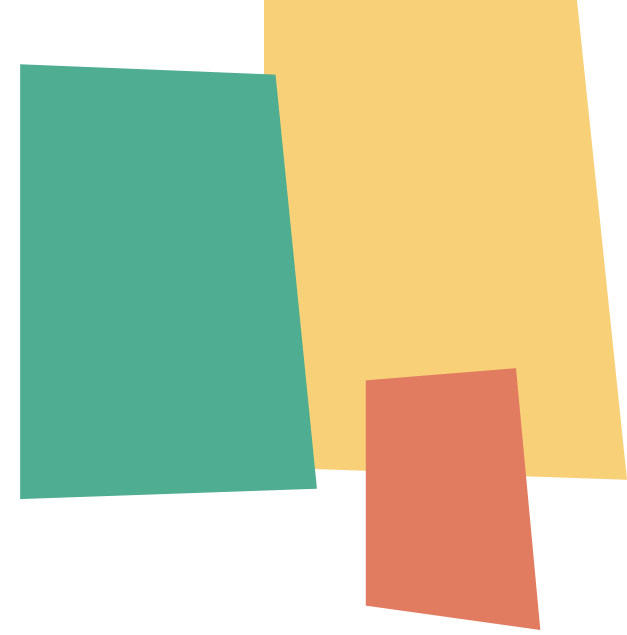


Changing Systems Together

Collaborate CIC
March 2023

Stories from Round 1 of the Cornerstone Fund

Produced by Collaborate CIC, the learning partner to the Cornerstone Fund, a funder collaboration involving City Bridge Trust, the Greater London Authority, the National Lottery Community Fund, Trust for London and the John Lyon's Charity.



Introduction

Cornerstone Fund assists partnerships led by civil society support organisations aiming to bring about systems change to build stronger, more resilient communities and in turn achieve better outcomes for Londoners.

From 2019 to 2022, ten partnerships received funding to test and develop approaches to long-term systemic change in their field. Each partnership differed; some included public sector partners, others only civil society organisations or individuals. All partnerships wanted to shift something in the system they work in or alongside, to make it healthier and better able to support people to thrive.

This period covered the first year of the pandemic, an especially difficult time for civil society organisations to be thinking about the future since the present was so challenging. The work was complex and their experiences are unique and difficult to summarise in a standardised case study.

So, instead of encompassing the whole journey of a partnership, the following stories each illustrate one facet of Cornerstone: the value and challenge of working in partnership, the roles of support organisations as system changers, and the system change strategies that partnerships adopted. We chose to highlight one aspect of a partnership for each facet. (This does not mean that the work they did was one dimensional!) Collectively, the stories illuminate the often tricky concept of systems change. To produce them, we drew on what we heard from partnership leads who shared their experiences with us in interviews.

Alongside these stories, we have also written a learning report that seeks to share what we have collectively learned from Round 1 of the Cornerstone Fund about what it takes to try to change a system as civil society organisations, and why it's worth it. If reading this makes you curious to know more, please do read that report.

Glossary

BAMER: Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Refugee

CSO: Civil Society Organisation

CVS: Councils for Voluntary Service

DWP: Department for Work and Pensions

GLA: Greater London Authority

Infrastructure Organisations: Organisations providing support to strengthen civil society

LGBT+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and more gender identities and orientations

NHS: National Health System

VCSE: Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise

Infrastructure roles

The purpose of Cornerstone was to enable civil society infrastructure and support organisations to develop and test new ways of supporting the sector to thrive and enable stronger 'voice' for communities.

Each Round 1 partnership was led by one or more infrastructure organisation providing support to other organisations towards strengthening civil society. These organisations varied in nature from community-level anchor organisations up to London-wide membership networks and those focusing on a specific sector, such as youth, as well those with a specialist field of expertise, such as campaigning.

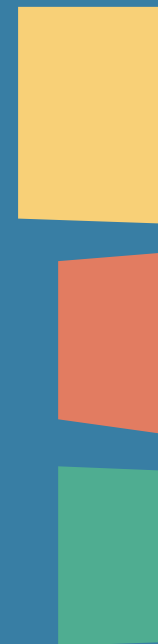
We found that there were three main types of roles adopted by infrastructure organisations in their partnership work, and they often played one or another at different stages. These roles are:

Convenor: bringing different stakeholders or system actors together to work more collaboratively and holistically.

Capacity-builder: growing the skills and knowledge of civil society to influence and shape systems more effectively.

Innovator: experimenting with approaches that are more participative, collaborative, person-centred, and equitable.

The following stories illustrate these infrastructure roles.



CONVENOR

Five London CVSs shared tactics and tools for the co-production of health and wellbeing services, and explored solutions for the inclusion of VCSE and communities in health policy and delivery.

Lead: Community Links Bromley

Partners:

Hackney CVS
Enfield Voluntary Action
Merton Connected
Metro GAVS (Greenwich)

The London VCSE Health and Wellbeing Transformation Project

We came together from CVSs in different boroughs to consider how to strengthen the capacity of the VCSE sector to effect change by collaborating with statutory bodies. Through regular meetings, we convened as leaders to share challenges and better understand the systemic barriers to the inclusion of VCSE and local people in health policy and services.

Through varied, our models for embedding the VCSE into decision-making nonetheless had crossover in themes and elements—for example, focussing on the co-production of services with hard-to-reach community groups—and a common overarching aim kept us motivated to exchange ideas. We needed an opportunity to test concepts, to challenge each other, to know if something worked so that we could celebrate and learn from it. For example, staff from Bromley’s Community Health Champions programme went to Enfield to learn about their approach to supporting and training community members in first aid, research and understanding health behaviours.

Based on learning from testing different models in each borough, we’re extrapolating ideas that we can use to influence change. Systems change is not linear or easy, but by working collectively, we can see a shift in the level of representation of the VCSE sector in the NHS. Through the engagement work of Greenwich Action for Voluntary Services, mental health-care residents now have a say in their care for the first time. The local authority is committed to responding. Better design and delivery is happening, voices and resources have been harnessed to shape things beyond Cornerstone to create better systems and processes. Some kind of co-production is possible.

“We’ve got to stop taking about ‘them and us’. We are all part of the system.”

150 groups engaged with the NHS structures across 5 Boroughs



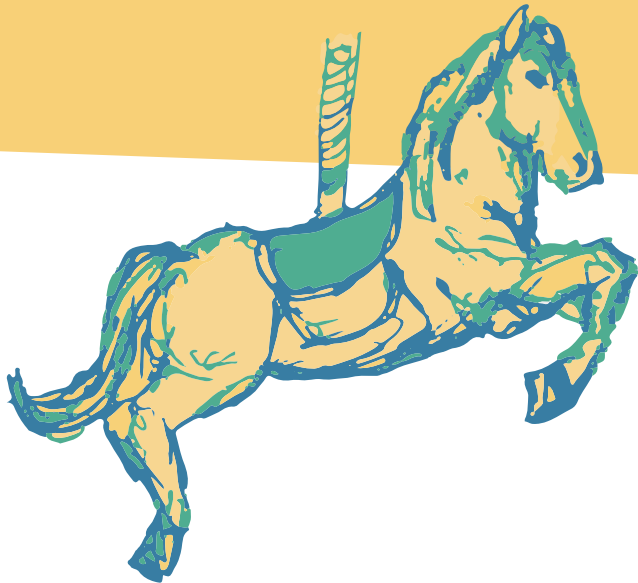
CAPACITY- BUILDER

The CRÈME partnership offered both proactive and reactive communications support to build media skills and increase coverage of BAMER community services and voices.

Lead: Race on the Agenda

Partners:

Black Training and Enterprise Group
Runnymede Trust
BAMER-led organisations



The CRÈME Project

Our three organisations worked as a partnership to bring issues of racism and race equality to greater prominence in the media. We believed building media capacity and coverage of BAMER community-focused voluntary organisations and networks could elevate race equality issues, in turn influencing policy and cultural change. A shared Project Communications Officer led the work and enabled a collaborative approach.

We had a couple of face-to-face media workshops before the COVID-19 pandemic, then did training for BAMER organisations using Youtube videos on topics like writing a press release. We started a podcast interviewing leaders from different charities as well. We were reaching smaller organisations with a real need and desire to engage with the media to promote their services, but a lack of capacity to do so.

We learned we also needed to engage more with public opinion, especially via the media, which required us to build relationships with journalists. During the Black Lives Matter uprising, this relationship-building became easier and the media expertise became vital in managing proactive and reactive media engagement. The news agenda moves on, but when the carousel goes round again and racism is back on the agenda, the connections and capabilities built through CRÈME will be there to support us.

“Changing public opinion instead of advocating with government directly can be considered a system mindset change.”

40+ race equality groups received media training or tailored support



INNOVATOR

A partnership of equalities networks and digital designers wanted to experiment with how technology might be harnessed to build solidarity amongst grassroots groups in London.

Leads: HEAR Equality and Human Rights Network

Partners:

Inclusion London
Kingston Voluntary Action and Superhighways Project
LGBT Consortium
Makerble
Refugee Council
Drew Mackie
David Wilcox

Mapping and Networks for Solidarity and Campaigning / Net Equality

At HEAR, we connect and support a pan-equality network of London equality and human rights VCSE organisations to get their voices heard in order to influence equality and human rights policy and practices. HEAR lead on the Net Equality project, working alongside three other partners, also equality networks: Consortium (LGBT groups), Inclusion London (Deaf and Disabled people's organisations) and the Refugee Council.

We support small grassroots and user-led voluntary groups in some of London's most marginalised communities. In solidarity, we came together, supported by specialist digital partners, to explore how accessible digital infrastructure might help build a sharing culture, strengthening our intersectional networks and enabling our communities to collaborate more easily on campaigns and build their relational power.

We experimented with network mapping tools to understand connections to each other and the strength of networks relating to particular topics, and shared knowledge, resources and connections. Topic-based workshops, for example on hate crime, were particularly effective in fostering connections that endured past the life of the project. Exploring accessibility was central for us, and our Experts in Access (a group of people with lived experience) formed a strong community within the project itself, a community that has endured. This and learning to experiment were some of our most valuable takeaways. Our partnership working was challenging at times, but the experimental nature of the project and the time and space given by funders allowed us to better understand each other's needs and priorities.

"Don't be afraid to make mistakes; it is ok to make mistakes in systems change as long as you learn from them along the way." 100 people took part in 3 digital co-design experiments



Partnership approaches

Cornerstone funds partnerships. Partnerships are fundamental if we believe that systems (not individual organisations or services) create outcomes, and that healthy systems are those where organisations collaborate to enable better outcomes for people and communities.

Partnerships have many drivers and take diverse forms, especially when formed for the purpose of systems change, rather than for a shorter-term goal. We have noticed three broad types of partnership function and form in Round 1. Most partnerships expressed some or all of these, but one was usually dominant. The partnership approaches illustrated through the following stories are:

The Social Change Lab: partners come together to test and create something new; use new technologies; disrupt traditional ways of doing things; and change power dynamics, narratives, mindsets or cultures.

The Alliance: partners come together to develop their collective voice, join up services and build relational power through working together, and with the people and communities they serve.

The Knowledge Hub: partners come together to share knowledge, perspectives and expertise, internally and with wider civil society, improving at navigating and shaping systems and services.

The following stories illustrate these infrastructure roles.



THE SOCIAL CHANGE LAB

The Winch worked with Camden residents to create an enabling structure and culture for their participation in local decision-making, critical for meaningful change at the neighbourhood level.

Lead: The Winch

Partners:

Residents and TRAs
Elfrida Rathbone Camden
Lighthouse London
London Borough of Camden
St Mary's Community Trust
Swiss Cottage Surgery
WAC Arts Ltd

North Camden Zone Community Action Initiative

As community organisation, The Winch, we have been working with residents from the Hilgrove and Chalcots Estates to make change on local issues they care about. We recruit community organisers who receive financial support, tools, training and support to listen to residents and take on a community leadership role. At community assemblies, we talk more about needs and priorities on the estates. Each estate now has its own set of community goals built from research and conversation. On Hilgrove Estate, even physical changes are happening; there is an orchard we didn't have before. There's going to be a mural. We're updating signage. This is about our community bringing its own visions into being.

Resident-led change is something Camden Council promotes but hadn't found successful ways to enact in the past. Holding regular meetings between community organisers and council staff is one way this has now concretely taken shape. Every month, we talk about what we can do together and how to use shared resources. This has led to an agreement for a new participatory budgeting pilot, for which residents will have the ability to decide how to spend £200,000 over two years, shifting power and creating more avenues for community-led change.

"Systems change is about power shift, and creating new structures that allow people's voices to be heard—how do people in power hear what they need to relinquish in order to do that?"

We listened to 300 residents and 20 specialist professionals



THE ALLIANCE

Through adopting open, transparent and structured engagement and influencing mechanisms, 45 grassroots refugee-led community organisations worked to develop a sense of collective power under the umbrella of the Forum.

Lead: British Refugee Council

Partners:
Refugee-led Community Organisations (RCOs)

London Refugee Advocacy Forum

It takes time to create a shared vision for systems change among many partners. That's what we set out to achieve as the London Refugee Advocacy Forum. Convened by the Refugee Council, we have come together from our different refugee communities—Congolese, Somali, Afghan, and more—around a common goal: to bolster the voice of London's refugees, for whom life-changing decisions are often made without looking to refugee-led organisations like us. We have done this by researching community needs and designing collaborative advocacy-related activities together.

At the beginning, we were saying 'refugee issues' as though it meant one thing but we were speaking to different concerns across our communities. After we ran a survey with our respective memberships, we could see collective priorities more clearly, and we adapted our theory of change accordingly. We reviewed our governing structure and added working groups matching the priorities that came through in the survey: housing, employment and mental health. With new evidence and a commitment to working together, we can influence policy, services from a position of power. This has already begun with *Going Full Circle*, a report about the primary needs and experiences of refugees and people seeking asylum living in London that has kickstarted conversations on policy change.

"The forum enables us to bring different perspectives together to have a common goal, and to see systems change as a possibility from the perspective of small communities, building a stronger refugee voice together."

We collected the experiences of 681 people with experience of the refugee and asylum system



THE KNOWLEDGE HUB

Datawise London partners have used their specialist knowledge to develop the data literacy and digital skills of small community organisations, influencing better use of data and evidence to shape services and influence decision-makers.

Lead: Superhighways (based at Kingston Voluntary Action)

Partners:

Coalition for Efficiency
DataKind UK
Greater London Authority
HEAR Network
London Plus
Makerble



Datawise London

Through Datawise London, we brought together six partners with complementary expertise and an interest in creating a better environment for charities to access and use data for improving and influencing outcomes. Partners brought digital skills, knowledge of equalities and the sector and experience with policy-making and measurement. We hadn't worked in partnership before.

The question, *What's the first word that comes to you when we say data?* opened our training sessions. People would share words like 'scary' and 'overwhelming' at first. Then, over time, the answers would change to being about power and usefulness. The strengths of our partnership came together into something tangible: making data training more accessible through scenarios and case studies, growing an ecosystem of data support and peer learning, drawing on all our specialist skills. We also supported a Data Deep Dive, exploring mental health access by the BAMER community in one London borough, which unlocked extra resources for mental health support.

Testing and learning about the data ecosystem and the potential of data happened continuously between partners, surfacing new questions, and so Datawise London continues in Cornerstone Round 2, with an increased focus on influencing the wider data collection ecosystem of funders, commissioners and infrastructure organisations.

"Cornerstone has enabled many of us to enhance our support to organisations by being able to signpost to each others' core activities. Working more collaboratively has also enabled us to learn from each other and build this into future work."

We ran 35 sessions data literacy with 492 participants



Systems change strategies

Cornerstone aims to bring about systems change to build stronger, more resilient communities and in turn achieve better outcomes for Londoners. The Fund does not define what approach to systems change partnerships should take.

Systems change is a developing theory and practice generally understood as an approach to tackling the conditions contributing to poor outcomes and holding deep-rooted problems in place (as adapted from FSG). These are problems that can't be solved by one organisation or service, or even one government, working alone. They are complex issues whose causes and consequences are interconnected and where the power to create change is spread across the system.

Systems change will only happen by many actors (individuals and organisations) working together with a common intention to make it so. It is fundamentally about building healthier systems characterised by collaboration, shared power, equity and continuous adaptation.

Partnerships seem to have adopted one of four system change strategies within the Fund, although most partnerships pursued more than one during their project:

Influencing: advocating for change and strengthening voice.

Cooperation: developing collaborative approaches and collective power.

Connecting: creating more networked and joined-up support.

Disruption: subverting the status quo and changing mindsets and behaviours.



INFLUENCING

Partnership for Young London set out to improve how young people's views and lived experience can shape and influence research, and thereby shape the decisions that affect them.

Leads: Partnership for Young London

Partners:

London Youth and the Centre for Youth Impact

Young Londoners Research Network

Partnership for Young London

The voices of young people are rarely at the core of policy and decision-making about issues that affect them. Linking research and practice, our partnership sought to centre young people's voices and work to support the system around them to do so more effectively. Young people have a right to help identify issues and develop the work that happens about them, and to be a part of the change.

We got off to a great start with establishing a research network, but COVID-19 had a big impact on the capacity of our partners and the youth work professionals we wanted to engage. It also affected our ability to set up student placements. However, our move to online training and seminars helped us reach more of our target audience. We were also able to rapidly gather insights on the impact of the pandemic on young people and there was an immediate platform to share them with health and government bodies, including the GLA. Young people also took part in online events with Public Health England on the vaccine roll-out to ensure messages reflected their views and insight.

There is now real potential for longer term change with the strong partnership we have built with 14 universities; we co-created a set of principles and a shared work plan that establishes the foundations for better collaboration between researchers and the youth sector in London. We are on the way to ensuring that research with and about young people is co-designed, participatory and impactful on their lives.

"[How do you] gather data and insight, analyse it and then use it to challenge practice or challenge the services that are on offer. That's the journey we've tried to get embedded across this piece of work."

130 youth sector practitioners took part in our 6 Research Into Practice workshops



COOPERATION

H4All, a partnership of health organisations that provides funding support, networking opportunities, and advocacy for the sector, worked to influence health systems transformation through collaboration in the sector and fostering joined up support to tackle health inequalities.

Leads:

Age UK Hillingdon
Disablement Association Hillingdon
Harlington Hospice and Hillingdon
Hillingdon Carers
Mind

Partners:

CCG
Hillingdon VCS
Hillingdon Health & Care Partnership



H4All

Without a CVS, the health sector in Hillingdon was very fragmented, so we came together in 2015 as five large charities in Hillingdon to form H4All and work jointly to provide sector support. As partners, we brought very different skills to the table in creating strategic leadership for the sector. It works because each of the leaders involved in coordinating H4All contribute a different strength: bidding and report-writing, data analysis and finance, reading policy papers—and so on.

Cornerstone gave us the opportunity to create the Hillingdon Health and Wellbeing Alliance and provide more joined up support, shared learning, and a 'voice' at the top table for vital grassroots health and care groups. Alliance meetings have been helpful in sponsoring better mutual understanding of the challenges faced by all sectors, with NHS partners regularly attending meetings. This work meant we were well placed to engage with the emerging North West London Integrated Care System, covering eight boroughs. We started to bring together a network of organisations from boroughs across London, and finally got them all around the table, working for a long time to overcome mistrust and replicate what we have been doing in Hillingdon. Third Sector Together (3ST) is now the recognised voice of the VCSE in NW London, with representation on all the emerging structures. We are part of the solution to health and care systems transformation.

"We've effectively removed competition in the borough. Before, we were divided as a sector because of commissioning practices. We're not looking over our shoulders anymore."

All 57 members of the Hillingdon Health and Wellbeing Alliance were involved in co-designing a COVID-19 recovery programme



CONNECTING

LVN's signposting app and Amplify Me programme are connecting disadvantaged young people to opportunities, helping them build social capital and skills for their future.

Leads: Local Village Network

Partners:

Youth sector providers

Local Village Network

Our project is about addressing network poverty and giving all young Londoners the same access to skills and opportunities. We struggled to reach young people during the pandemic as they became very isolated and didn't engage with youth clubs, so we changed strategy to develop partnerships with other services.

The Local Village Network app now helps to connect young people lacking pathways for employment and development to thousands of job and apprenticeship postings and other youth activities and events. The app is now part of the Thrive Strategy to ensure a safer London and Metropolitan Police officers have started to use it as a positive tool of engagement when interacting with youth. It is also endorsed and promoted by the Mayor of London.

Through work with the DWP, we expanded the app to include a five-session online mentoring programme for employability. Young people can register on the app to request a range of support from a pool of over 1000 mentors. Alongside the app, we have developed Amplify Me, a social mobility programme that we have tested in schools. Focussed on raising aspirations for young people, it helps them identify and build their skills and see an achievable future.

Through our partnerships and joining up support, we meet young people where they are and connect them to opportunities that can change their lives.

"With the dramatic increase in youth provisions on the app, the young person has a huge amount of support at their fingertips."

More than 2000 opportunities are available through the app



DISRUPTION

Shelia McKechnie Foundation's guide, *It's All About Power*, is the culmination of a two-year collaborative inquiry into power and participation in civil society. Aimed at social sector organisations, the guide aims to ignite a conversation about power for deeper solidarity with people with first-hand experience in our efforts for social change.

Lead: Sheila McKechnie Foundation

Partners:

Community of Practice from across civil society



The Power Project

We set out to answer the question, *How can we grow the voice and influence of people with lived experience of poverty and inequality?* Through rich conversations with people working for change both within and beyond social sector organisations, we learned we needed to flip the question. Approaching the issue from where we were best placed, we asked instead, *How can social sector organisations work in closer solidarity with people with first-hand experience of social issues?* Working with a Core Learning Group of diverse change-makers and engaging a wide community of practice from across civil society, we heard how some people actively choose to drive change from outside formal organisations, while others feel excluded by bureaucratic processes or unwelcoming cultures. Some felt that organisations' engagement efforts were tokenistic, or even exploitative.

Adopting a power lens for our conversations allowed us to 'see the system' more clearly. As one of our participants described, it began to feel like watching a movie from the back row of the cinema, taking in the whole picture, while seeing our own perspective and the perspective of others too. It became clear that the issues facing the social sector are systemic, they cannot be addressed by a single engagement or participation role alone. Rather than a 'how-to' guide to working together, our guide *It's All About Power* offers tools and insights to help people working in social sector organisations to navigate systemic issues with increased clarity and confidence. It reminds us that, if power is everywhere, opportunities for change are everywhere to — all of us can play a part in igniting a conversation about power and creating deeper solidarity in our work for social change.

"Talking about power seems simple, but actually, it's radical. It gets to the roots, shakes the foundations of the charity sector."

300 people contributed to our community of practice



Conclusion

In spite of a pandemic, the ten partnerships in Round 1 of the Cornerstone Fund built foundations for systemic change for Londoners. These stories are snapshots, representing a fraction of the depth of work but pointing to the features of partnership forms, functions and strategies positioning them to effect change.

The stories touch on the value and challenge of experimentation and learning from failure—whether by exploring how digital infrastructure might help build a sharing culture or by testing different models for co-production of services. They point to the potential in building capabilities in such skills as media engagement and the use of data to improve and influence outcomes. Finally, they also illustrate what it can look like to shift power and create and expand avenues for community voice and leadership—whether that community is of residents of council estates, refugees and asylum seekers, young people, or the third sector itself as a representative body.

Fundamentally, they show that systems change is not one thing, but plural, with everyone having a role. While systems change takes time and coordinated effort, we can see conditions being built that pave the way for longer-term change.

Thanks

Funders

City Bridge Trust
Greater London Authority
John Lyon's Charity
The National Lottery Community Fund
Trust for London

In-kind support

London Councils
London Funders
London Plus
The Mercers Company

Lead partners

Community Links Bromley
HEAR Network
H4All
Local Village Network
Partnership for Young London
Race On the Agenda
The Refugee Council
Sheila McKechnie Foundation
Superhighways
The Winch

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