Findings of the UK Prevention Consortium ActEarly 'Research on Research' Wave Two Qualitative Study

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Executive Summary

Background

ActEarly's mixed methods evaluation aims to generate understanding of consortium formation, collaboration, sustainability and transdisciplinarity across ActEarly, over time. This 'research on research' approach will result in a longitudinal study with three sweeps of data collection over the five-year programme of work. For Wave Two, we collected data by interviews with 20 members of the consortium across different disciplines and roles. Below is a brief summary of the key findings which are discussed in further detail in the main report.

Summary of key findings

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic: Challenge of establishing links in person; derailment of projects; inability for coproduction activities to progress.

Sustainability: A lack of funding and low capacity cited as a major challenge; uncertainty about resource and support available; not being able to bid for funds for members from a non-health background; lack of funding for interventions.

Local Authorities: Competing priorities due to the pandemic; lack of research culture in LAs although they were receptive to acquiring research skills; budgetary issues translating to a lack of funding; differing timescales to academics/researchers; the political landscape in LAs acts as a barrier.

Whole system and population level impacts: Challenges of engaging with people at different levels of the system; difficulty in demonstrating whether a whole system approach was in action; uncertainty at level of impact on population health due to short time scale.

Interdisciplinary working: Interactions with members from a various range of disciplines; partnerships borne across both sites and with local authorities; sharing of good practice; knowledge obtained on how to bid for funding; However, people still work in silos; issues with communication due to being from different disciplinary backgrounds.

Lack of knowledge of activities: Lack of awareness or clarity on activities across ActEarly; lack of regular meetings.

Co-production and citizen science: Well embedded within projects for some, but not for others; good practice examples shared by the coproduction team; lack of confidence on how to do coproduction; frustration at length of time taken to produce coproduction strategy; funding lacking for coproduction activities.

Recommendations based on findings

1. Efforts should be placed into encouraging non-academic consortia members to engage in research activities. A buddy/mentor system may prove useful in this regard.

2. Concerns were raised about the lack of community engagement in projects. The coproduction strategy is now available and is likely to be a useful resource to better understand what is meant by 'citizen science' and 'co-production' and how to embed these into ActEarly activities.

3. Further support should be given to consortia members to help them access and apply for grant funding.

4. A well-used central repository displaying the all ActEarly current projects is a way to increase awareness of ActEarly projects and reduce the chance of duplicating existing activities. A repository is currently being developed as part of the meta-evaluation work within the Evaluation theme.

5. There is a difference in project progress expectations from more senior staff members compared with others. Greater communication at different levels could help manage these expectations.

Introduction

ActEarly's mixed methods evaluation aims to generate understanding of consortium formation, collaboration, sustainability and transdisciplinarity across ActEarly, over time. This 'research on research' approach will result in a longitudinal study with three sweeps of data collection over the five-year programme of work. We are seeking to capture and describe the nature of new relationships between the research community and local authority formed as a result of ActEarly.

Pilot findings

The first sweep of data was collected between September and October 2018, following success in ActEarly's outline bid. Thirteen theme or deputy theme leads and the two co-directors of the consortium were interviewed. The main findings showed that participants felt that the sustainability of ActEarly depended on the involvement of a range of stakeholders across the commissioning and policy landscape as well as the explicit involvement of communities. Participants also stressed the need for ActEarly members to leverage significant funding from outside sources during the lifetime of the programme in order to continue upstream prevention work past the five year call. A practical challenge related to sustainability was the need for regular face to face meetings/communication. Members felt that strong relationships had been forged across different sectors and academic disciplines. A sense of higher purpose motivated ActEarly members and it was hoped that this higher purpose would provide aspiration to the group throughout the duration of the grant. Co-production, where communities as an active component of the research rather than passive recipients, was perceived to be essential and concerns were raised in relation to funding decisions concerning coproduction. It was expected that impact of ActEarly on population level changes would take time to surface.

Wave Two

Qualitative findings

We report here the findings from the second sweep of the data collected between December 2021 and February 2022. Our sample size consisted of the, co-directors of the consortium, six ActEarly theme and deputy theme leads, programme managers, research fellows and administrative staff. All those who had been interviewed in the first wave were invited to be interviewed again, except those that were no longer part of ActEarly. The remaining participants were invited because they were the most connected in the ActEarly systems map. Twenty people were interviewed in depth over Microsoft Teams. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. A partially deductive thematic analysis was undertaken which focused on understanding four key areas of importance to the group: sustainability, inter-disciplinarity, co-production and citizen science, and perceived impact on population level changes and system change. Other themes emerged inductively and were included in this write up where relevant.

The Covid-19 pandemic - The majority of participants felt that the pandemic hindered the progression of projects in a range of ways. Whilst the distance between the two sites was already deemed a challenge in forming partnerships, the inability to build meaningful relationships virtually was identified as a further barrier: *"it's interesting both culturally and organisationally, and at a distance how you, particularly over the last couple of years where you haven't been able to travel and meet face-to-face, how you establish that trust and belonging to a consortium when you've got two different tribes"* (P5)*.* Some participants remarked on the extent to which the pandemic had derailed projects they were engaged in, especially in regard to local authority partners: "*with the Council if everyone just gets pulled onto Covid response work then they have less time to respond to our requests"* (P6). It was also noted that coproduction activities decreased during the pandemic "*pre-Covid we did some work with some youngsters and ordinary, well, the public about their environments and stuff. People were genuinely interested in it and they wanted to take it on, you know, board. So I think it is, but it's just because of the pandemic and we just have to shift priorities a bit and put things on a bit of a back burner for a bit"* (P8).

Comparisons between both sites - Many participants spoke of the differences between both sites. Some participants felt that Bradford would experience more success and leave a better legacy than Tower Hamlets due to a well-established research culture prevalent in Bradford, citing Born in Bradford and the existing collaborations made there. Participants in Tower Hamlets identified challenges around obtaining data sharing agreements and felt this was not the case in Bradford: "*I mean obviously Born in Bradford has got this amazing data set and it's embedded in the NHS. And it's got this cohort that you're working with all the time and a ready source of data which is fantastic. But I think Tower Hamlets isn't like that*" (P3). Despite these setbacks, it was acknowledged that Tower Hamlets possessed unique strengths such as the development of stronger consortium links with local authority which was perceived to be lacking in Bradford, as well as a high level of motivation due to new links being established with partners which may now be stale in Bradford: "*Tower Hamlets are really racing to catch up and, in a sense, their Local Authority's even more committed…what's going to happen in Bradford is there's a bit …of like Born in Bradford fatigue or*

Bradford Institute for Health Research fatigue because they're like, "oh, will you just leave us alone?" (P13).

Sustainability - A lack of funding and low capacity was regularly cited as a major challenge in furthering the ActEarly agenda. Less senior participants in particular felt the sustainability of ActEarly was limited due to a lack of funding and not having enough capacity: "*it's been quite hard to make an impact because it really has meant putting in some extra time to forge connections, to explore ideas.*" (P7). This was especially seen to be the case for coproduction. "*…coproduction and with citizen science is something that require additional funding which are not there and it's kind of, it's complicated and slowed things down*" (P1). Senior staff acknowledged that consortium members were often pushed to their capacity yet hoped that the commitment to creating a fairer, healthier future for those most in need extended beyond their limited capacity to work on the project. "Mid-level staff raised concerns about having "a *lack of manpower to work on projects that has been an ongoing problem with my involvement where some decisions being made one or two levels above me [laughs] and there was ongoing uncertainty about what kind of support I basically have*" (P17), with other mid-level staff explaining "*I didn't have a research fellow with that theme, even though the theme was pretty big*" (P18).

There was also uncertainty about the type of financial support available: "*the biggest issue that I find with ActEarly is understanding where the resources are and who ultimately is in charge of deciding how they should be best deployed*" (P7). Although participants disclosed that there was significant encouragement within ActEarly to apply for funding, some participants expressed disappointment at being unable to bid for funds because "*if you're not embedded within the NHS, it's very hard to get health related funds*" (P3). The inability to secure funds was perceived to be a particular challenge for those not traditionally from a health background, as noted by P3 who stated: "*because it's predicated on health it's almost impossible for someone who hasn't got health in their title to enable them to go for funds. So we've just had that experience with an intervention...*" A further challenge noted by participants was the lack of funding for interventions with P1 remarking "*it's a project about intervention without money for interventions, which is fundamental problem throughout it*". It was also felt that at times, there would be better progress with ActEarly activities if senior members of staff pushed the agenda "*connections or emails or decisions need to come from kind of quite senior people in order for them to be taken seriously and I think that can be quite a challenge sometimes*" (P6).

Local authority – Partnerships with local authority, although highly valued, were fraught with issues according to nearly all participants. The largest issue when working with local authority identified by both academic and local authority partners were competing priorities, both Covid-19 related, and otherwise "*if the leader of the Council or cabinet members or board councillors want something doing really quickly as well, I'm afraid that always takes priority*" (P9). A major challenge identified by researchers was that local authorities did not have a tradition of conducting or hosting research which made it difficult for researchers to collaborate with them as local authority were not used to working with researchers. Despite this, it was identified that local authority members were receptive and willing to acquire the skills required to enable them to conduct research. Budgetary issues were said to be an obstacle within local authority, which meant a lack of funding to work on ActEarly "*they've (local authority budgets) been cut over a number of years including the Public Health Budget*

so they've been having to sort of keep peddling, delivering the same amount but with a lot less money" (P10).

Differing timescales between local authority and academics was described as further impeding ActEarly aims and sustainability, with local authority partners stressing the need for academic partners to be able to deliver faster*"…ridiculous timescales that we sometimes have in the Local Authority and like, you know, and I'm not exaggerating, we literally get a week to put in a bid for lots of money and things like we want to make"* (P19). The political landscape within local authorities was mentioned by participants as a further barrier in working on ActEarly projects *"things around Healthy Places are easier just because they're things that Local Authorities find easier like speed restrictions or, you know, greenspace type initiatives and some are much harder, which Local Authorities tend to avoid because they feel a lot more political around, you know, increasing people's income..."* (P8).

Whole system and population level impacts - It was generally felt that people were engaged at different levels of the system *"we are a complex system across different disciplines with different goals and so it's interesting to see how we can bring that together and to shape it and to give it direction"* (P7). Some participants, however, stated that a whole system approach was not easily demonstrable and that there weren't *"enough resources to do a whole systems analysis" (*P4). Overall, participants recognised that the project would have some form of observable impact, though opinions differed on what this difference would look like. For instance, some participants cautioned that *"it's quite a short period of time to deliver population health improvements" (P19)* whereas others stated the project would have wider impact such as *"an understanding of the successes and barriers for enacting change in those settings" (P18)* or that the population would indirectly benefit populations because *"the biggest impact might be on the practitioners and changing perhaps how they do things" (P5)*

Interdisciplinary working –Participants generally felt that ActEarly was working in an interdisciplinary way, citing their interactions with members from a various range of disciplines including psychologists, architects, geographers and computer scientists, agreeing that *"it's certainly transdisciplinary" (P19).* Participants felt that the true value of the project which would contribute to its sustainability was the partnerships that were borne from it across both sites and across different disciplines and local authorities because "*it's connected a lot of people together who've never really worked with each other before"* (P10) which, as P18 noted, has enabled "*really amazing examples of sharing best practice*". Participants discussed that through the collaborations they had made with others, they now had insights on how to progress bids for funding, which they did not have an understanding of prior to working in ActEarly. Many participants, however, also highlighted challenges with interdisciplinary working, mainly in terms of people working still working in silos and not being receptive to interdisciplinary working. Some participants disclosed that communication was a challenge, due to members being from different backgrounds, which meant that adjustment to new ways of working were required. One participant noted his difficulty with interdisciplinary working, stating that *"we've got more work to do because we haven't been doing it for that long you know, it takes time to do those things, it takes time to build trust and we're dealing with different cultures and so on you know between local authority cultures and academic cultures and different academic cultures between different universities and ways of budgeting"* (P12).

Lack of knowledge of activities- Another identified challenge was the lack of awareness or clarity on activities across the different themes which meant that "*there can sometimes be a little disconnect of what everyone's working on*" (P11) subsequently making it "*hard to just keep all of it straight and clear and not be duplicating things...because nobody's got the capacity for that*" (P13). One reason given for this was the lack of regular meetings across the project yet it was felt that this issue could be overcome by holding meetings that are *"designed specifically to foster collaboration across themes"* (P16) or by developing a central repository where members could *"tap into that spreadsheet or SharePoint or whatever it is, and have a look and see*" (P15).

Co-production and citizen science - Participants were asked how well they felt co-production and citizen science was embedded in the work they did as part of ActEarly. Participant 16 mentioned that the *"theme leads have a personal academic history of working with Co-Production and Citizen Science so it's well embedded in that sense"* (P16). It was clear, however, that not everyone understood how best to incorporate coproduction and citizen science in their work although they acknowledged that good practice examples of coproduction and citizen science were shared by the coproduction team. Some participants stated that they, or others, lacked the skills and confidence on how to do coproduction. P14 gave the following example: *"if you're a statistician, for example, or a quantitative researcher and then you've got somebody coming to say, "oh, you need to go to make some relationships with a community group or what did people think of that…it's not for everybody, not everybody can do it, not everybody likes to go out chatting and spending that time"*.

Most participants expressed eagerness for the coproduction strategy to be developed quickly so it could be used as a reference on how to do coproduction effectively, and expressed frustration that *"it hasn't been helped by not having some better guidance from the coproduction team as to how to do it" (*P12). This eagerness was acknowledged by the coproduction team who explained the delay *"Yeah, some people have been asking. It's taken a long while because it's been a proper research project, which has had different people involved at different stages. It's been quite exciting, but it's been hard to do it this way, but may as well co-produce it if we're going to have, if it's going to be about co-production"* (P15). Areas of good practice were identified across both sites and within the ActEarly work conducted across local authority with communities. It was felt that coproduction was one area in particular, in which funding was lacking "*eligibility is always an issue. I mean we've faced it loads in trying to do any kind of participatory research because there's a lot of issues around funding people who are not in an institution, you know like trying to fund community researchers"* (P6).

Free text responses from the ActEarly Consortium survey 2021

The free-text responses that were collected as part of the ActEarly members survey in October 2021 offer some insight into the views of the wider ActEarly consortia, beyond the twenty members interviewed. Overall, we found comparable themes across both. There were similar issues identified around lack of awareness of different ActEarly projects and how this hindered network formation and cohesion:

> *"The challenge of forming networks is being aware of all of the different projects that are ongoing and knowing how and when you can contribute".*

> *"The project is ambitious but often feels disjointed, with themes understanding what is going on within their theme but not others. It is difficult to know how it all fits together and what projects are part of the ActEarly umbrella".*

> *"This is a very large consortium and it is hard to keep abreast of all the initiatives that come under ActEarly having joined after it started and also under lockdown. The boundaries between what is ActEarly and what is related to ActEarly are also a bit porous[…]Would like to see more transparency on how to get ideas resourced and how topics get prioritised for ActEarly resources or follow on bids of bids especially those that have short turnaround times".*

Challenges around resources and time were also mentioned:

> *"I wish I had more time to dedicate to the project. Especially during 2020, the demands of teaching and family were such that it limited my ability to fully engage. Resource limitation as also an issue".*

Improving communication across the consortia though different methods were recommended:

> *"I think there is a need for improving communication between the research fellows and the PIs as well as with local authorities that work with the themes. Also, I understand that everyone is very busy but if there is a way to create more accountability and mutual expectation between different stakeholders, we can be more successful within the themes and the entire project".*

> *"It is a large project and the difficulties in meeting in real life over most of 20 and much of 21 have not helped with coordination. Something like a project-wide monthly newsletter might help".*

Conclusion

Consortia members across a range of roles shared their experiences and perspectives of working within ActEarly. Identified benefits included the development of new relationships across difference disciplines, sharing good practice and obtaining knowledge on how to bid for grant funding. A range of challenges, however, were also raised. These included: the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on establishing links with others, and the derailment of projects and the ability to do coproduction. Concerns were highlighted around the sustainability of ActEarly, which included the lack of funding and low capacity. Issues around partnership working with local authorities were frequently discussed by participants, such as competing priorities encountered by local authorities due to the pandemic, their lack of research culture, budgetary issues translating to a lack of funding, differing timescales to academics/researchers and the organisational political landscape. Further challenges raised by participants were the lack of regular meetings, a lack of knowledge of activities across ActEarly and general issues with communication. Co-production and citizen science, although well embedded in some projects, was an area in which others lacked confidence.

Recommendations based on findings

1. Efforts should be placed into encouraging non-academic consortia members to engage in research activities. A buddy/mentor system may prove useful in this regard.

2. Concerns were raised about the lack of community engagement in projects. The coproduction strategy is now available and is likely to be a useful resource to better understand what is meant by 'citizen science' and 'co-production' and how to embed these into ActEarly activities.

3. Further support should be given to consortia members to help them access and apply for grant funding.

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