

# What's Next for Early Action?



Early Action Task Force

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## Early Action today

Looking back over the seven years since the publication of The Triple Dividend by the Early Action Task Force (EATF), our progress towards a society that prevents problems from occurring (rather than simply treating their symptoms) has been an uneven road.

Certainly, on one level, we have come a long way. Research by BritainThinks shows that the general public are increasingly able to understand the benefits of Early Action and would be supportive, in principle, of a shift towards working more upstream.<sup>1</sup> The importance of prevention is also increasingly reflected in government strategy. The new Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock, for instance, has announced that “prevention” will be one of his top three priorities for health and social care.<sup>2</sup> “Early intervention” has similarly been highlighted as a key approach to tackling serious youth violence this year in the Home Office’s Serious Violence Strategy<sup>3</sup> and Mayor of London’s Young Londoners Fund.<sup>4</sup>

However, many of the social and institutional foundations of a preventative society that existed in 2011 have since been eroded, and the need for a shift towards Early Action is now greater than ever. Eight years of austerity have seen drastic cuts to much of the vital social infrastructure on which Early Action approaches are often built, with the axe falling particularly hard on services and organisations at the preventative end of the spectrum, such as libraries, youth services and Legal Aid. As upstream safety nets have been removed, the demands of an overworked and ageing population have increasingly fallen on already pressurised acute services, none more so than the NHS. Early Action, in this sense, is not just about prevention, but also about doing things sustainably and efficiently.

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Yet not only is it increasingly imperative that we implement methods of reducing demand on a creaking public sector, but time is increasingly short to prepare for and act on the challenges of the future. Climate change, increasing automation and low economic productivity are all issues that the UK must give greater attention and investment to in the coming years, yet much of the necessary infrastructure, planning practices and budgeting methods needed to prevent problems effectively are yet to be put in place.

That being said, the present moment represents a significant opportunity to take the Early Action agenda forward and work towards building this preventative society. The Prime Minister’s recent announcement of the “end of austerity” and lifting of the local authority borrowing cap suggest that significant investment may be on the horizon for public services and social infrastructure.<sup>5</sup> Greater devolution in England and a renewed focus on place-based working in the government’s Civil Society Strategy signal a new emphasis on community empowerment, pooled budgets and collaborative working.<sup>6</sup> The potential redeployment of funds from dormant accounts and from EU structural funds represent an opportunity for cross-sectoral investment in new,

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone who helped make this report possible. This includes the Big Lottery Fund, who funded the report and has offered on-going support for our Early Action work. We would also like to thank BritainThinks for sharing their exciting research on public opinions around Early Action. Finally, we would like to thank all of the members of the Early Action practitioners network who answered the survey and took part in interviews.

innovative ways of working. Furthermore, Early Action can play a significant role in defining what might be understood as the “new common sense”: an economic model which, as the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) Commission on Economic Justice has argued, would enable more people and communities to share in the spoils of prosperity.<sup>7</sup>

It is at this crossroads that the EATF now finds itself. Whilst we are not quite yet at the tipping point, we believe that our plan of work for the next phase will help us to take several significant steps forwards towards making Early Action not just common sense, but common practice.

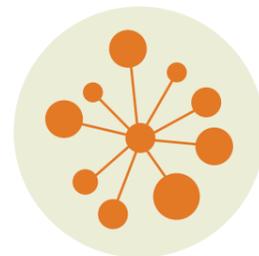
## The audit: key findings

It was against this backdrop that we undertook an audit of our Early Action practitioners network. We surveyed the network members about the support they need to implement Early Action and received 58 responses. We highlight the key findings here:

- The largest subset of respondents (31%) felt that the largest barrier to implementing Early Action concerned the lack of an evidence base for specific interventions. More people identified this barrier than funding for Early Action interventions. Unsurprisingly, then, 58% of respondents expressed interest in training sessions on making the case for Early Action programmes/services.
- Respondents expressed a high level of interest in joining local or themed networks: 89% said they would be interested in joining a network like this, and 57% said they would like to be part of both network types.

## Next steps

Our plans are divided into two phases.



### Current phase:

- We are currently designing a training programme for voluntary organisations in the Early Action practitioners network. In response to the survey findings, continuing to build an evidence base and making a case for Early Action will form part of this training. We will also work with members of the practitioners network to develop local and subject-themed networks. Our aim is to develop a network of regional Early Action hubs that can disseminate best practice and Early Action learning locally.
- We will continue to develop ideas that are new to the UK; as before, some of these will draw on good practice from other fields or from elsewhere in the world. We will maintain a programme of two publications a year, sharing and developing these ideas at appropriate events to disseminate and promote them.
- A reconstituted EATF will continue its work to influence national and local government policy at the highest level. This will include continuing our work with contacts in Whitehall and the Treasury whilst also seeking to expand our contacts base with governments in Cardiff and Edinburgh, and with devolved Combined Local Authorities around England.



### Next phase:

- We are seeking to expand and develop regional EA networks. The EATF aims to develop regional Early Action hubs that can disseminate the benefits of Early Action locally and begin promoting a decentralised, polycentric shift towards upstream investment. In response to the findings of our audit, these hubs will be focused around regions outside of London & the South East, and will be developed with local partners in Scotland, Wales, the West Midlands, North West and North East England.

## The story so far

Community Links established the EATF in 2011. The Coalition government had just been elected, the Field and Allen reviews had been commissioned and a “Big Society” programme had been promised but the details were unclear. At the same time, the austerity agenda was threatening to make deep cuts in government spending with immediate effects on the voluntary sector and on the communities we serve. It was a time of uncertainty for the sector, with some grounds for hope and a lot to be worried about.

The EATF was established to address the question: “How do we build a society that prevents problems from occurring rather than one that, as now, copes with the consequences?” It was a group of leaders from across all the sectors – voluntary, statutory, private and academia.

### Early building

Our first report, The Triple Dividend, was published in late 2011. It coined the phrase Early Action and introduced the idea of readiness as a guiding principle for public policy – “a Ready for Everything Community...Ready and able to seize opportunity and to cope with adversity.” Early Action, we said, is not only about young families and the earliest stages of personal development (early intervention) but about being “Ready for Everything” throughout the life course. We argued that such an approach yields a triple dividend – “thriving lives, costing less, contributing more.”<sup>8</sup> These arguments have been taken forward as the social, economic and growth arguments for Early Action. These are all phrases and ideas that have subsequently been widely adopted across the sectors.

The Triple Dividend introduced “the cliff, the fence and the ambulance” as a visual

metaphor for the Early Action approach. We noted that Early Action was “common sense but not common practice” and set out our stall for unpicking this paradox, identifying the obstacles and removing them. The Triple Dividend was the first in what is now a series of thirteen publications, some themed around Early Action in specific fields, others focused on policy.

At first, we found little understanding of Early Action in government and no reliable data distinguishing spending on prevention from spending on picking up the pieces. We identified the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) and the National Audit Office (NAO) as the routes to raising profile in Westminster and Whitehall, establishing a base line for measurement, introducing a process for setting transition targets and positioning Early Action as the most effective need reduction strategy. The PAC agreed to address these issues and we worked with the NAO on the Landscape review of Early Action in government.<sup>9</sup> Launching the report in January 2013, Amyas Morse, head of the NAO, said:

“A concerted shift away from reactive spending towards Early Action has the potential to result in better outcomes, reduce public spending over the long term and achieve greater value for money. Government has signalled its commitment to Early Action as a principle, and taken some tentative steps towards realizing that ambition. There remains much room for improvement, however. Short-term thinking, a lack of integration in many areas and poor evidence gathering are impairing effective adoption and implementation of Early Action across government..”

This was our first significant milestone. We then worked with the PAC on the NAO’s proposals for next steps. All our subsequent work has built out from the language that we developed at the start and the classification process that we built for the NAO.

### Classification as a tool for development

The classification process became our tool for development and has now been widely applied across the sectors. We have been running training based upon it ever since, including a section in the Business in the Community “Business Connectors” programme. Southwark and Lambeth took the approach into local government with their local Early Action Commission (another EATF proposal), chaired by Margaret Hodge. The Joint Strategy that evolved from this work picked up on many more of our ideas.

### Increasing the overall funding pot for Early Action

The EATF brought together some of the UK’s leading funders and offered to classify their spending. Based on the results, we jointly developed the Early Action Funders Alliance to inspire and engage independent funders. The Alliance adopted our proposal for a dedicated Early Action Neighbourhood Fund as their first collaborative project, launched in 2015. The Alliance is now run by the funders and has more than 70 members.

### Influencing the biggest funders and thought leaders

The Big Lottery Fund (BLF) were amongst the first major grant makers to fully embrace Early Action as an explicit priority. As the UK’s biggest independent funder and thought leader, this was another big step forward for the EATF. Other funders have also committed, including the John Ellerman Foundation and City Bridge Trust. We have also helped to create dedicated Early Action funds such as

the Charities Aid Foundation small charities fund and Big Society Capital’s Early Action “focus area”.

### Influencing government policy

Our influencing work on public policy has been based around six barriers to Early Action, which we have unpicked in our publications. Most recently we published Valuing Social Infrastructure and are now convening an online discussion and development group to take forward this aspect of our work.

The work with government can be detailed and technical, with results that are hard to attribute, but the EATF has built up trust and respect and our help is regularly sought, not only in Whitehall but by national and regional government offices across the UK. Our work on what became the Future Generations Commission in Wales is one example: the Labour Party won the 2011 election here on the promise of “A more sustainable Wales.” This initially focused on the natural environment. The EATF encouraged and supported ministers and officials to embrace more broadly the “social economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales” in what became the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, and to require public bodies to “think more about the long term, work better with people and communities and each other, look to prevent.” We continue to support the now flourishing Commission for Future Generations established under this Act.<sup>10</sup>

### Practitioner support

Much of our time has been spent on supporting Early Action practice. Our open Early Action practitioners network now has 796 members. Support has included one to one help, a bulletin at least once a month and a regular Early Action Insights

events programme focusing on Early Action in specific sectors and led by successful practitioners. Many of these organisations have also been featured in our online Gallery of Case Studies and some spectacular trailblazers have emerged from this work.

## Early Action practitioner network audit findings

In July 2018, we set out to audit the Early Action practitioners network. We aimed to assemble a better picture of who our members are, where they are working, and what kinds of work they do. We also wanted to find out what additional support they need to implement Early Action programmes.

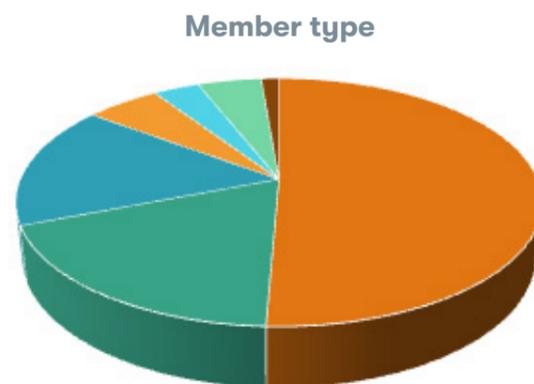
The audit had three elements. First, we reviewed the membership mailing list of 796 members, gleaning information from their websites. We then sent a survey to all members asking about their work and what additional support and training they needed to implement EA programmes. Fifty-eight members completed the survey. Finally, we completed telephone interviews with six organisations to do a “deeper dive” into the barriers to implementing EA programmes and how the network could help organisations overcome these barriers (see Annex 1 for the geographic breakdown of the interviewees). We chose interviewees who had not completed the survey in order to reach more people. They included one commissioner, one private funder, and four voluntary organisations of various sizes. Furthermore, we chose interviewees who had experience implementing Early Action programmes in order to strengthen our insight into existing working practices and barriers.

### The membership

From the network mailing list, we identified 385 organisations; four Lords; four MPs; and one former MP. The other members were from the same organisations or used personal email addresses, which meant we could not trace what organisation they were associated with, if any. Most of the organisations were part of the voluntary sector (184), with a significant minority in the public (68) and private sectors (61). The pie chart below provides a full break down of types of members:

### Location

Through our review of the mailing list, we found that nearly 60% of the member organisations are headquartered in London (229). However, 174 of these also worked in other parts of England, the UK or internationally, according to their websites. The other organisations are headquartered around the UK, with the second highest concentration in Scotland (24), the third highest in southeast England (23), and the fourth highest in Wales (22).

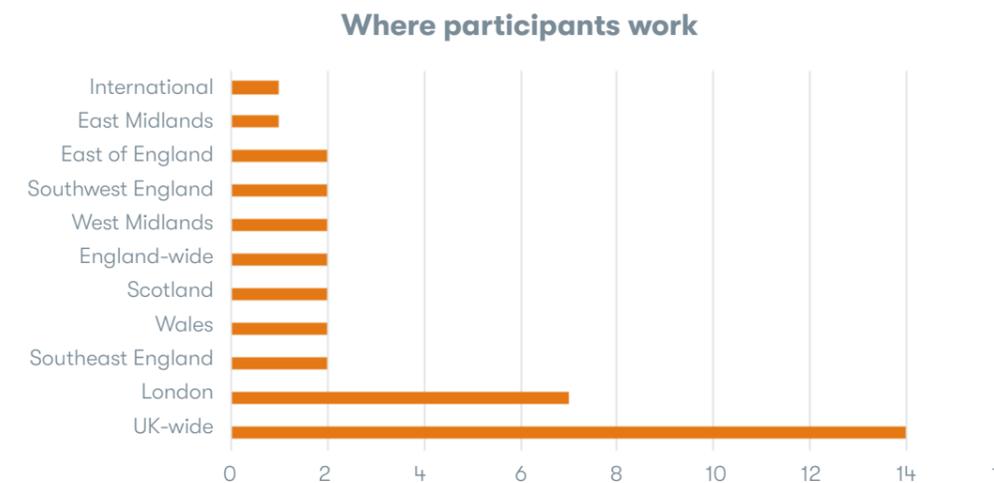


- Voluntary sector
- Public sector
- Private sector
- Membership organisation
- Academia
- Think tank
- Unknown

### Survey respondents

We then conducted the online survey to find out more about our members and their needs. We received 58 survey responses: 37 from organisations and 21 from individuals not affiliated with an organisation on the Early Action practitioners network. The respondent organisations were largely from the voluntary sector (73%), with 16% from the public sector, 8% from the private sector, and 3% from the academic sector.

A large minority of the respondent organisations work across the UK (37%). Below is a full breakdown of where the respondent organisations work:



### Thematic areas of work

We asked survey respondents what thematic areas they worked on, allowing them to select more than one category. The most common topics were health and wellbeing (81%); poverty and disadvantage (67%); community development and cohesion (67%); social impact and change (67%); and young children and families (64%). We also asked them which areas they run EA programmes in (though 18% of organisations did not run EA programmes), and the answers mirrored the areas they work in: 69% implemented EA programmes in health and wellbeing; 52% in community development and cohesion; 48% in young children and families; and 41% in poverty and disadvantage.

### Barriers to implementing EA programmes

We asked survey respondents to tell us about the barriers they face to implementing EA programmes. The question included five choices and allowed respondents to pick multiple options, as well as adding their own barriers in an “other” option. The most common barrier, chosen by 31% of respondents, was lack of a strong evidence base to back up specific EA interventions. The second most common barrier, cited by 25% of respondents, was that they were too busy dealing with urgent problems to start working further upstream. These barriers were not preventing them from implementing Early Action (as noted in the previous section, most were doing some Early Action work); however, these barriers prevented them from being as effective as they wished to be. The full results are displayed below.

In the “other” section, people talked about the need for a shift in thinking to EA principles among partner organisations, funders and service users. In particular,

participants noted that this required a commitment to long-term thinking and funding.

These findings were echoed in the qualitative interviews. Interviewees said that the lack of evidence for specific types of EA interventions meant that they struggled to convince governments to allocate funding to EA work. They said that neither public nor private funders were willing to offer the necessary funding to implement a comprehensive EA approach, which can take many years.

The qualitative interviewees agreed with the survey respondents that they did not always have the resources to run EA programmes in addition to the crisis work they were doing. This was especially true of legal organisations, who said that their staff did not have the skills and/or the time to do EA work. In cases where they had implemented EA projects, they had to train staff and support them to change their approach and way of working.

### Training and support opportunities

We are planning an EA training programme for members (this will be discussed in the next section) and we also asked our members what training sessions they would like. Again, participants were allowed to pick multiple options and add their own suggestions in an “other” section. 58% expressed interest in training sessions on making the case for EA programmes; 56% wanted training in how to design an EA programme/service; and 42% wanted training in how to write an effective EA funding bid. Other training requests included how to combine EA work with crisis resolution and how to obtain staff buy-in when implementing EA programmes.

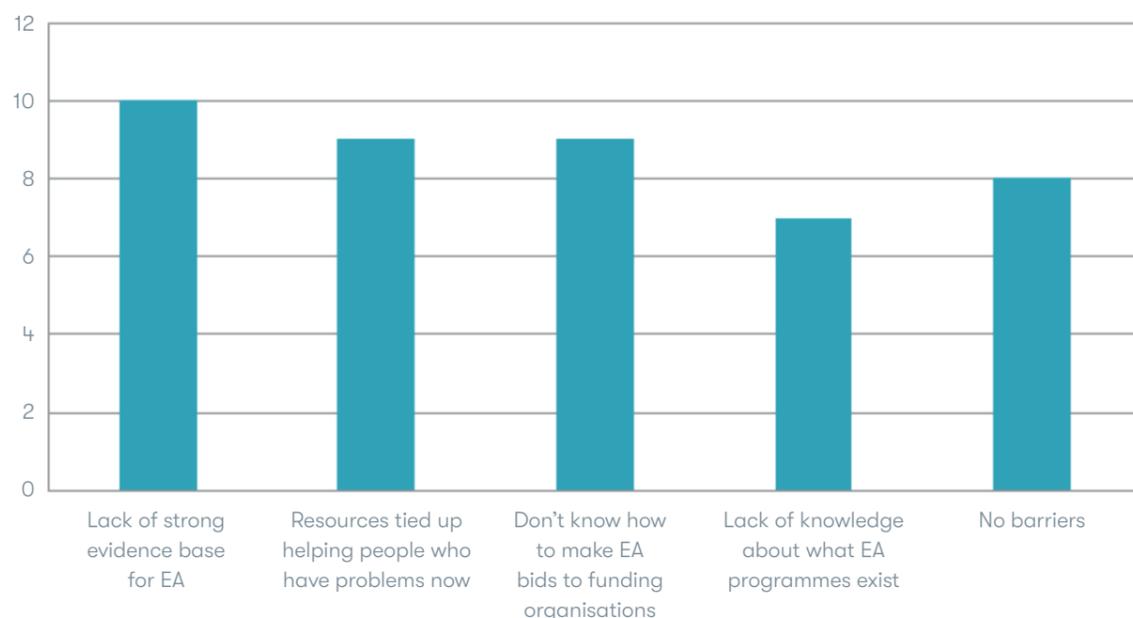
The qualitative interviewees suggested additional topics. All of the interviewees were already implementing EA programmes (or, in the case of the funders, working with organisations implementing EA programmes). They requested training in how to monitor and evaluate an EA programme, which directly relates to the need to evidence EA programmes discussed in the barriers section above. They also requested training to create a culture shift toward EA, both amongst funders and leadership as well as amongst staff in their own organisations. One interviewee noted, however, that staff should not be trained in EA unless they have the resources in place to implement what they have learned. Otherwise the training will be a wasted opportunity. Small voluntary organisations noted that any training would need to be free and nearby, as staff could not spare a whole day to travel to a session in London or another large city.

We also asked the survey respondents and qualitative interviewees what types of support they would like, beyond training. The survey respondents were asked specifically if they would be interested in a geographic or thematic network. 57% said they would like to be part of both kinds of networks. In the

“other” section, many of the organisations identified the need to partner with other organisations for funding bids and EA campaigns; they noted these partnerships could be issue-based or geographically focussed. In the survey and the survey and qualitative interviews, representatives of organisations in Wales and Scotland both expressed the need for a network of EA organisations in their areas. Therefore a geographic network might be most appropriate for those nations.

The qualitative interviewees were also equally interested in geographic and thematic networks, with the potential to form partnerships for funding bids through these networks. They also expressed interest in sharing good practice and peer learning. They noted that the newsletter is a useful resource for sharing best practice but they would also like to meet with other organisations implementing EA programmes. They also requested short materials on EA, such as videos and fact sheets, to share with funders and local government. They felt that these materials would be better received than longer documents.

Barriers to Early Action



## What's next?

With the kind support of the BLF, in the next phase the EATF will therefore focus its efforts on the following areas:

### **Practice development and training programme**

Between now and March 2021, we will work with our Early Action practitioner network and partners around the UK to further develop Early Action practice. Based on the findings of our network audit, the EATF is now working to develop an Early Action training programme, initially to be targeted at voluntary organisations in the practitioner network. The training will respond to the needs of these organisations by focusing on: how to build an evidence base and make a stronger case for Early Action; how to monitor and evaluate Early Action programmes; how to develop funding applications for Early Action programmes; and how to develop an action plan for working “one step sooner.” As far as possible, this training will be provided at a range of locations around the UK, with a focus on regions with a high concentration of network members (e.g. Scotland, Wales, North West England, West Midlands). We think some aspects of our learning, and of the Early Action training, may be applicable beyond the UK. We will explore the potential for extending some of this work to international audiences.

This training programme will be supplemented by continuing open Insight events, Business Connectors training, and ad hoc support to Early Action practitioners. We will also continue our current efforts to build our gallery of best practice case studies, further grow our practitioner network and publish the monthly Early Action Bulletin.

### **Influencing policy and working with government**

The work of the EATF has been entirely collaborative. It has built on the experience, knowledge and skills of those already in the field and has used these resources to develop original thinking on the barriers and obstacles. We will continue to develop ideas that are new to the UK; as before, some of these will draw on good practice from other fields or from elsewhere in the world. We will maintain a programme of two publications a year, sharing and developing these ideas at appropriate events to disseminate and promote them.

A newly reconstituted EATF will support this work with the aim of influencing local and national government policy at a high level. Responding to feedback from our network members, the membership of the EATF will reflect a more effective balance between London & the South East and the rest of the UK.

Ultimately we are not simply seeking to add projects at the margins but to change systems, cultures and conventions. It is essential that we bring national and local government agencies with us on this journey. We have built a strong reputation in Whitehall and will seek to maintain it with challenging ideas that carry the support of our cross-sector network. However, we will also seek to expand our existing contact base and develop opportunities outside of the South East. This means that the EATF will not only continue to work with central government and the Greater London Authority to encourage a shift towards prevention in policy, but will also increasingly look to work with local authorities, devolved powers in Cardiff and Edinburgh and Combined Local Authorities across England.

### **Early Action network development**

Training will be supported by a greater level of ongoing member support and efforts to develop the regional presence of our Early Action practitioner network. Working with local partners in Scotland, Wales, the West Midlands, North West and North East England, and continuing our work in South and Southeast England, the EATF aims to develop a network of regional Early Action hubs that can disseminate the benefits of Early Action locally and begin promoting a decentralised, polycentric shift towards upstream investment.

## Annex 1: Where each qualitative interviewee is based



## References

The Early Action Task Force has published a range of reports on Early Action, some of which are cited in this report. All of the reports are available at [www.community-links.org](http://www.community-links.org).

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### **About the Task Force:**

The Early Action Task Force is led by Community Links and consists of a group of leaders from across the sectors committed to building a society which prevents problems from occurring rather than one that struggles with the consequences.

We are grateful to the Big Lottery Fund for supporting our work.

## Early Action Task Force

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Community Links  
105 Barking Road, London E16 4HQ  
W: [www.community-links.org](http://www.community-links.org)  
E: [Daniel.Willis@community-links.org](mailto:Daniel.Willis@community-links.org)  
T: 020 7473 2270

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