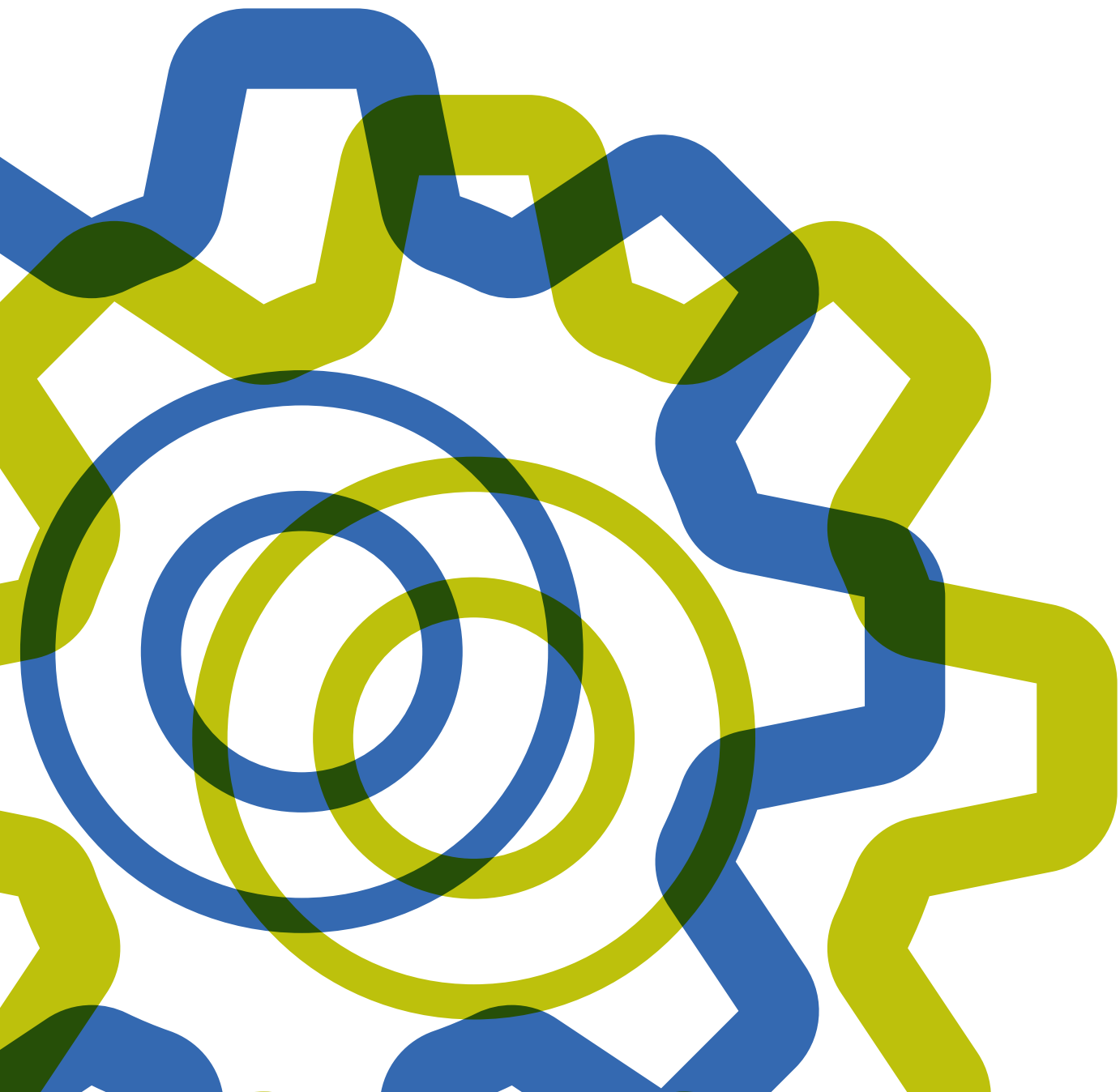


# Changing how we work

## A case study in East Lothian

November 2013



IRISS worked with East Lothian Council for nine months between October 2012 and July 2013 to help facilitate their Getting it Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) and Child Protection Quality Improvement Sub-group (hereafter known as ‘the group’). This was a multi-agency group, consisting of representatives from Children’s Wellbeing Social Work, Child Protection, Education, Health, the third sector (specifically Children 1st) and the Police. The group had asked for help in evaluating the work of the group as they moved from focussing solely on child protection to also taking on responsibility for GIRFEC within the council.

We initially conceptualised this project as a means to help an organisation reflect on and improve their use of evidence, however, as the project progressed it became evident that the lessons really centred around how a multi-disciplinary team can learn to work together well and change the way they work. **Some key reflections about this process are:**

- Try to ensure you are aware of all the different perspectives as early as possible – those of the enthusiasts and the sceptics
- A long-standing group has both strengths and weaknesses and there are many reasons why they work together as they do – these can both help and hinder change.
- Keep going! There are likely to be points when the process is frustrating for both you and the group. This is normal and you can work through it.
- For this group the keys to unlocking the door to move forward were: introducing appreciative ways of working, grounding the work in concrete situations and ensuring that the group had actions to undertake no matter how small. Keep trying new things until you find your key!
- Work with the group to help them identify what will maintain their new approach after you leave the process.

The case study is presented in the form of a time line using the following key below. Also note that some of the quotes and feedback from group members were gathered within the process and others from a feedback form at the end.

# Timeline

## Key



Date



Process



Reflection



Group quote



Lessons



### Recruitment for Evaluation Exchange

East Lothian Council got in touch with us to apply to be part of Evaluation Exchange ([www.iriss.org.uk/evaluationexchange](http://www.iriss.org.uk/evaluationexchange)), a group we were running to help organisations self-evaluate a piece of work. The work they were proposing to evaluate was too complex for that project but we thought that it would benefit from a more intensive and sustained process.



### Finding an experienced partner

We knew we wanted to use an action research approach, so we asked Cathy Sharp (Research for Real) – an expert in this field – to act as a mentor for the project.



### Making the most of your resources

Cathy was a great resource throughout the project. Her input might have been even more useful if we had made time for her to come to one of the sessions in East Lothian. A fresh pair of eyes or a different perspective might have highlighted some of the issues earlier.



### Decide early to involve others?

You need to weigh up the impact of introducing someone new to the group to facilitate, co-facilitate or observe a single session with the potential benefits of gaining new insights into what is motivating the group. If you think you might want to do this, it could be useful to introduce the additional facilitator to the group early on.



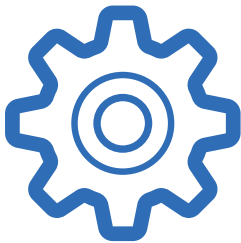
### Initial discussions

Initial discussions were mainly held with a member of the social work team and agreed to set up an exploratory meeting.



### Exploratory meeting – off to a good start

A meeting was held with a subsection of the group. This included mainly social services staff, with one person from health and a 3rd sector representative. Everyone was very enthusiastic and keen to get started.



### Start as you mean to continue

We agreed to run the meeting using an ‘action research’ style with creative facilitation and a variety of different exercises to get people thinking differently from the beginning.



### It went really well... or did it?

I hadn't accounted for the fact that the subsection invited was mainly those that my key contact saw as the enthusiasts. I therefore assumed a greater level of positivity than actually existed and I wasn't prepared for the huge amount of work needed to change the group's practices.



### Group divisions remained hidden

One of the things that would emerge whilst working with this multidisciplinary group was the wide divergence in perspectives of different agencies. Having an exploratory meeting where one profession dominated didn't give me this full picture at the outset and contributed to some members of the group feeling that they were being taken into a new process with IRISS without being consulted.



*“Ensure all members are aware of IRISS and the change of focus [...] some of the sub-group members were taken a bit by surprise about the change in direction and this resulted in a bit of resistance at the first few meetings.”*

*“Get agreement from everyone early on that it's ok to look at things in a different way.”*



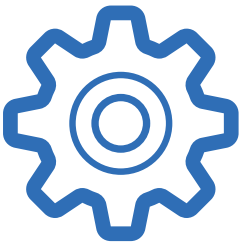
## Include all perspectives from the start

While it's good to engage with enthusiasts, you must be aware that other perspectives exist and what they are. If you want to take everyone in a multidisciplinary team with you in a process then you have to involve all disciplines from the beginning.



## Meeting 1 – reality bites

This first full meeting included representatives from all the different agencies. The group had stated that they were keen for the focus and priorities of the group to be defined during this meeting. However this proved to be difficult and we were not able to reach a conclusion at this meeting.



## Too early to prioritise

We attempted to work on defining priorities; however the group were not ready to do so this stage. Instead the discussion revolved around exploring different values and perspectives. Explicitly stating these differences was a new conversation for the group – and they felt it was necessary to do this in order to progress overall.



## What underlies anxiety?

It was clear that there was underlying anxiety about change in the group. The history of the group would emerge later and shed light on this but at this stage, as facilitator, I had taken on face value that the whole group wanted to engage in new ways of working. This, of course, was not the full picture.



*“We don't even have the same beliefs.”*

*“We've never had these conversations before.”*



## You say potato, I say...

The group all agreed that they had the overarching purpose of 'improving the health and well-being of children and families'. However, behind this broad purpose, it emerged that they all had different concepts of what this meant and different methods of approaching it. They had never articulated this to each other before. Some in the group found this realisation uncomfortable or surprising. Yet resolving this was to remain a theme for a number of sessions.



## Always lay the groundwork

A long-established group can be reluctant to go through the process of agreeing ways of working and ensuring they are all on the same page. But remember that shared history can be a barrier as well as an enabler! This group thought they worked well together but had become stuck and it emerged that in some cases they weren't speaking the same 'language'. An existing group may have to unlearn some behaviour so they can work differently and this can take time.



## Positive telephone conversation with contact in SW

Had a chat about the format of the next session and what we hoped to achieve. Agreed on a four hour workshop and to continue to attempt to establish the group's priorities.



## The view from here...

Despite the last meeting highlighting the many different perspectives being brought to the group, I didn't realise that in my planning and discussion about how the previous session had gone I was only taking into account one viewpoint – that of my key contact in social work. This was my easiest point of contact and the person I viewed as my 'ally.'



## Question your own assumptions

My task may have been easier if I had actively solicited a wider range of views and feedback at an earlier stage. I assumed that I understood the group but I was only seeing it through one set of eyes.



## Meeting 2 – Differences come out...

A four hour meeting, designed to turn over a fresh page on the differences identified in the previous meeting, to finalise two or three priorities for the group to begin working on and to start work on one of these. The group felt sure that after airing their differences for the first time at the previous meeting, they were ready to move on and 'get on with the work.' However discussion kept turning to the ways in which they were coming from different directions and could not agree priorities for working together as the priorities of individual agencies were not the same.



*“In some ways we are coming at this from polar opposites: I’ll give an example of an under 16 girl asking a health professional for contraception. From the perspective of health, we should give her it; From the perspective of police, it’s a crime. Social work would want to know about what the parents were doing. And education... we don’t know!”*

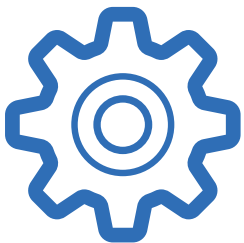


*“The problem is interpretation of GIRFEC. Some people are putting ‘safe’ at the top of the pyramid. But safe is not the only thing. It doesn’t have to be the most important.”*



### **...and frustration sets in**

The length of the meeting and the seemingly insurmountable differences between the group members made for a very frustrating meeting. We ended on a more positive note when the group engaged with the action research cycle, but overall the group (including me) left feeling disheartened and unsure this was going to work.



### **The action research cycle**

When we identified a specific problem (rather than the more abstract priority setting) to work on, the group worked better, as we went through the four stages of the action research cycle – observe, reflect, plan, act. However, by this point some of the group had disengaged and did not really participate. Nor did we get to deciding on actions.



### **Storming or avoiding the storm?**

The group spent a lot of time in early sessions discussing their differences, and this was certainly an important process and it didn’t seem that they had had a forum or permission to do so openly before. I started to wonder though if the discussion began to be an end in itself – a reason not to come to a compromise or a decision about what to actually do. As long as we were stuck on discussion, we weren’t narrowing down to one course of action.



*“...we were just wasting this golden opportunity and blaming the premature amalgamation with another group for the dilemma we were in and the lack of progress we had made over the preceding 12 months.”*



### **Get the group doing something – however small**

The group began to thrive when they had specific concrete actions to focus on between sessions. Build these in from the beginning no matter how small.



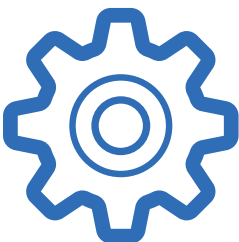
### **When to draw the line**

All groups have differences that they have to work with. At some point you need to bring the group to an agreement that their understanding of each other is ‘good enough’ to work together. And that they have more common ground than differences.



### **Telephone conversation with a group member**

A member of the group requested a phone call. This person was clearly troubled by the direction the group was taking and by my involvement. I learned that the group had moved straight from an unsuccessful partnership with another organisation to the process with IRISS. Some of the group felt they had not been involved in this decision and had been ‘thrust into’ a new process. I learned that there were concerns that different agencies had ‘hidden agendas’ and were not necessarily being open about these.



### **Is your presence helpful?**

During the phone call, the person suggested that my presence was inhibiting the group from discussing things honestly and requested that they have a discussion at the beginning of the next session where they would be asked to honestly articulate their agendas. We compromised in that I could be present during this discussion but not lead it. I pushed this because I felt that asking me to be absent was a way to try to re-establish the group’s pre-existing norms and behaviour rather than because I actually prevented honest discussion.





## Know your group

Up until this point I had not been aware of the group's background, and discovering this was very helpful. There were real concerns about the group moving from solely being responsible for child protection to GIRFEC as a whole, anxieties about how that might dilute the priorities of some agencies and generally result in change. This new understanding really helped me to consider the next steps in moving the group forward.



## Know yourself

I was really interested in the view that my presence was inhibiting honest discussion in the group. It was something that I found difficult not to take to heart. The process had been really frustrating and at this point I heard this statement as a criticism of my ability to facilitate the group. On reflection I realised that it was apprehension about where I might lead the group – they were saying different things than they had before. These more honest statements were unwelcome as they challenged the status quo.



## Do your homework

Gaining this understanding of the group's history and the anxieties surrounding it was invaluable. If you can, uncover the story of your group before you begin.



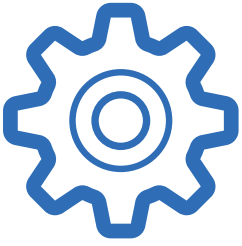
## Trying some hand-holding

The group stated that they wanted to continue trying to define what area of work they would focus on and that one of the barriers was that they were 'paralysed' by the blank sheet. So I did some qualitative analysis on their discussions so far and from that distilled emerging themes and priorities to present back to them.



## Meeting 3 – the lowest point!

As suggested by one of the group we began this session with each person being asked to honestly reflect on their thoughts so far. This highlighted right at the beginning of the meeting that people felt stuck, frustrated and still were not unified on the purpose of the group. We then moved to discuss the prepared themes and priorities, which was unsuccessful.



## Themes and priorities

This process did not have the outcome I had hoped. I had identified themes, sub-themes and overarching quality/process issues, which I displayed on the wall for the group to consider and choose from to work on. The group did not think this would be helpful to them and chose not to continue. Instead they decided that they wanted to work on Stage 2 Assessments.



## Getting off on the wrong foot

In two ways this meeting started poorly. Firstly there were new people in the group all of whom had their own ideas about what we should be doing and who weren't aware of the work we had done in previous meetings. I could have done more to catch these people up. In addition, the meeting started in a very negative way with discussion of frustration and what the problems were. I reflected on this at the time and started the next meeting in a more appreciative way.



*"I feel like we are going backwards."*

*"It's not like we've never seen these things on walls before."*



## When to push a group?

Many of the processes and activities I had tried with the group had not worked out, either because the group did not want to pursue them or because we got caught up in other discussion. At this point I reflected on why this was and decided that with this group, I needed to try being more directive. However every group is different and in other circumstances I might have asked them what was going on and why they didn't want to try the activities I suggested and how they would prefer to proceed.



## Sometimes you need to read between the lines

The group had consistently told me that they wanted to prioritise what they were going to focus on and that had been what my planning had been geared towards. However, their perceptions of their differences and, I believe, the perceived enormity of the task was keeping them from doing so. This group actually needed a concrete task and concrete actions. Once they settled on that they were able to move forward.



## Keep calm and carry on

After the third meeting I was very disheartened and really questioning whether my facilitation was helping or hindering the group. I decided to keep going and try something new based on my reflections.



*“Stick with it. We could have given up on this as too hard but we got through that painful bit and it then began to feel worthwhile.”*



## Facilitators need support too!

I took a lot of advice from colleagues and my mentor Cathy. At this point several people offered to co-facilitate or observe the next meeting. I declined this as I was concerned that it might look to the group that I had brought in reinforcements! In other circumstances this support would have been very welcome.



## It's ok to change direction

At this stage I had to acknowledge that priority setting was not working out, despite that being the group's stated goal. It was time to try something new – in this case focussing on a concrete task (Stage 2 Assessments) whether that was the key priority or not.



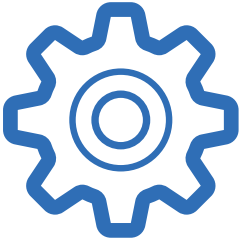
## Meeting 4 – the turning point!

This meeting had far fewer attendees than the previous, which concerned me, but actually turned out to be very successful. This, for me, was when the group began to work together well.



### Begin positively

At the last meeting I had been concerned by how the initial roundtable airing of feelings had set the tone for a negative meeting. At this meeting I decided to turn that on its head and start with an appreciative enquiry process. This worked really well.

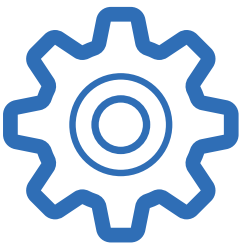


### Stay concrete

I had also reflected that this group really needed something more operational than strategic to get their teeth into. As they had said they wanted to work on stage 2 assessment I asked one group member (from education) to prepare in advance by thinking of a situation where a stage 2 assessment had been really successful. She described this to the group and we then considered what had gone well and what could have been better (i.e. an appreciative approach).



*“I came late to the process and it did feel it was a bit stuck in looking at role and tasks. It definitely changed when we agreed we would use actual cases to review processes and Emma’s role was key in keeping things going until the eventual ‘Eureka!’ moment.”*



### A little more action

Critical to the success of this session was that we finally managed to get to the point where each member of the group identified and committed to an individual action to undertake before the next meeting.



### Breakthrough

This was a really positive meeting and a great relief both the group and for me as facilitator. Several factors contributed, but chief was just keeping going, constantly learning from and reflecting from previous sessions and trying lots of new processes and ways of working until we found one that fitted for this group and allowed them to come together with a focus on their collective strengths rather than their differences.



### Previous sessions had not resulted in nothing

Once we had identified issues around Stage 2 Assessment that we wanted to work on, we related them back to the themes that I’d produced out of their previous work. This allowed the group to see that although the previous sessions had been difficult in many ways they had still accomplished good work through them.



*“[it would work better to] focus on something practical from the outset – we spent a lot of time talking in the abstract, although maybe we needed to do that in order to get where we did.”*



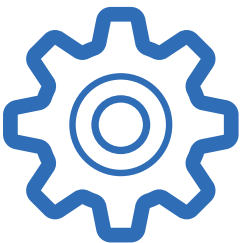
### **Celebrate**

It was really important to acknowledge with the group how well the session had gone so that they could feel good about their progress and use this to spur them on to future work.



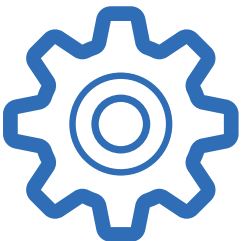
### **Meeting 5 – A fresh pair of eyes**

I couldn't meet with the group at this session, so a colleague stepped in to facilitate. My main concerns were to maintain momentum from the previous session and to ensure that those in the group who had missed it were taken with us into this new more positive phase.



### **Even more celebrating**

Once again the session began with an appreciative enquiry – this time one member of the group described the previous session and we discussed what had made it go so well and what could have been even better. This had the dual role of continuing the positive approach and bringing the other group members up to speed in an enthusiastic way.



### **And even more action**

The group reported back on what they had done before and were able to reflect on what this meant and where they should go next, before planning more individual actions to take forward.



### **Trust and belief in each other**

Some of the more sceptical group members had not been present at the previous successful session and I was concerned that they would not want to continue with the work we had built up – however their long-standing and trusting relationships with their colleagues meant that although they had not been there, when they were told in a positive way about the previous meeting they were keen to get on board and give the new way of working a try.



## A different perspective – different truths

My colleague was able to gather a lot of positives from the group about how they had found the period that I had been facilitating. They were pleased that people were open, honest and challenging; that they had been forced to think about things differently; that they had an external facilitator; and that I had continually pushed them. I don't think I would have asked that question or found it easy to listen to that feedback.



## Facilitators need to celebrate too!

Hearing from my colleague about the group's positivity about the process and how far they felt they had come really helped me in thinking about the journey and how to exit from the group in the best possible way. It's important to acknowledge our own successes and contributions.

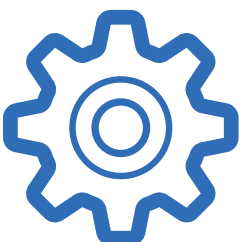


*“A facilitator not afraid to challenge the group was a key dynamic.”*



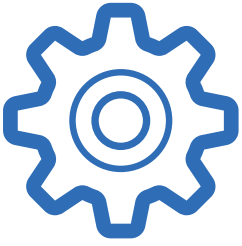
## Meeting 6 – the final IRISS facilitated meeting

This was the last meeting that I was going to facilitate and I wanted to leave the group with a sense of achievement, change and give them tools to keep working in a different way.



## Ways of working agreement

Often in a group you will develop agreed ways of working at the beginning of the process, but this group didn't think that would be useful to them as they had been established for a long period of time already. Our time together had shown that despite their longstanding working relationship, there were improvements to be made to how they worked together. We drew up this agreement to guide their future ways of working and hopefully to embed some of the new approaches they had been taking.



## Practical matters

We spent a bit of time thinking about what the group could do to enable them to keep on the new path we had forged and not revert to old habits. Much of this was practical – who would facilitate the meeting, who would take notes, how would they ensure they remained reflective?



## What's changed during IRISS's involvement??

- The group is still composed of enthusiasts and sceptics, but has learned to accept and use their differences – and has the power of momentum behind them
- The group is working appreciatively and this makes a big difference to the atmosphere and their belief that they can achieve their goals
- The group is now one that acts rather than a talking shop
- There were more changes of personnel for the group, but they are weathering this rather than letting it derail them



*“I think we are now holding much more outcome-focused meetings. Meetings were previously too much of a ‘talking shop.’”*

*“What’s made it work? Effective relationships and existing multi-agency working. Mutual respect and ‘ground rules.’”*



## Planning the future

I met the person who had agreed to facilitate the first meeting without IRISS to provide them with support in planning the session.



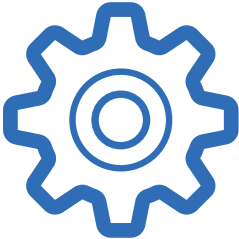
## Don't pull the rug out

The group is still keen to forge ahead with the style of working we've embedded over the months and I believe that it's important to continue to support them to do this by providing advice and access to any of our relevant materials.



## Self-facilitated meeting

The group continued to work within an action research framework and agreed additional actions to reinforce this. These included appending the working together agreement to their remit and constitution and sending a letter to all group members requesting their increased engagement and emphasising the changes that have occurred over the last few months and the new action-focussed approach.



## The action research cycle

The group continued to go through the phases observe, reflect, plan and act using the materials that they had received during the externally facilitated meetings. Everyone took away an action to complete.



## ...is bright

The group plans to continue in the approach we've established. They intend to use this as evidence of successful working at their inspection. They are also planning to report back to other committees and working groups on what they've been doing with a view to influencing their colleagues to look differently at how they work.



## What one thing will keep the process going?

*"Members must be willing to act on actions resulting from meetings."  
"Continue to build on the process we have started rather than return to our old agenda and bad habits."*



## What would you say to a similar group about to start?

*"Forget what has gone before and start at the fundamentals."*



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