

Creating an ECD National Digital Backbone (From a shared ambition to a practical demonstration)

Action 13 of the Bana Pele Shared Blueprint calls for unified national digital infrastructure centred on Early Learning Programme providers. The original Blueprint proposition envisages integrating existing platforms such as ECD Connect, PLAYSА, Funda and Grow Giraffe, while strengthening providers' access to peers, coaches, learning and wider health and social support.

Over recent months, the Action 13 work has focused on translating that ambition into something the ECD ecosystem can interrogate, test and build together. A key shift has been to frame Action 13 not as another stand-alone ECD application, but as an ECD National Digital Backbone.

Existing government and partner systems remain important. The backbone's role is to connect relevant information, services and human support around the journey of an ELP provider. As the August Action 13 work described it, the question is how existing government systems, partner platforms, human support and community networks can operate as one coherent service package around the practitioner and child.

This matters because the challenge is not simply the absence of technology. It is that useful systems, programmes and support relationships can operate separately, requiring practitioners to navigate different organisations and repeat information while individual supporters often see only part of the journey. The emerging backbone concept therefore concentrates on connecting what exists, rather than standardising or replacing the diversity of delivery models across the sector.

Progress made

1. The ecosystem has been mapped around the practitioner

The work has mapped the different networks surrounding an ELP provider across care, government support, community assets and support systems.

The August work describes three interconnected networks, nine primary actor groups and thirteen building blocks, including ELP providers, families, partners, government departments, local government, civil-society collectives, community assets, data and insights, technology systems and other enabling infrastructure. This has helped shift Action 13 from considering individual technology products towards understanding the relationships that the digital infrastructure needs to enable.



2. Practitioner and fieldworker journeys have been developed

The team has developed a connected journey around two core perspectives: Naledi, representing the ELP practitioner, and Thabo, representing those supporting her in the field. Naledi's journey has been mapped through six stages: Discover, Join, Learn, Practice, Improve and Grow. The corresponding support journey considers how a fieldworker helps her move through those stages while reducing duplication and fragmentation. The design principle emerging from this work is straightforward: technology should make Naledi's journey easier while making it easier for the people supporting her to coordinate their contribution.

3. The ecosystem has been brought into the design process

A focused Action 13 Digital Backbone co-creation process was convened for 2–3 September in Gauteng. Invitations explicitly sought expertise in digital platforms and ecosystems, programme-management systems, technology architecture and integration, data and interoperability, digital transformation and user-centred service design.

The stated purpose was to help shape a practical roadmap and an October National ECD Summit demonstration concept. Importantly, participants were invited not to advocate for individual organisational solutions, but to use the ecosystem's collective experience to help imagine shared infrastructure for practitioners, coaches, ELPs and the wider sector.

4. The backbone concept has progressed into demonstrable use cases

Three practical use cases have now been developed.

The first demonstrates coordinated support around an ELP provider. Naledi can connect into the backbone, and, with her permission, relevant support organisations can understand her goals, see existing support and identify unmet needs. Once assistance is accepted, the support relationship and progress can remain connected to the same journey.

The second explores discovering the right person for a particular need. Rather than expecting a practitioner to know which organisation or individual to approach, the concept enables trusted people and their capabilities to become discoverable, with potential matching based on relevant context such as need, expertise, location, language, availability, and verified role.

The practitioner remains responsible for choosing whether and with whom to connect. The third explores a continuous learning and development journey. It demonstrates how existing capability, goals, learning opportunities, practical activities, evidence, and support from different enablers could become part of one connected journey instead of a succession of disconnected courses and interventions.



5. A working prototype environment has now been developed

This is the most significant recent step.

Between the 8–14 October, the team walked through a functioning demonstration environment for the coordinated-support use case prototype.

The demonstrated flow included practitioner onboarding, permission-based sharing of information, discovery of support needs, matching to support organisations, making and accepting offers of assistance, assigning support, and updating the support case across participating views.

The demonstration also showed the ability to maintain the relationship through acceptance, assignment and completion of support, with status changes reflected for the practitioner and support provider.

Separate demonstration views have been established for the practitioner, NGO/support-provider and fieldworker perspectives, with an administration view also discussed. During the 14 October review, the practitioner and NGO environments were accessed from South Africa and reported as loading successfully. Three use-case videos were also reported ready, with minor refinements to the working demonstration continuing. This should not yet be understood as a production national platform.

The purpose of the prototype is to make the backbone tangible and create something concrete around which the ecosystem can test assumptions, identify opportunities and expose gaps. In the 14 October discussion, the intended Summit framing was explicitly described as demonstrating what is possible rather than presenting an exact final system or fixed feature set.

What the emerging backbone could enable

The prototype and use cases are testing an architecture in which multiple systems and actors can contribute to a provider's journey while retaining their distinct roles. For example, the coordinated-support use case envisages government continuing to own formal registration processes while an NGO supports practitioner readiness. Relevant journey context is shared according to role and permission rather than requiring every participant to operate the same application.

The broader concept is also deliberately human as well as digital. Naledi represents practitioners working across different ECD settings; "Thabo" represents the range of people who may support practitioners, including social workers, coaches, mentors and other frontline supporters. Government, NGOs, forums and investors form part of the wider support ecosystem.

The proposed architecture currently describes three connected layers: the tools people already use; shared Bana Pele services; and a trusted national network. The principle underneath this is equally important: Action 13 does not seek to make ELP programmes identical. The backbone standardises how relevant information can be shared, rather than prescribing how organisations deliver their programmes.



Where we are now

Action 13 has therefore progressed through several important stages:

Blueprint ambition → ecosystem mapping → practitioner/support journeys → co-creation → defined use cases → working demonstration.

The October Summit milestone identified earlier in the work was to show the Naledi/Thabo walkthrough, advance thinking about interoperability, build an adoption coalition, present the backbone prototype concept and MVP roadmap, showcase validated user journeys and ecosystem mapping, and report engagement outcomes. The immediate work is now to use the prototype and the Summit engagement to deepen co-creation rather than prematurely fix a national solution. The team is explicitly inviting questions about opportunities, overlooked areas and how the concept should evolve.

The ambition remains simple: connect the people, networks, systems and support already surrounding ELP providers so that they can experience them as a coherent journey rather than a collection of disconnected interventions, while introducing her to new support pathways to thrive and serve multiple generations of children.

The intended outcomes articulated in the Action 13 explainer are more children participating in early learning; practitioners recognised and supported; and children better prepared for school and life. One backbone. Many pathways