

The Cornerstone Fund Round 1: Final Learning and Impact Report

Executive Summary

March 2023

Collaborate CIC for City Bridge Trust

Naomi Diamond, Leigh Brown, Fanny Olsson, Dawn Plimmer

Contents

Executive Summary	3
Background	3
Partnerships	4
The Learning Approach and Report	4
Definitions	5
Introduction	6
Cornerstone Characteristics	7
What We Learned	8
Infrastructure Roles	8
Partnership Approaches	9
System Change Strategies	10
Reflections on the Characteristics	11
The Cornerstone Fund's Foundations for Systems Change Framework	12
What We Learned	13
System Awareness And Behaviours	13
Collective Vision and Purpose	14
Learning and Adaptiveness	15
Shifting Power: Influencing and Leadership and Embedding Voice and Agency	15
Legacy	16
Funders and Wider System Change	17
Conclusions	19
Systems Change: What to Pay Attention To	21
People	21
Purpose	22
Mindset	22

Executive Summary

Background

The Cornerstone Fund (the Fund) is a collaborative funding programme developed in 2017 to progress the ambitions of The Way Ahead, a joint initiative by civil society, public sector bodies and funders in London aiming to enable: "a thriving Civil Society, which is adaptable, resilient, collaborative, sustainable and driven by communities, which will lead to improved outcomes for Londoners."

The first phase of the Fund ('Round 1'), launched in April 2018, aimed to contribute to the Way Ahead goal by funding partnership approaches led by civil society support organisations to bring about systems change, to build stronger, more resilient communities and in turn achieve better outcomes for Londoners.

Five funders were involved in Round 1:

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

Four institutions provided in-kind support:

- London Funders
- London Plus
- London Councils
- The Mercers Company

Partnerships

Ten systems change partnerships were funded in Round 1, each funded for 2-3 years. By December 2022, all funding had come to an end. Lead partners and partnership/project names (where applicable):

- Race On the Agenda - CREME (Communicating Race Equality Messages Effectively)
- Superhighways - Datawise London
- H4All Hillingdon – Stronger Together
- London Village Network
- HEAR Equality and Human Rights Network - NetEquality
- The Winch - North Camden Zone Community Action Initiative
- The British Refugee Council - Refugee Advocacy Forum
- Partnership for Young London - Setting the research agenda with, and for, young Londoners
- Sheila McKechnie Foundation - Bringing Lived Experience into Social Change Journeys
- Community Links Bromley - London VCSE Health and Wellbeing Transformation

The Learning Approach and Report

Collaborate CIC was the Learning Partner to the Fund from 2018 to 2020. In 2022 we re-engaged with Round 1 partnerships to draw out final learning from Round 1. Drawing on interviews with lead partners, project reports and a learning event in November 2022, we have developed a [set of Cornerstone stories](#), and insights based on these stories and conversations, which are shared in [a learning report](#).

The learning report shares what we have collectively learned about [what it takes to try to change a system as civil society support organisations](#), and why it's worth trying. The full report contains story snippets and quotes from the partnerships.

This Executive Summary summarises the key learning points, including how the partnerships have built the foundations for longer term systems change and [what we have learned about the roles, strategies and partnership approaches that enable civil society systems change work](#).

Definitions

Throughout this report we use the term 'project(s)' and 'partnership(s)' interchangeably, referring to the 10 funded project partnerships that make up the Fund. We refer to the lead organisations for each project as the 'lead partner(s)' and the other partner organisations as the 'project partner(s)'. The term 'partner(s)' refers to both lead and wider project partners.

We use the terms 'infrastructure' and 'civil society support' interchangeably. These refer to any organisation that provides support to strengthen civil society.

Introduction

The Cornerstone Fund created a unique opportunity for civil society infrastructure to focus on collaborative systems change through developing and working in partnerships.

The Cornerstone projects addressed typical areas of work for sector infrastructure organisations: capacity-building, influencing, consortia, representation, convening. However, approaching these from a systems change perspective resulted in projects that were far more experimental and co-produced than usual, with a more diverse set of partners and more ambitious goals. The overall project goals were about creating lasting change in a system, and the project activities and ways of working were designed to lay the groundwork for this longer-term change.

There was no typical project. Each project was distinct in terms of the structure of the partnership, the systems change goal and approach, and the roles of the infrastructure organisations involved.

Through learning conversations with lead organisations from each partnership and reading project reports, we sought to understand the immediate impacts of the projects and their legacy. We also looked for patterns in the way in which the projects were set up and the approaches they took.

We used two frameworks to do this, both developed for the fund.

The Cornerstone Characteristics – which describe the 'what' of the projects – forms, roles, strategies and tactics.

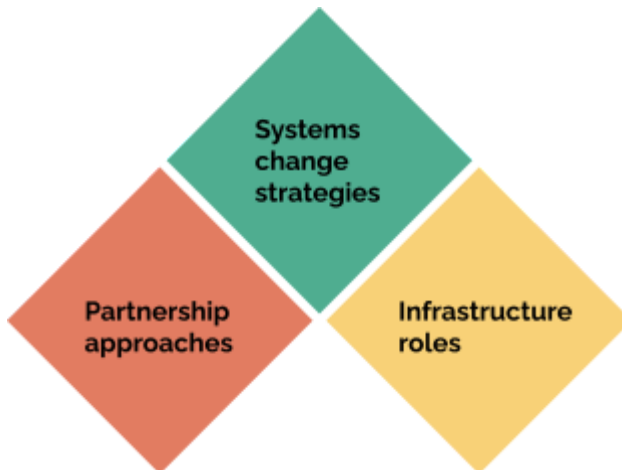
The Foundations of Systems Change – which explore the 'how' of systems change work – the behaviours and practices which build the foundations and conditions for long term systemic change.

Cornerstone Characteristics

The first framework explores the three interrelated *characteristics* which shape all Cornerstone projects.

- They are projects led by civil society **infrastructure** organisations which aim to support and strengthen civil society to improve outcomes for Londoners
- They are **partnership** projects, bringing together groups of organisations to collaborate
- They are **systems change** projects, seeking to shift the conditions and dynamics of systems to create better outcomes

These characteristics help us explore the '[what](#)' of the projects and the different approaches that each partnership took in practice. We share how the partnerships adopted these characteristics and what we have learned about what makes an effective Cornerstone Project.



What We Learned

Infrastructure Roles

The purpose of the Cornerstone Fund was to enable civil society infrastructure and support organisations to develop and test new ways of supporting the sector to thrive and enabling a stronger 'voice' for communities. Each Cornerstone partnership was led by one or more sector infrastructure organisations, and each partnership played one or more infrastructure role in their systems change work. We noticed three distinct roles that infrastructure organisations played in their systems change work.

Convenor: brings different stakeholders or system actors together to work more collaboratively, recognising that systems change requires working together for common purpose.

Capacity-builder: enhances the skills and knowledge of civil society (for example in communications and advocacy, research and data, and community participation) to influence and shape systems for better outcomes.

Innovator: experiments with approaches that are more participative, collaborative, person-centred, and equitable. This can involve co-production, user-centred design and prototyping, and developing more inclusive technologies and processes.

Partnership Approaches

Cornerstone funds collaborations. There was no set way in which partnerships had to form or organise themselves for the Fund, but [several distinct types of partnership formed for Cornerstone projects](#). Many partnerships had elements of more than one of these forms, but there was usually one that was dominant. We identified these three forms in Round 1.

Knowledge Hub: Partners come together to share knowledge, perspectives, and expertise internally and with wider civil society, and to become more effective at navigating systems together.

Alliance: Partners come together to develop their collective voice, join up services and build relational power through working together and with people and communities.

Social Change Lab: Partners come together to test and create something new and disrupt traditional ways of doing things, seeking to change power dynamics, narratives, mindsets and cultures. These partnerships are often made up of different types of organisations from sectors and organisations that don't usually collaborate.

System Change Strategies

While each of the ten projects was unique, patterns emerged in terms of **the way in which the partnerships understood their systems** and the systems change strategies that they adopted.

Partnerships had varied perceptions of their **relationship with the system** they were trying to shift. Some saw themselves as **insiders**, part of the system they were trying to change, others as **outsiders**, pushing to get access and influence decisions. A third group seemed to position themselves **alongside** the system, developing alternatives or a stronger collective base from which to push for change.

These perceptions **influenced the systems change strategies that were adopted**. We identified four distinct systems change strategies.

Influencing: **advocating for change** and strengthening the voice of Londoners. This strategy **focuses on how existing systems**, e.g. the health and care system, or the media, are failing to help people thrive, feel listened to or represented.

Cooperation: developing **collective power** and collaborative approaches to change. Cooperation is the work of **creating alliances and networks** to pursue common work.

Connecting: creating more networked and **joined-up systems of support**. Connecting is the work of **joining up existing systems and services** better for better outcomes.

Disruption: **subverting the status quo** and changing underlying cultures, mindsets and behaviours. This strategy seeks **deeper social and individual change**, focusing on creating new ways of thinking and alternative approaches to the current system, innovating and **building the new alongside the old** to show what different can look and feel like.

Reflections on the Characteristics

Exploring the Cornerstone characteristics through the Round 1 stories highlights [the many different ways](#) in which civil society support organisations can play a systems change role, structure partnerships for change and intervene in complex systems to improve outcomes.

The flexibility of the Cornerstone Fund rightly enabled each partnership to adopt and test roles, strategies and structures for systems change. There is no 'right' way to 'do' systems change. [What is important is to be intentional about all three of these](#), and to pick the role and the strategy that best fits the work.

Organisations need to take time to understand their system and their relationship to it, their system change goal, the assets they are bringing, their potential collaborators and their capabilities and culture, [before designing and embarking on systems change work](#).

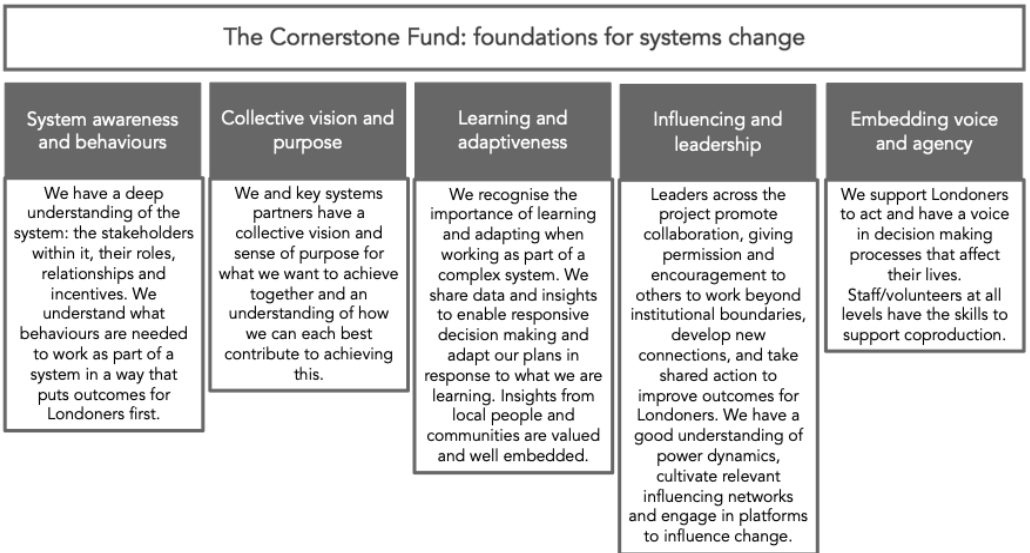
One aspect which has been highlighted through looking at the partnerships through this lens, is the importance of [seeing where you sit in relation to a system](#), how you can exert influence and [how comfortable you feel with different roles and tactics you might adapt](#).

The characteristics are in some ways the container for systems change work — [creating structure and helping shape activities and tactics](#).

The Cornerstone Fund's Foundations for Systems Change Framework

Systems change typically involves **changing entrenched mindsets, behaviours, relationships and structures**, and therefore tangible outcomes for people and communities may take years to emerge. For that reason, we developed, with Round 1 projects, a framework to help us recognise when the **foundations or conditions for change were being built** which could pave the way for longer term systems change.

The foundations for systems change are even more fundamental than the characteristics — as **they can help to shift the underlying system conditions holding the problem** in place or preventing change. what work was done. The foundations speak to **'how'** the work is done, the mindsets, cultures, practices and behaviours which support and enable systems change.



What We Learned

By the end of their projects, partnerships had begun to understand **what the foundations looked like in practice** and what was required to build them. Overall, as is to be expected, projects made different sorts of progress based on their context and approach. **Some conditions were particularly hard to shift during a relatively short project** and with the added disruption of the pandemic.

Three years (or two, in some projects) is a short time to intervene in a complex system. It proved enough in some cases to develop **a longer-lasting collaboration** or see **a small shift in power or resource flows**. There were tangible and less tangible **shifts in understanding, relationships and trust**. Co-production and community voice became more normalised in some places. **Cultures of learning and new skills** were grown, although not necessarily embedded yet. New behaviours were adopted. Partnerships took on **new ways of working** and **shifted their perspectives** on how change happens.

System Awareness And Behaviours

Partnerships gained **deeper understanding of the systems** they were trying to shift and their relationships to them as they started to intervene in them. They gained insight into their system change strategies, understanding more about how and when to build and sustain relationships with commissioners, resource-holders and gatekeepers, and **the critical importance of creating and maintaining trust through transparency and continual communication**.

Partnerships also gained insight into the extent that changing systems involved **changing themselves and their perspectives**. They grappled with their relationships with the system they were seeking to change; when did they need to challenge and when was it better to be in dialogue? Could they gain enough influence to shift something meaningful in the system or was it more impactful to work outside of the system to build collective strength or alternative systems?

Collective Vision and Purpose

Partnerships **refined and adapted their vision and core purpose** in response to gaining a deeper understanding of the systems they were operating in and of the insight they gained through initial mapping, co-design and insight gathering. Through experimentation, partnerships' goals changed in response to testing and learning tools and methods.

Developing **collaborative structures and practices** was one of the most important ways of building the foundations for systems. For most partnerships this is an ongoing process. The most important factor in developing successful collaboration was the **building of trust and doing shared work and learning together**. Partnerships were **largely positive about their experience of collaboration**. They valued the opportunity to build relationships, spend time learning from others, develop structures and foundations for future collaboration, and work together towards a common goal. They felt strongly that they were 'stronger and wiser together' than they were alone.

Working together, partnerships were able to **negotiate better relationships with key system institutions** such as health and social care partnerships and local authorities, **lever in resources** for joint working, and **provide better support and help** to civil society groups. They were able to **amplify the unheard voices and experiences of people** about services and systems that aren't working as well as they could be. They **shared collective wisdom** to shine a new light on practices like co-production and developed new skills in co-design and prototyping.

Learning and Adaptiveness

Cornerstone encouraged and created the unusual opportunity to [experiment and test new approaches](#), and most partnerships embraced this opportunity and centred this in the design of their work. The development stage enabled early co-design and testing work and helped to [build a culture of learning](#). Partnerships were then forced to rapidly adapt due to the Covid pandemic and this helped to accelerate their [capacity to adapt and innovate](#).

Partnerships began to understand and embrace the idea of [continuous learning for improvement in complex systems](#), as they experienced how challenging it was to achieve systemic change.

Most [partnerships improved their capabilities and cultures to support experimentation](#), co-design and shared learning, some quite radically. Different methods and processes were tried and adopted. For some partnerships, this was the biggest challenge, as it ran counter to prevailing cultures of 'delivery' and 'outputs' and 'proving' impact. It often left the [biggest legacy in terms of organisational culture change](#).

Shifting Power: Influencing and Leadership and Embedding Voice and Agency

Many partnerships have experienced [shifts in the sense of power](#) they have and have facilitated [a growing sense of agency](#) as a result of their work. For some partnerships this shift in power and agency has been significant. For some, this was a result of [altering the relationships with commissioners or decision-makers](#), and in other cases it resulted from trialling [new mechanisms for dialogue or influencing](#). It's too soon to say how enduring these changes are, but they have demonstrated that change is possible.

Partnerships have developed and tested approaches for more **effective influencing**, grounded in skilling up people and groups to **tell their stories and engage decision-makers**. This is perhaps the strongest and most important legacy of the Cornerstone project.

For some partnerships, this has involved **moving away from 'getting the sector a seat at the table'** to something more like (metaphorically) opening a restaurant, creating the menu and inviting decision-makers to dine. In other words, they were more interested in **setting the agenda** themselves as a sector, and inviting decision-makers to engage with them, on their terms.

Influencing and amplifying voice has been the area of most progress in Stage 2 of the partnership work. There have been genuine and sustained efforts to embed new approaches to **listening, gathering evidence and insight**, and hosting spaces and conversations for **sharing truths to power**. A range of different methods and approaches have been tested, but more important have been the skills that have been built and the **shifts in power that have been experienced and have in turn shifted priorities**.

Infrastructure organisations are not usually in touch with people and communities directly. They don't naturally have opportunities to listen or work directly with the grassroots. If they are serious about systems change, they need to consider **their role in amplifying voice and influencing 'from below'**.

Legacy

Some partnership members have been left with a **sense of regret or of a missed opportunity** to build the foundations more strongly. Perhaps the time was not right, or they were over ambitious. Perhaps they did not quite find the right role, the right partners or the level of organisational commitment needed for deeper change. This reflects the very real challenges of systems change work.

For some partnerships the level of trust and the structures that have been developed are **strong enough to act as a springboard for future collaboration**, although new alliances may require support from a convenor for several years to come.

Some partnerships have been successful in **attracting new resources** to support continued collaboration, some are looking for continuation funding, whilst others have become important enough to continue on the **goodwill and commitment** of members.

For some projects, it seems **unlikely that the collaboration is mature enough to survive**, especially without dedicated funding for convening and administering.

Where the partnership is not continuing, this does not mean that there is no legacy from the work. The **shared learning that has taken place will continue to influence the cultures and ways of working** of many of the organisations involved and there is **a legacy of resources, tools and changed relationships**. New partnerships may develop from the roots established.

Deeper system change is likely to require longer term collaboration and culture change to achieve lasting results but **focusing on building the foundations we have highlighted has been a good place to start**.

Funders and Wider System Change

The Cornerstone fund launched with two ambitions. The first was to **develop and test new ways of working for civil society support organisations** to achieve a thriving civil society which is **adaptable, resilient, collaborative, sustainable and driven by communities**.

The second ambition was to **develop new ways of funding to achieve a thriving civil society** which is adaptable, resilient, collaborative, sustainable and driven by communities, **and to influence the adoption of this practice** more widely.

We found that Cornerstone Fund [has begun to influence the development of other collaborative funds and thinking](#) about the funding of systems change work – work that tackles root causes, not just symptoms. Despite there being limited capacity amongst the fund leaders to go out and advocate for this way of funding, [Cornerstone has played a role in influencing funding practice](#), at least in London, creating confidence and a precedent in funding longer-term systemic change work and in funder collaborations.

Best practice in this area is still developing, but [the practice that has been tested through Cornerstone](#), such as aligning application and monitoring processes, supporting peer learning between grantees, and encouraging adaptation through flexible and responsive grant management, [is being adopted elsewhere](#).

Conclusions

Round 1 of the Cornerstone Fund has been a roller coaster journey for the ten funded partnerships and their stories illustrate the challenges and disappointments they have faced, and the successes and unexpected gains they have experienced.

Partnerships were appreciative of the opportunity given to them by Cornerstone, frustrated that it was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and proud of the work they have done with hundreds of civil society organisations and individuals to help build stronger, more resilient communities and in turn achieve better outcomes for Londoners.

Their work has added to the growing body of insight into what systems change means and what it looks like in practice. It has highlighted the potential for civil society support organisations to take more of a lead in tackling the root causes and underlying conditions holding complex problems in place, problems that civil society organisations are dealing with every day in the work they do.

This work is not easy, but nor is it work that can be left to others to do — it is part and parcel of the mission of civil society — to help shape and create a society in which everyone can thrive. Systems, not individual organisations create outcomes, and so systems change — or systemic working — is the route to improving those outcomes for everyone. Cornerstone has demonstrated that systems change is a valid aspiration for civil society support organisations and that there are opportunities and ways to intervene and take responsibility for healthier, more joined-up systems in which civil society can play a stronger role.

With the right funding there is potential to go further. As we heard from partnerships, **there is a need for more ambition and risk-taking, longer-term horizons and funding to address deep-seated complex challenges.** There needs to be more focus on understanding and shifting systemic inequalities, as reflected in Round 2 of the fund. This in turn will require new and different roles, behaviours and approaches to those described in this report.

There needs to be an **even greater emphasis on analysing and addressing power imbalances, on listening to diverse voices and on building relationships and solidarity across communities and sectors** to drive change. Infrastructure support organisations have a key role to play as bridge-builders, convenors, innovators and door-openers, and other roles that haven't yet been imagined.

Overall, despite the many challenges they faced, **the ten partnerships in Round 1 have contributed to our understanding of how civil society organisations have the potential to be drivers and facilitators of systems change.**

Systems Change: What to Pay Attention To

These are some of the things we have learned from them about what to bear in mind in a systems change initiative, organisationally and personally:

People

- Prioritise **relationships and learning** above deliverables, structures and agreements.
- Have **honest conversations** with partners, with independent facilitation where needed and be conscious of the importance of language, culture and communication.
- Make **time and space to reflect** with partners and challenge yourselves regularly.
- Try as far as is practical to ensure **continuity of roles and relationships** — and to ensure that relationships are held and passed on by both individuals and organisations.
- **Take your stakeholders on the journey** with you — don't wait until the end to try to influence them.
- **Nurture your allies** within and outside the system and understand what they need.
- **Hold the tension** between **collaboration and challenge** and know when to push and when to hold back.

Purpose

- Balance short- and long-term benefit to your ultimate beneficiaries.
- Don't be afraid to change course while holding firmly to **core principles and values**.
- Be prepared to **defend the value of your work** — it may be seen as risky or unfocused, and lacking in outputs and tangible deliverables.
- Be clear about the **different accountabilities** in the project — and don't be afraid to prioritise the needs of beneficiaries and collaborators above funders.
- Be **transparent and fair** with the use of project resources and **honest** with funders.
- Don't take shortcuts when it comes to **centering the involvement and empowerment of people with lived experience**.
- Have some sort of 'theory of change' but **use it in a flexible way**.

Mindset

- **Hold an open mind** about the problem you're addressing, and don't make hasty assumptions about the right solution.
- Be self-aware and thoughtful about **personal and organisational power**.
- **Expect to make mistakes** — and learn — again and again.
- Be **realistic and patient** about the timeline for change in complex systems, but if it's not working, be prepared to change course.
- **Be kind** to yourself — this is hard, complex work, and it doesn't often go as planned — seek support from peers and take time to notice and **celebrate progress and small successes**.