MENTRO ALLAN GUIDE TO USING ACTION RESEARCH

IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PARTICIPANT LED PROJECTS
INTRODUCTION

WHY PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

ROLE OF CONSULTATION AND EVALUATION IN PARTICIPANT LED PROJECTS

PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

CONSULTATION AND EVALUATION PROCESS: INFORMAL AND FORMAL

INFORMAL CONSULTATION WITH INDIVIDUALS OR SMALL GROUPS

INFORMAL CONSULTATION WITH ACTIVITY GROUPS

FORMAL GROUP EVALUATION

THE REFLECTIVE PROCESS: INCORPORATING ACTION RESEARCH AT ALL LEVELS OF THE PROJECT

PROJECT STAFF EXPERIENCE, SKILLS AND TRAINING

LOCAL PROJECT SUPPORT

THE REFLECTIVE PROCESS FOR PROJECT STAFF

COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPARENCY

DATA COLLECTION AND PROJECT DESIGN

GETTING PARTICIPANTS TO EVALUATION EVENTS

SETTING UP EVENTS

FORMAL EVALUATION EVENTS

ROLE OF FACILITATOR AND NOTE TAKER

INTRODUCTORY EXERCISES

WHY DO INTRODUCTIONS

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

DEVELOPING GROUP CONSENSUS AND PLANNING FOR ACTION
Following up people who’ve dropped out........................................................................................................ 21
Sample Session Plans........................................................................................................................................ 22
  Sample Session Plan 1: For establishing a participatory evaluation process................................................. 23
  Sample Session Plan 2: For an established group to reflect on learning....................................................... 24
  Sample Session Plan 3: Developing an Exit Strategy ....................................................................................... 26
Additional Tools and Techniques ........................................................................................................................ 29
  Gathering information...................................................................................................................................... 29
  Diamond Ranking: ......................................................................................................................................... 30
  Bean or Dot Matrix: ......................................................................................................................................... 31
  Target Evaluation: ........................................................................................................................................... 32
  Solutions Focused planning............................................................................................................................ 33
  Sample Session: Developing an Exit Strategy - a solution focused approach............................................ 35
  Consensus workshop technique..................................................................................................................... 38
INTRODUCTION

This guide is aimed at project managers / leaders, but could also be used by project staff who are or intend to be implementing participatory action research within their project. In addition the guide may be useful to senior managers and project steering groups in order to give support, advice and direction to project staff.

The Mentro Allan programme

There were fourteen Mentro Allan (MA) projects across Wales, running between 2006 and 2011. The aim was to learn about the most effective ways to support sedentary people to develop the habit of physical activity in the natural environment. The projects had a range of target groups: young people, older people, women, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities, people with physical disabilities, mental health service users, carers, people at risk of rural isolation, and people with low incomes.

The approach to project development was participant led, using a Participatory Action Research model of evaluation. A copy of the guidance notes given to project co-ordinators is available through the website. Projects were encouraged to focus on doorstep activities, as being more easily sustainable.

www.mentroallan.co.uk

Mentro Allan was led by a National Partnership made up of the following organisations:

Countrywide Council for Wales: www.ccw.gov.uk

Public Health Wales: www.publichealthwales.gov.uk

Sport Wales: www.sportwales.org.uk

Wales Council for Voluntary Action: www.wcva.org.uk

Welsh Local Government Association: www.wlga.gov.uk

WHY PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

This guide provides an introduction to using a Participatory Action Research model for developing participant led projects. The information in it is based on learning from the Mentro Allan programme.

The Mentro Allan programme had a strong focus on evaluation for two reasons:

- To gather feedback from participants in order to guide the development of the projects.
- To gather evidence of what worked best so that future health and well-being programmes could fund projects using methods that most effectively involve people.

An evaluation methodology was provided for the projects. The suggested approach was tested and modified through the learning and experiences of the project staff over the five years that the programme ran, and this guide contains the results of that learning.

The approach and methods outlined could be applied to a participant-led project in any field. The underlying assumption of a participatory action research approach is that for any project or initiative to be sustainable, it is crucial that the participants are fully engaged – that within the project’s constraints their experience informs the action; that they can identify personal gains, and as a result will commit to project’s aims.

The effectiveness of the approach has been demonstrated through the outcomes achieved by the 14 projects. (See project papers). Not only did physical activity levels increase, but there were also a range of outcomes in the various projects beyond those aimed for, including improved confidence and self-esteem, new skills learned, progression into training and employment, social connection, and mainstreaming of the model itself.
The assumption behind Participatory Action Research is that if a group of people are given an opportunity to articulate what they need, and to decide how it needs to happen (rather than having activities imposed on them from above), then the initiatives that develop will belong to and will make sense to them, and they will be far more likely to get thoroughly involved, change their behaviour and stay involved over the long term.

**Action Research**

Action research proposes a cyclical process of research, action and reflection. The action researcher, using appropriate locations, times and methods, asks the target group what action they would like to take. The researcher supports them in taking the action or sets up the action depending on the type of project.

Afterwards participants are asked to reflect on the experience and give feedback: what went well, and what could have been done differently. Changes are then made in the activity that takes account of this feedback. Participatory Action Research gives you the tools to gather this feedback in a structured and enjoyable way and then facilitates a process of reflection to draw out the learning arising from the action.

Practical example: You organise a walking group. After the first session several people mention that it was difficult getting to the start in time after taking children to school. So the next session is organised to start 30 minutes later.

Participatory Action Research methods and tools may already be familiar to you. They may have been part of a differently named process. Community development work often uses similar ideas.
ROLE OF CONSULTATION AND EVALUATION IN PARTICIPANT LED PROJECTS

The principal purpose of consultation and evaluation in participant led projects is to find out what issues potential participants have around whatever the focus of a project is (consultation) and to gather feedback from participants on project activities in order to inform future action (evaluation).

Participant led projects assume that people are the experts in their own situation. Groups and individuals may lack access to resources, self esteem or confidence, and may struggle with isolation or exclusion but generally they would prefer to lead healthy, productive, prosperous, creative, connected lives. In addition, people struggling against disadvantage have a better idea of what gets in their way and what the steps out of it would look like than anyone else, no matter how ‘expert’ they might be.

Advice and direction from the outside tends only to make a short term difference unless the participant has a sense of ownership of the process. An effective way of working with people includes respecting their thinking, listening to their ideas and implementing what they say needs to happen.

The data collected through the consultation and evaluation process is known as qualitative data. Qualitative in this context means information about participants’ feelings and opinions on activities. This information will be crucial in the development of the project itself but will also be used to provide evidence of the value of the project externally.

Formal evaluation events take place generally at the end of a course of activity, and will need to be recorded as soon after the event as possible. However, informal evaluation information (from talking with participants, volunteers and activity-leaders, and informal group discussion) should be gathered and recorded on a regular basis.

In addition, project staff are likely also to be collecting quantitative data, that is statistics about numbers taking part, demographic information etc. as part of the funding conditions and as evidence to back up the qualitative data. It is important to consider how the different types of data and collection methods support and complement each other.

PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Every project will have aims and objectives, and project staff will have to work within those constraints. Project participants need to have realistic expectations of what the project can offer, so clarity about the project purpose, boundaries and intended results is important. It is useful to produce a clear statement of the project aims as early as possible so that everyone can become familiar with it.

Research questions (including those questions used in evaluation sessions) need to be drawn from the project aims. These should be designed to measure the impact of the activities in order to assess the achievements against the aims, objectives and intended outcomes.
Participant led projects are developed according to feedback from project participants. Initial consultation and ongoing evaluation are how this happens. These processes can be done informally (through chat and informal group discussion) or formally (through facilitated participatory events). Both types of consultation are valuable.

INFORMAL CONSULTATION WITH INDIVIDUALS OR SMALL GROUPS

Informal consultation though conversations with individuals or small groups of different stakeholders, participants. Activity providers, service providers, and steering group members will happen in any project.

Project staff need to put a great emphasis on getting to know participants and their concerns in the initial stages of a project. This informal contact also provides valuable opportunities to find out what participants are thinking in relaxed situations, before, during or after activities. Once participants get to know and trust a staff member they will say things one-to-one that they may feel shy or worried about saying in a group.

INFORMAL CONSULTATION WITH ACTIVITY GROUPS

Informal consultation can also take place during a group chat or discussion, either when the project staff have created the opportunity (a coffee morning or picnic) or when it becomes available (on a bus trip, whilst waiting for the activity to start). With some groups it may be the best way to gather feedback. For example, young people may feel that a more structured session feels too much like school.

In a group discussion it is useful for the project staff to have prepared beforehand, so they know what questions need answering and can bring participants into the discussion in a natural way, as well as being equipped with pen and paper to take a note of important points.

Planning will also assist staff to manage the input of all members of the group. Discussions are likely to work best in groups where people have had the opportunity to get to know each other beforehand.
FORMAL GROUP EVALUATION

‘Formal’ evaluation means that there is a visible structure to the way that the information is gathered; it doesn’t mean that the occasion is black tie and tails. In fact, evaluation events need to be relaxed and good fun.

Lots of useful information can be gathered informally, but if feedback is gathered in a more structured way when a group of participants are together, there are several advantages:

- The process of project development is open and clear and participants learn that they will have the chance to contribute to the design and direction of the project.
- Group members are able to hear each other’s views, consider the implications of change on others and add to the points raised from their own perspective.
- Participants see a direct relationship between giving feedback and changes being made in the activity. This will encourage a sense of ownership of the project and make it less likely that people will drop out when they hit an obstacle.
- The group will get to know each other better, and develop a sense of identity. This will make the activities more fun and relaxing for participants, but also make it easier for the group to see how they might take on responsibility as a whole, for example, become constituted, open a bank account, etc.
- When the process works well, participants will become more creative in their input and start to come up with new ideas and identify ways forward.
- The participatory research process is designed to give a sense of positive options. For example, if something is identified as a problem, you can explore as a group possible ways to solve it. This approach treats problems as opportunities, and it can overcome an individual’s feelings of disappointment or apathy. However, it also requires follow-up action to take place, otherwise people lose respect for the process and drop-out will occur.

Facilitating formal participatory evaluations sessions is a skill that is easily learned. But if project staff don’t have experience of this kind of facilitation, it can seem daunting to ask participants to attend such an event, and to run the event. This is an area where support and training is likely to be needed in the first instance.
THE REFLECTIVE PROCESS: INCORPORATING ACTION RESEARCH AT ALL LEVELS OF THE PROJECT

In an Action Research project people at all levels of the project activity need to be included in the participatory development process. These might be activity leaders, support workers, referring agencies, project partner organisations, the project management team or steering group. Even if they already meet regularly as a group to make project decisions, it’s useful to add in regular participatory sessions for them to feed back their experience of the project and reflect on it.

Structured evaluation events are particularly useful when involving professional partners in responding to participant feedback or thinking about project development. They allow the systematic and regular gathering of data which will highlight changes, developments and areas of concern.

The process of reflection allows people to step outside their day to day role and look at the wider picture. Opportunities and connections that might otherwise have been missed will become visible.

PROJECT STAFF EXPERIENCE, SKILLS AND TRAINING

The success of a participant led project will depend on the skill and enthusiasm of the project staff.

They will need to have a range of softer skills and characteristics to become a “people person” such as:

- listening
- questioning
- trusting
- open
- perceptive
- reliable
- approachable

Understanding the importance of these skills is vital when recruiting project staff.

People will naturally bring some experience to their role. However, the organisation will also need to provide opportunities for project staff to explore, share experiences and plan with others, so that knowledge and prior learning is shared. Skills can also be developed through training.
LOCAL PROJECT SUPPORT

Colleagues from the lead organisation will provide day-to-day support but it’s useful to have a steering group made up of a range of stakeholders or a local partnership that meets regularly to review progress and plan future activities. Members of a steering group should bring a range of expertise to the project, and this can be invaluable to project staff.

Project steering groups need to be aware of the importance of allowing the Participatory Action Research methods to inform the direction the project takes. The role and methods of reporting back to the steering group needs to be established as early as possible. It is important that decisions made regarding the direction of the project derive from what participants have said rather than what experts sitting round a table think is best.

Raise questions  >  Collect data  >  Analyse and report  >  Draw Conclusions
THE REFLECTIVE PROCESS FOR PROJECT STAFF

Project staff will have unique access to information about the progress of the project and will develop a broad understanding of how the project is working, who the main players are, the dynamics of the group they work with and a sense of what the crucial issues are for them. Staff will hear what people think about the activities: what’s going well, and, as you get to know them and earn their trust, what their barriers are, what doesn’t work well for them, and what needs to change.

A good deal of this information will be captured by the participatory evaluation methods used in the project, but the project has another invaluable resource that needs to be taken account of, the staff. In the endless rush of organising and facilitating it’s easy to move from one task to the next without allowing time for project staff to reflect and learn from their experiences.

The importance given to evaluation is not always as high as it should be. It’s important that project staff are not isolated or burdened by this, and that senior manager’s give their support and time to this process.

There are a variety of ways that project staff can gather, share and reflect on information.

- Formal staff evaluation sessions.
- Informal staff discussion, which is bound to take place where two or more staff work on the same project.
- Writing personal logs or reflective diaries.
- Taking and reviewing notes from informal and formal discussions.

Some people find a diary easier to use than others. If this is the chosen method, it’s useful to try to write in it regularly. Giving time to reflect on what’s been happening will give staff an opportunity to identify any issues that need dealing with. If working alone, it can be a useful way to develop thinking and release some pressures. A wider programme or collection of projects can arrange to have diaries submitted to a central contact, so that management hear and respond to project staff’s concerns, identify common issues and training needs.

As a general rule identifying individuals should be avoided when writing a diary. Where possible, use characteristics to talk about experiences and not personal or specific details. For example, if you were quoting someone talking about their pleasure in a three mile walk, it can become more pertinent if you describe them as being seventy-three years old, or as having taken no regular exercise before joining the project, rather than simply referring to them by name.

On occasion it will be difficult to avoid identifying who someone is. For example, if you are expressing your concern about someone’s behaviour, and action needs to be taken, ultimately they will need to be identified. Ensure that what is written is ethical, responsible and fits with the organisation’s data protection policy.
COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPARENCY

If the participatory action research process works effectively, expectations will be raised. If you ask people for their views on what needs to happen they will tell you. That information must be acted on within the project, and the result needs to be fed back to the people who took part in the process which gave rise to the recommendations. They have to be informed of what has been acted on, and if the desired action can’t take place, they need to know why not. Keep the process as open and transparent as you can.

If the process is open and at least some of the more important recommendations are acted upon, participants will feel that their ideas and opinions are respected and their contribution matters. This will make the process empowering, and make it far more likely that they will continue to be involved in the project and the consultation process.

DATA COLLECTION AND PROJECT DESIGN

Since project staff will be drawing out and gathering information in a variety of ways, the project design will need to consider how this information will be recorded, analysed and reported. Systems will need to be set up that fit with the project criteria, but are also straightforward for the staff to use.

Project design should also consider ways that may be appropriate for staff members to record and reflect on their own learning.

Data and information should be collected and stored in line with legislation and the organisation’s policies covering things such as security of information, document storage, Data Protection and Freedom of Information.

RESOURCES

In a participant led project it’s not possible to say beforehand what the desired actions will be. As a result, the use of funding needs to be flexible, so that project activities can be developed in line with intended outcomes and based on participant feedback rather than directed by external targets or agencies.

Resources need to be provided for hosting a range of participant led evaluation events.
GETTING PARTICIPANTS TO EVALUATION EVENTS

In order to run a participatory evaluation event you need to have your group of participants in one place, and able to work together as a group.

It’s possible that you might be able to arrange this as part of a project activity. For example, if you have a picnic break on a walk, or there’s a room where you gather together while waiting for transport you might be able use the opportunity to ask some questions, and if you are running trips, you could plan the hire of a room for evaluation as part of the costs. It’s sometimes easier to arrange a special event to focus on the evaluation if you require in depth responses.

However, inviting people to ‘come and evaluate the project’ is unlikely to get a good attendance, particularly at the beginning when they don’t know what to expect, and aren’t particularly involved or convinced how they’ll benefit from it. Until they have a sense of ownership of the project, you are asking them for a favour, and the project needs to be able to give them something in return, such as food, fun, and a chance to socialise.

For this reason it is useful to be able to invite participants to an enjoyable social event, and do the evaluation as part of this.

The type of event you organise will depend entirely on what suits the target group you work with. Healthy refreshments, in some form, could be provided. Also, while the activity may look fairly informal to the participants, as the facilitator you’ll need to have a clear plan of what’s going to happen when, and how you’ll ask your research questions. If you can get people in the group to help you plan the event, that’s even better.

Here are some examples of events that could be used for evaluation:

- When people gather for refreshments after an activity.
- A celebration at the end of a block of activities.
- On a day trip or residential.
- At a healthy buffet / meal.
- At a Christmas party / summer BBQ.
- Going for a drink, either in a quiet pub, or hiring a room.
- At a demonstration of something they’ve expressed an interest in.
SETTNG UP EVENTS

Where and when you run your evaluation event will depend entirely on what suits your target group. Ask them!

Where?

- Ask participants to suggest a place to meet.
- Use a room on site.
- Use a local cafe / pub / leisure centre.
- Use a park or beauty spot.

When?

- Ask participants to suggest a time to meet.
- Parents of school children will need to be able to meet at times and places that enable them to drop off and pick up their children.
- Older people may not want to come out in the evening.
- Some groups meet regularly for other activities and this could be suitable to join.

FORMAL EVALUATION EVENTS

Setting up the room: People need to feel at ease, but also, for the evaluation exercises, they need to be able to interact as a group, and to see each other, and you, the facilitator and your flipchart. The layout of the event also needs to give the message that no one’s opinion is more important than anyone else’s. For this reason, the general layout needs to be approximately circular. This could be tables grouped round a room, or chairs in a circle. If people try to sit outside the circle you should encourage them to come into it. That way everyone is equally involved and has equal access to all aspects of the evaluation.

You’ll need:

A facilitator
A session plan
A large enough room to be comfortable in with tables and chairs
Flipchart and pens / sticky dots / post-its and pens
At least one note taker
Timing: This is not an exact science. In your plan you should estimate how long you think the various activities will take. You can either see what time is available / workable or fit what you want to do into that, or decide how long you think it will take and plan an event around that. Don’t take too much time, it’s better to move along fairly quickly and keep people’s interest.

Different groups work differently, and as you develop your experience with your group you will get a better idea of how long things are likely to take. In community activities, where people come as volunteers, it’s often difficult to start on time, but it is important to finish when you say you will, or if that’s not possible, to check with all the group members if they are OK to stay for additional time.

ROLE OF FACILITATOR AND NOTE TAKER

Role of the facilitator: The facilitator makes the evaluation happen. They have a plan, with times, and in a relaxed and friendly way they make sure it all takes place in the time available. They reflect on the event and make suggestions for future sessions.

Role of the note taker: The facilitator may be writing up what comes out of the exercises on the flipchart, but a lot of the important information about the session won’t be recorded there. It is really useful to have someone else who is free to observe the session as a note taker. The note taker needs to understand a bit about the evaluation process, so they can recognise what would be a useful comment, and they also need to be able to write fairly quickly! In addition they need to write up their notes promptly afterwards.

The note taker records whatever else they hear that is relevant to evaluating the activity, that is: how well or poorly the activity went, and what might improve it. This might include:

- Extracts of discussion that are too fast or complicated for the facilitator to record on the flipchart, or are taking place at a point where the facilitator isn’t writing.
- Comments participants make informally but are relevant to the issue (anonymous unless with express permission).
- The note taker’s impression of the mood or feeling of the group. Maybe they have a sense of something unfinished, or display a strong reaction to a particular suggestion.
- What people say in ‘go-rounds’, as it is often useful to capture their contributions. (A go-round is when everyone around the circle is given an opportunity to answer a question, for example during introductions you might ask people to say what they most enjoyed about a particular activity).

After the event the note taker types up their notes. They are used as supplementary information to the flipchart notes, and also to inform the reflective diary (if one is kept).

A project member could be the facilitator or note taker or a member of the steering group if they are available. Ask people to assist as it is good to have a number of people on hand to ensure that the event runs smoothly.
INTRODUCTORY EXERCISES

WHY DO INTRODUCTIONS

We all think more clearly when we feel relaxed and at ease. In groups this happens when people feel comfortable with each other, and when they have a sense that what they say won't be judged or laughed at.

In any structured event introductions are very important. Think of your own experience in groups. Unless we know something about who people are, and have at least one other person with whom we have a connection, it’s easy to feel tense and hostile.

Introductions don’t need to be formal. How you do them depends on what the situation needs, but even if everyone in the group knows each other, it’s still useful to do a brief introduction. If you choose fun exercises everyone will enjoy themselves and go on to the next part of the event feeling relaxed and connected. It can also be a light way to get people used to speaking in front of the group.

Opening rounds:

If you think there are participants who might find it difficult to talk in the big group without a warm up, do some paired introductions or use an icebreaker first.

Explain the purpose of introductions to the group (getting to know who’s present, feeling relaxed, breaking the ice), and go first so that people get an idea of what is expected of them. Then everyone else gets a turn. If you ask easy positive questions most people are fine. The ideas below are only suggestions; project staff know the group they work with and what would suit them best.

Usually in an opening round you ask each person to give their name – if service providers are present perhaps they could give their role or job title as well – plus something else relevant and positive. If group members don’t know each other well then basic information can be useful. If they do know each other, there are always additional things to find out and be surprised about, or you can ask about any light subject, for instance:

- Something you enjoy about this group, or this activity.
- Tell us something about your name. What does it mean, why was it chosen, does it suit you? (often works well in groups containing a mix of cultures)
- Something that’s going well for you.
- Where have you come from today?
- Your favourite food.
Sometimes it can be useful to find out about people’s interests or why they have come to a particular activity, and this information could be recorded, for instance:

- Name and what your involvement is with this issue.
- Name and what you hope to get out of this event.

Start off with questions that are positive and not loaded. The idea isn’t to put anyone in an embarrassing situation. If they don’t want to answer, move on, and give them a second chance at the end. Different types of questions will suit different groups.

**Paired Introductions:** The purpose is to make participants feel more relaxed by enabling them to build connections with other individuals in the group.

Ask the group to break into pairs for few minutes. Time this for 2, 3 or 4 minutes depending on how many people are in the group and how pushed you are for time. Either give them a task, (e.g. introduce yourselves, find out three things about each other, talk about how you are feeling today), or just let them talk.

You can pair up once, or else at the end of the first pair break them into different pairs, so everyone meets two people. Sometimes people are asked to report back what they’ve found out about their partner, but it’s just as useful to encourage a connection with one or two individuals, and talk. People who find taking turns around a circle a bit scary often value time in pairs.

Dividing into pairs can also be useful at other points in the session, particularly if time in the pair is divided equally so that each partner gets time to be listened to. You can then ask them to consider a particular question. If you give participants time to think about the issue in pairs (or a small group) then you are likely to get a more thoughtful and inclusive response than if they have to answer it cold.

**Other introductory exercises:**

There are lots of games you can play to break the ice, if you decide that that would be useful and workable with your group. If you type in ‘Icebreaker Games’ to an internet search engine, lots of sites with games information come up.

One useful game that you can set up in a way that suits any particular group is:

**Human Bingo:** Prepare by drawing a box of 9 or 12 squares onto a sheet of A4 paper. In each square write one item that’s a description of a person or lifestyle: wears green socks, has a twin, cycled to the event, lives more than ten miles away, bought locally grown food in the last week, is studying for an exam, speaks more than one language, believes in ghosts, has a water butt, watched Eastenders this week.

Items should be interesting, but reasonably likely to apply to someone in the group. For example, it might be best not to ask a group of climate activists to find someone who’s just back from a holiday in the Bahamas!
Bring one copy of your sheet and a pen for each person in the group. Then the group mingles and everyone tries to complete their sheet by finding someone in the group who answers each individual description and writing their name next to it. It’s the interacting and not the winning that’s important, but do give the first person to find names for all nine or twelve squares a cheer! And set a time limit.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

It’s important to choose the right questions. The first step towards this is to be clear about the aims of the event. What needs to come out of it? The question you start with will follow on from this.

For example, if you’re working with a group who are considering what action to take on climate change, you might start by asking them what kinds of action are there that a group like them could take, or what kinds of action they’ve already been involved in that worked well, and what it was about it that worked.

At an evaluation event you will generally be concerned with variants of the following questions:

- What went well?
- What didn’t go well?
- What can be improved next time?
- What additional or further action would you like to see happen?

You could phone around and get answers to these questions from individuals, but working in a group, in a structured way, gives participants a chance to be stimulated by other people’s suggestions and thinking, and to develop their ideas and a sense of the possibilities together. It functions as a group building exercise as well as an effective way of gathering information and developing strategic thinking. The techniques here describe very simple ways of addressing research questions.
DEVELOPING GROUP CONSENSUS AND PLANNING FOR ACTION

Introduction to evaluation

It’s useful to remind people of what the current situation is, what the aims and limits of the project are, and what’s already gone on so that everyone is clear about the scope of the discussion and the decisions they can make. It’s also useful to outline the plan for the session, with times, refreshment breaks etc.

LISTING

Tell everyone the first question and put them in small groups to discuss it. This will be useful to give even shy people a chance to have their say, and loosen up their thinking. It also helps build relationships within the group.

Back in the whole group, you list all the answers on a flipchart, being careful to write as accurately as possible what has actually been said (not what you think they said). At this point there is no discussion, although sometimes clarification may be necessary.

You can draw out the information in a slightly different way if you give the small discussion groups ‘post-it’ notes and pens and ask them to record all the answers they come up with, one point per post-it note. Give the groups a fairly short time, to keep the pressure on, say 5 or 10 minutes.

Back in the full group you call in the post-its, grouping them according to topics, (and in consultation with the group: does ‘organising a community event’ go with ‘demonstrating outside a supermarket’ or ‘having a fundraising coffee morning’?)

Either way, you end up with a list of possible ways to address the question. You can then get the group to choose what they think are the most useful answers.
**What didn’t go well?** You can use the same methods to examine an activity that’s already happened, looking at what went well and what didn’t go well. If you are doing both positive and negative sides, as you often will be doing, it can be useful to start with the positive and simply list on the board as people call them out. Participants are reminded of what they’ve enjoyed, and it gives you a good start to go on to look at the less successful elements.

You can then use the small groups and ‘post-it’ note method for what didn’t go well. People are often wary about criticising, and this needs to be presented to them as a valuable and essential part of the process, which enables the activity to be improved and tailored to their needs. In the small groups they get a chance to think about their experience, and what would have made it more useful or enjoyable for them.

When you gather in and group the post-its, with luck you’ll have a clear yet subtle picture of what didn’t work well for one or more members of the group.

You can also ask how to make it work better next time, or what shall we do next?

If you want to find out what people consider the most important factors, both positive and negative, you can prioritise:

**PRIORITISING**

**Dot voting:** Give all participants the same number of sticky dots (from three to six). Ask them to choose what they think are the most workable ideas on the list. (You can make this more specific, with different coloured dots people might choose what they think would work for different target groups, or which could be the easy winners). They can put all the dots on one item, or one each on as many items as they have dots, or anything in between. This will give you a clearer picture of the relative importance of items on the list.

**CLOSING ROUND AND FEEDBACK**

Allow time at the end of an event to have a round of feedback. Ask for anything that’s been missed, and feedback on how the event went. Give everyone an opportunity to speak. Remind people to be brief.

It’s really useful for the group to hear each other’s reactions, and for the facilitator to get feedback which will help in future events.
FOLLOWING UP PEOPLE WHO’VE DROPPED OUT

You’ll try to encourage everyone who’s participated in project activities to attend the evaluation event. But some people will drop out of the activities before they end, and some will be unable to attend the event. It’s useful to follow up these people to get their feedback on activities.

You might arrange to meet them in person, or talk to them on the phone, whatever makes most sense.

**Activity Feedback**: If possible you’ll need to get the same information from them that you’ll be gathering at the evaluation event so that it can be recorded in a feedback report:

- What did they enjoy/gain/learn from the activity?
- What didn’t go well for them, did they not like?
- What needed to be done differently?
- If possible, why they left?
- What future activities would they like to see happen?
- What would bring them back again?
In a session plan you’ll need to include the following elements:

- **Welcome**: people and briefly inform them about what you’re trying to do and why.

- **Introductions**: so that everyone knows who everyone is, and to get the session off on a shared and positive note.

- **Participatory Methods, answering your research questions**: make sure you have clear questions and design your methods around them. You will also be considering the group you are working with and designing the session to be interesting and comfortable for them. This doesn’t have to be complicated. You can use what you know works well with your participants, or in the ‘how to’ section below you’ll find some fairly standard methods that will be of use for most questions.

- **Closing circle and remarks**: give a brief opportunity for people to feedback on the event. It also allows you to tell them what will happen to the information gathered. For example, who will look at it? What will it be used for? Should they expect to hear about changes or developments in the project?

In this section you’ll find three basic sample session templates. These are intended to support you in planning your own sessions, and they should be used flexibly depending on the needs of your project evaluation. They aim to demonstrate what a plan might look like, and the sort of time you might allow for each section.

The **first session plan** is for a basic participatory evaluation to support project direction and development, particularly as the project is getting established, or if there seem to be difficulties that need clarifying. It checks in with participants to find out how things are going for them, and what they’d like to do next, and it aims to give them a clear idea of the importance of their feedback in developing future project activities.

The **second session plan** allows for a wider variety of questions, for when a project is up and running and more targeted feedback is needed for project development and for participants to reflect on their behavioural change and when they need to take a more active role in it. It also allows the project to start drawing out learning relevant to dissemination.

The **third session plan** is designed to support the development of a project exit strategy. As a project draws near to its end, group evaluation sessions can be part of the process of working with participants to involve them in thinking about the next steps, individually and as a group. With adaptations, this plan can be used with participants, operational groups and steering groups. It’s based on a solution focused model, and there’s more information on that approach in the PAR appendix.

Approximate times for each section and for the total session are included in each plan. These will depend on how many people you have in the session, whether you provide lunch or refreshments and what kind of issues come up, and you’ll probably need to be thinking on your feet!
SAMPLE SESSION PLAN 1: FOR ESTABLISHING A PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION PROCESS

1. Welcome (5mins)
   - Short introduction to the purpose of the meeting
   - Practical information: times, agenda, toilets, fire escapes etc.

2. Introductions (approx 10-15mins)
   - Pair introductions for 3 minutes
   - Go round with name and perhaps something positive about yourself

3. What went well with activities so far? (10mins)
   - List: as a whole group people call out what went well, and the facilitator writes the list up on flipchart.

4. What didn’t go so well?
   - What could be done differently? (15-25mins)
     - List: Divide into small groups and ask them to write what didn’t go well on post-its (one item on each post-it). After 5 minutes get back into the full group. The facilitator gathers items and groups them into themes on a flipchart.
     - Prioritise: Participants dot-vote to identify the most important themes.
     - Develop Solutions: The facilitator asks the whole group to discuss the themes in order of priority (say, the top 3), and lists possible ways to address them. Discuss the list and dot vote on the suggestions if necessary.

5. Any suggestions for other activities you’d like to see take place? (10mins)
   - Brief introduction on types of things included in the project, and resources available. You could show pictures or photographs of a wide range possible activities for the group to choose from. Discussion/Gather list of suggestions.

7. Closing round (5mins)
   - Go round the circle to give everyone a chance to say how they found the evaluation process.

8. Point out the Suggestion Sheet on the wall for any other ideas or comments that participants would like to make. And thank them!

Total time: about 1hr – 1hr 30ins
SAMPLE SESSION PLAN 2: FOR AN ESTABLISHED GROUP TO REFLECT ON LEARNING

1. Welcome (5mins)

   Short introduction to the purpose of the meeting

   Any practical information necessary: times, agenda, toilets, fire escapes etc.

2. Introductions (10 - 15mins)

   Pair introductions for 3 minutes

   Go round with name and something you’ve done that you’re proud of

3. Check in with progress of project: What’s going well, are there any difficulties or things that need changing? (15 -20 mins)

   As the group have got to know each other, and to trust the way the project works, this will be easier to ask as they’ll know that if they’ve got a problem it will be listened to. So this bit of the evaluation can be dealt with more informally and speedily than in the first plan.

4. Some questions that you could ask the group to think about: (20-40mins)

   The questions in this plan should be based on the projects aims, objectives and intended outcomes. The information gained is useful for dissemination, but it can also be of value for participants to reflect on their experience. It’s better to choose a small number of questions for a session, so that you give participants enough time to consider them thoroughly.

   You can simply ask the group to discuss the questions, or plan a more formal or facilitated process. For example, if people talk in pairs or small groups first, they can often come up with more complex responses. And drawing up a list and prioritising can stimulate discussion. Or maybe it would suit your target group to use a more creative approach, for example, they could use visual exercises to describe how they feel, and then talk about the results to give you your answers. Do remember to take notes on a flipchart or notepad.

   - What’s changed in your life as a result of your involvement in the project? A good starting point for reflective discussion
   - What was it that got you involved with the project in the first place?
   - What keeps you involved in the project activities?
   - What makes it difficult for you to get to activities? How have you overcome those barriers?
   - What will you be doing differently in the future as a result of what you’ve learned during your involvement in the project? A final question that asks participants to consider their reflections and
decide on future action. This question asks them individually. In the third session plan they’ll be thinking about this as a group.

6. **Closing round** (5 - 10mins)

   Go round the circle to give everyone a chance to say:
   
   - Anything they’ve not had a chance to say so far
   - Thoughts on how they found the evaluation process.

7. Point out the **Suggestion Sheet** on the wall for any other ideas or comments that participants would like to make. And thank them!

**Session time: 1hr – 1hr 45mins**
SAMPLE SESSION PLAN 3: DEVELOPING AN EXIT STRATEGY

1. **Welcome** (5mins)

   Short introduction to the purpose of the meeting: introduce the aim or issue to be addressed for example: “To build an effective exit strategy for the project,” (Useful to have it up on the wall)

   Any practical information necessary: times, agenda, toilets, fire escapes etc.

2. **Introductions** (10 - 15mins)

   Pair introductions for 3 minutes

   Go round with name and something that’s going well

   *(for steering groups or operational groups introduction can include role, and something you enjoy about your work)*

3. **The current situation** (10 mins)

   - With the project

   - With the exit strategy

   *(brief presentations so that participants are clear about how long activities have to run, what’s going on at present, what plans are already in place)*

3a. **Positive Outcomes from the project** (10 – 20mins)

   - Intro: useful to start this process to get a picture of why you’re at this meeting? What value you identify in this project?

   - Go round group, each participant answers question:

   - Individual participants: What have you gained from being involved in the project?

   - Volunteers/activity providers etc: What has been gained from the project so far, for you as an individual, and for participants that you’ve observed?

   - Steering Group members: What has your organisation gained from being involved in the project, in terms of organisational objectives, activities, benefits for service users etc?

4. **Hopes for Exit Strategy** (20 – 30 mins)

   If things were to go perfectly, what would you like to see happening at the point the project funding ends to continue or develop the valuable outcomes of the project?
In small groups, discuss and decide on what you think the five most important elements would be. (10 mins) Write one idea on each piece of paper, in felt tip, so visible on a flipchart.

In whole group, facilitator gathers ideas and groups them on the flipchart; according to what participants feel makes sense. Discuss.

5. **Scaling**: (5mins) on a sheet of flipchart paper, do a horizontal line marked 0 – 10. 0 represents nothing achieved, and 10 the perfect outcome. Ask participants to come and place a dot where they think the current situation is on the issue in question, given what they’ve heard.

6. **Resources Available** (15mins)

   - In pairs group members identify what they’ve brought to the achievement so far, and what support they would be able and willing to continue to offer (for example, time, continuity of involvement, skills, expertise, financial, organisational, equipment).

   - Back to group and go round, note on flipchart.

7. **Who else needs to be involved to achieve these goals?** (10mins)

   - List on flipchart, with contact details.

8. **First Small Steps** (25 – 35mins)

   Intro: At this point whilst project is still running, it’s a good time to prepare for what we’d like to see in the future, and be able to look into possible resources and support. Thinking about the scaling question, what needs to happen to move up one space?

   Putting things together into a plan: Given what you’ve heard so far:

   - What do you think are the first steps towards the goal that can be initiated immediately? Discuss in small groups; come up with two or three things per group. Gather on flipchart and dot prioritise.

   - What is the role for this group?

   - Who will take on which of these steps? (Action points)

   (Point out that at this meeting they don’t need to cover all the ground, just set off in right direction, and reassess in a few months time).

9. **What Next** (5-10mins)

   - Date for next meeting.

   - Any further action points?
10. **Feedback**: (10 mins) go round:

- Anything you think has been missed out?
- How did you find this session?

**Approximate session time: 2hrs – 2hrs 30mins**
GATHERING INFORMATION

When working with young people it’s useful to make exercises to gather feedback as visual and fun as possible.

For example:

*Ideas are gathered on Christmas trees. Children are asked to write in the star their favourite moment or activity and to write on the tree the other things that they liked.*

*Draw a smiley face next to the things you like and a sad face next to the things you don’t like*

- Fun / Adventure / Climbing / Cycling
- Boring / Long / Cold / Swimming
DIAMOND RANKING:

If you want more information about how people are choosing to prioritise, take nine items from the list (the nine most voted for), write them on cards and ask the group to decide where the items go in terms of importance in the nine squares of the diamond (one top, two second, three third, two fourth and one bottom). The note taker records as much as they can of the discussion that takes place as the group prioritises. From this exercise you’ll get a more considered list of priorities, but also the opportunity to record the process – e.g. was this a compromise, was the decision dominated by one or two people, was it a difficult decision, or an easy one? This is best done with a fairly small group, say up to eight people.
BEAN OR DOT MATRIX:

A good tool for comparing options. For example, if you are trying to attract more young people to an activity, with this tool you could look at what would be the most important factors you’d need to prioritise.

Draw a large (floor or table top) grid on stuck together flip-chart paper, with items prioritised down one side, and characteristics you want to think about along the top (e.g. age or gender) so that for each age range you have a square beside each priority. Participants have (say) six beans or dots each, and are shown each age row in turn, and asked to distribute their beans to show their assessment of the priority for that age group. The totals are written in and the group moves on to the next range.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers to exercise (for example)</th>
<th>18 - 25</th>
<th>25 – 50</th>
<th>50-75</th>
<th>75 +</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of motivation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of money</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of local facilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of company</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TARGET EVALUATION:

Useful for quickly evaluating events.

On a flipchart sheet draw out a target (three concentric circles). Divide the target like a pie in however many slices you need (ideally 3, but not more than 4 or 5). Write what you want evaluated round the edge of each slice: How Useful? How enjoyable? How much did you learn? How much better do you feel, etc.? The central circle is top value, and from there out, good, ok, not so good.

Give participants a dot for each slice and ask them to stick it in the appropriate circle.
A solutions focused approach is a very useful way for a group to plan for the future using their achievements, strengths and resources as a springboard. There are a series of stages to the process:

- **Define the issue** or problem you want to address
- **Clarify the current situation**
- **Envision the perfect solution**
- **Scaling**: on a scale of 1 – 10 how close to your perfect situation are you at present?
- **What are the resources** you have as a group that have got you to where you are, and that will help move one step closer to the goal?
- **What are the first small steps** from here towards your goal, and how will you set about them?

In a solution focused approach no time is spent on discussing barriers or problems: it’s seen as more important to look at what you can do, rather than what you can’t do. The assumption is that people are more effective if the focus is on positive achievements and skills rather than on what’s going wrong.

In addition no time or energy is spent planning beyond the first small steps. The small steps set you off in the right direction, but things change, and to keep in that direction, the situation will need reassessing in the future (this is intended to be a cyclical process of regular reflection and adjustment).

**Solution Focused Stages**

**Define the Issue**

This usually needs to be done before inviting people to the session. It’s useful to define the issue as an aim. For example, to use the session as an exit strategy planner, the focus would be ‘To build an effective exit strategy for this MA project’ rather than ‘Our MA project’.

**The Current Situation/Positive Outcomes**

This is your springboard. As a group you lay on the table what the current situation is in relation to the issue, so that you know what you have to work with. This will include:

- The practical stuff: how long activities have to run, what’s going on at present in the project
- what exit plans are already in place
- What’s been achieved: how people feel, what they’ve gained from involvement, why this project is valuable to them: the social capital.
The Perfect Outcome of this planning process:

**Hopes for Exit Strategy** This is your ultimate aim. It’s a chance to think outside the box, think big. If there were no constraints, where would you like to get to? If things were to go perfectly, what would be the most effective exit strategy? What would an effective exit strategy mean?

**Scaling:** given the perfect outcome, on a scale of 1 to 10, where would you say the project exit strategy is at present? This makes the situation concrete, you can check progress.

**Resources available**

In this section you want to get a clear picture of what resources are available to the project in developing the exit strategy. To do this you look at what resources you’ve had to bring you to where you are already, and what is there as yet uncalled upon. This will include staff, steering group, volunteer and participant time, skills, abilities and qualifications, partnership organisational support, finance and funding opportunities. Use participatory exercises to get group members to identify what support they would be able and willing to offer.

A useful additional exercise for people who need their confidence built: divide the group into threes or fours. In small groups one person takes a turn to list their relevant skills and qualities, listened to by the others. When they’ve finished each of the listeners gets a turn to say what they agree with, and add anything that they think the subject has missed. Repeat for each of the other group members.

You can also consider if anyone else needs to be involved/invited into this process who isn’t here? If so, who’s going to invite them?

**First small steps**

Given the current situation and resources available, what does the group think should be the first small steps towards the aim? Don’t worry about setting up a complicated structure that will get you all the way. This is about setting off in the right direction with confidence and agreement. In an agreed time you can come together again to reassess the situation and decide on the next steps. At this point you’re aiming to get group ownership of the small steps, and then a list of who’s going to do what.
1. Welcome (5mins)

   Short introduction to the purpose of the meeting: introduce the aim or issue to be addressed for example: To build an effective exit strategy for the project’ (Useful to have it up on the wall)

   Any practical information necessary: times, agenda, toilets, fire escapes etc.

2. Introductions (10 - 15mins)

   Pair introductions for 3 minutes.

   Go round with name and something that’s going well.

   *(for steering groups or operational groups introduction can include role, and something you enjoy about your work)*.

3. The current situation (10 mins)

   - With the project.
   - With the exit strategy.

   *(brief presentations so that participants are clear about how long activities have to run, what’s going on at present, what plans are already in place)*.

3a. Positive Outcomes from project (10 – 20mins)

   - Intro: useful to start this process to get a picture of why you’re at this meeting? What value you identify in this project?

   - Go round group, each participant answers question:

   - Individual participants: What have you gained from being involved in the project?

   - Volunteers/activity providers etc: what has been gained from the project so far, for you as an individual, and for participants that you’ve observed?

   - Steering Group members: What has your organisation gained from being involved in the project, in terms of organisational objectives, activities, benefits for service users, etc.?

4. Hopes for Exit Strategy (20 – 30 mins)

   If things were to go perfectly, what would you like to see happening at the point the project funding ends to continue or develop the valuable outcomes of the project?
• In small groups, discuss and decide on what you think the five most important elements would be (10 mins). Write one idea on each piece of paper, in felt tip, so visible on a flipchart.

• In whole group, facilitator gathers ideas and groups them on the flipchart, according to what participants feel makes sense - discuss.

5. Scaling: (5mins) on a sheet of flipchart paper, do a horizontal line marked 0 – 10. 0 represents nothing achieved, and 10 the perfect outcome. Ask participants to come and place a dot where they think the current situation is on the issue in question, given what they’ve heard.

6. Resources Available (15mins)

• In pairs group members identify what they’ve brought to the achievement so far, and what support they would be able and willing to continue to offer (for example, time, continuity of involvement, skills, expertise, financial, organisational, equipment)

• Back to group and go round, note on flipchart.

7. Who else needs to be involved to achieve these goals? (10mins)

• List on flipchart, with contact details.

8. First small steps (25 – 35mins)

Intro: At this point whilst project is still running, it’s a good time to prepare for what we’d like to see in the future, and be able to look into possible resources and support. Thinking about the scaling question, what needs to happen to move up one space?

Putting things together into a plan: Given what you’ve heard so far:

• What do you think are the first steps towards the goal, that can be initiated immediately? Discuss in small groups, come up with two or three things per group. Gather on flipchart and dot prioritise.

• What is the role for this group?

• Who will take on which of these steps? (Action points)

Point out that at this meeting they don’t need to cover all the ground, just set off in right direction, and reassess in a few months time.

9. What Next (5-10mins)

• Date for next meeting

• Any further action points?

10. Feedback: (10 mins) go round:
• Anything you think has been missed out?

• How did you find this session?

**Approximate session time: 2hrs – 2hrs 30mins**
Consensus Workshop Technique

This is a useful method to draw group thinking together on a complex issue where there may be a wide range of ideas.

1. Be sure that you have a clear question. Have it written up on the wall so that everyone can see.

2. Introduce the question and give everyone a couple of minutes to think about it individually.

3. Divide participants into small groups, preferably three or more groups of between three and seven people per group.

4. Give each group a pile of large post-its and a felt tip pen.

5. Ask them to discuss the question and come up with four or five responses, which they will write down, one post-it per idea, and written big enough so that they'll be legible from a distance (i.e. keep it simple). They'll need enough time to develop a good discussion, no less than ten minutes, but substantially more if the subject is complex or difficult.

6. Bring the whole group together again. Gather in the ideas in batches. Do this by picking a couple of ways to sort them: give me your.... Sort them into groups on the flipchart (you may need two flipchart sheets next to each other to work across).

Only group them with the direction and permission of the participants. It needs to be their groups and not yours. Try and keep to no more than 7 or 8 groupings. This may need some discussion and negotiation between the participants.

7. When the ideas are all grouped in a way that people can agree with, get them to agree on names for each of the groups.

8. Depending on the question, participants can then dot prioritise the groups.

Mentro Allan Website: [www.mentroallan.co.uk](http://www.mentroallan.co.uk) this is a public site that contains a range of information on the local projects, the published reports and an overview of news and events.