Safeguarding Early Adopters programme
Learning example

> **Early Adopter:** Devon/South West – a police perspective
>
> Learning theme: Multi-agency outcomes framework; Local Reviews

Introduction

The learning example is used to demonstrate how using a questioning technique based on the Appreciative Inquiry model can be used in the police service to have positive conversations with the overall aim to develop individual and team practice thus improving service to the public and the safeguarding of victims, children and families.

Background, aims and objectives

The Devon Early adopter project's aim is to develop a 'Devon' approach using the Appreciative Inquiry methodology to be used across the partnership to build on existing good and excellent practice and create a solution focused positive environment within and across agencies. This new approach has the overall objective to improve outcomes for children and families and will be used in practitioner led audit processes and learning events.

It is recognised that for too long the focus has been on what has gone wrong with cases, or on poor practice, with repeated findings from reviews and audits generating recommendations which are continually circulated. This project is about re-framing learning into a more positive context with the true engagement of managers, practitioners, children and families with real-time learning through the generation of ideas.

It has been important to remain focused on developing an approach which can be understood by all agencies, children and families so the use of simple language, free from organisational jargon, has been a key element. The ability to easily transfer the methodology to all types of situations has been a focus for the project team so its application within the police and health service was an important step in 'testing' the versatility of the approach to learning.

Approach

As the project developed it was necessary to find 'safe environments' within each agency to test out the approach based on the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) methodology. The project team devised the name of 'appreciative conversations' but each of the practice leads developed their own style of questions.

The project team had the support of an AI trainer, provided by Research in Practice, to assist with feedback on question design and interpretation of the AI model.

Planning stage:

For the police practice lead the first stage was to identify suitable ways in which to test out the appreciative conversation technique. A review of a Domestic Abuse Unit in one area of Devon was about to begin and the police lead was able to assist by designing questions based on the AI model to be used by both the police lead and the officer assigned to lead the review and then by undertaking a series of one to ones and group conversations both locally and across the Devon and Cornwall area.

The specific learning example will focus on the group session with the team under review. This group session was designed to bring together the team once all the one to ones were completed.

To plan for this the police lead identified through the outcome of the one to ones that all members of the team were seeking to be able to be more proactive in their role and undertake earlier intervention with victims and families. The aim of the session was therefore about how the team could find opportunities to be more proactive. Questions were designed for the session to focus on finding good practice within the team for some key processes and developing ideas to grow within the team.

Facilitating the session:

The police lead facilitated the session. Interestingly there was some nervousness reported by the supervisor of the team that tensions were running high within in the team and the session could therefore be negative.

To start the session the police lead explained the aim of the session and framed it within a 'learning together' context. Whilst questions had been designed, in reality the session flowed well with just some initial questions and then guiding the conversation throughout, keeping a focus on the aim and positively reframing comments to ensure it remained solution focused. The independence of the facilitator did allow for objectivity, key information was recorded on a flip chart in front of the team.

Following the session:

The Police practice lead gained feedback after the session from the participants and the information was also typed up and shared with the team a few days later with a further request for feedback.

Challenges
Due to the operational nature of the team, and the number of staff on flexible working agreements it was not possible to have every member present. The time constraints meant that the session did not cover all the topics.

Successes

There was clear positive engagement from the staff who attended and the richness of the conversation led to the generation of ideas and solutions. Despite the reported fractious nature of the team the session felt positive and productive. At the end there was a plan made to build on some of the ideas with further conversations to explore in detail particular issues. Some of the solutions suggested by the team were agreed there and then by the supervisor. The supervisor provided the following written feedback:

'I felt that it was good because it encouraged free dialogue, it sparked ideas, it flowed freely, it led to issues being identified but also promoted discovery of potential solutions. It looked at the benefits of working in certain ways. It has given us ideas to move forward. It provided an environment where people felt they could contribute.'

Conclusion

Whilst there was a question set designed it was only used as a reference as the session progressed. It was important to allow the conversation to flow but also the facilitator to have the skills and knowledge of the AI model to understand when it was becoming deficit based and then to subtly recap the conversation and positively reframe through questions. This type of reflective learning certainly has a place in any organisation, traditionally police 'reviews' or 'audits' are deficit based and more quantitative with a focus on 'why' something was not done. This approach of 'pausing and reflecting' in an appreciative way allows for time to share good news stories and effective ways of working.

The session did not ignore problems or poor practice as it is important that using AI should not mean that no thought is given to what is not going well. However, the 'dreaming phase' meant that what was 'discovered' to be not working could be discussed in a positive light and it was this that led to the generation of ideas and solutions.

It is important to keep the 'dreaming' phase grounded in reality to some degree and use it to good effect when working through 'what is not working well'. Too 'blue sky' may not result in a methodology which is widely adopted and therefore sustainable.

Knowing how our appreciative conversations are having an impact on outcomes and experiences for children and their families is anticipated in different ways. Firstly, appreciative conversations will identify 'what works' and what positive difference multi-agency work is having on improving outcomes for children. By identifying best practice this can be shared, providing consistency of practice, across the county. Consistently having appreciative conversations will lead to regular identification of good practice, innovation and ideas about how to achieve better and best practice. Secondly, appreciative conversations will lead to practitioners adopting this way of working with children and families and this will mean that families strengths will be identified and enabled to find their own solutions to presenting problems. By working this way, outcomes for sustained positive

change are expected to be improved as the family is following their own plan rather than a plan that has been developed for them.