

Evaluation of the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund: Learning Update 1 - Revisiting the Programme Theory of Change

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Evaluation of the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund: Learning Update

Revisiting the Programme Theory of Change

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Introduction

The Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (EANF) is a joint funding initiative from the Early Action Funders Alliance, a collaboration of funders from different sectors with an interest in supporting early action approaches. The Big Lottery Fund, Comic Relief and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation have invested collectively £5.25m to support three pilot projects which are testing early and preventative action approaches in different areas of public services.¹ The Fund is overseen by a steering group which comprises representatives of the three funding organisations, alongside the Legal Education Foundation and the Barrow Cadbury Trust. Further information on the EANF can be found at <http://www.earlyactionfund.org/>

The learning and evaluation contract is being delivered by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University. The evaluation is designed to help grant holders and the EANF steering group

members identify what has worked well and why in local approaches to early action and preventative services, so that successful approaches can be scaled or replicated. Over the longer term, the EANF's primary aims are to catalyse change and to influence the way that local statutory funders allocate resources towards, and delivery services to promote early action. This involves collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative data to:

- » Understand the effectiveness of EANF pilot projects, why they worked and under what circumstances, identifying key factors within the projects' Theory of Change models that facilitate a shift toward early action.
- » Understand the impact the projects have, why they worked, and under what circumstances, both in terms of improved outcomes for service users, and in cost savings or efficiencies.
- » Generate robust evidence that will help grant holders to deliver successful projects, and to demonstrate the case for early action as well as

¹ The pilot projects are the Healthy Relationships Project in Hartlepool; the Early Action Mental Health project in Norwich; and the Ignite project in Coventry. Full details of the pilot projects were included in the Year One evaluation report.

the transformation in service delivery required to achieve it.

- » Understand what has and has not worked in the design and delivery of the EANF programme, and the conditions of funding that are most supportive and conducive to this type of transformation in service delivery.

During 2017/18 the Evaluation Team has spent a considerable amount of time working with the EANF funders and the three funded projects to revisit the programme’s theory of change. This learning update provides a summary of that process and presents an updated theory of change to guide the evaluation moving forward.

The original EANF ‘straw man’ theory of change

Figure 1 outlines a ‘Straw Man’ Theory of Change for the EANF programme, produced by the programme steering group and NPC in the development phase of the programme.

The theory of change mapped out a logical linear process through which it was anticipated that EANF projects would facilitate change through early action. This involved a series of broad assumptions, as follows:

- » First, that EANF projects would engage in and/or deliver activities that could be broadly defined as ‘early action’.
- » Second, that these activities, over an unspecified timeframe (but assumed to be within

the five year timeframe of the programme), would lead to a reduction in ‘preventable need’.

- » Third, that this reduction in preventable need would lead to reductions in spending on acute services.
- » Finally, reductions in preventable need and associated spending could be identified through evaluation, including the factors associated with those reductions, and that the resulting evidence base would provide a strong case for increased spending on early action within the pilot areas and more widely.

What was wrong with the old theory of change?

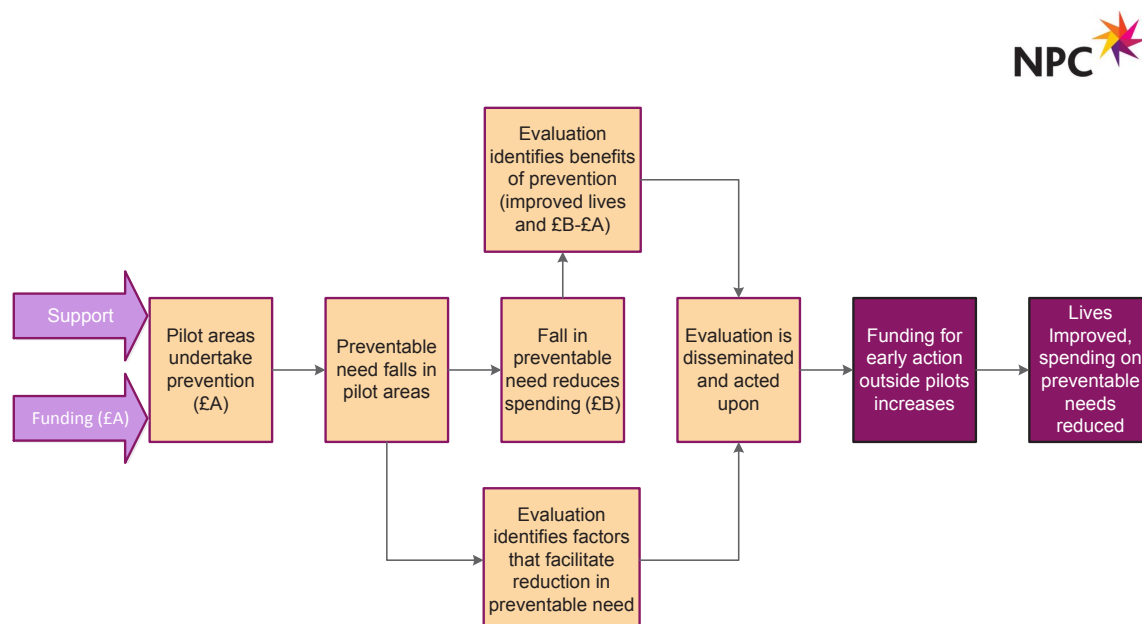
During the first three years of the evaluation it has become clear that the original theory of change no longer reflected the Evaluation Team’s and funded projects’ experience of delivering early action and that a number of the assumptions were open to challenge. This limited the usefulness of the theory of change for evaluating the EANF programme.

Some of those challenges to the underlying assumptions in the original ‘straw man’ theory of change are outlined below.

1) That the pilot projects will undertake early action

A review of the theory and practice of early action undertaken in year one of the evaluation identified a lack of consensus and clarity on what constitutes early action, and argued that prevention can include

Figure 1: Original ‘straw man’ theory of change for EANF



a range of responses: from universal approaches which aim to prevent problems occurring in the first place (upstream); through those which target high risk groups or individuals with a view to preventing problems intensifying or increasing (midstream) to those which intervene once a problem has occurred to stop it getting worse or to redress a situation (downstream).

The three pilot projects funded through EANF programme are delivering a variety of approaches that fall within these categorisations. As such, it makes sense for EANF theory of change, and subsequent evaluation activity, to adopt a broad definition of early action to encompass a variety of interventions that are preventative, rather than reactive (as many other public services are).

2) That EANF funded activities lead to a fall in need in the pilot areas, which is both identifiable and measurable

Earlier evaluation reporting has highlighted some of the complexities associated with identifying 'need': it may be universal, covering whole communities; or focussed, affecting particular individuals or groups in a community; and it may vary geographically and over time. This complexity creates challenges for the EANF pilots in identifying and measuring need in the context of the interventions they are providing, and in attributing positive reduction need to their work. Each EANF pilot has altered their approach to measuring impact as they have developed their understanding of the possibilities and limitations of measuring outcomes at individual and population levels. Often this has meant being less ambitious about the range of outcomes being measured, the types of data accessed,² and the level of analysis undertaken. At least two of the projects have also engaged in more qualitative research than initially planned, to both supplement and enhance their quantitative data.

3) That a reduction in need leads to a reduction in spending on acute services

There is uncertainty around the degree to which the EANF pilots will be able to demonstrate monetisable benefits linked to their interventions. This depends on evidence of reduced need which can be plausibly linked to their early action activities. For some measures of need - such as the numbers of looked after children, or reductions in numbers of voids in social rented properties - there may be clear monetisable benefits if positive change occurs. However, it may not be possible

to monetise the more 'intangible' impacts of the EANF pilots, in particular activities associated with changing the culture and practice of public services.

A further consideration when assessing whether reductions in preventable need can lead to reductions in spending is the financial context facing local public sector bodies as a result of central Government austerity measures. In the face of long term year-on-year cuts to their budgets most local public sector bodies are having to reduce spending regardless of need (including in areas where it continues to rise). In this context the idea that reduction in need can be linked to a reduction in spending is open to question.

4a) That evaluation will identify the mechanisms through which the EANF pilots lead to a reduction in preventable need.

This will require evidence on the ways in which the EANF pilots have collaborated with key local partners to influence changes in services leading to reductions in need. Key factors will include the types of interventions being delivered, and to whom; but also changes to cultures, systems and practices in services. The EANF programme has characterised the latter as working towards systems change, but there are differences between the pilots and funders in terms of the conceptualisation and operation of systems change at the local level. Crucially, it is not yet clear how (or indeed if) these changes will lead to reductions in demand, or over what timescales we would expect changes to occur.

4b) That the EANF evaluation evidence base will provide a strong case for increased spending on early action with the pilot areas and more widely

Challenges around the evidence base for early action (discussed earlier) notwithstanding, the idea that local public bodies have the financial capacity to increase spending on early action is open to question. In the context of large year-on-year budget cuts it seems unlikely that public spending on early action will increase, certainly in the short term. In reality, 'success' might mean the preservation of existing early action funding, or the protection of early action budgets from the most severe local authority cuts.

A further reflection on the original theory of change was that it didn't give sufficient emphasis to the 'systems change' and wider collaborative and partnership work being undertaken by each project.

² EANF projects have encountered challenges accessing the public sector data needed to understand need and measure outcomes

This work began prior to the EANF funding being awarded and intensified during the early phase of the programme, including prior to any interventions being delivered. It has also continued and evolved as each project has developed, and remains an important strand of activity that runs parallel to and in conjunction with the delivery of early action interventions. Capturing the importance of this work was a key objective for the revised theory of change.

The process for updating the theory of change

In light of these challenges to the theory of change the Evaluation Team undertook a process of updating it to better reflect the work of the three pilot projects:

- » First, in December 2017 we held a workshop during which the existing theory of change was debated and discussed with representatives of the three projects.
- » Next, the Evaluation Team combined the workshop feedback with a review of the evidence collected during the first half of the evaluation to produce a revised theory of change.
- » Finally, the draft theory of change was presented to the funders and pilot projects during a Learning Event in May 2018, followed by a workshop and discussion about additional changes and revisions that needed to be made.

During this process it was agreed that developing a revised theory of change for the EANF programme was a complex undertaking due the differences between the three pilot projects and the complex nature of the work being undertaken. As such it was agreed that the theory of change should be a working document around which there is some consensus between the Evaluation Team, funders and pilot projects. Inevitably, anything which seeks to distil three complex projects into an overarching theory will be simplification, but it is intended that this will provide a guiding framework which can be revisited and revised as the evaluation progresses, ensuring that it remains 'fit for purpose'.

At this stage, the theory of change necessarily includes a number of assumptions around the activities being undertaken by the funded pilots and the outcomes these will have for people and communities and for the system: testing these

assumptions and the relative importance of different mechanisms for change will be the focus of future evaluation activity.

An updated theory of change for EANF

Components of the EANF theory of change

The revised theory of change recognises a number of components of EANF activity, two of which are central to project delivery:

1. Delivering early action projects: this relates to the delivery of early action interventions.
2. Working towards systems change: this relates to the work that early action projects undertaken in parallel with and in addition to their interventions.

The remaining components complement and interact with these two central components throughout the delivery of an EANF project:

3. EANF funding: this recognises the importance of EANF grants in enabling the development and delivery of early action projects.
4. Evaluation and data: this emphasises the role of evaluation and data analysis as part and parcel early action projects, informing development and delivery as part of an ongoing process.
5. Experience and learning: this recognises the importance of the experiences of key stakeholders, and wider learning gained within and beyond an early action project, as key factors in shaping its development and delivery.

The theory of change also recognises that delivering an EANF project is a complex undertaking. Firstly, the compositional and dynamic nature of outcomes, which can be affected by a variety of uncontrollable, interdependent and mutually reinforcing external factors which may also be subject to external influences, shocks or crises. Secondly, the experiential nature of outcomes, which can differ markedly in how they are experienced by different service users.³ Finally, the often fragmented nature of services and interventions which can be competing or complimentary, which means outcomes often lie across and beyond service or organisational boundaries, meaning appropriate service response must be capable of mobilising a multi-stakeholder response.

³ See for example French, M, and Lowe, T (2018) The wickedness of public service outcomes: why we need a new public management paradigm. Paper presented at the XXII IRSPM Annual Conference 11-13 April 2018, Edinburgh.

Stages of the EANF theory of change

The revised theory of change aims to capture the way that each component exists and interacts across four distinct stages of project activity.

Stage 1: Pre funding

This stage recognises the work required to develop an early action project prior to any funding being awarded. Each of the EANF funded pilots had undertaken considerable work to develop their approach to early action and to lay the foundations for systems change prior to EANF funding opportunity becoming available.

For the delivery component this included having a clearly identified target population for their early action intervention and a good understanding of the nature and consequences of preventable need associated with this population. It also required projects to have developed a credible evidence-based intervention (or series of interventions) and to have secured buy-in from key stakeholders to support the implementation of the intervention.

For the systems change component it was important that each EANF pilot had a pre-existing relationship with the system that they were seeking to change, either through delivering projects and services through statutory funding, ongoing involvement in cross-sector collaboration or partnership working, or advocacy work on behalf of client groups that the intervention was intended to benefit.

All three pilots made effective use of existing evaluation, data and evidence and their own experience and learning from prior work with similar clients and with parts of the system they work seeking to change.

Stage 2: Project initiation and development

This stage recognises the importance of allowing time for an early action project to become embedded once funding has been awarded. In practice this means allowing time for projects to pilot and refine their intervention and to create the conditions in which systems change might be possible.

For the delivery component each funded pilot devoted considerable time to finalising the interventions that formed their early action delivery model and ensuring that these were embedded and integrated within the system(s) in which they were being delivered and in which the project was

seeking to effect change. This phase also involved developing an approach to evaluating service delivery, including the development of appropriate outcomes, indicators and data collection tools.

For the systems change component this stage can be broken down into two phases: first, identifying and understanding the system and then, developing a shared understanding of early action within that system. In order to identify and understand the system EANF projects each spent time mapping and bounding the system(s) in which they were engaging. This included understanding priorities, processes, practices, behaviours attitudes and values evident within the system. In order to develop a shared understanding of early action within the system the funded pilots focussed on embedding relationships with key stakeholders in and beyond the system. This enabled them to agree shared priorities for early action, framed by the intervention that the EANF pilot was proposing to deliver.

Stage 3: Project implementation

This stage aims to capture the key features of EANF project implementation, in particular the ways in which funded pilots model an approach to early action whilst working within and alongside existing system activities. Although this leads to some inevitable blurring and overlap between the delivery and systems change components of each project, the overall goal of each component remains distinct.

For the delivery component the early action interventions that are being delivered by EANF funded projects are intended to model how early action can be applied to particular target groups as an addition or alternative to existing system provision. Each project is being delivered on a 'test and learn' basis and constantly refined in response to stakeholder feedback. Funded pilots have also sought to broaden the reach and coverage of their early action interventions by expanding in to other areas and settings. Ongoing evaluation and data analysis is a crucial part of delivering early action, for it gives the projects and their stakeholders evidence about what is working and for whom (and vice-versa).

For the systems change component this stage relates to each project's activities which aim to engage with and influence the system. This includes engaging in and collaborating with system level fora and processes, including the identification of early action 'champions': people within the system with the power to influence others and/or

enact change. Other activities include promoting the values and principles of early action, sharing learning and evaluation evidence on an ongoing basis, and challenging the system to act differently when appropriate.

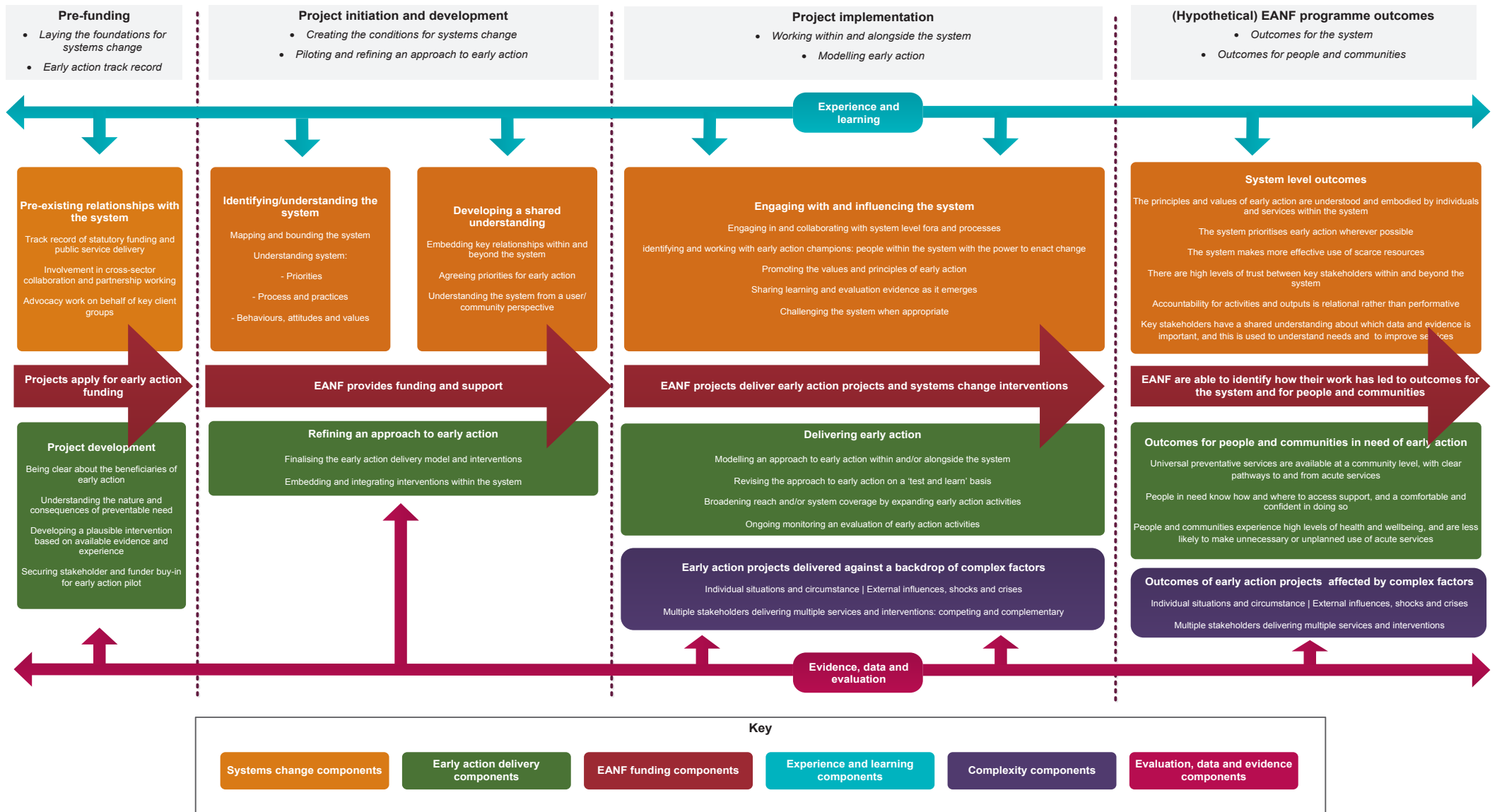
Stage 4: (Hypothetical) programme outcomes

At this stage the outcomes of the EANF programme remain largely hypothetical, and the timescale over which they might occur is unknown. However, from the research and consultation undertaken, it is possible to identify a range of high level outcomes for the system and outcomes for people and communities that the pilots are aiming to achieve.

These outcomes are more wide range than the outcomes set-out in the original EANF theory of change. Importantly they recognise that reducing preventative need is only one aspect of the work the funded projects are undertaking. Generating evidence in supporting of these outcomes will be a key focus of programme and project level evaluation activity for the remainder of the evaluation.

Outcomes for people and communities in need of early action	System level outcomes (evidence of systems change)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universal preventative services are available at a community level, with clear pathways to and from acute services • People in need know how and where to access support, and a comfortable and confident in doing so • People and communities experience high levels of health and wellbeing, and are less likely to make unnecessary or unplanned use of acute services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The principles and values of early action are understood and embodied by individuals and services within the system • The system prioritises early action wherever possible • The system makes more effective use of scarce resources • There are high levels of trust between key stakeholders within and beyond the system • Accountability for activities and outputs is relational rather than performative • Key stakeholders have a shared understanding about which data and evidence is important, and this is used to understand needs and to improve services

Figure 2: Revised EANF theory of change



Contact

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