

# The Cornerstone Fund Round 2 Interim Learning Report Executive Summary

March 2023

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for social change

The interim learning report for Round 2 of the Cornerstone Fund summarises **what we have noticed and heard so far in conversations, workshops and documentation in the first year** of the Round 2 work. This covers the development stage and awarding of stage 2 grants.

We have been able to start to **understand more about the different roles, approaches to system change and collaboration** adopted by Round 2 Cornerstone Partnerships in their projects, and **the work they are doing to build the foundations and conditions** for long term change.

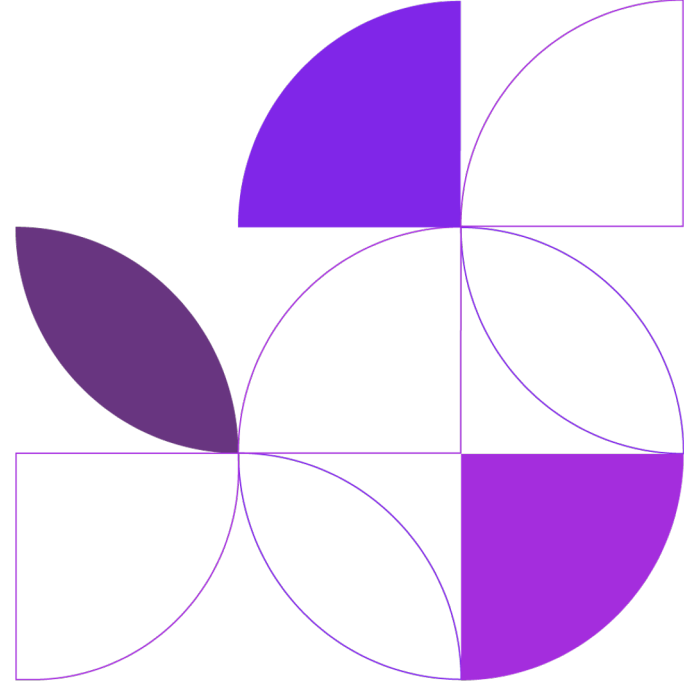
We have heard how **the way in which they perceive systems** has a strong influence on the approaches and activities that partnerships are designing and beginning to take.

Partnerships **are starting to grow the foundations for systems change**. Progress has been made in creating shared goals and common purpose, in starting to develop shared understanding of their systems and in identifying potential allies for their work in unexpected places.

There has been **less success in most cases on developing collaborative relationships outside of the core partnerships**, particularly with decision-makers and power-holders that they want to influence. This is an aspiration and major challenge for most partnerships

The Cornerstone Fund (the Fund) is a collaborative funding programme launched in April 2018. It funds partnership approaches led by civil society support organisations, to bring about systems change, build stronger, more resilient communities and in turn achieve better outcomes for Londoners. There is a strengthened focus on equity in Round 2.

*“We want to support collaborations and partnership approaches aiming to bring about systemic change to tackle structural inequalities and build stronger, more resilient communities’, prioritising ‘collaborations and partnerships that are led by those with lived experience/are user-led.”*



# Cornerstone Fund Goal

The Cornerstone Fund aims to bring about systemic change, enabling civil society support organisations to work in partnership with others to achieve the goal of:

*“a thriving civil society that is adaptable, resilient, collaborative, sustainable and driven by communities, with a focus on tackling deep seated structural inequalities to improve outcomes for Londoners.”*

# Funders and Partners

The Cornerstone Fund currently brings together three funders:

- City Bridge Trust
- The National Lottery Community Fund
- Trust for London

And four in-kind supporters:

- London Funders
- London Plus
- London Councils
- Greater London Authority

# Round 2 Funded Partnerships (name and lead partner)

Led by Civil Society Infrastructure Organisations, partnering with Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and other social sector stakeholders, for example public sector organisations and academic institutions.

- [Supporting Whole Person, Whole Community Advice](#) - Advice UK
- [Unheard Voices](#) - Africa Advocacy Foundation (on behalf of One Voice Network)
- [Health Inequalities: System Change in NW London](#) - BME Health Forum
- [Giving Together](#) - Bridge Renewal Trust/Haringey Giving
- [No Wrong Door](#) - Global Black Thrive CIC
- [Building Young Brixton](#) - High Trees Community Development Trust
- [Reframing the Disability Narrative](#) - Inclusion London/Inclusion Barnet
- [Cornerstone Croydon](#) - London Youth
- [Trans Learning Partnership](#) - Spectra CIC
- [Datawise London](#) - Superhighways @ Kingston Voluntary Action
- [Tower Hamlets Equalities Partnership](#) - Tower Hamlets CVS
- [North Central London Volunteering PLUS Partnership](#) - Volunteer Centre Camden

# Learning introduction

In recognition of the innovative nature of the Fund and the desire to learn about new approaches to funding and to test new forms of civil society support, the Fund appointed a learning partner and is funding grant holders to take part in learning activity.

This report is the first learning report for Round 2 of the Fund, covering the development stage and first few months of stage 2. It draws on interviews, peer learning workshops and reviews of documentation since Spring 2021.

It aims to build on the learning from Round 1 and to focus primarily on practice. Exploring the questions: **How are the Cornerstone partnerships going about their work and what is it that they are doing from day to day to strengthen collaboration, address systemic inequalities and effect systems change?**

In the first learning session that brought together Partnerships and Funders, participants identified their own questions that they were interested in exploring together through the Fund. We synthesised them into these three themes.

# Overarching learning questions for the Fund

## How can we enable systems change to address systemic inequalities?

- How does change happen? What are the different routes and approaches?
- What ways of working and infrastructure does this require?
- What are the roles of civil society infrastructure, civil society and communities in creating this change?
- What is the role of funders (incl. funder collaboration) in enabling this change?
- What are we learning about shifting power to people and communities?
- What is the space for systems change within the current political and economic context?

## What change are we achieving?

- What foundations for systems change are we establishing?
- How are we working together better?
- How are people more involved in decision-making?
- How are inequalities being addressed?
- What are we learning about taking an intersectional approach to tackling systemic inequalities?
- How are we using and sharing data better?
- What impacts will this have for civil society and communities?

## How are we influencing wider practice to help address systemic inequalities?

- What and who do we want to influence? Who are our priority audiences?
- What are our roles in influencing?
- What tools or levers do we have?
- What are the key messages we want to communicate?
- What impacts do we seek through influencing activity?
- What is the potential long-term legacy of the Fund?
- What do we need to do to achieve this legacy?

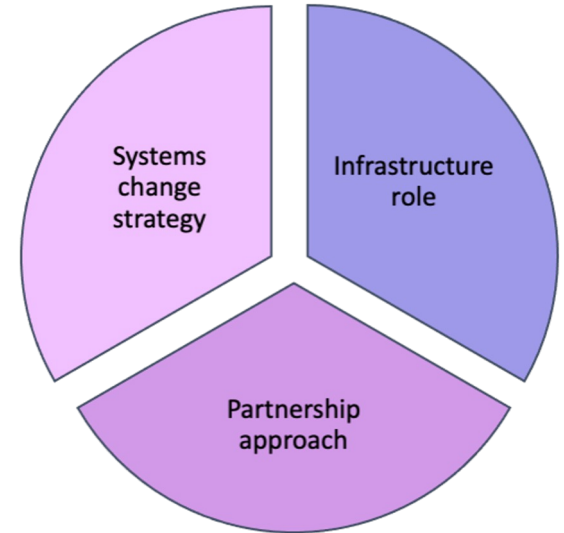


# Framework 1: The Cornerstone Characteristics

The first framework explores the three interrelated *characteristics* which underpin all Cornerstone projects:

- They are projects led **by civil society support organisations** whose role is to support and strengthen civil society
- 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 describe the core features common to each project - and help us explore **the 'what' of the projects**, the different approaches that each partnership took in designing their partnership project. We explore how these characteristics are expressed by each of the Partnerships



# Infrastructure roles

We have so far identified four main role types that partnerships are playing in Round 2 to support and strengthen civil society. Usually one role is more dominant, although most if not all partnerships play more than one of these roles at different times. The role can be shared across more than one partner or sit mostly with the lead partner.

These roles are:

- **Convenor:** Brings different stakeholders or system actors together to work more collaboratively.
- **Capacity-builder:** Enhances the skills and knowledge of civil society to influence and shape systems for better outcomes.
- **Innovator:** Experiments with approaches that are more participative, collaborative, person-centred, and equitable to disrupt the usual way of doing things.
- **Insight-gatherer:** Gathers evidence, stories and insights from people and groups with first-hand experience of a problem or system to use for influencing change.

# Partnership approaches

Cornerstone funds collaborations and partnerships, but is not prescriptive about the nature of these. Round 2 Partnerships are very diverse in terms of membership and purpose. Despite the wide variety of form and function, we have broadly identified three partnership forms in Round 2, whilst acknowledging that many partnerships are a hybrid of more than one form. They are:

- **Research and Knowledge Hub:** Partners come together to gather and share data and insight, perspectives and expertise, to become more effective at influencing their systems.
- **Alliance:** Partners come together to develop 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.

# System Change Strategies

There seem to be broadly three system change strategies in Round 2, although most partnerships will likely use more than one approach over the course of their project. These are:

- **Influencing:** Trying to effect change within a well defined, formal system to address unhealthy system behaviours, relationships and processes.
- **Collaboration:** Working in and alongside the system to develop more collaborative, joined up services and support and to facilitate collective action on complex challenges. Collaboration includes two approaches,
  - **Connecting:** Addressing competition and fragmentation within the system and improving the connectedness of support and help available to people within a system in order to improve outcomes.
  - **Cooperation:** Developing more collective and cooperative approaches which strengthen social networks, social solidarity and foster collective action to address complex challenges.
- **Innovation:** Creating alternatives which address fundamental system flaws and through changes in structures, culture, mindsets, resource flows or power dynamics.

## Framework 2: The Foundations for Systems Change

The second framework is the Cornerstone Fund's Foundations of Systems Change Learning Framework, which looks at building the long term conditions for systemic change.

Systems change typically involves changing **deep-rooted mindsets, behaviours, relationships and structures**, and therefore tangible outcomes for people and communities can take years to emerge. For this reason, it feels important to consider what foundations are being put in place for deeper, broader and more sustainable change.

At the start of our work as learning partner, we co-developed a [Learning Framework](#) with the partnerships in Round 1, drawing on their ideas and our knowledge of the wider systems change field. The foundations identified in the framework reflect key conditions for enabling systems change and their presence suggests that desired outcomes are more likely to emerge in the long term. These help us describe **the 'how' of the projects** - the practices, processes and behaviours which are helping to shift and shape the underlying conditions holding systemic problems in place.

For this learning report, we are sharing **a revised version of the Learning Framework**, based on learning so far with Round 2, incorporating a greater focus on equity in line with the changed focus of the fund, and paying more attention to the practices and behaviours that help to build these foundations.

| <b>Voice, agency and equity</b><br><br>We surface and address inequalities in voice, power and access to decision-making.  | <b>Vision, structures &amp; relationships for collaboration</b><br><br>We develop shared purpose and collaborate to achieve collective impact and change.  | <b>System understanding and behaviours</b><br><br>We recognise that systems, not individual organisations, create impact for people and that we have a role in nurturing healthy systems.  | <b>Learning and co-production</b><br><br>We learn and adapt with all our stakeholders when working for change in complex systems and ecosystems.   | <b>Shared power and influence</b><br><br>We have a deep understanding of power dynamics and use diverse strategies for influencing change.  |
|--|--|--|--|---|
| <p><i>What this may look like:</i></p> <p>We reach out and listen to stories of inequity to help us understand.</p> <p>We recognise and respond to intersectionality - overlapping systems of inequality.</p> <p>We target resources to the most marginalised and minoritised communities.</p> <p>We advocate for meaningful involvement in decision-making and support all Londoners to have their say.</p> <p>We invest in the capabilities, culture and structures for participation.</p> <p>We recognise our privilege and we step back to make space for others to step forward and be heard.</p> | <p><i>What this may look like:</i></p> <p>We work on shared visions and common goals.</p> <p>We work on our relationships and understanding with partners.</p> <p>We keep our partnerships open to fresh ideas and members.</p> <p>We organise ourselves to share our collective resources to achieve our common purpose.</p> <p>We work out what we each can best contribute to the whole.</p> <p>We take collective action towards our common goals.</p> <p>We put outcomes for Londoners, not our individual priorities, first.</p> | <p><i>What this may look like:</i></p> <p>We work towards shared understanding of the systems we want to change.</p> <p>We convene and facilitate conversation and learning.</p> <p>We work flexibly to identify and test strategies for systems change.</p> <p>We join up services and support, instead of competing.</p> <p>We imagine and nurture alternative, healthier systems to improve outcomes for all Londoners.</p> | <p><i>What this may look like:</i></p> <p>We learn and make sense of insight with the people it comes from.</p> <p>We use insight to inform responsive decision-making and better outcomes for all Londoners.</p> <p>We co-design and co-produce with people closest to the problem.</p> <p>We continually adapt our plans in response to what we are learning.</p> <p>We create opportunities for peer learning to improve practice..</p> | <p><i>What this may look like:</i></p> <p>We use our reach and convening capacity to build collective power for change.</p> <p>We cultivate our networks &amp; relationships for influencing.</p> <p>We share leadership &amp; resources, offering space to others to lead change.</p> <p>We are conscious of our own power and use it responsibly.</p> <p>We act in solidarity with people with first-hand experience of inequality</p> <p>We work beyond sector boundaries, developing unusual partnerships</p> |

# How are partnerships approaching systems change to address systemic inequalities?

We have identified five overarching approaches that partnerships are taking to effect systems change to address systemic inequalities.

- Collecting and sharing **knowledge and insight**, nurturing the **skills and capabilities** for systems change, particularly with communities directly experiencing systemic inequalities
- **Experimenting and innovating** to demonstrate alternative ways of thinking and doing that are built on more relational, democratic, equitable and person-centred approaches
- Gathering **insight about the experiences of people and communities** experiencing inequality, in order to help systems be more responsive and person-centred
- **Growing the collective power** and **strengthening the influence** of people and communities experiencing inequalities, through **finding common purpose and acting together**
- **Connecting parts of the system together** better, breaking down barriers and **building understanding and relationships across boundaries** to improve access and inclusion

Some progress has been made in centring grassroots groups and marginalised people in the work - the challenge of limited capacity and time has been a consistent barrier.

# What next?

These are some of the key challenges and questions about the work that have surfaced which we could explore as we go forward with the peer learning work over the coming months:

- Maintaining **a focus on long term change when fighting short term crises**. Translating the big goals of systems change into language and ideas that are meaningful and motivating to people that want immediate change.
- Further **centring grassroots groups and marginalised people** in the work and deepening the conversations and practices for equity.
- Finding and using **every-day learning practices** with the people who the work is about.
- Widening the circle of people that are involved in **making sense of data and insight and understanding the system** and testing how best to **use data and insight in mobilising change**.
- Developing **collaborative relationships outside of partnerships**, particularly with decision-makers and power-holders that they want to influence.
- Further **exploring and articulating what the system is**, where you sit in relation to the system, and the **desired impact on system conditions** you want to have.
- Understanding the **roles that are needed** for the work and what these look like.



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