

Safeguarding Early Adopters programme

Learning example

Early Adopter: Devon – The South West

Learning theme: Multi-agency outcomes framework; Local Reviews

Introduction

The example is an overview of an activity that took place using appreciative questioning with multi-agency partners to identify how an appreciative inquiry approach can be an appropriate method for a multi-agency practitioner led audit process.

Background, aims and objectives

The Community of Safeguarding Practice is seeking to 'strengthen relationships' between multi-agency partners to develop a methodology and associated tools for a practitioner led audit process, looking at cases/topics in real time. The aim and objectives of the practitioner led audit process is to;

- create a shared responsibility to safeguard children;
- identify whether we are making a positive difference to children and families' lives;
- identify learning that can be shared across the partnership to improve outcomes for children and families;
- further develop a skilled workforce;
- Identify and celebrate success.

Approach

The approach devised for this activity is an 'appreciative conversation' and the following stages took place.

Pre-planning stage:

As the MASH in Devon is a multi-agency team with social care, health and police representation it was identified that it would be beneficial for this activity to be trialed here. A topic question was chosen which was meaningful to the participants and gave focus to the set of questions within the appreciate conversation which was "*Is multi-agency working effective within MASH strategy meetings?*". A set of eight appreciative questions were devised before the appreciate conversation took place and developed from texts on appreciative inquiry. Examples of the questions used were:

- Can you tell me about a strategy meeting which you felt was successful?;
- How have you managed to overcome any challenges you have faced in strategy meetings?;
- If MASH was operating at its best what would an effective strategy meeting look like?;
- What would you need for this vision to be a reality?;
- How will you make this happen?

Facilitating the activity:

A practice lead within the Community of Safeguarding Practice facilitated the appreciate conversation in a group with the safeguarding agency representatives. The practice lead explained the rationale for the activity and asked the set of appreciative questions. Due to the richness of the conversation and to gain as much learning from the conversation as possible the practice lead asked additional questions to the eight devised. Asking the additional questions was not planned from the outset but contributed to a more in-depth conversation and avoided missing out on key learning. For example, the multi-agency partners felt that for an effective strategy meeting to take place it requires the people attending the meeting to have the right skills and experience to make the decision. To explore this further the practice lead asked, 'What qualities would the person have who had the rights skills and experience?'

Following the activity:

The Practice Lead's gained feedback from the participants on how they found the activity and the questions used.

Challenges

Due to the nature of the work in MASH, at the time that this activity was planned regrettably not all participants identified were able to participate. Participants felt that it may have been beneficial to have had the questions before the appreciative conversation took place so that they could have thought about their answers more.

Successes

Direct feedback received from participants;

- "I could see at the end of the questioning how it teased out the main issues, which allowed them to be solution focused so was a good experience";
- "Thank you for creating the opportunity to reflect on our multi-agency practice in this area, due to the volume of high concern cases coming through the MASH it has perhaps become routine to go into the meetings without considering what we are proud of and how we think the meetings are working well to safeguard children";
- "Speaking for myself, I thought the questions were well designed and in an open format which necessitated me having to think carefully about my responses. I feel that professionally we are often critical of ourselves, so it was a good activity to discuss what has and does go well in our usual practice and how this is then impacting on the outcomes for children and families";
- "It was particularly helpful to have the session with another MASH colleagues as this led to a discussion on areas which had not necessarily occurred to me. It was also helpful to have that reassurance that what I felt was going well was not my sole opinion. As an outcome of the session I felt reassured of my confidence in my professional practice and my ability to analyse, risk assess, and problem solve".

Conclusion

This appreciative conversation highlighted that participants felt that this activity gave them an opportunity to reflect on their success by identifying what they were doing well. They felt that it was beneficial to have practitioners from different agencies to have a richer conversation and consider issues they had not thought about. They felt the activity gave them the opportunity to come up with their own solutions on what they felt needed to be improved, therefore taking learning from this activity.

Critics of the appreciative inquiry approach have raised issues that the method risks only focusing on the positives at the cost of things that are not going well. However, learning from this activity has highlighted the importance of spending time developing the questions to allow participants to raise areas of concern but that subsequent questions take them into the 'dreaming phase' and remain solution focused rather than deficit focused. This way participants can still explore their areas of needed improvement, but by the end of the appreciative conversation feel it to be a positive experience rather than feel that they have spent their time just discussing problems without finding solutions. Also, by participants finding their own solutions there is a greater likelihood of success when it comes to implementation solutions as these were self-created rather than imposed by others.

Learning from this activity has also highlighted that although questions may be devised at the outset it is important to follow the flow of the conversation otherwise key learning may be missed if the facilitator only asks the prepared questions. This learning is important to consider in relation to tools that are developed for the practitioner led audit process.

A benefit from undertaking multi-agency appreciative conversations is that partner agencies would have a dedicated opportunity to talk to one another and create a more informed understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities.

A further benefit is that practitioners will become familiar with appreciative questions and see/experience the benefit of this approach. Its anticipated through this modelling that they will adopt and use this approach in other areas of their work, such as undertaking direct work with children and their families and helping families to identify what's going well so this can be built upon and empower children and families to find solutions to their own problems.