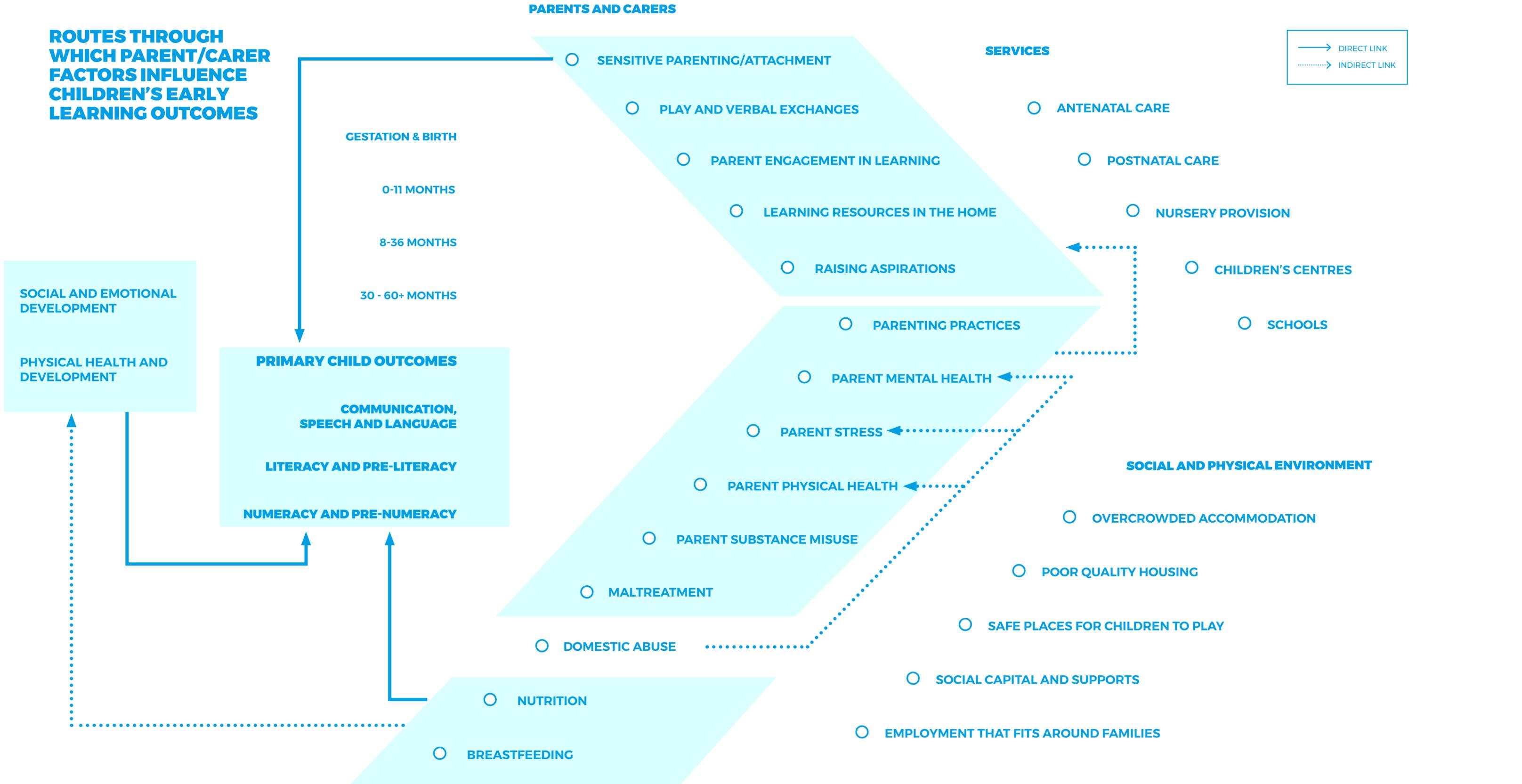
strong evidence base for improving that influence
 mixed evidence base for improving that influence

EVIDENCE MATRIX PATHWAYS

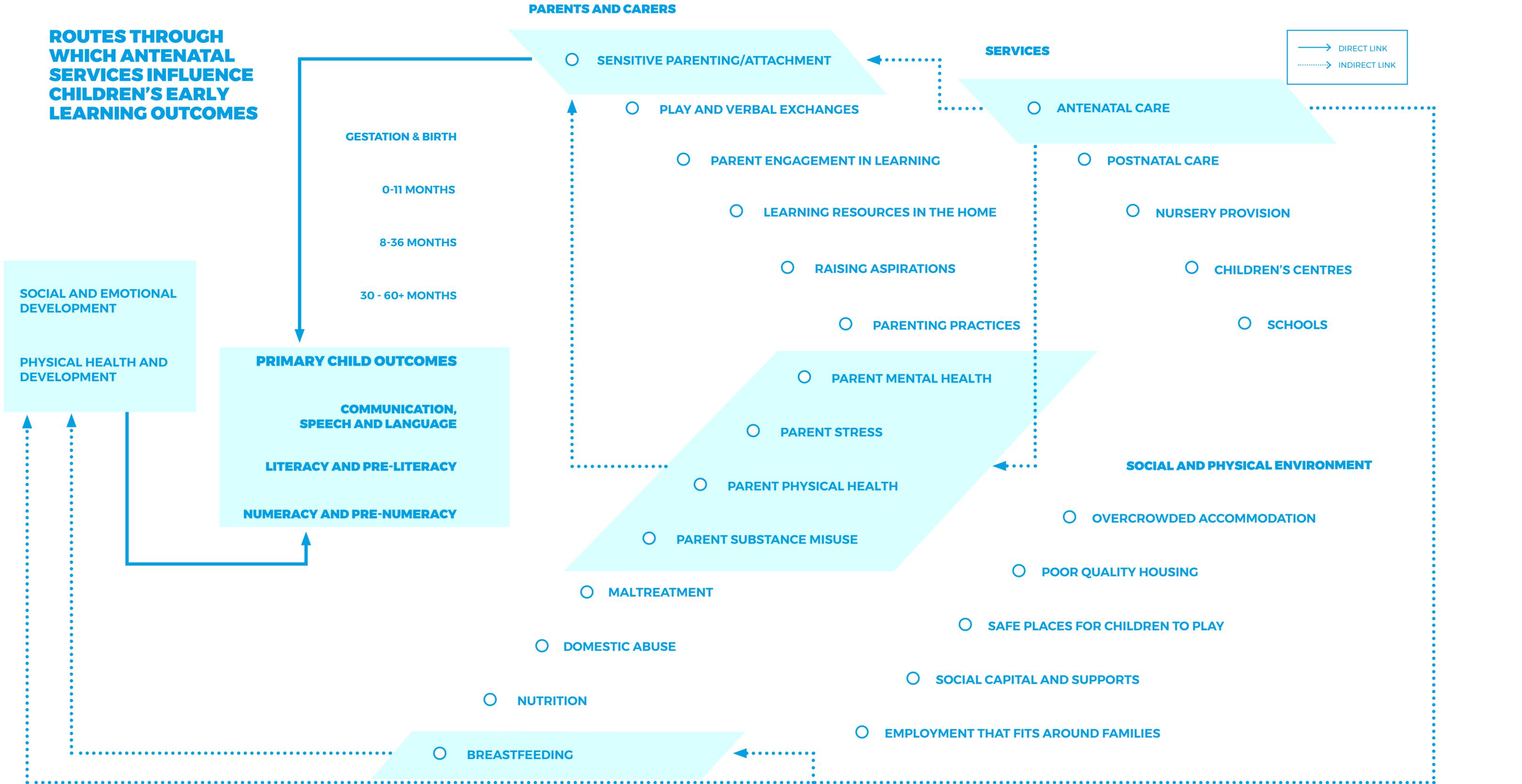
ROUTES THROUGH WHICH THE SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT INFLUENCE CHILDREN'S EARLY LEARNING OUTCOMES



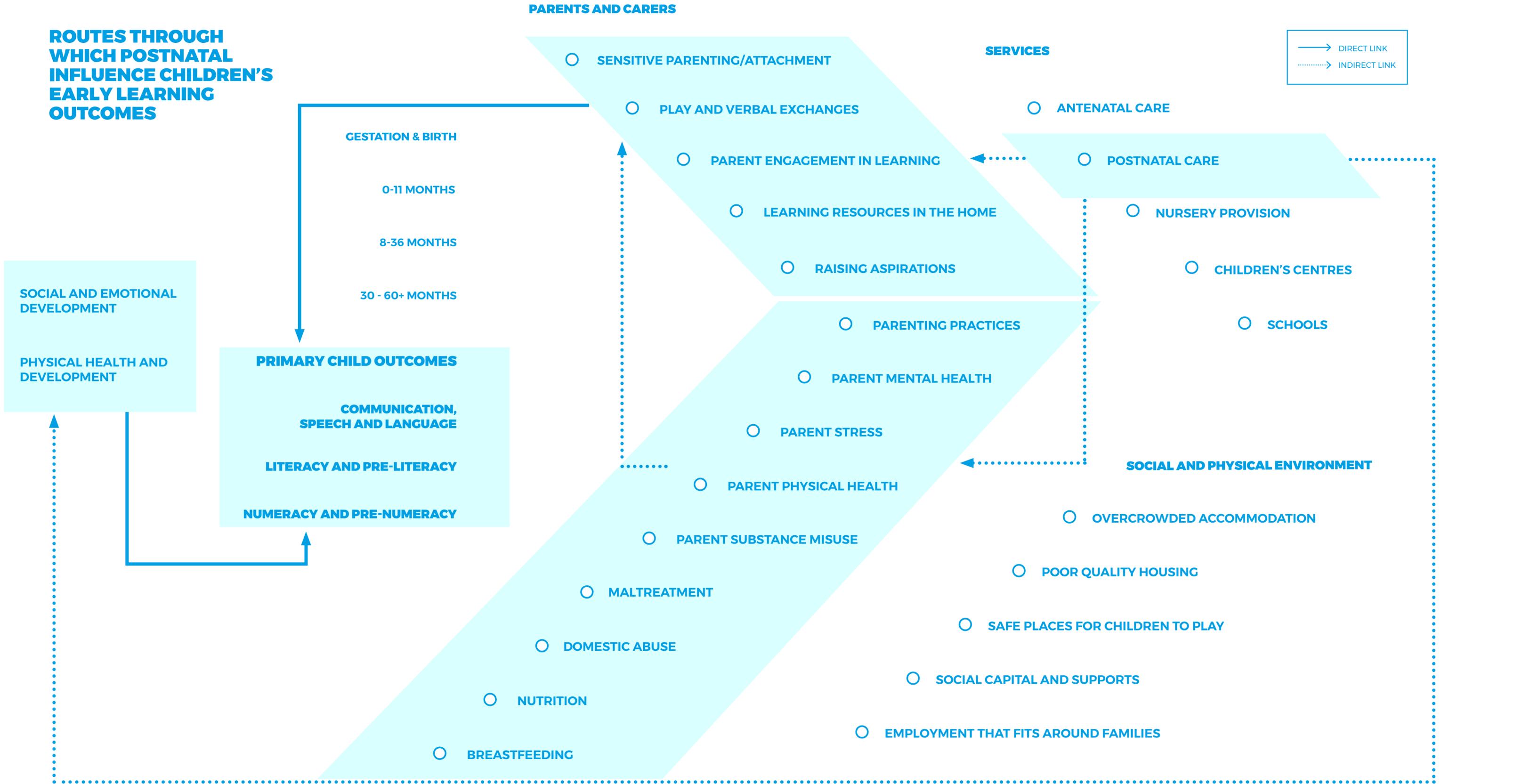
ROUTES THROUGH WHICH PARENT/CARER FACTORS INFLUENCE CHILDREN'S EARLY LEARNING OUTCOMES



ROUTES THROUGH WHICH ANTENATAL SERVICES INFLUENCE CHILDREN'S EARLY LEARNING OUTCOMES



ROUTES THROUGH WHICH POSTNATAL INFLUENCE CHILDREN'S EARLY LEARNING OUTCOMES



ROUTES THROUGH WHICH NURSERY, CHILDREN'S CENTRES AND SCHOOLS INFLUENCE CHILDREN'S EARLY LEARNING OUTCOMES

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT
PHYSICAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT

PRIMARY CHILD OUTCOMES
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PARENTS AND CARERS

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○ PARENT ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING

○ LEARNING RESOURCES IN THE HOME

○ RAISING ASPIRATIONS

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○ CHILDREN'S CENTRES

○ SCHOOLS

SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

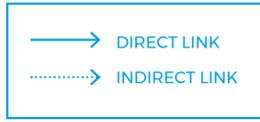
○ OVERCROWDED ACCOMMODATION

○ POOR QUALITY HOUSING

○ SAFE PLACES FOR CHILDREN TO PLAY

○ SOCIAL CAPITAL AND SUPPORTS

○ EMPLOYMENT THAT FITS AROUND FAMILIES



STRATEGY DETAILS

A STRATEGY TEMPLATE

CRAFTING A STRATEGY

A **vision** is a desired future state: in this context, an articulation of how children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds will be thriving in the future. A vision should be realistic and credible, yet also ambitious, energising and creating a bridge between the present and the future.

The **local context** should succinctly summarise the local situation, highlighting particular historical, structural, cultural and economic factors that may have a bearing on the local strategy. See **Section 1**.

How the strategy was developed should briefly describe the process by which the local strategy was developed, and who was engaged in the process.

‘What matters?’ Our local priorities should consolidate the information gathered and synthesised about the needs and associated circumstances of children living in the area and how this relates to the research evidence about *what matters* in promoting **early learning outcomes**. It should consider these together and prioritise outcomes and local factors (i.e. routes to improving these outcomes) (**Section 1**). The alignment of these priorities should be considered against the priorities of other elements in the local early learning system, and past or present initiatives.

The local early learning system and our boundaries should build upon the system mapping work, alongside considerations of local partnerships and wider stakeholders and actors (described in **Section 2**). Through considering the local priorities, **partnerships** and their leverage, it should draw and define some boundaries within which the strategy will operate. **Section 3** considers this in more depth.

What we are going to do? should communicate the overarching direction and narrative of the strategy. It should describe the local system change activities, and their local focus. It should include a series of concrete activities that will contribute to achieving the overarching vision. Depending on priority areas, these will likely include a blend of evidence-based activity, alongside local [innovation](#). **Section 3** considers this in more depth. **Section 4** considers the [system conditions](#) required to implement [evidence-based practice](#) successfully and introduces approaches to [co-designing](#) local innovations.

How are we going to do this? should describe how the specific system changes and activities will be delivered, when, by whom. It should describe how local partnerships will be developed to achieve this, and the associated [governance](#), decision-making and leadership arrangements. As introduced in **Section 4**, this part of the strategy should describe how the local early learning system will be prepared and supported to deliver this change, paying attention to workforce development, team structures, [change management](#) and technical considerations.

What does local system change look like? This element of a strategy should distil what the intended results of the strategy will look like. This might include, for example, how and to what degree the early learning outcomes of children from disadvantaged backgrounds will be improved, and what intermediate or longer-term indicators of local system change might look like (e.g. more qualified staff providing evidence-based provision; shifts in local expenditure towards promoting early learning outcomes; greater investments in evidence-based practice; etc).

How we learn and adapt as we go should consider the means by which local partnerships will learn what is working well and not so well, and adjust and improve their specific activities and overarching strategy as it develops. This is the focus of **Section 6** of the toolkit.

Next steps and timescales should provide an outline of the immediate, medium and longer-term steps (with a decreasing degree of specificity, reflecting that strategies will most likely require iteration and [adaptation](#)).

Risk and mitigations should include an analysis of key risks and steps that local partnerships may take to mitigate them.

Financial and human resources should include a worked-out analysis of the resources required to deliver the strategy, within the constraints that exist. This should consider not only financial resources but also the time (and associated cost), commitment and goodwill of partners and wider stakeholders.

GLOSSARY

ACTORS / STAKEHOLDERS

Actors/Stakeholders are the individuals, groups, organisations, government departments, businesses or other who have an influence on the initiative. Actor/Stakeholder mapping is a visual depiction of key stakeholders in the local system - identifying their expectations and abilities to make change.

ADAPTATION

Altering, refining or adapting parts of a service in order to encourage greater engagement, retention or satisfaction from those using a service (yet do not disrupt the underlying mechanisms of the service or initiative).

BOUNDARIES

System boundaries mark a limit to the system's internal components and processes. Due to the vast nature of systems, it's necessary to choose where to draw the boundary based upon the intentions and the possible influence of your work.

However, any system boundary must retain some degree of integrity. This means the parts within the boundary are still able to work together with a level of autonomy.

CAPABILITY

Having the required physical and psychological abilities and influence to conduct the activities necessary to your work and desired outcomes.

CAPACITY

Being able to provide the necessary resources, time and skills to the required strategic activities, without compromising other commitments and responsibilities.

CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Change management is a collective term for all approaches that work to prepare and support individuals, teams, and organisations in making organisational, and subsequently, systemic change.



CO-DESIGN

Co-design is the process of involving professionals, people using services, their families and the wider community in the planning and development of services and interventions. The approach is value driven and built on the principle that those who use a service are best placed to help design it.

CO-PRODUCTION

Co-production is the practice of involving all stakeholders in the design and delivery of an idea or project. This will involve children, families, practitioners and partner agencies working together to deliver public services in an equal and reciprocal way. Where activities are co-produced in this manner, both services and neighbourhoods become far more effective agents of change.

COLLABORATIVE DESIGN

Collaborative design refers to the engagement of diverse participants, including families and project partners, to work together in a planning and development process from the beginning.

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

The explicit buy-in and active participation in implementation processes from senior, middle and frontline management, within or across organisations, that implement a new intervention.

COMMISSIONER

In this context those responsible for the strategic allocation of public, or private, funds to projects, programmes or services that best address the needs of children, young people and families in their geographical or service area (for example Children's Services, Health, Education, Youth Justice etc).

CONTEXT

Context is comprised of the various facets within the community, including the existing local relationships; geography; history; social; cultural; political nuances. It is also having an understanding of the people within the community; what's important to them in their lives and the factors which impact their lives. These contextual factors should be considered when constituting a problem situation.

CORE COMPONENTS

These are the key activities that make the service work. Put another way, the specific aspects or mechanisms of a service that lead to the desired change in outcomes. For a service to be replicated successfully, providers need to be clear about what elements can and cannot be changed.

DISTAL

Interventions which are further from children and take longer to achieve, e.g. introducing new workforce qualifications or supporting change management in early years provision.



EARLY LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The Early Learning Communities are the first cohort of new local systems change initiative supported by Save the Children UK, consisting of Feltham, Margate, Newport and Sheffield.

This network provides an opportunity for sharing learning, as well as helping to influence the national debate on how best to support young children growing up in poverty. Save the Children UK is supporting the work through its staff, expertise and resources.

EARLY LEARNING OUTCOMES

Outcomes refer to the desired 'impact' or change that it is intended will be brought about by your work. This may include things such as changes in behaviour or improvements to physical or mental health. The early learning outcomes refer to the core focus areas that have been identified as integral to closing the attainment gap for children aged 0-8 years: Speech and Language development; pre-literacy and literacy; pre-numeracy and numeracy.

EARLY LEARNING SYSTEM

Encompasses those who have a stake in promoting children's early learning outcomes. This will include families and the wider community in which they live, early years services, nurseries and schools, and other individuals, organisations or movements working directly or indirectly to give children the best start in life.

ENGAGEMENT

Developing and sustaining a working relationship between the children, parents, families and communities receiving a programme, to address the needs and issues that the community experiences, to work towards an intended outcome. Without high levels of engagement, it is unlikely that programmes will achieve their desired impact.

ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnography is a qualitative approach adapted from anthropology that involves observing and studying people and cultures.

It can be used within the design process to explore the realities of life for those you are designing for, in this case, children and families. It is helpful to establish a deeper understanding of their context, challenges, capabilities and motivations and use this information to inform your wider work.

EVALUATION

Various aspects of a programme can be evaluated, including the process of delivery, user satisfaction and impact. Here evaluation refers to the use of social research methods to systematically investigate how effective programmes or services are in terms of improving children's health and development.



EVIDENCE

Generally speaking, evidence is information that acts in support of a conclusion, statement or belief. In the Toolkit evidence is used to demonstrate what is important for childhood development and whether particular approaches and services are effective.

We also take a broader view in that evidence may support or challenge aspects of service delivery, such as quality of implementation, reach and value for money.

EVIDENCE MATRIX

The evidence matrix is a tool designed to help local partnerships consider what the research says about 'what matters' to promote children's early learning outcomes and in **Section 3** of the toolkit, 'what works' in improving outcomes. It provides a visual summary of the vast body of research distilled in the accompanying evidence review.

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) requires that programmes and practice are based on the best available, current, valid and relevant evidence.

GOVERNANCE

The establishment of policies, and continuous monitoring of their proper implementation, by the members of the governing body of an organisation.

Also involved in determining how the power is distributed; ensuring voices are heard and who makes decisions. Those governing a process will be accountable to those who they represent (the public and internal stakeholders).

ICEBERG MODEL

The iceberg model refers to the observation that in many (if not most) cases only a very small amount (the 'tip') of information is available or visible about a situation or phenomenon, whereas the 'real' information or bulk of data is either unavailable or hidden. The principle gets its name from the fact that only about 1/10th of an iceberg's mass is seen outside while about 9/10th of it is unseen, deep down in the water.

IMPACT

The impact (positive or negative) of a programme or service on relevant outcomes (ideally according to one or more robust impact evaluations).

IMPLEMENTATION

The active, planned and intentional use of different strategies to enable the use and integration of research evidence into practice and services that are delivered within real-world settings.

The process of putting a service into practice. Implementation science explores theory and evidence about how best to design and deliver effective services to people.

INNOVATION

The process of designing and implementing new ideas or iterations into a service landscape that create value for the intended beneficiaries.

LEVERAGE POINT

A leverage point is a place in a system's structure where a solution element can be applied, and intervention can happen.

It's a low leverage point if a small amount of change force causes a small change in system behaviour. It's a high leverage point if a small amount of change force causes a large change in system behaviour.

LOCAL NEED

Need in relation to services for children and families, refers to how many individuals in a specified population match the target group for the programme.

MOTIVATION

The mechanisms in an individual that energise and direct the individual towards new behaviours and towards applying the new intervention – this motivation can be of both rational and emotional nature.

OPPORTUNITY

Opportunity frames the conditions outside of the individual that need to be in place before behaviour can change.

These can be 'physical' – concrete situations need to be shaped such that an individual can use a new intervention – but can also have 'cultural' aspects in that the new behaviour has to be accepted and acknowledged as the 'new way of doing things around here'.

PARTNERSHIP

Partnerships can be formed between a number of individuals, agencies or organisations with a shared interest. There is usually an overarching purpose for partners to work together and a range of specific objectives. Partnerships are often formed to address specific issues and may be short or long term.

PROXIMAL

Interventions which are closer to children and have more immediate impacts, e.g. delivering an effective programme or improving the quality of an existing service.

PLACE-BASED STRATEGY

A strategy is a plan of action to achieve the longer-term aim.

Place-based strategies are person-centred approaches used to meet the unique needs of people in one given location, which provide a framework for planning, organising, managing and delivering different activities to achieve a specified outcome.

RAPID CYCLE TESTING

The practice of developing the design of a project, implementing it and then assessing the progress and making changes at regular intervals through the project lifespan. Each implementation phase that ends with assessment and change is termed a cycle. A cycle can last for days, weeks or months depending on the outcome or change in question.

READINESS

The willingness and ability to take up an innovation and integrate it into daily practice.

SYSTEM

Systems are made up of interconnected parts that when put together create a complex whole. An early learning system is comprised of all the individuals and organisations that have an impact on a child's early learning.

SYSTEM CONDITIONS

System conditions include the culture and behaviours within the system, as well as the measures system uses, inclusive of: roles, process design, procedures, information technology, structure, management and contracts.

SYSTEMS THINKING

Systems thinking is a way of understanding how complex systems behave, what rules govern these behaviours, and what changes could be introduced to what effect. It also considers how a system's constituent parts interrelate and how systems work over time and within the context of larger systems.



THEORY OF CHANGE

Theory of Change is a specific type of methodology for planning, participation, and evaluation that is used to promote social change. It describes and illustrates how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. Theory of Change defines long-term goals and then maps backward to identify necessary preconditions.



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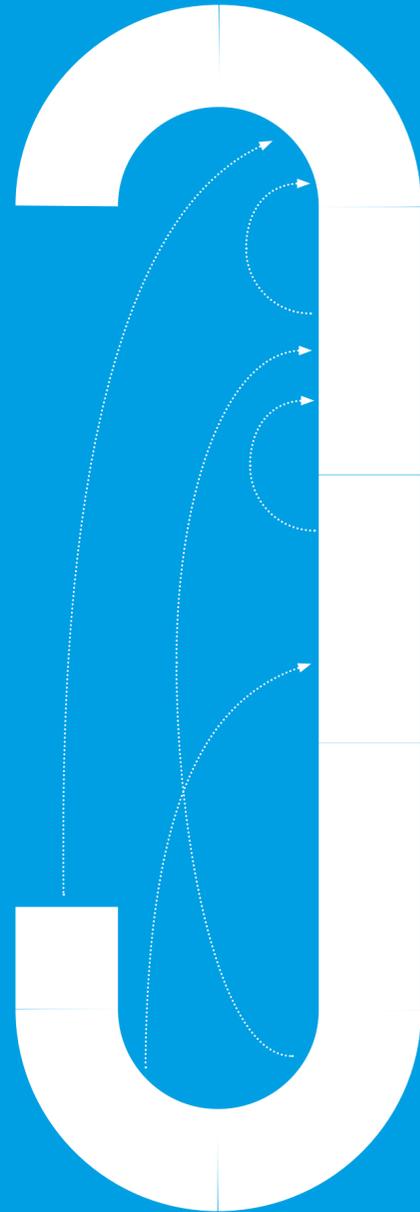
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