



Believe in  
children  
 Barnardo's

# THE BARNARDO'S FOUNDATION

Evidence  
and Learning  
Strategy

*'Learning is a constant  
process of discovery.  
A process without end.'*

– Bruce Lee

June 2022

# 1 The Barnardo's Foundation

The Barnardo's Foundation launched in the spring of 2020 to invest a proportion of Barnardo's voluntary funds in line with the priorities set out in Barnardo's corporate strategy (2016-2025), entitled *Better Outcomes for More Children*.

The Barnardo's Foundation Strategy (2022-2025) presents a theory of change (see Appendix 1) describing how the Foundation intends to contribute to Barnardo's objectives through a set of four strategies:

1. Invest voluntary funds
2. Leverage co-investment
3. Promote evidence and learning
4. Champion equality, diversity and inclusion.



## 2 The Foundation's Evidence and Learning Strategy

The Evidence and Learning Strategy describes how the Foundation will support funded partners to generate and use evidence and learning, and how it will do so itself. The Foundation will promote evidence and learning by:

- Supporting **individual funded partners** to generate and use evidence and learning, while strengthening the culture of enquiry, real-time learning and evidence-based practice; and,
- Brokering networks across the **portfolio of funded partners** to share evidence and experience across and beyond Barnardo's.

As a result, Foundation will investigate and communicate:

- The achievements, impact, and new knowledge generated with the voluntary funds invested in each funded partner;
- The Foundation's performance and the effectiveness of its model;
- The benefits to the wider Barnardo's organisation; and
- Contribution to longer term changes that lead to better outcomes for more children.



*'Do the best you can  
until you know better.  
Then when you know  
better, do better.'*

– Maya Angelou

## 3 Evidence and Learning with Funded Partners

Many of the Foundation's funded partners will work in complex and often uncertain environments where a wide variety of people and processes interact and are interdependent. The Foundation will encourage adaptive and iterative programme design and implementation by nurturing a spirit of curiosity and reflection. In order to create an environment for this way of working, the Foundation will invest in relationships with funded partners that are:

- **Collaborative:** The Foundation will meet funded partners where they are and work with them to build capacity in using evidence and learning. From application to close out, Foundation staff will engage in reflective conversations and the analysis of data and evidence to surface key insights and learning to inform future practice.
- **Flexible:** Drawing upon developmental evaluation<sup>1</sup> and action research,<sup>2</sup> the Foundation will encourage funded partners to critically review evidence and learning, problem solve, test out rapid iterations, and course-correct where needed. Funded partners will not be held to a restrictive set of pre-determined activities, indicators, outputs and outcomes.
- **Contextual:** The realist evaluation approach recognises that there is no 'one size fits all' solution to complex social issues, but seeks to understand what works, for whom, and in what context.<sup>3</sup> The Foundation will discourage funded partners from overstating positive outcomes and overclaiming the universal applicability of an approach. Instead, it will allow space for more nuanced interpretations of the evidence and learning.

To support this work, the Foundation will create resources and processes to support funded partners to generate evidence and learning.

### 3.1. Commissioning a Learning Partner

Where appropriate, the Foundation will encourage applicants to consider working with a learning partner: an independent 'critical friend' who can help them better engage with, understand, and apply the evidence and learning from their work through a long-term collaboration.

Where a learning partner would add credibility or other significant benefits, the Foundation will provide the necessary funding to cover these costs. The Foundation will also provide practical support to identify and commission a suitable learning partner, in the form of procurement templates and guidance and a list of potential suppliers.

As well as looking at the implementation and impact of funded partners' work, learning partners will be asked to collect data that provides insights about equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) issues, and to consider using cost evaluation methods to understand where and for whom value is being created.

<sup>1</sup> Patton (2006) [Evaluation for the way we work](#)

<sup>2</sup> Brydon-Miller et al. (2003) [Why action research?](#)

<sup>3</sup> ODI Methods Lab (2014) [Realist impact evaluation: An introduction](#)



### 3.2 Developing a Theory of Change

Most work funded by the Foundation will be expected to develop a theory of change. This process will prompt funded partners to explicitly describe their underlying thinking about how they expect change to happen, and how they will achieve their goals.

Theory of change development can be facilitated by a learning partner. If there is no learning partner, funded partners will be offered support from within Barnardo's and handy guides produced by the Foundation.

### 3.3 Posing Learning Questions

All funded partners will be asked to frame a set of learning questions, which will be the unifying and driving force behind their (and their learning partner's) efforts to generate and use evidence and learning.

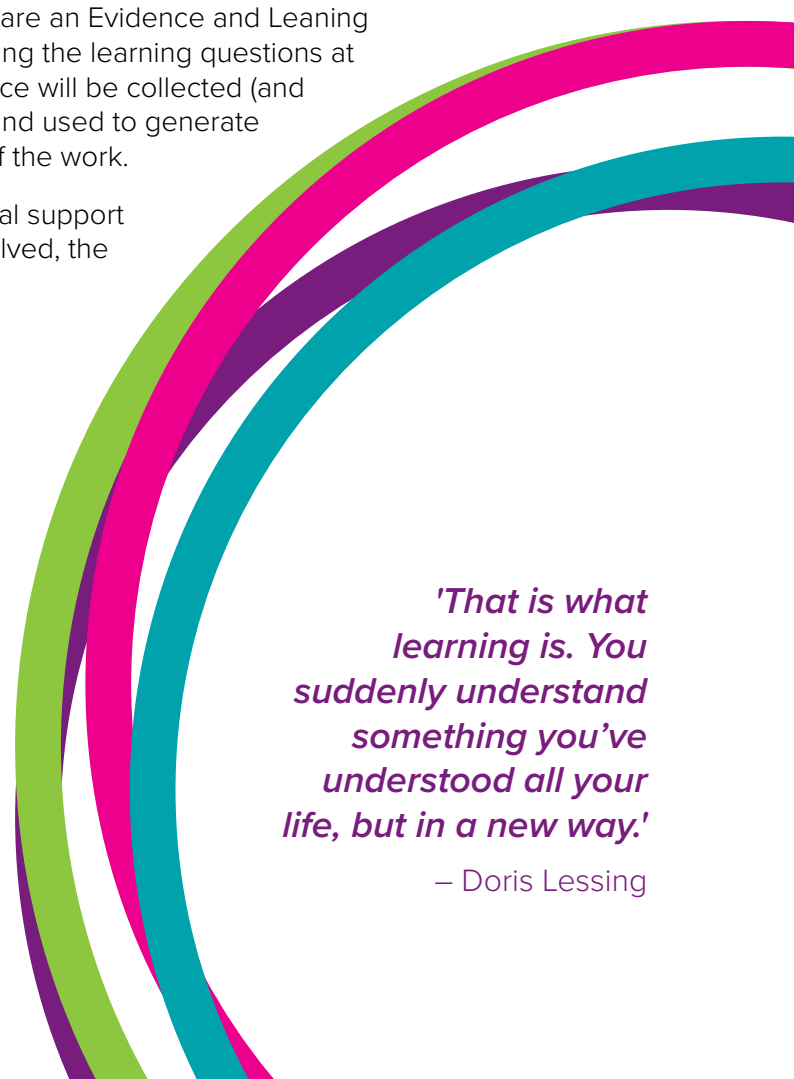
Learning questions should be grounded in the theory of change, designed to spark curiosity for active exploration and to encourage ongoing reflection. They should be open-ended questions starting with phrases such as "How...?", "To what extent...?" or "Under which circumstances...?" and should feel relevant throughout the project, thus driving a process of iteration and continual improvement.

The Foundation will support funded partners to develop suitable learning questions, but these can be refined in collaboration with a learning partner and can be adjusted, if needed, during project implementation.

### 3.4 Producing an Evidence and Learning Plan

The Foundation will ask all funded partners to prepare an Evidence and Learning Plan within the first few months of funding. Positioning the learning questions at its heart, this plan will set out what data and evidence will be collected (and when, how and by whom), how it will be analysed and used to generate learning and insights that will shape the direction of the work.

The Foundation will provide a template and practical support to create this plan. Where a learning partner is involved, the plan should be co-produced with them.



*'That is what learning is. You suddenly understand something you've understood all your life, but in a new way.'*

– Doris Lessing

### 3.5 Reflecting and Reporting

Maximising impact requires a culture that celebrates the use of evidence and learning to recognise what's not working as well as what is working, and to change plans accordingly. The Foundation wants to actively encourage funded partners to evolve their approaches as their knowledge grows. Reporting will not be just about progress updates but will hold time and space for funded partners to reflect on the evidence and learning and identify actionable adaptations and improvements.

The Foundation will ask funded partners to report twice per year, through a collaborative, conversational process that surfaces key points and captures these in a summary document. Learning partners may also contribute, or the process may co-opt activities led by the learning partner to avoid duplication.

### 3.6 Sharing Evidence and Learning

In order to maximise the impact of new evidence and learning generated by funded partners (whether through success or failure) the Foundation will broker connections and knowledge-sharing networks across its portfolio, with other Barnardo's colleagues, and externally.

Internally, the Foundation will work in close partnership with the BU to contribute to the shared evidence base that informs practice across Barnardo's.

Externally, the Foundation will explore opportunities and support efforts to share evidence and learning with other practitioners and voluntary sector organisations, local authorities, academics, and funders, with the aim of influencing the wider system, policy and practice.



## 4 Evidence and Learning within the Foundation

The Foundation is pioneering a novel funding mechanism within a large charity. Generating credible, high-quality evidence and learning from this innovative use of voluntary funds has the potential to influence the wider sector. To this end, the Foundation wishes to produce insights about its model and impact.

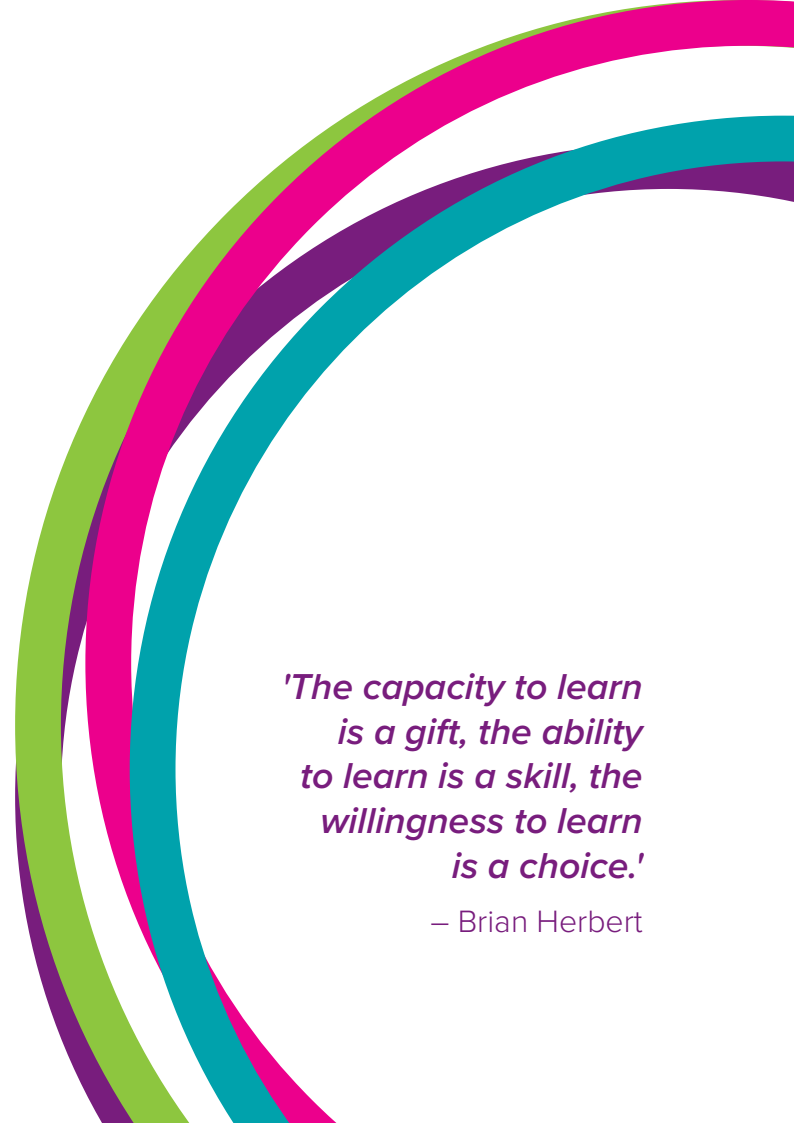
A common pitfall for funders is to take credit for the impact generated by those they fund and appropriate the sum impact of their portfolio as their own impact.<sup>4</sup> The Foundation seeks to avoid this trap by focusing on its unique investment model, where the continuous and embedded use of evidence and learning will fuel adaptation, iteration and improvement of the model, ultimately yielding greater impact from Barnardo's voluntary funds.

### 4.1. A Learning Partner for the Foundation

The Foundation plans to collaborate with internal colleagues to establish internal systems to collect data, examine evidence, reflect and learn. It will then commission an independent learning partner that can bring valuable external validation and challenge, and support even greater impact.

### 4.2. Refining the Foundation's Theory of Change

Although the Foundation has developed a theory of change, it will be reviewed and updated on a regular basis in response to new evidence and learning, to reflect any iteration of the Foundation's model.



*'The capacity to learn  
is a gift, the ability  
to learn is a skill, the  
willingness to learn  
is a choice.'*

– Brian Herbert

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<sup>4</sup> Association of Charitable Foundations, Stronger Foundations Initiative, *Impact and Learning Report: The Pillars of Stronger Foundation Practice*

### 4.3. The Foundation's Learning Questions

The learning questions, which will drive the Foundation's efforts to generate evidence and learning, will be based in the theory of change and will prompt the exploration of:

- The **investment principles**, including the fidelity with which they are applied in making investment decisions, the extent to which the portfolio is strategically aligned around them, and whether they are indeed the right principles.
- The **'value-add' activities** offered to funded partners, including both tangible and perceived value of these activities, opportunities for improvement, any unintended or negative effects, and any gaps where additional support is needed.
- The **portfolio as a whole**, including how it is being leveraged in ways that would not be possible with any individual investment, the extent to which it is attracting co-investment and influencing the wider system, policy and practice, and any other emergent synergies or antagonisms.
- The **application of EDI** as a cross-cutting theme in all the Foundation's work, to reflect the Foundation's strategy to champion EDI and Barnardo's organisational commitment to this matter.
- Potential **influence on long-term changes** that could lead to better outcomes for more children and young people.

### 4.4. The Foundation's Evidence and Learning Plan

The Foundation will develop a detailed Evidence and Learning Plan setting out exactly how the learning questions will be investigated, including plans to collect and analyse data, review the evidence and reflect on experience, in order to generate new learning and insights.

In the short term, data will be gathered from a range of sources, including funding proposals, reports from funded partners, and feedback from a range of colleagues and stakeholders. Data analysis frameworks will be developed to provide a robust and transparent process for evidencing the Foundation's investment model and performance.

Taking a long view, the Foundation aims to establish systems to catalogue its evidence and learning such that a potential future learning partner will be able to draw upon historical data for approaches such as contribution analysis<sup>5</sup> or outcome harvesting<sup>6</sup> to explore how the Foundation's investment of voluntary funds has influenced outcomes for children and young people, within a complex system subject to many other influencing forces.

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<sup>5</sup> Mayne (2008) *Contribution analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect*

<sup>6</sup> Wilson-Grau and Britt (2013)





#### 4.5. Reflecting and Reporting on the Foundation's Performance

The Foundation will establish a regular cycle of self-reflection, guided by its learning questions, during which the latest evidence and learning will be used to iterate and improve the investment principles, 'value-add' activities, portfolio leverage (or the implementation thereof) and long-term impact goals.

Evidence and learning will be reported to the Foundation's Advisory Board, and to Barnardo's Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) on a quarterly basis and the Children's and Young People's Services Committee (CYPSC) annually.

#### 4.6. Sharing Evidence and Learning from the Foundation

In the interest of transparency, the Foundation will share reports of the evidence and learning it generates, and any operational or strategic changes it makes as a result, with all funded partners and other Barnardo's colleagues.

Externally, the Foundation will seek to raise awareness of its innovative investment model and share the evidence and learning that informs the iteration and improvement of that model for generating maximum impact with voluntary funds. By influencing the practices of other large charities, trusts and foundations, this may contribute to greater levels of co-investment from ideologically aligned funders, and has the potential to create other ripple effects in the wider system.



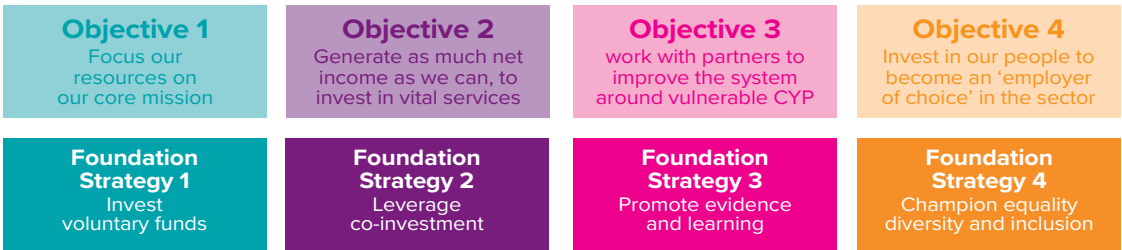
# Appendix 1: The Foundation's Theory of Change



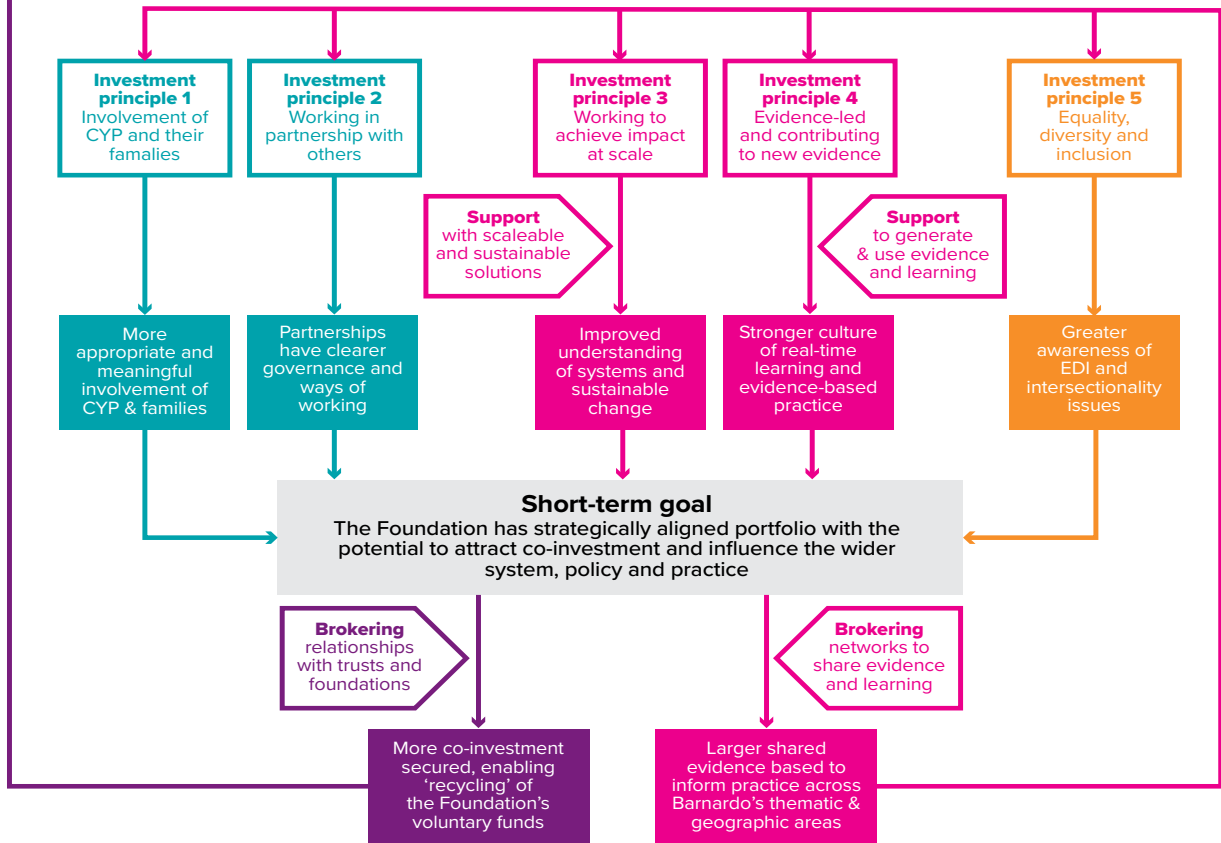
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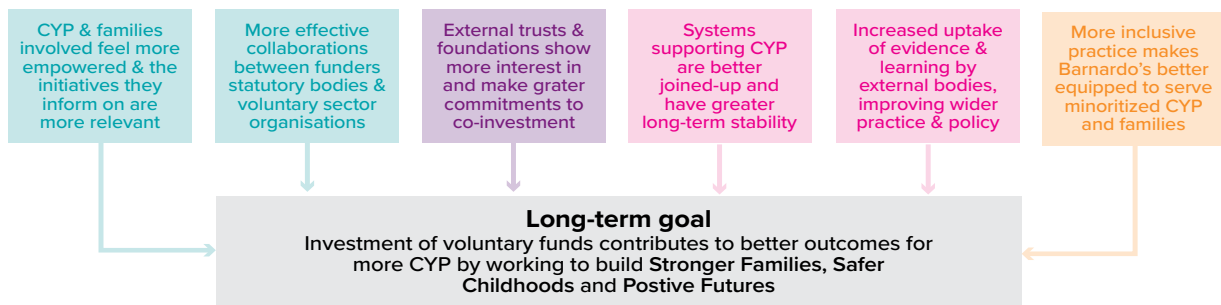
**The Barnardo's Foundation contributes to each of Barnardo's four corporate objectives**



Sphere of control



Sphere of influence





[barnardos.org.uk](https://www.barnardos.org.uk)

Barnardo House, Tanners Lane, Barkingside, Ilford, Essex IG6 1QG  
T: 0208 550 8822

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