

**Crossing the housing and care divide:
A guide for practitioners**



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Crossing the housing and care divide: A guide for practitioners



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**CHARTERED INSTITUTE
OF HOUSING**

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**School for Policy Studies
University of Bristol**

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Any errors of fact or interpretation that remain are the responsibility of the authors alone.

Finally, as co-researcher and project leader, Lyn Harrison had a huge input into and impact upon the research report from which this guide originates. Her untimely death meant she did not participate in the development of this guide. It is a cause of personal and professional regret to us all.

Introduction: A guide for practitioners

In this section we discuss the following topics:

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1. A guide for practitioners

The purpose of this guide

Those working in the field of housing, care and support face ever increasing pressures to deliver high quality services that are sensitive to the needs of service users, make best use of available resources, and can be demonstrated to be efficient and effective. The purpose of this guide is to provide resources to assist in this task.

The core of the guide is five modules that examine the following practical issues:

- **Project management**
- **Joint working**
- **Involving service users**
- **Monitoring and evaluation**
- **The use of information technology.**

These are issues that a large number of practitioners have to grapple with, regardless of the precise focus of the services they are developing or running.

All the modules emphasise that it is vital to formulate, and to some degree formalise, the goals or objectives of your activities. This is a fundamental message the guide seeks to convey. The modules make the point in relation to different topics and to activities on different scales. It could be the overall objective of the service you are planning. It could be a more specific objective in relation to working jointly with others, replacing IT systems or calling a meeting of project staff. What are you aiming to achieve? Without clear objectives it is not possible to monitor performance and evaluate whether objectives have been achieved. Without clear objectives you run the risk that there will be lots of activity to no clear purpose.

The guide provides the reader with an overview of the key issues that need to be considered in relation to each topic. It provides suggestions and examples of how the issues can be addressed. Through examples and exercises it makes connections between the broad 'issues' and the sort of concrete situations that practitioners are likely to encounter.

The guide is intentionally concise. Each module gives an overview of its topic. There is much more that could be said and much more detail that can be explored. The guide therefore provides suggestions for further reading and identifies relevant websites that readers might wish to access if they want to find out more.

Who is it for?

The guide is intended primarily for those who are responsible for setting up and running projects and services, at local and national level, in the field of housing, care and support.

The distinction between setting up projects, on the one hand, and running projects, on the other, is important. Not only are the issues to be faced different, but it is often different people who have to face them.

Setting up projects – including bidding for funding and setting up partnership arrangements – is often the task of more senior managers or staff with strategic responsibilities. Usually the intention is to appoint project staff if and when a bid is successful. Project staff then enter an environment in which either many of the key decisions have already been taken or a relatively vague proposal has been funded and they have the task of filling in the details. Either way, they have to make it all work. Often project staff are recruited for their experience in managing and delivering services, rather than for their expertise in joint working, user involvement or performance assessment. Yet, many staff very successfully learn these important skills on the job.

This guide is intended to assist in speeding up this learning process by distilling some of the key lessons and messages from experience. If fewer people have to struggle to reinvent the wheel then that will enhance the chances of projects and services being set up successfully and going on to thrive.

Many local projects in the housing and care field experience considerable staff turnover, even during the relatively short duration of the funding many succeed in securing. Time is always of the essence, so new staff need to ‘hit the ground running’. This guide can serve as an aid to their orientation and help get them ‘up to speed’.

While the guide is written with these purposes in mind, few practitioners have the opportunity to acquire skills and knowledge across all the topics covered. We therefore believe that some or all of the material we discuss will provide food for thought for most practitioners working in the housing, care and support field, and in other policy fields.

How to use the guide

The five core modules of this guide are largely self-contained. They can be read in any order. They are written in such a way that an individual can read through the material alone and reflect upon the issues raised. The modules propose questions that need to be considered in practice: they could therefore also be used as the basis for discussions among colleagues. Brief exercises are provided at various points in the text and these too can be completed by individuals or used by groups of practitioners as a basis for discussion.

The modules identify questions and issues that need to be faced when setting up a project or service. The modules then move on to consider some of the key factors in the successful implementation and on-going operation of a project. The guide will therefore be of use to people during the initial stages of project development, but it is also intended to be something that practitioners would find it helpful to return to over time.

The origins of the guide

This guide has been produced as a follow up to the evaluation of the *Crossing the housing and care divide* programme, published in 2001 (Cameron *et al.*, 2001).

Crossing the housing and care divide was a major programme jointly sponsored by the Housing Corporation and Anchor Trust. Funding of £1.25 million was made available for a number of innovative projects over the period 1996-2000. The projects were explicitly to tackle the interface between housing and personal care systems.

The focus was on *services* for older people, not capital funding for buildings. The intention was to increase the recognition of the potential of housing to play a central role in community care.

Proposals for services to be funded by the programme fell into three categories:

- *Information and advocacy*: ensuring that older people have access to good information can be the key to opening doors to ensure that they remain in control of their lives.
- *New technology*: new technology can help improve the lives of older people and enhance their quality of life.
- *Management and support services*: it was these services that the funders thought had the greatest potential to cross the housing and care divide to ensure that older people remain in control of their lives.

Following a campaign of national advertising to invite bids, applications were evaluated and nine projects were funded. The majority were underway by September 1996. The evaluation of the programme was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The evaluation of these projects highlighted a range of important issues, discussed key skills and competences that organisations and individuals need for this type of project to succeed, and identified a range of obstacles that can stand in the way of success.

The evaluation of the *Crossing the housing and care divide* programme, combined with evaluations of other similar projects and the messages that can be drawn from the relevant academic literature represents a substantial body of knowledge. It represents an extremely valuable resource for practitioners wrestling with the difficult tasks they inevitably face in this field. The aim of this guide is to draw on this literature and present its key messages in a form that is more useful to practitioners than academics.

2. A changing policy environment

The last 15 years has witnessed a host of policy initiatives and innovations that impact upon those working in the housing and care field. This is well illustrated by the experience of the original *Crossing the housing and care divide* programme.

One of the programme's main aims was to influence policy development at both national and local level. The programme was a response to concerns in the housing and community care field about the way national policy was impacting at the local level and the difficulties experienced on the ground in implementing the community care reforms of the early 1990s. The aim of the programme was to stimulate change that would:

- **enable housing to become a more integral part of community care;**
- **lead to greater inter-agency working;**
- **enhance the involvement of users in the planning, monitoring and delivery of services;**
- **deliver high quality services more cost effectively.**

However significant policy change – including a change of government – occurred following the initiation of the programme in 1995. By the time conclusions were being identified in late 2000 the policy context was very different. Major shifts in priorities meant that national policy had ‘caught up’ with the programme and was strongly endorsing the aims listed above. The case for a significant change in policy had already been accepted before the results from the project evaluation were available.

To illustrate quite how extensive change to the policy context has been, the following sections provide an overview of the pertinent policy developments.

3. The integration of housing into community care

The role of housing in underpinning social care was acknowledged in the white paper, *Caring for People: Community Care in the Next Decade and Beyond* (DHSS, 1989), which fed into the 1990 NHS and Community Care Act. However, progress in achieving any real integration of housing and social care was initially patchy and slow. A circular on housing and community care followed in 1992 (DoE, 1992), although detailed guidance relating to the strategic framework and the guide for practitioners involved in joint working were not published until 1997 (DoE/DoH, 1997; Means *et al.*, 1997).

By 1995 attempts to reconcile the priorities driving housing agencies and those driving social care agencies, together with the need to implement the health and community care reforms, generated a number of problems. Some of these had a long history, such as the role of sheltered housing and the problems of joint working. Others emerged as a result of the specific policy context of the mid-1990s, not least those associated with the introduction of quasi-markets, contracts and competition within the public sector. At the same time social services departments were having to develop needs assessment procedures and care management approaches as pressure on resources led to the introduction of eligibility criteria which targeted resources at the highest dependency cases.

The overall objectives of policy relating to housing and community care have essentially remained the same since 1995. Yet the election of the Labour government in 1997 heralded the introduction of a number of policies which were more explicit in their support for the role of housing in community care and intended to further its integration into thinking about health and social care. They also placed great emphasis on joint working and involving service users, while the cost effectiveness of provision has assumed a pivotal role in government thinking. The extensive range of new policies which has emerged since 1997 cut across virtually all policy areas, and a number of shared themes can be identified.

4. Policy themes

Collaboration, not competition

A very powerful message which has emerged from the current government is the need for ‘joined up’ thinking and working. The recognition of the need for partnerships is by no means new. But it has been given a much higher profile. The models advocated by

government are in some cases supported by changes in legislation, which it is hoped will overcome the barriers to joint working identified over the years.

The government has also been sensitive to the need for national policies themselves to reflect a greater degree of co-ordination across departments. There is now greater congruence in the priorities being set for local agencies working in different, but inter-related, policy fields. It is possible to identify an emphasis on joint working in key policy documents relating to health, local government, housing, social care, and urban renewal. This shift is not just one of emphasis but reflects a significant change in the values which should be underpinning relations between sectors and agencies. The competitive ethos of the quasi-market era is giving way to greater co-operation and the development of more inclusive strategies, policy communities and networks in localities. As with any attempt to reshape well-established ways of thinking and working, the process of transformation is not easy.

To take a concrete example, the *National Service Framework for Older People* (NSF), published by the Department of Health in April 2001, set out a structure for the improvement of health and social care services for older people. New national standards and models of care were proposed for all older people, whether they are being cared for in hospital, residential care or while living at home. Implementation of the NSF requires health, social services, housing agencies and the independent sector to work together. The introduction of Health Improvement Plans and Joint Investment Plans was intended to facilitate strategic planning. Pooled funding, introduced by the Health Act 1999, created scope for the provision of novel, integrated services, including Integrated Community Equipment Services. In principle, decisions on the application of *Supporting People* monies can be synchronised with the application of NHS resources to provide co-ordinated housing, care and support options for older people.

One of the NSF's proposals was to move to a single assessment process for older people. Single assessment is intended to lead to more efficient assessment of need and more effective services for older people. It aims to ensure that older people receive appropriate, effective and timely responses to their health and social care needs as a result of closer working between local health, care and housing service providers.

Involving service users

The involvement of service users, and 'the public' as citizens with rights and responsibilities, in the planning and provision of services is another powerful cross-cutting theme which has informed many aspects of public policy under the Labour government. This is a broad ranging issue that covers a diversity of aims. One of the thrusts of the modernising agenda is a desire to ensure more co-ordinated and flexible services within a customer service culture. But it extends beyond service provision to, for example, the question of how to enhance democratic systems of local accountability. The processes required to achieve such a diversity of aims are correspondingly varied. One example is the Patient Advocacy and Liaison Service (PALS), first outlined in *The NHS Plan* (DoH, 2000), which is central to the government's plans to involve patients and the public in decision-making in the NHS. They are envisaged as a means to improve service provision by learning from patients' direct experiences of healthcare services.

An allied theme is the need to address social exclusion. The failure of significant communities to engage with mainstream society in terms of involvement in public life and in relation to access to services is of major concern to the Labour government. This is linked to the acknowledgement of inequalities between communities – between, for example, the majority community and minority ethnic communities – across a range of indicators, including health status, access to education and housing, poverty and participation in local and general elections. The Social Exclusion Unit was set up within the Cabinet Office to bring about a co-ordinated approach to tackling problems of poverty and deprivation. Its move to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in 2002 enhanced the connection with bodies focused on delivery – such as the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit and the Homelessness Directorate – thereby increasing the scope for more integrated working.

The specific needs of informal carers, quite independent from those of individual service users, have increasingly been acknowledged (DoH, 1999). A Carers' Strategy is required from all social services locally. Nationally a Carers' Grant fund was established to enhance the provision of breaks for carers.

Promoting independence, prevention and rehabilitation

A major priority for all statutory agencies is that in all aspects of their work they should be enabling individuals to reach their greatest potential for independence. In relation to community care there has tended to be a focus on the relationship between health and social care and how to provide the most appropriate care across the continuum from complete dependence on hospital care to complete independence at home.

The stream of work associated with *Better Services for Vulnerable People* (BSVP) started with a focus on older people. The prevention and rehabilitation agenda was initially therefore geared to reducing the use of residential and nursing homes and preventing the use of hospital beds by people who do not need medical care. The BSVP programme of work has been geared to supporting effective Joint Investment Plans. Joint planning processes have, in the first instance, been concerned with services to meet the continuing and community care needs of local people; work to improve the process and content of multi-disciplinary assessment of older people, and the development of health and social services to optimise independence through timely recuperation and rehabilitation.

A Prevention Grant of £100 million was also established in 1999 to enable strategies to be developed locally so that low levels of support could be provided for those at risk. In 2001-2 this was replaced by 'promoting independence grants' which could prove an important means of funding developments by Staying Put agencies that focus on the reduction of hospital admissions or rapid discharge from hospital. More recently, through the Community Care (Delayed Discharges etc.) Act 2003, the government sought to use a financial stick rather than carrot to encourage rapid hospital discharge.

One of the early concerns of the Social Exclusion Unit was to address the causes of homelessness and, in particular, the resettlement of rough sleepers and street homeless people (SEU, 1998). The emphasis upon consumers, independence and choice rather than bureaucratic allocation was extended in the housing green paper (DETR/DSS,

2000) where the overhaul of local authority allocations policy is proposed, with a move away from 'allocation' and towards 'letting' social housing (see Marsh *et al.*, 2004). This emphasis on consumers, independence and choice was extended further in relation to housing for older people (DETR/DoH, 2001).

Monitoring and evaluation

The importance of demonstrating the efficiency and quality of services is a key driver for public sector bodies either as direct providers of services or, increasingly, as enabling/commissioning bodies. This leads directly to a heightened concern with monitoring systems. These systems must incorporate ways of allowing the views of the local population, as well as direct service users and their carers, to influence the shaping of local agendas. The mechanisms must be open to scrutiny and contribute to the ways in which those planning services and allocating resources may be held to account for their decisions.

In the case of local government the major policy tool for delivering this objective since 2000 has been Best Value. Best Value places a duty on local government to deliver services to clear standards and requires new and more detailed performance management arrangements to ensure that this is achieved. The system includes extensive use of performance indicators, benchmarking and rating of current performance and organisational potential. The arrival of Comprehensive Performance Assessment gives this process further momentum. Housing management has been singled out as an area for particular attention under the Best Value regime.

A similar agenda is being acted on in the NHS, with the emphasis on evidence-based practice and the introduction of clinical governance. These policies have the same overall goals as Best Value in that they seek to ensure greater transparency and accountability in relation to the planning and delivery of services and at the same time ensure that clinical practice is informed by rigorous evidence of its effectiveness.

Developments designed to ensure that services are delivered nationally to an agreed quality involve the specification of standards, through initiatives such as the National Standard Frameworks, the monitoring of performance locally using a set of indicators, such as the National Social Services Performance Indicators, and reviewed by either national and/or local bodies. The profile of provider scrutiny in the care sector increased in April 2002 when the responsibility for the registration and inspection of social care and private and voluntary health care services in England passed to the National Care Standards Commission. The Commission for Health Improvement, latterly the Health Care Commission, and the Commission for Social Care Inspection – which brought together the work of the Social Services Inspectorate, the Audit Commission and the National Care Standards Commission in 2004 – can utilise existing systems to jointly inspect health and social care organisations to assess how well they are implementing joint working arrangements.

Modernising and use of ICT

The government's 'modernising' agenda is fundamental to all policy initiatives for the public sector. The need for all services to be consistent, dependable and efficient is

powerfully expressed in policy statements across policy areas. This theme encompasses a commitment to improve the efficiency and quality of services through greater use of technologies. Under the banner of e-government there are aspirations for local services to be accessible electronically: this presents considerable challenges for service providers.

Improving service efficiency and quality may be achieved through the availability of information and communication technologies (ICTs), both in people's homes and through public access in libraries, surgeries and supermarkets; through interactive processes which allow users to access service providers; and through the transmission of information between professionals, such as tele-medicine and booked admissions to hospital by GPs. Many voluntary and statutory sector providers, some in partnership with large private sector IT suppliers, have already explored possibilities under banners such as Smart Homes, Telecare or Wired Communities.

The integration of health and housing into wider strategies

The formal acknowledgement of inequalities within society by the current government has enabled the social model of health to gain some prominence alongside the dominant medical model. The high priority given to joint working, and finding 'joined up' answers to difficult social issues, has contributed to locating health status more clearly in a social and economic context.

Projects have been initiated which clearly support the view that poverty, social isolation and living conditions may all contribute to poorer health. These initiatives require health bodies to work alongside housing, transport, leisure and social services. Examples of integrated projects include Health Action Zones and Healthy Living Centres. Government offices are increasingly looking for linkages between health and housing in Housing Investment Programmes, and through regeneration programmes housing will become integrated into wider strategies. The housing green paper (DETR/DSS, 2000) proposed that local authorities should link housing policies with planning policies and those for wider social, economic and environmental well-being of the community. A related shift concerns the idea of Housing Plus. When coined in the mid-1990s the term 'Plus' referred to activities that were largely an add-on to the housing function. These activities have now been more fully integrated as core activities, in the housing association sector, as greater emphasis is placed on sustainable communities. This suggests a subtle repositioning of organisations, shifting them further from the 'pure' landlord role.

The role of planning and commissioning in the health sector has shifted from local health authorities to Primary Care Groups/Trusts. Health authorities have been reformed and there are now only 28 strategic health authorities in England. There has been a very significant shift in the focus of the work of GPs that requires more local needs assessment and greater accountability to users. The new organisational landscape requires stronger partnerships between GPs and other professionals and agencies outside the health sector. It is still relatively early days for the new regime and some are still finding their feet. However, the changes have considerable potential to enable local housing circumstances and their implications for health and social care to be better understood (Harrison and Heywood, 2000). Resources could then be directed towards

innovative and flexible services, from a variety of providers, which allow people to remain in their own homes with appropriate support. Guidance on implementation of the single assessment process introduced in the NSF emphasises the point that housing can make an enormous contribution in terms of promoting independence and wellbeing (DoH, 2002), while the arrival of *Supporting People* in 2003 has offered further potential for meeting needs flexibly.

Financial frameworks

Underpinning local organisations are financial frameworks which are, in whole or in part, in a state of transition. Two of the most relevant are changes to housing benefit and rent policy. At one level, the government is currently running pathfinders to evaluate change to housing benefit, and the indications are that its broad structure is going to undergo radical change at some point in the near future (DETR/DSS, 2000). However, in the area of financing 'support' major change has already occurred – housing benefit can no longer be used for this purpose. The government has implemented a framework under which housing benefit will continue to meet the costs of the landlord function, while monies from *Supporting People* are financing government assistance with support costs. This represents a fundamental change. It has required landlords to be much more transparent about the costs of providing the landlord function and the costs of providing support. This in turn has the effect of exposing any implicit cross-subsidies. It can also render some types of support activity uneconomic. It may well be that such uneconomic activities are centrally concerned with crossing the housing and care divide. Equally significantly, by decoupling the financial support from the provision of accommodation, the advent of *Supporting People* can increase the possibilities of providing assistance with support costs outside the conventional settings of sheltered, supported or social housing more generally.

The other change that will affect attempts to provide innovative and integrated housing and care services is the government's rent restructuring framework (DETR/DSS, 2000, Chapter 10). The aim of restructuring is that social housing rents should reflect more closely property values and local earnings. While supported housing is treated differently under the regime, it has significant implications for some housing associations and has generated concern among supported or specialist housing providers. A move to capital value-related rents could well see downward pressure on rents on properties for which there is a limited market, either because they are in particularly deprived areas or because they are highly specialised. This in turn would lead to a reduction in rental income and a need to contain or cut costs. This could limit activities that are not essential to the basic landlord function. Conversely, landlords with older properties in high capital value areas may see rents rise and thereby offer greater headroom for diversifying into care-related activities. Equally important is the government's aim that housing association and local authority rents should converge at local level. Under rent restructuring housing association average annual rent rises are restricted in order to allow local authority rents to catch up. Again this will put downward pressure on housing association revenues and, in turn, on costs. There is concern among black and minority ethnic housing associations and other associations with large borrowing commitments that in the medium term rent restructuring will threaten their viability and independence.

5. Working in the current policy context

There has been considerable rethinking and refinement of policy over the last eight years. New initiatives seem to have emerged from a range of sources with great rapidity. Many carry substantial implications in terms of their effects on patterns of work and the way in which organisations relate to each other. Officers operating at local level can find themselves grappling with a complex web of requirements and imperatives. The context presents opportunities and threats and, while the overall thrust might be in the direction of greater strategy and co-ordination, extended periods of transition make the formulation of strategy and the forging of collaborative working arrangements a much more delicate operation. Much groundwork is still to be done to ensure that the statutory and the voluntary sectors and professionals with backgrounds in housing, health and social services are able to develop common understandings of what is required and to communicate effectively.

The themes we focus upon in the remainder of this guide – project management, joint working, user involvement, monitoring and evaluation, and the use of IT – are going to remain at the core of policy and practice for the foreseeable future, regardless of the precise direction in which national policy frameworks develop. We therefore hope that the guide will be useful to practitioners for some time to come.

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Means, R., Brenton, M., Harrison, L., and Heywood, F. (1997) *Making partnerships work in community care: A guide for practitioners in housing, health and social services*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

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The following websites offer information and/or links to further resources relating to research and policy in the fields of housing and care:

- <http://www.jrf.org.uk/> (The Joseph Rowntree Foundation)
- <http://www.housingcorp.gov.uk/> (The Housing Corporation)
- <http://www.anchor.org.uk/anchindex.htm> (Anchor Trust)
- <http://www.odpm.gov.uk/> (The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister)
- <http://www.csci.gov.uk/> (Commission for Social Care Inspection)
- <http://www.spkweb.org.uk/> (Supporting People)
- <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/> (The Audit Commission)
- <http://www.cih.org.uk> (Chartered Institute of Housing)

Module 1: Managing projects

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Executive Summary

- Activities in the statutory and voluntary sector seem increasingly to take place on a project basis. Services are 'on trial' and must demonstrate they can deliver before there is any thought of longer term funding. Managing projects is by no means straightforward and requires a different combination of skills to more conventional management.
- All sorts of activities can be thought of as 'projects', even if they are not formally labelled as such. Employing someone who is a specialist 'project manager' may not be necessary to complete a project, but whoever is in charge must possess the key skills of project management.
- Successful project management requires technical and organisational skills. A project manager needs to plan, budget, secure and allocate staff and other resources, and solve problems. In addition, the project manager is responsible for communication between the project and its environment. This environment encompasses all the relevant stakeholders, such as senior management, the client, partner agencies, local residents and the media.
- Projects typically have a lifecycle, passing through phases such as: conception and start up; definition; planning; organisation; execution and close. During the execution phase monitoring project activity is extremely important and evaluation will play a role both during execution and at the close of a project.
- Success in project working is enhanced by careful specification of objectives and detailed planning for how they are to be met.
- When planning a project think about how progress is to be monitored and controlled. Many projects drift because they lack adequate monitoring and control mechanisms.
- Setting project milestones, having a clear understanding of the critical path for the project and the dependency relationships between project tasks are important to ensuring progress.
- Staffing is central to the successful completion of any project. The place to start in considering this issue is with the skills that the project requires, rather than with who is currently available. There are several staffing options. It is possible to allocate work to existing staff; recruit one or more new member of staff; second people to the project; or bring in a consultant. Many projects operate a strategy combining these options. In some instances it is necessary to start with one option and switch to another – because demand is uncertain, for example – but changing approach can be a sign of poor planning.
- Many projects are pressured to change or add to their objectives. This type of 'scope creep' is one of the biggest factors endangering the chances of bringing a project to completion on time and budget.
- Risk management is a key part of the project manager's role. Analysing and anticipating risks and having appropriate strategies available to deal with them can make a vital contribution to ensuring that the project keeps to time.
- Project management does not need to be highly formalised. For small projects a relatively simple project action plan can be sufficient. However, as projects increase in size and complexity a more formal approach to project management can be valuable.

1. Thinking about managing projects

More and more activities in the statutory and voluntary sector seem to take place on a project basis. Pots of money become available from central government or its representatives – such as the Housing Corporation – for funding pilot schemes. Or local funders, with one eye on the need to demonstrate Best Value, are only willing to commit resources to new ideas or innovative services for short periods of time. Organisations and services are ‘on trial’ and must demonstrate that they can deliver before there can be any thought of mainstreaming or longer term funding.

For those working on new ideas or developing and implementing pilot schemes it is vital to retain a clear grip upon the process and a clear focus on the need to deliver. Managing projects is by no means straightforward. There is a lot written under the label of ‘project management’ that is aimed at helping with the task. The existence of this literature suggests that managing projects is somehow different from other types of management. It suggests that project management requires a different combination of skills.

Much of the writing on project management proposes the use of complex and highly formalised processes for keeping track of a project. These can be vital for successful management of large projects. Not all of them are necessary or appropriate for smaller projects. In this module our aim is to introduce some of the issues involved in managing projects and give a flavour of some of the ideas and techniques that have been proposed to assist project managers. Before we think about what ‘project management’ might involve, we need to start with a more basic question:

What is a project?

There have been many attempts to identify exactly what ‘a project’ is. Many writers think of a project as a set of activities that can be distinguished from the day-to-day activities of an organisation: something out of the ordinary. However, in housing and care, as in several other fields, there are organisations that exist, or are set up, simply to carry out projects, so this distinction does not apply.

It is more helpful to think of a project in terms of its characteristics. The key characteristics of a project usually include that it:

- **has specific objectives that can be clearly identified;**
- **is time limited and has a clear schedule against which to deliver on its objectives;**
- **requires resources and is budgeted separately from other activities of an organisation;**
- **requires people to apply effort to achieve its objectives;**
- **is a set of linked activities, all of which contribute towards achieving the overall objectives;**
- **is often complex because it involves drawing together people with different skills, from different departments or organisations;**

- **involves risk throughout the process;**
- **relies on people working flexibly to accommodate change and cope with risk;**
- **does not fit neatly with existing lines of accountability and structures of management.**

This list suggests that something does not have to be labelled formally as 'a project' for it to have the characteristics of a project. 'A project' can sometimes sound like it needs to be something rather grand or ambitious, but the idea can usefully be applied to all sorts of activities large and small. Any activity that shares characteristics on the list – even if not all of them – can be managed using a project management approach.

For a project to deliver on its objectives within the timescale that it has been allotted requires careful planning and management. It does not necessarily require employing someone who is a specialist 'project manager' but whoever is in charge of a project must possess the key skills of project management.

What is project management?

Successful project management requires both technical and organisational skills. At a technical level the project manager needs to be able to plan, budget, secure and allocate staff and other resources, solve problems, and control the project's activities. To deliver at this technical level the project manager needs to exercise organisational and interpersonal skills. For complex projects it is unlikely that the project manager will have expertise in all relevant areas, therefore it is vital that the project manager can act as a facilitator – bringing together those who have the appropriate skills and providing them with the flexibility and the resources to deliver. The project manager has to fashion a project team from a set of disparate individuals who may not have worked together, or even known each other, before. Where a project brings together people from different backgrounds there is a danger that this leads to conflict over the best way to take the project forward. The project manager has the responsibility of reconciling these competing views and establishing an environment in which people can contribute positively in order to facilitate the achievement of the project's objectives.

In addition to the work focused on by the project team, the project manager is responsible for managing communications between the project and its environment. This environment will include all the relevant stakeholders such as senior management, the client for the project, partner agencies, and other interested parties such as local residents and the media. It falls to the project manager to try to balance the needs and demands of senior management, clients, the project team, and others within and outside the organisation. It is the project manager's responsibility to keep key stakeholders informed of progress or lack of it. Alerting appropriate stakeholders as soon as possible to problems, potential delays and options for dealing with them is a key element in maintaining trust and positive relations between the project and its sponsors.

As a project progresses senior managers and/or the client have a tendency to suggest changes or additions to the project objectives. Allowing such changes or additions is

known as 'scope creep' and is one of the biggest hazards in managing projects. It is the project manager's task to make those who propose changes aware of the implications of these changes in terms of costs or timetable. Negotiating a route forward in the face of these proposals for change that is acceptable to all stakeholders can be one of the project manager's most delicate tasks.

Identifying a project manager

In many instances the person appointed to be a project manager is the person who has the most free time when the project is being set up or who can most easily be spared from what they are currently doing. It probably does not need saying that this is not the best basis for selecting a project manager.

There are many desirable characteristics for a project manager, many of which can be derived from an analysis of the characteristics of a project. An important characteristic of a project manager is that they don't just work hard, but also have the drive to finish what they have started. If a project is not to drift then putting someone in charge who is committed to getting things done on time is vital. They also need flexibility and the ability to innovate in order to cope with the issues that inevitably arise during the life of a project.

The project manager needs to be credible in the eyes of the various project stakeholders. Crudely put, they have to feel that the project is in a safe pair of hands. However, some project managers lack formal authority within their organisation – they rarely occupy a senior position – and this means that they have to rely upon negotiation and persuasion to advance the project. So interpersonal skills are vital. Similarly, sensitivity to read the situation both inside and outside the project team, to defuse tensions or manage conflict is a key skill. Finally, the project manager needs to lead – to communicate the direction in which the project should be heading and to motivate those working on the project to apply their efforts in that direction.

Too often the people who find themselves in charge of projects lack some or all of these skills. This can slow the progress of the project while the manager learns some of the required skills. In other cases it means that some areas of work get ignored and only part of the project is fully developed. In the worst cases it means that the project makes little headway because the project manager is not able to work positively with either the project team or those in the wider environment. Make sure that if someone is coming to project management without the necessary skills their training needs are addressed as a priority.

The project manager's role is fundamental to the success of project working. Before moving on to consider the nature of projects in more detail it is a good idea to pause and think further about the project manager. Exercise 1.1 is designed in part to help you do so.



Exercise 1.1

Look back at the characteristics of a project set out above. Think back to the activities you have been involved in over the last two or three years: how many of them had the characteristics of a project? How many of those activities did you, or others involved, actually describe or label as 'projects' at the time?

How many activities were you involved in during that time period that were labelled 'projects' by you or your organisation? How many of those 'projects' had most of the characteristics in our list?

Select one project that you have been involved in or are familiar with. Would you say that the project was a success? Why? Now think about the role of the project manager. What would you say were the strengths of the manager of the project? And what would you say were the project manager's weaknesses?

Compile a list of all the skills – both technical and organisational – that you would like the 'ideal' project manager to have.

Notes

2. A project lifecycle

In the real world projects tend to be messy affairs. Yet, it is possible to identify the stages that a project will typically pass through. Precisely at what stage different activities occur differs, particularly for the early stages of the project lifecycle.

In Box 1.1 we present one view of a typical project lifecycle. It illustrates that there are several developmental stages that should occur before anything happens on the ground – before we reach the execution stage. It also indicates that monitoring and evaluation play an important role in the execution of a project and in bringing a project to a conclusion. The relationship between monitoring and evaluation and execution and project closure is more complex than is portrayed in Box 1.1: monitoring is a recurrent activity during the execution stage, as is evaluation of the project's progress. The distinctions between some of the stages are conceptually clear but in practice may tend to blur together. Conception and definition may tend to merge into each other, while the planning and organisation stages tend to be heavily intertwined, as we discuss further below.

The rest of this module takes this version of the project lifecycle as its basis and considers each of the stages in turn.

3. Conception and start up

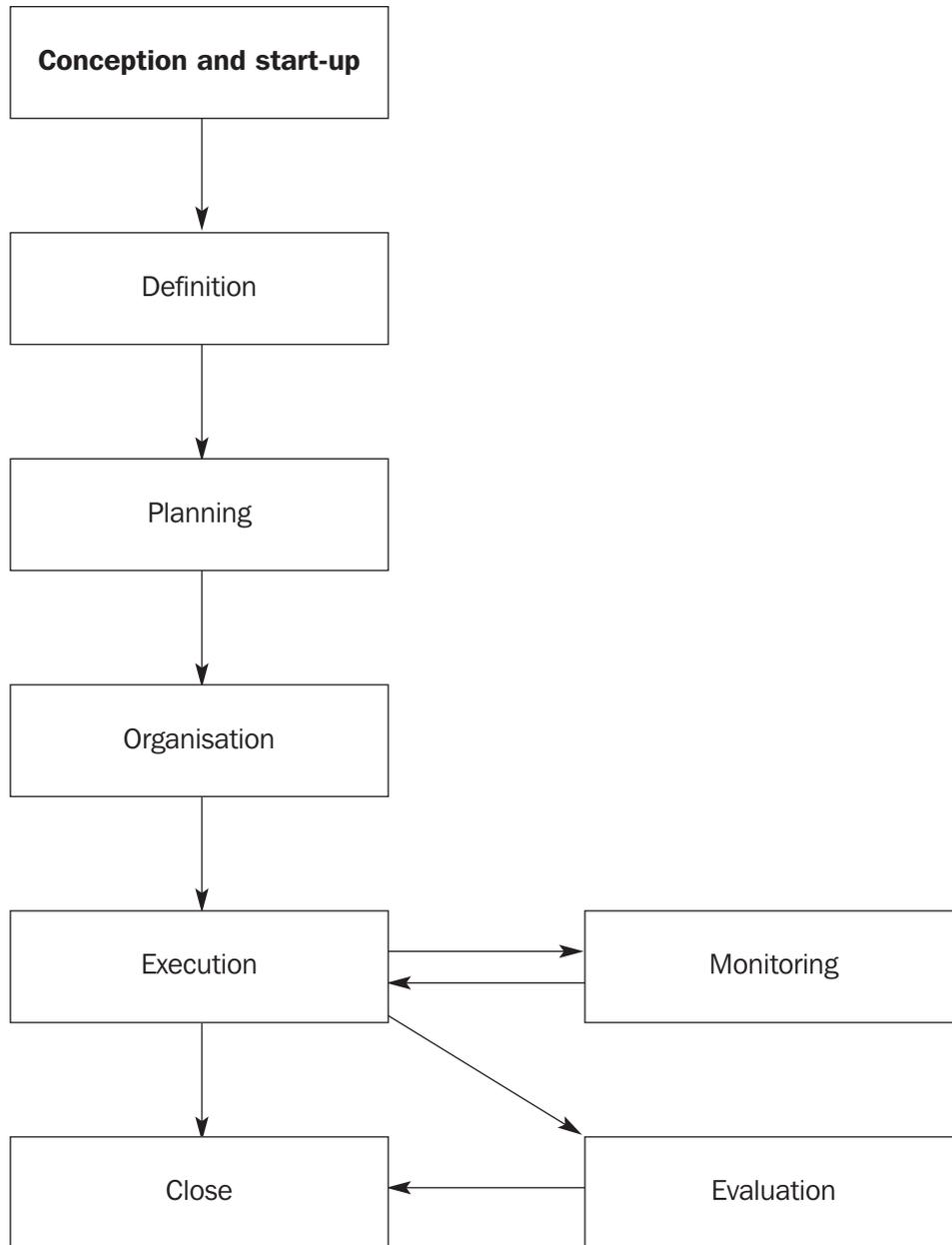
Where does the idea for a new project come from? It can come from one of a multitude of sources including:

- **problems with current services;**
- **identifying gaps in service provision;**
- **consultation with users or user feedback;**
- **changing requirements on the part of client organisations;**
- **new funding opportunities becoming available;**
- **individual or collective creativity and 'blue skies' thinking;**
- **brainstorming sessions.**

Only occasionally will the idea for a feasible project emerge fully formed at the outset. More common is the desire to 'do something' about a particular issue. The first stage is therefore the decision to start the process of addressing the issue using project working. Once this decision has been taken it is a question of giving shape to the task through a process of project definition.

It is at this early stage that decisions are typically taken regarding the appointment of a project manager. The project also needs a sponsor – someone who is ultimately accountable for its performance – and a champion – someone at senior level willing to argue on behalf of the project. The sponsor and the champion may or may not be the same person.

Box 1.1: A typical project lifecycle



Management structures

Beyond the key individuals, structures for managing the project need to be established. The project is likely to need a steering group to whom the project manager is accountable. Depending on the nature and scale of the project this group may in fact be the project manager's line manager or, at the other extreme, it may be a strategic body comprising relatively senior representatives of all the key stakeholders. How users or their representatives fit into these structures needs careful consideration.

In setting up management structures it is important to strike a balance. There needs to be sufficient structure to ensure that the project is accountable and to ensure that when issues arise those involved have sufficient seniority to make decisions, but there should not be so many tiers or committees that the project becomes stifled. There is a tendency for some projects to be 'under' managed, with project managers and workers having limited support in the broader organisation, unclear reporting mechanisms and vague lines of accountability. This is a particular danger if the project is a joint endeavour and hence no single partner organisation has a strong sense of ownership. On the other hand, some projects are 'over' managed: line managers or the project sponsor engage in micromanagement of project activities, which represents a wasteful duplication of effort, stifles the project's flexibility and sends the signal that the project manager is not seen as a 'safe pair of hands'.

At this start up stage a 'core' team needs to be identified, drawing together individuals – possibly from more than one organisation – who have the range of skills necessary to begin to explore the options.

Getting started

This core team is involved in one or more start up meetings with the responsibility for undertaking initial scoping work and feasibility studies. The questions to address are:

- **Is it clear what is required and what benefits the project should deliver?**
- **What are the alternatives available to deliver these benefits?**
- **What are the strengths and weaknesses of the available alternatives?**
- **Which of these alternatives are feasible?**
- **Which option is to be favoured and taken on to the next stage of project development?**

When thinking about the feasibility of alternatives not only do financial, time and quality constraints need to be taken into account, it may be appropriate to consider a broader range of Social, Technological, Ecological, Economic and Political (STEEP) factors (as discussed by Field and Keller, 1998). For example, it might be feasible within current financial, time and quality constraints for your organisation to develop a service offering innovative packages of care to older people but if the policy driving local commissioning is not flexible enough to accommodate this type of originality then there may be little point pursuing this option.

The output of this start up activity is typically a series of options or scenarios that can be presented to service users or partner organisations for consultation on the preferred option.

Once an option has been selected the core team can draw up a project brief. This can set out, among other things, the rationale for the project, the expected benefits of the project, the project budget (if it has been determined), and current thinking on timescales – when does the project need to deliver by? The project process can now move to the next stage.

4. Definition

It is essential that before work on the preferred option begins a clear definition of the project objectives is agreed. It is important to be clear from the outset what the project is attempting to achieve. It is equally important to decide what the project is not attempting to do. Not only should this be decided, it should be documented for future reference.

The process of agreeing project objectives needs to encompass all the important stakeholders. You want to avoid a key individual or organisation turning up late in the process demanding that things be changed because they were never consulted at the start.

A more detailed project brief can be drawn up at this stage, setting out the key information that will drive the project process from this point on. A range of information can be included, but at a minimum it should spell out:

- **Project title**
- **Overall objective**
- **Identity of the project manager**
- **Start date**
- **Required end date**
- **Project deliverables**
- **Project skills required**
- **Project costs (if known)**
- **Risk management.**

While the overall objective can be a relatively brief statement of the desired results of the project, the statement of project deliverables needs to be much more focused. The deliverables are outputs of the project that can be measured. Assessing whether these outputs have been achieved is a key element of the process of evaluating the project's performance. The simplest way to ensure that you have appropriately specified deliverables is to apply the SMART test: make sure that outputs are **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**ealistic and **T**imebound. Module 4 contains more discussion on defining outputs.

At this stage the project team should be thinking in terms of the skills required to deliver the project. The next step is to move on to thinking about whether those skills are available among the existing staff or whether it will be necessary to bring expertise in from outside.

Risk management

The final item in the project brief is risk management. All projects face risks throughout their lifecycle. If a risk becomes a reality then it is an issue that will need to be dealt with. Analysis of the risks that may affect your ability to deliver project outputs should start at this early stage in the process. Risk management continues throughout the life of a project.

The broad principle is to assess the different types of risk that may affect the project and decide how each should be managed. A very simple distinction can be made between the impact that a particular risk could have on your project and the probability of it occurring. This would give the four-way classification of risk shown in Table 1.1.

Risks in cell 4 – low impact and low probability – may be largely ignored. More generally, the strategies available to manage risk include:

- **avoiding the risk – which may mean not starting the project, if the risk is in cell 1 and it affects a central element;**
- **reducing the risk – if there are cost effective ways of lowering either the impact or the probability;**
- **transferring the risk – through insurance to another party;**
- **making contingency plans – identifying alternative options if an issue should present itself;**
- **accepting the risk – making no specific plans but simply monitoring the situation.**

Table 1.1: Classifying project risks

		Probability	
		High	Low
Impact	High	1	2
	Low	3	4

One example of a risk faced by many projects is that the staff allocated to a project lack relevant experience. This could have a high impact upon the project’s ability to deliver and, in many housing and care environments, it is also quite a high probability risk. Strategies to reduce the probability of this risk might involve training staff, or switching to the use of outside consultants or experienced subcontractors. Alternatively reducing the impact of this risk might involve increasing the length of the project lifecycle in order to allow for learning on the part of staff.

Many projects operate without any systematic analysis of the risks they face. If risks are considered then the dominant strategy is risk acceptance. Yet if risk is not actively managed from the start then the project is riskier than it might otherwise be and the project manager may spend more time in dealing with issues once they arise – trying to get the project back on track. Sometimes you can do nothing to avoid the issues that emerge during a project, but anticipating risks and acting to ensure that problems are avoided will increase the chances of delivering the project to time.

5. Planning and organisation

Having arrived at a clear statement of project objectives and deliverables project development can move on to the more detailed planning of the project. While we distinguished planning and organisation in Box 1.1, in reality, planning, budgeting and organisation of the project are closely entwined. Arriving at an acceptable project plan – encompassing what is to be done, when and how, and how much it is likely to cost – is often an iterative process.

Inadequate planning at the start of a project is a major reason that projects fail to achieve their objectives within time and budget. There is a range of computer software products available to assist in project planning. While these products can make a valuable contribution to making the process easier, for many smaller or less complex projects the process can be satisfactorily handled with the aid of a word processor or even a paper-based system.

The first, and most important, element of the planning process is to spend time drawing up a project action plan. The basic aim of the project action plan is to itemise all the tasks that need to be performed in order for the overall project to be completed.

In addition to itemising all the tasks – which in itself can be a significant job requiring considerable thought – the project action plan can include other information relating to each task. Most importantly, it should incorporate an estimate of the duration of each task, an estimate of the resources required to complete the task, and who is to be assigned the task (or the responsibility for seeing that the task gets completed). It can also provide initial information regarding the order in which tasks should be undertaken. For example, a task may require the outputs from one or more other tasks before it can begin – which begins to place some logical order on the tasks in the project action plan.

For many projects a more manageable action plan can be constructed using more than one level. An overall action plan identifies the key actions that need to be undertaken to achieve the project objectives. There is then a series of more detailed action plans that take each key action in turn and break it down into the tasks that will need to be performed in order to execute that action. Each of these tasks may in themselves require breaking down another level into components.

An extract from a simple action plan for the ceremonial opening of a new very sheltered housing scheme is presented in Box 1.2.

Box 1.2: Example project action plan**Action plan for the ceremonial opening of a new very sheltered housing scheme**

Task no.	Task	Predecessor task(s)	Duration (days)	Est. cost (£)	Staff resources	Responsible for completion
1	Begin preparations for opening		0	–	–	PM
2	Select date	1	0.5	–	Sec, PM	PM
3	Event dignitaries	2				
3.1	Identify and secure dignitary to open scheme		10		PM, CEO	CEO
3.2	Identify organisation's master of ceremonies		10	–	PM, CEO	PM
3.3	Identify distinguished guests		10		PM, CEO	PM
4	Invitations					
4.1	Compile address list	3	3		Sec	Sec
4.2	Approve design and printing	3, 4.1	5	500	Sec	PM
4.3	Mail out invitations	4.2	1	30	Sec	Sec
4.4	Collate responses	4.3	30		Sec	Sec
5	Event food					
5.1	Identify event caterers		2		Sec	Sec
5.2	Obtain sample menus/costs	5.1	1		Sec	Sec
5.3	Select caterer and menu option	5.2	1		PM	PM
6	Notify local media of event	2, 3.1, 3.2	1		Sec	Sec
	Etc.					

Notes: PM – Project Manager; Sec – Secretary; CEO – Chief Executive Officer

A carefully constructed project action plan should become a key work of reference for the project.

A project action plan can be more detailed than the example in Box 1.2 in terms of the volume of staff and other resources required for each task. This would then provide a more direct link to the compilation of a project budget.

Exercise 1.2 allows you to explore this topic further by drawing up your own project action plan.

Staffing

One component of a project plan is identifying the resources that will be required for the successful completion of the project. While there are important questions regarding access to suitable accommodation or equipment that need addressing, staffing the project is the core of this issue.



Exercise 1.2

Either think of a project that you have worked on in the past, but which did not use an action plan, or think of a project that you could be working on in future.

Draw up a project action plan for this project. For each task, the action plan should identify:

- The task number
- Task name
- Task duration
- Predecessor task(s)
- Resources required for the task (staff and other resources)
- The person responsible for task completion.

Notes

Determining who is to carry out the work associated with the project can be the most complex element of project planning because the range of options is often great. Making the wrong decision can perhaps have the most significant impact upon the success of the project.

The most fundamental decisions are whether to:

- **Assimilate work into the workloads of existing staff**
- **Recruit one or more new member of staff**
- **Second people from within or outside the organisation**
- **Bring in a consultant.**

The issues attached to each option differ. Many projects operate a strategy combining them. While it is possible to start with one option and switch to another, in most instances this is less than ideal. For example, projects often start by trying to add the work to the workloads of existing staff, only to recognise eventually that additional staff are needed to cope with the volume of work. In this case recruitment is likely to be a belated response to the project becoming delayed. Yet, if a project is facing a situation in which the demand for a new service is unknown then it might be a conscious strategy to leave recruitment until it is clear that there is enough work to support additional staff.

The place to start in considering this issue is with the skills that the project requires. These should be identified in the project brief. From the project action plan it should be possible to estimate the volume of input required for each different skill and whether each is required only at particular points in the project lifecycle or throughout. This type of analysis will start to indicate whether recruitment is an option: it can most sensibly be considered in relation to skills needed in significant volume throughout the project. The analysis could also indicate whether it is realistic to plan to recruit a single individual with all the necessary skills. The project may require a combination of skills that would be beyond that which can reasonably be expected from a single individual.

Assimilating work into existing workloads

If you decide that it is appropriate to assimilate the new project work into current workloads then you need to consider the impact of giving that work to existing staff. Will the staff member be required to carry out the work on top of their existing workload or will they give up part of their current work to someone else? If it is for short term, specialist or infrequent inputs into the project then it may well be possible for existing staff to take on the work required.

Alternatively, rather than expecting the new work to be borne by a single member of staff, could it be shared by several members of the existing team without them having to give up any work? The danger with this strategy is that no one really 'owns' the project and it can end up taking a backseat to other more substantial concerns, and hence the project timetable slips.

Recruiting or seconding the right person

If you decide that the work cannot successfully be added to current workloads then you need to consider whether you recruit a new member of staff or second someone to cover the work. When thinking about secondment, how widely should you look for an appropriate person? One sure way to slow a project is to second internally but expect

the member of staff to continue with some or all of their old job because no one is available to cover their absence.

The recruitment and secondment options both need thinking through. For example, short term project work may not be a very attractive or secure employment opportunity, especially at times of potential redundancies. On the other hand, the opportunity to do the work as a secondment might be seen as an attractive training opportunity.

Bring in a consultant

Consultants can be an expensive option, but they can represent a way of accessing specialist skills quickly and for short periods of time. If, for example, a project needs detailed policy development work to get things up and running or requires specialist inputs to determine IT needs then it may be worth investing some money in specialist services. The alternative can be to muddle through or 'learn by doing'. While this may well appear to be cheaper it may result in the project needing a significantly longer timescale – or in significant delays if this risk had not been recognised at the outset. It may be worth buying in project management skills to assist in getting the whole process up and running. If this route is chosen then it is important to ensure that project management consultants have sufficient knowledge of the policy and organisational context to work effectively.

A note of caution

Experience suggests that managers often underestimate the time required to recruit a new member to the project team. Advertising and selection often take longer than anticipated. Make sure that you allow sufficient time for the recruitment process and ensure that you have budgeted enough funds to advertise the post in appropriate media. Problems can be compounded when organisations are overly optimistic about the 'pool' of potential applicants willing to apply for a fixed term post. This is an example of the need for risk management: think ahead and develop a strategy that covers the possibility of re-advertising or secondment.

Organising the project

The project action plan itself can form the basis of thinking about how the project is to be organised. However, it is valuable to supplement the action plan with two further ideas:

- **Milestones**
- **The critical path.**

Project *milestones* are simply key events. They are usually major events such as the completion of one phase of work or the production of an interim report. Milestones can be used as the basis upon which a framework for monitoring the progress of a project can be structured. For some projects milestones are also used as the basis for things like budgeting and invoicing.

The *critical path* is the sequence of tasks that determines the minimum length of time a project can take. Some tasks required for a project lie on the critical path and some do not. A project manager needs a good understanding of the critical path because it is tasks on the critical path that need to be kept on track more than any others if the project is not to overrun.

To take a simple example: a project is made up of the following four tasks, of different durations:

- Task A (takes 10 days)
- Task B (takes 3 days, requires the output of Task A)
- Task C (takes 4 days)
- Task D (takes 5 days, requires the output of Tasks A and C).

This project embodies *dependency* relationships: some tasks depend on the completion of others before they can start. In this case, Tasks B and D could not start on day one of the project because they both require Task A to have been finished first. Similarly, while Task C does not depend on any other task before it can begin, it needs to be finished before Task D can start. A simple representation of this project might look like Table 1.2. A solid black line indicates the duration of a task. Task A is shown as starting on day one of the project and continuing until day ten. At that point both Task B and D begin. Tasks B and C are shown with dotted lines following their solid black lines. This indicates that there is some *float* associated with both of these tasks. This means that while they are scheduled to take three and four days respectively, there is some room for manoeuvre: they can either start a little later than scheduled or take a little longer without it affecting the overall project timetable. If Task C is started on day one, as shown, then there is a float of six days because we know that it has to be finished by day ten in order to allow Task D to start on time. This table is constructed on the principle of the *earliest start date* for each task: all tasks start at the earliest opportunity, given the dependency relationships. If you looked at the project in terms of the *latest start date* then Task B would need to start by day 13 and Task D by day seven in order to ensure that the project finished by day 15.

Tasks A and D have no *float* attached to them. They must be completed in the allotted time for the project overall to finish in 15 days. There is no way for the project to finish sooner than this. These two tasks lie on the *critical path*. To say that project managers need a good understanding of the critical path is to say that they need to understand the notion of dependency and have a good grasp of scheduling project tasks so that they are completed in sufficient time to keep the project on the critical path.

Table 1.2: Organising a project

Tasks	Project timescale (Days)														
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
A	—————														
B											—————			
C	—————													
D											—————				

Table 1.2 is a version of what is known in the project management textbooks as a Gantt chart. We have added to our table the marker * to signal that the completion of Task A – on day ten – would be a suitable project milestone at which to review progress, as it is the key intermediate event of the project. You could also think of the completion of Tasks B and D by day 15 as the most significant milestone of all – the completion of the project on time.

Exercise 1.3 allows you to investigate how you could present project data in this format.

There are various other tools of this type that can be used to assist project managers to plan project tasks and to monitor how the execution of the project is progressing compared to the plans. Most are elaborations upon the project action plan that allow you to look at the action plan from different angles. For example, it is useful for the project manager to diagnose whether particular members of staff are overcommitted at particular points in time. If the initial project plan commits a member of staff to spending 150 per cent of their time on project tasks during one particular week then this suggests the rescheduling of project tasks or redeployment of resources should take place so that this potential overload is avoided before the project starts. More generally, analyses that combine monitoring of the progress of tasks with the progress of project spending and resource availability allow the project manager to decide whether there is a need to restrain spending or to reallocate or reschedule resources in order to ensure that the project remains on schedule.

One criticism of Gantt charts like the one in Table 1.2 is that, except for the very simplest of projects, they do not show the dependencies between tasks very clearly. Other techniques – such as PERT charts or network diagrams – can be useful in clarifying and illustrating more complex dependencies.

While these more elaborate analyses are possible by hand, they can be time consuming. If they are likely to be helpful or necessary for a particular project then it is typically easier to work with project management software. Most such software works by first entering a version of the project action plan and then allowing the data to be presented in different ways to assist the project manager in understanding more fully the way the project tasks develop and link together over time. The software subsequently allows the comparison of plans with data on actual progress.

One feature of this sort of program is that it relies on a heavily quantified approach to the use of resources, including staff time. Not all statutory or voluntary sector organisations are used to thinking of workloads in terms of specified numbers of days or hours spent on particular tasks. Often work is undertaken more flexibly. Yet, the software typically expects much of the information to be presented in a quantified manner and some of its data presentation and analysis features require it. It is as well to be aware that this type of formalised project management can carry with it broader implications for the way the organisation operates. It may not necessarily mesh well with existing ways of doing things.

6. Execution

Once a project enters the execution phase project management is about ensuring that sufficient resources are available at the right time, allocated appropriately and directed at the right objectives. Crucially this phase involves dealing with issues that arise and threaten the progress of the project. A key task is managing project staff, which we consider next.

Managing project workers

Project workers are clearly central to executing a project successfully. In some instances staff working on projects, which by their nature are time limited, require different managerial arrangements to permanent staff members.

Induction

The importance of an induction period should not be underestimated. Unfortunately it is often overlooked because of the tight timescales involved in project work. This is a critical phase in the life of a project: staff will work more effectively if they are clear regarding the project's objectives and know how the project fits into the local policy system and the organisation's broader objectives. Experience suggests that managers should build in sufficient support in these early stages to ensure that the project worker or team is able to 'hit the ground running'. It is always easier to reduce managerial input as the project gets going, but if the project manager does not support project workers in the early stages then it can significantly undermine initial progress and also cause resentment if the manager decides to have more input at a later stage.

On-going management

Another tension that can emerge is between project staff and mainstream staff. It relates to the management of unequal workloads and degrees of support. This can often be exacerbated when staff work in the same office, but are funded from different pots of money. The management of staff working on projects can involve quite intensive input to ensure that project milestones are met. It can sometimes be the case that projects with the shortest timeframe require comparatively more managerial support than core activities. This needs to be handled sensitively to ensure that core staff do not begin to resent the 'special treatment' given to project staff.

Pitching it right

Projects sometimes suffer because they receive limited on-going management support. This inevitably has a significant impact on both the operational and strategic functioning of the project. For example, when staff do not have a clear understanding of what the project is trying to achieve, or when they do not receive sufficient guidance on how to set up and manage monitoring systems, they can struggle to progress and deliver the outcomes needed. Such problems can be exacerbated when the management of project staff is allocated to managers for whom the project is only a small and temporary part of their overall workload. On the other hand, micromanagement of a project can be equally counterproductive. Hence, a project manager needs to be sensitive in diagnosing the level of managerial input that will ensure that project staff can realise their full potential.



Exercise 1.3

Using the project action plan that you created in Exercise 1.2, create a table for the project like that presented in Table 1.2. Use the earliest start date approach for scheduling tasks. Mark the float associated with each task on the table.

Identify the tasks that lie on the critical path and the minimum duration of the project.

Where would you suggest placing project milestones?

Notes

Monitoring project activity

Some books on project management speak of a plan-monitor-control cycle. This is important because it makes the clear link between project planning and monitoring-control during the execution phase. A project manager's monitoring and control activities during the execution phase should flow directly from the planning stage. Monitoring and control activities are the primary mechanism for avoiding 'project drift' – failure to adhere to planned timescales as a result of inattention.

Monitoring is primarily about collecting data, while control refers to taking corrective action on the basis of the data to ensure that the project remains operating according to plan. Monitoring should focus on key milestones and activities identified as important for achieving the project's objectives and control efforts should be directed at ensuring that the project is able to stay on track.

It is best to think about and design the systems needed to facilitate the planning-monitoring-control cycle during the project planning stage. The key design questions are:

- **Which data are to be collected?**
- **How frequently are they to be collected?**
- **How are they to be analysed?**
- **How and to whom are they to be reported?**

For data to be valuable in project control they must be collected, analysed and reported in a timely fashion. It is of little value to design an extremely elaborate, comprehensive and labour-intensive monitoring system that analyses and reports on data that are six months old. Such data are of limited value in assisting a project manager in controlling project activities.

If monitoring data alert the project manager to a need to exert control over project activities then the type of actions that may be considered include:

- **bringing tasks forward to expedite the project;**
- **rescheduling tasks to ensure that the project remains on, or returns to, its critical path;**
- **slowing tasks down because they have considerable float over their completion date;**
- **redeploying resources from one task to another, or obtaining additional resources from elsewhere.**

While early consideration of monitoring-control is advisable, experience repeatedly demonstrates that the design and implementation of monitoring systems is neglected in the rush to 'get on with it'. This is a fundamental mistake. It means that the project manager's ability to exercise control over the progress of the project is curtailed. And it treats monitoring and 'getting on with it' as being in conflict. Yet, effective monitoring systems can ensure that project resources are deployed most productively, and hence that the project is 'getting on with it' more successfully. We recommend very strongly that early attention to monitoring can make an extremely valuable contribution to project success. We discuss these issues in more detail in Module 4.

7. Evaluating and closing a project

To evaluate a project is to assess its progress and performance relative to the project plan. Project evaluation can take place at the end of the project or it can take place at a number of points in the project lifecycle. Some projects build in review milestones and interim evaluations.

Interim evaluations can have at least two distinct purposes in the context of project working. Evaluation can be directed at control – assessing progress so far and determining how project working might be improved, either for this or subsequent projects – or it can be directed at decision-making – should this project be allowed to continue?

Against which criteria should the project be evaluated? A number of measures might be applied. There are various dimensions by which 'success' might be judged, including the project's:

- **Efficiency in meeting its schedule and budget**
- **Demonstrable delivery of the expected outcomes**
- **Rate of take up of services by referring agencies/customers**
- **Impact on consumers and their lives**
- **Future potential – has it established a firm base from which to build or demonstrated that there is a market for innovative services?**

While some of these dimensions of success are relatively easy to determine, others present considerably more difficulty and the project manager will require more ingenuity in gathering data upon which to determine whether the project can be judged a success. We discuss these issues further in Module 4.

Closing a project

Some projects close because they have reached the end of their planned existence. In such instances their activities may have been mainstreamed by the organisation, if they have been judged successful. Other projects may be brought to a close ahead of plan because they were felt not to be performing to expectations. In either case, closing a project is a process that should be managed, rather than simply allowing the project to unravel. At the very least there is a need to ensure that all documentation and financial transactions are complete, all personnel issues are taken care of, and that all project resources are handed back or handed on to successor organisations or departments. There may also be data protection or data security issues that need to be dealt with. Closing a project can be viewed as a project in its own right.

Projects fail for a range of reasons, but research has suggested that the most fundamental reasons for a project failing are:

- **a belated decision that the project was not required in the first place;**
- **that it received insufficient support from senior management;**
- **appointing the wrong project manager;**
- **poor planning.**

Support from senior management is vital in dealing with issues as they arise during the project lifecycle, particularly if the project needs to secure additional resources to keep it on track.

Whether a project is closing as a success or a failure it can be a good idea to write a final report on the project. This is not so much a formal evaluation as a reflection on the process. It can cover the way that the project was administered, the structures used to manage and operate the project, and the way in which the project team functioned. The report would look to identify strengths and weaknesses and to identify lessons learnt. The aim is to provide the organisation with a resource from which it can learn for the future.

8. Managing projects: hints and tips

- Project managers need a combination of organisational and technical skills. The right mix is not necessarily common. Many people are either technically gifted but unable to handle the important diplomatic aspects of the role or they are good at negotiation, liaison and organisational politics but are not so good at planning, monitoring and controlling the project itself.
- Appointing the person with space in their workload to manage a project is not a good strategy for successful project working. Appoint the person who has the skills to do the job and then make space in their workload so that they can complete it.
- Success in project working is enhanced by careful specification of objectives and detailed planning for how they are to be met.
- Most projects are subject to pressures to change or add to their objectives. This type of 'scope creep' is one of the biggest factors endangering the chances of bringing a project to completion on time and budget. Make sure that the implications of changes for timetabling or budgets are clear to those who are asking for them (often senior managers or other stakeholders) and that all agreed changes are documented.
- Risk management is a key part of the project manager's role. Analysing and anticipating risks and having appropriate strategies available to deal with them can make a vital contribution to ensuring that the project keeps to time.
- At the planning stage think about how project progress is to be monitored and controlled. Many projects drift because they have insufficient monitoring and control mechanisms in place.
- Project management does not need to be highly formalised. For small projects a relatively simple project action plan can be sufficient. However, as projects increase in size and complexity a more formal approach to project management can pay dividends.

9. References

Field, M. and Keller, L. (1998) *Project management*, London: Thomson Learning/Open University.

10. Where to go for more information

There is a lot written on project management. Many of the books use examples from manufacturing, construction or software engineering. These are the fields that have placed importance on formalised project management for many years. Although many housing and care projects are working on a smaller scale with a different type of objective, there is a lot of useful information to be extracted from these publications. There are also a number of publications setting out the project management methodology favoured in the public sector, which has more of a service orientation.

Some of the publications that you may find helpful include:

Brown, M. (2002) *Successful project management in a week*, 2nd edition, London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Kyle, M. (1998) *Making it happen: a non-technical guide to project management*, Toronto: Wiley.

Mantel, S., Meredith, J., Shafer, S., and Sutton, M. (2004) *Project management in practice*, 2nd edition, Chichester: Wiley.

Rosenau, M.D. (1998) *Successful project management: a step-by-step approach with practical examples*, 3rd edition, Chichester: Wiley.

PRINCE2 is the most commonly used project management method in the public and voluntary sector. The PRINCE project management method was first developed by the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency in 1989 as a UK government standard for IT project management. PRINCE® is a registered trademark of the Office of Government Commerce. More details can be found on paper in publications such as:

CCTA (1997) *PRINCE2: An Outline*, London: The Stationery Office.

Or on-line at:

- <http://www.ogc.gov.uk/prince/>
- <http://www.prince2.com/>

For those particularly interested in IT projects:

Wysocki, R. (2003) *Effective project management*, New York: Wiley.

The project management community has its own trade publications that can provide links to materials and publications. One such publication is:

- Project Manager Today: <http://www.pmtoday.co.uk/>

There is also a range of organisations providing services and training for project managers. Two examples are:

- Association for Project Management: <http://www.apm.org.uk/>
- Project Management Institute: <http://www.pmi.org/info/default.asp>

Module 2: Working across organisational boundaries

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Executive Summary

- Joint working is currently central to many areas of policy. Joint working is thought to provide 'joined up' services which better meet the needs of service users. It is also seen as representing more efficient use of public money.
- The first stage in joint working is choosing your partners. Mapping the local organisational landscape will allow you to identify potential partners. Partnership working succeeds when based on mutual respect and trust. It is easier to capitalise on existing relationships and work with organisations with which you are familiar than to initiate new partnerships. Developing new partnerships takes time and effort to build shared understandings. The process needs careful thought, from the initial approach to a potential partner onward. Partnerships across professional boundaries in particular can take considerable effort to build and maintain.
- When launching a partnership it is important to involve partners from the start. The partnership needs clear aims and objectives that allow all the partners to pursue their own organisational goals through the partnership. This will increase the relevance of the partnership to the partner organisations and therefore enhance their commitment to it. Be realistic in setting aims and objectives: overambition can lead to disillusionment.
- Management of a project or service developed in partnership can be complicated, as partners make varied contributions. Staff may be formally linked to both the project and a partner organisation. Ensure that lines of accountability are clear. Staff need to know to whom they are managerially accountable and how they will be held to account.
- Successful partnership working requires strategic commitment from all the partners and most new services require a champion to advocate on their behalf.
- Evaluation can be vital to successful joint working and needs to be built into partnership working from the outset. Evaluation allows success to be demonstrated, and keeps partners fully informed and involved. Evaluating difficulties and keeping partners informed of problems can also assist keeping partners on board as they see that problems are being taken seriously and addressed. Both processes and outcomes should be evaluated.
- Maintaining successful partnership working requires clear and consistent communication between partners and with a broader array of stakeholders. Thought needs to be given to the best means by which to communicate with different groups. Formal and informal communication should be tailored to the needs of each audience, but the message should be consistent across audiences.
- Reviewing aims and objectives regularly will assist in maintaining positive partnership working, as will evaluating and modifying processes as the service develops.
- Joint working requires the creation of common ground between staff. Effective working may require that the professional stereotypes held by some staff be challenged and replaced by mutual understanding and respect. This may be an area requiring repeated attention as new issues arise or as staff change.

1. Why work jointly?

Joint working is a central feature of the present government's approach in many areas of policy. It is a practical consequence of the emphasis on what has come to be known as 'joined up' thinking. Yet, the recognition of the need for joint working and partnership – both between departments of a single organisation and between organisations – is not new. It has been part of the policy rhetoric in the field of community care since the 1970s. Nonetheless, the theme has become even more high profile since the election of the Labour government in 1997.

In the field of community care the discussion document *Partnership in Action* (DoH, 1998) captured the philosophy behind the drive to joint working. It identified the changes needed to support its implementation. The 1999 Health Act introduced a number of 'flexibilities' designed to assist joint working: the pooling of budgets, lead commissioning, and better integration in the provision of health and social care through a focus on a single provider. The document *Building Capacity and Partnership in Care* (DoH, 2001) offered a framework within which statutory and independent providers of health, social care and housing services can work together to ensure the maximum benefit from the relationship.

Joint working between different professional groups or between agencies from different sectors is thought to provide benefits including:

- **Services that better meet the needs of service users**

There is a growing realisation that many people have complex needs that require a multi-agency response rather than a single agency response. It is believed that by working in partnership agencies will be better able to address these complex needs. For example, an older homeless person who accesses an outreach service for rehousing may have social and health care needs as well. Getting these services to work together is intended to ensure that the needs of the older person are met more effectively.

- **More efficient use of public money**

It is argued that working collaboratively can lead to more efficient use of public funds. If agencies work together in a co-ordinated manner they can remove some of the overlaps and fill in some of the gaps in service provision that often exist. Better co-ordination between agencies will, it is believed, lead to a more streamlined or 'connected' service being provided.

Although joint working can lead to improvements in service provision it is an inherently difficult task. There are a number of strategies that can greatly improve the chances of success. This module examines some of the key issues that need to be reviewed, understood and addressed by those wishing to get involved in working across boundaries and by those working to sustain and maintain joint working arrangements. It starts by looking briefly at the differing origins of joint working.

2. The origins of joint working

Research evidence suggests that joint working arrangements and partnerships develop in one of two ways. They tend to either be *organic* or *pragmatic*.

Organic partnerships develop as organisations come together to discuss problems and issues. They see that their own organisational aims and concerns can be more effectively addressed through joint working. In these instances the agenda will develop over time and leaders will emerge naturally, as will the aims and objectives of the partnership.

Pragmatic partnerships are possibly more frequent. They are assembled in response to a particular government initiative or an announcement of funding. In this instance relationships usually have to develop quickly. An organisation will need to identify potential partners, set aims and objectives, establish which agency will lead the venture, agree whether or not to delegate resources, and develop lines of accountability in a very short space of time.

The process leading to the formation of organic and pragmatic partnerships is different. But to stand a chance of success they both require that agencies have a genuine and mutual interest in working together.

Joint working arrangements can be established for all sorts of purposes and combining all sorts of organisations or departments. In order to make the discussion in this module clearer we will focus on the example of a partnership between independent organisations which aims to develop a service in response to an announcement of new funding. This provides a good illustration of many of the issues that anyone seeking to work jointly with others will have to face. The first step is finding partners.

3. Choosing your partners

Mapping the organisational landscape

Having decided that you wish to develop a new service that will require working in partnership with other agencies, the first step is to identify or map the agencies that may be potential partners.

The aim is to identify all the key statutory and non-statutory agencies that have:

- **an interest in this area of work; and**
- **may be willing to work with your agency.**

Start by asking yourself the following questions:

- **Which agencies currently work in this service area?**
- **Which agencies might a client contact about services like the one you are planning?**
- **Which agencies might refer clients to the new service?**
- **Which agencies might be interested in diversifying into this area of work?**
- **Which of these agencies have you worked with in the past?**
- **Which of these agencies have you never previously worked jointly with?**

Remember that at this stage you should be including all the relevant statutory and non-statutory agencies. As well as voluntary and statutory sector providers, the map can include organisations more closely associated with representing the interests of service users. Parts of the map can be drawn from memory or direct experience. Parts may require you to find out whether anyone in your organisation has experience of working with particular organisations.

Capitalising on existing relationships

It is usually easier to approach agencies that you already work with or have worked with in the past. Partnerships built on existing relationships seem to experience fewer problems. New cross-boundary relationships with familiar partners are easier to initiate and sustain.

Agencies who have previously worked together are more likely to have an understanding of each other's aims, objectives and ways of working. Consequently they have a realistic idea of what the partnership would involve and of what they can expect from partners. Having worked together in the past the agencies are also more likely to trust and respect each other's work, which is vitally important when developing a new service. Absence of confidence that other organisations will perform and lack of respect for their track record and expertise can completely undermine attempts to work jointly.

Developing new partners

In some instances existing partners are unwilling or unable to be involved in new ventures. You will then have to develop new partnerships. The research evidence suggests that joint working between organisations that have never previously worked together is always more difficult to initiate and sustain. Not only will you need to approach an agency that you don't have any previous experience of working with but you may also have to work against a very tight timescale. Lack of time makes the whole process of 'getting to know' another agency very difficult, just when it is undoubtedly most important.

Without a prior history of working together you will need to invest significant resources in building the level of understanding and trust upon which successful joint working is founded. Often you will need to develop partnerships with agencies from another sector. This complicates the process of partnership building because organisations are starting with less common ground and fewer shared understandings.

The difficulties in developing new relationships are often most profound when they involve a housing organisation making connections with organisations in the health service. In part this may reflect the historical failure to ensure that housing is properly integrated with community care services. But there are also a number of cultural differences between health and other sectors that contribute to this failure, which we discuss later. As we've already noted, current policy is directed at enhancing cross-boundary working with the health sector. Being able to overcome these cultural differences is therefore extremely important.

Approaching potential partners

Having mapped the agencies you think may be affected by or have an effect on the development of the new service you will need to decide how to approach those agencies you consider to be potential partners. The approach you chose will usually be influenced by whether or not you have worked with the agency in the past. For example re-igniting a previous joint working relationship may require an informal approach to former colleagues whilst contacting a new agency will probably require a more formal approach.

The way you initially approach a potential new partner is vitally important. Who should be approached? Do you start at the top? If time is pressing then how insistent should you be that the organisation acts fast? Do you, for example, follow up an initial letter with a phone call a couple of days later? Or might that be considered too pushy? This initial approach can shape the way that the whole partnership evolves. Or, more fundamentally, it could determine whether the partnership gets off the ground at all.

To illustrate these points, Box 2.1 presents an example of the process that you might go through in order to establish a new partnership. Exercise 2.1 invites you to work through the key issues.

Box 2.1: Diversification through partnership

Funding has been announced to support housing associations wishing to diversify from their core business.

A small locally-based housing association which specialises in providing sheltered accommodation has been experiencing difficulties maintaining full occupancy. At the same time, through their participation in a local liaison group, senior officers are aware that there is a shortage of respite provision in the locality and that local commissioners are seeking to identify new providers.

The housing association decides to apply for funds to support the development of a respite care scheme for frail older people. One condition of the funding available is that the service is developed in partnership with other local agencies.

At an internal planning meeting the management team decides to 'map' the potential partners that need to be involved in the development of the service. They ask themselves the following questions:

Which statutory and non-statutory agencies currently work in this service area?

There is a shortage of respite beds in the area. The health authority has no respite provision, whilst the local authority has recently cut its allocation from 10 to 3 beds. A privately run nursing home has a limited number of beds but these tend not to be popular with older people from minority ethnic communities.



Which statutory and non-statutory agencies would refer clients to the new service?

The adult care team within the local authority social services department is an obvious source of referrals. So is the day hospital run by the local healthcare trust. The local Primary Care Trust (PCT) may be a source of referrals but no one in the housing association has much experience or knowledge of working with the NHS so it is unclear whether the PCT may be a source of referrals.

Which agencies would they need support from in order to diversify into this area of work?

Although the housing association specialises in providing accommodation to older people it currently doesn't provide accommodation for anyone with dementia. The management team realises that some respite referrals may be for people with dementia and that their staff will need training to deal with this client group. There is a local voluntary group that specialises in providing dementia awareness training and the housing association is keen to involve them in the project development.

The housing association already provides accommodation to members of the black and ethnic minority community but decides that they would like to involve a local community group in the planning of the new service.

Which agencies have they worked with in the past?

- The housing association has well-established links with the local authority social services department (SSD). Many of their residents currently receive services from the department. The housing association and SSD have worked in partnership on a number of small initiatives in the past.
- The association has never worked in partnership with the health service. The management team realises that if they want to develop a service that health colleagues will use then they will need to develop links with the local healthcare trust and the PCT.
- The housing association has no formal links with the dementia awareness voluntary group but a member of the management team used their training services when working for a different association.
- The association has well-established links with the local community group. A representative of the group is a member of the housing association's management board.

Action: Approaching potential partners

The management team decides to invite representatives from the social services department, dementia awareness group and local community group to a preliminary meeting to discuss the service. It is decided that it would be best if all these approaches were initially formal.

The management team decides it would be better to make a different type of approach to health colleagues. A senior manager will arrange a pre-meeting with the local healthcare trust and PCT to introduce the housing association and discuss whether or not the respite service would be of interest to health colleagues.



Exercise 2.1

Funding has been announced to support the development of staying put schemes in an effort to reduce the number of older people being admitted to hospital. The funding brief demands that an application must demonstrate that new services will be built in partnership between statutory and non-statutory agencies. You work for a relatively small non-statutory agency that has decided to apply for funding.

Draw up a comprehensive list of all the agencies that could potentially be involved in such a partnership. Think of all those whose work might be directly or indirectly affected by such a scheme. What is your reason for including each organisation in the list?

What could each organisation potentially contribute to the partnership? For each organisation you have identified assess, on a scale from 1 (essential) to 5 (unnecessary), how important for the success of the partnership you consider it is that the organisation is involved.

What would be the best way to approach each potential partner?

Notes

Choosing your partners: hints and tips

- Capitalise on joint working relationships that already exist.
- If you need to develop relationships with an agency that your organisation has never previously worked with then think laterally and see if you can capitalise on the knowledge of your own staff. They may have direct experience of working with or in these agencies.
- Before approaching an organisation working in a different sector, spend a little time getting on their wavelength. Read some of the literature they will be familiar with so you have an appreciation of what their concerns are. Searching the trade press or visiting key websites like the Department of Health or the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister can rapidly yield information on the current preoccupations in a particular field.
- Normally joint working relationships take time to develop and require a degree of nurturing. In some instances however you will have to move quickly and resolve sensitive issues in a short space of time. The alternative is to accept that some issues will need to be resolved once the service is established. If you decide to go down this route then you need to have established sufficient confidence in the partner organisations that you believe you will be able to work things through with them once a service has got off the ground.

4. Getting the partnership off the ground

You have approached the organisations you are proposing to work with and they have responded with interest. You then have to get the partnership or joint venture off the ground. In Module 1 we discussed the topic of project management more generally. Much of that material is relevant to our discussion here. However, in this section we focus more specifically on the issues raised by joint working that you will need to bear in mind to maximise the chances of success during this phase.

Involve key partners from the outset

Make sure that you involve all your key partners in the planning process from the outset. Failure to do so can be disastrous. If the proposed service is going to depend on receiving clients referred by statutory agencies then make sure you involve the statutory agencies. To succeed the new service must address their needs and those of their clients.

Remember that you want to develop a service that people will want to use. Consequently potential partners need to be clear how collaboration will benefit their own organisation. If they are not clear how the partnership will be of benefit to them then there are two likely outcomes. Either they will not see any point in collaborating or they will stay with the partnership but treat the joint activity as a low priority: their commitment will be half hearted at best. By involving partners at an early stage not only are they more likely to feel a sense of commitment to the venture but most importantly you are more likely to develop a service that takes account of, or is even tailored around, their organisation's aims and objectives.

Whether potential service users or their representatives are also involved at this early stage needs to be considered closely. We discuss involving service users in more detail in Module 3, but clearly if you are seeking to develop a service that will be attractive to consumers then planning processes should not proceed too far without exploring whether consumers will actually be willing to use the service.

Develop complementary aims and objectives

Successful joint working is more likely to occur if the aims and objectives of the venture allow all partners to pursue their own organisational goals and not just those of the partnership. In other words you have to ensure that the aims and objectives of the venture complement the aims and objectives of each of the partner organisations. As we have suggested, one way to ensure that you develop complementary aims and objectives is to involve partners in the planning process from the beginning.

This is not to say that a new project needs to fall fully in line with existing priorities and ways of doing things. It may be that early efforts should be directed at challenging thinking and demonstrating that approaching things in a different way could meet the aims of partner agencies more effectively. Do not *assume* that the benefits of a project are transparent to everyone. A process of explanation and education could well be needed. A process of negotiation about how the aims of the project relate to existing priorities is also quite common. Compromises between innovation and continuity may be necessary in order to keep the development of the project on track. Unfortunately all this can take time. However, the alternative is worse. Projects that are planned in isolation from partner agencies or in ignorance of partners' objectives are always going to struggle to get off the ground. This is particularly true where the partners are to be the source of referrals.

Take the example of a housing association wanting to develop a staying put scheme. It will need to show potential partners what benefits the service will offer them. One way to approach this is to find out what the partner's aims and objectives are and demonstrate how the staying put service could help to achieve them. For example, the NHS is concerned with reducing the number of admissions to hospital of older people due to falls. To secure support from the NHS the housing association would need to demonstrate how the staying put scheme could help support older people in their own home, reduce the number of older people admitted to hospital, and free up beds for other patients. This may well require challenging existing thinking: demonstrating how housing or other 'non-medical' services and spending can contribute directly to achieving the goals of the health service.

When a proposed project involves several partners with differing aims and objectives it can be a difficult task to identify a core of common ground that furthers the objectives of all. It may not be possible. If that is the case then hard decisions about the feasibility of maintaining a fully inclusive partnership that carries genuine commitment from all partners will have to be faced.

In contrast, there can sometimes be a difficult balance to be struck between sharing enough common ground to allow a partnership to develop and a situation in which

agencies have so much in common that they are in outright competition. Successful partnerships appear more likely when all agencies share some aims and objectives or core business, but when there is not a complete overlap in interests.

Finally, if it appears that a proposal does not engage sufficient interest then it requires an early – and often brave – decision regarding whether it is worth pursuing further. There is little virtue in wasting effort in negotiations around something that few can see much merit in. However, it is important to read this situation sensitively. Is it that the new service actually offers only limited potential benefit to partners and potential purchasers? Or are there more subtle issues concerning, for example, the relationships between, or personal priorities of, staff involved in the negotiations that are slowing progress and dampening enthusiasm? Would a change of negotiators revitalise the process?

Clarify aims and objectives

A lack of clarity about the aims and objectives of the venture can inhibit joint working. All partners need to have a shared understanding of:

- **why they are working together;**
- **what they plan to achieve;**
- **what the process of working together will involve;**
- **how the project will be evaluated.**

The partnership will be much more accountable, and quite possibly more durable, if the aims and objectives are clearly stated and each organisation knows what is expected of it. Problems will arise if there is any confusion or lack of clarity about the aims and objectives. For example if there is no shared view about the focus of the venture then each agency will develop its own expectations. As a consequence each agency will develop different perceptions regarding the extent to which the project has met its aims and whether or not the project has been successful. Such misunderstandings can ultimately undermine the joint working relationship. For example, they can carry implications for partners' willingness to continue funding beyond an initial pilot period.

Once you have clarified the aims and objectives of the service put them down in writing and make sure all the partners sign up to them. You will then be in a position to agree and clearly articulate the input each agency or worker is expected to make. If an organisation is going to dedicate staff time to the project, for example, then you need to specify how much time will be involved. Drawing up a project protocol covering all of these issues can be a great help.

Agreeing at the outset how a project or activity is to be evaluated is a vital step, whether or not it is partnership based. What are you planning to achieve? How will success in achieving those plans be judged? These are issues that need to be considered right from the beginning of the process, not left until later. We examine this topic in more detail in Module 4.

Ensure aims and objectives are realistic

Aims and objectives should not only be clear and agreed, but also realistic. The more ambitious you are, the more difficult it will be for a new service to succeed. Sometimes innovative projects set themselves highly ambitious aims and objectives in terms of volume of activities, range of activities, or both. This can become threatening to partner agencies and ultimately undermine the service. Be realistic. Set yourselves achievable targets.

Allow adequate time for those activities associated with setting up and maintaining joint activities. Many organisations underestimate the time it takes to get a new service off the ground. Recruiting new staff, securing appropriate accommodation and equipment, setting up new administrative and monitoring systems or consulting with service users can take much longer than anticipated. Similarly the demands of short term crisis management in the first few months can significantly inhibit the capacity of organisations to achieve objectives for service delivery. Be realistic and plan accordingly. Don't try to achieve too much, too soon. If you plan for significant outputs earlier than is really feasible and do not allow sufficient set up time then partnership relations can become strained as targets for performance go unmet due to apparent 'slippage'.

Remember that aims and objectives can be revisited if they need to be refocused, but it is better to start with something realistic.

How will the service be managed?

Having decided to develop a new service you need to plan how it will be managed, which agency or individual will take the managerial lead and what the lines of accountability will be. This issue may be resolved once you have identified what is expected of each partner. For example, it may seem most appropriate for the agency that agrees to provide office space for the new service also to take the lead in managing the service. In other circumstances decisions about location and management will be separate because, for example, while a partner organisation may be able to offer accommodation it does not have the spare resources to provide managerial input also. In this sort of situation being clear precisely where managerial responsibilities lie and who project workers are responsible to is vitally important if later problems are to be minimised.

Management of a service developed in partnership can be complicated. Once you have identified which agency will take the lead you need to decide what managerial involvement your partners should have. You may decide to set up an advisory group in order to give your partner agencies some form of input into the overall management of the service. It is essential in setting up this type of group that everyone is absolutely clear about its purpose. Does it have overall managerial or strategic responsibility? Is it a steering group? Or is its role that of an advisory group? These functions differ in the amount of influence the group can expect to have over how the project develops. While a strategy group can legitimately expect its decisions to be implemented, an advisory group is there to offer views and comments and to suggest possible future directions, but

the final decision lies with the project staff. Whichever management structure you decide upon it is essential that all partners agree. Failure to be clear on the function of this type of group almost inevitably leads to problems between partners later in the process.

You will also need to establish strategies to ensure that each partner is accountable for their role in the partnership. This will largely depend upon what they are expected to invest in the partnership, which could include finance, managerial support, access to information or staff time. Sometimes this will involve quite complex decisions regarding whether individual staff members are accountable to the partnership or to their employers. Issues like these are tricky to resolve but crucially important: project workers need to know exactly who they are managerially accountable to and how they will be held to account.

Strategic commitment

The process of working collaboratively is sometimes hampered by a lack of commitment or strategic support for the partnership. It is essential that senior managers from all agencies commit their organisation to the partnership. The commitment of frontline workers is essential for the project to stand a chance of functioning on the ground, but without strong support at strategic level in each organisation the partnership will flounder.

The issue of strategic commitment is particularly important if the partnership depends on individual agencies making some form of investment in the service or if the new service depends on partners referring clients to the service. Failure to secure commitment at senior level can seriously undermine the long term – or, in extreme cases, the short term – future of a service.

The need for a champion

Most new services require a champion who can advocate on behalf of the project. It could be a key player from within the partnership or a strategic figure who is involved in the local planning processes. The involvement of people with a broad understanding of how different organisations operate and of the key planning processes or decision-making forums can be very important in terms of securing the long term future of the new service. You need to involve people with knowledge of local 'politics' who can wheel and deal on behalf of the project.

Mutual respect and trust

Joint working is more likely to be successful if organisations respect the work of partner agencies. If organisations have previously worked together then it is probable that an element of respect and trust already exists.

However, as we have already indicated, many partnerships develop between organisations that have never previously worked together. Such partnerships can feel

very threatening. Ways of looking at the world, ways of working, and motivations may all differ dramatically between organisations, particularly where they are in different sectors. Staff – particularly frontline workers – may regard their counterparts in partner agencies with suspicion. Sometimes these suspicions are only overcome when the service begins to ‘prove itself’ in the eyes of frontline staff. Once the partnership begins to meet its aims and objectives partners can begin to see each other, and the partnership itself, as a valuable resource. Activities such as joint training can work to build bridges more quickly. We return to this point below.

In some instances the partnership may appear to threaten the future of some of the agencies involved. In these instances the partnership is more likely to be successful if the lead organisation is regarded as being independent. If, instead, it appears that the lead organisation could benefit directly if some partners end their activities when the partnership succeeds – because, for example, it removes a ‘competitor’ – then this could well undermine the willingness of others to commit to the partnership.

Evaluation

Evaluation can be the key to successful joint working. Much joint working involves agencies committing time and money to a new venture. Consequently they need to know whether the project is achieving its aims and objectives.

One way to demonstrate success is to ensure that you are evaluating the progress of your project from the outset. So your evaluation systems need to be in place when the new service starts. Ensuring that you use evaluation information to keep all parties regularly informed about the progress of the project can contribute positively to the maintenance of commitment to the project. Those services that are able to show partner agencies that they are meeting their aims and objectives will probably find that they are able to create positive momentum behind the project. This may be useful if problems are encountered later on.

Evaluating any difficulties faced by the partnership is equally important. Keeping partners informed about the results of such evaluations can make an important contribution to keeping them on board. If a service appears to be slow delivering, partners are more likely to remain engaged with the process if they are aware not only of the problems being encountered but also that these problems are being taken seriously and addressed.

The discussion in Module 4 of this guide will help you translate the aims and objectives of your venture into outputs and outcomes that can be monitored.

In Box 2.2 we continue with our example of a staying put scheme to illustrate the points we have been making in this section.

Exercise 2.2 allows you to explore some of the issues in more detail.

Box 2.2: Deciding the project fundamentals

The housing association discussed in Box 2.1 is awarded funds to develop the respite care scheme for frail older people.

The following groups have agreed that they will support the development: the local authority social services department, the local health care trust and the Primary Care Trust, the dementia awareness voluntary group and the local community group.

All the partners come together for a planning day. They want to address the following issues:

- What should the aims and objectives of the service be?
- How will the service be managed?

Aims and objectives

Over the course of the discussion disagreement emerges about how to develop aims and objectives that all partners can sign up to. The meeting decides that they should first agree a set of overarching aims and objectives that all partners can agree and then translate them into individual organisational aims for each of the partner agencies.

After much discussion the meeting identifies an overarching aim for the new service: *'to provide high quality short term respite care to older people with a diagnosis of dementia'*.

The partners agree that the objectives for the first year should include:

- Establishing an advisory group to support the management of the new service
- Refurbishing two flats in which the respite care will be provided
- Providing dementia awareness training to all housing association staff
- Promoting the service to potential users
- Raising the awareness of members of all partner organisations of the existence and value of the new service
- Developing appropriate referral processes for the service
- Bringing the first respite flat into use within four months and the second to be phased in by month six.

The objectives for the main partners were defined as:

- **The housing association**
 - Reduce the number of voids
 - Change the use of two hard to let sheltered flats into two respite units
 - Phase the introduction of the new service, with the aim of increasing provision in year two if demand is sufficient
 - Complete a programme of dementia awareness training for staff.
- **The local authority**
 - Increase the number and range of respite units they can refer older people to
 - Develop appropriate referral mechanisms
 - Develop an invoicing system
 - Work with the housing association to ensure the quality of the new units complies with relevant standards.
- **The local health care trust**
 - Develop appropriate referral mechanisms
 - Work with the housing association to ensure the quality of the new units complies with standards required to enable the safe discharge of vulnerable patients.
- **The dementia awareness voluntary group**
 - Enhancing the quality of the services available to the vulnerable people they represent by assisting in the training of the staff of the new scheme
 - Develop the organisation's relationships with the housing sector and the other statutory agencies and embed the organisation more firmly in local provision networks.



Exercise 2.2

Having identified the partners you will be working with to develop the staying put scheme (see Exercise 2.1) now develop a set of aims and objectives for the service that your partners will be willing to commit themselves to.

Once you have drawn up a list of aims and objectives for the staying put scheme, examine each aim and objective in turn and identify which partner organisation's aims and objectives will be advanced by that staying put scheme aim/objective.

Are there any proposed partners that do not appear to have their aims and objectives advanced by the staying put scheme? If so, would you recommend modifying the aims and objectives of the staying put scheme so that this partner's aims can be accommodated? Doing this would mean it would then make more sense for the partner to remain in the partnership. Alternatively, would you consider dropping the partner?

Notes

Getting the partnership off the ground: hints and tips

- Make sure your aims and objectives are realistic and achievable.
- Ensure that all partners know why they are working together and what they are hoping to achieve. One way to do this is to draw up a project protocol that explicitly states why you are working together and what is expected of all partners.
- Ensure that senior figures in each organisation demonstrate their support for the partnership.
- Invest time in bringing frontline staff, from all agencies, on board with the new service.
- Make sure you translate aims and objectives into outputs against which your progress can be evaluated.
- Evaluate process issues as well as outcomes.
- Keep all partners informed of progress.

5. Maintaining successful cross-boundary working

Once an activity based on joint working is off the ground you will need to invest significant amounts of time maintaining the collaboration. Remember, joint working can be very expensive in terms of time and money. Partners need to be reassured that their investment is paying dividends.

There are a number of issues that need to be addressed in order to maintain the partnership.

Communicate clearly and consistently

Effective communication between partner agencies is essential in developing and sustaining good working relationships. It is necessary to develop a variety of communication channels to reflect the needs of the different constituent groups. Frontline staff, for example, will have different communication needs to senior managers. Their needs will focus on the operation of the service. They will need to know if the referral process is working and, if it isn't, what changes need to be made. In contrast, the communication needs of senior managers will probably have more to do with strategic planning. In which case make sure that your advisory group continues to meet frequently and is well attended by partners. If it is not well attended then this usually indicates there is a problem. It may simply be a problem of communication: do people have sufficient notice of when meetings are taking place? But it may be an indication that something more serious is wrong. It is often the result of partners reducing the priority they give to joint working as a consequence of their expectations about either the process or the outcomes being frustrated. If time was spent at the start making sure that aims and objectives are clear and that everyone understands the process then this sort of difficulty will be minimised. If communication channels

between the project and partners are maintained – so that everyone understands when and why problems have arisen – then it increases the chances of partners staying on-board.

For more routine communication you could think about developing a newsletter to be sent to partner agencies and service users. Setting up a simple website and producing an electronic newsletter for posting on the web might be a cost effective means of reaching a broad audience, but you have to be sure that the groups you are trying to reach will have access to, and be comfortable using, the web.

This is an example of the more general point that both formal and informal communication channels have to be tailored to the needs of the audience with whom you are communicating. It is equally important to make sure that the message being communicated is consistent. All partners should hear the same story about the progress of the project. They might not need the same level of detail but they should all receive the same broad message.

Communication with partners is best thought of as ‘internal’ rather than ‘external’. It is better for partners to be frank than to attempt to disguise from each other what is going on. If it is felt that some partners should be receiving a different, perhaps more positive, message than others then it may indicate that some partners are not as committed to the joint activity as they might be and hence they need to be kept on board through some ‘positive spin’. The danger with this strategy is that it could simply be storing up trouble for the future.

Evaluate processes as well as outcomes

Make sure that you evaluate process issues as well as outcomes. Six months after the service is launched, for example, you may wish to evaluate your administrative and managerial processes to ensure that they remain appropriate. Some of these processes may seem less significant as the service begins to gather pace. You may, for example, feel that the advisory group needs to meet less frequently. Alternatively, you may feel that the frequency of team meetings should be increased in an effort to manage emerging tensions between partners or staff from different backgrounds. Whereas a service may start relatively informally, you may feel that developing clearer processes and procedures becomes more important as the volume of activity increases.

Review your aims and objectives regularly

Ensure that your aims and objectives – and the performance targets that flow from them – remain relevant as the project progresses. It is possible that such rapid progress is made in the first six months that the plans originally set for the first year have already been realised. Targets will therefore need to be reset. In contrast, in some cases progress may have been slower than anticipated and your original aims, objectives and plans might have proven to be unrealistic. In this case you may need to scale them down or rethink the focus of the service entirely. Before doing so, however, you should be sure you understand why performance has departed so dramatically from

target. Is it the result of an unforeseen risk which the project could do little about? Or does it signal that all is not well with the way the project is functioning? If that is the case then some more substantial intervention in the way the project is running may be necessary if performance is to improve.

Aims and objectives may also need to be reviewed in response to changes in the environment – both local and national – in which the project operates. Changes such as the arrival of *Supporting People* open opportunities for particular types or combinations of activity, but equally they are likely to render others unworkable. There might be little benefit in, for example, putting a lot of effort into the detailed refinement of a project which cannot survive initial pilot funding because it cannot possibly be transferred to main budgets. It might be better looking for ways to reshape a project in recognition of these changing priorities. Scanning the evolving policy and organisational environment in order to maintain awareness of changing agendas, emerging issues and potential obstacles can make a vital contribution to a project's long term future.

Create common ground

Many of the difficulties experienced in joint working are a product of a lack of common ground between different groups of staff. This is true even when the staff involved work in different departments within the same organisation. Partnerships between staff working in the same local authority – for example between staff in a housing department and social services department – can be problematic. Although they share the same employer they don't necessarily share much common ground. Differences may include different interpretations of policy, different understandings of terms such as eligibility, needs or risk assessment and different working practices in terms of, for example, client confidentiality.

Difficulties can be magnified when the partnership involves working with agencies from different sectors. Professionals working in different sectors are even less likely to share any common ground and are more likely to have different working cultures and philosophies. This is particularly the case when local authorities or voluntary agencies collaborate with colleagues from the NHS. The health, local authority and voluntary sectors have distinct professional working practices. These difficulties can be further compounded by a lack of appreciation of the contribution of housing to health. This lack of awareness might reflect the different models of health, disability and ageing with which staff in local authorities and voluntary agencies, on the one hand, and the NHS, on the other, are working.

In order for a partnership to succeed you must create common ground. One way of doing this is to have regular joint training sessions at which you explore these cultural and professional differences and find ways to overcome them. Joint training sessions or team building events can be used to agree shared understandings of terms such as assessment and eligibility. They can also be used to iron out particular difficulties, such as how to refer emergency cases.

Challenge the negative impact of professional stereotypes

Professional misunderstandings and stereotypes can undermine joint working. These include a lack of appreciation of the role of other workers and a lack of trust in their professionalism. These differences are often exacerbated by the different cultures, philosophies and working practices in different sectors.

Again these differences are often acute when the partnership involves working across boundaries with the NHS. For example, health and local authority staff often hold negative stereotypes of each other, which can manifest themselves in defensive professional practices. In particular health and social care professionals have very clearly defined client groups and fiercely resist attempts to add to or take away from this core client base. Similarly, staff can hold damaging perceptions about issues to do with bed blocking and 'cost shunting' which often owe more to historical difficulties than current practice. Regular joint training sessions and team building events can help to break down these professional stereotypes. At the most fundamental level these sessions contribute to the development of the mutual understanding, trust and respect that are the basic building blocks of successful joint working. However, the most powerful way to undermine these stereotypes is through demonstrating the successes of the joint project.

It may be necessary to put the issue of stereotypes and defensive professional practice under the spotlight repeatedly, as new issues and challenges need to be faced or as new staff join the project.

Plan succession

The research evidence suggests that partnerships rely on key individuals to make things happen. These people are often natural 'networkers' who have endless enthusiasm and commitment. When these key people leave or move to another part of an organisation the partnership can lose momentum. Make sure you record as much as possible of the information these 'key' workers possess before they leave. This will go some way to keeping the project on track. The alternative is that the project runs out of steam before it reaches its planned end date.

One way to reduce the likelihood of this happening is to plan ahead. This is a key area for applying the risk management approach discussed in Module 1. Think about the key individuals in the partnership. Are there specific qualifications or experiences that make them indispensable to the partnership? What would you do if they left? Would you need to replace them? Can you draw on similar skills and experience from elsewhere in the lead organisation or in one of the partner organisations? Or will you need to recruit? Could employing a consultant be the most effective way to fill the gap in the short term?

In Box 2.3 we examine the issues discussed in this section in the context of our example of a respite care scheme. Exercise 2.3 allows you to explore some of the issues in greater depth.

Box 2.3: Keeping things on track

The respite care service has been up and running for six months. All partners are happy with progress and are discussing how to expand the service in the coming year. However, during the course of these discussions a review of the monitoring data reveals that social workers from one area team have made very few referrals to the new service.

A meeting is arranged between the manager of the housing association, a divisional director from social services and the manager of the area team. During this meeting it becomes clear that there are some concerns within the social work team about whether or not housing association staff are adequately prepared to deal with the needs of people with dementia. The meeting decides to set up a joint staff meeting to iron out these problems.

Joint staff meeting

A meeting is convened and staff from the housing association and the area social services team attend. A training officer from the local authority, who has been briefed about the problems, facilitates the session.

The staff take part in an introductory ice breaking exercise. Each participant is asked to describe their role within their respective organisations. It soon becomes apparent that there have been staff changes within both organisations which hadn't been communicated to partners.

The facilitator then asks people to split into two groups: housing association staff and social workers. Each group is asked to draw up a brief description of the respite care service. After a short break each group reports back and immediately the exercise reveals that there are disagreements about whether people with dementia can be referred to the service and whether or not housing association staff have been adequately trained to care for people with dementia.

The manager of the respite service volunteers to respond to these concerns. He begins with a brief description of the eligibility criteria for the service, which do include 'people with mild rather than severe dementia'. He describes how the three members of staff with responsibility for supporting respite clients have attended a residential course on caring for people with dementia. The remaining staff have attended, or are going to attend, a half-day seminar run by the local dementia awareness group.

The social workers respond positively to these comments but indicate that in practice they find it hard to identify 'people with mild dementia'. It is agreed that a working party will be set up to provide a clearer definition.

Attention now focuses on why so few referrals are being made by the area team. Problems with the eligibility criteria appear to be the main source of confusion, but it is also clear that newer members of staff in the social work team know very little about the service and that the contact details they have been given are out of date. The housing association agrees to draw up a new contact list. The group agrees to request the advisory group to draft a referral protocol.

Action

- Both organisations agree to provide each other with an up-to-date staff list which includes telephone numbers. It is agreed that this list will be updated as a matter of course every six months and will be circulated to all partner organisations.
- The respite service manager agrees to work with social workers, health colleagues and a representative from the local dementia awareness group to establish a more detailed definition of 'mild dementia'.
- To resolve the referral problems the participants suggest that management should draw up a joint referral protocol. The protocol will stipulate eligibility criteria as well as the referral process.
- It is agreed that joint staff meetings should be held regularly.



Exercise 2.3

The staying put service has been running for four months. Clients report they are happy with the service. Yet, referrals from statutory agencies have been lower than expected. At a recent meeting it became clear that community nurses and social workers have some concerns about the 'professionalism' of housing association staff, while housing association staff questioned whether they are seen as equal partners in the service.

In an attempt to resolve these differences you convene a multi-disciplinary training session. Your aim is to raise awareness about the contribution of each staff group to the new service. You also want to iron out difficulties that have already been identified. As well as the concerns about 'professionalism' and being seen as equal partners in the service, there appears to be a lack of communication between the partners.

What would the programme for the training session look like? What tasks or exercises would you ask participants to carry out? What difficulties or conflicts can you anticipate arising? What strategies would you use to address them?

Notes

Maintaining successful cross-boundary working: hints and tips

- Don't assume that other agencies or people are working to keep the relationship going. All agencies, but particularly the lead agency, need to ensure that they are doing their bit to keep the collaboration alive.
- Keep the information flowing. Make sure partners are kept informed about the progress of the project and about any major problems that are encountered.
- If any changes are made to the service ensure that all frontline workers are made aware of them.
- Regular training sessions or meetings for those working in the partnership are a useful way to solve problems and build a sense of mutual understanding and trust.
- Make sure that new members of staff are properly introduced to all partner agencies.
- Many organisations are in a constant process of reorganisation. Partner agencies need to be kept informed of these changes, particularly if they have implications for the service.
- Make sure partner agencies have up-to-date information about key personnel, for example let people know when project workers change. Circulate an up-to-date contact and telephone list every six months. Don't assume that your partner agencies will have this information.
- Continue to review your aims and objectives, whilst monitoring process and outcome issues. Do not assume that these will remain relevant throughout the life of a project. Agree any changes collaboratively.

6. References

DoH (1998) *Partnership in Action: New opportunities for joint working between health and social care*, London: DoH.

DoH (2001) *Building Capacity and Partnership in Care: an agreement between the statutory and the independent social care, health care and housing sectors*, London: DoH.

7. Where to go for more information

A lot has been written during the last decade about the potential and problems of joint working. Publications you may find helpful include:

Arblaster, L., Conway, J., Foreman, A. and Hawtin, M. (1996) *Asking the impossible? Inter-agency working to address housing, health and social care needs of people in ordinary housing*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

Arblaster, L., Conway, J., Foreman, A. and Hawtin, M. (1998) *Achieving the impossible: Inter-agency collaboration to address the housing, health and social care needs of people able to live in ordinary housing*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

Audit Commission (1998) *A fruitful partnership: effective partnership working*, Abingdon: Audit Commission Publications.

Balloch, S., and Taylor, M. (eds) (2001) *Partnership Working*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

DoH (2004) *Changing times: Improving services for older people – Report on the work of the Health and Social Care Change Agent Team 2003/4*, London: DoH.

DoH (2004) *Making partnership work for patients, carers and service users A strategic agreement between the Department of Health, the NHS and the voluntary and community sector*, London: DoH.

Glendinning, C., Powell, M. and Rummery, K. (eds) (2002) *Partnerships, New Labour and the governance of welfare*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

Kings Fund (2002) *Partnerships Under Pressure: a commentary on progress in partnership-working between the NHS and local government*. www.kingsfund.org.uk

Means, R., Brenton, M., Harrison, L., and Heywood, F. (1997) *Making partnerships work in community care: A guide for practitioners in housing, health and social services*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

Module 3: Involving service users

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Executive Summary

- Involving service users in the planning, management and evaluation of services is a powerful theme which informs current policy across policy fields.
- While more and more emphasis is being placed on consultation and involvement, you need to watch out for 'consultation fatigue'. Some service users do not wish to be very involved. Those that do can end up assuming a heavy burden, particularly if they represent excluded communities or minorities. A more strategic approach to involvement at local level would be a step forward.
- Agencies need to be clear regarding the reasons for involving users. Is it because their views are valued or is it simply to satisfy the conditions of funders or regulators? Involving users simply so you can say you involve users is a shortcut to disillusionment and resentment.
- Service users can be involved in decision-making for one or more reasons – planning, managing or evaluating services – and each will entail a different involvement strategy.
- Service users can have different levels of involvement in a service, from simply receiving information or involvement in a one-off consultation to taking the lead in managing the service. A key question is who decides on the appropriate level of involvement – staff or service users?
- The term 'service user' can be much broader than simply those who are currently making use of the service. It can include both past and potential service users. It can include households who face barriers to accessing the service. It can include organisations who refer people to the service or whose work is directly or indirectly affected by the service. Hence, involving the full range of service users can be a complex task.
- Feedback is absolutely essential to involving service users. If service users have no idea what impact their views have on subsequent developments then they have very little reason to remain involved.
- It may require innovative and sensitive strategies to access the views of socially isolated service users. This can be a long term task involving trust building, not a short term task involving administering a questionnaire.
- Thought must be given to how the views of vulnerable service users are sought. There are issues of power and dependence in the relationship between service user and professional, or service user and carer, that need to be understood. Service users may not always be comfortable giving their honest views. Using independent researchers or advocates is an option to consider.
- There is a range of mechanisms by which service users can be involved. The choice of method will be shaped by the purpose of involving users, the size of the user group, the difficulty in accessing their views, and the resources available to do so. You also need to decide which methods represent a meaningful level of involvement and provide you with a means of satisfactorily accessing the diversity of users' views.
- Successful service user involvement is more likely in organisations with a genuine commitment to user involvement and a willingness to put in place a supportive organisational infrastructure. It also requires staff with sophisticated communication skills, maturity, 'local' knowledge, capacity to respect 'lay' as well as professional perspectives, persistence, good humour, and commitment.

1. The current emphasis on involving service users

The involvement of service users and 'the public', as citizens with rights and responsibilities, in the planning and provision of services is a powerful theme which informs many aspects of public policy under the current Labour government.

The broad theme of promoting public involvement covers a spectrum of more specific aims including:

- **enhancing democratic systems of local accountability;**
- **improving public access to information;**
- **making services more responsive to the needs of individual service users;**
- **improving communication between individual professionals and service users.**

The processes required to achieve these diverse aims are varied. They can include:

- **identifying need at the individual and collective levels;**
- **establishing transparent systems for monitoring and scrutiny;**
- **engaging in consultation exercises;**
- **involving users in the training of professional staff;**
- **involving users in the management of services.**

At the most basic level, in local government the whole structure of the audit and inspection regime since the advent of Best Value is, in principle, founded upon consultation with users, communities and tax-payers. Other recent policies moved further in the direction of involving service users. Initiatives such as Tenant Participation Compacts in the local authority sector (DETR, 1999) raised the profile of user involvement in housing considerably. In the housing association sector the Housing Corporation's regulatory framework makes clear that good governance requires the consultation and involvement of tenants, and there are requirements upon housing associations to do so in certain circumstances. The Housing Corporation advanced the participation agenda further through publications such as *Making consumers count* (HC, 1998) and *Communities in control* (HC, 2000) and continued to pursue the agenda with a more formal statement of policy during 2004 (HC, 2004).

In the arena of health and social care the involvement of users in the planning of services to ensure that they are delivered in a more co-ordinated and flexible way is an important theme of the modernising agenda. Key documents that captured this theme include *The National Service Framework for Older People* (DoH 2001), *The NHS Plan* (DoH, 2000), and *You and your services* (DoH, 1999). The theme was central to initiatives such as the establishment of Patient Advocacy and Liaison Services.

Initiatives such as the Charter Mark heightened the awareness of those working in the public sector that listening to service users, and shaping services to meet their needs and expectations, is a central component of modern public services.

In this module we focus upon involving service users in the planning and delivery of services that cross the divide between housing and community care. Beyond this level of

user involvement is the more fundamental shift in approach represented by the development of user-led or user-controlled services. These ideas feature in the discussion below, but they are not the primary concern. Nonetheless, we hope that those interested in developing user-led services will find the material in this module of value. It must be recognised that developing services that are genuinely user-led magnifies the challenges faced and can raise issues that we do not discuss in detail here.

Before we move on to consider in more detail how to involve users in the development of new services there are two difficult issues that need to be acknowledged.

A word of caution

Clients, customers, consumers and citizens will vary in their inclination to get involved. Some will see involvement as important and will be keen to be involved themselves. Some will not. It cannot be assumed that there is an unlimited pool of service users and citizens eagerly awaiting an opportunity to participate. The commitment to involve users and citizens much more extensively, as for example proposed in the NHS Plan, means that there will be even greater competition among local organisations to ensure user participation and representation. This may make little impression upon service users who do not wish to engage with these processes. But it can place considerable strain on those willing to participate.

There is already evidence that individuals and groups, particularly those representing excluded communities, are struggling to satisfy the current demand for user representatives. At a strategic level much greater consideration needs to be given to how to co-ordinate the demand for user involvement to prevent fatigue and disillusionment. The absence, for example, in many localities of advocacy services means that it is difficult for professionals and managers to access the views of some excluded or disadvantaged users and communities. A collective approach to these problems could be effective, with all major agencies contributing to the resourcing of such services.

The real priorities?

User involvement is a political priority and is seen by many policy makers, regulators and funders as indisputably a 'good thing'. Demonstrating that service users are involved in shaping a service is now frequently a condition of funding or continuing support for a project. It is therefore likely that some activities directed at involving service users do not flow from a genuine commitment to listening to and responding to service users' views but from a desire to satisfy grant conditions or regulatory requirements. This can lead to tokenism. And there is a danger that more harm than good is done to the relationship between organisations and their local communities.

Even where government initiatives endorse user involvement it is one of a number of competing priorities. It may end up being neglected in favour of other more urgent concerns. This is arguably what has happened with the Best Value regime: an initial commitment to involving and consulting service users has to some extent been overtaken by local organisations' concern to satisfy central government expectations in relation to nationally prescribed performance indicators. It could be argued that the move to Comprehensive Performance Assessment reinforces this tendency.

A further complexity is that in many cases the continuation of a project – and therefore the continued employment of its staff – depends on its success in selling itself to potential funders or purchasers, usually in the statutory sector. This can mean that the project workers feel compelled to address the priorities of these agencies. This in turn can skew projects towards working with professionally/organisationally defined services and eligibility criteria. This does not always correspond to an approach that is responsive to the needs of service users. A project that begins as an innovative attempt to move away from professionally-driven services and respond to the diversity of users may, in a bid to secure continuity of funding, be forced to compromise and conform to exactly those professionally defined expectations from which it was trying to break free. An example of this process is the restrictions imposed by social services department eligibility criteria. Projects established to address the needs of households with low levels of dependency, for whom the service would have a significant preventative element, may find their core aims challenged if they seek mainstream funding, which has tended to prioritise 'high dependency' households and reactive, emergency interventions.

Our purpose in raising these issues at the beginning of this module is to alert readers to the need to analyse user involvement in its context. Where does the motivation for involvement originate? Are there other priorities – local or national – that mean that user input into a process may be marginalised or neglected? Is it possible to involve users appropriately in the processes or is there a danger of either tokenism or involvement fatigue? What is the history of involving service users locally? Have other local organisations involved users without that involvement having any demonstrable impacts? How are users to be convinced that this initiative is different?

You need to be acutely aware of the context in which you seek to involve service users and set off down this road with your eyes open. With that in mind, we now discuss in more detail the why and the how of involving users.

2. Getting started

Your organisation may have a history of working with users and may have repeatedly addressed many of these issues when setting up previous initiatives. Even if this is the case, the process of establishing a new service may be a good time to review how you involve service users. In contrast, for some organisations involving users may be a new departure. Here are some issues you need to think about.

Why involve service users?

Before considering *how* to involve service users it is important to be clear about why you want to involve them. What are you aiming to achieve by their involvement? Is it:

- to understand the views of service users?
- to improve quality and focus of services?
- to canvas opinions as a prelude to change?
- to ensure that all needs are recognised?
- to give your project or service greater legitimacy?
- or simply to comply with the policy of central government or other funders?

Once you have thought about these questions you can then go on to consider the different forms of involvement. Are users, for example, going to be involved in:

- **planning a new service?**
- **the on-going management of a service?**
- **evaluating the quality, focus and impact of an existing service?**

These issues need to be clarified at the outset because they shape your approach to involving service users. If you want to involve service users in order to improve the quality and focus of an existing service then the nature, frequency and timing of inputs from users is likely to be completely different to involvement in either management or planning.

Having decided why and when you are involving service users there is the further issue of the status of this decision. Are you going to:

- **tell service users that this is what has been decided?**
- **treat it as a proposal for discussion with service users?**

Taking the first route means that your organisation can use the decision to manage the expectations of service users who become involved in the process. It will give service users an indication of the nature and scope of their likely input into and impact upon the service. It runs the risk, however, of striking the wrong note at the start of the process: users were not involved or even consulted about the terms on which they are to be involved.

The alternative is that your initial statement of the purpose of involvement opens a dialogue with service users to explore whether this role is acceptable. It may be that service users wish to be more fully involved than you initially propose. Your response to user wishes for greater involvement could be a reformulation of your original proposal. The net result is a more inclusive process that demonstrates from the outset the organisation's commitment to involving service users. Alternatively, if you feel that user wishes cannot be fulfilled, your response will entail further discussion and negotiation to manage expectations downwards. But it would be worth reflecting on precisely why it is not felt possible for service users to be more fully involved. Is it a question of time or resources? Is it a question of service users lacking capacity to participate? Or is it a perception on the part of professionals that greater involvement by service users would reduce their own power and control, which they are reluctant to see happen? Are there unhelpful assumptions here – that power is something 'owned' by one person or another – which can be challenged? Are there early actions – such as capacity building – that can be taken to facilitate service user involvement?

Finally, never involve service users just for the sake of being seen to involve them. This strategy will create resentment and undermine future attempts to engage with users. If funding is contingent on demonstrating user involvement then this should be treated as an opportunity to be embraced, rather than an inconvenience to be endured.

The degree of user involvement

The term 'user involvement' or a commitment to 'involving service users' can cover a multitude of possibilities. Different degrees of user involvement can represent a valuable and effective contribution to the planning, management or evaluation of services. The method chosen should be driven by the reason for involving service users and by users' preferences for the level and nature of that engagement. Importantly, whether determined by professionals or in consultation with service users, what is being asked of users and the terms of their engagement must be clear to all those involved throughout the process.

The degree of user involvement in an organisation or process has frequently been represented as a 'ladder'. Such a ladder would range from total control as the top rung to occasional consultation – or even simply providing users with information on the performance of the service – as the bottom rung. In relation to providing a service combining housing and care, options located on different rungs of the ladder might be identified as:

- **total control of the service by its users;**
- **service users forming a majority of any partnership managing the service;**
- **service users having a voice on the management committee;**
- **service users being asked their views occasionally in quality surveys or meetings;**
- **staff occasionally sending out a newsletter to users informing them of services available and any changes that are planned, with a general request for comments.**

Who are the 'service users'?

It is important to pause at the start of the process and think through precisely who we are referring to when we talk about 'service users'. A range of groups or communities could reasonably fall within the term. They could all potentially therefore be involved in aspects of service planning, delivery and evaluation. Not all such groups spring readily to mind when discussion turns to 'service users'. It may therefore be helpful to set out a clear statement of who are to be treated as users of a particular service. This can be a means of making sure that everyone is operating with an appropriately inclusive definition. But it could just as easily be constructed to exclude particular groups. It is better that the definition of 'service users' to be employed is a product of conscious decision rather than oversight or inadvertent omission.

Consider the following groups:

- **citizens who may have no specific experience or expertise relating to the service;**
- **active users of the service;**
- **excluded households who are experiencing barriers to accessing the service;**
- **groups of potential users/communities of interest who are able to speak on behalf of a particular constituency;**
- **advocates who are able to reflect the views of those unable to participate directly themselves.**

These are all individuals with a different relationship to a service. They could make reasonable claims to speak for service users, with more or less direct experience of a service. Even those with no specific experience or expertise relating to the service may have an interest in it as tax-payers, or can be thought of as indirect beneficiaries of the service. Do representatives of all these groups need to be involved? Do they all need to be involved to the same degree? Or can some be simply consulted, while others, for example, have a hand in managing services?

In addition to deciding who is going to be counted as a 'service user' you need to think about whether you want to involve:

- **current users;**
- **past users;**
- **people who could use the service in the future.**

Each of these types of service user presents different challenges for involvement. A service seeking to develop a broad and inclusive strategy will inevitably need to use a range of approaches to involvement.

A further step is to think about whether it is best to involve them:

- **as individuals;**
- **in groups;**
- **via representatives from existing service user or community groups.**

Here it may be necessary to compromise between what is desirable and what is feasible. The different groups of users are likely to be of very different sizes. Some groups – such as local citizens – might be too large to involve on an individual basis. However, if it is decided that representatives will be used – to sit on a management board for example – then the question 'who is being represented?' needs to be asked.

It is rare that a single individual, or a small number of people, is in a position to represent adequately the full range of views among service users, particularly if the constituency they are there to represent is highly diverse. For intensive or detailed user involvement it is inevitable that only a few users can participate, but that should not lead to the complete neglect of the views of other service users. There may be groups with no obvious representative – such as those who have trouble accessing the service or future service users – or it may be that, for example, local minority communities do not have a strong sense of self-identity and community organisation. There may need to be special efforts to target these groups to ensure that their voice is heard. Their views can be fed into decision-making processes and complement those of the more heavily involved service user representatives. This is just one illustration of the broader issue of how to involve hard to reach groups.

So far we have discussed users in terms of individuals that either actually or potentially benefit from the service. It might also be possible to view local agencies, rather than individuals, as 'service users'. And there may well be quite a number. As an example,

one local authority recently changing the way part of its housing service operated and decided that it should explain the changes to all the local agencies that could be affected. Representatives of more than 80 agencies attended a seminar to discuss the changes. So the impact of a new service or a service alteration can be widespread.

Relevant local organisations might include advice agencies or information providers such as libraries. These are organisations that need to have access to information about your service so that they can refer people to it. They may not be partners in the provision of the service, but they may be able to make a valuable contribution in terms of, for example, views on the accessibility of publicity material and whether materials cover the sort of questions that people ask when initially hearing about the service. You may want to treat them as a separate type of 'service user' and involve them in the process of planning or revising the service.

Focusing down on 'your' service users

In many instances it can appear relatively easy to identify the current and potential users of a service. The users of a care and repair service, for example, are usually thought to be the owners of the accommodation being repaired. The potential users might be all older owner occupiers in a given area or, thinking about future users, all owner occupiers in the area currently over 50 years old.

In some instances the position is not so clear-cut and there may be multiple 'user' groups. The users of a common application form for applicants to sheltered housing could include current tenants of sheltered housing and older tenants of social housing. But users could also include older people living in the private sector, as well as the housing agencies who are involved in the common application process. If we return to the example of the care and repair service we can see that in addition to older households there is a range of organisations whose work is affected by the service – social services, the local NHS trust, the local authority housing department. They could also be considered directly or indirectly as users of the service.

In other situations you may need to distinguish between 'users' and 'carers', even though they both use a service. For example, when developing a respite care service there is sometimes confusion as to whether the user or the carer is the primary target for the service.

Feeding back

Involving service users requires effort on the part of staff. It should never be forgotten that it can require considerable effort from service users themselves. It is vital to successful involvement that service users are informed of the impact that their involvement has had on subsequent activities. One of the quickest ways to disillusion service users is to put a lot of effort into collecting their views on what should happen and then never bother to explain what impact those views had on the outcome of decisions or on future activities. So from the outset you need to build into involvement strategies mechanisms for providing feedback to users. More than one channel of communication will probably be needed if all service users are to be kept up to date.

Even if it were decided that service users' views could not be responded to in detail, staff need to be willing to engage in a dialogue with users about why that was the case. However, if staff find themselves regularly explaining to users why their views were not or could not be taken into account then it should be a trigger for reviewing why the organisation is trying to involve users in the first place.

Balancing the costs and benefit of involving service users

When making plans to involve service users it is important to be aware that involvement brings both costs and benefits. When thinking about costs and benefits it is almost always easier to think of the costs than the benefits. Costs might include staff time in working with service users, costs of hiring meeting halls, conducting consultation exercises, or printing newsletters. Less obvious costs might include taking longer to make decisions and having more complex decision-making processes. Inevitably these costs tend to loom large in the minds of staff when they think about consultation and involvement.

The benefits of involvement can be less concrete. They might comprise higher levels of satisfaction among service users, a greater sense of ownership of the services provided, valuing the services more highly, better relations between staff and service users. More fundamentally, the benefit is that the service actually has users. Service users are increasingly willing to make choices and 'vote with their feet' to signal whether they are happy to use a service. Where policy has emphasised the need to offer choice – such as housing for older people – providers who are not offering a service which customers want face difficult decisions about what to do with assets and services for which there is little demand. The problems currently facing many sheltered housing providers or social landlords facing problems of 'low demand' are good examples of this. From an organisational point of view, involving users can therefore avoid wasting large amounts of money.

The costs and the benefits of involving users may well be on different timescales: the costs may have to be incurred now, but the benefits are longer term. Couple this with the fact that costs are much more tangible than benefits and it becomes easier to see why some staff take the view that involving service users is an unnecessary luxury. This would be a mistake. Just because the benefits are less easily measured does not mean they are less significant than the costs.

While involving service users can significantly enhance the quality and appropriateness of a new or existing service it is an activity that must compete for resources with other organisational tasks. In the extreme, you could spend all your time and resources consulting with users and involving them in decision-making processes and never have time to make any progress with the service itself. This is just as likely to lead to disillusionment on the part of potential service users. While involving service users is vital, a balance has to be struck.

In Box 3.1 we illustrate the issues we have been discussing so far using the example of a luncheon club. Exercise 3.1 provides an opportunity to explore the issues further.

Box 3.1: Involving users in shaping an extension to services

A housing association specialising in providing sheltered accommodation runs a luncheon club every Tuesday for older residents and members of the wider community. The club is held in a communal lounge and is proving popular. It is over subscribed. The manager decides to run a second luncheon club. Before going ahead with this she decides to discuss the idea with service users.

Consulting service users through the tenants' forum

The manager decides that she should canvas opinion from existing users of the luncheon club. At the next meeting of the tenants' forum the manager asks representatives whether they would support a second luncheon club being held in their lounge. The response is mixed, those tenant representatives that go to the club are enthusiastic but there are a number of other tenants who no longer attend. In order to be clearer about the best way forward the manager needs to canvas opinion from two groups: existing users and potential users of the service, both those that have never used it and those who have stopped using it.

One-off consultation with existing and potential users

A short questionnaire is developed that is given to everyone attending the luncheon club, whether tenants or visitors. The manager also delivers a copy of the questionnaire to tenants who don't attend. She makes sure that this includes tenants who have never attended and tenants who have stopped going. She would like to send questionnaires to older people in the local vicinity but decides that this would be too time consuming, expensive and difficult to organise. She therefore accepts that she won't be able to get a full picture of why some older people don't use the club but at least she might get some clues from residents who don't attend.

Analysis of the questionnaires returned reveals that the majority of people attending the luncheon club are men and that they are satisfied with the service, particularly with the food provided. Almost all respondents would like to see the club running on a second day. However, a number suggest that they would like a greater variety of afternoon activity sessions.

It becomes obvious from the questionnaires returned by tenants who don't attend the club, mostly women, that there is a clash of activities on Tuesdays. The majority of these potential users attend a health and beauty session run by the local church. The session takes place at almost exactly the same time and a sandwich lunch is provided. Most of these tenants would welcome the chance to attend the luncheon club on a different day of the week but several comment that they would like the afternoon activities to reflect the interests of older women.

Action

The manager decides to go ahead with the second luncheon club. This is announced at the Tuesday luncheon club, on noticeboards and through a leaflet sent to all those who received the original questionnaire. The manager also sets up a working group including users and non-users of the existing club. The group is asked to draw up a new list of activities.



Exercise 3.1

You are asked by a local voluntary group to advise on the user involvement strategy they should adopt for the outreach service for older homeless people that they have been running for six months, based in a local day centre. They are keen to understand whether the service they are providing is meeting service users' needs effectively and is of satisfactory quality.

Given this objective, what would be an appropriate definition of the users of this service? Will some of them be more difficult to reach than others? Would you suggest involving service users on a one-off or regular basis? Is it more appropriate to aim at involving individuals, groups or representatives?

Notes

Getting started: hints and tips

- Be clear about the purpose of involving service users.
- Clarify what you mean by 'service user' – do you for example include potential users and excluded users?
- Be realistic about the scope for change, don't create unrealistic expectations.
- Decide whether service users are going to be consulted through a one-off exercise or whether you are embarking on a rolling programme of consultation.
- Are you going to deal with users individually, in groups, or through representatives?
- Think about how you will gather views that adequately reflect the diversity among service users.
- Make sure that you build in ways to give service users feedback on decisions and on the impact of their views.
- Allow extra time for decision-making, project completion and review processes in order to allow these processes to take account of service users' views.

3. Accessing the views of service users

Once you have determined who the users of a particular service are, decisions have to be made about how their views are to be accessed. These decisions are partly a question of feasibility: we have already suggested that whether involvement is on an individual, group or representative basis will in part depend on practicality, which will relate to the type of involvement envisaged and the resources available. Here we are concerned with how service users' views are accessed: not in terms of detailed methods of collecting views but in terms of the source of those views.

Using research in service design

Some new services are set up as a direct response to local research on users' views and experiences. Where this is the case managers are usually fully aware of the limitations and problems associated with traditional forms of service delivery, user involvement and evaluation of service users' views. They are aware of the problems faced by users in expressing their views. As a result service provision is designed to be user-driven: highly sensitive and responsive to individual preferences.

The views of service users and their preferences for involvement have been investigated extensively at local and national level in a range of policy fields, including social care. So even where resources for research into users' views locally are constrained, it is still possible for those designing services to be informed by users' views, drawing on the material gathered nationally or elsewhere in the country.

Involving isolated service users

Even where the commitment to user-driven services is present, developing methods for involving service users can be a real challenge. Take the case of services for rough sleepers. Members of this user group tend to be isolated from more conventional forms of interaction and communication and depend on highly individualised forms of support. Particularly imaginative and resource intensive approaches are required if you want to engage with their views. For example, you may need to develop sensitive one-to-one approaches. This form of user consultation requires considerable skill and is often very labour intensive. It may be that effort will have to be invested over a period of time to build trust before it is possible to engage in a meaningful dialogue about the nature or quality of services.

The task of engaging with isolated users can be compounded by an explicit aim of not subjecting service users to the sort of overly bureaucratic procedures that are sometimes associated with accessing statutory services. Bureaucratic evaluations of services involving questionnaires or interviews may be an inappropriate method of seeking views from particular types of service user. Such methods can in fact come into direct conflict with the flexible, informal ethos that innovative services are trying to maintain.

Eliciting the views of vulnerable service users

Some service users are unable to articulate their own views clearly or consistently. Evidently this presents great difficulties in accessing their views of the services they receive. How, for example, do you involve users of a service who are experiencing dementia?

In this sort of situation it is sometimes inevitable that someone else will be asked to stand in for the service user and act as a proxy. Often this is the user's main carer. Where this approach is taken its limitations should at least be acknowledged. The first question is whether the carer is a formal (paid) carer or an informal carer (family, friends, neighbours).

If the carer is paid then to ask them to act as a proxy for the user assumes that they are able to speak on the user's behalf and give primacy to the user's best interests. Yet at the same time managers typically recognise the need to monitor the activities of paid carers when they are working in the community, which implies that there is an awareness that carers will not always be working entirely in the best interests of those they help. So contradictory views exist in relation to the capacity of paid carers to speak on behalf of the service users they help.

Similar arguments might be applied in relation to family, friends and neighbours. While it may well be the case that informal carers will speak on the service user's behalf, it should not be assumed self-evidently true. If, for example, carers assume that criticism of a service might lead to that service being withdrawn, with their own care burden increasing as a consequence, it may influence their willingness to be frank.

A similar point can be made in relation to asking older people or other vulnerable households their views directly. If they are fearful of the consequences of giving their true views, they may not be as frank as is desirable.

The importance of thinking about who is to seek the views of service users cannot be emphasised too much. It is not unknown, for example, for organisations to ask their care workers to gather information from service users on the quality of the service that they themselves provide.

This type of approach needs to be questioned. Are users likely to express dissatisfaction with a service to the person providing it, particularly if the user expects to be seeing the care worker again tomorrow and on into the future? Sensitivity in recognising this sort of issue is essential. Without it the whole process of involvement can be undermined.

It may be appropriate to consider the use of, on the one hand, independent individuals and organisations to gather views from service users or, on the other, advocates to speak either on behalf of individuals or as representatives of groups of (rather than for) users. The use of independent individuals or organisations to gather information can encourage a franker expression of views, as long as service users believe that the information will be treated sensitively. The use of advocates can be a means of getting more independent views of the needs of the direct user. However, the limited availability of well developed networks of trained advocates severely limits the potential for this strategy.

Regardless of these difficulties, it is not satisfactory to rely solely on the feedback from those intimately involved in providing care to reflect the views of service users or to assess, for example, the degree to which service users can, and have been allowed to, choose between alternatives. Corroborating evidence from other sources needs to be gathered which indicates the extent to which users have been allowed to make choices and indeed to shape the nature of the choices on offer.

The principle of independent advice and information being available to users needs to be consistently applied.

Accessing the views of service users: hints and tips

- Think ahead and think creatively if you want to access the views of socially isolated users. You may need to allow plenty of time to build relationships informally before they are willing or able to offer their views on services. Less formal ways of consulting and involving these groups are likely to be the most productive.
- Think carefully about who collects information from service users or who you use as a proxy – are you confident that the approach will give you an accurate picture of service users' views?

4. User involvement in running services

When we turn to the mechanisms by which users can be involved in planning, managing or evaluating services there are many approaches that can be taken. Some are associated with the lower rungs of the ladder of involvement, while others are more closely related to the higher rungs of the ladder and with user-led services. Approaches to involving service users can include one-off consultations; regular user surveys; user forums; user participation in management teams. Here we provide an overview of the issues surrounding each approach. The details of the methods underpinning these approaches are not discussed here, but at the end of the chapter there are references that the reader can follow up for further information.

If, as we suggest above, you start by establishing why service users are being involved then this begins to give some shape to the timing and nature of user involvement. If, for example, you are planning a new service then the group you will be involving will primarily be potential service users and they will need to be involved early in the process. A key problem in this instance will be identifying and locating the people to involve. The precise form their involvement takes can depend on factors such as:

- **the size of the group of potential service users;**
- **the diversity within the group of potential service users;**
- **complexity of the questions you want to ask service users or of the issues that you want their views on;**
- **resources, skills and time available.**

The larger the group of potential service users the more difficult it would be to talk to a large proportion of users, whereas the greater the diversity among the potential service users the more important it would be to ensure that a range of perspectives is included. If the questions or issues are complex it might suggest that a strategy of involving a limited number of committed people in more detailed discussions would be the most appropriate route. But care is then needed in thinking about the representativeness of the small group of service users involved. Constrained resources and limited time might point to involving small numbers and one-off, short term, rather than extended, consultations.

Involving service users in management is going to involve recurrent or continuous involvement and is only likely to be feasible with the participation of a small number of user representatives. There is, in contrast, perhaps the greatest range of possible approaches to involvement where the aim is to assist in evaluating the quality, focus or impact of a service. This could be attempted through, for example, one-off consultations at the end of a pilot period. Or it could be through the analysis of the results of continuous user satisfaction surveys. Intermediate strategies, such as carrying out focus groups or surveys annually, are also clearly an option.

It may be possible to tap into more general resources such as the People's Panels that have been established by local authorities around the country as a means of regularly

gathering views from local populations on a range of issues. Alternatively, you could consider the possibility of setting up your own panel of service users to meet regularly and provide you with feedback on the service.

It is also sensible to consider involvement strategies that mix methods. By bringing together, for example, the results of a simple satisfaction questionnaire and detailed work with small groups of service users exploring their views about services a more rounded picture of users' views is possible than relying on one method alone.

The decision about the most appropriate involvement strategy requires examining the service in the light of the factors identified above. It also requires assessing which of the various methods of involvement will generate the type of service user input needed. We now briefly consider some of the available methods.

One-off consultations

One-off consultations do not so much represent a specific approach but a decision that involving service users at a particular point in time, rather than regularly, is sufficient. The precise nature of the involvement could vary. It might be a one-off door-to-door survey of residents in a particular area or it might be a series of focus groups or consultation meetings held during the planning phase of a new project. It might be something more ambitious in the form of a special event such as a planning day or a 'planning for real' exercise which gives communities an opportunity to explore and articulate their needs and preferences.

User surveys

Surveys are a means of gathering data from a large number of individuals. If they are concerned with users' views on services then they usually fall under the label 'user satisfaction surveys'.

The format of the survey can vary. It could be a specially organised door-to-door survey, a telephone interview or a self completion questionnaire returned to the organisation by post or, increasingly these days, by email or over the internet. Many organisations use a user satisfaction survey in the form of a brief feedback questionnaire to each user who visits the office or receives a home visit so they can rate the service that they have just received. While this may be a useful approach, it is worth pausing to think about what it tells us about the narrowness of the organisation's view of who its 'service users' are.

Survey design is a major topic in its own right. The key principle of most surveys is to ask questions of a sample of respondents – in this case, service users – who can be seen as representative of the population of respondents as a whole – in this case, all service users. But to say something meaningful about the views of service users as a whole the sample needs to be constructed correctly. Just picking all the users who visit the office one Friday morning is unlikely to give you a sample that is very representative of current service users as a whole, and clearly cannot reflect the views of potential users, excluded or past users. You need to seek some advice on sound methods of sampling.

The advantage of using the survey method is that it generates easily manageable data because service users are asked to select a response to a question from a list of prespecified options. The answers can easily be entered onto a computer and analysed numerically. The disadvantage of surveys is that precisely because the format is fixed before you talk to service users they are not very flexible. They are also not very good for investigating processes, complex issues or getting at the thinking behind people's views.

Each of the different methods of carrying out a survey has strengths and weaknesses. A face-to-face survey can be conducted relatively quickly, if there are enough interviewers available, and a large proportion of those approached are usually willing to be interviewed (it generates a high response rate). But this is an expensive way to do things. Telephone interviewing is being used more and more, but it relies on the respondents having a telephone with a number that appears on a suitable database (e.g. in the phone book or your organisation's own files). A postal questionnaire is a much cheaper way of surveying service users but it is inevitably slower and the response rate is much lower. Also, with a postal questionnaire you have little control over how the respondent fills the questionnaire in – for example, they may read the questions in the wrong order – or even who actually fills it in. Methods such as email or internet based surveying, although becoming more popular, rely on each respondent having access to a computer and the appropriate skills to operate it.

User forums

Holding regular forums for service users to come along and share their views is a common means of involvement. They have advantages over survey-type methods in that they are much more flexible. Issues can be discussed in some depth and service users can, where appropriate, explain not just their view but why they hold it. A forum can therefore be a potentially valuable resource.

User forums can be run in different ways. They can be more or less formal, working with more or less structure. This will influence not only the way the forum operates but also the nature of the input from service users. It would be a mistake to treat service users as a homogenous group. Some will be comfortable in a structured environment. They are used to meetings that are, for example, run to an agenda. They will be happy to participate in discussions run on these lines. Other will find this approach alien and would feel unable to share their views in this type of environment. They would prefer something more informal. Yet, one person's informality is another's lack of direction and purpose.

One of the disadvantages of forums is that they can attract the same set of regular attenders, with a large number of users never participating. Or they start out well attended but the numbers drop off over time. One reason for this is that the format might be putting people off. Another reason might well be that the users are not being given any feedback on the influence that their input is having. Few except the activists and those with an axe to grind will want to keep turning up regularly to share their views if they do not see that doing so makes any real difference. So, as we

noted earlier, a vital element of this sort of activity is providing feedback on what action was taken in the light of views expressed at earlier meetings.

The success of service user forums can depend on a range of other things that staff need to think carefully about, some of which might not be immediately obvious.

Important factors include:

- **The physical location in which it is held – formal or informal?**
- **The staff present – could you, for example, expect residents of a sheltered scheme to be frank about the services they receive if the warden attends the meeting?**
- **The number of staff present – will alter the dynamic of the meeting. More staff than users, for example, is likely to give a very different tone to the meeting.**
But not enough staff attending could send the signal that the organisation is not actually very interested in service users' views.
- **Who controls the agenda – do staff determine what is to be discussed or is it shaped by users' concerns?**

Focus groups

The focus group is a well-established social research technique. A small group of people meet to discuss a range of topics. The meeting is facilitated or directed by an interviewer. Focus groups are used if you want to explore what lies behind people's views or to get them to work through complex issues. Because they are group interviews they have a particular dynamic: one person expressing a view or recounting an experience may trigger another person to share their views. Accessing this sort of dynamic is one of the reasons for holding focus groups. If, in contrast, you were interested in an individual's views 'untainted' by the views of others then you would need to use a different method, such as individual in-depth interviewing.

A focus group is usually structured around a list of topics that the interviewer guides the group through. The structure is relatively flexible. Some interviewers will steer the group through the topics in a particular order, others will let the conversation flow in a way that ensures that all the topics are covered by the end of the allotted time. Focus groups can also be valuable for gathering service users' views on things like publicity or explanatory materials that the organisation is developing. Is it attractive? Does it engage the reader's attention? Is it clear? Does it tell you what you need to know?

From the organisation's point of view a focus group has the advantage that the participants can be selected to represent different types of service user. While they don't generate 'representative' samples in a statistical sense (which is what you would want for a survey), focus group participants can be selected according to the profile of the organisations' users to ensure that the diversity of views is represented. Running separate focus groups for different groups of service users is a good way of ensuring that the discussion is relevant to the users involved. So you might consider running

separate groups for current service users and excluded households. The second group might dwell more on the problems encountered in accessing services and potential solutions. In contrast, in some instances mixing user groups might be a key part of the approach, allowing the differences and the social dynamic between the two groups to be explored. Thinking how best to structure the groups is therefore an important element of the process.

Focus groups can be a valuable source of rich data. But they place considerable demands on the interviewer/facilitator. There are researchers who specialise in this technique and it may be worth considering employing someone to conduct focus groups for you. However, skilled practitioners can very successfully conduct their own focus groups as long as they are aware of the process, its problems and pitfalls.

Service users on management teams

The degree to which it is possible to engage service users on management teams or steering groups is limited. Often when service users are involved in such forums their attendance is reported to wane over time and their involvement is often described as tokenistic. This is not surprising given the style of working of such bodies and the characteristics of the individuals and households that some organisations are providing services for. It does suggest, however, that although membership of formal bodies is often one of the preferred ways of involving service users it is not without its problems. It should certainly not be relied upon as the only means of involving service users, or it can be used simply as a token gesture.

If service users are represented on your management board and their involvement does decline, why not explore ways of changing how the body works? Perhaps the meeting is held at an inconvenient time, or service users are having trouble getting to the building. Some service users may feel that they need more training to enhance their participation or that paid officers require training in how to communicate with users. One of the dangers when involving service users on management boards is that professionals make no concessions to the fact that users may be unfamiliar with the processes, organisations or funding regimes under discussion. The result is that service users can find it difficult to follow the discussion and hence to make a contribution to the proceedings. If you don't review the process of involving service users you are unlikely to improve their participation.

Clearly, the management teams of many organisations in the voluntary and statutory sector operate with very heavy agendas. Their decision-making is also quite often constrained by external pressures which mean that decisions have to be made by a certain date. These are factors which can work against inclusive decision-making processes. This is a problem that needs to be faced directly but it is one to which there is no easy solution. Planning ahead and starting to think about issues sooner rather than later can maximise the time available for familiarisation, discussion and deliberation. Ensuring that meetings are well chaired can minimise the amount of time wasted on less important issues and maximise the time available for service users' representatives to ask questions or present their views.

Meaningful involvement?

It is important to think through the extent to which each of these methods represents meaningful involvement. And to ask yourself whether a method will yield the desired outcome, in terms of the level of input service users can have. To illustrate this point, consider a door-to-door survey. The usual format of a survey is a set of prespecified questions with pre-coded answer categories. The aim is a standardised response with the scope for numerical analysis of the results. But does it represent meaningful involvement?

If officers or project staff decide on the questions to be asked and the answer categories to be included then to a large degree they structure the outcome. There is little scope for service users to come up with new ideas or to explain in detail what they think about services or how things should be changed. Some might therefore decide that survey methods do not represent sufficient or 'genuine' involvement. They are viewed, at best, as a form of consultation. Others could legitimately take the view that this does represent meaningful involvement.

Diversity and disadvantage: maximising involvement

When considering which methods of involvement to use you have to be aware that different methods carry different risks of excluding particular groups of service users. For example, a face-to-face survey requires that people are able to comprehend and respond in spoken English. A postal questionnaire requires an adequate level of literacy and eyesight.

It is possible to employ interviewers or focus group facilitators who are fluent in minority languages. It is possible to ensure that postal questionnaires are checked for plain English and the complexity of language. It is possible to provide large print or braille versions of questionnaires. But each of these options has cost and time implications that need to be recognised and built into planning. Similarly, are you going to offer newsletters and websites in translation? Or on tape? Are the outlets that you use to distribute newsletters going to reach all your service users or do you need to develop other more specific information channels in order to reach members of particular communities?

In sum, do you have an involvement strategy that maximises the chances that all those who wish to give their views are able to?

In Box 3.2 we illustrate some of the issues discussed in this section, continuing with our example of a luncheon club.

Exercise 3.2 invites you to think further about the appropriate methods for involving service users.

Box 3.2: How are we doing?

The luncheon club has been running for six months. It appears to be popular, however the working group set up to review the afternoon activity sessions would like to find out whether or not users are satisfied with the sessions.

The group decides to design a simple satisfaction survey. Every older person attending the luncheon club will be asked to rate their satisfaction with each of the sessions, which rotate weekly. The activities include: reminiscence sessions, bingo, quizzes, and once a month a visiting speaker attends.

The survey is handed out the following week to everyone attending the luncheon club.

Only half of the questionnaires are returned. The answers suggest that while users are satisfied with the reminiscence sessions, bingo and quizzes they feel that the sessions with visiting speakers are not so enjoyable because mostly they have to sit and listen rather than participate. The group decides as a result that they need to change the format of these sessions to allow for more participation.

However, the working group is also concerned that only half of the questionnaires were returned. They decide to do some follow up work using a different method of involvement to find out why the other users did not bother to return the questionnaire.

The working group is not satisfied to leave the situation there. They also discovered that the week that the surveys were handed out the luncheon club was relatively poorly attended because there was a special one-off event being held elsewhere in the town which many users chose to attend. The working group decided it was important to discover what this group feels about the luncheon club. The very fact that they chose to do something else instead of coming to the luncheon club indicates that they are likely to have a somewhat different perspective: they could, for example, be more mobile and hence have more choices in terms of the pastimes they pursue.



Exercise 3.2

The local voluntary group found your advice on the broad shape of the user involvement strategy for their outreach service to older homeless people very helpful. They have now asked you to provide more detailed proposals about the ways to approach involving service users. What method or combination of methods of involving service users would you suggest?

Notes

User involvement in the running of services: hints and tips

- One-off attempts to consult with users with no follow up merely contribute to mistrust and render future attempts more likely to fail.
- All the other pressures that organisations face to deliver quickly can lead to rushing or neglecting service user involvement. Staff must be on their guard to prevent this happening.
- An explicit and resourced long term strategy should inform all aspects of an organisation's work to involve service users.
- Staff need to watch against the exclusionary possibilities of language and of different methods of consultation. Is the involvement strategy sufficiently sensitive to allow diverse service users the opportunity to offer their views?
- Meaningful involvement requires feedback. Without it service users won't see the point in contributing to the decision-making process.

5. Conditions for success

Successful service user involvement does not just happen. The conditions must be right. A combination of a supportive organisational culture and staff with the necessary skills and commitment needs to be in place to maximise the chances of success.

Organisational

The extent to which those providing a service involve users and obtain their views is usually strongly shaped by the nature of the organisation within which they operate. In organisations with a strong culture and tradition of involving service users a new service can capitalise on this. In this type of organisation there is a commitment at senior level to valuing service users' contributions. Resources will often have been deployed over a longer period of time to develop an infrastructure to support involvement and the organisation has in place a range of methods that are employed regularly to listen to service users' views.

Indicators of such a culture and commitment include:

- **a well developed complaints procedures;**
- **the implementation of an equal opportunities policy;**
- **a system of well-resourced service user groups and advocates;**
- **regular two-way communication with a network of groups of service users;**
- **training and support for frontline staff on how to involve service users.**

Services with a strong commitment to involving their users could be developed in organisations that do not demonstrate these characteristics. Success will depend much more on the skills and persistence of individual staff members who may find themselves struggling against the dominant culture. For the service to survive it may be necessary

for staff, on top of their activities related to the service itself, to engage in a process of education and persuasion of colleagues in order to gain acceptance of an approach based on involving service users. The task is considerable. Yet, if successful it could represent the beginning of a cultural shift within the organisation.

Staff skills

There is still a shortage of skills among frontline staff and managers to enable them to involve service users meaningfully. Effective involvement requires a different set of skills to more conventional project or line management. It requires the sensitivity to recognise and attempt to deal with the issues that flow from the power differentials and dependencies that can arise in the relationship between professional and service user. As we noted above, it is not always appreciated that users may not speak frankly about services on which they depend. Users can fear losing a service, even if they are not entirely happy with it.

A keen sense of the need for two way communication is essential to successful user involvement. Staff have to be able to step outside the world of the professional and deal with users on terms – and in language – that they are comfortable with.

To make involvement meaningful staff need the skills to move beyond the formulation of policies and procedures and make these a reality to service users. So, for example, while equal opportunity policies and complaints procedures may exist, service users need to be informed of their rights and how they would invoke them. It is not always clear that this happens. It also needs to be recognised that the group of people who are ‘users’ of a service changes over time – as people move into or out of an area, for example – so communication and awareness raising needs to be a recurrent not a one-off activity.

At the more detailed level of involving service users in decisions about which services they should receive, the evidence that users are offered choice and are able to express preferences is relatively weak. Staff with the ability to work through options with service users and allow them to make decisions about their own care are vital if a general commitment to user involvement at the level of policy is to translate into genuine involvement. There is the ever present danger that staff will use their more powerful position in the relationship to make sure that their view of what is appropriate prevails, overriding user concerns or wishes without comment. The temptation to do so is heightened where staff have one eye on performance targets or budgetary concerns that need to be addressed.

Individual

The success of some services or agencies in involving their users can be linked to the personal skills and characteristics of the staff appointed. The skills of the individuals involved are critical. The sort of work undertaken to elicit service users’ views is often slow and not especially visible. While involving users should have clear goals, the route to achieving these goals cannot always be specified in advance.

The skills needed can often be difficult to specify in writing but are more easily recognised in practice. Maturity, ‘local’ knowledge, capacity to respect ‘lay’ as well as professional perspectives, persistence, good humour, and commitment all play a part.

Conditions for success: hints and tips

- Organisations and localities which have a culture of involving service users and a well-resourced infrastructure of service user groups and networks are better able to sustain user confidence and involvement.
- Appoint people with experience and skills in community development or similar activities.
- Explain to users, prior to seeking their views and involvement, the limits within which professionals/agencies are obliged to operate.
- While information and communication technologies have huge potential to increase access to information and services for users, there will be people whose lack of familiarity with technology means that they will not benefit from these sorts of developments. It is important that these people are not further excluded from the services they need if and when resources are moved away from more 'traditional' forms of labour intensive communication.

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DoH (2000) *The NHS Plan: A plan for investment, a plan for reform*, Cm 4818-1, London: DoH.

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HC (1998) *Making consumers count*, London: The Housing Corporation.

HC (2000) *Communities in control*, London: The Housing Corporation.

HC (2004) *Involvement policy for the housing association sector*, London: The Housing Corporation.

7. Where to go for more information

Improving the way that users are involved in shaping and delivering services is a key concern across many policy areas. Consequently an extensive literature on the topic has developed. Some of the publications that you may find helpful include:

Age Concern England (2000) *Involving older people: Good practice guide*, London: Age Concern England.

Barnes, M. and Bennett-Emslie, G. (1997) *'If they would listen ...' An evaluation of the Fife User Panels*, Edinburgh: Age Concern Scotland.

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Service First Unit/NCC/CC (1999) *Involving users: Improving the delivery of local public services*, London: Cabinet Office.

Small, N. and Rhodes, P. (2001) *Too ill to talk? User involvement and palliative care*, London: Routledge.

Thornton, P. (2000) *Older people speaking out: developing opportunities for influence*, York: York Publishing Services.

Thornton, P. and Tozer, R. (1995) *Having a say in change: Older people and community care*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The website explaining the Charter Mark scheme for public sector bodies, which places the emphasis very much on service users and customer service is:

<http://www.chartermark.gov.uk/>

Involving service users using methods such as surveys and focus groups means applying well-established social research methods. There is a large literature on social science

research methods available that you may find useful. While some of this literature is a bit technical and possibly more detailed than you might need, there are books which provide a useful introduction to the field. These include:

Babbie, E. (2003) *The practice of social research*, 10th edition, Belmont: Wadsworth.

May, T. (2001) *Social Research*, 3rd edition, Buckingham: OUP.

And specifically on the topic of survey research:

De Vaus, D. (2001) *Surveys in social research*, 5th edition, London: Routledge.

Sapsford, R. (1999) *Survey Research*, London: Sage.

Module 4: Knowing what you're achieving: monitoring and evaluation

Executive Summary **99**

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Executive Summary

- Evaluation can be extremely valuable in helping organisations assess how services or projects are performing and helping to decide whether policy and practice need to change. It is also increasingly required by funders.
- We evaluate to see whether we have achieved what we hoped to achieve from a project or intervention. Often we are interested in *whether*, *why* and *how* we have succeeded.
- Evaluation is a field with its own jargon. Terms such as aims, objectives, inputs, processes, outcomes, and outputs are central to understanding the evaluation process. Yet, they do not all have agreed meanings. Be clear how you or others are using the terms in a particular context.
- Assembling baseline data relating to the situation before the start of a project or service is important if an evaluation intends to say anything meaningful about how things have changed. Constructing a snapshot of the existing situation is valuable but often neglected.
- In order to assess whether a project achieves its aims and objectives it is necessary to specify the project's intended outputs in terms of a series of targets and milestones. Drawing up targets and milestones requires some thought to ensure that they are clear and meaningful. It is a common mistake to set targets and milestones that are ambiguous or too vague.
- If an evaluation is worth doing, it is worth doing well. Doing it well inevitably costs and there are more costs than the purely financial. Any evaluation will need a variety of different resources: some financial, some political, some organisational. Many projects underestimate the costs of evaluation. Some writers suggest that around 10 per cent of total project costs should be set aside for evaluation. Projects without much money available may nonetheless be able to conduct a rigorous and worthwhile evaluation by drawing on alternative uncosted resources such as the 'free' time of staff and volunteers. The cost of obtaining and using these resources should not, however, be ignored.
- The key to successful evaluation is to plan ahead and to be clear from the outset regarding the fundamentals of evaluation: What are you evaluating? Why and how are you doing it? Who will use the results?
- Much data that is useful for monitoring and evaluation can be extracted from existing information systems and used in new ways. But there is always the danger that existing systems don't quite give you what you need. If your planning for evaluation starts early enough then you can ensure that information systems are designed to provide data useful for monitoring and evaluation. Confidentiality and data protection issues need to be borne in mind at all times, especially when sharing data between partners.
- It can be helpful to draw up a clear evaluation strategy or framework. This involves a number of stages including: clarifying the aims of the project; specifying objectives; identifying measures of success that can be used to decide whether objectives have been achieved; evaluating whether the objectives have contributed to the overall aims; and recommending action. The criteria used to evaluate projects are typically closely related to the project's aims and objectives. But they often also include broader issues such as efficiency, effectiveness and equity.

1. Approaching evaluation

How do organisations decide whether they are providing the right services in the right way or whether they might improve those services? Clearly they must examine what they are doing and think about whether it comes up to scratch and is meeting expectations. Are things going as intended? Are there problems? How might any problems be solved? Is there anything that could be done to improve the way things operate or the service that is provided? Much of the thinking about these issues is done informally by staff making adjustments to how things are done on a day-to-day basis. Sometimes it is done more formally and systematically. It could then be referred to as an 'evaluation'.

So, evaluation can be extremely valuable in making sure things are on track and to aid organisational learning and development. Yet, when the idea of evaluation is mentioned most people are not very enthusiastic. It often provokes feelings of anxiety or annoyance among busy practitioners who would rather spend their valuable time developing and delivering better services. However, evaluation should not be seen as in conflict with that desire. If managed properly, it can make a valuable contribution to the objectives that practitioners see as most important.

It can be helpful to think of your own feelings about evaluation in terms of two questions. How useful do you think it is? And how difficult do you think it is? When asked, most practitioners say that evaluation ought to be useful, but often is not, and is usually hard to do.

This module starts from the belief that evaluation can be extremely useful and can be made easier if approached in the right way. This 'right way' mainly involves thinking carefully in advance about the purpose of the evaluation and the uses to which it might be put. It involves paying attention to planning an evaluation as thoroughly as possible and knowing the strengths and weaknesses of different evaluative techniques.

2. Why evaluate?

Before examining this approach in more detail it is useful to think a little more about why we evaluate.

Essentially we evaluate to see whether or not we have achieved what we hoped to achieve from some kind of project or intervention. Often we are interested not only in *whether* we have succeeded, but also in questions of *why* and *how* we have succeeded. And an important element of this involves questions about value for money and cost effectiveness, such as:

- **How efficient have we been in achieving our results?**
- **How effective have our actions been?**
- **Have we reached the right people?**
- **How equitable is the impact of our actions?**

In all of this, evaluation holds the promise of allowing us to learn from our experience of developing policies, projects and practice so that we or others can do things differently – and hopefully better – in the future.

So, evaluation offers considerable benefits to those providing services or managing projects. But it is also important to recognise that we live in a time in which external evaluation has become an important element of the environment in which organisations operate. In business, in government at central and local level, and in voluntary and community groups performance measurement and performance management are increasingly dominant features.

The government says that 'what matters is what works'. This clearly requires knowledge of what works. Evaluation is an important way of finding out what works and what doesn't. Evaluation of performance is increasingly a requirement of funding: financial support always comes with strings attached, and more and more frequently one important set of strings involves evaluation. So, for many practitioners evaluation has become an unavoidable activity. Continued funding under grants or the terms of contracts or service level agreements requires the demonstration of satisfactory performance. Many practitioners need to be concerned with evaluation because, ultimately, their jobs depend upon it.

This module is intended to support you in making the evaluations you are involved with more useful. It should allow you to be better placed for evaluation to help you improve your practice and the services you provide for others.

It starts by offering some definitions of terms used in evaluations. There is a degree of consensus around the meaning of these terms, but some of them are more debated than others. For example, the relationship between 'aims' and 'objectives' is not always clear or agreed. The definitions offered here provide you with a starting point for constructing your own. Remember that the most important point is to be clear about how you are using terms, so that others know what you mean when you talk about things like aims, objectives, milestones or targets.

3. Some definitions

Here we set out some definitions of terms that are widely used in evaluation and suggest how they are connected to each other. We provide some illustrations from the field of housing and care to help you see how these terms can be related to your interests.

Monitoring

Monitoring is the routine collection of information about a service, activity or project which allows you *to keep track of what is going on*. It can include collecting information about inputs, outputs and processes, each of which is considered below.

Goals, aims and objectives

The things we want to achieve are usually called goals, aims or objectives. Increasingly organisations also formulate visions and mission statements to encapsulate their purpose.

The things we want to achieve vary in terms of how broad or specific they are. Generally, objectives are more specific than aims or goals. But they are linked. More specific objectives tend to be things that will have to be done in order to achieve a broader aim or goal.

For example, all the projects in the initiative that prompted this guide had the goal of crossing the divide between housing and care, but they each went about reaching this goal in very different ways – some by providing information, some by providing care, some by using technology to enhance services. Hence their specific objectives varied.

Evaluation

Evaluation is the process of *assessing* or *judging* the value of a piece of work or activity *against certain criteria*.

The criteria will often relate directly to the goals, aims and objectives of a project or initiative: has the piece of work or activity contributed towards their achievement? But the criteria can also include broader ideas such as efficiency, economy, effectiveness and equity.

For example, an outreach scheme aims to make contact with older homeless people and to allow them to access housing advice, health and other social services more effectively. An evaluation would allow you to judge whether or not these aims have been realised.

- If we used *efficiency* as our evaluation criterion then we might look at how many homeless people were reached by a scheme with a budget of a certain size and whether any money was being wasted.
- If we were mainly concerned with *effectiveness* then we would consider whether the scheme was allowing homeless people to access the service or combination of services appropriate to their specific needs.
- If *equity* was our evaluation criterion we might be looking to see if certain groups of homeless people – such as rough sleepers – were less likely to access services than others, such as people living in hostels.

In most real world evaluations we will be looking to evaluate across several criteria at once. And we need to be clear which criteria are being used to judge performance.

Evaluation can help you decide whether you are going in the right direction: in other words, doing the right thing as well as doing things right. You can see this by thinking about the difference between efficiency and effectiveness. A scheme might be very efficient and reach lots of people for a limited budget, but achieves this by providing a standardised service that doesn't necessarily suit the needs of individual users. It is efficient but not effective. An effective scheme, in contrast, might be one that made sure that the service was tailored to meet the needs of individual users. You can also see that you might have to make some trade-offs between efficiency and effectiveness. Making sure services are tailored to need may mean a smaller number of people can receive services.

Evaluation assists conscious and informed decision-making. On the basis of evaluation you may decide that services or activities should carry on as normal or you might see

that they need to change direction or be streamlined or reorganised. But it will be a conscious decision rather than something that happens by accident while you are busy dealing with day-to-day tasks and problems.

Self-evaluation

Self-evaluation means relying on those who are responsible for planning and delivering a project to carry out the evaluation, rather than using outside experts. When we discussed evaluation as an aspect of project management in Module 1, the focus was very much on self-evaluation as an element in controlling the implementation of a project. We would suggest that all projects and services can benefit from integrating self-evaluation into their work plan. Self-evaluation carries with it the advantage that those involved in the evaluation know the structures and processes intimately.

In contrast, outside evaluators can bring a greater degree of objectivity to the exercise, and may see things that those responsible for the project take for granted. Outside evaluators can also find it easier than insiders to reach and present difficult conclusions. However, they can be costly and take a long time to familiarise themselves with the detail of your work. Those funding a project may well require outside evaluators to be used. Or you may wish to employ outside evaluators yourself to provide an independent perspective on how you're doing. As ever, there is a balance to be struck between these factors in deciding which approach is best for you.

The process of project development and service delivery is often said to involve a range of stakeholders – for example, funders, project staff, service users, volunteers, outside experts. The term self-evaluation can also refer to the process of involving these stakeholders in various aspects of the evaluation – so that judgements and decisions are made within the project. For example, service users could be involved in discussions about which criteria should be applied during an evaluation to judge the success of a project or service.

It is often difficult to separate this approach to self-evaluation from the broader issue of involving users in the development and running of projects or services. We have covered these issues in more detail in Module 3.

Baseline data

Most, if not all, evaluations are interested in how things have changed since a project or service began. In order to make judgements about how things have changed it is necessary to have information about the situation before the project starts. A profile of this initial situation is often referred to as the 'baseline' data for an evaluation. Without baseline data of some description the job of evaluating the difference a project or service has made becomes impossible. The range of baseline data collected needs to be related to the aims and objectives of the service and any broader evaluation criteria being used: you may well need baseline data relevant to each criterion against which you plan to judge performance.

Experience suggests that the baseline data used by many projects is patchy or extremely limited. The evaluation is correspondingly less effective than it might be. However, in many cases it is not that data on the baseline situation are not available, rather the

data have not been assembled for this purpose before. It may require a degree of creative thinking to make the most of what is available. For example, if you are engaged in joint working to provide an innovative service then assembling baseline data will probably involve collating data on existing services from each of the partners to arrive at a comprehensive 'snapshot' of the situation at the outset. This may never have happened before and will undoubtedly require effort. It may only be possible to construct a partial picture: for example, partners do not all collect data of a particular type or use incompatible definitions of variables such as household type. In some instances the effort of collecting baseline data is one that no one is inclined to make. Yet, it is effort that will undoubtedly be repaid many times over in terms of what can be achieved by an evaluation.

It may also be necessary to think about conducting a data collection exercise specifically to gather baseline data before the project or service gets off the ground. Then you have a benchmark against which to judge performance. This requires thinking about evaluation to begin early in the process because the data you might wish to use to benchmark your new service against may only be available before the service begins. Turning your attention to the issue of baseline data once the service has launched may be too late. For example, service users' views on existing services could be influenced by their experience of the new service, or they may not be able to recall what the old service was like. Alternatively, old systems of record keeping will often be discontinued, or even erased, once the new service is in place. The opportunity to construct the baseline snapshot may therefore be lost.

It is also critical to establishing a baseline to think about how long that 'snapshot' needs to be. If you only have data for the month or quarter prior to the new service being launched then you need to think whether there are any reasons for thinking that this period was atypical in some way. Most obviously, if the demand for your service is at least partially seasonal – a homeless shelter, for example – then relying on that single period for the baseline may lead you to over- or understate the impact of the new service because part of the change in level of demand for, or use of, the service can be attributed to seasonal effects. Atypical levels of activity could be the result of other factors such as changes in local policy, or problems in related services leading to short term backlogs. You would ideally have a long enough run of baseline data to make allowance for such effects. However, in many situations that is an ideal that is unattainable.

Inputs

Inputs are the resources put into a project to make something happen – for example: money, staff time, expertise, equipment. They are all the things you would need to include when constructing an expenditure budget for a project.

Outputs

Outputs are things which are directly produced from the inputs, including services, buildings, events, documents. For example, they might include the construction of a new residential facility or day centre for older people; or some cookery classes for older men; or a directory of local respite services for carers.

Outputs tend to be related to the more specific objectives of a project.

Outcomes

Outcomes are changes brought about as a result of the outputs produced. Outcomes are more typically related to the broad aims of the project. For example, the outcomes of projects aiming to link housing and care might be seen in evidence of a greater involvement of older people in service planning, delivery and consumption or in improvements in the health of older people.

The difficulty with measuring outcomes is that because they are typically very broad and take time to be realised, it is often not easy to be sure that the outcome was the result of the actions of your project or initiative: other things will have changed in the lives of the service users and that could be the cause.

We hope the outcomes we observe are those we have anticipated and which we desire, but it is important to recognise that they may be unforeseen or even unwanted.

Inputs, outputs and outcomes can be linked together by a process or activity, as illustrated in Box 4.1. Note that the achievement of *outputs* does not necessarily guarantee the achievement of *outcomes*. For example, you might succeed in preparing precisely the right number of meals, using the estimated volume of inputs (i.e. you didn't waste ingredients or run out of anything) but the quality of the meals was so poor that no one chose to eat one. The meals remained uneaten and you failed to achieve the desired outcome of people who were no longer hungry. Uneaten food is an undesirable outcome that represents 'no change' from the baseline situation. If all the meals were eaten and everyone subsequently went down with food poisoning then the outcome is an undesirable negative change compared with the baseline position.

Box 4.1: The link between inputs, outputs and outcomes

For a simple example of how inputs and outputs are linked by processes or activities to outcomes, think about the activity of preparing meals for a group of people who are hungry:

The Inputs are:	Cooker, ingredients, power, kitchen staff
The Process is:	Preparing and cooking food and serving meals
The Output is:	Meals
The Outcome should be:	People who are no longer hungry

Measurement often becomes more difficult as we move from inputs through to outcomes. In other words it is often more straightforward to count beans than it is to decide whether or not meals are satisfactory. However, while outcomes tend to be *less measurable* than inputs and outputs, they are *more meaningful*, because they are more directly connected with what we are ultimately aiming to achieve.

Exercise 4.1 uses the example of a service for the resettlement of homeless households to examine further some of the issues fundamental to any evaluation.



Exercise 4.1

The board of a local housing association working to resettle homeless households is concerned about households abandoning their property within a few weeks of taking up a tenancy. They decide to enter into partnership with a local voluntary agency to provide support to resettled homeless households in the early months of their tenancy. The voluntary agency will provide support in the form of: a peripatetic worker who will provide tenants with advice and assistance in managing their tenancy; the organisation of social events three times a week; and the operation of a 24-hour helpline.

What baseline data would you recommend should be collected in order to provide a snapshot of the situation before the new service begins?

What are the inputs, process, outputs and outcomes associated with this new service?

What evaluation criteria do you think should be applied to assess the performance of the new service?

Notes

Targets and milestones

The achievement of objectives usually involves producing a particular set of outputs by a certain time.

These outputs can be described as targets which have to be reached by certain milestones – for example, to have made contact with 50 new service users by the end of next year, or to have set up partnership arrangements with all other local organisations after six months.

Notice that these two examples contain both a target (*'50 new service users'* and *'all other local organisations'*) and a time period (*'the end of next year'* and *'after six months'*). Setting up clear targets and milestones in this way makes it easier to evaluate what you have achieved. Sometimes at first sight it is not always obvious how to relate your activities to a target-milestone like this. But often with a bit of thought it is possible to set down an indicator by which you can judge your achievement.

It is a common mistake to work with targets and milestones that are ambiguous or too vague. This makes it difficult to assess whether or not the target-milestone has actually been achieved. This is a situation in which it can be useful to apply the SMART test: make sure that targets are **Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timebound**.

It is important to think clearly about how you are going to interpret your targets and milestones. If you think about the examples we have just given, you might start to ask yourself questions. How do we distinguish new service users from existing service users? If someone used the service six months ago then came back again today, would they be a new user or an existing user? Does *'all other local organisations'* mean all or just those which play an important role in assisting local people? If we want to say we will achieve this *'after six months'* when does the six months start?

Some of these questions do not have a *'right'* answer – such as the distinction between new and old service users. In which case you need to be clear how you are interpreting them. And you need to make it clear to everyone who will be involved in recording monitoring information during the project so that information is recorded consistently. Other questions might lead you to rephrase or define your target-milestone to be more precise.

4. Key issues and questions

Evaluation is in essence a relatively straightforward activity in which we compare expectations with outcomes: what we hoped would happen with what actually happened. As in many other areas though, it can become much more complicated once you get into the detail of what that means in practice. Listed below are some key issues to think about and some pitfalls to beware of.

Confusing terminology

In all areas of life we tend to develop a specialised form of language that makes sense to those involved, but which often does not mean a lot to outsiders. Jargon is

commonplace. Sometimes it is clear why it is necessary but sometimes it appears to be used deliberately to exclude people who are not part of the group.

There are many academic books on the subject of evaluation that explore the complexities of the activity. Some of these look at the philosophical questions of how we know and understand things; others at the practical difficulties of researching people's perceptions and feelings; some look at technical debates around sampling and how we generalise from particular cases; and others at the measurement of change.

Some simple definitions of key terms used in evaluation have been given above, but it is important to be aware that in the field of evaluation there is great scope for inventing new phrases to describe familiar activities.

An American evaluation specialist once produced an 'alphabet soup' in which he listed an evaluation technique for every letter of the alphabet. While this is not a sign in itself of a problem, it can lead to confusion and to feelings of inadequacy when we encounter a technique or approach with a name we do not know. The best approach is usually to ask what it means in simple terms as this will often reveal that it is very similar to something you are already familiar and comfortable with.

False conflicts

Partly because we tend to rely on jargon and shorthand to describe the approaches and techniques we use, it is easy to over-simplify and to create conflicts between approaches where none need exist.

This can be seen in the tensions that often exist between quantitative and qualitative approaches to evaluation. Quantitative approaches are characterised as being concerned with measurement and numbers, while qualitative approaches are seen as focusing on processes, interpretations and understandings. There can therefore appear to be a tension between the two and in the past arguments have raged over which approach is preferable. However, for many social researchers this tension has been resolved by thinking more carefully about the types of questions that are best answered by quantitative research and evaluation and those that are best answered by qualitative evaluation methods. This in turn often hinges on whether we are most interested in accurate description and measurement of what the situation is or in understanding why things happen as they do. Often we are interested in both. Evaluation frequently employs a range of methods.

Tensions also exist between evaluations carried out internally or externally, as we discussed above. For example, is it sensible to allow practitioners to take responsibility for evaluating their own activities or is it best to use independent and possibly more objective outsiders? It is usually more sensible to come to a decision in each particular case than to propose a general rule that might apply in all circumstances.

Finally, there are often disputes around the timing of evaluations: should they be carried out before, during or after a project or an intervention? Again this depends on the purpose of the exercise. If your project has been set up as a form of experimental pilot it might be best to allow it to run its course as planned and then to judge its impact at the end. In other circumstances it might be more important to learn as you go and hence for the evaluation to be on-going.

Of course, even for an after-the-event evaluation, it will be necessary for baseline data to be collected at the outset and to collect process data as the project develops. The use of this information in making evaluative judgements may not happen until the end, but data gathering happens throughout the life of the project.

Magic wands for wicked problems

Although some of the detailed aspects of putting projects into effect on the ground might be novel, the underlying issues that affect most projects are not especially new. The same is true of evaluation. For this reason it is advisable to be cautious and sceptical about any apparently new technique or approach that promises to change the world overnight. Just as financial advisors tell us to be wary of get-rich-quick schemes, we need to be wary of apparently new evaluation techniques that promise to solve all your problems of designing and putting into effect an evaluation. A snappy title for a 'new' evaluation technique does not always mean it is best for you or indeed that it works very well at all.

The real costs of evaluation

If an evaluation is worth doing, it is worth doing well. Doing it well inevitably costs, but that does not mean that the more you spend the better it will always be. There are more costs than the purely financial. Any evaluation will need a variety of different resources: some financial, some political, some organisational.

Experience suggests that many projects tend not to take a realistic view of the costs of evaluation: they tend to underestimate the costs involved and do not budget adequately for evaluation at the planning stage. It is easy to underestimate the financial costs of paying outsiders to carry out evaluations and to pay insufficient attention to the cost of time. Some writers suggest that around 10 per cent of total project costs should be set aside for evaluation. It is certainly useful to bear this figure in mind when thinking about the resources that might be needed to conduct an evaluation.

For a project that does not have a lot of money to spend it may be difficult to contemplate devoting 10 per cent of project resources to evaluation. Such a project may nonetheless be able to conduct a rigorous and worthwhile evaluation. But it will most likely need to draw on alternative uncosted resources: the 'free' time of staff and volunteers, the expertise of local people, the use of other people's equipment, the political support of other organisations. It is important to be conscious of the cost of obtaining and using these resources and not to ignore them.

5. Principles

When starting to prepare for an evaluation it is helpful to bear in mind the following set of principles. They come from the experience of conducting evaluations and from helping others carry out their own evaluations. They also come from recognising the many pitfalls that exist and hence are aimed at trying to avoid them in the future.

Clarify the fundamentals

You should be able to answer the following questions about your evaluation:

i What are you going to evaluate?

Processes

- Has the project been working in the way that you wanted it to?
- Have some ways of working proved to be difficult or even impossible?
- Which processes have been most successful?

Direction

- Was the chosen direction the right one?
- How was it chosen and why?
- Should the project change direction?

Outcomes or impact

- Has the project made a difference?
- Was the difference what you wanted at the outset?
- Was it what other people expected?

Performance

- What was the **balance** between inputs and outputs?
- Was it **effective** – did the inputs produce the desired outputs and did these lead to the desired outcomes?
- Was it **efficient** – could the desired outputs have been achieved with fewer inputs?
- Was it **economic** – could more outputs have been achieved with the same volume of inputs?
- Was it **equitable** – did the groups or people you wanted to benefit actually do so?

ii Why are you going to evaluate it?

- To look back at the end of an experiment to judge success or failure?
- To provide an opportunity for on-going adjustments to a project?
- To provide lessons and good practice for others?
- To meet the requirements of a funder?

iii How are you going to do it?

- In-house or externally, or some combination of the two?

iv Who is the evaluation for? Who will use the results?

- Is it clear who wants the results?
- What possible decisions might they take as a consequence?
- How do they like to receive information and recommendations?

v How long will it take?

- Does it have to be done by a particular time and are there important deadlines to meet along the way?
- Is there scope to alter the pace by devoting more or less resources to the evaluation?
- Do you have the time to do what you think needs doing?

vi How much will it cost?

- Have you listed all the known costs?
- Does that include all the hidden costs, including goodwill, local knowledge and staff expertise?

Plan ahead

As we mentioned in the introduction, evaluations can be seen as difficult and unproductive exercises. This is often a result of insufficient preparation. In order to counter this, preparation is important. Therefore:

- **plan in as much detail as you can and think about evaluation as soon as possible in the process of project or programme development;**
- **develop an evaluation strategy that includes answers to the questions listed above.**

Audit existing data

Evaluation does not have to be all about collecting piles of new data. It may be that there are a lot of useful data being collected already. Projects invariably have systems that collect different types of data as a matter of routine. With constrained resources it makes sense to make as much use as possible of the data that already exist and turn them into information useful for evaluation.

The data already collected might include:

- **Client records**
- **Minutes of meetings**
- **The telephone log**
- **Complaints records**
- **Customer feedback forms**
- **Staff training records.**

If these data are collected through reasonably well-designed and functioning systems then they will hold much that can be used in an evaluation. The information may not have been collected for this purpose, but it may nevertheless be possible to use it in this way.

As a first step in planning an evaluation it is often worthwhile carrying out a quick survey of existing project information systems. You would be looking to see what they hold, in what format, how accessible it is, whether systems are kept up to date and whether everyone who should be entering or handing over information actually does so.

If you take a step further back in the process one reason why you should think about evaluation from the start becomes clear. If you are conscious of your evaluation strategy and information needs right from the start then it is possible to influence the way routine data collection methods are structured. Looking back over what is already being collected to see what can be used for evaluation carries with it the danger that existing data might not quite fit the bill. By being aware of evaluation needs at the start you can make sure that routine data collection systems are tweaked so that information appropriate for evaluation is being collected right from the word go.

Also remember the information collected and held by others. Partner organisations, local statutory and voluntary bodies will all be collecting their own information about what they do. Sometimes this will not be accessible to you because of issues of confidentiality and data protection, but often organisations are willing to share information if you ask for it and especially if you are willing to give other relevant information in return. Here again early thought about evaluation can lead to discussions with partners about how data protection concerns may be overcome. It may be possible, for example, for other agencies to change the permissions they secure when the data are collected in a way that will allow it to be shared.

Be flexible

While preparation and thinking ahead are vital to evaluation, it is important to avoid being too rigid in the application of your strategy. This is not to say that you should chop and change your approach in the face of any and every problem. Rather you need to keep an eye on whether or not some of the assumptions you make at the outset remain valid.

For example, you might find that the new member of staff who you expected to be able to carry out some data analysis is given other work to do when they arrive. Or it may be that the funds that would have allowed you to buy a new piece of software are not now available. Or you may find there is widespread public indifference to the meetings you had planned.

Therefore:

- **learn as you go and be prepared to change elements of your evaluation strategy;**
- **react quickly if elements of the strategy do not work in practice;**
- **beware of allowing projects being evaluated to constantly move the goalposts.**

Be aware of the impact of the evaluation

While evaluations involve the use of many technical skills, they are not purely technical exercises. To be effective they usually require a wide range of people to co-operate with you in one way or another. Moreover, because they require judgements to be made, evaluations will have an emotional component. If an evaluation reveals success then those associated the project or initiative will probably feel pleased; if it reveals shortcomings, they are likely to feel anxiety or concern.

Therefore:

- **remember that evaluation is a political as well as a technical activity;**
- **you may end up criticising the assumptions and the practice of others, so think about how they are likely to react;**
- **avoid personal criticism, but be prepared to deal appropriately with evidence of bad practice or malpractice.**

6. Frameworks and strategies

It helps to have an evaluation strategy or framework that sets out clearly what you will be doing and why. The questions set out in the previous section provide a useful starting point in this exercise, but it is also worthwhile to consider the stages in the development of a simple evaluation framework. The stages are as follows:

- **Clarify the aims of the project or intervention**
- **Specify objectives**
- **Derive measures of success**
- **Collect relevant information**
- **Make judgements**
- **Recommend action.**

This evaluation framework has a lot in common with the broader framework for managing projects presented in Module 1. As we discussed there, self-evaluation is integral to the overall process of project management. It can also be helpful to think of evaluation as a project within a project: many of the suggestions made in Module 1 are relevant to conducting evaluations.

If you are adopting a more formal approach to project management, of the type discussed in Module 1, then some of the early stages of thinking about evaluating services – such as clarifying project aims – should occur at the inception of the project. The material in this section will help in that process.

Here we take each of the stages, or groups of stages, in the evaluation framework and set out the things you should think about. Where appropriate, we have provided some exercises or templates to help you put them into practice.

Clarify the aims of the project or intervention

These are often simply stated, but it is not always clear what exactly they mean in practice. For example, a project might say that it is committed to empowering older people as service users, or to delivering a high quality service. But what do these statements mean? Does empowerment mean giving people opportunities alone, or does it require people to take up those opportunities? Does empowerment mean taking some power away from one group and giving it to others? What standards of service quality do you hope to achieve? Are you striving for perfection or is there room for continuous improvement? Do you define high quality in terms of achieving some absolute standard or in comparison with what is being provided by others?

Are your aims stated in terms of inputs, processes, outputs or outcomes? As we suggested above, it is better to focus on outcomes, or at least outputs, than inputs or processes. Yet, some projects formulate their aims entirely in terms of inputs or processes. This is not necessarily very useful for evaluation purposes.

For example, if the project aim is specified as being *'to set up a new service to provide domiciliary care to older members of the local south Asian community'*, then it would be straightforward to report that such a service has been established. But is that useful information on its own? Possibly. But it does not get us very far in evaluation terms. Why was the service being set up? Are people using it? How do they rate it? Has it made a positive impact on the lives of service users? Answers to these questions would make for a more useful evaluation.

If, instead, we started by specifying an aim such as: *'to improve the quality of life of all older members of the local south Asian community'* then this presents a more challenging, but also more useful, starting point for evaluation. Formulating the project aim in this way places the focus on outcomes – in this case, quality of life. Questions about the effectiveness of the actions you have taken to achieve this aim tend to flow directly from the need to assess whether the aim has been fulfilled.

Having thought about questions like these, it is still good to be able to encapsulate your broad aims in a relatively simple statement. However, this statement needs to be clearly linked to the next level of detail.

Specify objectives

These should derive from the broad aims and should describe in more detail what must be done in order for the aims to be met. For example, in order to achieve the aim of empowering older people a project could aim to establish a discussion forum by the end of the year for older residents so that they can say what concerns them.

In other words these more specific statements have to be connected to the broader aims, so that in achieving them you are contributing to the fulfilment of the broader aims.

Often, the process of generating aims and objectives will start with a sense of dissatisfaction with something in the present. For example, you may feel that older people do not have any meaningful opportunities to help shape the services that are

provided for them and that as a result those services are not as good as they might be. A useful starting point can therefore be to identify what you see as the problem you wish to address, and then to move on to setting out your broad aims and more specific objectives.

Table 4.1 is designed to help you think along these lines. It shows how you can move from the identification of a problem, through the description of broad aims in addressing this problem, to the setting out of more specific objectives. The table goes on to prompt you to think about how success might be measured and what information or data you would need to see if the measure has been achieved. The next section discusses these aspects in more detail.

Table 4.1 has been filled out with some illustrative examples. A blank form has been included on page 124 of this module for you to use in relation to your own project or initiative. Exercise 4.2 provides the opportunity to explore these issues in the context of the example introduced in Exercise 4.1.

In filling out the blank form, you should start if possible at the left and work your way along each row. Of course one problem may generate more than one aim and in turn this is likely to generate more than one objective.

How many different objectives and outputs should a project set? Even when a project has one broad aim, it is unusual to have only one objective and output. Often, what initially appears to be a single objective is actually too broad, complex or multifaceted to be a useful guide to either management or evaluation of the project. It can be broken down into a number of separate and more manageable objectives. However, identifying too many separate objectives and outputs can mean that not only does the management of the project itself become more unwieldy, but evaluation becomes much more complex. As ever, there is a balance to be struck.

Derive measures of success

By moving in turn from objectives to action, it is also possible to begin to think about timescales and people responsible for these actions. These provide further detail on who will do what, by when, in order to achieve the objectives. For example, *'the Manager will establish a forum to meet monthly at which we expect at least half the residents of Townsville Older People's Home to attend and contribute on a regular basis'*.

Once again it should be possible to link these measures back to the objectives and broad aims and hence show how they contribute to addressing the problem that was identified in the first place. This is important because, just as it is difficult to come up with one measure of success for the broadly stated aims, the more specific measures should be seen as means to an end and not necessarily as ends in themselves.

Following the example of the Townsville Older People's Home, while it is important that the monthly forums are held and that reasonable numbers attend, it is even more important to see this as a means to enable older people to have their say and to be listened to. In order to discover whether or not the views expressed by older people at

these forum meetings have been influential, it would be necessary to look for examples of changes in practice that could be clearly attributed to the expression of these views. This will probably require interviews with people with responsibilities in these areas and the exercise of judgement about the balance of their views regarding the influence of older people's views.

In summary, the whole process is one of breaking broad aims down into more tangible and manageable pieces but then building up the measures of success so that they relate again to the wider picture.

The next stage involves thinking about the best ways of collecting information that relates to the measures of success.

Table 4.1: Moving from aims to indicators

Problem to be addressed	Broad aims	Specific objectives	Key actions to be taken	Measures of success	Data collection methods
Racist harassment of black families	A safer community	Support people who are harassed	Create support scheme for victims of harassment	Take up rate by prospective clients Client satisfaction with service provided	Group records Interviews with clients
Extent of safety hazards in homes	Encourage more healthy and safe lifestyles	Help people identify health and safety risks in their homes	Launch home safety check scheme	Number of hazards rectified Consumer satisfaction with service	Records Survey of consumers
Older people not listened to in service planning	Empowerment of older people in service planning	Give older people opportunities for involvement in service planning	Create Older People's Forum	Forum established and meeting regularly Views of Forum members about extent to which voices heard Views of other planners about impact	Administrative records Interviews and group discussions Interviews and group discussions

Collect relevant information

Too often in evaluations it is the techniques of data collection that drive the process forward, rather than the process of breaking down and building up described above. We can become fixated on particular techniques and look for ways of applying them, rather than being driven by the need to gather particular types of information and selecting techniques accordingly.

Research techniques, like many other things, come in and out of fashion and too often we employ techniques because they are (or appear to be) new rather than because they are the best in the circumstances and suit our purposes.

It is clearly impossible in this brief guide to describe, let alone review, the full range of social scientific research techniques that might help in gathering data for evaluation. However, some simple principles will help in approaching the task of information collection:

- Look to draw on **existing** administrative or management information systems in the first instance. If these do not exist then explore the need for carrying out new research to collect the information you need.
- Existing information systems may not provide all the information needed to judge success. For example, they may record the fact that an older people's forum was established on time, that it meets regularly and is attended by more than half the older residents. However, it might not reveal that most of those attending are not satisfied that the concerns they raised are taken seriously by service providers – this would require some **additional research**, possibly involving interviews or group discussions.
- Make sure you know **why** you want all the information you collect. Do not go to the trouble of collecting information that does not help you answer the key questions of the evaluation.
- From the outset, think about the **costs** of collecting information. Try to remember the hidden costs of collection and avoid assuming that your colleagues will always welcome the opportunity to get involved in your research (especially if you do not forewarn them!).
- Think in advance about how you will **analyse** the data you collect:
 - Who will **enter** the data into a system (probably PC-based) that will help in the analysis?
 - Who will do the **analysis**?
 - Are they **capable** and **competent**?
 - Do they have the **time**?
- Think in advance about the audience for your results:
 - How do they like to receive information?
 - How much complexity can they handle?

Table 4.2 describes different types of evaluation research and shows how they vary according to such things as the main user of the research, its purpose, the focus of study and so on. This again should help you in deciding which research methods are best for different approaches and should also help you avoid being driven by methodological fashion.

Table 4.2: Summary of differences between four main types of evaluation

Type	Main user of results	Purpose	Focus of study	Methods	Role of evaluator
Experimental	Scientists... but eventually practitioners	Discover evidence of cause and effect	Outcomes	Hypothesis testing Measurement of outcome Control and quantification of variables Statistical analysis	Independent, external and detached scientist
Economic	Managers and policy makers	Calculate resources used and benefits obtained	Inputs, activity, outputs and outcomes	Quantitative and specialist outcome measures (e.g. QALYs)	Independent, external and detached scientist
Developmental	Managers and frontline staff	Help providers improve in short term	Process	Mainly qualitative	Independent but collaborative Assisted-self evaluation
Managerial	Managers	Accountability and performance management	Inputs, process and outputs	Quantitative and qualitative	Inspectorial, detached and semi-independent

(Source: Adapted from J. Overtveit (1998) *Evaluating Health Interventions*, Buckingham: Open University Press)



Exercise 4.2

The board of a local housing association faced the issue of resettled homeless households abandoning their property within a few weeks of taking up a tenancy. They have now set up a service, in partnership with a local voluntary agency, providing support to households in the early months of their tenancy. The support comprises: a peripatetic worker who will provide tenants with advice and assistance in managing their tenancy; the organisation of social events three times a week; the operation of a 24-hour helpline.

The board asks you to set out a simple evaluation framework for this new service. Following the template set out in Table 4.1, identify each of the following:

- The problem to be addressed
- The broad aims
- Specific objectives
- Key actions to be taken
- Measures of success
- Data collection methods.

There is a blank form at the end of this module for you to use.

Notes

Make judgements

The purpose of evaluation is to come to conclusions and to make judgements. Judgements usually focus on the direction of policy and practice and the pace at which policy and practice objectives are achieved.

Evaluation involves weighing up all the available evidence, coming to a conclusion about whether the objectives have been reached *and* whether they have indeed contributed to the achievement of the broad aims.

Clearly, it can help to be able to refer to pre-agreed standards of success in coming to these judgements. Standards can be locally determined or may be part of a national framework set by government or by professional bodies.

If these external standards or benchmarks do not exist, then the success of projects or initiatives must be judged against their own internal criteria. As discussed above, these come from the interaction of problems, aims and objectives, and specific actions. The way a problem is presented and analysed usually gives an indication of what its possible solution might involve.

At the conclusion to an evaluation it is important, therefore, to make these judgements and to present the results of them as clearly as possible. Without them, it is not clear how the lessons from a particular policy or project or initiative might be learnt by others. And as pilot projects grow in popularity this is becoming an increasingly significant consideration.

Some of the possible conclusions that might be reached from an evaluation are to:

- **terminate the pilot and take no further action of that type;**
- **roll out or extend the scheme to a wider area;**
- **extend the life of the pilot;**
- **amend the project or policy in the light of the evaluation.**

Recommend action

As we have said above, it is important to know who your audience is when recommending action following an evaluation. Of course there may be more than one audience, but it is important to bear in mind how your audience prefers to receive information. Do they:

- **Expect recommendations or more simply the presentation of different courses of action?**
- **Want to read all the technical detail of an evaluation or to see only an executive summary and recommendations?**
- **Like to see vivid illustrations of issues and proposals?**

This is not to say that you should pull any punches in reporting the results of your evaluation nor that you should avoid presenting conclusions that might be unpalatable to some. But it does mean paying attention to the presentation of your case. And there

are few better suggestions than those of Joseph Pulitzer. He said that when writing for an audience, we should put it to them:

- **briefly so that they will read it;**
- **clearly so that they will understand it;**
- **picturesquely so that they will remember it;**
- **accurately so that they will be guided by it.**

7. Some final hints and tips

The following hints and tips should offer a final checklist to bear in mind when preparing for an evaluation. By keeping these in mind the chances of your evaluation being a reasonably rewarding experience for you and everyone else involved will be increased.

i Build on past practice and experience:

- Do not forget about evaluations carried out within your organisation in the past or more recently in other similar organisations.
- Remember any relevant lessons from previous evaluations – whether or not they took longer than anticipated; the hidden costs; how the results were used.

ii Avoid where possible linking evaluations with potential budget cuts:

- Remember that evaluations can be very threatening, try to minimise this by avoiding evaluations that look simply for ways to make cuts.
- If this is impossible, do not expect the enthusiastic participation of staff whose jobs are threatened.

iii Show how the evaluation might lead to improvements in the quality of service:

- If possible, make clear that improvements in the quality of service provision usually come from systematic and often simple evaluations.
- Provide illustrations of evaluation-driven improvements to service quality from the past.

iv Plan ahead and get people thinking about evaluation as soon as possible:

- Preparation usually leads to productive evaluations.
- Poor preparation usually leads to problematic evaluations.

v Use existing data as much as you can:

- Collecting data costs – time, money, goodwill, equipment.
- By knowing what exists already you will be better placed to cut down on these costs.

vi List all the resources – not just cash – that you will need in carrying out the evaluation:

- It is easy to underestimate the real costs of an evaluation.
- Finding extra resources after you have started is not so easy.

vii Think about who you want to influence with the evaluation:

- Keep this in mind when deciding how to present the results and recommendations (this is described by some experts as Utilisation Focused Evaluation).

viii Make sure you strip out as much jargon as you can when describing your work and what you want from others:

- While it can sometimes help to use technical jargon, most people will be turned off by it.
- Remember Pulitzer's principles!

8. Where to go for more information

The literature on monitoring and evaluation has expanded dramatically, very much in line with its increasing importance in policy terms. The details of many of the data collection techniques that evaluators use can also be found in books on social research methods. Some of the publications that you may find helpful include:

Ball, M. (1988) *Evaluation in the voluntary sector*, London: The Forbes Trust.

Barr, A., Hashagen, S. and Purcell, R. (1996) *Monitoring and evaluation of community development in Northern Ireland ... and ... Measuring community development in Northern Ireland: a handbook for practitioners*, Belfast: Voluntary Activity Unit.

Burns, D. and Taylor, M. (2000) *Auditing community participation: an assessment handbook*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

Cameron, A., Harrison, L., Burton, P. and Marsh, A. (2001) *Crossing the housing and care divide*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

Clarke, A. and Dawson, R. (1999) *Evaluation research: an introduction to principles, methods and practice*, London: Sage.

Connor, A. (1993) *Monitoring and evaluation made easy: a handbook for voluntary organisations*, London: HMSO.

DETR (1998) *Guidance on enhancing public participation in local government*, London: DETR.

Laird, R. and Greaves K. (2000) *Effective research for Registered Social Landlords*, London: The Housing Corporation.

Meyrick, J. and Sinkler, P. (2000) *An evaluation resource for Healthy Living Centres*, London: Health Education Authority.

New Economic Foundation (1998) *Participation Works! 21 techniques of community participation for the 21st century*, London: NEF.

Patton, M.Q. (1997) *Utilization-Focused Evaluation: the new century text*, London: Sage.

Rubin, F. (1995) *A basic guide to evaluation for development workers*, Oxford: Oxfam.

The following web sites are also worth visiting and following their links:

<http://www.evaluation.org.uk/>

<http://www.mande.co.uk/>

<http://www.ces-vol.org.uk/>

<http://www.eval.org/>

<http://www.goshen.edu/soan/soan96p.htm>

If you are interested in pursuing the debates about the context in which evaluation occurs and its broader social significance then you may find the following of interest:

Taylor, D. and Balloch, S. (2005) *The politics of evaluation: participation and policy implementation*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

PROJECT TITLE: _____

Key dimensions for evaluation: from aims to indicators

Page:

Problem to be addressed	Broad aims	Specific objectives	Key actions to be taken	Measures of success	Data collection methods

Module 5: Putting the systems in place: using information technology

Executive Summary **127**

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Executive Summary

- Information and communication technologies (ICTs) now support or influence the activities of most workers: those who provide frontline services as well as those who are office-based.
- ICT can contribute to a project at different levels and on different scales. Determining a project's ICT requirements is a complex task. For all but the simplest systems, procuring the necessary equipment can be a highly technical process. This is an area into which project staff have to be very cautious about entering unless they can access specialist skills.
- Start from a clear understanding of the goals, aims and needs of your organisation. Then move to the information requirements for meeting your organisation's goals and to the alternative ways those requirements might be met. Only then is it sensible to consider the more specific issue of ICT. If you start by focusing on ICT there is a risk of wasting a lot of money on inappropriate or unnecessary equipment.
- Thinking about the issues or problems you are facing as a 'business change', rather than a technical ICT matter, encourages a broader view. It may lead to the conclusion that investment or change to ICT systems is in fact not the best way to address the issue.
- Before thinking about accommodating a new project within your organisation, you have to understand fully how the organisation currently operates, particularly how it processes information. You can analyse the problems associated with existing ways of working and the extent of change needed to move to alternatives. If you are setting up a project from scratch then, in contrast, you have the opportunity to establish effective processes from the start.
- Ensure that you are aware of the wider organisational context in which you are developing ICT systems. It will probably present constraints and opportunities you need to be aware of.
- Using or changing ICT systems is not just a technical question. You need to give thought to how ICT affects an organisation's social system. Will the ICT integrate well with the culture and ways of working? Ensure that staff are consulted early regarding the nature of change. Develop a communication plan to ensure everyone is aware of what is happening.
- If you are introducing systems that involve greater use of ICT by service users you must test fully whether users will be comfortable using the technologies.
- There are three options for developing software: a bespoke system; an off the shelf system; or the do-it-yourself option. The first two can be too expensive for smaller voluntary sector projects. Consider investing in training for a staff member to enable them to design simple applications to run on commercially available software. This could be money well spent.
- Never *assume* that a system will do what you want it to do, even if it is already being used by other similar organisations. Always check before accepting what is being offered.



- When procuring an ICT system a clear and comprehensive specification is essential. Drawing up an adequate specification, particularly for a bespoke system, is a complex exercise. Practitioners without a strong background in ICT run the risk of writing specifications that are too vague, which results in underperforming systems.
- Determining and meeting the information and ICT needs of an organisation is one area in which the assistance of consultants, either internal or external, is extremely valuable. Spending money here can avoid wasting money on systems that are not 'fit for purpose'.
- When changing ICT systems it is important to consider the whole picture. This includes issues of data security and data protection, health and safety, and accessibility.
- Tight project management is essential in projects implementing new ICT systems because it is a complex and multifaceted process.

1. IT's all around

Information technology (IT) or, more inclusively, information and communication technologies (ICTs) are now central to most working environments. Office workers would find it hard to think about doing their job without access to the computer and the fax, to word processing software and email, and increasingly to more specialist software and to the internet. For those providing frontline services ICT may have seemed more remote – something that is associated with ‘the office’ – but increasingly services and information are being provided through electronic means. Technology is allowing the reconfiguration of service delivery through the use of remote alarm systems, call centres or the internet. Organisations are also using ICT in less high profile ways to support their operations through, for example, electronic monitoring of the delivery of services to users as part of care packages.

Most people providing public and voluntary sector services are aware of the increased emphasis being placed on monitoring and evaluation. The need to report regularly to others – partners, funders, government, auditors – on what a project or service has been doing means that many are looking to ICTs to help them demonstrate whether an activity is delivering value for money.

The flexibility of ICT means that electronic systems can be set up to meet diverse organisational needs. They can provide timely management information as well as information that can be used to evaluate the achievements of a project or service. Valuable data for monitoring purposes can be generated as a byproduct of systems designed to assist in the administration of a service.

In the current climate ICT is very much viewed as a necessity. Yet exactly what is it that is necessary? ICT can contribute to a project at different levels and on different scales. At one end of the spectrum is the single PC sitting on the project administrator's desk and fulfilling all a project's ICT requirements. At the other, there is the fully integrated network which costs many thousands or millions of pounds and links staff in different offices in different locations, supporting both a full range of ‘back office’ administrative functions for staff and a web-based, ‘front office’ for potential and existing users to access services.

Most projects and services will need access to word processing and probably email, but how much further than that is it sensible to go? Projects need to be aware of how ICT might help, but they also need to be realistic about whether investing heavily in ICT is actually necessary. For example, small projects may not generate a large enough volume of activity over their lifetime to justify the investment in sophisticated software to track what is going on.

The whole issue of deciding on a project's ICT requirements can be an extremely complex area. And when those requirements start to move beyond the simple end of the spectrum and toward the more complex, the processes involved in procuring the necessary equipment can rapidly become highly technical. These are areas project staff have to be very cautious about entering unless they can access specialist skills.

As we suggested in Module 4 in relation to monitoring and evaluation, it can be helpful to think of determining and meeting a project's ICT requirements as a project within a project and to manage it as such. Because they are often complicated, projects involving the implementation of ICT are an area in which the use of formal project management methods, of the type we discussed in Module 1, is essential. ICT projects are renowned as being extremely difficult to deliver successfully on time and to budget. Even where formal project management methods are used many projects to implement new ICT systems in the private, public and voluntary sector end in disaster because those in charge of the project find themselves out of their depth. That is why access to specialist ICT skills – and knowing when to call on them – can be vital.

In this module we provide some advice to assist practitioners who need, or want, to become involved in this area. The module looks at:

- **Key questions that need to be asked when thinking about developing and using ICT.**
- **Key issues that need to be addressed if ICT systems are to make a positive contribution to an organisation.**
- **Some of the practicalities of developing, purchasing and implementing ICT systems.**

One difficulty with this field is that it is technical and can become dominated by experts and jargon. This is not a technical manual. There are plenty of such manuals already in existence. In this module we try to pose questions and discuss issues in plain English so that it can help people who are not computer experts to be aware of some of the issues and pitfalls in working with ICT systems.

2. Thinking about developing ICT

A good starting point in developing ICT systems is to ask yourself a series of questions. Are you clear what you want the ICT system to do? What are the activities or processes that you are hoping an ICT system will handle or, alternatively, render redundant? Or what is the issue or problem that you want the system to deal with? In sum, what do you hope to achieve by putting a new or modified ICT system in place?

If you cannot give a clear account of why you want a new system then you do not have a strong base to build on. Working on a new system without a clear idea of what you are trying to achieve is a recipe for a lot of wasted effort and money.

In fact, it is a good idea to start by stepping back from the whole issue of ICT. You need to do some homework – preliminary thinking to be clear in your mind what is needed. Start from a clear idea of the goals, aims and needs of your organisation or service. Look not just at current needs but at changes that you can foresee over the next few years. Are upcoming changes in government policy or regulation, for example, going to require changes in the way you deliver your services? Are there internal processes that you recognise need to be changed or streamlined? A clear idea of the direction in which your organisation is heading and of the issues it faces means that you are better placed to formulate a clear definition of the nature and scope of the problem(s) to be addressed.

You are then in a position to consider the alternative courses of action available and the information requirements of each. Only then should you consider whether your ICT systems need attention.

Approaching the problem in this way means seeing the issue as a 'business change', with ICT being one possible element of change. You will therefore develop a broader appreciation of what is needed. Starting from this point could lead you to decide that the issues you are facing do not require a technological solution. It may be that organisational or staffing changes could overcome difficulties or integrate activities better, without the need for costly ICT development. A technological solution may be the best way forward, but it is always a good idea to think around the issue and see if there aren't alternatives. Technological solutions may seem 'up to the minute' and modern, but that does not mean they are always the best. In some organisations a 'technical fix' can be used as a means of avoiding thorny issues about the performance of staff, management or the ineffective use of existing systems.

3. Analysing your organisation

If you are setting up a project or service from scratch then you have the opportunity to develop a set of organisational processes and associated information flows that represent an effective way of achieving the aims and objectives of the project. If, in contrast, you are introducing an innovative service or project within an existing organisation, with a view to changing the way things are done, then you have to start by developing a clearer understanding of how things work currently. This is the situation that we consider in this section.

Describing the back of your hand

You may know all or part of your organisation 'like the back of your hand' and have a clear idea how it functions. But much of that knowledge is 'tacit': it is not written down in formal procedures or regulations, and it may be impossible to do so. Before you think about implementing a new or modified ICT system there is work to be done away from computers, software and programming to map out how the organisation works. In particular there has to be an understanding of how the organisation uses information – all types of information not just that contained on computers. How is information gathered, used and circulated within the organisation? What sort of information does the organisation disseminate?

Documenting and analysing information use in this way may highlight areas where the flow of information between staff or between staff and services users is poor. Enhancing flows of information may enhance the effectiveness of the organisation, but the emphasis may be on modifying procedures or staff training rather than changing ICT systems.

Being able to give this type of account of information use is an important step in the process of developing ICT systems. It will be hard to make much progress in computerising some or all of the organisation's activities without a clear understanding of how information flows within the organisation. The alternative is that you end up

with an ICT system that does not mesh well with what the organisation is actually trying to achieve. Time taken at this stage will pay dividends later on.

In the computing world the term 'systems analysis' can be used to describe these initial stages of getting to know the organisational processes for which an ICT system is to be developed. For small organisations and simple processes it may be a fairly straightforward exercise and can be carried out quickly. But for more complex processes it can be a time-consuming exercise. It involves asking lots of questions that might at first strike you as obvious. These are needed to build up a complete understanding and profile of the processes involved. What you're trying to establish is a firm grasp of how the organisation operates and to make the 'tacit' knowledge held within your organisation more explicit. This means being clear about the 'obvious' as well as the less obvious. A comprehensive analysis of information use is a good basis for designing and developing an appropriate ICT system.

Analysis of this type will ask questions such as:

- **Where does information enter the organisation?**
 - Who receives the information?
(e.g. receptionist, care worker, project manager, finance director)
 - Through which channels?
(e.g. telephone calls, emails, faxes, letters, visits to the office, while visiting a service user)
 - In what form?
(e.g. verbal, on paper, email message and attachments)
- **How is information stored?**
 - In one or more locations?
(e.g. files on service users, personnel, finances held separately)
 - Who is responsible for ensuring that it is stored?
(e.g. office administrator, officer looking after information regarding users they have contact with)
- **Who needs access to stored information?**
(e.g. other members of care team, line manager)
- **How is information passed between members of the organisation?**
 - Through which channels?
(e.g. memos, reports, agenda items for meetings, emails, informal verbal)
 - Does it vary for different types of information or different types of communication?
(e.g. verbal or email for colleagues, memos or reports to line managers or the project board)
- **How does the organisation disseminate information?**
 - Who receives information?
(e.g. service users, funders, partner agencies, local press)
 - Through which channels?
(e.g. written, verbal, email, fax)
 - In what forms?
(e.g. newsletter, presentation to service user forum, grant claim, report to project board, press release)

Answering these questions may require consulting with several members of different departments of your organisation. Once you have the answers you should be able to draw up a map of your organisational processes. The focus should be on information flows, with a single process quite possibly including more than one flow of information and information being passed back and forth between departments or even organisations.

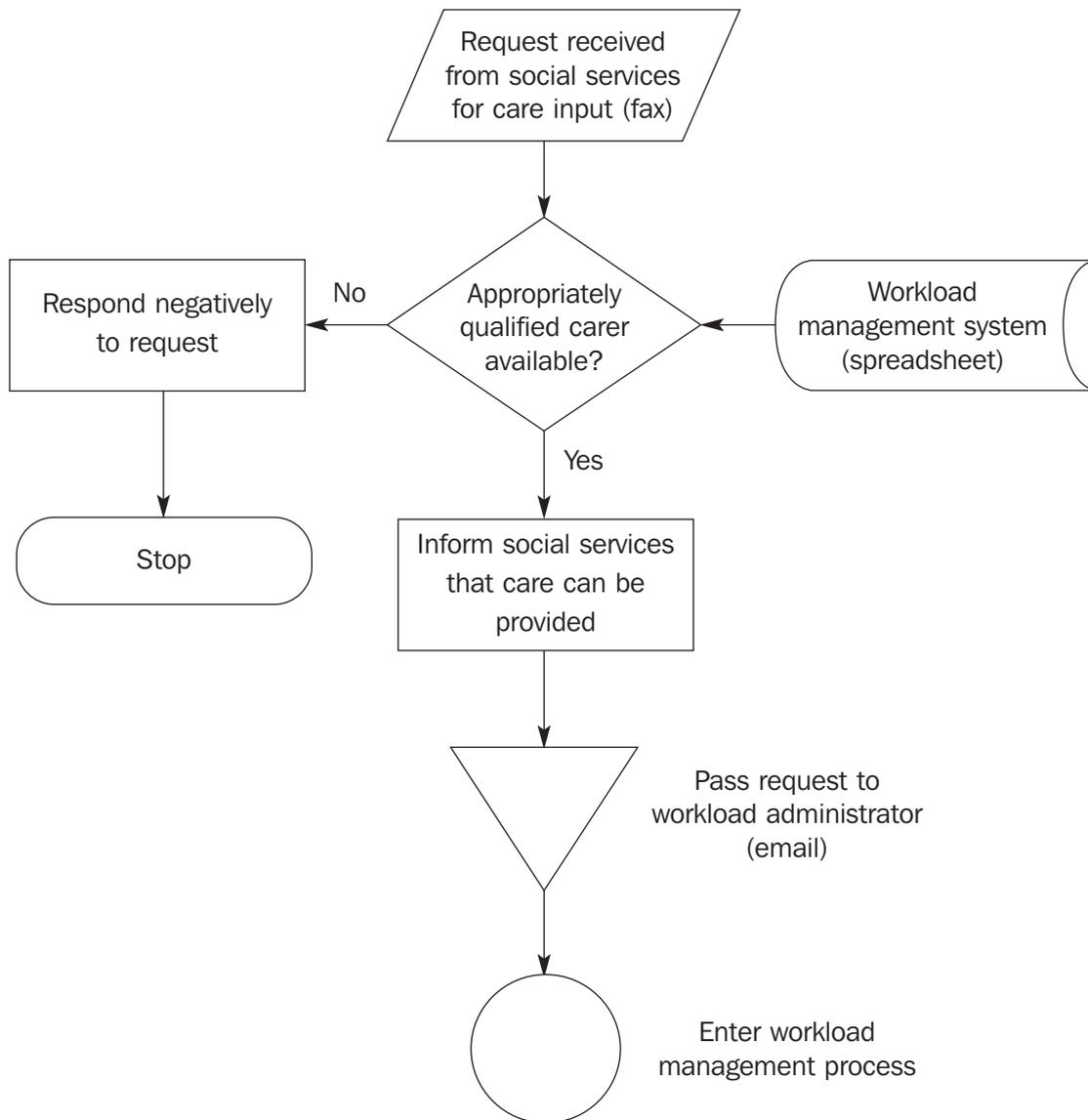
A variety of approaches to mapping organisational processes exist, each using different conventions. There are different angles from which you can look at these processes – a number of different perspectives from which you can view the way the organisation operates. A good starting point for mapping your organisation is to flowchart your existing processes. A simple example is presented in Figure 5.1, which sets out the process used by a care provider to decide whether it can meet a request for care input from a social services department. A clearer focus on the way information moves through this process can be achieved by looking at it from a slightly different perspective, as we do in the data flow diagram presented in Figure 5.2. Developing this sort of understanding of the operation of organisational processes can take some time. It may not always be necessary to take a highly structured approach – although that would be the preference of a professional developing a software application. Even if you do not take a structured and detailed approach, some mapping exercise of this type is an important prelude to considering the options for moving away from current ways of doing things.

An information map of your organisation could identify several distinct but interconnected processes and flows of information, such as information about and for service users, financial information, and information about staff. If you are aiming for a comprehensive understanding of your organisation's information needs this may well be appropriate. However, if you have specified your objective as, for example, to streamline and speed up the handling of information on service users then that immediately places some boundaries around the extent of the map – making it a more manageable exercise.

If you are interested in overhauling all the flows of information in your organisation then you have to decide whether it is best to proceed on all fronts simultaneously or to treat it as a modular exercise. With a modular approach you would address one information flow at a time. Only once all modules are in place would you have completed the full exercise and, if appropriate, provided all the relevant information flows with appropriate ICT support. Using a modular approach can mean that the process takes longer, but it is more flexible. It places fewer demands on the organisation's ability to cope with change at any one point in time and less intense demands on the project manager.

Exercise 5.1 asks you to start analysing the informational aspects of an organisation by focusing on one of your organisation's processes and examining it from the perspective of information flows into, around and out of the organisation.

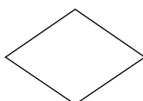
Figure 5.1: Flowchart for a provider's decision in response to a request to provide care under a contract



KEY



Document/data



Decision



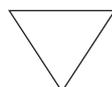
Operation/process



Connector



Data store



Data movement

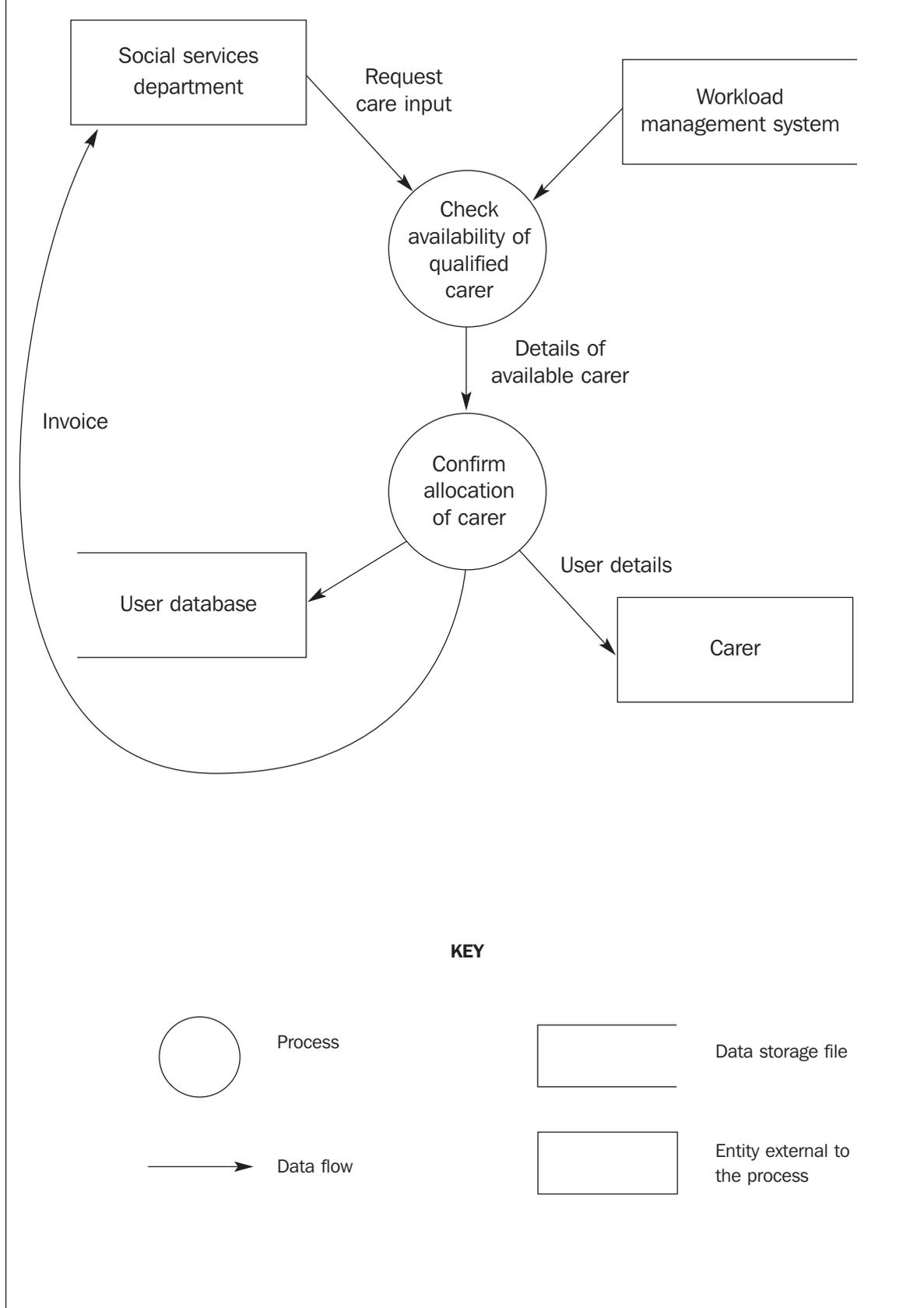


Terminator



Data storage/transmission media

Figure 5.2: Data flow diagram for a provider's decision in response to a request to provide care under a contract





Exercise 5.1

Select one of the processes in your organisation – for example, how you interact with service users – and the associated formal and informal record keeping and monitoring activities. Examine this process from the perspective of information flows.

Think about the following questions:

- Where, and in what form, does information enter the organisation?
- How, and in what form, is information stored?
- Who needs access to stored information?
- How, and in what form, is information passed between members of the organisation?
- How, and in what form, does the organisation disseminate information?

Produce an information map of the process.

Notes

Doing it yourself?

Small organisations may have to go through this process of analysis for themselves in order to decide on what sort of ICT systems would be suitable for them. However, many will want to consider getting help from a consultant. The same applies for later stages in the process. The decision to involve a consultant cannot be taken lightly because consultants can be expensive. However, it is important to recognise when your organisation lacks the necessary expertise in-house. The benefit of a fresh pair of eyes looking at the problem also needs to be considered. Spending hundreds or thousands of pounds early in the process on a reputable consultant can reduce the risk of buying an unsuitable system as a result of inexperience or an approach constrained by conventional thinking. This could be money well spent.

Just as the world of ICT has its own jargon and experts who share common understandings, so too does the world in which you work. All those who work in the worlds of housing, social care and health build up understandings of the way their professional world works. These are not necessarily shared by those from 'outside'. Therefore when looking for consultants to help you understand your systems and to develop new ones it is important to identify one who understands your world – or who is willing to take time to develop that understanding (preferably without charging you too much for doing so!). It may be that there is someone within your organisation, perhaps in the IT department, or one of your partner organisations who can help: they will understand well what the organisation is trying to achieve and they have the analytical skills needed to understand the organisational processes involved.

Occasionally small organisations have taken advantage of the fact that computing students need to complete extended projects, and can be willing, at nominal cost to the organisation, to develop systems that proved perfectly satisfactory in practice. This is a strategy that has its risks, but in some cases it can be very successful.

Moving forward

Once you have a map of your organisational processes you can look at how you are going to move from existing ways of operating to the way you are going to do things in future. There will probably be alternatives available in terms of the way processes and information flows are arranged under a new project. These need to be spelt out.

This comparison between the existing system and the options for the new systems might highlight:

- **unnecessary duplication of information or flows under existing systems;**
- **more steps or people involved in the process than are strictly necessary;**
- **elements of the process that could to be streamlined.**

A key issue is how far each alternative for the service would require you to move from the way things are done at present. Can significant improvements be achieved by modifying existing processes? Or might substantial restructuring be more productive?

Most importantly, in your organisational context, what sort of change is likely to be feasible?

Having mapped out the possibilities, it then makes sense to consider to what extent the changes you are considering will need to be supported by changes to ICT. It may be that ICT is more fundamental to some options than others in the sense that without major changes or investment in ICT a particular option is not feasible.

It can be extremely valuable to involve or consult members of staff involved in the processes under scrutiny during these discussions. Not communicating openly with those whose work will be affected by the decision is a recipe for generating resentment and making the implementation of any changes more difficult.

For all but the most modest changes, the output of this exercise is likely to be a presentation to a project board or steering group of the available options and/or the case for pursuing your preferred option. If this proposal includes the need to change ICT then it will require more work to be done to determine the feasibility and implications of the options. In considering the move from the old way of doing things to the new it is important to include an assessment of the costs and benefits of each option, including the time and resources involved in making the move.

In Exercise 5.2 there is a chance to explore the process of identifying options for changing the information flows within an organisation.

In the next section we move on to consider one of the most important, but frequently neglected, issues.

Analysing your organisation: hints and tips

- There is a tendency to rush straight to buying new ICT to support new processes or projects. This is the wrong place to start.
- Change and investment in ICT should flow from a sound understanding of the organisation's aims and objectives, its current ways of working, and the alternatives for moving forward. Only then should ICT requirements enter the picture.
- Be willing to acknowledge when you lack the knowledge to make progress with ICT and to call on specialist assistance, either from elsewhere in the organisation or from outside.
- Calling in a consultant to assist in developing a clear strategy towards business change and ICT is worth considering seriously. You'll have to bear a cost early in the process, but it could help avoid some much more costly mistakes later on.



Exercise 5.2

Working with the organisational process that you considered in exercise 5.1, consider whether there are any aspects of the information flow that could be improved.

Start by setting out the information flow that you would consider most effective in relation to this process. Then compare this flow with the way things are currently done. Are there significant differences between the two?

What are the options for change? Do you think that significant improvements can be achieved by modifying the existing process or will it need substantial restructuring?

Which option for the future organisation of this information flow would you prefer? Do you consider that the changes that you would like to see are feasible in your current organisational context? If not, why not?

Notes

4. How will the system fit into your organisation?

There are two dimensions to this question:

- **How will a new ICT system fit with existing systems?**
- **How will a new system fit with the social processes and roles within your organisation?**

Meshing with existing systems

If you are considering developing a completely new ICT system to support your organisation's activities then the question of where it 'fits' within the organisation's existing ICT may seem unnecessary. Yet, it may be necessary to exchange information with partner organisations and so the issue of compatibility of systems remains important.

For smaller projects or innovative new services based within an existing organisation it can be tempting to view the project as an island of activity isolated from the rest of the organisation's operations. This may be true. In which case compatibility with existing systems is not an issue. Yet, it may be *assumed* to be true when in fact it would be better to think about things differently. Developing systems that can interface with existing hardware and software may be a more effective way of structuring activities. For example, if your project can tap into existing client records then it would save having to enter a lot of basic data onto your project systems as well. There may, however, be data protection issues here that would need to be resolved.

When thinking about the ICT requirements of your project it is vital to find out what is going on elsewhere in the organisation. Are there plans to replace the main ICT system? The last thing that you want to do is develop a system that can communicate successfully with existing systems, only to discover that they are to be phased out! Is your organisation committed to a modular ICT system that your system will be expected to fit into? If so it implies that some of the choices of supplier and fundamentals about software will already have been settled.

It is therefore a very good idea to get the IT department or officer of your organisation involved in the development of any new systems. It can save you reinventing the wheel or making costly mistakes and ending up with technology that is out of step with everyone else. This involvement might be as formal as including a member of the IT department on a project team or, for small projects, it might be simply a quick briefing to check whether what you are doing seems sensible within your organisational context.

The social impact of change

Introducing a new ICT system will almost certainly carry implications for the way in which your organisation operates as a social system. A new ICT system may alter the relationships between members of staff, or lines of reporting and accountability, it may

mean that departments come into closer contact than before or no longer have any direct dealings with each other. Changing ICT is often accompanied by automation that redefines the activities of some staff members. Staff may perceive this as threatening if they see themselves as losing skills or ending up with less interesting jobs. Similarly, using ICT systems to monitor activities may be seen by management as primarily about being able to demonstrate that the *organisation* is performing effectively, but it may be seen by staff as threatening because 'management' could use the system to check up on them as individuals.

How proposals for new ICT systems are received within an organisation will depend a lot on the history of relations between management and staff. While staff in one organisation may see a proposal as a threat because their relationship with management is already strained, in another the same proposal could be received positively because of the trust that exists between the parties.

More often than not too little thought is given to the social impact that changing ICT will have on an organisation. It is absolutely fundamental to determining whether new systems are successful or not. Staff can refuse to work with new systems or subvert systems – intentionally or unintentionally – through, for example, not following procedures for data entry. This can render the systems useless.

Thinking through the likely social impacts of ICT systems is therefore an important element of their design and development. Some systems may be designed to completely reshape the way an organisation operates. Others may have more subtle effects upon the social relations within the organisation. Some effects will be very difficult to foresee. Nonetheless, these changes need to be anticipated and managed as far as possible.

We suggested above that staff members could be involved in discussions or consulted about the possible ways forward for the organisation. Even if this approach is not adopted, information needs to be shared and staff members need to be consulted from an early stage to be clear about the purposes of change and to minimise the risk that change will be perceived as threatening. Where jobs will be redefined, old skills rendered redundant and new skills become necessary this is particularly important. These are not issues that should be left until a new system is being installed.

Often this aspect of ICT projects can be badly neglected. While it is not entirely clear why this might be, there is often so much effort involved in developing and testing the ICT systems themselves, there are limited resources available for 'extras' like detailed consultation with staff. This is an unfortunate way to look at the issue. Another possibility is that the managers of ICT projects are appointed for their technical skills, rather than their negotiating or interpersonal skills. This can lead to more emphasis being placed on the technical aspects of the project than the organisational aspects.

The best way to approach the whole issue is to formulate a communication plan, which in larger organisations would probably be drawn up with the co-operation of

the human resources department. A communication plan would identify a set of activities to run alongside the project plan for the development and implementation of any new ICT system. It would set out at which points in the process information is disseminated, staff are consulted and their concerns addressed, or training is conducted. The aim is to ensure that implementation of the new system is as smooth as possible.

Groundwork in planning a new ICT system and discussion with staff about its likely impact upon the organisation should mean that the new system meshes well with existing working practices or that the transition to new ways of working is as smooth as possible. The ideal is for staff to perceive the new system as a boon not a burden.

Fitting an ICT system to your organisation: hints and tips

- Be aware of the broader organisational context in which a project will be operating. The context may place constraints on the ICT options that should be considered, but it could equally offer opportunities for arriving at more effective ways of working.
- Don't neglect the human and organisational dimensions of change. Ensuring that staff understand and accept the changes that are planned means that change is more likely to succeed. The alternative could be ICT systems that either don't fit with the way the organisation operates or systems that are subverted. It is not unknown for lots of money to be invested in equipment only for it to stand underused or idle. This would suggest the process of change has been very badly handled.

5. The impact on service users

If you are introducing ICT into the delivery of services it can fundamentally alter the way that your organisation relates to service users. Indeed that can be the primary objective, as with the e-government agenda. Yet, in many instances the drive behind increased use of technology is often greater efficiency and the anticipation of savings in staff costs. So, for example, community alarms and mobile wardens are used rather than having a warden on site at every scheme.

The impact that this will have upon the users' experiences of the service is not always thought through sufficiently. Will they be comfortable with the technology? Is the user interface well-designed? Will users know how to use it? It is good practice to ensure that the systems are explained to users when, for example, they take up a new tenancy. But can you be sure that they understand? To pursue the example of alarm systems, even if the user understands the explanation at the start of the tenancy, the technology is intended to be used rarely: will they remember what to do if and when they need help?

Without a clear idea that the technology is acceptable to service users and that users are able to make use of it there is a danger that systems will be installed but simply lie dormant because users ignore them. For some systems this may be unfortunate. For others, such as community alarms, it could be very much more serious.

It is therefore essential to build into the project plan for ICT projects one or more phases of consultation and prototype testing to ensure that the systems are acceptable to the prospective users of the service. It is important that this type of testing is undertaken with people who are prospective users, rather than, for example, staff members trying out the system to judge whether it is likely to be acceptable to service users. It may be that staff members are more comfortable with the whole idea of technology than those for whom the service is intended, and hence they will fail to spot some of the problems with new systems.

Broader issues about electronic provision of services and their impact on social relations are explored in the literature on 'community informatics'. We suggest where you might start to read about that topic at the end of the module.

6. What sort of system do you need?

If you are not modifying the operation of an existing ICT system then you will be looking to procure a new system. A fundamental decision is then to identify the sort of hardware and software system that will meet your needs. With respect to software the options are:

- **A bespoke system**
- **An off the shelf system**
- **The do-it-yourself option.**

Bespoke systems developed from scratch by software developers have the advantage that they can be closely tailored to the processes and tasks that you specify. However, in order to arrive at a workable system it is necessary to be very clear about your requirements. The procurement procedure can be complex. While larger projects or organisations may have sufficient resources to think about commissioning bespoke software solutions to meet their needs, this can cost tens of thousands of pounds (at least!) and be beyond the budgets of smaller voluntary sector projects. Adopting a highly bespoke system may also mean that in the longer term it is not possible to take advantage of a supplier's upgrades of its off the shelf products.

Off the shelf systems can remove some of the need for costly systems analysis and development activities because you are buying a standard package, with limited scope for shaping it to any specific requirements. Off the shelf systems have been developed for specific tasks – such as housing or care management – and, while not as costly as bespoke systems, these can still be out of reach for small organisations. Using such a system means that your organisation could benefit from the supplier's continuing

support and periodic upgrades, but the system is unlikely ever to be as closely aligned to your precise requirements as a bespoke system can be.

A middle way is to opt for what is basically an off the shelf system (so-called 'packaged software'), but with bespoke modifications at key points to meet the specific requirements of your organisation.

In making this decision projects again often look to consultants – either external or from the internal IT department – for assistance. Whether consultants are used or not, it is essential to examine thoroughly whether a system will meet your requirements. This is particularly important when considering off the shelf software. Because it is not designed specifically for your organisation an off the shelf system is unlikely to do everything that you would like it to. But does it do the basics well enough? It may be a compromise worth making.

In order to assist in the evaluation of off the shelf systems it can be very useful to draw on existing practical knowledge by:

- **talking to other organisations that are already using the system;**
- **approaching existing users with a checklist of key questions to discover their experience of working with the system;**
- **making site visits to existing users to see systems in action.**

Don't assume that because other organisations are happy using a system it will necessarily meet your requirements, even if they appear to be using it for a similar purpose. They may be looking for different things from a system. If so then their successful use of it is not necessarily a good guide to whether it will work for you.

When appraising systems – either bespoke or off the shelf – there are important questions to ask the supplier, including:

- **Can the system generate reports of the type that you would find useful?**
- **Is it flexible enough to cope with fundamental changes such as variations in the frequency of service delivery?**
- **How many staff members will be able to access the system simultaneously?**
- **What volume of activity has it been tested to handle at acceptable speeds on available hardware?**

In relation to the last point, you want to avoid buying a system that works really well with 100 transactions a day but crashes spectacularly if you need to process 10,000. This type of problem could originate with hardware or software.

In order to have this sort of discussion you need at least some broad idea of the volume of activity that your service might generate. This is a crucial issue. Any new system will need to be able to handle the volume of activity that you would anticipate. Yet, even if there has been extensive market research, it can be difficult to

forecast the likely demand for the service. If you go for a major investment then you could end up with a seriously underused system, if demand turns out to be low. On the positive side, the service to the customer would not suffer. If, on the other hand, you go for a more modest investment but demand turns out to be greater than the system can cope with, then you will have to come up with some form of rationing and services to customers might well suffer. You need to decide which of these risks is more likely and more acceptable.

Alternatively, you could go for an incremental strategy: setting up a modest ICT system to get the service started and to see whether there is demand for it and then replacing the ICT with a more substantial investment when it is clear that the demand is there. You may be able to purchase a system for which it is not too difficult or costly to increase capacity, if and when this becomes necessary.

Understanding the flexibilities and limitations built into systems – both bespoke and off the shelf – is an important component of appraising the options available. It is not in the interest of many software developers to provide a lot of flexibility in their systems. Relatively inflexible systems mean that every time organisational circumstances or requirements change then they have the opportunity to sell the organisation a modification or update. You need to be very clear what the precise version of the systems you are being offered will and won't do. Then you will be able to decide whether the compromises that you will have to make to implement the system are acceptable or unreasonable.

Reporting

One area in which both the lack of flexibility and in some instances the lack of planning is demonstrated is in setting up the reporting function of systems. Often officers don't think in detail at the specification stage about what sort of reports an ICT system needs to generate in order to provide management information or for evaluation purposes. A minimal level of reporting is therefore specified and, consequently, provided. Only once the system is up and running do officers start to think that it would really useful if they could have reports on X or Y. Developers will usually modify the system accordingly, but they will typically charge for it.

In Exercise 5.3 we present a scenario that asks you to think more broadly about what sort of reporting would be useful from a system. This type of exercise should really take place at quite an early stage in the process of shaping the specification of any new system. It can be linked explicitly to the monitoring and evaluation issues raised in Module 4.

It may not be possible to arrive at an agreed or comprehensive set of reports at the specification stage. An alternative approach is to specify that the ICT system should offer a highly flexible reporting facility or the facility to download all the information it contains in a format that can be read by commonly available spreadsheet or database packages (sometimes referred to as a 'data dump'). You then have the flexibility to analyse the data as you require.

Simple can be vital

In all of this do not be afraid to ask the simple or seemingly obvious questions, either of existing users or system suppliers. If something is not clear to you do not take for granted that it is okay and the system will do what you want it to do. Remember that systems are designed by software and hardware designers. While they will usually have been developed on the basis of systems analysis they are unlikely to have been designed with your precise requirements in mind. So don't be afraid to check. The alternative is that you buy a system and only later discover that it does not do something of fundamental importance to you. This could be a costly mistake.

Similarly, if you do not feel entirely comfortable with providers' explanations or you feel that they are losing you in jargon, be prepared to seek assistance, either from others within your organisation, from partners or from consultants. This is a field in which it is very easy to be 'blinded by science' if you are not careful.

The DIY alternative

The alternative route to an ICT system to support your organisation's activities is to do-it-yourself using a package purchased on the High Street. It is possible to set up highly sophisticated systems using spreadsheet or database packages available on the High Street. Indeed this may be what you are paying a consultant or ICT supplier to do. For relatively simple processes it is fairly straightforward to set up a recording and reporting system for keeping a track of an organisation's activities using these types of packages.

The problem may be that staff lack familiarity with the technology or its capabilities. It would probably cost a few hundred pounds to provide staff with some training in the use of a spreadsheet or database package in order that they can set up a simple system to record and report on the organisation's activities. This could well be a better use of resources than spending thousands on a software consultant to develop a system for you.

One aspect of the system that tends to suffer when you use the DIY route is the user interface. Are users going to find the system easy to use? Non-expert programmers (and some professionals!) do not always give enough attention to making sure that screen layouts are uncluttered and data entry procedures are clear. They don't use on-screen labels and instructions effectively to guide the user. This can severely limit the usability of a system. The goal is to make a system as intuitive as possible for the user.

If you are the only one using the system then you may not see a complex user interface as a problem, but if you are expecting several people to use it then make sure that you make it as user-friendly as possible.



Exercise 5.3

The board of a local housing association is finding that resettled homeless households are abandoning their property within a few weeks of taking up a tenancy. They have set up a service, in partnership with a local voluntary agency, providing support to households in the early months of their tenancy. The support comprises: a peripatetic worker who will provide tenants with advice and assistance in managing their tenancy; the organisation of social events three times a week; and the operation of a 24-hour helpline.

A comprehensive monitoring system for this service has been set up. The housing association asks your advice on the reporting function they need on their ICT system in order to monitor and evaluate the performance of the new service. Assuming that all the data needed are being collected on a computerised database, draw up a list of the reports that you would recommend the system produces to allow the association to assess:

- How the service is being used by tenants
- How usage varies between households and over time
- How efficient the new service is
- How effective the service is
- How equitable the service is.

(You may need to refer back to Module 4 for a discussion of efficient, effective and equitable)

Notes

7. Buying ICT systems

The approach to buying an ICT system will differ depending on whether it is bespoke, off the shelf, or a DIY system. However, it is vital to draw up a clear specification of what you expect an ICT system to do, regardless of the type of system that you choose to pursue. This specification flows from the analysis of the organisation that we discussed in section two above. But it should also take account of, for example, plans for monitoring and evaluation of the service. It is relatively straightforward to include provision for data to be collected when developing the system at the outset. It can be harder to modify the system to take account of the needs of monitoring and evaluation at a later date. And it will cost money to do so. This is another reason for ensuring that you think about monitoring and evaluation early in the process.

It is useful to bear in mind the idea of being ‘fit for purpose’ when buying an ICT system. If you stipulate that you are seeking to buy a system that is ‘fit for purpose’ then it indicates to suppliers that they will have a responsibility to supply a system that fits your requirements. This can reduce the risk of, for example, being supplied with an off the shelf system that does not actually meet your specification. If a supplier were to offer that then you could argue that it was not ‘fit for purpose’ and the supplier has not met your requirements. There is a need to be clear precisely what standard of performance would constitute a system being fit for purpose. This may require detailed negotiation.

Drawing up the specification to procure an ICT system, particularly a bespoke system, is a challenging task that can involve considerable complexity. A great deal of care is necessary. You may have analysed your organisation and thought about monitoring requirements and therefore you may have a good idea what you would like the system to do. But you may not feel confident that you can translate that into a technical specification to put to software developers that will ensure that you get the system you are looking for. This is an area where expert assistance can be vital. Once a system has been specified and a supplier appointed the basic structure of the system is largely fixed. It is important therefore to make sure you get things right. It is not unheard of for specifications drawn up by practitioners without detailed knowledge of ICT to leave far too much unclear with respect to, for example, required standards of performance, support following implementation, or compatibility with other systems. This allows scope for dispute later on regarding whether the supplier has supplied an acceptable system.

If expert help is brought in – either from elsewhere in the organisation or from outside – to assist with the process of specifying a system then it is always a good idea to ask the obvious questions of that expert to ensure that the specification fully reflects the tasks you want the system to perform. Experience suggests that many non-specialists underestimate what ICT systems are capable of. To many people the fact that you can word process or send email is pretty amazing in itself! They are afraid to ask whether a new system might do one thing or another because it seems too complicated, when in fact in technical terms it is quite straightforward. This often relates to things like the type or format of reports that the system can generate. There will, of course, be occasions when a task cannot be performed using existing technology or where the complexity of development would make the system prohibitively expensive, but it is worth checking to find out.

If your procurement process involves a formal tendering element for ICT then this can be more complex than tendering for other goods and services, particularly in terms of evaluating competing bids. You may be trying to judge whether a potential contractor is well placed to provide you with a unique product. As such, their previous work is only a partial indicator of their ability to deliver. This is an area in which various government departments have been producing a range of good practice guidance recently. The links presented at the end of this module point you to some relevant websites that you may find helpful.

The specification for a new system should require that it be accompanied by comprehensive documentation of its design and development. This should include details of both how the various parts of the system relate to each other and how the software processes information. This can be amended or updated at a later date if the system is modified in any way. This can be particularly important if you go down the DIY route to system development. A staff member can develop a system and get it up and running and then move on to another job or organisation. Without good documentation of what went into the system then the job of anyone coming along later to work on the system will be considerably more time-consuming and difficult.

Data security and data protection

An increasingly important concern in systems design is data security and data protection. One way to think about the distinction between the two is that data security is primarily concerned with the physical security of the system and unauthorised access to data, while data protection is about how data are managed and who has access to data that the organisation holds.

Data security issues might include:

- **Where are data physically located?**
- **How easy is it to steal the computer(s) containing your data?**
- **Do you back up your data (that is, make a copy of all the important data)?**
- **Is the back up data stored separately from the working copy of the data so it won't be vulnerable if the working copy is stolen?**
- **How regularly does backing up occur?**
- **Who is or will be responsible for making sure that this happens?**

The design of the hardware and software of your system carries with it data security implications. Relevant questions might include:

- **Is your system going to be designed so that data are stored on the hard disk of all the terminals or are all data going to be stored on a central server?**
- **Where is the server going to be physically located? How secure is that location?**
- **Are you making terminals available to service users? Could users access the records of other users, accidentally or intentionally?**
- **Where will any public access terminals be located? How easy would they be to steal?**

There are differing degrees of data security possible, but it is important to examine what will be needed to ensure any data you are handling – which will often relate to vulnerable people – are secure. It would be appropriate to conduct a risk assessment at the start of the project to identify the problems and decide on the steps to be taken to address them. We discussed risk assessment more generally in Module 1. The key is to identify risks and then assess the impact they would have on activity and the probability of them occurring and then decide the type of action needed to mitigate the risk. Another way of examining the issue would be to identify ‘worst case scenarios’ and think about whether the organisation could cope with them.

One approach that can be taken is to draw up a ‘disaster recovery strategy’. Could the organisation reconstruct its key databases after theft or total failure of equipment, or more general disasters like the building flooding or catching fire? If not then perhaps further steps are needed to secure the organisation’s important data.

Data security is an issue for any ICT system. For most organisations data protection is also a major consideration. The data protection legislation applies to the handling and storage of any information on individuals. This includes records relating to service users, but also personnel or payroll records. It applies to all records, not just those stored on computers. Organisations have to be careful regarding who has access to data, how long data are stored for, and how data are used or disposed of.

There are data protection issues in relation to, for example, who has access to information on shared computers or whether access to particular data stores is password protected. At a more basic level, do staff handling data on individuals routinely use, for example, password-protected screen savers to ensure that others can’t get access to their terminal when they are away from their desk? Linking back to the wider issue of data security, is your data so sensitive that it needs to be encrypted – that is, stored in code – so that if a computer is stolen no one will be able to make sense of the information stored on it. This level of security can come at the cost of reduced system performance because encrypted data are more difficult to process, but this may be seen as unavoidable. These issues need to be considered closely when procuring a new ICT system. At a broader level, organisations should have a data protection policy in place and ensure that all staff members are aware of it.

More complex issues arise when your systems are going to be connecting to the systems of other organisations or to the internet. This increases the possibility of people breaking into your system from outside the organisation and modifying or stealing your data unless you build in measures to protect your systems.

The complete picture

When introducing a new ICT system most attention is focused on the hardware and software, but there are other issues that need to be considered, particularly if you are computerising processes that were previously paper-based.

Even if staff are already using computers regularly, a new system that requires spending more time in front of a computer can raise issues:

- **Does the new system carry with it health and safety implications?**
- **Are workstation assessments required?**
- **Is there a need to replace office furniture with more ergonomically designed models?**
- **Are current office layouts acceptable?**
- **Is lighting adequate for extended computer use?**
- **Do staff using computers need to be funded to have regular eye tests?**

These are mostly issues which organisations should be aware of and concerned with already, but the implementation of a new system is a good time to review the situation.

There are also questions of accessibility:

- **Are systems designed so that partially-sighted users are comfortable using them? This will require consideration for things like the minimum font size used or the size of display screens. For websites it means making sure designs comply with the relevant web accessibility standards**
- **Do you need to consider modifying input devices?**
- **Are all users going to be able to use a standard keyboard and mouse? What about those with arthritis?**
- **Are systems physically accessible?**
- **Can people with differing degrees of mobility actually reach the terminals?**
- **What about those using wheelchairs?**

These issues can be a particular concern where you are expected service users to access information on-line for themselves by, for example, using a terminal set up in a local office.

Project management

When procuring a new ICT system part of the tendering process should be a clear agreement with suppliers about targets and milestones for the delivery of the system and about things like the phasing of implementation. Indeed, it is very important that the process should be subject to the same good practice requirements as would be applied to the management of any other project. We discussed this issue in more detail in Module 1.

The key factors in maximising the chance that an ICT project will be implemented successfully are that there needs to be:

- **Backing for the project at senior level**
- **One person who takes responsibility for the process and can be held accountable for what happens**
- **Clear lines of responsibility and accountability**

- **Well specified intermediate target-milestones and rigorous review of performance during the process**
- **Processes and decisions that are well documented**
- **Risk assessments carried out and contingency plans in place**
- **Acknowledgement of problems, with problems being addressed rather than avoided or ignored.**

An important element of the management of ICT projects is determining at what stage the project is signed off as completed. This should not happen until systems are fully tested, accepted, installed and considered to be performing satisfactorily.

8. Working with new ICT systems

As we noted above, new ICT systems are likely to have considerable impact upon the way an organisation operates. Early during the process of development thought needs to be given to the question of staff familiarisation and training. This will avoid disruption to services when the system actually goes live.

There may well be teething problems with a new system, even if it has gone through a rigorous process of development and testing before going live. It is valuable to keep a log of problems encountered (in particular, what the system was doing when things went wrong) as this will help diagnose the nature of the problem. It is important to think about how much support you wish to purchase from the system developer to work with you to resolve problems once the system has gone live.

It may be worth setting up a user group to gather information on experiences of working with the system, with a view to possible improvements or modifications in future. If you are buying off the shelf systems or bespoke systems from a major supplier there may well already be a user group that you can join to share your experiences with other users, learn from their experiences, and feed information back to suppliers.

9. Where to go for more information

CITU (2000) *Successful IT: Modernising Government in Action*, London: Cabinet Office.
(can be obtained from the e-government unit: <http://e-government.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/Homepage/fs/en>)

Keeble, L. and Loader, B.D. (eds) (2001) *Community Informatics: Shaping Computer-Mediated Social Relations*, London: Routledge.

Martin, A. and McDonald, A. (1999) *Buying IT: A good practice guide*, London: The Housing Corporation.

Goeghegan, L., Lever, J. and McGimpsey, I. (2004) *ICT for social welfare: A toolkit for managers*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

You may also find the following websites helpful:

<http://www.cira.org.uk/> (Community Informatics Research and Applications Unit)

<http://www.ogc.gov.uk/sdtoolkit/> (Office of Government Commerce – Successful delivery toolkit)

<http://www.ogc.gov.uk/index.asp?id=36> (Office of Government Commerce – IT projects and procurement)

<http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk/> (The Information Commissioner)

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/> (Health and Safety Executive)

For those interested in exploring the whole idea of systems analysis and development in a little more detail, it is worth being aware that it is an area that uses a variety of formal and graphical techniques to analyse information flows. It rapidly becomes quite technical. However, the following books, particularly the earlier chapters, will give you an insight into what is involved:

Britton, C. and Doake, J. (2002) *Software systems development: a gentle introduction*, 3rd edition, McGraw-Hill Educational.

Skidmore, S. (1997) *Introducing systems analysis*, 2nd edition, Basingstoke: Macmillan.

There are many books on project management, but one with a particular emphasis on ICT projects is:

Wysocki, R. (2003) *Effective project management*, New York: Wiley.

