

**Report from NWTWC Learning Exchange Seminar
Communities in Control: What does AI have to offer?
9th February 2010 at Riverside Hotel, Kendal.**

Introduction

This learning exchange seminar aimed to explore how Appreciative Inquiry (AI) can be used by organisations committed to changing the way they work in order to enable communities to take greater control. AI is a method of whole systems change which starts from the strengths of communities and organisations and focuses on solutions rather than weaknesses and problems. The seminar presented four case studies where AI was being used and provided an opportunity for participants to explore questions that mattered to them. The target audience was individuals who do or want to actively work with communities, those who wanted a taster to find out what AI is about and those who would like to engage people using the approach in the North West. Twenty six people participated in the seminar.

Welcome

Stuart Pate, Head of Community, Cumbria County Council welcomed participants on behalf of the hosting authority. In order to find out what is going on in Cumbria, he referred people to NWTWC (2010) Community Empowerment Activity within Local Authorities in the North West of England¹. He claimed that in respect to community engagement, rural areas are no different to urban areas. A huge majority of people do not feel that they have influence. While he thought the language of Appreciative Inquiry is flowery he anticipated that participants would gain a good grounding in the technique and practical tips, stressing the importance of valuing what you have rather than what you have not got.

Eve Davidson NWTWC, Programme Manager welcomed participants on behalf of NWTWC giving a brief introduction to the organisation which encourages learning and networking concerning empowerment in a range of ways. She drew attention to new publications, an Action Learning set and the community empowerment award, see www.nwtwc.org.uk for details.

Appreciative Inquiry – Having a Go – telling stories of success

Participants introduced themselves to others on their table by telling their story of
‘The most amazing and enabling experience you have personally had about communities taking control.’

The tables fed back the key components which had enabled such success. These were:

- Willingness of professionals to listen and give authority – not offer solutions
- Professionals as conduits/ leaders
- Examples of how residents can influence
- Sufficient space and time for communities
- Trusting communities; being prepared to take risks
- Championing – within communities and organisations
- Creativity and enthusiasm
- Realisation by the community of its assets
- Relevance, appropriateness
- Skill to know what to do in a situation
- Problems can be a catalyst

¹ access http://www.nwtwc.org.uk/uploads/NWTWC_Community%20Empowerment_Study.pdf.

This gave participants a taste of AI and was followed by an introduction² and the 4 brief case study presentations.

Dave Broome, Principal Neighbourhood Renewal Officer, Rochdale MBC : **Lower Falinge in Focus**³

Linda Cheetham –Sharples, Scrutiny Support, Health, Wellbeing and Social Care Scrutiny, Salford City Council – **Building on success for a smokefree Salford**

Linda outlined the current Overview and Scrutiny review being carried out as an AI which is focussing on the desired solution; getting the stories of non-smokers who live in an area where smoking is relatively common. The aim is to get a greater understanding of what enables them not to smoke in order that agencies can learn from them to make it easier for others who would like not to smoke. The OSC is interested in working with communities in Salford and how AI might be used to help them do that.

Cllr Mary Robinson, Chair of Overview and Scrutiny, South Ribble Borough Council **You Matter in Broadfield – Learning for members**

Mary told the story of an inquiry which is in progress in Broadfield, Leyland. This started as an Overview and Scrutiny Review and is now being led by community engagement. AI had provided a new way for the Council and Councillors to engage with the public with an open agenda and everyone was excited by all the positive things emerging. Despite the area being in the 10% of SOAs with greatest needs, lots of assets have been identified including the housing, green space, community spirit and proximity to the town centre. Those involved want more of these and are planning accordingly. The work so far has generated greater involvement in the Community Association, activities in the area and partners working together to make things happen.

Brian Morris, Neighbourhood Development Officer, Eden, Cumbria County Council: **AI as professional development**

After exploring a few avenues, Eden Neighbourhood Development team have started using AI as a method of professional development. They have integrated aspects into their regular team meeting enabling them to be more reflective and positive about their work.

Case study workshops

Dave Broome, Principal Neighbourhood Renewal Officer, Rochdale MBC : Lower Falinge in Focus
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Question: Can AI make raising aspirations concrete?

The press and media gave Lower Falinge a bad name and no-one including the officers know how to turn this around. The inquiry got chief officers walking around the area. The first aspiration was to make people feel that they matter. In the valuation it was talking to residents that was really important – that is the difference between AI and Participatory Appraisal or Asset Based Community Development.

The tools included the stories and understanding the core of what was working in the area from the stories. 7 themes emerged from analysis of the stories; work, skills, health, home and environment, safety, accessible services, belonging and community. At a multi-

² see http://www.nwtwc.org.uk/uploads/Judith_Emanuel.pdf

³ see http://www.nwtwc.org.uk/uploads/Lower_Falinge_Story.pdf

stakeholder summit imaginative ways of portraying the themes eg plays and sketches, explored what life might look like. This was followed by design workshops which looked at the issues, actions and solutions. Key transformations were identified; services needed to be brought closer to the community and raising aspirations of the residents

Question: How did you know and work out what to do on the way?

1. The statistics were scary and bleak
2. We heard about the Salford spotlight approach
3. We had done some AI training with the LSP and got a lot out of it
4. We wanted a positive AI and spot light approach
5. We wanted a strong residents base
6. We worked with Salford University (the council believe that outside people know more). The stories were gathered through 1 hour interviews using University community interviewers which were analysed by the University
7. We found that most services had no record of who they were giving services to
8. A consultant, Clíodhna Mulhern, trained us up. We will be doing it ourselves next time.

Question: Have new groups emerged and residents as leaders?

There are several new groups – eg Portuguese, Congolese, young people, women

Jo from the NW Community Activists network was interested in contact details and can offer them support. He pointed out that groups can get isolated and demoralised.

It was clear that people did not feel safe in the neighbourhood or going to services, what worked was bringing services in. The positive core related to more personalised planning which took on board different languages and needs and peoples lack of confidence and self belief – 60% of people on Invalidity Benefit have mental health issues. There were front line staff representing 28 different services delivering on the ground. Cross team training has helped, so that people know what others do and get connections. People had to go through 13 different doors for services. The first training was about cross cultural issues and health. Issues were picked up like how to promote family literacy where there are few books in the house so you generally create a climate where whoever is involved can pick up a range of things and direct people accordingly, you need a team structure that can take that on board. It started with briefings to all services, the big conversation was held in November 2007 and in December 2008 150 people were involved in the launch. People were really involved. They used world cafe and looked at different issues and prioritised. This got people to commit. Communication is very important to keep people informed.

In March, the LSP did a tour of the area and in June, there was a summit with the LSP, looking at the data.

They have re-done a survey involving 313 residents and staff. They are using Participatory Budgeting to keep work ongoing.

Question concerning work with communities that had been frequently let down and over consulted.

Suggestions included being honest

The difference with AI is the commitment as a collective; not you have said you will do for us. It is together; it is not a community wish list

Question: What skills do officers need?

There was a steering group. The project was council led and officers got training. The main thing is that people participate at an event as an individual with values and experiences rather than as a professional. The name badges had name only. The selling points are community pride and that no-one will be shouted at. The stories provide a good evidence base; a voice for the community -200 stories with different perspectives.

Linda Cheetham –Sharples, Scrutiny Support, Health, Wellbeing and Social Care Scrutiny, Salford City Council – **Building on success for a smokefree Salford –**

Participants were interested in the unusual focus, the non-smokers and the practicalities – how the OSC are doing the review.

- Initially the OSC identified a geographical area and target groups. The area Walkden was chosen because smoking levels are high for Salford and officers advised it was a good area for the review as there are networks that the OSC could work through and it is not too 'swamped' with initiatives. The OSC then decided that they would like young people and adults to be involved.
- There has been a lot of interest in the review. Initial meetings attracted people with a smoking brief local and regional as well as an LSP officer who saw the work as an opportunity to sustain previous appreciative work. The LSP did a 3 day Futuresearch using similar methods.
- The lead OSC is Health and Wellbeing. Children and Young People OSC and an OSC manager have been involved; there is interest and learning from the review for OSC practice in general
- With the advice and help of neighbourhood workers, planning teams have been set up including young people and community members, chaired by OSC members, to shape the inquiry
- Focus groups of non-smokers will be held to start the process of make visible the stories of being a non-smoker
- The data from the focus groups will be used to develop questionnaires to get more stories from the community. Local people will be trained up to be part of the interviewing team
- The community researchers, planning team and OSC members will analyse the data from the stories
- The planning team will plan the next phases, most likely an event to develop a vision for Walkden (in relation to smokefree issues) plus others to consider design and sustainability.
- One issue is to keep all the interest on board – Linda is doing regular briefing notes to keep people informed. The OSC has meetings to reflect on the project and feed in.
- Workshop participants are interested to know what the review find and what happens as a result of the review

Cllr Mary Robinson, Chair of Overview and Scrutiny, and Darren Cranshaw – Communications Manager, South Ribble Borough Council **You Matter in Broadfield – Learning for members**

- Video shown and Scrutiny report circulated
- Report kept brief, relevant and interesting for readers

- Appearance can be deceiving – video depicts colourful, positive area, whereas it is a high Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) area.
- Contrast/Comparison with South Lakeland District Council (SLDC) experience, where initially the Scrutiny had been “done to” the community.
- Councillors (Scrutiny Members) were leaders in implementing the review forward: they took full ownership of getting it right.
- This was first Appreciative Inquiry (AI) experience – will probably be used again (albeit may be occasional instances where it is not the most appropriate process).
- AI can keep people to think beyond the “dog fouling/litter” perennial concerns.
- The type of questions employed by AI has helped Scrutiny members to learn the fresh interview techniques, which will open up new responses from the Public.
- Getting positive member engagement should have been rational since councillors should be good listeners. However councillors can be overly familiar with having to hear the bad news stories from their electorate. Key to getting people on side was to get a good enthusiastic team, and to get people to give it a try. People are more convinced if they can be shown clearly identifiable results.
- This type of approach is particularly valuable in a time of dwindling budgets, since it is effective but comparatively inexpensive.
- In order to approach councillors and convince them, perhaps use the AI techniques to explore how to persuade them.
- To prove its effectiveness it would be particularly effective to demonstrate whether it has livability and positively influenced memorable outcomes. Concerns in the group were that this is deliverable, yet very difficult to achieve.
- In terms of Broadfield the high degree of community engagement between the councils community teams and the local residents, achieved doing and since the AI exercise is considered a clear and marked success.
- Similarly littering has dropped significantly. The “Broadfield Matters” project has and is being followed by many other community exercises in the area.
- South Lakeland District Council area work on local area partnerships included disaggregation of place survey data so that as the place survey is repeated, progress can be maintained.
- Timeline – member and teas training in June 2009. At same time discussions took place with community groups. Previously there had been little formal work with communities gathering stories and organising community workshops came next
- Blackpool experience was to ask what was good or bad in their area; but then they tended to forget the good things!
- In Broadfield it took a lot of skill to keep people focused on what’s good rather than on their problem (EG. Darren’s British Legion experience!)

- **Q** – How did you address the important negative things? (they shouldn't be ignored)
R – make sure you still address them, but keep coming back to the good.
People often said that they did get on well – so in a sense they recognised their strengths, but also experienced a desire to be better.
- Defining the area to analyse (IE: which street was in, which was out) was important.
- **Q** – Was community critical of what might be perceived as an attempt to paint the area in a rosy glow?
R – Don't over egg the positive and don't ignore negativity, but emphasise that this is an opportunity for them to define their future, see if there are specific situations in the public's priorities.
- **Q** – Would it have been worked in a less stable area with a less settled community?
R – Not certain, but the principles are equally applicable in almost any area.
- People's stories helped the team to plan and deliver the workshops, in order to make it more meaningful.
- Comparison with Wigan M B C – the Chief Exec and Leader unilaterally required people to portray the borough as the best place in the world to live and work.
- Interestingly, Wigan M B C now employs up to 32 people purely to draw down external funding for a wide range of initiatives – each bid to GONW and others includes a 15% levy used to employ officers to generate further funding (hence the department now is so large) Significant amount of informal lobbying of funding.
- No quantitative analysis undertaken since Broadfield project took place – however lots of anecdotal evidence in place, to show improvements.
- The workshop exercise was helpful in which officers and councillors were put on one side and members of the public on the other side – each where asked to rate how important (to what extent people 'Matter in Broadfield') they perceived their area to be. The public rated less highly than the official reps, but later feedback from the public was positive, while the public now recognised the importance that the officials felt about the area.
- Concerns expressed as to whether the relatively small number of people involved in the Broadfield Matters project would be truly representative of the ward.
- The Broadfield Matters Project has now been passed on to the local Community Engagement Teams.
- The Scrutiny Committee have had a good experience of Area Improvement, but won't be bound to use it in the future – it will be a useful tool though.

<p>Brian Morris, Neighbourhood Development Officer, Eden, Cumbria County Council: AI as professional development</p>

There was general discussion about the approach and how Brian's team looked at ways to make this work for them to develop on a professional basis.

As a result it was agreed that at each weekly team meeting they would each tell a 'story' and reflect on this using the AI methodology.

One suggestion was made that this could be at the start of the meeting rather than at the end, which Brian felt, was a good idea. Sets a positive note for the rest of the meeting.

They have found this useful and have validated thoughts that have already been had. Once the analysis had been completed they could use this to justify.

John Chapman questioned what things are fundamental to an inquiry. 'What is in Judith's head in terms of questions at the start of an inquiry?'

There was interesting discussion around using AI as a personal development tool and how you do that. By it's nature you focus on the positive so how do you address weaknesses? It was felt the interrogation of 'what' is key to this in the process.

Feedback

The feedback received at the close of the event has been collated and analysed to highlight how best to progress the learning and support activity going forward based on specific requests and comments made by the delegates. Feedback from the discussion session has also been pulled together. This will help to shape future events relating to this and other topics. 18 forms feedback were received.

The table below shows which aspect of the seminar attendees found most useful. Some individuals noted more than one in their response:

Aspect	Case Study Presentations	Workshops/ Group Discussions
Number	7	15

In response to the question around improving the format and learning opportunity there were 3 responses suggesting feedback from a community perspective and possibly a site visit. Provision of case histories and background to areas detailed, post project evaluations by speakers and longer workshop sessions. Clearer definition of AI – language was hard to grasp. More evidenced based outcomes on how AI has changed negative behaviours within the community.

With regard to individuals changing aspects of their practice as a result of learning on the day, the following actions identified were:

- 1 wanted to find out more about AI.
- 3 were going to discuss AI and opportunities to use this approach with colleagues.
- 1 was going to work with Scrutiny Team to develop a Neighbourhood Agreement possibly using AI.
- 1 took away positivity and a different approach.
- 1 would follow up networking and was enthused to develop AI further.
- 2 were going to explore the use of AI in their role, pilot methods and build into Community Engagement Action Plan.
- 1 would consider AI for future scrutiny reviews.
- 1 would take partnership colleagues through AI approach to Community Engagement.

14 individuals made new contacts at the event.

Suggestions for future NWTWC events or action were as follows:

- New developments in evaluation e.g. storytelling.

- Community Governance – exemplar status management structure, setting up a Neighbourhood Team

Future LEXs:

1 attendee Sarah Elliott (sarah.Elliott@blackpool.gov.uk) would be prepared to present and host a LEX.

Future Support Information Requested:

16 attendees would like to be contacted regarding the Award Scheme, Action Learning Sets and Learning Events.

This will be followed up by Liz Wood.

Conclusions

The quality and varied nature of the case studies and opportunity to discuss, question and share information as well as network proved to be a successful mix for participants.

Attendees recognised the opportunity to explore the different case studies in a more in depth way in their own time with the flexible round table discussion groups. The opportunity to hear about AI in practice contributed to the overall success of this seminar.