

Positive Engagement

What makes the appreciative inquiry approach so special?



Positive Engagement events facilitated by **Kate McAllister** and colleagues are rapidly becoming recognised as an extremely effective, engaging and morale-building option that can bring together diverse interested parties such as service users, front-line staff, senior management and other stakeholders.

The Appreciative Inquiry process provides a way for everyone involved to identify and celebrate what is already working well, collectively envision the desired future, and identify practical ways to get there in a way that raises energy and generates an impressive level of positive motivation to move forward.

This document introduces the Appreciative Inquiry approach and gives an idea of what a typical Positive Engagement event would look like.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI)



Rather than just another focus group technique, Appreciative Inquiry is a radically different approach to activities such as needs analysis, strategic planning, restructuring, cultural change, customer satisfaction, and many more.

AI has been used effectively in international peace negotiations, community-based regeneration, and to assist major business improvements in such major corporations as BA, NASA, BP, and the BBC. Appreciative Inquiry is built on these fundamental principles:

- In every society, organisation or group, something works.
- The act of focusing on the positive influences the outcome
- We have more confidence in the future when we rediscover and carry forward the achievements of the past. By doing this, we recognise our strength and competence and we can repeat and build on success.

The aim is to generate new knowledge about what's working well within a sector or organisation and to assist those involved to collectively envision a desired future which will take them where they want to go, without losing sight of what is already working well.

Using the Appreciative Inquiry process, all interested parties can identify areas where their current systems are successful, and then determine ways to make those successes more constant and effective.

A Typical Positive Engagement Event

A Positive Engagement event is a highly flexible and adaptable workshop, and each one is different. This example is a one-day event that brings together representatives of all key stakeholders including service users, a format that experience has shown to work well, and can accommodate up to 100 people per session. Other formats are possible and we can adapt the process to meet your needs.

Affirmative topic

The first step is to agree the focus of the event. Here are some recent examples, facilitated by Kate McAllister:

- *Recommendations that ensure that the housing, care and support needs of vulnerable people are an integral part of future local planning, commissioning and delivery (Audit Commission national review of Supporting People – Dec 08)*
- *To ensure that the housing, care and support needs of vulnerable people are included in the new strategic framework (CLG, Housing Corporation and CSIP review of regional housing strategies – 6 regional events June 2008)*
- *An opportunity to talk to colleagues in an informal setting to share effective practice and consider how to overcome current obstacles to effective integration of DFG/SP in terms of the pilot. (CLG and CSIP Individual Pilot conference Sept 2007)*
- *3 constructive conversations about how SP-funded short stay services in Cheshire can really make a difference to the lives of vulnerable people (Review of short-term services in Cheshire Oct 2008)*

Training of facilitators

To keep costs at a minimum, we usually suggest that the host organisation provides a small team of 'table facilitators' who will guide the people sitting at their table through the day and ensure that required information is collected. We offer a brief training session on the principles and application of Appreciative Inquiry. A typical training session lasts about 2 ½ hours and takes place ahead of the event. The host organisation is welcome to invite as many attendees from the wider organisation as it wishes, in order to gain maximum benefit from the training and to maximise potential for wider application.

The Positive Engagement event

Opening

Setting up from 8 am onwards, the event itself will start at 10 am. After registration, delegates will be conducted to a table and meet their facilitator for the day.

The session starts with a brief overview from the host, welcoming delegates, overviewing the session and highlighting key achievements to date, and your intention to improve service provision. Our Lead Facilitator will then talk through the specific purpose of the event and the process. We will make it clear that the feedback from this event will help to inform your future service delivery.

The rest of the day will be delivered and actively facilitated by Kate McAllister, working in conjunction with your facilitators. Attendees will be invited to follow the following process:

Discovering – what currently works well?

Delegates initially work in pairs, and after some introductions, will be invited to talk about any positive experiences or memories in respect of the issue to be explored. They will be encouraged to come up with examples of services or initiatives or policies which are making a real positive difference.



Feedback will be anecdotal and the aim at this stage is to capture key themes in terms of existing positive practice and ideas which have been shown to work. We do not require detailed feedback from each participant – simply collation and agreement of key themes, (by trained facilitators) which are then shared freely with the room as a whole.

Designing –what could work and how?

Of course, these events need to deliver some specific, tangible ideas and actions. Therefore, the same groups are then invited to come up with some practical suggestions about how to make the changes or improvements necessary to produce the ideal service.



Facilitators will encourage delegates to keep suggestions as specific, feasible and realistic as possible, without losing the 'creative flair' which is one of the key positive elements of this process.

Some of our client organisations have asked delegates to generate a "Shopping List" or fine tune their ideas with "Must Have" and "Nice to Have". It's also useful to gather the **reasons why** these ideas will make a difference.

Delivering – making it happen

At this stage we will invite delegates to look in more detail at how some of the ideas generated during the previous session could be translated into action. This will result in a variety of creative ideas to take forward, some of which may be relevant to individuals or local groupings and some of which will contribute to wider strategic thinking and plans.



Close

At the end of the Positive Engagement event there will be a session entitled '**Commitments, Offers and Requests.**' This is an opportunity for delegates to make statements in an open and accountable forum about potential next steps.

This is also an opportunity for your organisation to highlight the range of ongoing opportunities for users to get involved and deliver positive change - with particular emphasis on how you intend to take the work from the Positive Engagement sessions forward.

Our Style and Approach



One of the unusual things about Positive Engagement is that people enjoy themselves at these events, whilst working extremely hard and generating a range of very useful ideas, suggestions and hard data.

Our approach is engaging and professional, yet upbeat and informal. Delegates are also encouraged to be as creative as they wish – and to express themselves in a variety of ways, with a range of artistic materials at their disposal. Some choose to do so, some don't.

Optionally, we can employ a **graphic artist** to capture the imagery and metaphors that emerge as the day progresses to create an artwork depicting the group vision.

Another option is to use a film create a **DVD** capturing the best of the event, which can be circulated to providers and service users, and act as a catalyst for further involvement. We have used this approach very successfully with a wide range of audiences.

You can view some clips from these videos at [Positive Engagement videos](#). to help you get a flavour of what Positive Engagement events are like.

Outcomes from each event will differ, but we are always pleasantly surprised by the level of energy and enthusiasm generated during the process.

Call **Kate** on 01663 795004 to find out how a Positive Engagement event can help your organisation to move forward.

Recent clients

Client	Details of Appreciative Inquiry	Outcome
National Housing Federation	What key things would make a dramatic positive difference to your experience of the inspection process?	Suggestions for Audit Commission about how to improve the experience of the housing inspection process for RSL's
SE Employers federation (organised by Audit Commission)	What key things have helped you in delivering relevant and sustainable change?	Introduction to AI and opportunity for delegates to share innovative ways of delivering and sustaining organisational change
Liverpool Council	7 positive engagement sessions for local authority staff, service users, providers and other key stakeholders between October 2006 and February 2007. Each event was attended between 40 and 70 people	The information gathered from the events helped set strategic priorities and later to produce designs for new services and draw up a support charter for the city.
Access Liverpool	Appreciative Team Building	Ideas about how to build really effective working relationships
Carr-Gomm	Appreciative Team Building	Ideas about how to sustain positive practice and morale during a period of organisational change
Lincolnshire Supporting People	5 Positive Engagement sessions for local authority staff, service users, providers and other key stakeholders in the spring of 2007.	Helped set priorities for 5-year strategy. Initial priorities for service design. 1 st active involvement by service users into strategic planning and service design.
Lincolnshire Council	Effective governance	"Both governing bodies gained significantly from the events. They refer to open and honest discussion; a fun way to deliver rather than in formal environments; generated a common sense of purpose and direction; opportunity to reflect, be creative and look forward .Thanks for your part in delivering these sessions."

Client	Details of Appreciative Inquiry	Outcome
Bedfordshire Council	To inform the design of 'ideal' services to inform future service development (one event) To uncover and chart the key range of services, support activities and partnership working which need to be in place to deliver each of the 5 key themes within the new outcomes framework (two events).	Suggestions and recommendations re effective county-wide partnership arrangements for the future. Range of service designs based on user input and reflecting the SP outcomes framework
Warwickshire Council	Effective governance	Practical suggestions which begin to translate some of key strategic priorities into reality. Agreement about how to operate effectively as a governing body
Herefordshire Council	to agree the most effective ways of meeting the identified housing related support needs of socially excluded people in Herefordshire.	Helped inform needs analysis for Supporting People
CLG/CSIP/DoH	how Supporting People and DFG can be most effective in taking forward the Personalisation and Choice agenda once the Individual Budget pilots have finished	A wide range of practical suggestions about the way forward in terms of IBs which will be taken into account in the final report.
Lincolnshire Commissioning Body and Core Strategy Group	Positive governance through partnership	Following a requirement to improve the governance of the programme Kate delivered an appreciative inquiry session to CSG & CB members and the Supporting People Service. The "creative" and "fun" approach enabled everyone to join in, forge effective relationships and achieve a huge amount in a short space of time. Feedback from the session was very positive with comments such as; "Time well spent – I am fully signed up to the programme. Today has pointed me in the right direction and showed steps I need to take corporately and individually"; "Didn't feel like "work"- "Liked the approach and how you cleverly got commitment"; "Real outcomes and commitment

Client	Details of Appreciative Inquiry	Outcome
		identified within the group"; "Collective input and opportunity for real engagement"
Bradford SP	Positive engagement for over 100 service users, commissioners and stakeholders	100% positive feedback from delegates
CLG, Housing Corporation and Care Services Partnership	5 national consultation events on how to best integrate the needs of vulnerable people into regional housing strategies	Report including findings and recommendations
Cheshire Council	Event for councillors who will have responsibility for the new Cheshire East following local government reorganisation	Suggestions re effective governance for the future
Cheshire SP	Events for stakeholders and users as part of strategic review of short-term services	Informed wider review and key recommendations for change
Bradford SP	Session for service users wishing to be involved in governance	CB report
FTSE listed international corporation	Post occupancy evaluation	In progress
North East Lincolnshire SP governance bodies	Positive governance through partnership	Clarity re future roles and commitments
Audit Commission	Part of ongoing national review of SP programme	Feedback from a wide range of delegates about future recommendations for the programme

Kate and colleagues also delivered training to all 500 managers at Southampton City Council on Appreciative Inquiry and AI-based coaching skills and are delivering open training courses this year in London, and Manchester.