

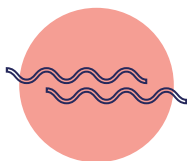


The development trajectory of collective impact work in supporting families with children

From regional pilot projects to strategically led systemic change.

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Abstract • The objective of collective impact work is the long-term and systemic reform of the support and service system for children, young people and families. • Itla has promoted and accelerated collective impact work in Finland since 2020. • The publication describes how collective impact work has developed over a period of five years. The publication examines the development of collective impact work in Finland between 2021 and 2026. The starting point is the regional learning network model presented by Ristikari et al. (2021), based on which the principles of collective impact have been applied in the reform of the service system for families with children. The publication also analyses the elements of Itla's learning path (2024–2025), the observations made in Anni Kyösti's evaluation study (2025), and the key results of Venla Ritola's report (2022). Also highlighted are the chain of translational research by the University of Oulu and the researcher network's key publications (Timonen et al., 2021/2022, Takalo et al., 2022/2023, Penttilä et al., 2024, Ulmanen et al., 2024), which strengthen prevention, leadership, shared measurement systems and knowledge-based management in collective impact work. According to the results, change has progressed from sub-regional pilot projects to a strategically data-driven and participatory model in which the feedback system (including the digital Näkymä situational picture tool) and translational research are integrated into decision-making. The article concludes with a discussion of the future directions of collective impact work.			

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CONTENTS

1. Introduction	9
2. Joint agreements promote systemic change	14
3. The backbone support organisation and its role in supporting and accelerating the regional learning network's development efforts	16
4. Method and material	19
5. Results	20
5.1 THE BEGINNING OF COLLECTIVE IMPACT: The starting point (2020–2022):	20
5.1.1 The work of the regional learning network begins	20
5.1.2 A strategic step towards a national approach to development and research	21
5.2. SYNTHESISING THE LESSONS LEARNED: The learning path for collective impact work as a means of scaling (2023–2024)	21
5.3 EXPANSION PHASE: The current state (Itla 2025–2026)	23
5.3.1 Observations made in the assessment study	23
5.3.2 Collective impact and leadership	23
5.3.3 Family centre activities as an operating environment for collective impact work	24
5.3.4 Translational research as an activity of the research network	24
6. Conclusions	26
7. A look at the future	28
An example of collective impact work	30
References	32



1 Introduction

Collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011) is an internationally widely used, evidence-based framework for solving complex social problems (Virtanen et al., 2021). In Finland, the framework has been applied in collective impact work that is aimed at systematically reforming the service system for families with children. The work has developed and expanded significantly in recent years. The aim of this publication is to describe the development of collective impact work and assess its current priorities.

Collective impact is a framework in which the stakeholders in the service system and growth environments of families with children commit to a common goal and shared indicators to together solve complex problems related to families' wellbeing, the service system or society.

In Finland, collective impact work has been systematically developed in the regional learning network coordinated by Itla, in which the participating wellbeing services counties, municipalities and third-sector stakeholders link everyday development environments and services at the local level, and joint development and decision-making are guided by situational picture information generated by the local leadership and development structure. Collective impact work aims at the renewal of cooperation between children's and young people's growth environments and services in different regions and the strengthening of good and functional daily life for families.

Itla has supported collective impact work since 2020 (Ristikari et al. 2021). Itla has provided backbone support and acted as a broker between the practices linked to regional development efforts, research, and decision-making. This has made it possible to model the elements identified as key to collective impact work and utilise them in the collective impact work of new regions. It has also enabled the assessment of collective impact work.

In the cooperation regions, collective impact work has become attached to the strategic management of the regions. The aim of this publication is to analyse how collective impact work and Itla's backbone support have developed over the years. The goal is to make the operating logic of collective impact work visible in a situation where more and more regions are committed to reforming the cooperation between the service system for families with children and the growth environments (such as schools and early childhood education and care) so that development and management are based on the principles and structures of collective impact.

In Finland, the theoretical framework for collective impact work is based on systems theory, resilience theory and game theory, the utilisation of collective impact principles as core elements of joint management and development, and on systematic and vertical peer learning both locally and nationally (Ristikari et al., 2021).

The collective impact framework (Kania & Kramer, 2011) provides a change theory structure comprising five key elements: 1) Common Agenda, 2) Shared Measurement Systems, 3) Continuous Communication, 4) Mutually Reinforcing Activities, and 5) Backbone Support Organisations.

These principles take concrete form in the work of regional multidisciplinary management and cooperation teams, in the guided and coordinated role of local developer employees and in the backbone support provided by Itla to the region concerned. The development work of these stake-

holders is driven by regional needs, and they ensure that the work proceeds in a coordinated manner and is based on shared knowledge, peer learning and broad commitment (Ristikari et al., 2021).

In Finland, the application of the development principles has begun in a situation where structural problems have been identified in the service system. These problems weaken the system's ability to meet the changing and often concurrent needs for support and care among children, young people and families.

By international comparison, the services are diverse but siloed: professionals operate in profession-based structures, and cooperation across organisational boundaries remains intermittent and limited. Support for families is seen as fragmented and fixed-term, as a result of which the responsibility for the coordination of services is often transferred to the client. This means that visible symptoms are primarily addressed instead of influencing the underlying circumstances, the life situations of families and the root causes of the visible problems; this maintains demand for intensive and remedial services and recurring service needs.

In Finland, the efforts to address these shortcomings in the system within the framework of collective impact have been built on the principle of *prevention, integration and continuity* (Niemelä, 2023) and structures of knowledge-based management and continuous learning (cf. Kania & Kramer, 2011; Ristikari et al., 2021; Ritola, 2022; Itla, 2024a). In addition to the challenges identified in the service system, the wellbeing services county reform initiated in 2022 created a historically significant period of change that made the reconfiguration of cooperation and joint management structures between municipalities and the wellbeing services counties the highest priority in both national and regional development efforts.

In collective impact work, change is perceived as systemic: the aim is to shift the focus of the service system and measures related to growth environments from remedial measures to prevention, coordination and the continuity of support. In practice, this means, for example, that the process of helping an individual child or family begins at an early stage through multidisciplinary cooperation, is strengthened as necessary, and ensures the continuity of support.

The key operational mechanism is that the key adults in the child's daily life are brought together for a joint discussion on what is meaningful (Ungar, 2011), in which the focus is on life-situation literacy (Niemelä, 2023), i.e. the ability of the adults to conceptualise the child's situation as a whole. This is linked to the systems-ecological interpretation of resilience (Ungar, 2011). Strengthening resilience means activating and strengthening protective factors in the child's environment. This, in turn, means that the adults who are significant to the child – professionals and family members – are able to together identify and build supportive factors in different development environments (home, early childhood education, school, leisure time, social and healthcare services) (Niemelä, 2023).

The resulting joint plan is implemented through joint and mutually agreed-upon work by the adults, and its impacts are monitored as agreed upon to ensure the continuity of support. If the existing resources are not sufficient, the stakeholders call in the necessary expertise, utilising, for example, the local *single contact principle*, i.e. the centralised coordination structure of social and healthcare services, which enables the coordination of services without transfers (see Ritola, 2022; Itla, 2024c).

Life-situation focus and life-situation literacy are presented as concepts that support cooperation. Common concepts in multidisciplinary cooperation facilitate collaboration. For example, in discussions concerning social work, the starting point for the work has traditionally been “the individual in his or her life situation”. (Richmond, 1917; Satka & Kananoja, 2025).

The collective impact work promoted by Itla has identified *two systemic structures* that are used to implement reform efforts at the regional and sub-regional levels: 1) the structure of management and 2) the structure of practical work.

The structure of practical work refers to a (generic) operating practice agreed upon together at the local or sub-regional level, where each stakeholder carries out their work in such a way that prevention, integration and continuity are realised. In prevention, all of the stakeholders take into consideration the child’s current life situation as a whole and focus on the strengthening of everyday life that supports development. Integration and continuity mean that if a stakeholder does not have the necessary resources within its own range of services and activities, it can engage other stakeholders to participate in helping the client through the *coordination structure* (e.g. the single contact principle).

The purpose of the structure of practical work is to ensure that multidisciplinary cooperation begins at an early enough stage, is implemented systematically (across all services), is intensified as necessary, and ensures continuity at all stages of the assistance process. This aims to prevent families from experiencing services that are mistimed, fragmented or difficult to find. Through multidisciplinary cooperation, the aim is to create a coordinated package of support services that safeguards, at an early stage, a smooth daily life for the family and the child’s development and adapts to the child’s life situation and the family’s wishes.

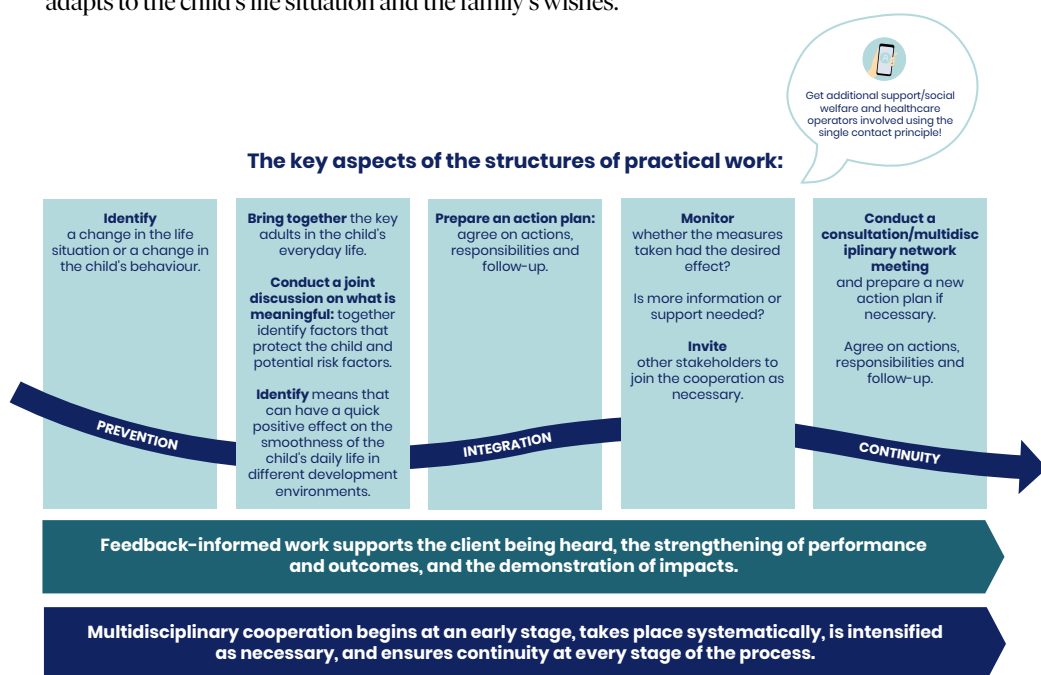


Figure 1.
Generic practical work structure, Itla 2026.

In order for the general structure of practical work to be agreed upon, implemented and established regionally, management and development must take place at multiple levels so that day-to-day knowledge (the wellbeing of children, young people and families and the ability of the service system to meet needs) arising from the stakeholder level is integrated into operative decision-making and strategic steering.

The local stakeholder level collects observations and feedback, from which the operative level identifies phenomena and trajectories and supports operations, and communicates the relevant situational picture to the strategic level, and the strategic leadership ensures that the shared vision and the actions aligned with it have the necessary resources and structures, and gives permission to act. The feedback system built between the different levels combines qualitative experience-based knowledge and quantitative monitoring, and makes it possible for decisions to be based on a regional situational picture that is updated and reflects the current situation.

When integrated into the feedback system, the digital crowdsourcing snapshot tool Itla View helps to crowdsource data collection, speeds up the flow of information between different levels, and helps to identify phenomena that require action and target measures through multidisciplinary cooperation where they are needed (see Ulmanen et al., 2024). The Itla View tool utilises artificial intelligence and supports the knowledge-based management of services for families with children by helping to anticipate the demand for remedial services and identify opportunities for preventive work (see Ulmanen et al., 2024).

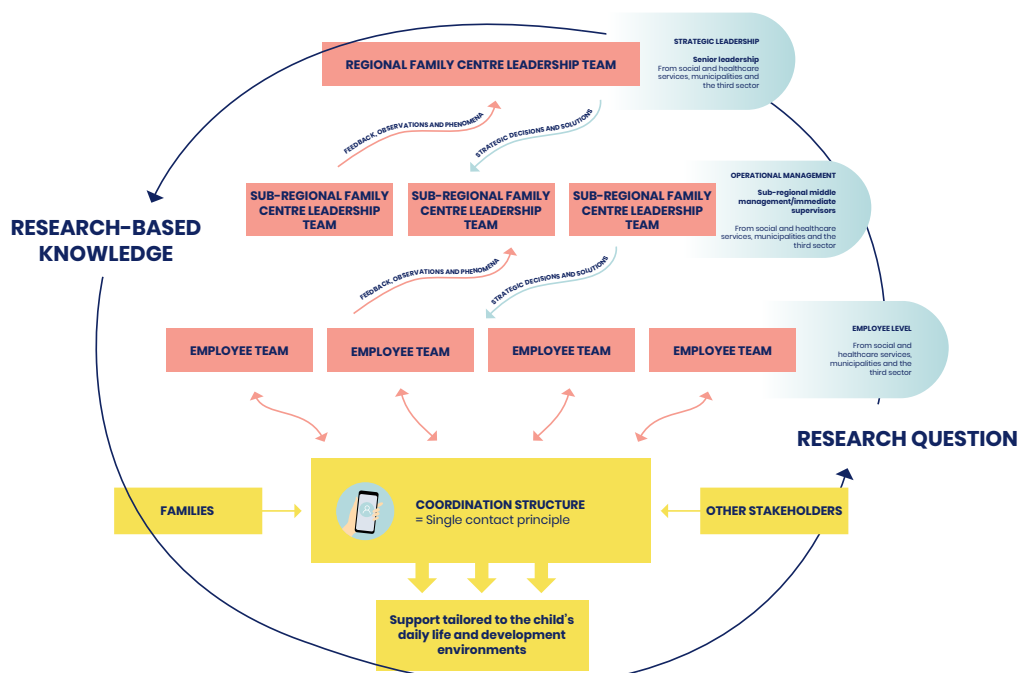


Figure 2. An example of the leadership and development structure of collective impact. Itla 2024.

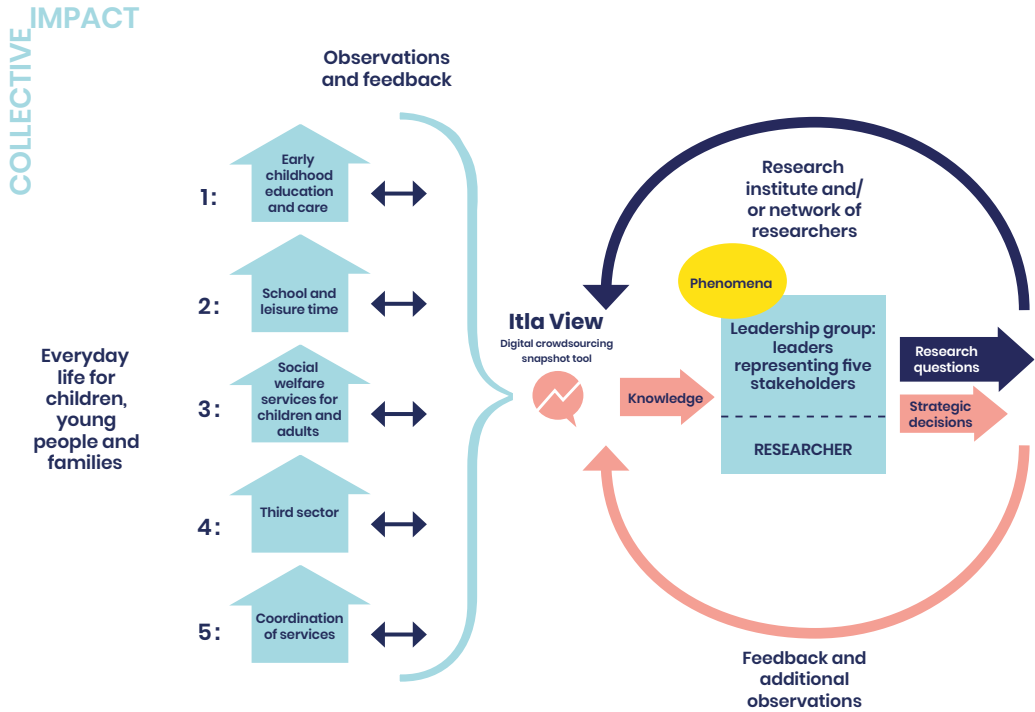


Figure 3. Processing of observation, feedback and phenomenon data in the leadership group, Itla 2024.

When the *single contact principle* is applied, it provides the key data foundation for the feedback system used to monitor families' needs for support and the ability of the services to respond to those needs as agreed upon (Itla, 2024b; Itla, 2024c).

Phenomenon-based work complements this whole and steers operations towards prevention: the representatives of different services consolidate observations and feedback and identify current phenomena that require joint solutions. The process is linked to research or systematic monitoring and progresses from establishing a shared understanding of the phenomenon and the enrichment of phenomenon-specific information to the collaborative development of alternative solutions, pilot projects and measures, and impact assessment. A successful *phenomenon-to-initiative* chain can strengthen trust between professionals, lead to shared operating practices and support the emergence of scalable solutions with proven effectiveness.

Connected with collective impact work, translational research – dialogue between research and development – is integrated into the feedback loop: practical work highlights research questions, research produces new insights, knowledge, indicators and mechanisms, and the results serve as inputs for leadership and development, enabling the creation of more impactful solutions (cf. Takalo et al. 2022; Takalo et al., 2023; Timonen et al., 2021/2022; Penttilä et al., 2024; Ulmanen et al., 2024).

2 Joint agreements promote systemic change

In collective impact work, it is essential that the key operating principles are defined and agreed upon so that the various stakeholders can work together in accordance with the agreements between them. Agreements create a structure for the systematic organisation and management of multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder cooperation. Agreements determine the extent to which the work progresses in accordance with the set goals, and whether the work produces the desired impacts.

At the same time, the agreement-based approach serves as mechanism that enables the monitoring and assessment of joint work. For this reason, it is important that agreements include clear performance indicators, practices related to the collection of qualitative feedback, and methods for the systematic collection of ad hoc observations. Jointly defined monitoring produces a knowledge base that guides the development of cooperative practices and strengthens the transparency of the work (cf. Niemelä, 2023).

Agreements and the related monitoring mechanisms provide incentives and support for commitment by the parties involved, and harmonise the operational orientation. They help to ensure that the stakeholder direct their efforts towards jointly set goals and implement the practices in accordance with the agreements as permanent operating methods. In joint management structures, the implementation of the agreements is monitored, and development needs are identified and prioritised. This is essential for both the steering and management of operations and political decision-making, as it provides systematic information on the direction and effectiveness of the work (cf. Niemelä, 2023).

As the national backbone support organisation for collective impact work, Itla puts these principles into practice when it signs long-term and goal-oriented cooperation agreements with regions. The agreements set out the regional development areas, the forms of support offered by Itla, and local backbone support, such as a designated developer employee. The resulting contractual foundation ensures the commitment of the parties involved, guides the development process and creates the conditions for subsequent impact assessment and further planning of cooperation. Achieving systemic change requires sufficiently long-term work aimed at a shared goal so that population-level changes in the wellbeing of children, young people and families can be achieved.

Between 2019 and 2022, the cooperation agreements drawn up as part of Itla's collective impact work included 50% funding for work carried out by developer employees designated by the regions. Developer employees play a central role in promoting local development and coordinating cooperation between regional stakeholders while also providing local backbone support.

In the early stages, in 2019, two wellbeing services counties and two major cities were involved in collective impact work. Extension agreements were concluded with the established regions for the period from 2023 to 2026, and these agreements included funding for a developer employee. The agreements concluded in the subsequent years with newly joined cooperation areas no longer covered funding for a developer employee, as the goal was to make collective impact work an established part of the joint management structures between wellbeing services counties and

municipalities, thereby ensuring that local backbone support and collective impact expertise are directly reflected in the cooperation between the key stakeholders involved.

In the regions concerned, efforts were made already at the contract negotiation stage to ensure that the key directors of the municipalities located in the regions commit to collective impact work regardless of their administrative branch. The local backbone support structure was strengthened in the new cooperation regions in a number of ways, including giving the regions the opportunity to designate a pair of developer employees that worked in close cooperation with Itla's specialist acting in a backbone support role. In addition, in large wellbeing services counties, broader networks of champions or core teams were assembled to support the local developer. These networks or teams consisted of key promoters of collective impact from the region's municipalities or non-governmental organisations.

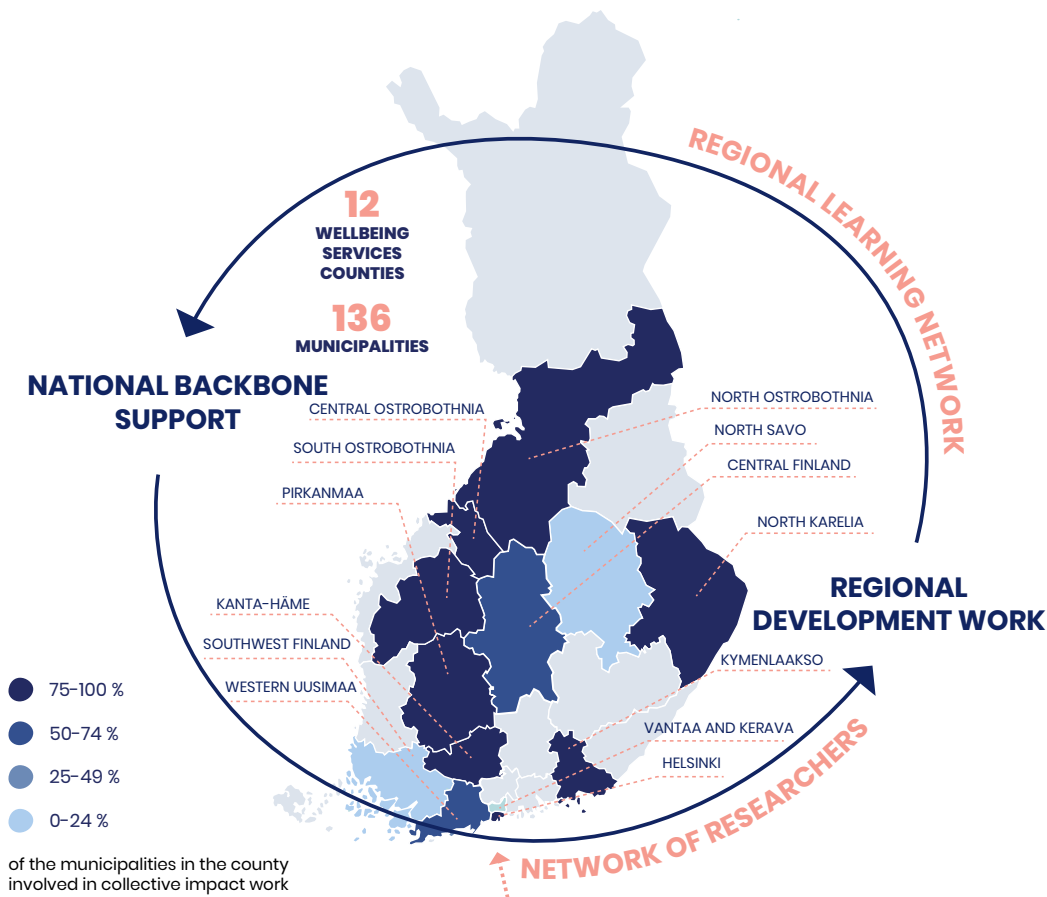


Figure 4.
Collective impact work in Finland. The situation in spring 2026.

3 The backbone support organisation and its role in supporting and accelerating the regional learning network's development efforts

One key element of collective impact is the backbone support structure and backbone support organisation for development (Kania & Kramer, 2011). This refers to a team that acts in a backbone support role and is dedicated to providing long-term support for collective impact work through all of its stages. In demonstrating the effectiveness of collective impact work, the role of the backbone support organisation and measurement as support for learning are particularly emphasised (Stachowiak et al., 2018).

The task of backbone support is to guide the vision and strategy, influence policy, build shared indicators, support mutually strengthening functions, mobilise resources and increase the participation and ownership of the local community (cf. Collective Impact Forum, 2019). In order for change to be achieved, collective impact work is also dependent on intangible elements, such as relationships and trust, identifying and building leadership, strengthening the culture of learning and forming connections between different stakeholders (Collective Impact Forum, 2019).

In collective impact work, it is also important to recognise what roles and functions backbone support is not intended to serve: backbone support should not set the agenda for the stakeholders, nor should it define the solutions. It should not be responsible for all funding, nor should it lead the joint work or process alone (Collective Impact Forum, 2019).

Itila's backbone support for collective impact work is built on two levels: Since 2020, Itla has promoted and influenced development efforts at the national level, at the same time supporting the local backbone support designated by the participating regions area, namely the developer employees whom the regions have designated as their point of contact with Itla, along with the leadership teams and steering groups in the structures of collective impact work.

Local backbone support, which often takes the form of a core group comprised of key managers and experts, jointly leads, steers and operationalises development efforts, with support from Itla and partners, in accordance with the principles of collective impact, primarily as part of the regions' multi-level (stakeholder, operational level, strategic level) family centre and interface structures. It is important to recognise that acting as national backbone support does not take place alongside other work – instead, it requires a stakeholder or organisation that is committed to the role of backbone support, such as Itla, which has the ability to bring stakeholders together around a shared vision. (Collective Impact Forum, 2019.)

Key conditions for success have been identified with regard to the work of developer employees:

- The developer employee must have the support of the local leadership, and the leadership must commit to collective impact work across administrative boundaries (Framework agreement of the learning network for collective impact work 2020–2026).
- The developer employee must be able to work at the interfaces between municipalities, well-being services counties and non-governmental organisations.

- The task of the developer employee is to cooperate with local stakeholders and promote local collective impact work. This is why the developer employee needs a mandate to act as a promoter of collective impact work across administrative boundaries and the freedom to move at the interfaces.
- The developer employee operates at the local level as an expert in collective impact work, and they also facilitate the orientation of new local key individuals (champions).
- The developer also coordinates, monitors and supports local collective impact work according to the region's needs together with the local backbone support and key stakeholders, acts as a contact person for Itla's backbone support team, and facilitates peer learning between regions.

It would be good for the developer employee to be involved in key steering groups and co-operation groups. It should be ensured that the collective impact work is not personified in the developer (Ritola, 2022). In cooperation with Itla's backbone support, the local developer must strive to expand collective impact competence within their organisation and at different levels of the cooperation structures, as well as invite new stakeholders to get involved, and identify advocates for the work.

Itla's key tasks as the backbone support organisation have included providing on-the-ground development support for the regions, as well as coordinating and facilitating the regional learning network of collective impact work. The network's activities are based on peer learning and joint development. Itla has facilitated peer learning and joint development by organising regular virtual network days, meetings between regional developer employees, joint development workshops and collective impact training, as well as various events that have provided theory, methods and practical tools for promoting systemic change in the participating regions.

As part of backbone support, Itla maintained an innovation and pilot fund (2021–2025). From 2021 to 2024, the innovation and research fund was supported by a significant amount by the Tiina and Antti Herlin Foundation. The fund's annual expenses were evenly divided between Itla and the Tiina and Antti Herlin Foundation. Through the fund, support was provided to key initiatives with respect to the development of collective impact work, including research on collective impact work. In 2025, Itla received significant funding from the Brita Maria Renlund Foundation to support the aim of ensuring the continuity of collective impact work.



4 Method and material

The publication is based on a literature review and document analysis on the Finnish development of collective impact work. The materials under examination are the following:

- Ristikari et al. (2021): regional learning networks and collective impact
- Niemelä (2021): resilience and intergenerationality
- Ritola (2022): long-term change and assessment
- Itla's learning path (2024–2025): strategic and methodological elements
- Kyösti (2025): evaluation study in Itla's Pointti publication
- Itla's annual reports for 2020–2025.

First, the key elements of change theory were identified in the initial stage, and they were subsequently compared with the latest development phases and assessment observations. The reading progressed in chronological order (2021–2025) and by theme: systemic change, cooperation, knowledge-based management, evaluation and translational research.

5 Results

5.1 THE BEGINNING OF COLLECTIVE IMPACT: THE STARTING POINT (2020–2022):

5.1.1 THE WORK OF THE REGIONAL LEARNING NETWORK BEGINS

The article “Alueellinen oppimisverkosto ja yhteisövaikuttavuus lapsiperheiden tukemisessa” (“The regional learning network and collective impact in supporting families with children”) (Ristikari et al., 2021) conceptualised the Childhood Builders regional learning network approach as an alternative to project-based development tied to individual government terms. The focus was on (i) internally driven systemic change, (ii) a multidisciplinary leadership group and peer learning, and (iii) the role of local, observation-based knowledge and the situational picture emerging from everyday life in directing and managing the work.

The theory of change is particularly reflected in how local knowledge is positioned at the centre of development and as a key driver of internally driven change. Experience-based knowledge on the daily life and services of local families with children is systematically collected, and it is utilised when establishing the common direction and targeting development initiatives. Relying on local knowledge makes it possible to better identify both needs for change and the pain points of the service system. This, in turn, helps to target decision-making and development efforts at matters of local significance.

Regular dialogue between the stakeholders in a given region and also between regions promotes peer learning and advances change wherein regions can learn from each other's solutions, avoid pitfalls and develop new, jointly sustainable operating models. This continuous interaction implements the change theory principles of continuous (vertical) learning. (Ristikari et al., 2021.)

Thus, the regional learning network model constitutes a two-level theory of change: on the one hand, it is based on a systemic understanding of the service system as a whole and, on the other hand, it is based on the principles of collective impact, which guide multi-stakeholder and goal-driven cooperation to solve complex and systemic challenges. There is overlap between these theoretical foundations, with systems theory defining the nature of the change and collective impact providing the methods and structures for implementing it. In the regional learning network model, it is precisely the combination of these elements that creates the conditions for permanent and impactful change in services for families with children. (Ristikari et al., 2021.)

In the initial phase, collective impact work was described as an ABCD model. In the model, "A" referred to strengthening the cooperation between development environments and services with the help of the "Let's talk about children" method, while "B" referred to strengthening children's ability to cope by strengthening leisure time activities with the help of the Finnish model for leisure activities, "C" referred to utilising machine learning in establishing situational picture data, and "D" referred to promoting learning through regional learning network activities and meetings between developer employees. For its part, the ABCD model implemented the CI model's key elements of a goal A, established through a shared situational picture C, while element B implemented the key element of continuous dialogue D. (Ristikari et al., 2021.)

5.1.2 A STRATEGIC STEP TOWARDS A NATIONAL APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH

Itla's next strategy, covering the period from 2023 to 2026, was prepared during 2022. One of the strategic priorities was to ensure the continuation of collective impact work, developing collective impact work and opportunities to expand it into new regions. In autumn 2023, as part of its role as the backbone support organisation, Itla strengthened the concept of collective impact work and made plans concerning the expansion, implementation and scaling of the work.

The aim was to strengthen Itla's backbone support role as a national expert in collective impact work and as a contributor to expanding the development approach. In addition, plans were made regarding ways to make collective impact work well-established as a national approach to development and research. In 2021–2022, Itla organised collective impact lectures on a targeted basis to address the needs of the participating regions.

Ritola's (2022) evaluation report, which was based on interviews in the four regions participating in the regional learning network, demonstrated that collective impact work is a suitable starting point when the aim of the change effort is the integration of the service system for families with children and when building a shared goal. The growth of multidisciplinary cooperation and closer communication between different organisations in the participating regions were identified as successes. The slowness of change, personnel turnover and the work becoming personified in local developer employees were identified as challenges. The recommendations emphasised the strengthening of assessment practices, permanent and regular cooperation structures, and the transparency of the information being utilised.

5.2. SYNTHESISING THE LESSONS LEARNED: THE LEARNING PATH FOR COLLECTIVE IMPACT WORK AS A MEANS OF SCALING (2023–2024)

Over the two years that followed (2023–2024), the goal was to create a structure for continuous research and learning to support development efforts taking place in municipalities and well-being services counties (Itla Annual Report 2023). In 2024, the focus was on providing increasingly strong support for the political monitoring of collective impact work and helping to form a region-specific backbone support structure that supports the work of the local developer employee and helps to make joint management systematic in the cooperation regions.

Between 2023 and 2025, Itla published a newsletter on collective impact work. There were nine issues per year and they shared concrete examples of development efforts in the regions and introduced readers to local stakeholders in collective impact work, as well as initiatives and research that had been promoted as part of collective impact work. Training related to collective impact work was implemented once a month, collectively for all of the cooperation regions.

The development efforts of Itla's backbone support team to model collective impact work based on the lessons and experiences accumulated during the preceding years culminated in the planning of the learning path for collective impact work and its publication as part of Itla's website. The learning path serves as a platform that makes the key principles of the work, the research-based framework, the theory of change and its practical applications easily accessible to the general public and the regions engaged in collective impact work.



The learning path was developed into a navigable structure that guides the user stage by stage: the need for change and the theory of change; the theoretical foundation; support structures (regional learning network, network of researchers, backbone support team), leadership and development (phenomenon-driven development, feedback system, digital crowdsourcing snapshot tool Itla View); and the structures of practical work (e.g. the single contact principle). The decision was made to build the learning path as a gradually deepening resource so that different target groups, leaders, decision-makers, developers and practical stakeholders would find the level of depth relevant to them. The development of the learning path and the structure of the website were guided by feedback from a test group.

The learning path has made information about the basic elements of collective impact work easily accessible to regions. It supports development efforts and systemic change in the regions' leadership and development structures: from observations to the formation of the phenomenon, the formulation of a solution proposal, the construction of pilot projects, the planning of monitoring or research, and the assessment of impacts.

The contents of the learning path make it concrete that feedback and observations made in the field are discussed in the joint leadership team at multiple levels (employees, immediate supervisors, strategic leadership) and that feedback, observation and research data can be integrated to support development, monitoring and decision-making in situations where additional information is vital (Itla, 2024c; Itla, 2024b). The contents of the learning path promoted the emergence of both a common language and shared operating practices and principles, which is essential in cross-sectoral cooperation in the participating regions and when the aim is to expand collective impact work into a national approach to development.

5.3 EXPANSION PHASE: THE CURRENT STATE (ITLA 2025–2026)

5.3.1 OBSERVATIONS MADE IN THE ASSESSMENT STUDY

The results of Anni Kyösti's evaluation study (Kyösti 2025) demonstrate that collective impact work has developed significantly. The local pilot projects of the initial phase have been expanded into a strategic and national approach. Ritola's (2022) report emphasised the prerequisites for long-term change and the importance of assessment, which are complemented by Kyösti's observations. This development reflects the need to combine research, practice and policy into the long-term promotion of wellbeing.

5.3.2 COLLECTIVE IMPACT AND LEADERSHIP

When the goal is for collective impact to be established as an operating method for supporting families with children, a key role is played by the leaders of organisations that have an impact on the wellbeing of children, young people and families. Leaders legitimise collective impact as a shared method of service development, are important stakeholders in resource management and are responsible for the creation of the networks that make strategic choices related to collective impact (Kyösti, 2025).

In practice, this means a transition to shared leadership, where leadership is characterised by strong cooperation and jointly established principles that guide operations, also across organisational boundaries. Collective impact is not intended to create a new organisation. Instead, it is intended to develop organisations' and networks' ability to operate in a different manner than before. This also requires leadership thinking to be updated and new skills for systemic interface management.

This represents a major transition in the public sector, as the traditional way to perceive administration and service production has relied on hierarchical decision-making, stable procedures and a strict division of work in all circumstances (Martela, 2019, pp. 6–7). These models, which are based on linear partial optimisation, are often also prevalent in everyday leadership thinking, which makes it more difficult to implement collective impact in practice.

As a multi-stakeholder operating method that cuts across boundaries and is collectively developed and phenomenon-based, collective impact requires leadership that focuses on building joint thinking and operations. Among other things, it requires a people-oriented approach to

leadership, the ability to reformulate the goals that guide work, investments in the ability of organisations to adopt and reform, as well as competence in collaborative change management and ecosystem building skills (Virtanen & Tammeaid, 2020, pp. 61–91). To strengthen these key leadership skills, Itla began planning and offering a systemic change management training package for collective impact leaders in 2025.

The six-month systemic change management training process supports and trains the responsible leaders in the participating regions to renegotiate meanings and operating practices within and between organisations and to put different ways of doing things into practice through dialogue (Stacey, 2010; Bushe & Marshak, 2016). The training process builds both individual and collective leadership skills that support the renewal of leadership thinking and systemic change management skills (Cairney & Toomey, 2025). At the same time, the training guides the participants to strengthen their region's joint leadership project portfolio, cooperation relationships and practices that influence the community across administrative boundaries. The pedagogical starting point of the training is to strengthen a solution-driven and future-focused leadership orientation (Tammeaid, 2025, p. 39).

The ability to face and solve paradoxical questions and the adaptation challenges brought about by the new operating model, as well as the ability to spread the thinking and operating methods of collective impact through learning together are key challenges when strengthening collective impact as an everyday operating method. Leaders and networks of leaders are a key group, and changes related to collective impact can be accelerated by investing in their competence and commitment.

5.3.3 FAMILY CENTRE ACTIVITIES AS AN OPERATING ENVIRONMENT FOR COLLECTIVE IMPACT WORK

The wellbeing services county reform reshaped the operating environment in such a way that municipalities and wellbeing services counties have had to rebuild closer and clearer cooperation structures, for example, as part of family centre work.* This has been necessary to ensure that the promotion of wellbeing, which is key to municipalities, and common processes between municipalities, the wellbeing services county and the third sector remain genuinely common and part of the family centre entity – even after administrative changes.

The reform of the funding system for wellbeing services counties and services, along with significant cost-cutting pressures, have made it necessary to coordinate cooperation and leadership structures. In this work, the collective impact framework has provided a clear common approach to the renewal of cooperation and interfaces as part of family centre structures. As the practical implementation of multidisciplinary cooperation is challenging, the participating regions have gladly utilised the collective impact framework and Itla's support in the renewal of structures and the facilitation of cooperation. In the current situation, the participating regions have implemented partnership agreements between the wellbeing services county, municipalities and other partners to ensure that all of the stakeholders participating in family centre activities commit to joint collective impact and family centre work.

* <https://www.innokyla.fi/fi/toimintamalli/perhekeskustoimintamalli-thl>

5.3.4 TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH AS AN ACTIVITY OF THE RESEARCH NETWORK

Between 2020 and 2025, the Itla-funded part-time professor of practice at the University of Oulu worked in close cooperation with Itla's backbone support and the cooperation regions, providing consultation related to the work of the regions and being in charge of the research network on collective impact work.

The aim of the research cooperation has been to implement translational research, where research responds to needs emerging from day-to-day work, and the results are fed into an iterative cycle to support the development efforts of the participating regions. A key aspect is that potential researchers and doctoral researchers operate and work in the regions in which the research questions and needs emerge, as this enables a translational approach to research. The role of the backbone support organisation is to maintain and build research cooperation related to collective impact work and the operations of the regional learning network.

The publications of the network of researchers on collective impact are directly linked to development and leadership-related needs, such as the following:

- Takalo et al., 2022: The article provides an empirical example of how the key elements of collective impact – a common agenda (the goal of influencing a population-level phenomenon: symptoms of depression among young people, heavy use of services, urgent placements in child welfare services), shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities and regional backbone support – can be built into preventive work for children and families. The adoption of the "Let's talk about children" method served as an example of the alignment of activities.
- Timonen et al., 2021: Social leisure time activities during adolescence are linked to psychiatric morbidity in early adulthood. The study highlights the need to strengthen preventive measures in development environments.
- Timonen et al., 2022: Leisure time activities as a mediating link between symptoms and morbidity. The study supports ecosystem-based influence across sector boundaries.
- Takalo et al., 2023: The psychometric properties of a new instrument for measuring collective impact based cross-sectoral collaboration and leadership: responds to the need for shared measurement systems.
- Penttilä et al., 2024: Risk factors in out-of-home care among the population of children with neurodevelopmental disorders: helps to target early support and resources with a phenomenon-based approach.
- Ulmanen et al., 2024: A crowdsourcing and AI-based tool for knowledge management in public services: strengthens the feedback loop of collective impact work and the conditions for systemic change.

In addition, digital crowdsourcing snapshot tool Itla View developed as part of family centre activities at Itla quickly relays information from day-to-day operations to strategic decision-making. The feedback system generates research questions, and research activities produce information on indicators, phenomena and mechanisms to support decision-making, forming a translational, systemic circle of change.

6 Conclusions

In Finland, the change theory of collective impact has progressed in three stages: (1) The regional learning network basis as a starting point for collective impact (2020–2022): internally built, local change supported by situational picture data (Ristikari et al. 2021); (2) the phase of synthesising the lessons learned (2023–2024) (3) the expansion phase (Itla 2025–2026).

Translational research and the network of researchers have produced evidence that supports prevention, integration and continuity, and enables scalable joint leadership. This responds to the challenges highlighted by Ritolta (2022) and Kyösti (2025): the slowness of change is addressed by structures that maintain collective impact and by making assessment concrete. Personnel turnover, in turn, is addressed by clear organisation and coordination, shared practices and indicators.

In summary, it can be stated that the operating logic of collective impact in Finland has shifted from pilot projects towards a strategically managed, knowledge-based and participatory model. Permanent structures (the family centre leadership group, the feedback system, digital crowdsourcing snapshot tool Itla View), translational research and shared indicators, along with strong local and national backbone support, are key prerequisites for the work.





7 A look at the future

Going forward, the aim is to ensure research support for collective impact work by developing the HUB for innovation and research activities. All interested higher education institutions are invited to participate in its activities. In addition to medical translational research, the practice research approach of social work corresponds to the starting points of collective impact: the phenomena arise from practical work, and the research serves practical development efforts (Julkunen & Saurama, 2012; Satka et al., 2016; Joubert & Webber, 2020).

The future of collective impact work requires a shift towards constructive, reflexive and structurally conscious development in collaboration with local communities. The practice research approach provides a basis for this. Practice research produces local and community-specific information that is generated through a joint dialogue between employees, residents and researchers. It makes visible the everyday practices, power relations and structural barriers that often determine the realisation of impact more than individual interventions. In addition, the reflexive and cyclical nature of practical research enables continuous learning and the shaping of operations in parallel with research, which is essential in the context of complex and changing communities.

The application of design thinking and continuous development also structure collective impact work.

Another future direction adds depth to this development: the clients' actual power to influence their services is strengthened as awareness of the feedback they provide is increased. Feedback awareness does not simply mean collecting feedback, but also that the clients' experiences and assessments affect the service process in real time. This shifts the focus towards work in which the client's voice is not merely heard but it also has a tangible impact on the content, goals and progress of the service. At the same time, feedback awareness generates systematic data on performance and outcomes that can be used to strengthen the entire feedback system for collective impact and the structures of knowledge-based management.

Combining feedback data from the individual level with community-level and system-level data on performance and outcomes creates a whole that enables both quick reaction and long-term assessment of effectiveness. Research that is linked to practices, along with feedback awareness, are key drivers that will jointly shape future impact work: they make operations transparent, learning-oriented and attached to the reality of communities.

Efforts will be made in all of the participating regions to strengthen the adoption of the digital crowdsourcing snapshot tool Itla View and making it well-established as part of the management and development structures of collective impact work. The Itla View tool has promoted and accelerated collective impact work at the sub-regional level by strengthening the role of professionals in building the situational picture and knowledge-based management processes as part of joint management structures.

The Itla View has supported interaction between sub-regional leadership and the stakeholders involved in day-to-day operations, and it has also accelerated phenomenon-driven initiatives implemented through multidisciplinary cooperation. The participants in the measures taken

have also included stakeholders outside the public service system, such as local entrepreneurs. This has strengthened the significance of the local community and stakeholders in promoting the wellbeing of children, young people and families in the area.

In the scaling of collective impact work, i.e. disseminating it and making it well-established as a national approach to development and research, it is essential that the participating regions are not simply given a ready-made model, but rather a development approach that is grounded in an evidence-based framework and research, along with structures that support it. The aim is to create solutions that suit the local context and needs, and to utilise the existing local cooperation and leadership structures in shaping those solutions. In scaling, the aim is to provide municipalities and wellbeing services counties with an effective approach to continuous learning and assessment, the development of which Itla supports at the national level in partnership with key stakeholders in the field of family and child services.

The aim is to make the work embedded in family centre structures and local communities by implementing the principle of "early – together – long enough" in joint assistance processes that promote the wellbeing of local children, young people and families in work with individuals, families and communities alike. The significant support received from the Brita Maria Renlund Foundation enables the scaling to continue.

In partnership with the Central Union for Child Welfare, Itla started the activities of the influencer network in spring 2026. The aim is to make a proposal on the national coordination of family centres. Collective impact work has been identified as the framework for family centre management and work, which means that Itla is making a contribution to national family centre activities.

In collective impact work moving forward, it is important to build a systematic assessment framework to support one of the key elements of collective impact: shared measurement systems. Measurement systems are necessary for monitoring cooperation, joint management and the monitoring of client impacts in the short and long term when pursuing systemic change at the population level.



An example of collective impact work

Phenomenon-based collective impact initiatives – collective solutions to family and child poverty, a pilot project in Oulu

This case study describes how a phenomenon-based initiative to reduce the impacts of family and child poverty was built within the framework of collective impact work in Oulu in 2023–2024 as part of Itla's "Equal Start for Everyone – solutions to family and child poverty" programme 2022–2024. The initiative focused on strengthening the protective factors for children and young people in the midst of a multifaceted phenomenon in which the structural root causes of poverty cannot be solved at the local level, but where forms of support for everyday life can be developed on the basis of research data.

Establishing a situational picture with a phenomenon-based approach

The initiative was based on a situational picture, based on research data and regional statistics, of the prevalence of family and child poverty, its known impacts and protective factors. The analysis included, among other things, the impacts of financial difficulties on children's wellbeing, parenting and functional capacity in daily life. Where gaps were identified in the data, the information was specified further with the help of research questions defined in collaboration with the network of researchers. For example, observational data concerning queues at food aid distribution points provided additional perspectives on the situation of children and young people. The situational picture served as the basis for phenomenon-driven development: the aim was not to solve individual problems, but rather to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the impacts of poverty are manifested in local services and the everyday lives of families.

The collective impact framework as the structure for the initiative

The initiative was designed in accordance with the principles of collective impact. The process involved activating a large group of stakeholders, defining a common goal and building long-term multidisciplinary cooperation. Companies, political operators, non-governmental organisations, parishes, service system professionals, organisers of leisure activities and local residents were invited to participate in the development work. The initiative was joined by stakeholders with the desire and opportunity to operate in different dimensions of the phenomenon.

The focus of development was on identifying financial difficulties at an early stage on the basis of evidence-based data and preventing the resulting adverse impacts, especially from the perspective of the wellbeing of children and young people. Life situations in which, according to research, the financial standing of families typically deteriorates were also examined to ensure that services linked to such situations participate in the pilot project.

Integration of experiential knowledge and research The planning and design of the initiative was supported by qualitative experiential knowledge collected from families that had managed to cope with financial hardship. These interviews were used to identify factors that had helped the families or which, in their view, should have been taken into consideration in a different manner. This material served as the basis for joint discussions on what is meaningful, the aim of which was to understand the actual daily life of the families and the conditions needed to sustain them.

Research-based knowledge guided the selection of the key areas to be developed. Among these, enabling meaningful leisure time for children and young people emerged as the most significant area, as studies show that it serves as a strong protective factor. The focus was on supporting the entire family instead of assisting an individual child.

Joint development and building solutions

The partners that participated in the development work were divided into two roles: stakeholders that guided the pilot project and partners that provided support. The study was integrated into the structures of the pilot project, which enabled the scientific examination of the process and results (Tikkanen et al. 2025).

Three key development paths were formed as a result of the joint development effort:

Enabling meaningful leisure time and taking the overall situation of the family into consideration: Support was offered to children, parents and siblings. The work included plenty of concrete assistance in daily life (Tikkanen et al. 2025).

Taking the family situation into consideration in services for adults: Structures were built in employment services, integration services and separation-related services to make it possible to take the children's situation into consideration systematically. The work was later expanded to include oral healthcare services for children and adolescents, for example.

Bringing together information that supports access to low-cost leisure activities: A single-contact service which both the families and the professionals had wished for, and which the City of Oulu will continue to maintain as a permanent structure.

Making the initiative well-established and expanding it

As is typical of the nature of collective impact work, the pilot project was integrated into the existing service and cooperation structures right from the start. Instead of being a project-based activity, it was an experiment intended to develop into part of permanent work without separate project structures. As the work progressed, new stakeholders joined it, including employment services and services that promote immigrant integration. The initiative also created a network of financial support for leisure activities in Oulu, and it strengthened professionals' awareness of the impacts of economic inequality. In addition, a study analysing the impacts of enabling leisure activities was published in the form of a scientific article.

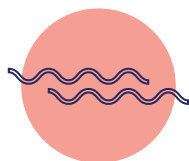
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