

action learning

LEARNING TO LISTEN - LISTENING TO LEARN



Why Action Learning?

The work of West Durham Rural Pathfinder is delivered through case studies, which have been developed to help identify and overcome key issues. These include:

- SW Durham Heritage Corridor
- Eastgate Regeneration
- Asset Mapping
- Rural Transport

Action Learning was employed as an educational tool to promote the sharing of experiences, skills and information amongst the group of case study leaders. It was designed to improve communications and to encourage mutual learning amongst those tasked with delivery of the four projects, including representatives from relevant Local Strategic Partnerships, AONB bodies, rural councils, community support organisations and other leading stakeholder organisations.

What is Action Learning?

Action Learning is a process of learning and reflection. Based upon the principle that adults learn best from their own experiences, it encourages groups of individuals to share thoughts and knowledge. By promoting new ways of thinking and different approaches to situations, it assists organisations and individuals in responding positively to change. At the same time it promotes personal development, communication and team leadership skills. It is increasingly used by companies and organisations as a means of encouraging personal development and embracing change, through the sharing of ideas and emotions.

Action Learning in practice

Action Learning sessions are generally run by a facilitator whose role is non participatory, but rather managerial - making the event happen, observing time keeping parameters, and ensuring observation of the ground rules. In this instance the group met six times, with each session following the same basic format. All sessions were run on a totally confidential basis, allowing participants to openly explore emotional and practical problems.

“ I thought it would be impossible to find the time to attend but in the end it saved me time - the informal exchange of view and reflection time changed my way of working. ”

Tony Devos, project manager Mineral Valleys Project

In line with the Action Learning format, during the meeting, each group member takes a turn in the role of presenter, with the remaining participants acting as “supporters”. Insightful questioning by the group encourages the presenter to develop and explore any potential challenges. This is also supporting the individual in finding a course of action.

Progress and developments are then reported back to the group at the next meeting.

Action Learning and the Pathfinder

The problem-solving and strategic discussion techniques used in Action Learning provide stakeholders with a tool-kit to deliver the key Pathfinder objectives:

- A simpler delivery of services
- Importance of engagement with local communities
- A stronger voice for local people
- Prioritisation of resources according to community needs

The benefits of Action Learning

The confidentiality of this approach, coupled with the opportunity to openly share problems and frustrations, was seen as hugely beneficial by the participants. The advice and support of other team members was also much appreciated. The collaborative approach was found to highlight shared problems, and helped identify potential solutions, whilst simultaneously building confidence.

“ Bringing together a diverse range of people who might not normally meet was valuable both professionally and personally, and I found it incredibly useful to be able to hold discussions with a group of peers who were working on a similar but slightly different project. The other participants brought in new viewpoints I would not have considered - all for a common purpose - improving rural delivery. ”

Tony Devos, project manager
Mineral Valleys Project

Outcomes and results

- Bringing together those with strategic and delivery responsibilities proved hugely beneficial
- Meeting new contacts facing similar challenges was found to create networking opportunities and other useful openings
- Combined funding approaches were identified
- By involving community development officers, community involvement was improved
- Communication links with young people were improved and their views sought
- The process developed a sounding board for rural issues
- It was recognised that consultation without change is debilitating and demoralising for communities

Learning in action: Highlights from the Rural Transport Case Study Group

- Created a less intimidating way for young people to voice their opinions via the community network
- Provided backing for important discussions such as those on post-16 school transport charges, held with Children & Young People's Services
- Created a new focus for groups working for young people in relation to community transport issues

The way forwards

- WDRP recognises the Action Learning approach as an effective mechanism by which to support rural development programmes, and will continue to promote its use on a wider scale
- To be really effective it was felt that Action Learning should be included from the outset in similar collaborative projects
- It was deemed a useful tool by which to share experiences and network, and could be usefully applied more widely between government departments and between partnership members
- It could potentially play a vital role in improving the rural proofing process

The practice of action learning was developed by Reg Revans in the 1960s.

For more information on action learning please contact:
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For more information on the Pathfinder and further case studies, please contact Bryan Rees, Chair of the West Durham Rural Pathfinder management advisory group, on 0191 202 3969, email bryan.rees@gone.gsi.gov.uk or visit the Pathfinder website at www.westdurhampathfinder.com.

“ The Durham Rural Community Council has been working with a range of consultation tools for a long period of time, and I am pleased that the Pathfinder has adopted Action Learning and is actively promoting it. We will use Action Learning when setting up the new Rural Communities Action Network North East ”

Jo Laverick, director
Durham Rural Community Council (DRCC).



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