

# ANCHOR PROJECT EVALUATION, 2023: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Report of the third evaluation of the Anchor Project  
to the Early Action Programme Board

## Executive Summary

The Anchor Project is a four-year early action system change project funded by the National Lottery Communities Fund and in its later stages also The Promise Scotland. The Project is designed to give families and services space to try new ways of working together and is due to conclude in March 2023.

The third evaluation of the Project is informed by monitoring and interview data provided by Project Officers and consultations undertaken by Anderson Solutions.

### Aim

The Project works with families who are struggling to cope with their current circumstances, but who have not yet reached a crisis.

The aim of the Anchor Project is to: **facilitate learning and action that demonstrates the value of family-led problem solving and early intervention.**

### Rationale for the Project

There are weaknesses in the current system of support which limit its benefit to families. Understanding the impact of these systemic weaknesses on families has improved because of the Anchor Project. The weaknesses include: service-led rather than family-led service delivery, late rather early intervention, insufficient capacity, and family-based barriers to engagement.

The family-led approach of the Anchor Project is designed to mitigate these systemic weaknesses. The Anchor Project is designed to result in better outcomes for families because its approach looks at the whole family, is led by family priorities, explores root causes of problems, and improves connections between families and existing services.

The expectation is that Anchor support helps families to avoid or halt a worsening situation, thereby reducing future harm to the family and supporting better family outcomes.

### A changing environment and a changing delivery model

The Anchor Project has evolved in its four-year lifetime. The Covid pandemic, swiftly followed by a cost-of-living crisis were significant and unforeseen events which have impacted on families. The Project has adapted to its own learning and in response to needs which have arisen due to the crises. The current range of family support services provided by the Anchor Project are described under three headings<sup>1</sup>:

- **Family-led planning and support** – an in-depth support service usually provided to a parent/carer and designed to deliver against the aim and rationale described above.
- **Enquiry response service** – guidance on a specific issue and/or signposting to other services. This is a lighter touch service also helping to mitigate some of the systemic weaknesses.
- **Crisis support** – a new and time-limited response service from Anchor to help families cope with external and universal shocks. This was an unforeseen role that grew in response to need.

In the most recent period, there has been an average of 2.2 FTE Project Officers delivering all three types of service. In the first two years, there were 1.4 FTE Project Officers.

### Impact on families

Over the duration of the Anchor Project, 67 different families have benefitted from the Family-led Planning and Support service, with some returning for follow-up support. The average time a Project Officer spends supporting a family is around 11 hours, including direct and indirect support. There is

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<sup>1</sup> These descriptions were developed to support evaluation analysis and reporting.

reassuring consistency in the evaluation findings on the impact of the Project on families across all three evaluations.

The findings show that the Family-led Planning and Support service provides supported individuals with confidence and a feeling of being more in control, and this appears key to the Project's and the family's success.

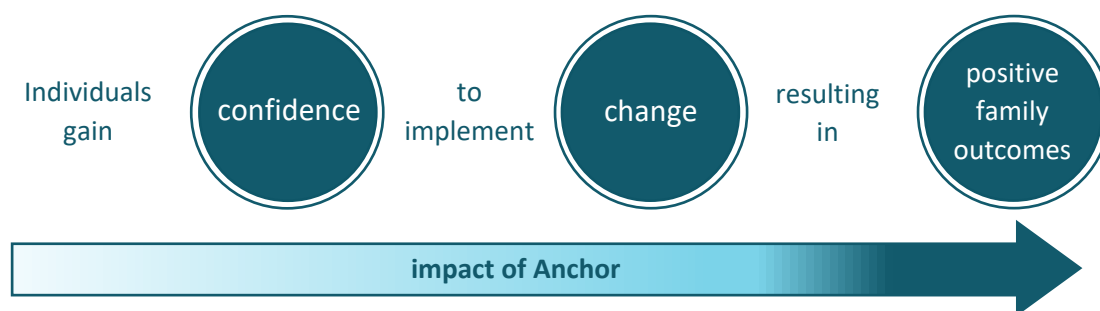
Findings from the second and third evaluations show that the individual often attributes this confidence boost and feeling of control to one or more of the following:

- they gain reassurance from being listened to;
- they realise that improving their situation is possible; and/or
- they feel supported to make a change.

An improvement in confidence and sense of control, and encouragement from the Project Officer, supports individuals to take actions or make changes that in hindsight most respondents do not believe they could have taken without Anchor support. The type of actions and changes include accessing practical support and benefits, better relationships with their child's school, pursuing new opportunities such as employment or training, and accessing new services and support.

The implemented changes often lead to benefits for the whole family. Common benefits include:

- improved financial circumstances for the family;
- a calmer and more settled family life, with family members experiencing less stress; and
- improvements in child's or children's wellbeing and behaviour.



When asked what it is about Anchor that helps them, one person appeared to sum up many of the comments by saying “someone to listen and get things moving”. Supported individuals commonly believe Anchor is effective because of the following characteristics: officers are friendly and approachable, the individual feels listened to, and they receive support to act.

The impact described is from research with families who have benefited from the Family-led Planning and Support service. There is more limited information on the impact of the other two services: the Enquiry Response Service and the Crisis Response Service. Monitoring data shows the Enquiry Response Service has supported 106 individuals with guidance and signposting since the Project commenced. Consultees suggest that the crisis response actions undertaken by Anchor have provided new knowledge and insights on current challenges for families and have given the Project a much higher profile locally, encouraging more engagement with the services. Since the crisis response service commenced, at the peak of demand, food parcels were being provided to 86 families and fuel vouchers to 45 families.

## A lasting impact?

The rationale for the Anchor Project's Family-led Planning and Support service is that it can help avoid or halt a worsening situation for families. It is therefore important to consider whether, after the support has ended, the family is on a different and better pathway. While it is relatively early to comprehensively judge long-term success, a case study in the main report offers encouraging evidence that for one family, family-based barriers to engagement with the wider support system have been overcome to the benefit of the family.

## Impact on the wider system

Given its ambitions, the Anchor Project could reasonably be expected to contribute to change in three areas associated with system and culture change: policy and strategy, language, and service design.

The Anchor Project, led by its Board, sponsored a person-centred vision in late 2020 describing how households in Shetland will be supported in the future. Consultees report that the language of this vision is in regular use in strategic meetings in Shetland. There is also a commitment to early action in Shetland Islands Council's current Corporate Plan. Both the vision and the Corporate Plan are potentially impactful although there is limited evidence they have trickled down to mainstream decision-making as yet, although the focused research activity for the evaluation may have missed some examples of success.

In terms of system change, of greatest consequence is the decision to evolve the family support activities of the Anchor Project into an expanded service called [Anchor for Families](#). The evolution of the Anchor Project into a new and expanded service is a convincing and significant sign of the Project's success in providing valuable and effective support to families.

Understandably, much of the Project effort in 2022 focused on creating Anchor for Families, the new service, and providing support to families during the cost-of-living crisis. However, this effort inevitably comes at a cost to other activity and consultees report there has been a reduction in effort at a partnership and strategic level – activity which was highly praised in the first and second evaluation. There may be a sense with the creation of Anchor for Families that the job of the Anchor Project has been completed, but some consultees feel differently. Consultees still believe there is work to be done and the following questions remain around the Project's impact on wider system change:

- How can learning from the Anchor Project be used to influence service design in established services?
- How can system change and the introduction of new services such as Anchor for Families be managed in a more cohesive manner?

## Learning, observations, and recommendations for Anchor for Families

The Anchor Project's evolution into Anchor for Families means that observations and issues raised by consultees could be used to inform development of the new service. There are three areas where feedback has been turned into recommendations: clarity of role, value for money, and robust and efficient processes and systems.

### Clarity of role

The blurred line between the Anchor Project and Anchor for Families has added complexity to the evaluation process, and this uncertainty is echoed in comments from all types of consultee. There is a sense from consultees that Anchor is at another crossroads where confusion is emerging amongst Board members, staff, and partner agencies, and this creates longer-term risks for the service. The following recommendations are made around clarity of role:

- Review and clearly specify the intended outcomes from Anchor for Families, and particularly who and where the target beneficiaries are, and how they are expected to benefit.
- Clearly describe the range of activities Anchor for Families will deliver to achieve the intended outcomes, and under which circumstances these activities will be delivered. It can also be useful to state activity which Anchor for Families will seek to avoid delivering.
- Describe how Anchor for Families fits into the wider system of universal and specialist support services, including other new and similar services.

### Value for money

Until now Anchor's success has been judged on whether it met project objectives set for it as a learning and development project and, against these original objectives, the Anchor Project has been a success. However, the value for money calculation will change now that Anchor can be viewed as a new service and in receipt of funding that could feasibly be spent elsewhere in Shetland. The following recommendations are made:

- Develop a new logic model for Anchor for Families that shows how investment is linked to action and improved family outcomes.
- Define and agree the wider systemic benefit expected from Anchor support, for example fewer social work referrals, and put in place standards and processes which can be used to reliably measure impact over time. Establishing a baseline is also recommended.
- Collect feedback from supported families by building in efficient monitoring and evaluation to the everyday activity of Project Officers. Investigate adding feedback checkpoints to the Anchor process for Family-led Planning and Support interventions.

### Robust, efficient, and effective processes

Anchor's success is commonly attributed to the people who have been managing and delivering it. A small initiative can work well with relatively informal systems and processes, often wholly reliant on direct communication between people. As initiatives grow, assuring the same success will usually require more formalised systems and processes. Challenges encountered when the Anchor Project expanded to include additional staff have already led to some improvements such as the creation of a senior coordinator and formal supervision activities with officers. The following recommendations are made to support robust processes:

- Review current Anchor processes and identify where time consuming and low skill activity is tying up valuable resource.
- More automated data sharing is expected to be one key target for improvement, benefiting both Anchor and other services. The recommendation is to appraise existing Council information systems to understand the pros and cons of utilising different systems.
- Once the above recommendations have been implemented, evaluate the options for improved process and system efficiency and their associated costs and benefits.

### Summary

The Anchor Project was given the space and time to make a difference to families, and it has. Anchor has shown that meaningful change for families can be achieved through a service delivery model that is approachable, flexible, and led by family priorities. It has also demonstrated that positive family outcomes can come from small interventions. Compelling evidence of its success is the transition of the family support element of the Project into a new service Anchor for Families.

The Anchor Project, and those who champion it, have also significantly impacted wider discussion around a more person and family-led approach to service delivery, a change also supported by Government policy and other local initiatives. More widespread system change will take time, and will be challenging, but there are still opportunities for the Anchor Project and its Board to benefit a wider change process. Therefore, as the Project reaches its conclusion, it will be important to synthesise the learning gained, both good and bad, to ensure it can be communicated in a meaningful way to those who continue to pursue a more person and family-led system of support.