



Engaging everyone together

One thing that gives consultation a bad name is that those consulted rarely find out what happened to the information they contributed. Information is commonly 'extracted' and put into language decision-makers feel comfortable with. As far as those consulted are concerned it has disappeared into thin air. The beauty of having all the stakeholders in the room is that conversations create actions.

'I said I wanted to set up a fruit and vegetable stall,' explains one local resident. 'Someone from the healthy living network said they could help with initial funding and resources. As a result I have set up a stall.'

A community development worker spells out the benefits: 'A healthy walking group was meeting in the area. The AI enabled participants to link with neighbours involved in other community-based activities on food and environment with children, staff and parents at a local school. This resulted in a treasure hunt involving 120 people developing local knowledge about pathways and natural history. Everyone won on that day.'

AI also brings different groups in the community together: young people were delighted to be involved in consultation which was not just about young people's needs. An asylum seeker who had to cope with the loss of ten relatives and cancer reports that she linked with others through AI, got involved in courses and is on her feet again.

Six months after AI, as well as some of the outcomes described above, local people reported continuing enhanced community feeling and activity in the area. A local no smoking group was strengthened; mothers were talking about planting flowers in the spring; there was a young people's fruit and vegetables rap and a fun-run had taken place.

It had also impacted on other agencies by helping them understand local needs. As a result, new provision includes: a 'mums in arts' project (for mothers with post-natal depression); extra parenting courses; and new ante-natal services.

Linking to current policies

Within regeneration there is continuous pressure to measure performance and demonstrate results. Recent policy directives have focused on proving effective community engagement processes are ongoing.

The new comprehensive area assessment for local authorities emphasises how recipients measure the performance of service providers.

AI can be used to provide evidence of engagement by documenting the process and results. Equally importantly, AI is likely to generate positive perceptions in communities: seeing their own input translated into action on the ground leads to real satisfaction.

AI can make a contribution to the redesign

and improvement of services, to place shaping and public engagement. The energy and positivity are not restricted to community members but permeate through workers as well.

Challenges

1. Scaling up

Stockport decided to use AI as the method for consultation in the health inequalities strategy, a serious indication that it recognised the benefits of the approach. However, there were advantages and disadvantages in the transition from 'exciting new idea' to 'mainstream' method.

Some staff resisted having AI imposed. Others found it difficult to adapt to a solution-focused approach. Workers were put under pressure to run the inquiries within short time periods.

It was interesting in itself that the decision to use the method did not transform the topic from 'health inequality' to the more positive 'health equity'. The topic of the inquiry is crucially important and needs to be decided by a range of stakeholders, a step which is easy to forget. Inquiry topics should be positive and specific enough to get useful information.

Working under the heading 'health inequalities' meant it was challenging to identify a more specific topic area. Workers tended to opt for broad inquiries which led to very broad and diverse information.

We struggled to make the design phase meaningful. In order to make this less abstract and theoretical we asked people to think of the likely objections that would be raised to turning their dream into reality. This helped to anticipate the likely challenges and then design them out.

2. Getting people with authority in the room

The initial overview and scrutiny committee was a high profile, one-off event offering an interesting new method – AI. It was harder to get decision-makers to attend a series of smaller, local events.

While it is possible to get workers to attend events, and to get senior management support, it is harder to get buy in from staff who are not from the lead agencies. Workers often lacked the flexibility to develop the actions identified by community participants. This requires organisational change so that managers participate themselves or give their staff authority to commit to action on issues that emerge.

Conclusion

Appreciative inquiry offers workers an energising, positive method for community engagement. Time and resources must be allocated to the preparation of an inquiry in order to get the right people in the room and ensure that the topic is appropriate. Synthesis of the data to distil the key information for decision-makers is also needed and providing support to workers in the use of AI will enhance the results.

» find out more

Judith Emanuel is an independent consultant. Much of her work concerns community involvement and health equity, with both statutory and voluntary agencies. See www.judithemanuel.co.uk or contact her at judith@judithemanuel.co.uk

Eleanor Hill is public health network coordinator for Stockport PCT and an independent health development consultant. She can be contacted at e.j.hill@which.net. Judith and Eleanor are planning to run a one-day course on appreciative inquiry with North West Together We Can in the near future. For details contact eve.davidson@nwtwc.org.uk or tel: 0161 218 1789.

For more information on appreciative inquiry, visit <http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu>