Changing local systems to improve **EARLY LEARNING** outcomes

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NPC

collaborate
for social change

Save the Children

This resource shares some key insights from Save the Children's <u>Early Learning Communities</u> programme. It is designed to be a learning resource for systems change programmes, practitioners and funders.

The resource is based on findings from systems change evaluations of the Early Learning Communities conducted by Collaborate and NPC from 2020-2023. The resource was compiled by Collaborate and NPC, in discussion and collaboration with Bettws, Feltham, Margate and Sheffield ELCs.

Authors: Dawn Plimmer (Collaborate CIC) and Seth Reynolds (NPC)
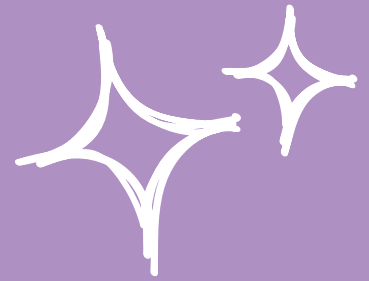
Kenan, 1, with his father Ali at the Meadows Nursery, Sheffield, attached to the Early Years Community Research Centre supported by SCUK.

Introduction
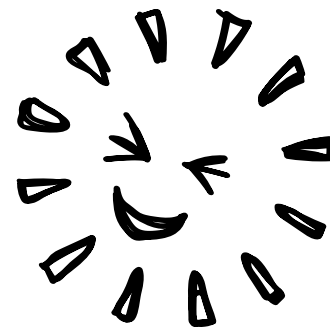
The phrase "it takes a village to raise a child" acknowledges that no one person can ensure a child has the nutrition, care, safety, stability and range of development inputs that they need to thrive. It is the work of many. However, current systems of support rarely acknowledge the breadth of different interconnected factors that impact a child's early years, nor enable the collaborative and flexible approaches that might better provide them.

In response, a growing movement has emerged in recent years for multi-agency, partnership-based approaches to early child development. These include the five Lottery-funded 10-year **Better Start programmes** (Southend, Lambeth, Nottingham, Blackpool and Bradford) and initiatives informed by the **Collective Impact** approach such as West London Children's Zone.

Building on their own **Children's Communities** programmes in Wallsend and Tameside, which took a multi-agency, partnership approach to supporting child development, in 2018 Save the Children UK (SCUK) initiated the Early Learning Communities (ELC) programme in four communities – Bettws (Newport), Sheffield, Margate and Feltham. Each ELC aims to change the systems that impact the learning and development of children living in poverty. All of the ELCs focus on children below school age (0-5), with some taking a more specific remit (e.g. age 0-2). In 2020, SCUK also initiated development of the Eastside ELC in Belfast, Northern Ireland, which was then launched in April 2022.*

The aim of the ELC programme is to convene and coordinate key partners from across the local early learning system, develop a shared and local vision for how those early learning systems needed to change to create better outcomes for children, and work together to create this change. This **Evidence Review** and this **Toolkit** guided the development of each ELC.

Given that complex systems are interconnected, ever-changing and unpredictable, it has been essential for the ELCs to learn and adapt their approach over time. This short resource attempts to share some of the tools, approaches and learning from the ELC experience over the past three years. We hope this contributes to collective knowledge about what it takes to change local early learning systems.

Authors: Dawn Plimmer (Collaborate CIC) and Seth Reynolds (NPC).

* The programme of work in Belfast followed different development timescales, so was predominantly out of scope for this evaluation and the related learning is not incorporated into this document. Links to more information about Eastside ELC can be found at the end of this document.
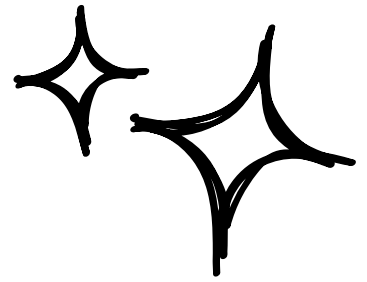
Building the conditions for systems change
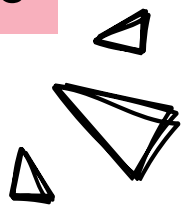
Changing systems is often likened to gardening – the environment is beyond our control and so the job of the gardener is to sense, respond, tend, nurture, observe and adjust. If individual plants are to thrive, the garden must be understood and responded to as a whole system – plants, pollinators, pests and all.

Systems change initiatives like the ELCs should take a similar approach – not focusing narrowly on trying to 'fix' individual parts but instead seeking to create the conditions for a healthy ecosystem which enables children to flourish. ELCs have seen themselves as '**system stewards**' in this process, looking to nurture change by creating the conditions for healthier local early years systems, particularly for children living in poverty.

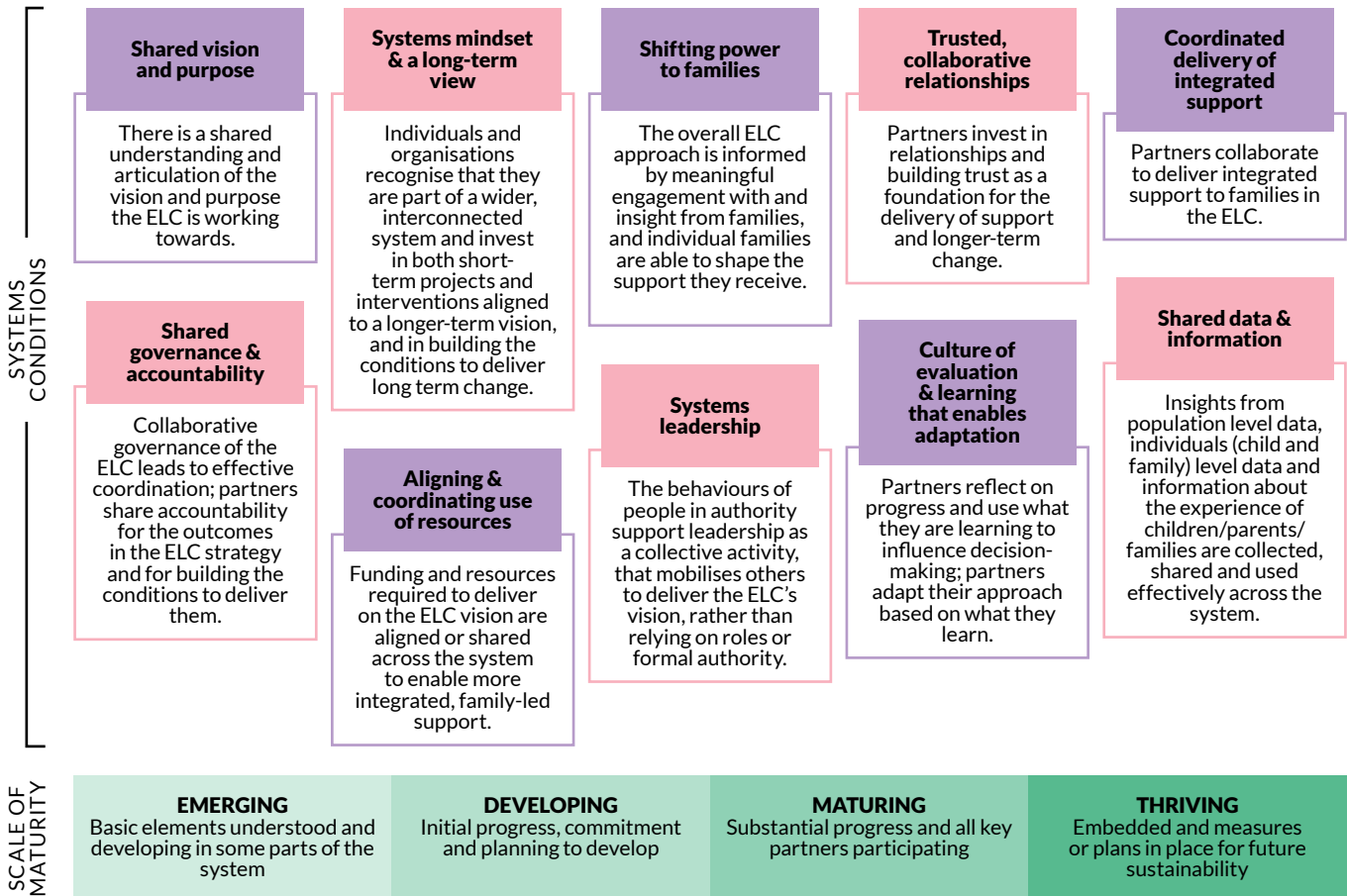This learning resource focuses on how the ELCs have developed some of these conditions. While the ELCs exist in different local contexts and have developed different projects and interventions as a result, how they have worked to develop these conditions offers transferable learning about what it takes to bring about local systems change.

Sehr, 2, takes part in creative activities at a family fun day in Sheffield

EARLY LEARNING COMMUNITIES MATURITY MODEL

SYSTEMS CONDITIONS

Shared vision and purpose

There is a shared understanding and articulation of the vision and purpose the ELC is working towards.

Systems mindset & a long-term view

Individuals and organisations recognise that they are part of a wider, interconnected system and invest in both short-term projects and interventions aligned to a longer-term vision, and in building the conditions to deliver long term change.

Shifting power to families

The overall ELC approach is informed by meaningful engagement with and insight from families, and individual families are able to shape the support they receive.

Trusted, collaborative relationships

Partners invest in relationships and building trust as a foundation for the delivery of support and longer-term change.

Coordinated delivery of integrated support

Partners collaborate to deliver integrated support to families in the ELC.

Shared governance & accountability

Collaborative governance of the ELC leads to effective coordination; partners share accountability for the outcomes in the ELC strategy and for building the conditions to deliver them.

Aligning & coordinating use of resources

Funding and resources required to deliver on the ELC vision are aligned or shared across the system to enable more integrated, family-led support.

Systems leadership

The behaviours of people in authority support leadership as a collective activity, that mobilises others to deliver the ELC's vision, rather than relying on roles or formal authority.

Culture of evaluation & learning that enables adaptation

Partners reflect on progress and use what they are learning to influence decision-making; partners adapt their approach based on what they learn.

Shared data & information

Insights from population level data, individuals (child and family) level data and information about the experience of children/parents/families are collected, shared and used effectively across the system.

SCALE OF MATURITY

EMERGING	DEVELOPING	MATURING	THRIVING
Basic elements understood and developing in some parts of the system	Initial progress, commitment and planning to develop	Substantial progress and all key partners participating	Embedded and measures or plans in place for future sustainability

To support learning and evaluation across the ELCs, a 'Systems Change Maturity Model' (summarised above) was developed. This covers ten system conditions that were identified as key to shifting early learning systems. The model describes what these conditions might look like at different levels of maturity: 'emerging', 'developing', 'maturing', and 'thriving'. This framework was used as a tool for reflection and learning, helping ELCs to understand progress against each of these key conditions and consider strategies that might further develop the conditions.
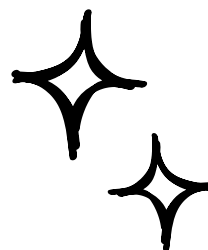
Three foundational conditions:
ELC experiences

The ten conditions are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. While they are not a sequential 'recipe' to follow, certain conditions have emerged as particularly foundational across the ELCs and have acted as building blocks for the development of other conditions. Below we explore three of these foundational conditions, how they have been developed within the ELCs, and how building that condition has helped to shift certain aspects of their local early learning system.

1

Trusted collaborative relationships

Partners invest in relationships and building trust as a foundation for the delivery of support and longer-term change.

People's experience of systems is often defined by the nature and quality of the relationships within it. Building trusted collaborative relationships has been fundamental to all of the ELCs' work. Without such relationships, it would have been impossible to engage, convene and coordinate the different stakeholders needed – whether families, practitioners or senior leaders – to enable more joined up approaches.

BUILDING THE CONDITION

The ELCs have played a convening and coordinating (or 'system steward') role to foster relationships at multiple levels across their local systems. Each has a Project Board which has overseen the strategic development and direction of the ELC's work from the start. The ELCs have also brought together practitioners in different ways to improve relationships and awareness of each other's roles, and created shared spaces for practitioners to work together on collective challenges. This has taken different forms in different places, for example working groups and early years networks.

It is important to highlight the effect that the pandemic and the subsequent crisis response had on the ELCs and the relationships between partners. Local crisis responses helped break

down barriers between different organisations and bring them together around a common goal. As the pandemic receded, this experience gave the ELCs a strong example of how to work together and the benefits it can bring.

The ELCs have worked to intentionally develop a different culture in the spaces they've created to bring people together, for example, by focusing on shared learning and collective problem solving rather than operational updates. They have sought to shift traditional power dynamics by fostering understanding and empathy across different organisations and roles, such as between local charities and public sector bodies.

SHIFTING THE SYSTEM

Developing trusted collaborative relationships has helped to:

- **Develop understanding of the system and its needs:** Developing trusted relationships has enabled the ELCs to bring together perspectives from different parts of the system. This has helped stakeholders develop a more comprehensive shared understanding of what the local early learning system offers, what families need, and some of the systemic barriers that need to be addressed.

- **Improve access to services and support:** Increased knowledge of the system has resulted in increased access to assets within it, for example, increasing ELC delivery partners' access to training and support, or increasing families' access to spaces and services which partners may have previously been unaware of. Improved connections between partners has also meant that programmes have had better reach across different groups of families e.g. parents from a wider range of schools.

- **Address problems in the system:** As relationships have matured, partners have improved communication and become more able to have challenging conversations about problems in the system. For example, partners are more open about challenges teams are facing (such as with capacity and engagement) and more willing to acknowledge and find ways to address duplication and competition.

- **Enable other conditions:** Developing trusting, collaborative relationships is arguably the condition that has most enabled the ELCs to then develop other conditions. These include 'coordinated and integrated support' (i.e. collaborating on projects and service delivery), and 'aligned and coordinated use of resources'.

Raimonda and her son Faustas, 4, looking at plants at the allotment at the Reach Academy in Feltham, London.

ON THE GROUND

Feltham ELC (FELC) has seized opportunities to build relationships and strengthen networks in all areas of its work, including through the Early Years Foundation Degree programme it developed in partnership with Kingston university. The programme was developed to address recruitment and retention challenges in the early years sector and, through investing in building relationships with and between practitioners, has also made an important contribution to FELC's wider systems change goals. For example, when FELC played a role in helping enrol children aged under 5 from asylum-seeking and refugee families in early years settings, they were able to do this quickly and effectively due to the local relationships established through the degree. The degree has also provided a forum for practitioners to meet regularly to collectively identify trends and issues in the early years system. Practitioners identified that families in Feltham were lacking access to basic oral health services, enabling FELC to raise this issue with the Local Authority, who agreed to support the delivery of dental health workshops for parents and training for practitioners.

Sheffield ELC (SELC) has seen the benefits of developing trusting relationships with partners in helping navigate challenging conversations to improve support offers. SELC developed an effective Breakfast Club model which provided parents with a cooked breakfast and hot drinks, while giving them an informal space to socialise with other parents. When initially tested over four weeks with 28 parents, this approach was very successful. Parents said that they had made new friends, felt valued when giving information to others, and valued the support they received from other parents. Parents wanted the Club to continue and expressed interest in being involved in running it.

Given this success, the approach was rolled out in other areas of Sheffield through local partners. However, when this approach was replicated by a local not-for-profit in part of Sheffield, the result was very different. The team struggled to engage parents and the Club had limited attendance. Based on existing trusting relationships with the local partner supporting this work, SELC was able to have challenging but critical conversations with these partners to understand the reasons behind the challenges and how to overcome them.

## LEARNING FROM OUR EXPERIENCE: ELC REFLECTIONS

- The work of relationship building is never done - time and attention is needed to build and sustain relationships. It will not be possible to engage everyone in your local system (whether the local authority or early years providers), so 'go where the energy is' – **start with those already engaged, build momentum, show what's possible** and then continue to reach out to others who are less engaged. It can be helpful to do this in 'rounds' of engagement, say every six months.

- **Modelling how to nurture trusting relationships** is an important role for those in stewardship or convenor roles. This includes modelling authenticity and transparency, recognising and celebrating the work of other partners, and demonstrating a commitment to genuine listening.

- Personnel changes will always affect relationship building, and there is no easy way around this. When key individuals move on, the process may need to start again. It is therefore important to **build multiple relationships within an organisation** to ensure that the partnership with that organisation doesn't depend on one single person and whether an individual retains their existing job or moves to a different role.

- The ELCs' experience has highlighted the importance of **creating dedicated spaces for relationship building and shared learning** that feel different for participants compared to meetings with a more transactional and operational focus.

In the words
of the ELCs...

"In the early days I thought I'd have to deliver change through complex programmes and processes... but I've learnt that what I've needed the most to create impact is people who have confidence in each other and confidence in walking in the same direction towards the same goal. One of our mantras is that we can only move forward at the speed of trust. When trusting relationships haven't been there we've been held back from achieving impact."

– Rebecca Thomas,
Bettws ELC Lead
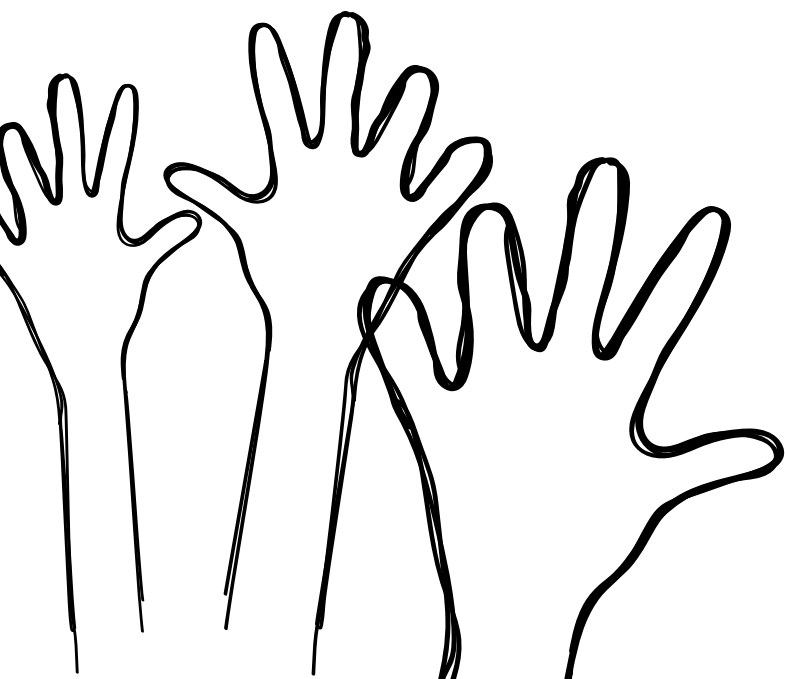
2

Shared vision and purpose

There is a shared understanding and articulation of the vision the ELC is working towards, and long-term strategic planning for how to achieve that.

Developing shared understanding is essential when working with a diverse range of people and organisations from across a system. While everyone will have different perspectives and approaches, building a shared understanding of the system and what needs to change is an important starting point. Bringing together the views and experiences of different people and organisations enables partnerships to articulate what they collectively care about and determine their shared goals in a way that provides coherence, direction and purpose.

This shared vision should be based on specific analysis of the local early years system, and how the group wants it to be different, rather than on a generic vision for change. This will provide a clearer sense of purpose for the collective endeavour and help embed the unique value of working together across the system. It will also enable each partnership member to consider what specific role it can best play in contributing to the desired system change.

As this condition builds, it should take the form of a shared strategy, supported by a coordinated action plan. In its most mature state, it should become integrated with other place-based plans.

BUILDING THE CONDITION
Developing shared vision and purpose across diverse local partners was an important starting point for the ELCs. Each developed their vision through a collaborative process involving families and partners.

While all the ELCs share a common broad vision, how this translates to specific strategies differs in

Miroslav, 3, rides his bike on Margate seafront.
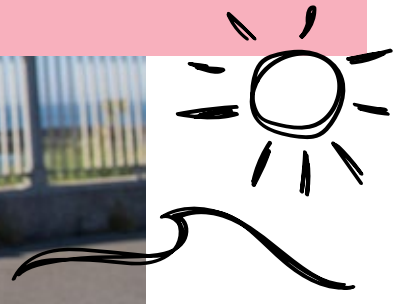
each place according to the local context. For example, Sheffield ELC includes workstreams on 'System Navigation', which ensures families and communities know which services there are to support them and 'Workforce Development', which focuses on using public services as enablers of change, whereas Margate ELC is particularly aiming to increase parental capacity and headspace to support their children's play. This has included testing different approaches to parental support, including parenting programmes, parent counselling and providing digital and physical resources for learning in the home.

The shared vision should allow for flexibility and adaptability. Systems continually shift, and part of systems work is developing the ability to sense what is happening in the system and adapt accordingly. For example, out of necessity during the pandemic, ELC activity shifted towards crisis response. While the broad shared purpose to improve early years outcomes in the areas remained the same, the strategies and activity that was needed on the ground to achieve that looked very different. Families were in far more need of emergency support, and so the ELCs adjusted to provide that. As the pandemic began to ease, new economic challenges emerged. This new context again meant that the ELCs needed to consider how their activity still met their long term aims.

In the earlier stages of the ELCs' work, when they had not yet started much visible delivery and new partners were joining, there were some challenges in supporting ELC partners to understand and articulate the distinct approach of the ELC - especially its focus on long term systems change rather than short term programmatic delivery. This was also the case following the pandemic emergency response. Since the pandemic eased, the ELCs have worked to re-establish vision and purpose and develop strategies focused on longer term systemic change.

SHIFTING THE SYSTEM

Developing shared vision and purpose has helped to:

- **Identify common goals and how everyone can contribute:** Developing a shared vision across multiple local partners has enabled organisations to focus on the bigger picture and focus on what matters to families rather than just on their own organisation's mission and services. The existence of shared visions and related strategies has enabled partners to understand where they can contribute their distinct strengths.

- **Enable more systemic thinking:** Having a clear shared vision and purpose has enabled ELCs to engage new partners by communicating an inspiring vision of a more systemic approach to early learning.

- **Connect to a broader movement:** As the ELCs have matured, they are increasingly making connections between their vision and purpose and those of other place-based, local systems change programmes. This has allowed them to draw learning and strength from initiatives outside of their own, as well as having more influence locally. Examples include connections with the **Family Hubs** programme in Feltham, Margate and Sheffield; and with the development of **Community Focus Schools** in Wales.

Photo: John Owens / Save the Children

Bastian, 3, takes part in creative arts workshop for families.
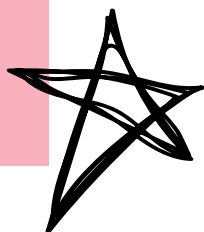
Margate ELC has experienced the importance of balancing clarity of vision with flexibility in how it is applied. Margate ELC participates in a number of other cross-sector forums for children's services, in which they speak regularly about their vision. Doing so has enabled local agencies to factor the ELC's work into what is happening across their system, and incorporate that into their own plans and priorities. It has also helped build collaboration - as new partners who share that vision have engaged with the work, identifying points of crossover and potential input and support. At the same time as having a clear vision and strong sense of purpose, Margate ELC have also been conscious of making this practical and meaningful for partners - translating it into a language they use. The way in which the vision is spoken about therefore needs revisiting and updating annually. For example, following the Covid-19 pandemic they referenced the new challenges that families were facing within how they communicated the vision for the work. This spoke to the people's present experiences and helped with engagement.

Sheffield ELC has experienced the importance of maintaining a strong vision as collaborations grow. SELC went through a number of changes and growth in personnel both internally within the team and also externally with partners. This meant more people becoming involved, which brought challenges in ensuring that everyone understood both the overarching SELC systems change vision, and also their contribution to that vision. It is critical for partners not just to understand the vision but to be able to see themselves in it. For this reason, having been concerned with a potential disconnect from the vision, in 2021 the SELC Board decided to develop a tagline and brand that would help people identify with the ELC.

LEARNING FROM OUR EXPERIENCE: ELC REFLECTIONS

- Traditionally, vision-setting might be the first thing a group does together. However, it can take time for partners to become aware of what local systems change work means in practice, understand their local system, its challenges, barriers and opportunities for change. Setting shared vision and purpose should therefore be thought of as an ongoing **process not a one-off event**.

- A systems change vision and purpose should **sit across, add to and knit together partners' existing work** as well as identify new activity needed. Additional components may be added to projects to allow them to work more systemically. Project delivery might support systems change by bringing different practitioners together, testing new ways of working or uncovering insights about shifts needed in the system.

- **Flexibility is key.** One of the strengths of the ELC programme and how it is managed is that the ELCs have a broad overarching goal, but a significant amount of flexibility in how they work to achieve their goal based on their specific context and what they are learning. This flexibility to adapt and not fixate on delivering specific predefined activities is essential for systems change work.

- **Shared vision and purpose should be clearly communicated externally** as well as internally, across all levels. This will help establish the partnership's identity and how it might differ from other initiatives, as well as increase buy-in from a wider range of local partners.

- It is important to invest in **supporting partners to understand a partnership's shared vision**. Some ELCs specifically focus on helping onboard new entrants to the system – supporting them to understand the shared vision and how they can contribute. As the ELC partnerships mature, a key priority is to forge relationships beyond individuals – engaging their whole organisations in the shared vision to embed more sustainability and achieve a greater scale of change.

In the words of the ELCs...

"Shared vision and purpose is often where a lot of early years or place-based work starts, but is definitely not where it ends. It's something we've definitely found that you have to keep coming back to and making sure you're keeping fresh."
– Freya Nowell, Margate ELC Lead

Shifting power to families

The overall ELC approach is informed by meaningful engagement with and insight from families, and individual families are able to shape the support they receive.

Rebalancing power relationships so that those the system seeks to support have more voice and influence is a critical part of systems change work. This means understanding who the system currently works least well for, and how this can be addressed in a way that increases equity. Giving families a greater say about what matters to them and influence in the support they receive is a foundation of the ELCs' systems change work.

BUILDING THE CONDITION

Families were involved in the development of ELC strategies at the start of the programme. Since then, the ELCs have worked to build relationships with families and develop ways for them to increase their voice and influence. Embedding families more closely within the ELC was challenging during the pandemic due to the need to focus on crisis response and a lack of opportunities for face-to-face engagement.

Since the pandemic has receded, the ELCs have been working to increase the voice and deepen the involvement of families. Genuine co-production means providing different ways for people to engage, depending on their preferences, capacities and potential contributions. This has included providing families with more opportunities to shape the support they receive, connect with other families for peer support, co-design ELC approaches, and have greater representation in decision making.

Measha and her baby at a Stay and Play session in Bettws, Wales

Photo: John Owens / Save the Children

SHIFTING THE SYSTEM

A focus on shifting power to families has helped to:

- **Build families' confidence and skills** in co-designing support, enable parents to benefit from peer support, and develop greater ownership of the ELC work overall. Increased co-design has also led to better engagement with projects. For example, Margate ELC found that Health Visiting services that were informed through co-design had better engagement, and outdoor play sessions were more popular when run in a less facilitated format at the suggestion of local parents.

- **Enable families to engage with the ELCs' work in a way that works for them.** This can include opportunities to sit on the board, working groups, co-produced spaces, or consultation groups. Offering a range of ways to engage helps broaden the range of families involved, and reach more parents who might not normally take on these roles.

- **Engage local partners:** Developing ways to meaningfully engage with families has encouraged key local partners, especially in the public sector, to engage with the ELCs as they want to access parents and embed parent voice but often don't have the means and skills of doing this. This highlights one distinct aspect of the value the ELCs bring to local places, and the opportunities to help influence systemic change by embedding this practice more widely.

- **Develop co-production skills among local practitioners and parents:** As well as providing training and resources, ELCs have given practitioners opportunities to experience co-production in action by inviting them into co-design sessions with families. Over time, practitioners have developed their skills and confidence and begun applying co-production approaches in their day-to-day work. In some cases, parents have also been supported to learn about co-production and then use these skills to engage other parents in co-design work. This is an important way to help embed and spread these practices across local systems, in turn enabling more, and more sustainable, shifts in power to families.

ON THE GROUND

Bettws ELC has established several structured methods for involving families in its work, as well as engaging families through its partners on an ad hoc basis. BELC has continued to develop its Biscuit Club which provides a space for families to provide peer support to each other with professional support on hand when needed, plus three other parent peer groups based in the primary schools on the estate. BELC has also developed the Voices for Bettws group which aims to act as a panel to provide insight and feedback from parents to other services in the area. A parent representative is also sitting on the BELC board to enable parent voice to be heard at a strategic level.

In **Feltham ELC**, the community organising principle of "not doing for others what they can do for themselves" has underpinned the approach since the outset. This has been a challenge to usual ways of working as it required a fundamental shift in mindset. Instead of listening to try and fix or solve people's problems or even to give advice (which, however well intentioned, comes from a deficit-based view), the ELC has moved to listening to, understanding and empowering, which means always having an asset-based approach.

In practice, this has meant evolving from just providing direct support through group interventions and activities, to FELC starting to convene, facilitate, train and try to provide as many opportunities as possible for families to participate in decision-making equitably. This has also meant thinking about equity of participation and the support families might need in order to do that successfully. As a result, parents have joined as partners alongside service professionals in the Feltham Convening Partnership, the collective impact approach to systems change that has evolved from FELC. Parents have also joined the Hounslow Family Hub Parent Carer Panels, working alongside local authority executives to shape the Family Hub's offer across the Borough.

Amelia, 8, rides a bike at the Reach Academy in Feltham

LEARNING FROM OUR EXPERIENCE: ELC REFLECTIONS

- Families will want and be able to **engage in different ways** – so it is important to offer multiple channels, such as creating opportunities for families to have more say in the support they receive or to influence the strategic direction of the ELC. It's also important to go to where families are (e.g. the school gates and local libraries), rather than always expecting them to come to you.

- Factor in the **time and resource it will take to build relationships, trust and confidence** for parents to engage. This is vital or there is a risk that only parents who already have the confidence and skills will engage.

- **Be prepared to adapt.** Co-design approaches that have worked in some neighbourhoods haven't worked in others e.g. where there are fewer existing relationships with parents, or where families predominantly speak English as an additional language.

- One way to develop confidence and trust is to **build up engagement and involvement over time**. In many cases the ELCs have built co-design and participation up from lighter touch engagement at clubs/coffee mornings. In some cases this has been about building on existing structures and in others creating them from scratch.

- As the ELCs have matured, there is an **increasing focus on increasing family ownership of the ELCs' direction and activity**. This requires investing in training and support to help parents engage in more formal opportunities such as involvement in decision making and leading on strands of work.

In the words of the ELCs...

"If we're talking about shifting power, then we need to be able to understand and know who has the power – whether that's through job titles, the resources that they have available to them, or the decision making roles they have – versus who is powerful. We know our families are incredibly powerful, but they have to be given opportunities to exercise that power."

– Mei Lim, Feltham ELC Lead

Looking to the future
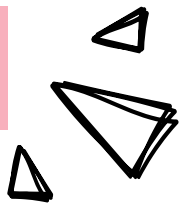
As the ELCs have been operating for several years, as well as providing helpful insights into what the initial period of set up and testing for systems change initiatives can look like, they also provide examples of what the next phase of maturity might involve.

While all the ELCs operate in different ways in different contexts, as they move into a phase of embedding and sustaining their impact, there are some common priorities. Below we summarise three priority areas that were identified in recent evaluations as important for all of the ELCs. The first two of these priorities relate to further strengthening two of the system conditions in the maturity model **shifting power to families** and **developing a learning culture**. While the ELCs will continue to work on developing all of the system conditions (maintaining those that are strong, developing those which are weaker), these two conditions emerged as particularly important to enabling the systems change journeys of all ELCs. The third priority, **sustainability planning**, is an overarching priority for each ELC as a whole.

- **Embedding practices to shift power to families:** Having worked to test and model ways to shift power to families, ELCs are now turning their attention to how to embed these practices. In their next phase, ELCs will be working to develop approaches of engaging with families which meets their specific needs, interests, and capacity, with a particular focus engaging families that face additional barriers to involvement. The ELCs are working to help upskill the local workforce in co-production approaches to help embed these ways of working. As this condition matures, the ELCs will encourage families to have a greater degree of ownership in their work through volunteering, training and peer support opportunities, as well as developing creative ways for them to engage.

- **Developing and embedding a learning culture:** To date, ELCs have tested different approaches to learning and evaluation to better understand what works for them. At this stage in their development, the ELCs are now looking to formalise approaches so that learning is more centrally embedded in the culture, processes and structures of the ELC to facilitate ongoing adaptation and improvement. This includes making learning everyone's business (as opposed to it confined to a specific job role), and supporting practitioners to learn and adapt in their day-to-day work. Another priority is to ensure that insights are purposefully shared across different 'levels' of the system in a timely way to influence ongoing action and decision making. e.g. ensuring that practitioners have forums to bring together and reflect on how to act on insights from families and ensuring that insights about systemic barriers and opportunities are fed up to ELC boards to inform strategic decisions.

- **Sustainability planning:** ELCs are examining what their future sustainability looks like. This includes seeking out new funding and resources, and continuing to expand their partnerships. As part of sustainability planning, it is important for each ELC to identify the core functions needed to sustain its long term impact, recognising this might look quite different to their initial set up. To support this, ELCs should reflect on what they have learnt, their level of maturity, and what is needed in a rapidly changing external context.

Implications for funding and support organisations

The kind of work involved in building the conditions for systemic change is a different approach to those that funding and support organisations are generally used to.

Traditionally, programmes are funded for 1-3 years with relatively linear plans based on measurable outputs and individual level outcomes. The experiences and case studies described above demonstrate that building the conditions for systems change requires a fundamentally different approach, and a different model of funding and support. Participants are seeking to convene previously competing or siloed organisations to co-create new approaches, with changed relationships, rebalanced power dynamics, joint programmes, collaborative processes, shared measurement systems etc. This requires a lot of intentional focus and persistence when working in contexts that typically don't incentivise and often actively undermine collaborative, systemic approaches. Funders and support organisations (referred to below as 'infrastructure organisations') should approach the work with the following principles in mind:

- **Allow the time that is needed:** Even just the three foundational conditions we have focused on in this report each require a significant investment of time to develop. It is not possible to predict in advance how long developing systems conditions will take and funders should shift expectations from the usual 1-3 year timelines towards 5-10 year timelines. It is important that funders invest and trust in the process and the people to

Photo: Laura Pannack / Save the Children/Save the Children

Richard plays with twins Charlie and George, 2, at their home in Sheffield.

implement it, without imposing artificial or unrealistic timelines on particular parts of the process. Dialogue should be maintained with local teams to both keep funders informed and provide teams with external support, input, and reassurance.

Jaycee, 9, takes part in a Stay and Play session in Bettws, Wales

Photo: John Owens/Save the Children

- **Remain flexible on expected outcomes:** Working across a system with a wider lens and multiple stakeholders, each with their different needs and constraints, is less predictable than working as one organisation or delivering discrete projects and therefore requires a fluid and flexible approach. When building conditions, the outcomes that are achieved in the early phases are likely to be process outcomes rather than end user outcomes. To use a gardening metaphor, the ground must be prepared before the plants will grow. Process, or interim, outcomes should therefore initially focus on how the conditions are being built. There should also be flexibility on the sequencing of conditions, as this is likely to vary from place to place.

- **Provide stability:** As the operating environment for systems change initiatives is fluid and complex, it is even more important that infrastructure organisations provide stability. This means committing to longer funding periods, avoiding significant strategic or structural changes that will introduce further instability and complexity, and not imposing additional pressure on teams through unrealistic expectations and reporting requirements. Infrastructure organisations should play a trusted advisor role, offering a safe space for programme teams to access support.

- **Encourage experimentation:** Given the fluidity and unpredictability of systems work, it is vital that teams take an experimental 'test and learn' approach to see what strategies and activities take hold. This can be challenging for programme teams used to a risk-averse operating environment. Infrastructure organisations should therefore not just allow a test and learn approach but actively encourage it, to give programme teams the confidence they need to experiment.

- **Create time and space for learning:** Linked to the above, it is essential to establish spaces and processes for programme teams to observe, reflect and learn about what they are seeing in the system and as a result of their own process and strategies. This will enable teams to learn what works in their context, respond and adapt and, ultimately, implement more effective system strategies. However, these spaces can be difficult for teams to maintain, as learning will invariably fall into the category of 'important but not urgent'. There is therefore an important role for infrastructure organisations in not only modelling and encouraging these spaces but resourcing them - building learning spaces into budgets and programme plans.

- **Build systems skills:** As has been stated previously, these are likely to be new ways of working for programme teams. There is an important role for infrastructure organisations in helping teams build the skills and capacities that are needed from the start. The precise needs will depend on the teams and context, and will likely emerge in the process. However it would be helpful for budget lines to be assigned to these needs as they may require external training, for example in: systems change methodologies and tools; facilitating collaborative working; co-production; etc.

REFLECTIONS FROM SAVE THE CHILDREN

Save the Children UK (SCUK) has played an active and engaged role in this programme, providing resource both for the ELC structures and personnel, as well as for project activities, team support and learning activities. The programme has involved many new ways of working for the organisation. Below are some of the reflections from SCUK about what they've learnt about their role in supporting the Early Learning Communities.

- **Funders are part of the system:** Funders sometimes set themselves apart from "the work on the ground". However, they are part of the systems they are trying to change. This means they are affected by them, and also affect them. They are subject to forces of complexity and unpredictability just as ELCs and their partners are, as in major events like the pandemic. Of course, how they are affected and the resources they have available to respond will be very different. Other forces and dynamics will be unique to SCUK's system, but will also affect those they are connected with. For example, at the start of the ELC process, SCUK experienced a restructure, leading to significant changes in personnel. This caused constraints on capacity, which in turn affected those they were connected to such as the ELCs, their partners and by extension local families. This is one example of how these internal and external systems are connected.

- **Changing external systems might mean first changing internal ones:** The cause-effect relationships between funders and local systems don't just apply to unexpected events. As Peter Richards, Head of Evidence & Learning for SCUK reflected, *"We should also understand that our own set of internal and external relationships, the people, expectations, culture, norms, traits, etc, influence our own system and also those we are connected to. And like any system, it's a living, breathing thing"*. An internal mindset shift in how SCUK approached the work was needed in order to support the ELCs' work effectively, and therefore have a greater chance of helping shift the local system. This meant shifting to much greater expectations of change, complexity and uncertainty, as well as building in more flexibility between and across places in how certain goals are achieved.

- **Enable, facilitate and connect:** If ELCs are building the conditions for systems change, for example through the relationships of trust, shared visions and power shifts described in this document, funding and support organisations have a role in creating the enabling environment for them to do that. This means ensuring sufficient time, patience, flexibility and capacity that such long-term work requires. Within the learning and evaluation components of the programme, SCUK's enabling role has also meant helping to identify what is shared between places, finding and creating opportunities for connection, and then working together to collate and aggregate learning. This has required paying close attention to identifying what is shared across places and what is unique.

- **Understand and consciously play an insider/outsider role:** In any system, an insider/outsider role is vital: being 'inside' enough to be able to understand what is happening and support effectively, while being sufficiently 'outside' to be able to take a wider view, make connections across the system and offer insights where useful. This insider/outsider role is not an easy one to play. It comes with an inherent tension that requires conscious attention to address, particularly for resource holders, who will also have their own agenda they hope to meet through the process. Being honest and open with local partners about these tensions and power dynamics will help to manage them in a way that enables infrastructure organisations to add value rather than creating constraints.

Further resources

**Dartington Service Design Lab (2018)
Evidence Review: Improving the early learning outcomes of children growing up in poverty: A rapid review of the evidence**

**Dartington Service Design Lab (2019)
Early Learning Communities toolkit**

**Collaborate CIC and NPC (2021)
Evaluating systems change: developing a Maturity Model for Save the Children's Early Learning Communities**

**Collaborate CIC and NPC (2021)
Evaluating systems change (during the pandemic): Lessons from Save the Children's Early Learning Communities programme**

**Collaborate CIC and NPC (2022)
What does it take to change local systems?**

ELC WEBSITES AND LEARNING RESOURCES

What is an Early Learning Community?

These websites contain links to a range of spotlight reports, local evaluations, blogs and other learning materials specific to each ELC:

Bettws ELC website

Feltham ELC (Reach Children's Hub) website

Margate ELC webpage

Reach Foundation Annual Review 2022

East Belfast ELC
[Note: at the time of publishing this report, this website is under construction. It is expected to go live in the middle of September 2023.]

Save the Children