

HIDDEN INSIGHT 13: APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY



This insight considers the philosophy, principles and practice of appreciative inquiry, it considers an approach that enables communities to be heard through reframing the dialogue with statutory agencies and listening to the concerns and issues from communities that are sometimes “hard to reach”. It is an approach that seeks to build on the strengths of local communities.

#AppreciativeInquiry #Listeningtocommunities #BuildingsocialCapital #Reframingthedialogue
#strengthsbasedapproach #Generatingnewideas

When we embark on an Appreciative Inquiry process we are setting out to discover the kinds of practice that, if increased, would make a community an even better place to live. The process involves as many people as possible and seeks to discover, inquire, connect and learn about strengths, values, and practice that make a difference to the lives of those involved (through improved professional practice or improved community action, and the relationships between the two and beyond).

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has a key concept of ‘Generativity’. Generativity unsettles the common assumptions and looks for the possibilities and strengths so that new ideas can be discovered and developed. It is not about positive thinking; that alone does not result in transformational change but does adopt a positive approach. It is about allowing the dialogue of deficit problem solving in the short term, and seeking to identify what can be done differently by generating new ideas and commitment to explore those ideas with others.

AI works on constructionist theory: social change is possible when collective efforts to passionately engage and ignite the imagination of self and others is fostered. It works on the basis that knowledge and reality are socially constructed through relationships and experience.

The public sector-public relationship is an important one when we consider the legitimacy of the public sector and the implications on public confidence. It can be said of council officers, NHS workers, police officers and housing officers who are seeking to support, protect and serve the vulnerable in society.

It has been said by many that Appreciative Inquiry may not work in command-control environments. AI is generative, co-creative and is at all times mindful of the imposition of our own values and assumptions. As a result no assumption of good and bad is made, instead we adopt a process of anticipating the best, and putting things in place to achieve the best possible outcome through a shared narrative and learning process. It is conversation based and encourages listening and learning rather than telling and enforcing

Command/Control processes rely on instructions and directives channelled through hierarchies. The challenge for the modern public sector is how they use their professionalism to ‘reflect in practice’ about when it is necessary to adopt the command/control approach (e.g. a critical incident which depends on a standard set of rules to adhere to) and building new relationships (no rules – all relationships).

Participants on the MutualGain programme took part in a one-day training session that provided them with the philosophy, principles and practice to help engage their imagination in how they might create a new relationship with the public.

Two examples of Appreciative Inquiry Leading to Positive Action

Example 1

A Neighbourhood Policing Team comprised police (PCSOs, PCs, Sergeants, and an Inspector), Council (Policy and Housing), and an active resident (Neighbourhood Watch). They all do good work within their own worlds and are passionate about making a difference in their community. Often though, they experience challenges with engaging the very people that they want to have conversations with (those that don’t attend public meetings and those that don’t want to engage with them).

Inspired by the training, the team decided to hold an Appreciative Inquiry event which aimed to attract those they don't normally have conversations with. To prepare for the event they undertook a series of Focus Groups which brought together:

- The positive questioning techniques that they covered in the AI training
- The new focus on social research and conducting 'real' Focus Groups; and;
- The reframing process that the day one training provided in encouraging them to think about building social capital.

They wanted to discover perceptions of the police and why people wouldn't come along to a police event. With new information to hand they planned the event using incentives and conversations to recruit.

On arrival the public were surprised by the format of the event (colourful, creative, structured, positive, and dialogical), and as a result engaged in a different conversation to that they expected to have (would previously have complained about what is bad in their area).

The problems are not ignored in Appreciative Inquiry – they are reframed to encourage positive shared social action through the sharing of stories and the asking of a different type of question. One hundred and ten people participated compared to an average of 6-10 at usual PACT meetings. The team collected all the data, produced a report and invited the community to continue the conversation to explore possibilities for creating a new framework for engagement. With no paid incentive to attend, 35 people participated.

The issues raised at the original event were shared across the conversation tables using a roots a fruits activity which was learned in training: At the end of that round of conversation, residents completed 'I will' statements which they felt were manageable and convenient for them to achieve.

A couple of weeks later the PCSO learned about a local man who was litter picking on a daily basis. After speaking to the man he realised that this activity was as a result of an event he attended recently where he made a commitment to himself to pick up more litter – it was his 'I will' statement that he wrote at the follow up conversation event. He had been doing this without 'reporting in', without attending meetings, without informing anyone in 'authority'. He had been enthused by the start of the Appreciative Inquiry process and wanted to make a positive difference. This is how he wanted to do it. He now has a relationship with the local PCSO who has provided him with some health and safety equipment to make the job a little easier.

Building social capital can't and won't always fit with the 'counting' mechanisms of police engagement e.g. numbers of Key Individual Networks (KINs), numbers of people at PACT meetings, numbers of volunteers etc., but it will encourage people to commit to doing some things differently which will have an overall impact on the levels of crime in a community due to adopting greater social responsibility in their individual lives.

Example 2

One Neighbourhood Team did not embark on an Appreciative Inquiry process to tackle their challenge, but one of the officers was enthused by the idea of it. She is a detective and had been having trouble building relationships with the business community in her area.

She organised a mini Appreciative Inquiry with them where she adopted new questioning techniques and new approaches. The results stunned her: she would normally be asked why police weren't supporting the businesses and doing things for them to prevent some of the anti social behaviour and minor crimes in the area. They wanted the police to fix their problem.

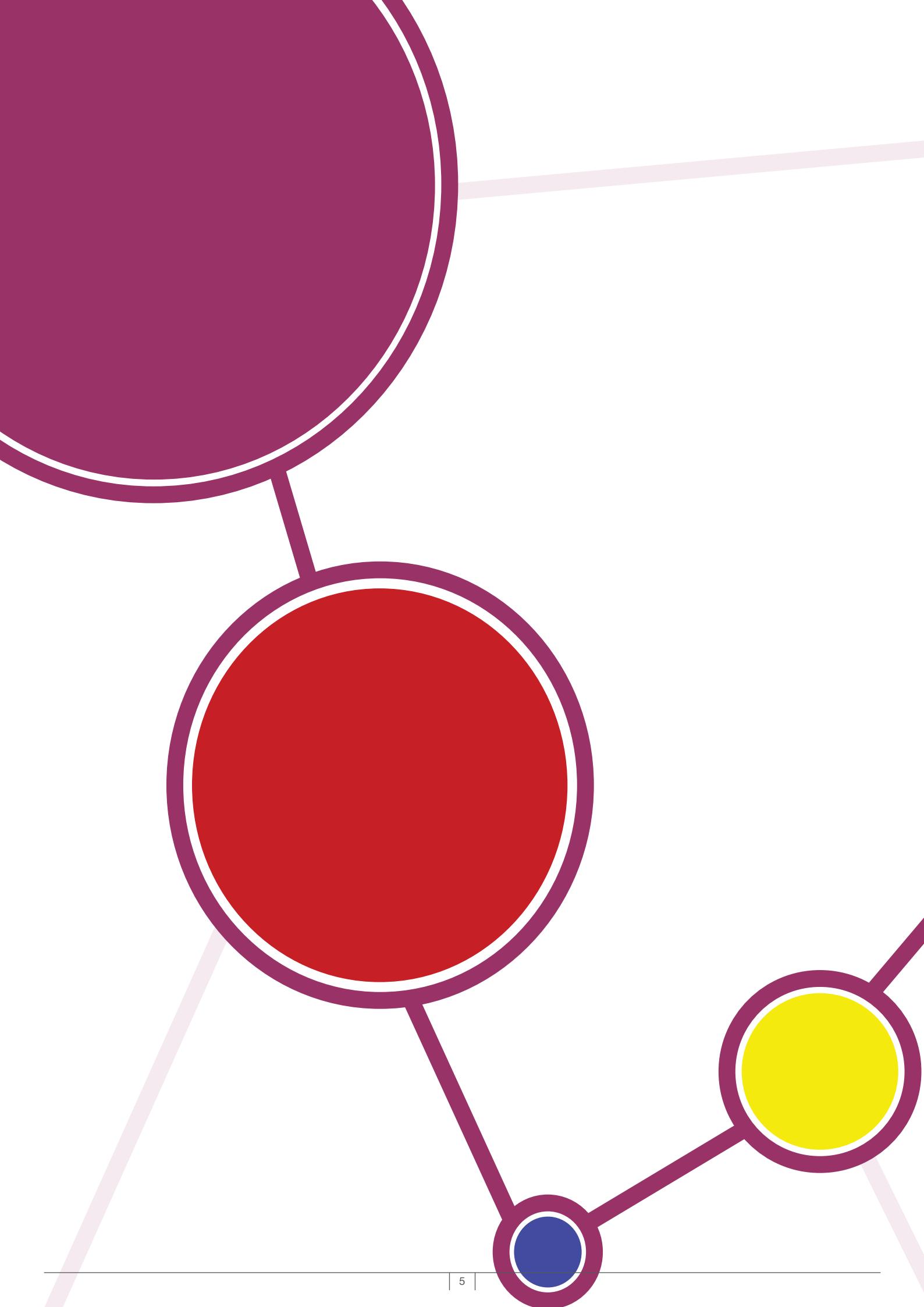
As a result of the Appreciative Inquiry they discovered their own potential and resources to support themselves and agreed to work closely with the officer to resolve the issues affecting them.

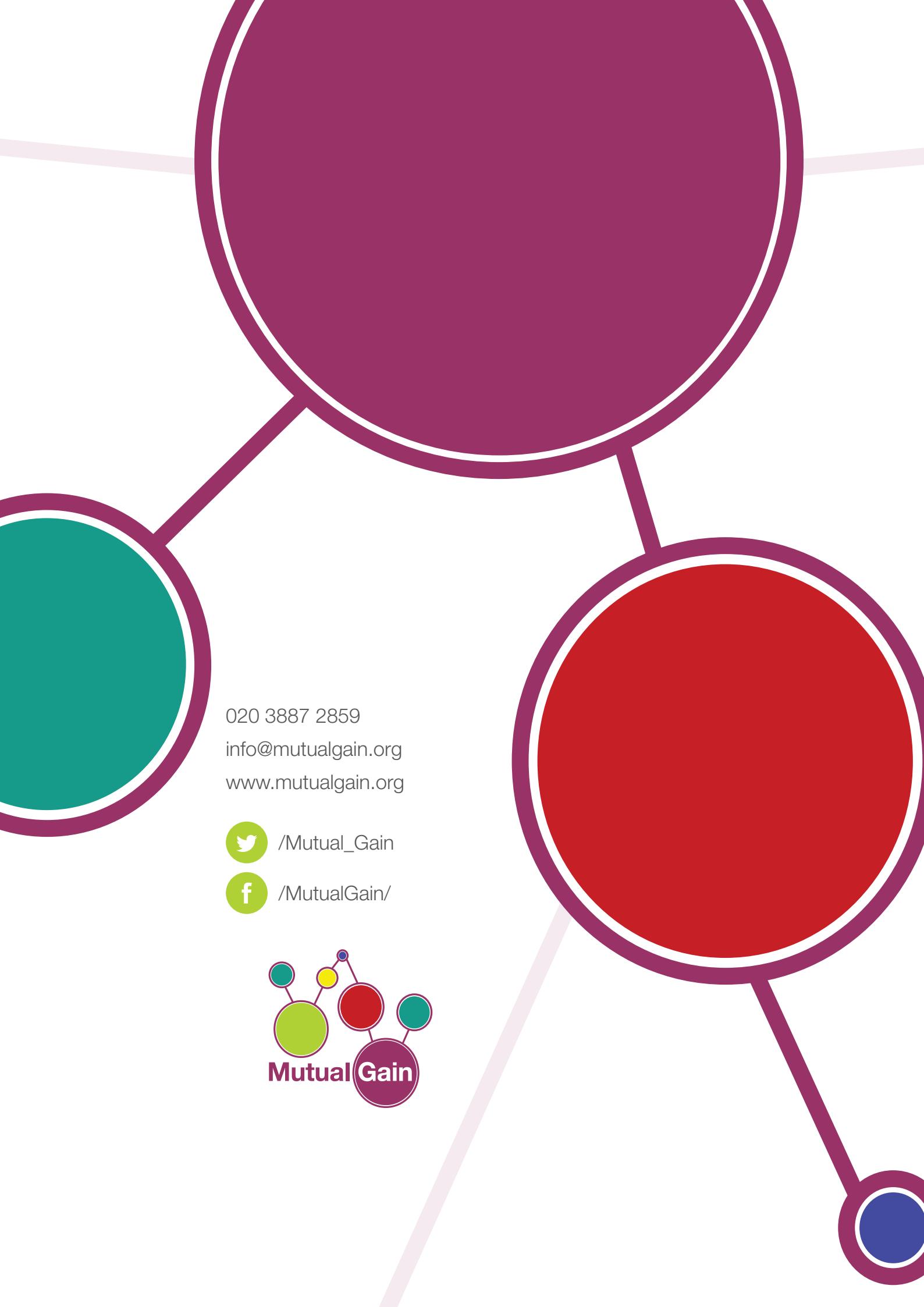
Summary

Both teams proved that command-control organisations can adopt an Appreciative Inquiry process and achieve very positive results. The challenge for the teams as they go forward is to continue generative dialogue and appreciative processes. They will need to remember to reframe their view of community engagement and not 'revert to type' under the pressures of the command/control organisational culture.

The Appreciative Inquiry 'event' is the start of the process in both cases, and should not be seen as an end in itself. They have developed a shared sense of how they will define their work, and engaged the community in dreaming about the possible.

They will continue the in depth investigations into what is working in the community (beyond policing and statutory requirements) and consider how they can enable the amplification of that to design a new way of policing where communities police themselves by building social capital and developing meaningful relationships with those in statutory agencies so that together they deliver a positive future.





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