

Why don't we invest in early action?

LESSONS FROM THE EARLY
ACTION TASK FORCE, 2010 -2021

About this report

This has been written for Community Links by Caroline Slocock, the Director of Civil Exchange and co-convenor of A Better Way, a cross-sectoral leadership group committed to improving services, building community and creating a fairer society. Caroline advised the Early Action Task Force from early 2011 to 2021 and has written or contributed to many of its publications. She worked for many years as a senior civil servant, including at No 10, the Cabinet Office and the Department for Education, where she was Head of Early Years and Childcare, and nine years in the Treasury, where, amongst other things, she designed the existing public expenditure system.

Community Links is a hub tackling health and social inequality in East London and beyond. It works alongside the community helping people of all ages reach their full potential. It takes local knowledge about what works to influence national decision making. It is proud to be part of Catch22. Community Links set up and hosted the Early Action Task Force in 2010.

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Caroline Slocock
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Foreword

For more than four decades, Community Links' development work in East London was based on the principle that it is always better to build a fence at the top of a cliff than to run an ambulance at the bottom, 'to tackle causes, not symptoms', said our founding document, and for 40 odd years we called this early action.

In 2010, Community Links was thinking about the future of that work in the wake of the financial crash, the beginning of the Coalition Government and in anticipation of an era of austerity. It established the Early Action Task Force, which was a cross-sectoral body – with leaders from academia, the private sector, public sector and third sector – tasked with considering how we could get better at being a society that doesn't wait for trouble, fingers crossed, but is better at taking action early.

Our first major publication in 2011 was called The Triple Dividend, capturing what we described as the three benefits of early action: thriving lives, or living at the top of the cliff; costing less, because when we are there, we're less in need of state support; and contributing more, both economically and socially. In that report, we called on the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office to undertake a landscape review, effectively establishing some baselines across government by scoping the current extent of early action spending. They responded with two landmark reports which really put the concept, the language and in particular the measurement tool that we devised for that process on the map both in Whitehall and beyond.

What was then called the Big Lottery Fund, now the National Lottery Community Fund, adopted the vocabulary and the tools, it supported the Task Force financially and it made early action one its then three priorities. Other funders followed and some of the biggest formed the Early Action Funders Alliance and also established the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund. Tiny neighbourhood groups and organisations as diverse as the Home Office and the Lancashire Constabulary joined the EATF's Practitioners' Network, creating a growing movement. Andy Rhodes, now the Chief Constable of the Lancashire Constabulary, told us that the cliff metaphor became part of their language, saying:

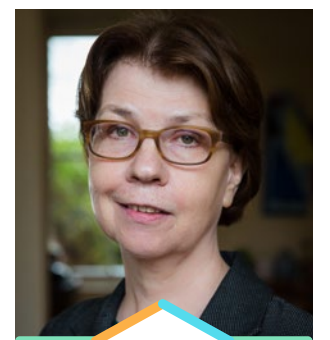
'It's referenced now in the Crime Plan, it's in our recruitment, training and development, we run a Masters in Early Action at the University of Central Lancashire, and it's in tons of front-line tool kits. In four years, we've taken a department wide approach, we've secured the biggest single innovation grant in the country and are using it entirely for early action initiatives. The first officers who came out of this training programme were immediately assigned to work on prevention in intensive neighbourhoods, and an early action board has been set up to facilitate cooperation between different partners and agencies sharing the same purpose in the region. We would never have been on this journey without the Task Force.'



The Task Force went on to produce 14 other reports on early action, developing and deepening understanding of how to make it not just common sense but common practice, including ones on social infrastructure and deep value relationships in services and communities. Many other positive changes were achieved, many of which are detailed in this report. But it is also true that most of the issues which led to the creation of the Task Force remain and some have got worse, the greatest of which is underinvestment. The Task Force's recommendations seem as relevant now as they were when first proposed. So we welcome the discussion in the pages that follow about these challenges and about how the momentum established by the Task Force can be accelerated.



David Robinson
Former Chair of the
Early Action Task Force



Caroline Slocock
Former adviser to the
Task Force and author
of this report



Executive summary

The Early Action Task Force (EATF) was established in 2010 by Community Links with the aim of making early action not just common sense but common practice. This report reviews the impact of its work over the following decade and considers how the challenges it identified, many of which still exist, might be addressed now.

The biggest single challenge the Task Force faced remains a major block to change today - underinvestment, exacerbated by short-termism and silo working. Britain is stuck in a recurring pattern of underinvestment, with expensive crisis management leading to cutbacks in existing preventative services and social infrastructure, making a bad situation worse. Over the last decade, austerity brought on by the financial crisis has denuded much of the existing early action services and social infrastructure. Looking ahead, the financing of the cost of the Covid-19 pandemic, and with the prospect of tax cuts ahead, looks likely to starve early action - from reducing global warming to the 'Levelling Up' agenda - of funds.

The Task Force made a powerful case for more investment in early action and its recommendations to government and others included:

- **A 'triple dividend** – thriving lives, costing less, contributing more' case for investing in early action, including social infrastructure, delivered not just through public services but also through activities and amenities provided by the voluntary and private sectors as well as the public sector. Linked to this, it argued for a UK Well-Being Budget that prioritises investment in well-being; major investment funds including a Social Infrastructure Fund; and better evaluation.
- **Defining and classifying early action**, making it clear how resources are used now. Related recommendations included a shift from acute to early action spending and a ring-fencing of early action budgets to stop them being raided to fund short-term pressures.
- **Longer term planning**, with all spending decisions required to take into account long-term costs and benefits, supported by a UK wide Well-Being of Future Generations Act which places a duty on the public sector to do so, with an external, independent body giving the Act teeth, similar to the Commissioner for Future Generations in Wales.
- **Changing management and accountability systems** to help break down silos, including a focus on shared outcomes and pooled budgets.
- **Changing the culture** to create 'enabling services' which help connect people and develop their strengths, supported by deep value relationships both in services and in 'ready for everything' communities.



Its work had significant impact, including these advances to which it directly and indirectly contributed:

- A raised awareness of the case for early action and a growing priority being given to it. Prevention is a key priority in both the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales, for example. Direct evidence of the Task Force's agenda being taken forward can be found in the [National Audit Office](#) and [Public Accounts Committee Reports](#) in 2013, which called for a consistent definition of early action to be applied in Government, for the Treasury to lead in promoting early action and for 10 year impact assessments to be required in Comprehensive Spending Reviews. The Task Force also directly influenced The Big Lottery, as it was then, to make early action one of its three priorities, and other charitable foundations followed suit.
- The creation of Wales' [Well-Being of Future Generations Act](#) in 2015, together with its [Future Generations Commissioner](#), was directly influenced by the Task Force, and Sophie Howe, the Commissioner, is having a significant impact on decisions in Wales. There are calls for a UK Well-Being Budget, most notably from former Cabinet Secretary Lord O'Donnell, and for a [UK wide Future Generations Act](#), which has been put forward in Parliament by Lord Bird, the founder of the Big Issue. There is already some political traction, with Sir Keir Starmer committing to putting well-being at the heart of decision-making in [The Road Ahead](#) in 2021 and the Labour Party adopting a [new Office for Value for Money](#), also advocated by Lord O'Donnell. Although there is some way to go to capture the long-term value of investment in early action in government planning and accounting, there have been several improvements and advances, including a greater focus on the [delivery of long-term outcomes](#) in the UK Spending Review.
- Momentum for greater integration and collaboration has increased, for example, in relation to health and social care and [integrated care systems and partnerships](#) in England. The Treasury has set up a [Shared Outcomes Fund](#) to promote working across silos.



- The setting up of the Early Action Funders' Alliance, which brought together the National Lottery and other funders, was initiated by the EATF. The Alliance resulted in the [Early Action Neighbourhood Fund](#) of £5.3 million to fund cross-sector initiatives led by the voluntary sector. One example is the Ignite project in Coventry, which is a case study in this report.
- The Task Force published three reports on social infrastructure and set up a network of think tanks and policy-makers to share thinking and build momentum. Social infrastructure is now widely recognised as a priority, and featured in [Danny Kruger MP's report to the Prime Minister on levelling up communities](#), which fed into the recent [Levelling Up White Paper](#) which recognises the importance of social capital. The Government's £4.6 billion [Levelling Up Fund](#) (for all limitations) is a step in the right direction, and there are other local examples of community wealth funds which are potential models for investment.
- The Task Force initiated the [Southwark and Lambeth Early Action Commission](#) led by Margaret Hodge MP, which in turn resulted in an ambitious Southwark Council strategy, [Common Purpose, Common Cause](#) to improve health and reduce health inequalities in Southwark by working in partnership with the voluntary sector.
- Taking on the challenge to improve the evidence base, the Early Intervention Foundation was established in 2013 to help improve and spread knowledge of what works for children and young people, and this was followed by many other What Works centres in subsequent years.
- Finally, many initiatives were directly inspired by the EATF's reports, for example practice in the [Lancashire police force](#), and there are many other local examples of local authorities and others trying to push at the boundaries, a few of which are explored in the full report.

To prepare this report, we spoke to a number of senior stakeholders and also surveyed former members of the Early Action Practitioners' Network to assess the scale of the challenges that remain and to consider next steps. A clear picture emerged of how much the Task Force's work was valued and of the need to build momentum, bring champions and beacons of good practice together and create common cause.

So what can we learn from the Task Force and this report?

First, the EATF's model of bringing about change works. This model connects local expertise with national policy, bringing national experts and leaders together from across sectors and combining this with community based and practitioner knowledge.

Second, many of its recommendations, if not all, are still relevant to tackling the barriers to change.

Third, it takes significant time to embed change. A decade is a long time for a project like the Task Force, but it is not enough.

With this in mind, there is a good case for picking up the legacy of the Task Force and reinventing it for the next decade, with potential ways of doing so suggested below.

1. Assemble a new Task Force or time-limited Commission. This body would identify the opportunities for change, make recommendations and carry out awareness-raising activities and influencing work with government and others to help to build a growing movement. As this report documents in Sections 6 and 7, there are many champions for new ways of working, as well as local beacons of change. Ideally, many of these would directly take part in this initiative, helping to build momentum and collective profile, and new champions would also emerge.
2. Revitalise the practitioners' network for sharing expertise, where ideas and best practice could be shared, and disseminated through a series of interactive events as well as regular newsletters.
3. Create a website for sharing knowledge and ideas and promoting events and blogs by members of the network, backed up by active use of twitter and LinkedIn and regular bulletins.
4. Run training courses to help practitioners understand early action, what it might mean for them and gain funding.



1. Introduction: the investment challenge

'What is striking is that there has been so much written often covering similar ground and apparently sound, setting out the well-known major determinants of health, but rigorous implementation of identified solutions has often been sadly lacking. If we are going to capitalise on the growing cross-party support for early action, we must recognise and tackle the barriers, align the incentives and, first and foremost, we must win hearts and minds throughout Whitehall, local government, public services and wider civil society.'

Sir Derek Wanless in his second health review, in 2004, Securing Good Health for the Whole Population.



The Early Action Task Force (EATF) was launched in 2010 with the aim of making prevention not just common sense but common practice, addressing the question, ‘How do we build a society that prevents problems from occurring rather than one that, as now, copes with the consequences?’

The new Coalition Government, elected the previous year, seemed open to investing more in early action, despite austerity. It committed in November 2010 to investing more in public health to ‘protect and improve the nation's health and wellbeing, and reduce health inequalities’, with a dedicated, ring-fenced fund, a new body, Public Health England, and new public health responsibilities for local authorities. It also commissioned reviews from Frank Field on [Poverty and Life Chances](#) and from Graham Allen on [Early Intervention](#), both of which made the case for greater investment in support and education for babies and young children. Importantly, it remained committed to the Sure Start programme initiated by the previous government, probably the biggest single investment in prevention in recent decades.

But good intentions soon began to unravel as the UK government put its foot down hard on the pedal of public expenditure control, requiring departments and local authorities to make year on year cuts to budgets. The motivation was to reduce government borrowing, which had risen to avoid a complete collapse of the financial system in 2008. Stepping in as major banks were on the brink of failing, and

some had already failed, meant more had to be spent to prevent disaster – and this in turn led to cutbacks in public spending, falling most heavily on preventative services. The new public health budgets launched with such a fanfare were cut back per capita by [24 per cent](#) between 2015-16 and 2020-21, and by far more in some areas with the highest health inequalities and the greatest needs. Sure Start, essential to the future of young children and equalising life chances, was [cut back drastically](#) too: £1.8 billion was invested in the centres at its peak in 2009-10, but this had fallen by two-thirds to £600 million in 2017-18, with many Sure Start centre closures. Other preventative services and facilities were also impacted adversely, from children's mental health services to youth services, to adult social care to daycare centres for older people, leisure centres and green spaces. Cuts fell most heavily in the most disadvantaged areas, and statutory services such as adult social care became increasingly rationed and less preventative. The impact on health and well-being will have been enormous, and some of these impacts will have contributed to the many deaths caused by Covid-19, and the immediate and long-term social and economic costs of the pandemic.

Indeed, Professor Sir Michael Marmot produced a report in 2010, [Fair Society. Healthy Lives](#), commissioned by the previous Labour Government to advise on the most effective evidence-based strategies for reducing health inequalities, which recommended action on six policy objectives, with a framework of indicators to measure progress. A decade later, he produced a second report, [The Marmot Review Ten Years On](#), which found that over the previous decade things had only got worse overall, with a decrease in life expectancy and an increase in the amount of time people spent in poor health. He also documented a widening north/south health gap, with the largest decreases in life expectancy in the most deprived ten per cent of neighbourhoods in the North East, and the largest increases in the least deprived ten per cent of neighbourhoods in London. Sir Michael concluded:

‘Austerity has taken its toll in all the domains set out in the Marmot Review. From rising child poverty and the closure of children’s centres, to declines in education funding, an increase in precarious work and zero hours contracts, to a housing affordability crisis and a rise in homelessness, to people with insufficient money to lead a healthy life and resorting to foodbanks in large numbers, to ignored communities with poor conditions and little reason for hope. And these outcomes, on the whole, are even worse for minority ethnic population groups and people with disabilities.’

In 2022, it seems like history might be repeating itself. The Johnson government committed itself to an ambitious programme of so-called Levelling Up, finally publishing a [White Paper in February 2022](#) which included [12 'new' missions](#), including very similar goals to the ones pursued by the 2010 Coalition Government in relation to reducing health inequalities and closing the educational attainment gap, albeit with a particular focus on closing geographical disparities. The Johnson government has also committed itself to stretching targets to combat global warming. But once again there is a mismatch between ambition and investment – made far worse by financial pressures brought on by another major exercise in crisis management, this time the Covid-19 pandemic, which itself would have been far less devastating if Sir Michael's 2010 report had been heeded, or Derek Wanless' two reports to government on health in the previous decade. The words are there but not the investment.

We are seeing a vicious cycle of underinvestment in which major resources can only be found to stave off a disaster already upon us, rather than to invest in the well-being of our population - thereby averting or ameliorating the crises to come, a new deadly Covid-19 variant or another pandemic being ones that seem likely – or in the sustainability of our environment. Worse still, as crises come and go, it is prevention which is cut back the most.



This pattern of low investment is not just seen in national and central government, but also in many organisations and institutions. It is easier, as the Early Action Task Force put it, to pay more for an ambulance at the bottom of a cliff than to spend less putting up a fence at the top to stop people falling.

In 2011, the Task Force was launched to try to understand why this was happening, to make recommendations and try and reverse this seemingly inevitable pattern. Its work has now come to an end, many valuable things came from it, but this challenge, together with other aggravating factors, including short-termism in government and silo-working in delivery, have not gone away. We can learn from the Task Force's recommendations, its successes and its failures. But there is also the question: now that the Task Force has gone, who is taking this work forward and is something more required? This is the subject of this report.

2. About the Early Action Task Force

The EATF was founded in 2010 by David Robinson at Community Links, a community-based charity in Newham in East London, because it recognised from its own experience that many preventative initiatives were seeded by public money but not given the time and investment to grow into lasting change.

Community Links' own ethos was entirely preventative, rooted in its experience with the community. Community Links' mission when it set up the Task Force was, amongst other things, 'to tackle causes not symptoms, find solutions not palliatives' and 'to act local but think global, teach but never stop learning'. As Community Links' currently says, 'We believe everyone can thrive if they have three basic things: good people around them, a good place to live and a purpose in life. We call these our 3Ps.'

Unlike many community-based organisations, Community Links also had connections to national politicians and policy-makers through its charismatic and influential co-founder, David Robinson. David had already chaired the cross-sectoral Council on Social Action, set up by the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown in 2007, which looked at ways in which individuals, communities, organisations and businesses could address the social issues they cared about. It was a natural step for Community Links to set up a similar Task Force on early action, which brought together a mix of leaders from across the sectors – voluntary, statutory, private and academia. A list of members is at Annex A.

This extraordinary mix, linking community-based expertise with national and local policy-makers, was the EATF's great strength. It meant that its recommendations were connected to the reality of people's lives and the experience of organisations at the coalface, as well as being informed by leading academics, think tanks, charities and businesses, and practitioners. The nationwide Early Action Practitioners' Network that Community Links also led enriched its work and vice-versa, symbiotically.

The EATF would never have happened, however, without the vision and support of, first, the Barrow Cadbury Trust in 2010 and, from 2011, the National Lottery Community Fund (then named the Big Lottery Fund) which continued to fund it throughout its lifetime. Again, these organisations knew from the experience of those they funded that this was a major strategic issue. As well as providing financial support, they brought their expertise, being active members of the Task Force themselves. They also gave the EATF the gift of time: a decade is a long time for most initiatives.

With the support of a small team, the Task Force produced 15 publications with examples of good practice and recommendations to government, funders and practitioners about early action, including social infrastructure and deep value relationships. It held numerous events to publicise these as well as policy roundtables to explore particular topics, and over its lifetime had countless meetings with the Treasury and others in the UK government and devolved administrations. It also ran a practitioners' network and provided training in early action. In addition, the EATF was instrumental in the creation of the Early Action Funders Alliance and the Southwark and Lambeth Early Action Commission. A full list of the EATF's reports and related material is at Annex B.

The range of these activities was part of its success, creating a virtuous circle: through its network and Community Links' own work it had access to examples of good practice and direct knowledge of the barriers to change, which it fed into its policy work. Through the Task Force it developed ideas which fed into practice and into policy making.

Its broad remit was also unique and allowed it to focus on systemic barriers and solutions rather than specific interventions. Early action covers not just investment in the early years of life but all interventions that represent a stitch in time - from cradle to grave - and includes interventions that protect the environment. Early action also applies to administrative processes: getting things right first time. The focus also broadened over time to include not just investment in public services but how public services were run, including the impact of deep value relationships on prevention. In its final years, it also looked at the preventative effect of what it called social infrastructure, which includes not just public services but all services, activities and facilities delivered by the public, voluntary and business sectors which help to build what the Task Force and Community Links called 'ready for everything communities'.

One of its first tasks was to identify the systemic barriers common to all forms of prevention, which are looked at in the next section of this report.



3. The barriers: leadership, culture and systems

'For the most part we know what to do, but we are inhibited by the rules that we have made for ourselves and intimidated by custom and practice.'

The Deciding Time, 2012

The barriers to change

The Task Force recognised that 'leadership, culture and systems' were all significant barriers to change, and all three needed to be addressed together if lasting change was to be secured. In its second report in 2012, *The Deciding Time*, it broke these down into six problems:

- Difficulties affording the initial funding required for early action.
- Short-termism in planning and funding.
- Silo-working.
- Lack of leadership skills and accountability structures to work differently, including problems with procurement and commissioning.
- Lack of evidence of what works.
- Lack of skills to work differently.

The barriers to early action, sadly, have not gone away, judging by results. Even when governments know the solutions, they do not necessarily put them into practice, a pattern common to different administrations over decades. Derek Wanless, for example - who was commissioned by a Labour government to write two reports for Government on health, the first in 2002 and then a second in 2004, [Securing Good Health for the Whole Population](#) - made recommendations to spend more on public health and called for better integration of health and social care for older people in order to free up expensive hospital beds for more patients. Despite his reports nearly 20 years ago, health inequalities, lack of integration of health and social care and hospital bed-blocking are major problems still. As mentioned in the Introduction, the second Marmot health and inequalities review published in 2020, a decade after his first report, showed overall progress in key areas like health inequality - which in turn reflect a great many of the issues that encompass the wide definition of early action - had gone backwards, if anything, over the previous decade, despite the determinants being clearly established in the first report.

Moreover, the Scottish Government, which had embraced the recommendation from the Christie Commission in 2011 that prevention should be one of the four pillars of public service reform, has it seems made little progress in its related commitment to shift the focus in budgets to more prevention activities. A [2021 academic symposium](#) was in agreement 'that this has not occurred at the scale needed to move the needle', including in key areas like the NHS budget. The challenge it was noted was 'in execution'.

As discussed earlier in this report, lack of funding on the scale required to make lasting change is a major issue. Short-termism, including short-term budgeting and planning, is a related barrier and becomes particularly problematic when, as under the policy of austerity, funding is cut back, as programmes with longer term benefits are often the first to suffer. Short-termism is exacerbated by electoral cycles and the political pursuit of media headlines and day-to-day popularity as well as political lobbying, and it doesn't just affect public funding, but also taxation and regulation. For example, despite the Westminster Government's commitment to levelling up health inequalities, and the link between Covid-19 deaths and obesity, in May 2022 the Johnson Government reversed a decision to ban junk food adverts at times when children are watching TV, and buy one get one free offers (BOGOFs), citing the cost of living crisis, despite the fact that advertising has no impact on the cost of living and the reason that BOGOFs work as a marketing strategy is that they lead consumers to spend more.

Public opinion is often cited by politicians as a reason for short-termism, a practical example being the outcry that often follows a decision to close a local hospital even where community-based services and centres of expertise are arguably offering a more preventative and accessible service. In 2018, the National Lottery Community Fund undertook [some research of public opinion undertaken by Britain Thinks](#) which showed that the public are more receptive to early action arguments than politicians may think, and there is potential to build on this.

Key findings from the public research

- 1 There is some spontaneous (but not overwhelming) concern that too little government and charitable spending goes towards preventing problems before they arise.
- 2 Overall support for the principle of early action is very high, and the concept is often interpreted as an example of 'common sense'.
- 3 However, there are indications that this support is relatively 'soft', and potentially vulnerable to accusations of diverting funding from cherished frontline services.
- 4 The benefits of early action are seen to be relativant across the board, but the issues where it resonates most are early years, later years and, above all health.
- 5 The narrative is generally viewed as a clear and compelling statement of the case for early action.
- 6 Although the term early action is popular, 'prevention' is also vital in helping to make sense of the concept.

Have the barriers changed?

To help us compile this report, we conducted a survey of former members of the Early Action Practitioners' Network established by the Task Force, asking them whether they thought these barriers still apply and the extent to which they have increased or decreased over the lifetime of the Task Force. We received responses from a wide range of social and public sector organisations across the country.

The great majority thought that silo-working (100 per cent), short-termism (100 per cent), lack of funding (91 per cent) and management and accountability issues (91 per cent) were still problems, but only 55 per cent thought lack of skills was still a problem and 36 per cent considered lack of evidence was an issue.

Almost everyone who responded thought difficulties affording the initial funding for early action and short-termism were either the same (27 per cent) or - even more thought - had increased (64 per cent). Respondents pointed directly to austerity, Covid-19 and immediate welfare needs as a reason why funding was such an issue. One wrote that there was (still) no long-term planning to address structural issues. Another said that funders have been focused on the pandemic and worried about funding long term with so many unknowns. Most thought there had been little movement on leadership and accountability structures.

However, the survey results also gave some grounds for optimism on lack of evidence of what works, silo working and lack of skills.

Almost everyone said that lack of evidence had become less of a problem (91 per cent). One reason given was that 'evidence of what works has been shared very widely in part by the Task Force - but other organisations such as the 'What Works Centre for Wellbeing' etc have also delivered evidence and case studies'. The majority of respondents also felt that lack of skills had decreased as a problem (67 per cent).

The majority of respondents to our survey felt that silo-working was either the same, or the problem had decreased (over 80 per cent) but the comments presented a more nuanced picture. One respondent thought that:

'the Covid-19 emergency situation made us work differently and showed us what was possible. But in terms of the things that have increased - Covid has increased some silos, it has been harder to connect.'

Another said that silo working has increased as funding and income pressures have intensified.

The majority of respondents also felt that lack of skills was less of a problem (64 per cent).

Three other general barriers were mentioned in survey responses:

- A lack of political will to shape genuine policies and ensure adequate funding follows.
- The current focus on privatisation and profit maximisation does not incentivise early action.
- More clarity is needed on models of work and what early action looks like in different sectors / areas of society.

These comments capture the overall picture:

‘There have been improvements in some areas, ‘end’ of austerity, greater focus on lived experience led solutions, increased collaboration across areas of work, more people doing this work and calling it early action so easier to connect with others, more focus on strengths-based approaches and working holistically.’

‘I think integration and prevention are higher on the agenda.’

‘There is still a long way to go but, in general, the Task Force succeeded in improving conditions for early action. The recent context, of course (austerity, Covid-19) has reduced the available resources but early action is still better understood and more highly valued than it was 10 years ago. The Task Force succeeded in developing awareness.’

The survey also asked questions about the operational barriers they were facing in delivering their own projects, and again a strong picture emerged of short-term pressures trumping early action investment.

45 per cent of respondents said that the organisation's staffing and financial resources were tied up helping clients who already have problems and in individual comments the difficulty of meeting demand for people's immediate needs shone through as a significant issue:

‘People, for example local councils, are short of money so can't take long- termist decisions if these cost more in the short term.’

‘Acute need is difficult not to prioritise for funding.’

‘Balancing the urgent and the important is always a challenge.’

‘People are more interested in acute need - including our clients and think tank audience.’



27 per cent of respondents reported difficulties in knowing how to make bids to funding organisations and lack of knowledge about what other interventions exist was also seen as a problem. Only one person specifically commented that lack of evidence was a problem for delivery of their own work but one wrote that the Treasury is not convinced by much of the evidence that early action saves money, and some of it is inadequate in truth, they added, suggesting room for improvement.

Another issue raised was a difficulty separating what makes something specifically early action, leading to internal resistance and lack of buy-in because people think early action means only working with people at the beginning of the process, rather than at all points more preventatively.

What might help?

Respondents were also asked what might be useful in future to help them with these issues, suggesting a range of options. The majority were in favour of:

- Network activities to share best practice and gain inspiration from others (73 per cent).
- A website and portal to provide up-to-date information and advice on early action (64 per cent).
- A new Task Force/Commission to consider best practice, identify the opportunities for change and make recommendations for how early action can move from being occasional good practice into the norm (64 per cent).
- Training courses, for example to help make the case for early action, learn about best practice and how to run early action programmes and make effective funding applications (45 per cent).

Respondents also suggested:

- Policy and lobbying to ensure political will and funding flows in the direction of early intervention.
- More collaborative work with other people doing this work in their sectors.

4. The Task Force's recommendations

The Task Force made many recommendations about how to tackle the barriers identified in the previous section. Not only were these set out in its many widely read reports, but they were disseminated through its influencing work. The Task Force and its support team discussed them in detail with policy-makers in the Westminster government, particularly the Treasury, and the devolved administrations, with the National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee, think tanks and charitable foundations and trusts, and with practitioners nationally and locally, sharing these regularly through its practitioner network.

These recommendations undoubtedly had a direct influence on practice in the UK, will also have contributed to the wider momentum for change and are still relevant today. This section looks at what the Task Force concluded and what happened during the decade it was working.

The recommendations are grouped into five areas:

1. The case for investing in early action, including social infrastructure, arguing for major investment funds, better evaluation of what works and a UK Well-Being Budget.
2. Defining and classifying early action, seeking a shift in existing resources from acute to early action and making it possible to ring-fence early action budgets.
3. Longer term planning which ensures decisions take into account the long-term costs and benefits of government decisions, including a Well-Being of Future Generations Act.
4. Changing management and accountability systems to help break down silos, for example pooled budgets and integration of services like health and social care.
5. Changing the culture to create enabling services, ready for everything communities and deep value relationships.

The remainder of this section looks at each of these in more detail.



1. The case for investing in early action

The first set of recommendations were aimed at getting to the heart of why more investment in early action at scale makes sense and why it deserves greater priority.

Thriving lives, costing less, contributing more

What the Task Force said...

The case for investing in early action was first set out in the Task Force's first report, [The Triple Dividend](#), which argued that early action saves money and promotes both prosperity and well-being, yielding a 'triple dividend':

- Thriving Lives: developing people who are happy and capable and ready for everything, creating strong communities, investing in deep-value relationships, generating social capital and ensuring that everyone has the support they need throughout their lives to reach their full potential.
- Costing less: reducing costs, helping to tackle an unsustainable deficit by investing in provision that will reduce the cost of future liabilities.
- Contributing more: strengthening growth, increasing the competitiveness of the UK. Building human, economic and social capital, so widening prosperity rather than simply consuming and even destroying these resources.

It was not uncommon at the time to try to place a financial cost on inaction in terms of service demand – indeed there were a spate of reports commissioned by government making this point around the time the Task Force was established. For example, the Field Review into poverty and life chances, [The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults](#) published in December 2010, estimated that the public service costs of child poverty were between £10 and £20 billion a year. But the triple dividend argument extended this approach to include social and economic benefits.

The economic case was explored in more depth in 2016 in A Question of Growth: How earlier action can promote good growth, a collection of essays by Task Force members, which also argued that, when the case for early action is seen only as social and moral, that type of spending tends to be squeezed out; and it called for an alternative, positive cycle of investment in early action, one that reduces avoidable demand for services and seeks to remove any barriers that stand in the way of the positive economic and social contribution that everyone can make. Moreover, contributors argued that economic growth as an end in itself can be destructive where it creates poverty and reduces social and environmental sustainability, creating costs that have to be funded from taxation and borrowing as well as huge social disbenefits. The overall conclusion was that what is needed is investment in 'good growth'.

What happened..?

The influence of the triple dividend argument can be seen directly in the Chief Medical Officer's 2012 annual report, Our children deserve better: prevention pays, which devotes a [whole chapter](#) to the economic case for a shift to prevention, specifically citing the EATF:

'Taking steps to prevent problems before they occur or deteriorate, as the Early Action Taskforce has argued, offers a "triple dividend – thriving lives, costing less, contributing more".'

With the help of its Triple Dividend arguments, the Task Force successfully persuaded a number of charitable foundations to take on early action as a priority. As noted in the Task Force's [What's next for Early Action](#) report in 2018, the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) was 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 also committed to do so, including the John Ellerman Foundation and City Bridge Trust. The Task Force 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'.

Governments are also increasingly making prevention a strategic priority. Scotland led the way by making it a [key priority for its public services](#) following the Christie report in 2011. A few years later, and directly as a result of the EATF's influence, prevention was made one of the five ways of working to deliver the Well-Being of Future Generations Act 2015 in Wales.

Social infrastructure and levelling up

What the Task Force said..

The Triple Dividend introduced the idea of readiness as a guiding principle for public policy, referring to 'a Ready for Everything Community...Ready and able to seize opportunity and to cope with adversity'. The Task Force developed this idea in three reports about social infrastructure, [Valuing Social Infrastructure](#), in 2018, [Being in a good place: investing in social infrastructure](#) in 2020 and [Making a good place: how to invest in social infrastructure](#) in 2021.

These defined social infrastructure broadly, saying that everyone should live in a good place where they can thrive and feel included, a place with:

- A good home that is affordable, healthy and safe, environmentally friendly, and well connected to other good quality social infrastructure.
- The services that every community needs both to prosper and to support people when things go wrong.
- Physical spaces and places to meet, exercise, play, enjoy leisure and socialise, with green spaces or a park within walking distance.
- Activities which help create connection and community and build social capital and social integration.
- Community hubs and connecting institutions and individuals that bring people together, connect up services and ensure everyone's voice is heard and needs are met.

For social infrastructure to be fully preventative, the reports also stressed that local people should have real influence over what happens in their area, and that the infrastructure should be accessible, inclusive and sustainable.

The reports also detailed extensive evidence to show that a place with this social infrastructure is naturally preventative, helping people across all ages to be the best they can be, and it made the case for major investment in it, not just to repair a decade of major disinvestment as a result of austerity but also to build resilience in the light of the pandemic, which had hit poorer communities disproportionately. Just as the Victorians, experiencing waves of cholera and typhoid, invested in the social infrastructure that led to good health and greater well-being and resilience – from sewers and clean water, to schools, libraries and parks – it argued that we need once again to become great place-makers to promote health and well-being.

Although some aspects of social infrastructure are delivered through public funding, the reports also stressed that both the voluntary and private sectors are very important parts of the social infrastructure eco-system. However, the Task Force also argued that public funding was crucial. When withdrawn, it could trigger a vicious cycle of disinvestment, particularly by businesses, with communities increasingly run down. When injected, public money could stimulate the reverse.

The reports also coined the phrase, civic inequality – the idea that certain communities have relatively low levels of social infrastructure – and called for greater mapping of these differences.

The Task Force developed a network of think tanks and others with an interest in social infrastructure– including the RSA, the Centre for Progressive Policy, the Local Trust, and Danny Kruger, who was then a government adviser – to build momentum, share this investment case and build a deeper understanding of the importance of social infrastructure. This fed into the three reports it produced on social infrastructure, and into the work of others. For example, the RSA's Inclusive Growth Commission – led by the economist Stephanie Flanders and supported by the Core Cities Group of major UK cities – said in its [final report in 2017](#):

‘Investment in social infrastructure – including public health, early years support, skills and employment services – should go hand in hand with investment in physical infrastructure, and in business development. This will have a first order impact on productivity and living standards. The key shift we need is from an economic model based on growing now and distributing later to one that sees growth and social reform as two sides of the same coin.’

What happened..?

Partly as a result of this work, thinking about social infrastructure is now mainstream, with many think tanks and commentators advocating for more investment in it and developing the evidence for it. [A 2019 index](#) commissioned by the Local Trust from the Oxford Consultants in Social Inclusion, for example, found the most deprived areas as measured by other deprivation factors also lacked key civic assets. This proved influential with politicians, not least because areas of high civic inequality correlated with Vote Leave areas.

Importantly, Danny Kruger became an especially influential advocate for social infrastructure, including in his report commissioned by the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, [Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant](#), which in turn contributed to the 2022 [Levelling Up White Paper](#), which recognises the importance of social capital and commits to addressing social as well as economic inequalities. Danny Kruger then became the Parliamentary Private Secretary to Michael Gove when he was the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Communities and Housing in the Johnson Government.

Well-Being budgeting

What the Task Force said..

Ultimately, the case for early action and social infrastructure is that it promotes well-being, and in its social infrastructure reports the Task Force argued for a Well-Being Budget, similar to that adopted in New Zealand. New Zealand's Well-Being Budget judges proposals against outcomes-focused measures of well-being – for example, the quality and affordability of housing, healthy life expectancy and access to nature, and subjective well-being, as well as economic indicators. Importantly, New Zealand's well-being 'dashboard' also measures the impact of spending decisions on the assets of the nation that generate well-being and sustainability, now and into the future. This includes human capital, environmental capital and social capital, not just the financial and physical capital which appears on the UK balance sheet.

What happened..?

In Scotland, the government also has a performance framework against which it assesses everything it does. At its heart is the goal of increased well-being with sustainable and inclusive growth, with a range of indicators of how it will achieve this. Amongst them is a commitment to creating communities that are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe. The Welsh Government has seven well-being indicators, including a resilient, healthier and more equal Wales which is globally responsible.

The case for a Well-Being Budget in the UK is gaining some important champions. Sir Keir Starmer, the Leader of the Labour Party, appeared to commit to one in his [The Road Ahead](#) statement of future policy published in 2021, saying:

‘Inspired by the ambition of Wales and New Zealand, and the experiences of the pandemic that kept our minds and bodies healthy, Labour would put wellbeing at the heart of government decision-making.’

The former Cabinet Secretary, and a former Permanent Secretary of the Treasury, Lord Gus O'Donnell, has also argued for a Well-Being Budget in the UK since 2019.

Investment funds

What the Task Force said..

At various stages in its work, the Task Force argued for the creation of significant investment funds, proposing new ways of funding them. In [Towards effective prevention: practical steps for the next government](#), published in 2014, for example, it set out a proposal for an Early Action Loan Fund, which would offer interest free loans to public sector agencies to invest in early action. The loans would be paid back over 3 – 7 years through savings in acute provision or welfare spending. It would promote innovation and system change within public provision and be independently administered. This partly built on the idea of social impact bonds and social finance, which it saw as valuable instruments for leveraging in non-governmental funds for piloting of innovative ideas, but this fund would be on a much larger scale and would be financed by Government.

The EATF's social infrastructure reports also called for major investment to address civic inequality and improve social infrastructure in poorer areas, with an ambitious national social infrastructure fund, financed through borrowing and taxation, for example, taxation on internet-based companies and social polluters such as the gambling industry, and bringing together various micro pots of existing funding. Again, the Task Force said that this should be managed at arms-length from government, with a long-term perspective. Crucially, it said that funds should be allocated to local areas to spend as they chose, within broad criteria, rather than competing for funds against narrow criteria. It argued that it should be used to seed local investment funds, to which others might contribute, giving several examples of such funds already in existence including Bristol's [City Funds](#) and Barking and Dagenham's new [community endowment fund](#).

To make it go further, the Task Force also suggested that some of the fund's resources could be invested in social infrastructure capital assets within communities, with annual revenues from these being used to help other projects, and existing public land and buildings could be repurposed for social infrastructure and kept in public or community ownership. The MOD and NHS as well as local authorities own considerable assets which might be used in this way, as do local authorities.

Making a Good Place also explored ideas for innovative investment by local people in their areas, such as looking at the current regulatory framework for credit unions and covid-recovery bonds.

What happened..?

Although the Government did not take up the idea of an Early Action Loan Fund in its entirety, it did set up a number of so-called [outcomes funds to promote social impact](#) bonds, for example the Life Chances Fund, an £80 million fund managed by the Big Lottery Fund on behalf of the government, which was launched in 2016 and sought to tackle issues around key themes: drug and alcohol dependency, children's services, early years, young people, older people's services and healthy lives. In 2019, the Treasury also created a £200 million [Shared Outcomes Fund](#), which was doubled in 2020, for pilot projects to test innovative ways of working across the public sector, with an emphasis on thorough plans for evaluation.



The Johnson Government's new £4bn Levelling Up fund was announced in 2020 for investment in social infrastructure but the EATF noted several limitations:

- Its top-down nature, with nationally determined priorities for each round, reduces the ability for local areas, particularly local people, to determine what works best for them.
- Despite the apparent scale of the fund, it will be spread very thin, especially as bids for large capital items such as by-passes, are encouraged, and it is available for use in every local authority.
- The process of selection seems to encourage 'visible projects' enjoying the support of local MPs, which may lead to less glamorous projects not being successful; and some areas are given some priority based on deprivation factors that have proved controversial.
- It provides no current expenditure for the ongoing costs of projects.
- It does not look holistically at social infrastructure, or have any clear definition.
- Local areas will have to bid competitively for funds, which can be a time-consuming and costly process that will not necessarily lead to the best value for money.



What works

The Task Force said..

In order to strengthen the case for investment in early action, the Task Force called for improvements in evaluation.

What happened..?

Over the last decade there have been significant advances, with the Government establishing first, the [Early Intervention Foundation](#) in 2011, which is now an independent charity, and then a number of [What Works Centres](#) were set up in 2013 'to embed robust evidence at the heart of policy-making and service delivery'. This includes one on well-being created in 2014.



2. Defining and classifying early action

Although some dedicated funds have been established by the government to invest in early action and social infrastructure, they are not of sufficient scale to make a major impact, especially against a backdrop of damaging cuts to basic services and infrastructure. The Task Force also explored whether it might be possible to shift existing funding toward prevention gradually over time and to protect existing early action funding from being raided to protect short-term pressures. Their second tranche of recommendations addressed this.

What the Task Force said..

As noted earlier, the Task Force had a very broad definition of early action. The focus at the time was on the importance of investing in the early years of children's development, which had been coined 'early intervention'. However, the Task Force took a wider view, defining early action as a generic term applying to preventative action of all kinds, including help which gets it right first time, and encompassing social infrastructure and social assets as well as public services.

The early action cliff edge: moving early action upstream

The Task Force also broke early action down into different stages as shown below, revealing the important truth that some action which is called preventative is often only triggered when issues reach some form of crisis. Earlier action is often less expensive in the short run and generally has much greater impact over the longer term.

Primary prevention

Preventing or minimising the risk of problems arising, usually through universal policies like health promotion or a vaccination programme.

Secondary prevention

Targetting individuals or groups at high risk or showing early signs of a particular problem to try to stop it occurring. For example Family Nurse Partnerships, screening programmes, or the Reading Recovery Programme.

Tertiary prevention

Intervening once there is a problem, to stop it getting worse and redress the situation. For example work with 'troubled families' or to prevent reoffending.

Acute spending

Manage the impact of a strongly negative situation but does little or nothing to prevent the negative consequences or future reoccurrence. For example prison, or acute hospital care.

From [A Rough Guide to Early Action](#)

[How to classify early action spend](#) was published by the Task Force in 2014 as a practical guide for all organisations, not just government, to do this.

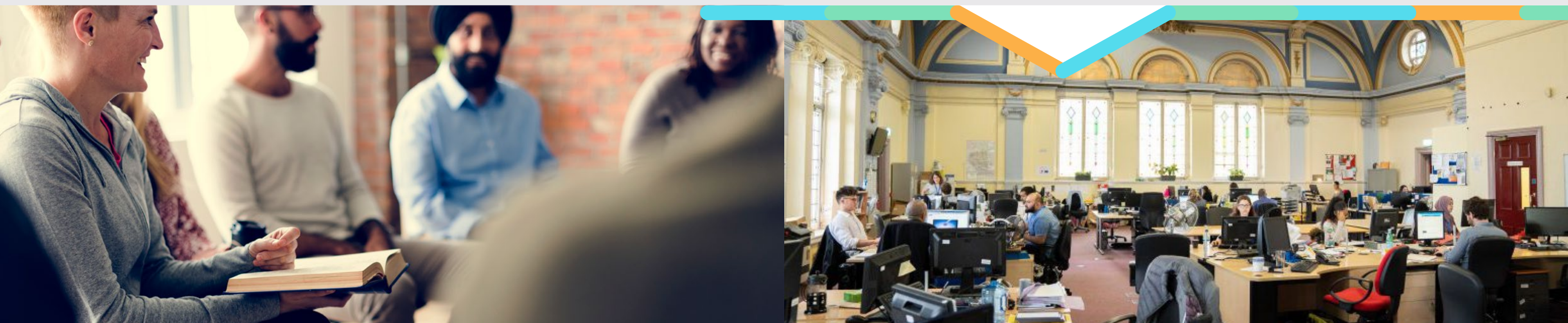
The Task Force also recommended so-called Transition Plans to shift spending toward early action and away from acute interventions over time; and it also suggested that early action budgets be ring-fenced in a similar way to capital expenditure to prevent them being raided to fund short-term pressures, on the grounds that spending on early action created long-term benefits and assets, akin to capital expenditure, and so should be given a preferential status.

What happened..?

At first, according to its [What's next for Early Action](#) 2018 report, the Task Force found little understanding of early action in government and no reliable data distinguishing spending on prevention from spending on picking up the pieces. In its Triple Dividend report, the Task Force had called on the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) and the National Audit Office (NAO) to look at this, having identified them as the routes to raising the profile of early action 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 way to reduce needs and cut costs over the long term. After a meeting with Margaret Hodge MP, the Chair of the PAC, the Committee agreed to address these issues and the Task Force advised the NAO on its [Landscape review of Early Action in government](#). Launching the report in January 2013, Amyas Morse, the then 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.'





Applying the definition to the spending of the Departments of Health and Education, the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice, the NAO found in 2013 that only 6 per cent of their total spending was early action.

The [PAC in its 2013 report](#) on the NAO's early action landscape review reiterated the NAO's concern that there was a lack of leadership in Government, that planning and budgeting was too focused on the short-term, that there were not enough incentives to encourage early action, that the evidence base needed to be improved and that joint working was poor. It recommended amongst other things that a common definition should be applied across the public sector, that the Treasury should take on the responsibility for promoting early action in government and that early action budgets should be ring-fenced. These recommendations were not taken up.

However, the Scottish Government did commit to increase the proportion of their spending on early action though, as noted earlier, the goal has not yet been achieved. A key reason, as explored in this [evidence to Scotland's Finance Committee](#), is the lack of a consistent working definition and other barriers include short-termism in planning.

In 2019, the Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountants (CIPFA) and Public Health England produced a report, [Evaluating Preventative Investments](#), based on a series of roundtables in which the Task Force took part, in which Public Health England estimated that £5.2 billion was invested in prevention, only 4.7 per cent of total health spending in England in 2014.

The Early Intervention Foundation also produced [a report](#) which used the classification approach to identify the proportion of early action spending on children and young people, with the aim of shifting to more early intervention. Moreover, the EATF worked with some charitable foundations to apply this approach to their work, and used the classification in its training, including a section in the Business in the Community 'Business Connectors' programme.

Everyone responding to our survey of the EATF's practitioners' network recognised the definition, confirming that it was understood not just by specialists but also practitioners outside of central government.

Despite these advances, a consistent definition of early action has not yet been adopted by the Treasury and this remains a major weakness in its management of public expenditure.

Little or no progress has been made in protecting early action investment. The Government removed most of the ring-fences from existing early action budgets to give local authorities more discretion at a time of austerity – taking away the one from the Sure Start budget in 2011 for example – which made it easier to cut Sure Start back, unfortunately. Indeed, capital expenditure was also raided to plug shortfalls in acute spending during this period, despite being held in a separate budget in order to protect it.

3. Longer term planning

One of the critical barriers identified by the Task Force, and indeed the PAC and NAO in their reports, is short-termism in the existing financial planning and budgeting system. It is too geared towards the immediate needs of the economy at the expense of well-being and sustainability, including the needs of future generations. Inevitable future financial, social and environmental costs, such as global warming, the increasing costs of obesity and the social and economic costs caused by lack of good housing, are ignored. At the same time, the positive benefits of early action are not sufficiently taken into account.

What the Task Force said..

The Task Force made a number of recommendations to shift the incentives in planning toward the longer term:

- The Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) and other forms of budgeting in central and local government should adopt a ten-year planning horizon. All existing and proposed spending in the CSR should be assessed against its impact on the future, through an 'intergenerational test', with provisional ten year plans introduced in the CSR and reassessed in the light of developments every 3-5 years.
- Outside of the Spending Review, there should be a ten year test for all new spending proposals, which identifies their longer term costs and benefits and any impact on other areas of spending.
- Future costs and liabilities should be calculated and ideally recorded in the government's accounts.
- There should be a Well-Being and Future Generations Act, policed by an external body.

What happened..?

The biggest single change that happened directly in response was the creation of the [Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015](#) in Wales. When the Labour Party won the 2011 election in Wales on the promise of 'A more sustainable Wales' the initial focus was 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' and to require public bodies to 'think more about the long term, work better with people and communities and each other, look to prevent'. The Act is monitored by a Future Generations Commissioner who has an influential role, as explained in Section 7 of this report.

Lord John Bird has sought to introduce a similar bill in Westminster, so far unsuccessfully, though with growing support.

The Treasury has not introduced longer term budgeting in the CSR but in the 2020 Spending Review it has introduced a longer term perspective by introducing [planning around longer term outcomes](#), including some cross-cutting outcomes where there are shared responsibilities, with Outcome Delivery Plans which encourage joint working. These capture the government's long-term policy objectives, from maximising employment and improving skills, to achieving net zero by 2050. Moreover, the Government did introduce something similar to the Task Force's recommendation for the [NHS in 2018](#), giving it a firm five year spending envelope and asking it to produce a ten year plan including that five years.

The PAC, in its early action report described earlier in this section, called for ten year impact assessments for all spending in the Spending Review, but this was rejected by the Treasury who said that all spending is subject to its Green Book (the guidance followed by government for calculating costs and benefits of new spending proposals), which is supposed to take into account longer term impacts. However, use of the Green Book is patchy in practice and there were limitations in its cost benefit analysis.

However, in 2014 the Treasury did adopt as a supplement to its [Green Book](#) a cost benefit model which more fully reflected social and economic benefits, which was initially developed by the [Greater Manchester Combined Authority Research Team \(formerly New Economy\)](#) in 2011.

There is still room for improvement in evaluation across government. The NAO in a [2021 report on evaluation](#) found that:

However, the NAO did note that in 2020 the Treasury gave departments additional funding for some programmes where it assessed that evaluation arrangements were particularly good. Following its review of departments' evidence bases and evaluations, and in concluding the Spending Review, the Treasury set conditions to improve the quality of evaluation. It asked each department to agree at least five priority evidence gaps to be addressed with robust evaluation and to appoint its Director of Analysis or equivalent to be accountable for delivery, robustness, and use of evaluation.



Measuring assets and liabilities

One of the things that would dramatically improve longer term thinking would be a clear assessment of future costs and liabilities. The independent Office for Budget Responsibility does this to some degree through its long-term fiscal projections but there is a need for more precise and targeted information. In 2019, CIPFA and Public Health England's report on evaluating investments in prevention commented that:

It recommended that spending on prevention should be assessed in the same way as capital investments, using the Prudential Code used by Local authorities in connection with borrowing. As it points out, in the Prudential Code guidelines it is possible to assess the impact of under-investment on the balance sheet, whereas on the revenue side this is not seen in the same way. The creation of ratios parallel to those applied in the Prudential Code might provide a means by which future organisational and whole system costs of failure to invest in preventative action are more explicit, it said.

'Any decision on spending or investment should take account of the potential impact on future financial sustainability. This is particularly important in preventative investment as the future costs and benefits must be considered, but also the potential future impact of not making the investment. Again, this links to the idea that investment and spending decisions may be inappropriately made with an over-emphasis on short-term consequences, instead of taking into account the full impact.'

'While individual departments have undertaken initiatives to improve evaluation, the use of evaluation continues to be variable and inconsistent, and government has been slow to address the known barriers to improvement. As a result, government cannot have confidence its spending in many policy areas is making a difference.'





4. Changing management and accountability systems

The EATF identified silo-working as a major barrier to investment in early action, as did the NAO and PAC in their early action reports, and as noted earlier in this report this remains a significant barrier.

The Task Force said..

It made a number of recommendations in this area, many of which were set out in [Towards effective prevention: practical steps for the next government](#) in 2014, including:

- Pooled budgets, including integrating health and social care budgets, where public bodies contribute to a joint fund for tackling issues where they would not otherwise have an incentive because the savings of their investment would fall to another part of government.
- Social profit agreements, where different parties agree to invest in early action on the understanding that any future savings are shared to a pre-agreed formula.
- Responsibility charging, a charge where one public body passes on costs to another because of inaction or systems failure. The same principle could be applied to 'social polluters' outside of Government such as the alcohol and gambling industries.
- Mapping the connections between spending on services (as set out in Departmental Expenditure Limits (DEL)) and spending on benefits and other demand driven expenditure (as set out in Annually Managed Expenditure (AME)), as cuts in one area could increase spending in another, or investment in services might reduce spending in AME or vice versa.
- Whole systems analysis, of the kind used by Vanguard Consulting as set out in Locality's report, [Saving Money by Doing the Right Thing](#), which looks at the whole system, not individual public services, that contribute to social outcomes. The aim is to understand how services work together and to recognise how getting it right first time makes sense, rather than passing individuals from one service to another without resolving an issue.

What happened..?

There are a number of examples of pooled budgets introduced during the time of the Task Force, for example the [Better Care Fund](#), which encouraged integration by requiring clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) and local authorities to enter into pooled budget arrangements and agree an integrated spending plan. The Government is now committed to integrating health and social care and ambitious [integrated social care systems and partnerships](#) are being introduced. Other local examples are included in the Towards Effective Prevention report.

The introduction of cross-cutting outcomes in the 2020 Spending Review has already been mentioned earlier. The Treasury has also committed to better mapping of DEL and AME links.



5. Changing the culture

The Task Force was clear that it is not just leadership and systems that stand in the way of early action, but also culture.

The Task Force said..

Across its reports, the Task Force emphasised the importance of a different way of working, including what it called 'enabling services' which empower individuals and communities and play to their strengths, listening to people and making sure they have a say, ensuring social infrastructure is inclusive and bringing leaders together to help create a good place. In a series of reports, it set out how this might look in practice, including [Looking forward to later life: taking an early action approach to our ageing society](#), [Secure and ready: towards an early action social security system](#), both published in 2014, and [Thriving Minds: acting early on mental health](#), in 2016.

One important strand of this work is a focus on relationship-building, based on the view that lives are transformed by the human connections created through strong, meaningful and consistent relationships. This is what Community Links calls Deep Value, first explored by the Community Links report in 2011 of that title. The Task Force's follow up report, [The power of deep Value Relationships in Services and Communities](#), published in 2020, reviewed what had been happening since, and also drew on insights from a roundtable of people with first-hand experience.

It found that, since 2011, the evidence has only grown that creating strong relationships in services such as health and education, as well as where people are facing complex problems, leads to better outcomes. Experts increasingly recognise that the problems people face are increasingly complex, social isolation is a major challenge and an increasingly diverse population requires a more individualised approach. At the same time, human contact is undervalued by a 'factory model' of service delivery and reduced through a loss of personal services caused by cuts in services and by automation. Our existing service delivery model is beginning to crack too, with major contracts and payment by results models failing, it concluded.

The report highlighted the value not just of better deep value relationships in the delivery of services but also the value of the arts and the sports in helping to create agency and purpose and unlock creativity. Moreover, sometimes the best deep value relationships are provided by communities and the deep value activities they create, it found; and it concluded that 'community anchors' like community-based organisations such as Community Links, or universities, and indeed other institutions rooted in and committed to a particular geographic area, can play a strong role.

What happened..?

There are many examples across the country of these kinds of changes being put into practice, for example the increasing use of social prescribing in the health service, and some of these are explored later in this report. But we are still a long way from these changes becoming common practice.

5. Sharing good practice and ideas

The Early Action Funders Alliance

In response to the Task Force's work, and with the encouragement of David Robinson, a group of funders formed the Early Action Funders Alliance, which aimed to make the public case for early action, help funders to embed it in their work, and ultimately help the shift towards early action. A number of them already had early action threaded through their priorities, and everyone used the classification (sometimes called 'bucketing') tool devised by the EATF and described earlier. It held regular meetings and employed a small secretariat.

Five members of the Alliance committed resources to the [Early Action Neighbourhood Fund](#) to test and demonstrate the potential impact of early action work and funding in England. The grant funding came from The National Lottery Community Fund, Comic Relief and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, with [Barrow Cadbury Trust](#) and the [Legal Education Foundation](#) providing additional support and guidance. They funded three projects:

- [Changing Futures North East](#) (providing £1.56 million over five years). Changing Futures aimed to reduce spending on acute children's services in Hartlepool by ten per cent, as well as improving school attendance and children's emotional wellbeing, and reducing parental and family conflict. It did this by improving the way its services and staff relate to each other and by building stronger family relationships through intensive support.

- [Mancroft Advice Project](#) (providing £1.64 million over five years). The Mancroft Advice Project aimed to reduce acute spending in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service budgets in Norwich and unlock a percentage of the future budget for preventative work, as well as improving children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing, and reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training. It did this by targeting 13-14 year olds in three schools with a range of interventions, mentoring and family support.
- [Coventry Law Centre](#) (giving them £1.53 million over five years). Coventry Law Centre's Ignite project aimed to reduce demand on specialised services (for example, children's services and housing) and initiate a shift in how resources are allocated in Coventry, as well as raising people's aspirations for their lives and expectations of themselves, improving communities' ability to resolve their own problems and ensuring fewer people reach crisis point. It did this by building legal knowledge, confidence and skills in people to help them deal with everyday law-related issues.

These projects generated significant learning, as shown in the Coventry case study in the box below.

The Early Action Neighbourhood Fund project in Coventry

Ignite was a five-year programme led by Central England Law Centre and Grapevine in partnership with two partners: Coventry City Council Children's Services and Whitefriars Housing Group (now Citizen Housing). The purpose of the programme was to explore how to redesign public sector support to help people earlier and build resilience in those least able to cope.

Overall, the Ignite project sought to generate a new model of 'early help':

'Early help brings a focus on strengths and possibilities, rooted in the here and now, that looks to enable people to benefit from opportunities and support to create something that people want to see happen. This stands in contrast to a deficit-based approach that seeks to act to prevent something from happening in the future.'

Ignite worked alongside front-line housing staff to create a new face-to-face pre-tenancy process to build early relationships and trust with tenants. This helped to reduce the time to relet an empty property, saving money and time and reducing the potential for disruption for staff and prospective new tenants. The staff told them that they really felt the benefits, were able to spend time with people and so were able give them more information earlier.

As a result of their work with local authority children's services, they published a jointly agreed Blueprint for Action that continues to guide the ongoing work with Children's Services. This articulated a better understanding of how to activate early help and the key ingredients.

They shared the following lessons with us, in what they described as a 'bumpy experience', set out in their own words

- 'There is always something you can do at a very practical level. Our work was a 'call to action', helping to challenge notions that as poverty is so pervasive and entrenched, professionals can do little more than tackle the symptoms.
- It is all about relationships. Early help starts with building trust, developing relationships at a personal level through honesty, empathy, and availability.
- The ability to be alongside and work relationally with people is a crucial skill. The words used and how people speak all impact on the willingness of a person to accept help.
- Connecting people to community-based support can address problems before they escalate.
- Creating partnerships is essential for early action to succeed.
- The practical activation of rights and community-level help has generated a 'sense of hope', building the agency and resilience of people in the community and the practitioners.
- Commitment at a senior level is important, but it is no guarantee of success; it's worth asking "who are the best people to make change happen?"

'The conditions that continue to hold the problems in place include pervasive poverty that impedes early action and effective responses. As we look to support recovery and renewal from Covid-19 and the deepening and extended austerity on the near horizon, we want to restate our learning about how the failure of services to take account of poverty is a significant barrier to system change; this compromises their attempts to meet people early in their problems. We hope that sharing the bumpy experience of being a third sector organisation trying to create change in wider systems will initiate more conversations about this important and, for us, still unfolding work.'

A big part of what has made our learning possible has been the attitude of the funders. Their approach has been genuinely exploratory and enabling, allowing us to go where the work led us. They have understood that the work is both experimental and experiential, that needs to be rooted in shared learning. In this kind of work, there can be pressure to demonstrate or 'prove' that specific contributions have led to the outcomes established at the start or test the original theories of change. This has conceptual, ethical, and practical difficulties, some of which were uncovered in the programme evaluation of the EANF.'

Extracts from a draft report shared with the author of this publication.

It is clear that the five-year support of the Alliance and the Fund was critical to this project, but one lesson is that change takes even longer to embed, particularly at scale. The work of the Alliance and Neighbourhood Fund came to an end in 2019 for a variety of reasons, including staff changes, and some of the energy of funders has gone into a new focus of place-based working and asset-based approaches, which builds on some of this learning. Although the pilots were valuable, there is no longer an active Early Action Practitioner Network in Community Links with which to share it, as this too effectively came to an end when the Task Force's funding expired.

The Early Action Practitioner Network

'The work of the Task Force has helped us to light some candles instead of complaining about the dark.'

Andy Rhodes, Chief Constable of Lancashire Constabulary

An important part of the Task Force's work was disseminating ideas and best practice through its practitioner network.

In July 2018, Community Links audited that network, and found that it had a mailing list of 796 individuals coming from 385 organisations and a small number of Parliamentarians. Most of these organisations were part of the voluntary sector (184), with a significant minority in the public (68) and private sectors (61), working across a range of areas and based mainly in England and Scotland.

An outstanding example of the impact that sharing the Task Force publications and other ideas and examples of good practice is the way in which Andy Rhodes in the Lancashire Constabulary took the Task Force's ideas and applied them in their work to develop a new early model of local policing – the story is in his own words here.



The impact of the EATF on my work, by Andy Rhodes, Chief Constable, Lancashire Constabulary

'Actually aiming to have fewer calls to 999 in the first place, not charging around under flashing lights catching criminals, is where I want us to be. From the outside, people see the police as enforcement. But policing is about social impact, it's about people feeling safe where they live, about people who are vulnerable being protected. The lock-up-and-throw-away-the-key-system isn't working. We need to spend upstream.

I came across Triple Dividend [Community Links' first Early Action Task Force report] when I was Deputy Chief Constable. The report wasn't aimed at the police, but we feel at the bottom of the cliff too sometimes – where prevention and early action have failed. Its cliff metaphor became part of our language, from our crime plan to tons of frontline toolkits. It's a department-wide approach. We've secured the biggest Police Innovation Fund grant in the country and are using it entirely for early action initiatives. The first Early Action police cohort that came out of this was immediately assigned to work on prevention in intensive neighbourhoods and an Early Action board has been set up to facilitate collaboration between different partners and agencies sharing the same purpose in the region.

We would never even be on this journey without the Early Action Task Force set up by Community Links. We are experiencing real challenges through austerity and the work of the Task Force has helped us to light some candles instead of complaining about the dark. I remember telling the Task Force that the Lancashire Constabulary was spending 48 per cent of its time dealing with issues that might have been prevented had they been addressed earlier. The Task Force offered positive language and a useful framework in which to develop preventative action and, above all, a new interpretation of success: a systemic view with people at its centre rather than a statistical account of narrow achievements.

I am now leading on a national consensus that's developing a new model of local policing, integrated with partners and community assets. Despite the huge cuts everyone is facing it's an amazing opportunity, for positive and lasting change.'

From [40 Stories](#), published by Community Links in 2017.

Training

The EATF initially provided some ad hoc training and support to members. However, in 2018, based on the findings of the network audit and in depth interviews, the EATF developed and then ran an early action training programme, targeted at voluntary organisations in the practitioner network. The aim was to provide greater support to smaller voluntary organisations to enable them to better understand early action, how they can deploy it in their own work and how they can attract funding for early action projects.

The Southwark and Lambeth Early Action Commission

The Task Force was instrumental in setting up the Southwark and Lambeth Early Action Commission, which was supported by the New Economics Foundation and funded by the Health and Well-being Boards of Southwark and Lambeth. It was chaired by Margaret Hodge MP and published its [final report in 2015](#). It applied the EATF's thinking and tools to the two London boroughs, and made many similar recommendations, advocating for:

- Resourceful communities where residents and groups are agents of change, ready to shape the course of their own lives. To achieve this people need not just actual resources (but in the broadest sense), connections and control, it said.
- Preventative places where the quality of neighbourhoods has a positive impact on how people feel and enables them to lead fulfilling lives and to help themselves and each other.
- Strong, collaborative partnerships where organisations work together and share knowledge and power, fostering respectful, high-trust relationships based on a shared purpose.
- Systems geared to early action where the culture, values, priorities, and practices of local institutions support early action as the new 'normal' way of working.

This resulted in an ambitious local strategy, [Common Purpose, Common Cause](#), for the voluntary sector and Southwark to work together to improve outcomes in ways that reduce and prevent future demand on high cost, high demand services; and to sustain and build strong cohesive communities where no group or community is left behind. Hopes were high, and one of the ambitions was to create an Age Friendly Borough, bringing voluntary and public services together to co-create outcome-based commissioning, with everyone working to a common outcome framework. Talking to one person who was very active in this process at the time, it is clear that not everything went to plan in this area at least, with high staff turnover in the local authority and long-standing power dynamics resulting in a more traditional form of commissioning in the end, with the local authority in the lead, rather than a genuine partnership.

A key lesson going forward is it is far easier to identify barriers and recommendations than to make and change last on the ground, especially against a background of changing staff and pressures.

6. The scale of the challenge still ahead: some perspectives

In 2015, the Task Force asked a number of prominent thinkers and practitioners to give their advice to an incoming Government in [One Hundred Days for Early Action: Time for Government to put prevention first](#). The agenda in One Hundred Days was ambitious and, sadly, much of it remains unfulfilled. Contributors asked for many of the key recommendations of the Task Force and also, amongst other things:

- New methods for co-ordinating local delivery, building on City Deals, Health and Well-Being Boards.
- Development of some existing models for pooling budgets and working collaboratively, such as Community Budgets and Our Place.
- Putting power into the hands of front-line staff to work in new ways.
- Shifting financial incentives to reduce pressure on existing services (for example, raising council tax bands to generate revenue and reduce incentives to under-occupy).
- Shifting existing public sector contracts toward outcomes, finding ways to work with the voluntary and community sectors more effectively and moving away from big contracts.

- Encouraging personal action such as investing in parenting skills and resilience in young people, home sharing, and encouraging better health and reducing food poverty by a public campaign to 'grow your own food' and reduce food waste.

In preparing this report, we spoke to a number of the essayists to get their views on the progress that has been made and the challenges ahead and how to meet them. We also spoke to individuals with whom the Task Force had an ongoing relationship, most notably Dame Margaret Hodge MP, who chaired the PAC at the time of their 2013 Early Action report, and led the Southwark and Lambeth Early Action Task Force in 2015, as well as taking the views of Jennifer Wallace at Carnegie UK, which is a leading advocate for the well-being agenda.

It is fair to say that, although everyone felt some advances had been made, they all thought that there was still a long way to go to make early action not just common sense, but common practice.

Reflecting on the big ambitions of the PAC's early action report (which is described in Section 4) and how little progress had been made since 2013, Margaret Hodge said:

'Far from a push toward more investment in early action over the last decade, we've gone backwards, with key areas like Sure Start, youth services, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, and special educational needs being drastically cut back as a result of austerity, creating an even bigger hill to climb now. Going forward, I think we need additional ways to hold Government to account on its record on early action and to raise the profile with the public, building on the successful model of the Children's Commissioner and the [Future Generations Commissioner in Wales](#).'

However, for such an independent role to be appointed with such a wide-ranging and potentially powerful remit, there would need to be a step change in political buy-in to radical action on early action, which only another Early Action Task Force or some other way of building momentum could achieve.

Lord Bird, the founder of A Big Issue, has been a strong proponent of such a Well-being of Future Generations Act for the UK, introducing a Bill through the House of Lords recently, and getting as far as it being debated in the House of Commons. This also included external independent scrutiny of progress of the kind suggested by Margaret Hodge, a Future Generations Commissioner and a role for the Office for Budget Responsibility. He spoke passionately about the challenge of making change happen and in favour of such an Act at the Early Action Task Force's final webinar, 'A step change in investment in early action including social infrastructure', in May 2021.



Sophie Howe, the current Future Generations Commissioner in Wales, spoke about her role at the same event, and it is clear that she is being enormously influential on the actions the Welsh Government is taking. She identified income insecurity as perhaps the biggest factor in poor health in Wales and said that she had been advocating for universal basic income as a consequence, which the Office's modelling suggested would reduce overall poverty by 50 per cent. The Welsh Government had agreed to trial it in response. She also explained that housing is another determinant of health and her office was working on proposals to finance retro-fitting to improve housing. She gave a striking example of her power to make the Welsh Government change its mind on a major investment:

'One of the earliest interventions I made was on government plans to use the entirety of their borrowing capacity to build a 13 mile stretch of road because of its economic benefits. Now when you start applying a well-being economics lens to that, and when you have an independent Commissioner who is going to ask you questions like, please explain to me how you think that £1.4 billion is going to meet the goal of a prosperous Wales, please explain to me how it's going to contribute to the goal of a healthier Wales, when actually what we need to do is get people travelling on public transport rather than sitting in their cars in congestion and adding to the environmental crisis that we already have, and please explain to me how it's going to contribute to the goal of a more equal Wales when a high percentage of the poorest people in that region don't even have access to a car and you'll be spending that money to no benefit to them whatsoever. Please explain to me how this meets your goals of cohesive communities, when what we want is communities interacting, travelling, and talking, locally – and so on. When you put that to the Government, its own legislation, it was completely at odds, and the Government then took a completely different decision, so they're now investing £800 million in six new train stations and massive investment in public transport in the region, because that gives you a better return on investment in terms of those broader concepts of well-being.'

Anna Coote from the New Economics Foundation, and at an earlier point the Secretary to the Southwark and Lambeth Early Action Commission, and an Early Action Task Force member, remains ambitious for early action. She is now a passionate advocate for [universal basic services](#) – extending universal access to more of life's essentials including social care, childcare, housing, digital information and communications, energy, and transport service. She also co-authored [The Social Guarantee](#), a guarantee that would combine universal basic services with living income. She also feels that something like a new Early Action Task Force or UK wide Commission on early action is required to continue to build momentum.

Professor Anne Power, Emeritus Professor of Social Policy and Head of Housing and Communities at the London School of Economics, a member of the Early Action Task Force and an essayist in One Hundred Days, is equally ambitious for this agenda. She wrote in 2015 that major action was needed particularly on housing, income insecurity, food, public health and the environment, and, like Margaret Hodge, she lamented the loss of investment in early action in key areas.

Looking back on what had been achieved since, she said that:

'The EATF was very successful in raising the profile of the argument that early action makes sense. This is obvious and the government seems to accept it. However, actions speak louder than words and we are still falling very far short on the actions necessary. There is a lot to do.'

Specifically, she added that:

'Back in 2015, I argued that the five giants - poverty, ignorance, disease, squalor, and want - that led to the foundation of the welfare state after World War Two - were still haunting us. If anything, I would argue that these conditions are worse today because of the impact of two years of a worldwide pandemic; and because of leaving the European Union. This double whammy has made things much worse for people at the bottom. I suggested ten early actions then which I think should stand today. Some of them have moved a little, but most are still in urgent need of a policy response.'

These are the ten actions that need taking today:

1. No demolition of social rented housing, or any housing.
2. Use small spaces in our existing built environment to produce additional homes, commonly known as 'infill'.
3. Raise council tax at the top band, since it is very regressive and could be a ready source of revenue for councils.
4. Ensure that the minimum wage is fixed at a living wage, and link it to some sort of regulation of zero hours contracts especially for the lowest paid.
5. Accelerate light-handed regulation of the private rented sector, given that it now houses more people than the social rented sector.
6. Fight against climate change through energy saving measures and a radical reduction in food waste, clothes waste, and other material wastes.
7. Protect all our vital ecosystems, such as forests and woodlands, rivers, air, soil, biodiversity - they are all under threat.
8. Adopt a more flexible approach to planning that favours and facilitates infill building and protects green belts and green spaces.
9. Develop special programmes to help young people in their transition from school to further study, work, or training so that the most disadvantaged young people do not fall through the net. Develop special protective programmes to tackle knife crime and drugs.
10. Work much harder on our social care to make it truly viable and affordable.'



Rob Whiteman, Chief Executive of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounting, wrote back in 2015 in One Hundred Days about the need for investment in social care, housing, public health and for more collaboration – systems leadership – with the structures to support them, including aligning local public spending (ALPS) so that partnerships can better assess the totality of local resources. Talking to him in preparation for this report, it is clear that there has been some progress on accountability structures and monitoring of expenditure but mostly at local level. Reflecting on the overall progress made, he said:

‘The Early Action Taskforce has brought welcome focus to the case for prevention. We see that examples of good practice have improved outcomes and made more optimal use of resources. But we still need a concerted effort and fresh ideas to deliver earlier prevention on an industrial scale, not least to see the wider determinants of poor outcomes assessed and carried as liabilities in the way we think and report.’

Back in 2015, Ray Shostak, an international Adviser and former Head of the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit and Director General for Performance, at HM Treasury, felt the common sense case for early action had been made and the focus should be on changes to systems, and especially on empowering the front line and creating a movement. But he is less sanguine now that the case for change has been won, pointing to large scale disinvestment in early action:

‘Back in 2015, I wrote that we no longer needed to make the case for both central and local government to invest upstream - but events since have proved me wrong. As austerity and government policy began to seriously impact on services, one of the casualties was early action – against both logic and the commitment of those who actually work with people and communities at risk. There are still some great local examples of early action - but, for example, we’ve seen the systemic initiatives like Sure Start, Every Child Matters and the funding of public health unravel. Even though front-line staff still recognise the importance of prevention and are focusing more on the outcomes they want to achieve - the significant financial and bureaucratic barriers have again begun to stop progress in doing what they know is right. It’s clear to me that we need to re-make the case for early action if we are going to stop forcing people to get worse before action is taken.’

Dan Corry – the Chief Executive of New Philanthropy Capital, and a former head of the Number 10 Policy Unit and Chair of the Council of Economic Advisers at HM Treasury, and also a Task Force member – called back in 2015 for changes to how government plans, including ten year impact assessments and a commitment to spending more of early action as a proportion of total spending. He also threw a challenge back to the sector to improve its evaluation.

In 2022, Dan Corry saw a mixed picture and is enthusiastic about the need to build on the EATF’s legacy through an Early Action Commission or something similar:

‘The ‘missions’ set out in the Levelling Up White Paper are potentially a positive sign that the current Government has some commitment to early action and the new Outcome Delivery Plans recently introduced in the Spending Review are also welcome - it’s good to see that both have a longer term focus in a hark back to the Public Service Agreements (PSAs) of the Labour years. But have there been more resources devoted to early action? – not really. The What Works centres and Early Intervention Foundation have worked hard to improve the evidence, and the voluntary sector has put more effort into making the case for investment in its early intervention work. But it is not clear how much difference this has made. Some of the language has moved from early action to systems change, including in the government, but whatever it is called, the emphasis is still on short term alleviation of problems.

I think the Early Action Task Force was very important in pushing this agenda over a long period of time, and we had good access to Government: for example, numerous meetings with the Treasury. I do think it would be very useful to have an Early Action Commission, or something similar, to continue this work and raise awareness.’



Lord Gus O'Donnell, Chair of Pro-Bono Economics and a former Cabinet Secretary, advocated in his One Hundred Days essay for a five year Spending Review with a focus on well-being, a reprioritising of spending toward early action, for example on health, borrowing to finance investment in prevention, including some dedicated pooled budgets, and for a new independent Office of Taxpayer Responsibility (OTR) to approve major spending proposals. He added that funds should be shifted to enhance children's education to build character, resilience and mindfulness, thereby raising their future productivity and wellbeing, and reducing their future demands on the taxpayer.

Speaking to him in 2022, he said he was pleased that the Labour Party had now adopted the idea of the OTR; that David Cameron as Prime Minister had improved the measurement of well-being through the Office of National Statistics, which was 'massively important', and had raised its profile. He also felt that the Levelling Up agenda with its 12 missions did in some respect carry forward elements of the well-being agenda, and welcomed the fact that the Education Select Committee is currently undertaking a review of children's well-being. Changes to how Gross Domestic Product is measured to create better incentives for early action would have been another step in the right direction, he thought, but have not happened. His overriding message was how important it is for government to focus on well-being, especially improving the well-being of those with least. This is what he said at the Task Force's May 2021 webinar on that subject:

'If we could just start to use the very good data we are generating, you could start to build a [government] Budget and Spending Review around the impact on people's lives. Other countries are starting to do this: New Zealand, for example, has a Well-Being Budget, and to an extent it is also being done in Scotland and in Wales. Pro-bono Economics have estimated about £172 billion is being spent on Building Back Better, with £163 billion of that allocated to physical infrastructure, which is important but so is human and social capital: which comes back to a basic principle which is that prevention is better than cure and if you want to improve the well-being of our nation we should start with our kids. We measure our children to death on things like maths and English but [research shows that] a better predictor of their future well-being - how happy they are in their lives - is their well-being earlier when they were at school and it's better for getting them jobs... So what does this mean? First, you would prioritise prevention rather than cure. This would be massive for the health service. First, mental health is an enormous issue and it is a scandal in this country that so many people who have been diagnosed with mental health issues get no treatment. And on physical health we spend an enormous amount of money toward the end of life and on drugs and spend a tiny fraction on prevention to stop people needing all of that...

We need to intervene early, building human and social capital and resilience and think for the future, prioritising things that have a massive impact on well-being.'

We asked Jennifer Wallace, the Director at [Carnegie UK](#), the Trust which is a leading advocate for Well-Being, to give her assessment of progress on early action for this report. She said:

'At Carnegie UK we believe that those involved in campaigning for early action have won the moral argument on the need for change. The challenge now is to focus on the how of early action as much as the why.

We need the tools for policy development, implementation, funding and evaluation to adapt. Current systems were designed for discrete (single-department or professional unit) linear interventions. The system, codified in government guidance, manuals and toolkits, sustains that illusion against the wealth of knowledge that we have to the contrary. But an emerging model of government, which we call well-being governance, promotes early action by breaking down these assumptions and asking governments to think about their investments in social, economic, environmental and democratic wellbeing 'in the round.

This paradigm shift to well-being governments would mean that policy appraisals would not be judged on the benefits to the funding department but to society as a whole. These are early days for budgeting for collective well-being but we have some innovations that we can learn from, New Zealand and Wales being global leaders (and founding members of the Well-being Economy Governments Alliance).

What they show us is that this is a generational shift that takes time and sustained effort, at every opportunity the existing paradigm will seek to reassert itself.

The challenge for early action champions is to maintain efforts over the long-term. In doing so, they have much in common with those in sustainable development, anti-poverty and human rights fields. While groups have different focus, those in this broad but loosely formed 'well-being movement' share the ultimate goal of improving people's wellbeing by reducing predictable harms. By finding this common cause, we may just shift the paradigm together.'

It seems the challenge is how we can continue to build the momentum, find common cause and maintain our efforts over the long-term, as Jennifer Wallace suggests. In the final section of this report, we consider how that might be done but first we briefly survey some of the other champions and beacons in the field.

7. Champions and beacons

There are many beacons and champions across the country still taking this agenda forward and in some respects the agenda has arguably moved on.

Some of these have already been showcased in this report. Lord O'Donnell and Lord Bird in the House of Lords, Carnegie UK on well-being and the Future Generations Commission in Wales are all examples included in the previous section. Both the Welsh and Scottish administrations are leading the way but, as this report has shown, significant practical obstacles still stand in their path.

To name but a few of the thinkers and practitioners who are contributing to improving practice:

- Toby Lowe and Collaborate are powerful champions for complexity and [systems thinking](#).
- John Seddon and [Vanguard Consulting](#) help practitioners to stop focusing on individual services and start thinking about how to improve the system.
- Hilary Cottam in her enormously influential book, [Radical Help](#), has led many to think about a more relational welfare state in which people are not 'done to' by individual services but where human connection is supported.
- Danny Kruger MP now holds an influential role in government and is a proponent of social infrastructure, amongst other things.
- [Cormac Russell](#) is an international proponent of community based asset development.

David Robinson, the former Chair of the Task Force, has himself set up the [Relationships Project](#) and is working with councils across the country to embed deep value relationships in their practice. He is calling for a fundamental shift in design so that relationships are built into all services - private as well as public - and within communities. Poverty remains a huge determinant of health inequalities and other social issues. As mentioned in the previous section, Anna Coote and the New Economics Foundation, are deepening the argument for universal basic services, and Sophie Howe in Wales is championing universal basic income. There are senior academics, such as Professor Sir Michael Marmot and Professor Anne Power who are major players. And of course there are the What Works centres and the Early Intervention Foundation.

There are also networks of practitioners and policy-makers. [The Better Way network](#), for example, which was founded by a small group of leaders including David Robinson and Caroline Slocock, a key adviser to the Task Force, has as its first founding principle that prevention is better than cure, and has developed thinking and practice around this in its network of nearly 900 people across the country.

There are also many local examples of ambitious practice. To name but a few, [Leeds](#) is committed to being a [child-friendly city](#) and has an [inclusive growth strategy](#) - as set out here:

Leeds' Inclusive Growth Strategy

Inclusive Growth

Inclusive growth is about:

Ensuring all people and communities can contribute towards and benefits from our economy

Tackling inequality - through low pay, in-work progression, improving skills and opportunities

Supporting all sections of our society into better jobs

Supporting people to live healthy and active lives, through good housing, social values, green and transport infrastructure, regenerating neighbourhoods, low carbon initiatives and involvement in sport.

Raising skills levels and increasing productivity

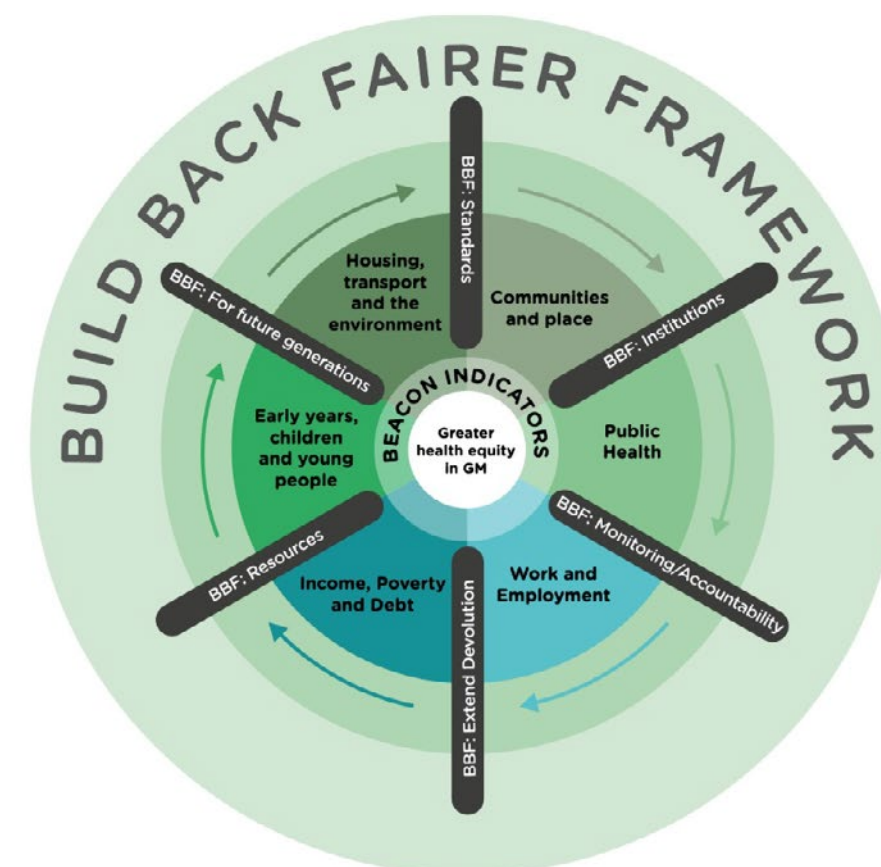
Improving the health of the poorest the fastest

[Manchester](#) is seeking to implement the thinking of the Marmot review and build back better, with its framework for action shown below.

Framework for Building Back Fairer in Greater Manchester

And the [North of Tyne](#) is leading on well-being and creating an investment fund.

There are many other beacons out there, but still early action remains more the exception than the rule. Is there a way in which we can take up Carnegie UK's challenge in the previous section and create common cause and build momentum, going forward?



8.

What next?

Conclusion and future work

There is no doubt that the Early Action Task Force achieved a great deal, raising the profile of early action and seeding critical ideas and good practice through its many reports, policy roundtables and events and its wider influencing work and through its practitioners' network and training. But many challenges remain and this concluding section explores the case for further investment in capacity to take on the legacy the Task Force has created.

The Task Force's recommendations

As set out in detail in Section 4, the Task Force produced many significant ideas and recommendations, arguing for:

- A 'triple dividend – thriving lives, costing less, contributing more' case for investing in early action, including social infrastructure, delivered not just through public services but also through activities and amenities provided by the voluntary and private sectors as well as the public sector. Linked to this, it argued for a UK Well-Being Budget that prioritises investment in well-being; major investment funds including a Social Infrastructure Fund; and better evaluation.

- Defining and classifying early action, making it clear how resources are used now. Related recommendations included a shift from acute to early action spending and a ring-fencing of early action budgets to stop them being raided to fund short-term pressures.
- Longer term planning, with all spending decisions required to take into account long-term costs and benefits, supported by a UK wide Well-Being of Future Generations Act which places a duty on the public sector to do so, with an external, independent body giving the Act teeth, similar to the Commissioner for Future Generations in Wales.
- Changing management and accountability systems to help break down silos, including a focus on shared outcomes and pooled budgets.
- Changing the culture to create 'enabling services' which help connect people and develop their strengths, supported by deep value relationships both in services and in 'ready for everything' communities.

These ideas are just as relevant today as when they were first made.

What has changed?

Some of these ideas have already borne fruit, as explored in in Section 4 and 5 of this report, including:

- A raised awareness of the case for early action and a growing priority being given to it. Prevention is a key priority in both the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales, for example. Direct evidence of the Task Force's agenda being taken forward can be found in the [National Audit Office](#) and [Public Accounts Committee Reports](#) in 2013, which called for a consistent definition of early action to be applied in Government, for the Treasury to lead in promoting early action and for 10 year impact assessments to be adopted in Comprehensive Spending Reviews. The Task Force also directly influenced The Big Lottery, as it was then, to make early action one of its three priorities, and other charitable foundations followed suit.
- The creation of Wales' [Well-Being of Future Generations Act](#) in 2015, together with its [Future Generations Commissioner](#), was directly influenced by the Task Force, and Sophie Howe, the Commissioner, is having a significant impact on decisions in Wales. There are calls for a UK Well-Being Budget, most notably from former Cabinet Secretary Lord O'Donnell, and for a [UK wide Future Generations Act](#), which has been put forward in Parliament by Lord Bird, the founder of the Big Issue. There is already some political traction, with Sir Keir Starmer committing to putting well-being at the heart of decision-making in [The Road Ahead](#) in 2021 and the Labour Party adopting a [new Office for Value for Money](#), also advocated by Lord O'Donnell. Although there is some way to go to capture the long-term value of investment in early action in government planning and accounting, there have been several improvements and advances, including a greater focus on the [delivery of long-term outcomes](#) in the UK Spending Review.
- Momentum for greater integration and collaboration has increased, for example, in relation to health and social care and [integrated care systems and partnerships](#) in England. The Treasury has set up a [Shared Outcomes Fund](#) to promote working across silos.
- The setting up of the Early Action Funders' Alliance, which brought together the National Lottery and other funders, was initiated by the EATF. The Alliance resulted in the [Early Action Neighbourhood Fund](#) of £5.3 million to fund cross-sector initiatives led by the voluntary sector. One example is the Ignite project in Coventry, which is a case study in this report.
- The Task Force published three reports on social infrastructure and set up a network of think tanks and policy-makers to share thinking and build momentum. Social infrastructure is now widely recognised as a priority, and featured in [Danny Kruger MP's report to Boris Johnson on levelling up communities](#), which fed into the recent [Levelling Up White Paper](#) which recognises the importance of social capital. The Johnson Government's £4.6 billion [Levelling Up Fund](#) (for all limitations) is a step in the right direction, and there are other local examples of community wealth funds which are potential models for investment.
- The Task Force initiated the [Southwark and Lambeth Early Action Commission](#) led by Margaret Hodge MP, which in turn resulted in an ambitious Southwark Council strategy, [Common Purpose, Common Cause](#) to improve health and reduce health inequalities in Southwark by working in partnership with the voluntary sector.
- Taking on the challenge to improve the evidence base, the Early Intervention Foundation was established in 2013 to help improve and spread knowledge of what works for children and young people, and this was followed by many other What Works centres in subsequent years.
- Finally, many initiatives were directly inspired by the EATF's reports, for example practice in the [Lancashire police force](#), and there are many other local examples of local authorities and others trying to push at the boundaries, a few of which are explored in this report.

Why don't we invest in early action?

The challenges that remain

However, there remain major challenges in achieving the Task Force's mission of making early action not just common sense but also common practice. As we explore in the introduction and throughout this report, investment in early action and social infrastructure has gone into reverse, largely as the result of austerity. Sadly, it seems likely that this pattern may be repeated in the next decade as the Government seeks to repay the massive costs of the Covid pandemic crisis and to deal with other crises, most recently rising inflation. Indeed, the EATF identified many barriers to action but, as the interviews and survey evidence gathered for this report underline, the greatest of these now is the difficulty finding funds for early action while acute pressures are being managed, aggravated by the related challenges of short-termism and silo working. Systems are partly to blame, but so is leadership and culture.

There has never been a greater need for investment at scale in early action, particularly to avert the existential threat of global warming, but also to tackle rising poverty and increasing health inequalities, as well as to ensure that future pandemics are less deadly than the last.

Yet the gap between the level of Government ambition and the investment required is, if anything, even worse than it was back in 2011. The 12 missions of the UK Government's Levelling Up agenda include, for example, commitments to reduce health inequalities and the education gap by 2030. Yet no extra investment has been given, despite the fact that the Marmot review ten years on showed that no progress had been made in the last decade on health inequalities, even though the determinants had been clearly identified ten years ago. Indeed, things have got worse.

Our survey and interviews carried out for this report also suggest considerable support for more action to help achieve the Task Force's original mission, as we explore throughout the report.

So what can we learn from the Task Force and this report?

First, the EATF's model of bringing about change works. This model connects local expertise with national policy, bringing national experts and leaders together from across sectors and combining this with

community based and practitioner knowledge.

Second, many of its recommendations, if not all, are still relevant to tackling the barriers to change.

Third, it takes significant time to embed change. A decade is a long time for a project like the Task Force, but it is not enough.

With this in mind, there is a good case for picking up the legacy of the Task Force and reinventing it for the next decade, with potential ways of doing so suggested below.

1. Assemble a new Task Force or time-limited Commission. This body would identify the opportunities for change, make recommendations and carry out awareness-raising activities and influencing work with government and others to help to build a growing movement. As this report documents in Sections 6 and 7, there are many champions for new ways of working, as well as local beacons of change. Ideally, many of these would directly take part in this initiative, helping to build momentum and collective profile, and new champions would also emerge.
2. Revitalise the practitioners' network for sharing expertise, where ideas and best practice could be shared, and disseminated through a series of interactive events as well as regular newsletters.
3. Create a website for sharing knowledge and ideas and promoting events and blogs by members of the network, backed up by active use of twitter and LinkedIn and regular bulletins.
4. Run training courses to help practitioners understand early action, what it might mean for them and gain funding.



ANNEX A

Early Action Task Force members*

David Robinson, Task Force Chair and Senior Advisor, Community Links

Geraldine Blake, CEO of Community Links, and later Arvindha Gohil and then Venu Dhupa

Kim Bromley-Derry, CEO, London Borough of Newham

Martin Brookes, former CEO, New Philanthropy Capital

Haroon Chowdry, Evidence Analyst, Early Intervention Foundation

Anna Coote, Head of Social Policy, New Economics Foundation

Dan Corry, CEO, New Philanthropy Capital

Hilary Cottam, Principal Partner, Participle

Sir Stuart Etherington, CEO, National Council of Voluntary Organisations

Lucy de Groot, CEO, Community Service Volunteers

Victoria Hornby, Executive, Sainsbury Family Charitable Trusts

Will Horwitz, Community Links, and later Daniel Willis, Ben Robinson and Murshad Habib

David Hutchison, CEO, Social Finance.

Ben Jupp, Social Finance, Seconded from Director, Efficiency & Reform at the Cabinet Office

Dharmendra Kanani, England Director, The Big Lottery Fund

James Magowan, Director of Strategy, Tomorrow's People

Tom McLaughlan, Director, Government Relations, Accenture

Dan Paskins, Head of Policy and Learning, Big Lottery Foundation

Debbie Pippard, Head of Programmes, Barrow Cadbury Trust

Professor Anne Power, Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics

Caroline Slocock, Director, Civil Exchange

Baroness Stedman-Scott, House of Lords and CEO, Tomorrows People

Dame Clare Tickell, CEO, Action for Children

Kitty Ussher, former CEO, Demos and former Treasury minister.

Yasmin Waljee, International Pro Bono Manager, Hogan Lovells

Nick Wright, Managing Director Corporate Responsibility UBS

Advisers to the EATF

Will Horwitz, Community Links, then Daniel Willis, Ben Robinson and Murshad Habib

Ben Jupp, Social Finance, seconded from Director, Efficiency & Reform Cabinet Office (for a period)

Caroline Slocock Director, Civil Exchange

*Membership varied over time

ANNEX B

Early Action Task Force reports

[The triple dividend: thriving lives, costing less, contributing more, 2011](#)

[The deciding time: prevent today, or pay tomorrow, 2012](#)

[How to classify early action spend, 2014](#)

[Looking forward to later life: taking an early action approach to our ageing society, 2014](#)

[Secure and ready: towards an early action social security system, 2014](#)

[Towards effective prevention: practical steps for the next government, 2014](#)

[100 Days of Early Action: time for government to put prevention first, 2015A](#)

A question of growth: how earlier action can promote good growth, a collection of essays by members of the EATF, 2016

[A rough guide to early action: seven stories of how society is acting earlier, 2016](#)

[Thriving Minds: acting early on mental health, 2016](#)

[Valuing Social Infrastructure, 2018](#)

[What's next for Early Action, 2018](#)

[The Power of deep value relationships in services and communities, 2020](#)

[Being in a good place: investing in social infrastructure, 2020](#)

[Making a good place: how to invest in social infrastructure, 2021](#)

Related reports

[Local early action: how to make it happen, report by the Southwark and Lambeth Early Action Commission, New Economics Foundation, 2015](#)

Here is a link which sets out the results of the Britain Thinks research mentioned in Section 3:

www.community-links.org/news-item/whats-next-for-early-action/



Why don't we invest in early action?

LESSONS FROM THE EARLY ACTION TASK FORCE,
2010 -2021

JULY 2022

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