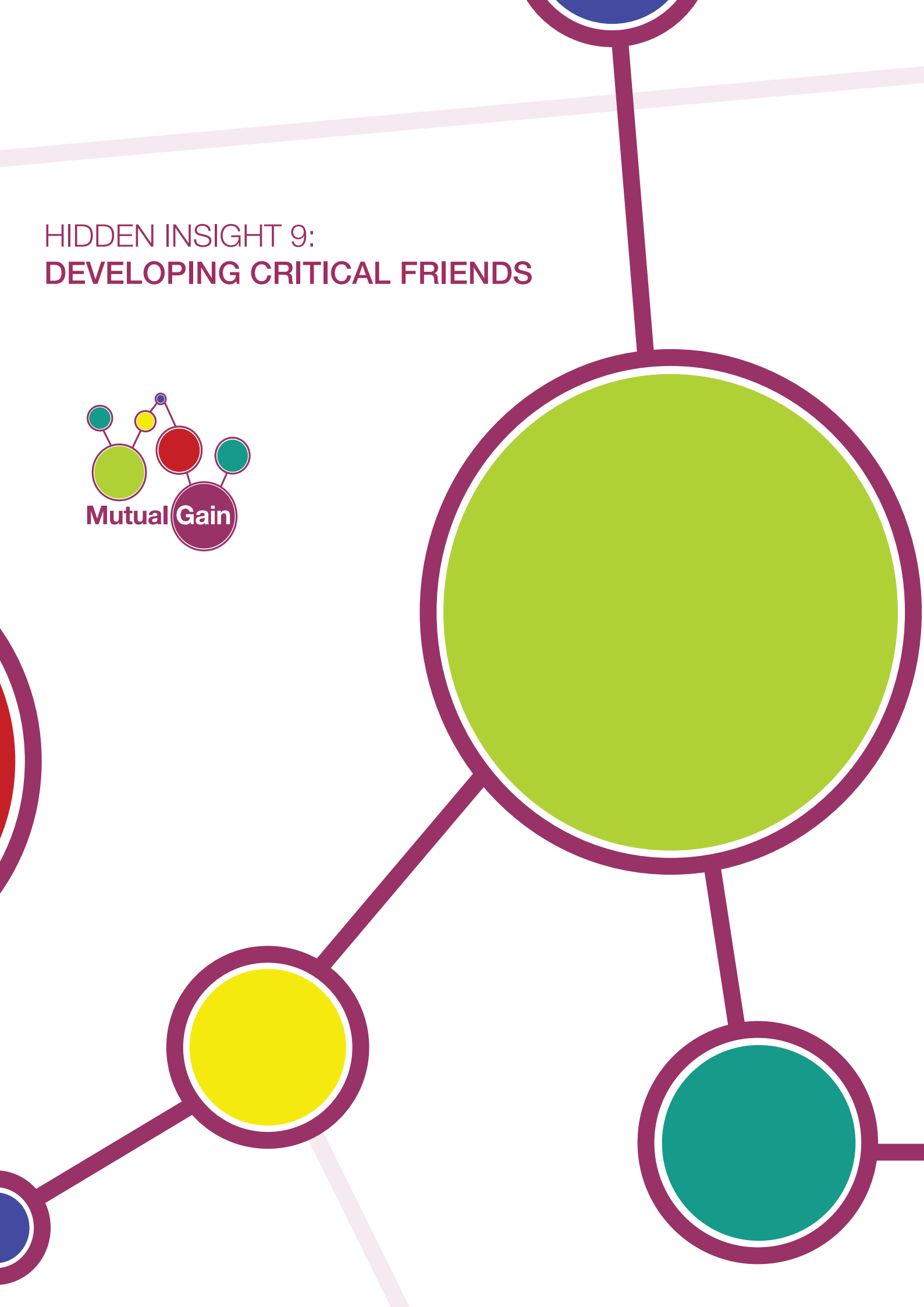


HIDDEN INSIGHT 9:  
DEVELOPING CRITICAL FRIENDS



**This Insight considers how a public sector team developed as reflective practitioners whilst developing their knowledge and skills for community engagement. It considers the principles and theory of reflective learning, how the team undertook the process and the benefits that were achieved through adopting it as a process for development.**

*#Reflective Learning #Reflective practitioners #Community engagement #Transforming organisations  
#Packtyping #Homenatch #supported Delivery #Action Learning Sets*

Reflection is strengthened if you have a 'critical friend' to help hold a mirror up to your practice. A critical friend can be defined as a trusted person who challenges you by asking provocative questions, provides information through another lens, and offers an honest and supportive critique of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work.

Who is your critical friend? A core group of partners engaged in Action Learning Sets (ALS) to help develop their role as a critical friend, and in doing so, improve their approach to community engagement. The confidence of individuals grew by understanding how they could help each other. Being able to receive constructive criticism with a positive mindset can be challenging, but all participants embraced it for the learning and enjoyed the time spent with colleagues to think through complex social problems.

What is an Action Learning Set? An Action Learning Set is a group of six to eight people who meet on a regular basis to explore day to day challenges, and identify actions that enable front line leaders to trouble shoot.

Action learning can maximise financial savings, improve productivity and identify new ways of working with limited resources. To achieve significant change, it is essential that independent, expertly trained facilitators are used at all times.

Action learning is more than the questions set out on the next page, but the questions are a useful aide memoire for individuals to use in their daily professional life. Try them out and see how much more you learn with genuine inquiry!

Questions to ask in an Action Learning Set The trick to getting the most from an Action Learning Set is to ask open questions. The following are examples that you may wish to consider.

- What result do you want?
- What is your biggest difficulty or problem?
- How do you feel about this situation?
- What could you do differently?
- What do you want the other person to do differently?
- What judgements are you making about the other person and/or the situation?
- How do you know this?
- What would make the situation better?
- How does the situation affect you?
- What don't you know about the situation?
- What's the most extreme measure you could take?
- What's the best possible outcome from this situation?
- What's the worst thing that might happen?
- What options are open to you now?
- What could you start to do differently?
- What action are you going to take?
- What learning are you taking from this action learning session?

MutualGain worked with a public sector organisation to help develop reflective learning and enhance community engagement. For the Action Learning Sets the staff involved divided into their four geographically based teams with partners.

The group was asked to identify the behaviours of ‘trust’ associated with being a critical friend. This led into a second activity whereby each group was asked to develop ‘ground rules’ for working together over the next few months.

After training the group was keen to ensure any future community engagement was meaningful: they recognised that some of what they do must be improved or there could be the unintended consequence of wasting public money. They valued the investment the force was making and wanted to help develop a new approach from the ground up.

To this end the following rules demonstrated that commitment:

- Not getting caught up in a discussion on current policy and why it may/may not work, and instead they will do what is ‘right’ and share the learning for the wider force to consider at the end
- Will show courage and try new things
- Dream big and be open to challenge.

One group created a mission statement for their group:

**“WE ARE A DEDICATED COHESIVE TEAM WHO ARE OPEN, HONEST AND THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX”**

After discussing what success might look like one of the groups identified what they thought might be preferred short, medium and long term successes. They are shown here:

Short	Medium	Long
To ensure decision makers support the process and fully engage.	To mobilise the community in all aspects of their lives and improve engagement.	Open interaction between organisations/partners and community.
Understand the community by building on existing contacts/groups.	Working together to achieve the community VISION.	Change.
Time. Honesty (police & partners). Interaction.	Confidence. Honesty (public). Trust.	Reduction in demand. Resources. Sustainable.
Open dialogue.	More community led activity.	Reduction in demand.

Challenges that the group brought to the Action Learning Set for discussion:

- Youth engagement
- Financial restraints and opportunities
- Alternative options for incentivising people to participate
- Engaging around Islamic views of Lee Rigby murder
- Changing peoples’ perceptions
- Changing policy
- How to tackle apathy

- How do we get large groups of people to attend meetings and what is the best method?
- How do we know the real picture of what is going on out there?
- How do we get councillors to go on the same journey and let go?
- How do we work closer with the community?
- How do we change peoples’ perceptions of homeless offenders being re-housed?

## EXTERNALLY

### Using Partnership Resources:

In one locality, youths said the reason they were engaging in Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) was because they had nothing else to do. The local team organised access to football space for them to use.

The 'deal' from the officer doing this on their behalf was that they stayed out of trouble or they would lose their access to the pitches.

### New Approaches to Dealing with Complaints:

One participant used an 'appreciative inquiring' philosophy in her role in dealing with ASB complaints. As a result of her different approach she noticed that the complainant was more engaged and started to consider how they might become part of the solution with a positive impact.

### Local Business as a Resource:

Due to emerging local issues, one participant spoke of organising focus groups of security teams at a local McDonalds'. By using a different form of questioning he was pleasantly surprised that the security teams wanted the same things the group.

As a result the group supplied them with a list of contacts with whom the security team might engage with to resolve the different issues.



# INTERNALLY

## **Avoiding Duplication through Better Partnership Working:**

Through the new engagement process the team has been working with partners that they don't usually work with on a daily basis. They have been exposed to structures, programmes, and resources (assets) which they didn't know existed. The participants were surprised at how much the Council was doing and how they might better work together to bring about benefits to the local people. The team felt that the Council valued their direct access with some of the more difficult to reach communities. They felt that with the knowledge of Appreciative Inquiry they could change the local approach which could influence local resource allocation in the future.

## **Daring to be Different: Senior Buy In**

The team spoke about previous approaches of engagement as more of a 'telling' approach rather than a 'listening' one. There were mixed views about a new listening approach; positive versus a nervousness about the impact it might have in practice within the organisation. If this cultural change was to be achieved then the same programme will need to be run for senior officers too.

## **Developing Reflective Practitioners:**

Some participants had completed learning logs and had started to develop their ability to reflect on their practice. While they found this contrary to normal practice and very hard work, they felt that they had enjoyed it and it had positive results.

## **Action Planning:**

Having established the short, medium, and long term goals for the programme in each area, the groups developed their thinking to consider the who, what, and how of putting that into action.

## **Neighbourhood Teams:**

One Neighbourhood Team worked on an approach that would develop their working with existing contacts around a football and cooking intervention in hopes of long term benefits of this type of intervention in the prevention of crime. Their passion to work with disadvantaged and problematic groups was harnessed by challenging them to do what they thought might be too ambitious at this stage: a Participatory Budgeting event. They all wanted to try this approach but felt that it would be too difficult to engage that particular community so through practicing being a critical friend the team took up the challenge again and decided to pursue focus groups with parents and young people which would potentially be followed by a Participatory Budgeting event (funds permitting). Participatory Budgeting would generate ideas from local people about how they might run activities for themselves which focus on supporting young people.

When learning about new methods of engagement, it is the finer details of each of the techniques that are important in understanding how a new way of engaging might evolve. It was important therefore to remind participants at this stage to revisit their notes from training. Participants were tested on their knowledge of the rudimentary elements of the techniques taught during their training, and, as expected, participants' knowledge varied.

The subjects raised in the ALS at this stage included:

1. Staff Survey Engagement.
2. Developing Homewatch.
3. Engaging with the Gypsy and Roma Community.
4. Achieving a balance between team activities and partnership attendance at meetings.

The team gave immediate focus to improving the engagement in the staff survey. Participants acknowledged many myths that had come from 10-15 years prior (under the old regime) and were able to clarify the reality. The group was reminded of the similarities between what they had been saying about the survey and what the communities were saying about the team and partners, even if their experience was also 10-15 years old. What the group was able to learn was that despite the best intentions of the survey there was a need to not rely on rank to disseminate the message but to consider how the frontline might be involved in dispelling beliefs of mistrust. This was likened to community engagement in that you can not always rely on community leaders to provide messaging and insight, sometimes you have to go to those who are usually disengaged.

Each member of the group provided one solution which would help tackle the problem, this was taken by the individual to help inform their practice.

### 1. Developing Homewatch:

This Action Learning Set revealed the need for a more coordinated, area wide communications about the approach for Homewatch. There was a desire to extend and improve the role of Homewatch to become more proactive as in the case of house to house operations following critical incidents. The challenge is how to encourage people to become part of the Homewatch team in areas where public participation is low. Since the Homewatch structure and involvement of the organisation varies between the teams, a helpful exchange of ideas and possibilities were presented.

### 2. Engaging with the Gypsy and Roma Community:

Access to this community by the team was raised as a challenge. Through dialogue it became apparent that one of the Housing participants had a 'strategic responsibility' for this community but since they weren't a priority there had been limited activity. However, she did use a key community member for mystery shopping and once the group learned who that person was they realised that she also sat on a diversity engagement forum, fulfilling a number of roles in the public sector.

Achieving a balance between team activities and partnership attendance at meetings - The issue had been raised about the use of staff time at attending partnership meetings; how useful the meetings are to 'organisational work' and the relative importance of them in the day to day work.

Additionally four other issues about internal systems and priorities were raised:

- Organisational goals or community engagement? Internally individuals will not be able to be held to account for not attending partnership meetings, but will be held to account for delivery of organisational goals.
- The issue of shift inflexibility to meeting demands.
- Visible senior leadership at meetings to enhance a partnership feel to the neighbourhood versus valuable use of time.
- Working with Councillors in a proactive way so that they could have a direct line and feeling of trust requires investment of time to build those relationships.

### Packtyping:

Packtyping is a self awareness tool that helps people to recognise their own values and strengths. Some organisations have been using Packtyping for some time in order to enable members of the organisation to understand how they can make better decisions, build confidence, openness, improve self esteem and improve communication. MutualGain would normally carry out a 'social styles' activity at this point to encourage participants to reflect on how they see themselves and how others perceive them (they were taught reflection at the last set). However, our philosophy is to support the organisation where relevant in embedding other activities which might appear to have minimal relevance in other settings and as Packtyping is now linked to the leadership programme we thought it prudent to include it here.

Action Learning Sets are designed to test the levels of knowledge, understanding, and application of engagement methods and techniques. Participants were asked to complete research prior to attendance and updated with progress. Feedback on progress to date:

The Team has completed all of their planned focus groups. The feedback is included in the following bullet points:

1. The turnout for each group was higher than expected.
2. The team had successfully recruited people via door knocking and using existing networks.
3. Some of the attendees had not been directly contacted but had heard from neighbours/ friends/ family about the MutualGain focus groups and attended to have their say.
4. The Team manager commented on the learning gained from the focus groups including positive and negative perceptions of the organisation in the locality. Overall, he stated that the team had learned about issues that were directly influencing public confidence in the organisation.
5. A number of the issues raised, including a request to start a residents group and make use of an available house for community purposes, were useful in terms of the planning for the forthcoming Participatory Budgeting event.
6. One resident identified that some of the people in the area would be uncomfortable attending meetings in buildings linked to authority, and offered to allow her home to be used for future focus groups. This included the provision of home baked cakes.

Feedback given on the focus groups included the following:

One participant commented *“This has been a good learning experience for me. Taking the lead has been challenging but rewarding. This is a great way to interact with people.”*

### **Presentations on Community Engagement Techniques**

The participants were split into five mixed groups that were not confined to their geographical areas. Each group was asked to research and prepare a 10 minute presentation on a specific technique related to community engagement.

The tiles shown below:

1. Effective Focus Groups
2. Appreciative Inquiry
3. Participatory Budgeting
4. Social Capital
5. Social Media

The rules were that each member of the group had to have a speaking part and questions could be asked by all other participants at the conclusion of the presentations.

The overall standard of the presentations were high with teams demonstrating a varying degree of research and application. The teams not only presented on their given subject, but considered the potential impact for their organisation, partners and community. All of the participants took part in the presentations.

The participants demonstrated innovation and creativity with successful use of internet links in relation to social capital and video in relation to Focus Groups.

### **Elevator pitches**

Elevator pitches are an opportunity to pass on information in relation to a specific aspect of work or an idea to another person within a 30 second period. The Elevator Pitch has to conform to certain protocols e.g. it has to be positive and delivered with enthusiasm. Once the input was given the participants were given the task of preparing an Elevator Pitch to their organisational lead answering the question ‘What value have you received from being on the MutualGain programme?’

Their team manager played the part of the organisational lead and participants were chosen at random to stand in a lift and give their perspective.

Those chosen not only gave a demonstration of the value of the MutualGain programme to the organisation, but also linked their answers to key issues currently being addressed by the organisation and partners e.g. levels of confidence, listening to communities and changing culture. This further demonstrated those changes in language and behaviours that had become increasingly evident during the previous two Action Learning Sets. The vocabulary of participants in relation to community engagement was reflective of their learning, but more important was the fact that they are using them in the right context and with accurate understanding. A clear demonstration of learning.

## Packtyping revisited

The teams were asked to consider their Packtype and how it has altered throughout the course of the programme. A number of the participants demonstrated a personal development as a result of the programme. Comments included:

1. Being less of a 'control freak' and letting go, thereby sharing responsibility and division of workload.
2. A number demonstrated reflective practice including perceptions of individuals and a recognition that some preferred to undertake ground work behind the scenes work rather than stand in the spotlight.
3. A number commented on how they felt that they had 'come out of their shell' and developed the confidence to openly challenge and put forward their point of view.

## Delivery

***"Leadership, true leadership, is about negotiating progress on complex issues in environments where telling people what to do is not the best way ahead."* - Dr. Victoria Harrington, Director of Research and Learning at the Australian Institute of Police Management**

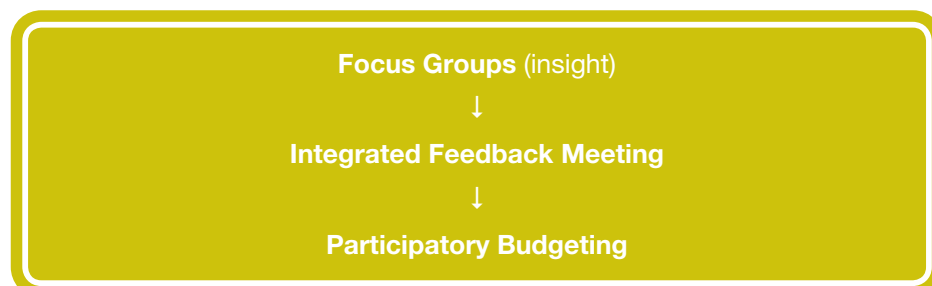
Supported Delivery is having the knowledge of how to make the complex simple and having the opportunity to practice the skills needed to make that knowledge a reality. Through Supported Delivery participants were challenged to reflect with peers and build on what they know, to improve the way they engage. It needs to be said that neither Supported Delivery nor Action Learning Sets are linear; instead Supported Delivery can happen in between two Action Learning Sets.

The following issues were discussed as part of the Supported Delivery programme:

1. Identify preferred engagement techniques to be tested, and check they are fit for purpose.
2. To develop a well planned and thought through process of engagement.
3. To allocate high and low level tasks in terms of planning and organising.
4. To ensure plans aren't duplicating activities of partners.
5. To clarify uncertainties of approach.

## Engagement Teams:

One Engagement Team has developed their approach from one which looked at providing partnership activity for young people in a community centre (football and cooking) to testing out the techniques and methods learned on the course. They were keen to explore community perceptions of the organisation which could affect trust (in relation to reporting, attending meetings etc.) With a better insight into perceptions, they wanted to use Participatory Budgeting to encourage the community to come up with ideas of how they themselves might provide solutions to their perceived challenges rather than rely on the statutory agencies.





**Observation:**

There was a great deal of commitment, cohesion and enthusiasm from the Engagement Team. They were constructively challenging each other and are keen to extend their knowledge and experience of doing something new.

Another Engagement Team was originally divided into three separate teams to enable effective group work. All three are now working towards a single collective process by bringing all their ideas together. When planning for the delivery of their preferred approach to community engagement the discussions were open and constructive enabling the group to demonstrate their enthusiasm, offer excellent challenge, and to move forward positively.



Both teams are very different in composition and personalities, but what ties them all together is their enthusiasm, passion and commitment to the programme which is both impressive and encouraging.

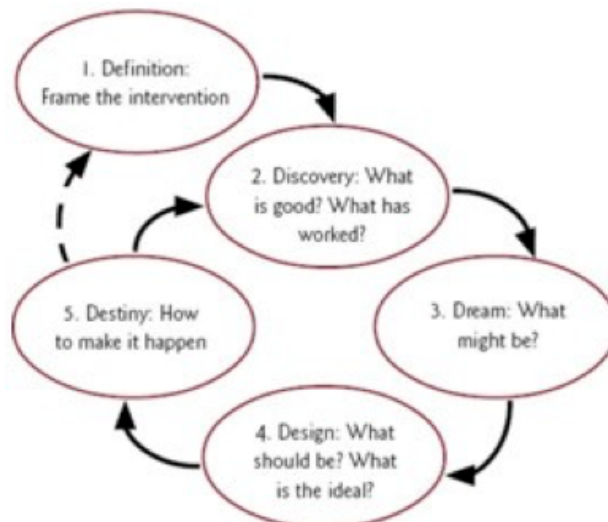
The advantage of Supported Delivery is that it can focus on individuals as well as the team. This means that the two teams can have Supported Delivery that is unique to the stage of planning and individuals can take advantage of a one on one focus. The process of planning is often an area that is covered and in the case of these two teams they wanted to link their training to the planning process.

The areas covered at this stage included:

- 1. Progress planning with new techniques (revisiting training).
- 2. Continuity of process (maintaining momentum).

One team wanted to use participatory budgeting to encourage the community to come up with ideas about how they themselves might provide solutions to their perceived challenges rather than rely on the statutory agencies to provide this.

The second team completed a successful series of focus groups in addition to a Community Appreciative later in the year.



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