Two Years of Learning:

HALN enters its third year

The Health Anchors Learning Network (HALN) launched in February 2021, with funding from the Health Foundation and NHS England. HALN set out to explore how organisations might begin to develop as an anchor, with particular focus on collaborating with partners and creating the right conditions for success. The aims of HALN included helping health anchor organisations and systems develop practice and innovation, sharing learning and realising the anchor ambitions of the NHS; especially those relating to enhancing the social determinants of health and reducing inequalities.

Over the last two years we focussed on delivering a range of learning related activities and outputs for the network, which has included:

- Building a network of over 1,600 enthusiastic anchor colleagues
- Hosting over 25 public events on key anchor topics, which reached over 1500 attendees across the United Kingdom
- Creating 30 high-quality anchor learning products, resources and blogs
- Running 5 action learning sets for organisations, to support work in practice
- Engaging with the wider health anchor community on platforms including Twitter, LinkedIn, FutureNHS and through a monthly newsletter

As we reflect on the insights gleaned through this work, we have identified five areas which stand out as markers of just how much the field of anchor organisations has grown over the past two years, and drawn out the implications this has for our work as the network moves into its next phase.

1. The growth of the anchor movement
2. Maturing anchor programmes
3. Measuring anchor impact
4. Key elements of successful anchor programmes
5. The needs of the anchor community.

The growth of the anchor movement

The anchor movement in the UK has grown significantly over the past two years as anchor organisations have reflected on the importance of their role in tackling health inequalities for their communities.

We have seen a growing demand for resources and access to learning to help anchors deepen their impact. This growth signals the renewed focus of organisations tackling post-pandemic health inequalities, their desire to contribute to inclusive and sustainable economies, and cross-sector drive towards place based working and service integration.

The anchor movement continues to grow, attracting new organisations at the beginning of their anchor journey including:

1. Health organisations and Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) that want to increase their impact in the local community and support the NHS to contribute to broader social and economic development – this includes emerging anchor activity in primary care and the ambulance sector.
2. Health organisations that are already doing similar work but are new to the anchor approach and looking to become more intentional by creating an anchor programme with specific aims and objectives.
3. Non-health organisations with deep community connections that are doing similar work and looking to partner with health organisations for greater impact.

Maturing anchor programmes

Some anchor organisations are making rapid progress and we're beginning to see great examples of mature, impactful anchor programmes emerging across the UK. When the network first started many anchor organisations were at an early stage in their anchor journey and had seen the benefits of using some of their existing anchor strategies (such as procurement or workforce) to try and take action on health inequalities. The maturing of the field over the past few years has seen these isolated initiatives evolve into more comprehensive organisation-wide anchor strategies with new resourcing, stronger partnerships, impact measurement frameworks and board level support.

There are a growing number of recent [case studies](#) that highlight the 'inspiring and promising' anchor activities happening across the UK.

Measuring anchor impact

As anchor programmes mature there is an increasing focus on understanding the impact their activity is having and the changes that their work is making to benefit their local community. Good measurement enables organisations to review progress, identify areas for intervention, develop plans, increase stakeholder transparency and inspire further action across the organisation or system. Some anchors within the network have developed exciting approaches to measurement, creating their own indicators and impact dashboards. But, overall, this remains an area in need of further development and is one of the areas that anchor organisations struggle with the most.

In the coming year, we will work with partners to support the development of metrics and guidance for anchor impact, which over time could build to national-level impact measurement.

Key elements of successful anchor programmes

Through HALN, we have observed the common conditions that need to be in place to support a successful and sustainable anchor approach. These include:

- **Long-term commitment of funding** and resources to drive anchor work forward and ownership at various levels in the organisation, including a named anchor lead who can connect different parts of work across an organisation or system.
- **Acknowledging and supporting existing initiatives** within the organisation which can contribute to an anchor mission, such as existing social value procurement projects or workforce development initiatives.
- **The active support and sponsorship of senior leaders**: this is crucial to being intentional about adopting an anchor mission, shepherding culture change towards an 'anchor mindset' and facilitating system level anchor working

- **An ambitious vision and regular communications** to share successes and engage partners in the work. Anchor work is long term work, so celebrating successes along the way is crucial to sustaining buy in.
- **A clear set of objectives** for the anchor work, and real intentionality with how different parts of the organisation are working to achieve these objectives.
- **Carefully managed risk** to support a 'get up and go attitude' to anchor work throughout the organisation.

The needs of the anchor community

Through network events, learning sets and our engagement with the wider anchor community we have become aware of the changing needs that anchor organisations across the UK have. These vary depending on the starting point of each anchor, and also on the evolution of the new structures that are becoming more established at a place based level following the creation of ICSs. Three large areas of need we have identified, which will shape our offer over the next year, include:

1. An increased focus on the 'anchor system', to help define the role of ICS[1] as a central and stabilising force for anchor organisations. This might include an understanding of how ICSs can use their influence to bring together organisations and partners to work towards common anchor goals or use their resources to invest in initiatives that support the health and well-being of the community.
2. The inclusion of more local partners within local communities who are able to directly support social determinants of health, such as local authorities and housing associations.
3. The need for the network to support those who are further along in their anchor journey, innovating and learning alongside them, as well as continuing to engage those who are taking their first steps with some of the existing resources we have. The potential for peer learning is huge as the movement grows, and a big part of our role is helping to connect anchors with each other so they can draw inspiration and learning from their work and maintain the energy and commitment they have shown to deepening their anchor work.

As we look to a third year of HALN, we're excited to continue to engage with anchor organisations just joining the movement and those who have been with us for some time. We can't wait to see the life-changing work that many of you will deliver in the coming year.

Get in touch: hello@haln.org.uk

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[1] Integrated Care System