

Fairer Futures Partnerships Spotlight Session: Sharing Learning and Telling Stories

Learning Report



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In partnership with the Scottish Government, the Improvement Service are supporting colleagues delivering Fairer Future Partnerships (FFPs) with sharing learning, facilitating opportunities for peer support and collaboration around approaches, opportunities and challenges.

Part of this support includes a series of Spotlight Sessions, focused on bringing FFP colleagues together around specific themes identified as priorities by FFPs and partners, to share approaches and learning. The November session focused on Sharing Learning and Telling Stories with presentations from West Dunbartonshire and East Ayrshire. The session explored how FFPs are sharing learning from their work, the approaches they're taking to storytelling and considered the importance of storytelling in influencing policy, practice, and community engagement. This learning report offers you the chance to familiarise yourself with key learning gathered from the session.

You can watch the presentations here and access slides in the [resource pack](#), or via the links highlighted throughout the report.

About the Improvement Service

The Improvement Service (IS) is the go-to organisation for local government improvement in Scotland. Established in 2005, the IS supports councils and their partners to deliver better outcomes for communities, reduce inequalities, and achieve efficiencies.

We do this through leading transformation, building capacity and capability for improvement across the sector, supporting collaboration to tackle shared challenges, providing data and intelligence to inform policy and decision-making, and delivering national shared service applications and technology platforms.

Our expertise covers a wide range of areas including digital public services, performance measurement and benchmarking, transformation and change management, workforce and skills development, planning and place-based approaches, economy and employability, poverty and inequalities, and climate change.

For more information, visit our website: www.improvementservice.org.uk

Understanding and Definitions

What do we mean when we talk about sharing learning and telling stories?

We reflected on our understanding of storytelling: why it's important to ensure we have a clear and consistent understanding of what we mean by sharing learning and telling stories, and that we have a collective understanding of the purpose behind them and how they are beneficial to this work.

A key part of the FFP approach is to embed a culture of iterative learning and storytelling. This can help us reflect on and evidence what's happening as we undertake complex systems change work.

Learning and stories in this context could include:

- **The anecdotal data/intelligence/stories** from people involved in and/ or impacted by any of your FFP's work (e.g., individuals, communities, staff). This could be people sharing their lived experience of accessing services, or working within services. This is likely not captured in data or reporting mechanisms, or formal or published reports/ evaluations.
- **Ongoing, iterative learning** from your FFP about your approach, barriers and challenges, opportunities and enablers, and the strategic and operational work in planning and delivering your FFP.
- **Telling your FFP's broader story of change**, e.g., what was the impetus for this work, where did you start, what is the ambition and intended outcomes, what's been the key learning, what does progress and impact look like over the short, medium and long term.
- **Existing data/reporting mechanisms** locally/nationally that can help your FFP evidence progress and impact.

Why share learning and tell stories?

This could be to support:

- **Strengthening learning in your FFP** to continually influence your planning and delivery and understand where you're making progress and having an impact, and where some of the blockers might be.
- **Strengthening understanding internally** in your organisation and partner organisations locally about the FFP and its ambitions, progress and impact, to develop buy-in and commitment.
- **Sharing learning with other FFPs** with other FFPs and local areas to share approaches, collaboratively tackle any common challenges, and celebrate successes.
- **Sharing the progress and impact** of this work with your communities, to support relationship building, engagement with services/systems, and recognise achievements.

- **Strengthening a culture of collaboration**, locally and nationally, to highlight where we're working to shared outcomes across services, systems, policy areas and funding streams.
- **Supporting a culture shift** away from reliance on only quantitative data and shifting decision makers' understanding of what data, stories, learning and intelligence matters and is valued.
- **Sharing learning, progress and impact** as we go, rather than at the "end".
- **Feeding into local decision making and national policymaking**, and influencing wider systems change.

Opening Reflections

Attendees were asked to share their views on what they want to share about their FFP's story, how confident they are in telling the story of progress and impact, what are they capturing well locally and what is a challenge, and what they hoped to gain from the session.

What one thing do you want to get across most when sharing your FFP's story?



How confident are you in your FFP's approach to collecting learning and telling stories within and about your FFP?



What kind of learning are you capturing well locally in your FFP and what are you struggling with?

In terms of collating and sharing learning and stories, FFPs highlighted that:

- Positive impact of the work for individuals is being captured well, particularly through case studies and impact stories.
- There is growing confidence across FFPs in using tools to support journey mapping and capturing parts of the system using different approaches.

- Challenges include:
 - o Capturing the voices of lived experience in an impactful way, gathering and embedding feedback from people accessing services, and reflecting frontline learning, and how to best make use of those stories.
 - o Quantifying impact, particularly around long-term systems change work remains challenging to evidence.
 - o There is no standardised data model across FFPs as there is no “one-size-fits-all approach”, so how best to quantify progress and impact towards shared outcomes.
 - o How to best demonstrate value for money with this work and to ensure this work is understood as long term, rather than short-term tests of change or delivery of specific services/ interventions.
 - o Capturing the broader story of change for an FFP can be challenging.

What are you hoping to learn about today?

- Participants were keen to learn about what other areas are doing, particularly in terms of methods for capturing experiences; systematic approaches to data collection; using an evaluation/ impact framework; how stories are shared once captured; and what kinds of stories and learning have had the most immediate impact.

Key Messages

A number of key themes around sharing learning and telling stories were identified during the session:

- Strengthening narratives around FFPs, systems change and public service reform:
 - **There's a need to think about different kinds of learning, storytelling and evidence in the context of FFPs**, systems change and public service reform—how can we combine people's stories, quantitative data and broader narrative to clearly evidence the need for change, and the progress and impact of that change.
 - **Evidencing the need for, and progress and impact of systems change** remains challenging, particularly in the current context of short-term funding, siloed working, and pressures for “quick wins”.
- Storytelling and developing an evidence base:
 - **Collaboration through trusted partnerships strengthens storytelling**, with learning partners (e.g., from third sector, academia, etc) supporting FFPs with framing impactful stories and providing a neutral perspective on systems change work.
 - **Values-based service models can help** services gather and develop authentic stories as whole-family, dignity-driven models not only improve support but also generate impactful stories.
 - **Innovative, impactful storytelling** can be achieved through a number of methods, including case studies, composite stories, and personas, each making the voices of lived experience meaningful and compelling for policymakers.
 - **Case studies help bridge measurement gaps**, where traditional quantitative performance frameworks struggle to capture people's holistic and long-term outcomes, making case studies a valuable alternative for illustrating impact and influencing policy.
 - **Sharing qualitative evidence through case studies and storytelling** is powerful but resource-intensive, requiring significant time and effort.

What's Been Working Well?

We heard from East Ayrshire and West Dunbartonshire about their approach to sharing learning and telling people's stories within and outwith their FFP, and throughout the discussion we heard about what's been working well across other FFP areas.

Collaboration in Storytelling

Participants highlighted the importance of trusted collaboration to support the framing and narration of high-quality, high-impact stories to evidence the need for and impact of change.

- West Dunbartonshire is working with the Poverty Alliance to strengthen their storytelling and lived experience work, and with the University of Glasgow on developing composite stories.
- East Ayrshire partners with Yipworld, a community charity offering practical and emotional support through a family-centred approach, working at the family's pace and building trust through word of mouth and low-barrier access. Capturing the experiences of families helps tell a story about the need for culture and systems change and the importance of co-production in shaping support. They prioritise dignity and ensure families consent to their story being told, with the option to be as involved in storytelling as they wish.
- Using methods like composite stories and case studies helps demonstrate the complexities of people's lives and of navigating systems in ways that quantitative data often cannot do.
- In discussion, participants highlighted the value of having learning partners who help capture broader systems change alongside collating stories from individuals accessing services, offering a neutral perspective and a broader, "helicopter" view beyond operational detail.

Mixed-methods Approach to Capturing the Voices of Lived Experience

Participants discussed how their FFP is developing ways to capture and communicate the voices of lived experience meaningfully, with different methods suited to different contexts. These approaches not only provide insight into individual experiences but also help illustrate the complexity of systems and where change is needed.

- East Ayrshire use individual case studies to demonstrate how multiple issues reaching across various policy areas—including housing, ASN, employability—intersect and require holistic solutions. The stories tangibly highlight barriers and enablers within the system.
- West Dunbartonshire have been capturing the voices of lived experience through interviews and surveys, aiming to create personas that demonstrate the impact of approaches developed as part of the FFP, and the need for wider systemic support for families affected by poverty and justice involvement. They are also working with the

University of Glasgow Centre for Public Policy to build composite stories, combining data and the voices of lived experience to create fictional personas that reveal systemic challenges and opportunities for change. This is also a key opportunity to include individuals' values and ambitions, rather than only focusing on challenges.

- Participants highlighted how case studies and composite stories can provide decision makers with different perspectives, see a broader view of the system and where the opportunities are for change. The aim is to change decision makers' approaches to key issues.
- Fife reflected on work they carried out as part of collaborative action research with What Works Scotland around how we share data between partners to prevent sanctions. They developed vignettes and produced [guidance](#) on how to do this, offering another method for telling stories that highlight systemic issues.

Tools for Systems Change

In discussion, participants shared practical tools and approaches that support telling the story of complex systems change.

- One participant shared a personal guide for navigating systems change, with rules such as “stay alive, don't work uphill - if something feels difficult, find another way”, and recognising that innovation needs a good idea, supportive allies, and sparks across different parts of the system. They reflected on the personal costs and vulnerability involved in this work, noting that it requires bravery to take risks while also celebrating successes and telling the story of why the effort matters.
- Inverclyde are developing journey maps that show where people enter the system and where there are opportunities for improving services, systems and processes. Initially completed from a professional perspective, they plan to involve community members to capture stories with greater depth. This approach aims to illustrate systems change by highlighting what could have been done differently. They acknowledged they are still learning how to do this but see it as an interesting way to gather qualitative data and tell the story of change.
- Participants shared the [Public Health Scotland Prioritise Child Poverty approach](#) as a useful tool for supporting systems-focused work.
- Clackmannanshire Council reflected that bringing much of their work under the “Family Wellbeing Partnership” umbrella helps create a coherent narrative of change across programmes supporting improved outcomes for children, young people, and families.

What are the Challenges?

Quantifying Outcomes

Participants reflected that outcomes such as improved wellbeing cannot be easily measured or quantified through traditional metrics or in short periods of time.

- Participants highlighted that while case studies can demonstrate the complexity of families' circumstances and the value of holistic support, these narratives do not fit easily into performance frameworks that prioritise quantitative data. This creates a challenge for evidencing impact of systems change work such as that of the FFPs. Case studies offer an alternative to quantitative metrics, but the challenge is in ensuring decision makers value qualitative data.

Resource-Intensive Evidence Gathering

Participants noted that while case studies provide rich insight, the process of creating them is highly resource-intensive and difficult to scale.

- Participants reflected on the significant time and resource required in building strong evidence through case studies. Whilst these narratives provide rich insight into families' experiences, this work requires a 'labour of love' as it's difficult to carry out this process with every family who are all looking for different kinds of support. East Ayrshire highlighted that they work on building a relationship with the family to build up trust. As part of developing a family's story, they will seek the views of the family, of the partners, gather quotes, and take photos of the circumstances the family were in. This creates a challenge for scaling storytelling and embedding it as a routine part of systems change work.

Balancing Privacy and Anonymity in Storytelling

Participants discussed the ethical and practical challenges of storytelling.

- Participants discussed the challenge of deciding when to use real names in case studies. While celebrating individuals who are comfortable being named can be positive, anonymity is often necessary to protect privacy.
- The group agreed that the most suitable approach may be a combination of named stories and anonymised composite stories, noting that both methods are powerful for conveying impact and supporting systems change narratives.

Challenges around Evidencing Progress and Impact of Systems Change

Participants noted that the system still prioritises investment in short-term crisis support. Structural issues such as siloed budgets, temporary funding, and a lack of joined-up prevention-focused work hinders efforts to embed and demonstrate lasting systems change.

- Participants reflected that evidencing the progress and impact of systems change is difficult because often the context in which we are working – through funding, culture and decision making – focuses on short-term service delivery, projects or initiatives, rather than transforming how the system works. They reflected that the aim to change practice by putting people at the centre is becoming harder as financial pressures push organisations back to traditional ways of working. There is a need to show evidence of positive impact to keep stakeholders and decision makers engaged and maintain the narrative that this is about long-term change, not short-term interventions at crisis point.
- Participants highlighted the need for support across the FFPs in developing a consistent and compelling narrative around whole systems change and the continuing need to prioritise prevention and early intervention at a time of increased pressure on budgets. Participants highlighted that there is lots of temporary innovation and change work, and investment is being made in shifting from crisis to prevention, but much of the innovation funding is temporary and distinct. This means systems change work is siloed in itself and isn't joined up to be able to evidence cumulative impact.
- Participants highlighted that we have a wealth of evidence around what works in supporting families—e.g., person centred, holistic, etc—from multiple pilots and tests of change, but that FFPs (and beyond) need a stronger narrative that centres systems change as the work for all policy areas, and a narrative that challenges the 'as is' system to prioritise outcomes, rather than funding and regulations.

Speaker Inputs and Slides

East Ayrshire

East Ayrshire shared how their approach has helped them develop impactful case studies focused on individual families.

[Watch East Ayrshire's presentation](#) and [access the slides](#) here.



Case Study: Family C – East Ayrshire

Family C is made up of a 34-year-old lone parent mum, with two young daughters aged 16 and 8. The younger child had been diagnosed with ADHD, and the 16-year-old recently left school early without qualifications, putting a financial burden on family. The mum moved from England to Scotland in January 2025, initially planning to stay at a friend's house. However, they ended up staying with an acquaintance in East Ayrshire. Their living conditions included one bedroom for her and her children, leaving them struggling with little space. They were struggling financially and couldn't afford to rent a private let, didn't have any family in the area, and had no access to homelessness accommodation as they hadn't lived there long enough to qualify.

The acquaintance they were living with then brought another adult into the house, leaving them even more tight for space, and the mum became concerned for the safety of her two girls. They became aware of previous rent arrears accrued in England despite never having missed the payment of £850 per month in rent. The family's circumstances were dire, and they had to endure living there for a period of time.

The mum reached out to YipWorld who supported her with multiple aspects of her situation, including liaising around housing, finding furniture, sourcing ASN support for the younger child, and employability support for the older girl.

Now, the family are living in a new house which has been furnished through community donations, except for their flooring and blinds which was covered by their Scottish Welfare Fund application.

From the family's perspective, this support has made a huge difference to their lives and improved their living conditions tremendously.

West Dunbartonshire

West Dunbartonshire develop composite stories to help tell families' stories and evidence the what changes to the system are required to improve people's outcomes.

[Watch West Dunbartonshire's presentation](#) and [access the slides](#) here.



Composite Stories – West Dunbartonshire

Composite stories are a policy tool used to narrate people's experiences, and in this case, experiences of child poverty. Personas are developed to encapsulate a holistic story reflecting common, or uncommon, experiences felt by a multitude of people, not just one person. The stories are made up of real insights from quantitative personal information as well as qualitative lived experience expressing the complexity of people's lives, and are turned into personas, or fictional characters. In creating a realistic, holistic story that provides context and explores the challenges people face, it highlights the myriad of policy domains involved, and public bodies encountered, across many people's experiences.

The purpose behind the composite stories is to develop a tool that can be used in policy labs to help demonstrate people's experiences to policymakers, with the intention to generate a greater understanding and form solutions that will tackle the issues at play. Using these personas can give a decision maker a different perspective, a chance to step outside of the part in which they work to get a broader view of how it works, where it feels and where the opportunities are for change.

This approach is new to West Dunbartonshire, who are used to writing case studies based on an individual. In contrast to case studies which tend to use emotive language through hard-hitting stories, these composite stories tell the story of groups of people using raw data, allowing the story to come through in an impactful way. Examples of composite stories in use include those developed with Adaptation Scotland and Kent Trust in helping understand the impact of climate change on the local community.

There has been brilliant feedback showing how impactful it has been in changing approach to the challenge of storytelling.

IS Offer of Support to FFPs

What could our support look like for your FFP?

We know this isn't a one size fits all approach, as each FFP has different priorities, different local context and is at a different point in the journey.

- **Supporting you to identify what works best for your FFP in terms of collating and using your learning and telling stories** – what processes/structures do you need in place to best do this? How do you build this into your FFP wherever you are in your journey? What kinds of learning, data and stories will best support planning, delivery and understanding progress and impact?
- **Supporting your FFP to work through any identified barriers/challenges** around this part of the work.
- **Supporting your FFP to identify what existing reporting mechanisms and data already exist** locally/nationally to help you understand and articulate your FFP's progress and impact.
- **Supporting your FFP to develop outputs** that capture learning, stories and evidence. Outputs could include: storytelling, case studies, infographics, short thematic reports, blogs, etc.
- Where relevant, **supporting developing a consistency of approach** to how we share learning and stories from FFP work across Scotland, and building the broader narrative around FFPs, systems change and public service reform.

Please get in touch!

Contact us

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