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Improving Collaboration through Action Learning: Guidance for Children's and Young Person's Services Committees in Ireland.

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Improving Collaboration through Action Learning
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About the Author
Dr Denise O’Leary (deniseoleary@live.ie) is an experienced facilitator with over 20 years of international experience in research, consulting and teaching across public and private sectors. Her particular expertise is in the area of interagency and interorganisational collaboration, and examining effective collaboration in organisational development was the subject of her PhD study. She has utilised action learning in the facilitation of effective collaborative working among various stakeholders. This handbook draws from that experience and in particular her facilitation of action learning with Kerry Children’s and Young People’s Services Working Groups.

¹ The Kerry CYPSC was known as the Kerry Children’s Services Committee (CSC) at the time of the roll-out of the programme. However to avoid confusion, it will be referred to as the Kerry Children’s and Young People’s Services Committee CYPSC in this document.
Chapter 1. Introduction

This action learning handbook draws from the experiences of the Kerry Children’s and Young People’s Services Committee (CYPSC) Working Groups who engaged in an action learning intervention to improve collaboration, between October 2013 and June 2014. The intervention was designed by Dr Denise O’Leary and Dr Clare Rigg from the Institute of Technology Tralee. If you are a member of another county’s Children’s and Young People’s Services Committee Working Group, this handbook will provide you with the information and tools to implement a similar action learning intervention in order to:

- Improve collaboration within your county’s CYPSC structure
- Improve collaboration and embed collaborative practice within your working group
- Learn from others and facilitate their learning
- Make greater use of reflection in CYPSC working group meetings

Your working group can use the information to examine aspects of collaboration within the group or within the county CYPSC structure. You will choose problems/issues you are struggling with, look at them from a different angle, reflect on them, test your assumptions, come up with possible new approaches and then experiment, by applying these approaches to see how well they work. Action learning can be used to develop the capacity of individuals to better adapt to change and to develop the skills of individuals to engage effectively with others. So, engaging in action learning will encourage you to work with other CYPSC members in a different and more collaborative way. Feedback in Figure 1, from members of Kerry CYPSC working groups highlights the ways in which action learning helped them work differently. As is highlighted by the feedback, action learning created a time and space for critical questioning and reflection which allowed the working groups to explore group processes and outputs, and to take actions to improve them.

1.1 Why Action Learning?

Action learning programmes have been shown to improve collaboration within and between organisations by improving strategic planning practices, improving management and leadership practices, building teams, and facilitating transfer of learning back to organisations. This handbook focuses specifically on how it can be used to improve collaboration.

“Action learning activity in working groups has given the group a way to reflect and interrogate the group processes, the focus of the work and to enhance group interaction and working relationships”

“It has allowed us to step back a bit and look more in depth at what is really being achieved”

“I found the sessions challenging but productive. The sessions highlighted that asking the difficult question is necessary to move work on.”

Figure 1: Feedback - Creating a Time and Place for Reflection and Critical Analysis
In effective groups, members learn with and from each other to their mutual benefit, but simply bringing people together in a group does not guarantee that this learning will occur. Action learning enables a group to build on experience generated through collaborative action. Thus, groups can learn from their experiences and put that learning into practice to the benefit of all. As highlighted above, the Kerry CYPSC working groups engaged in action learning over a nine month period. Feedback\(^2\) was overwhelmingly positive. In an anonymous questionnaire sent to Kerry CYPSC working group members in June 2015, every respondent agreed that the initiative was worthwhile and only 1 out of 20 respondents disagreed with the statement “Action Learning changed my working group dynamics in a positive way.” Figure 2 provides a small sample of participant’s comments on the initiative. Additional feedback is provided in chapter 4.

Action learning was chosen as an approach to improving collaboration within the Kerry CYPSC and its working groups for various reasons. It has been shown to be effective in facilitating interagency collaboration. Thus, even in groups that work well together, action learning can improve collaboration. However, this is not the only reason that action learning lends itself to the work of CYPSC’s. It is a powerful approach for dealing with complex, interdependent issues, which are the types of issues CYPSCs deal with on a continual basis. Action Learning therefore is an effective approach to solving complex problems in real time.

### 1.2 The Kerry CYPSC Action Learning Intervention

The Kerry CYPSC action learning intervention was practice-based occurring mostly within working groups meetings. Rather than simply teaching working group members about collaboration, they were instead facilitated, through action learning, to develop their collaboration skills while engaging in CYPSC working group activities. The practice-based focus was possible because action learning utilises

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\(^2\) Participants were asked for feedback at the March 2014 workshop, to gauge reaction to the action learning intervention in order to make any necessary adjustments, and again in June 2015, a year after the programme’s completion, to see if any lasting changes had been introduced.
action, and reflection on action, as a vehicle for personal learning and team development.

The formula \( L = P+Q \) is often used to describe the learning that occurs in action learning.

- L stands for Learning
- P stands for programmed knowledge. This represents existing theory. It is the type of knowledge that exists in books or known to experts and can be gained from formal instruction.
- Q stands for questioning insight. This is the insight gained by asking fresh questions about a problem and reflecting on the responses.

The programme was tailored around working group activities and the challenges faced by working groups. ‘P’ was provided through articles on collaboration while ‘Q’ was encouraged through small and large group facilitated discussions where participants examined how they could work more effectively together. Thus, through action learning, working group members were challenged to develop their own interpretation and refinement of the question: ‘How do we improve/develop our collaborative working arrangements/relations?’ As will be highlighted in this handbook, participants gained ‘L’ and considered the experience to be a positive learning experience.

1.3 How to use this Handbook

Chapter 2 provides background information on action learning which should be read first as it informs the more practical advice provided in later chapters. Chapter 3 gives an overview of effective collaboration, which will provide a baseline for reflection. Chapter 4 provides an overview of how action learning in CYPSCs might look in practice, and gives practical examples from the experiences of the Kerry Children’s Services Committee working groups.
Chapter 2. Background to Action Learning

This chapter provides an overview of the history, philosophy and theoretical underpinnings of action learning. It will provide you with the information you need to develop a theoretical understanding of action learning before putting it into practice.

Action learning is an approach to learning with a set of core values applied differently according to context. It is an approach to problem solving and learning that is rooted in the work of Reg Revans. Revans trained as a physicist at Cambridge University in the 1920s and there he witnessed Noble-prize winning scientists sitting down together regularly in small groups. Individuals did not use these group discussions to draw attention to their achievements or to highlight their expertise in a particular field. Instead they readily admitted their own ignorance, focused on their current difficulties and went through a process of asking each other questions in order to work through problems and come up with potential courses of action to address them. Each group member was considered to have valuable contributions to make no matter how unrelated their own field of knowledge and expertise. Revans went on to use this approach in the coal industry with pit managers. Instead of bringing in ‘experts’ to solve their problems, he encouraged them to emulate what the physicists had done: meet in small groups to ask each other questions in order to get to the root of problems, come up with solutions that could be tested, experiment by testing the solutions and then engage in ongoing cycles of exploration and experimentation. The approach proved effective and Revans went on to develop it further and use it successfully in other settings.

Revans proposed the formula \( L = P + Q \) to describe the learning that occurs in action learning, where, as highlighted in Chapter 1, \( L \) stands for Learning, \( P \) stands for programmed knowledge and \( Q \) stands for questioning insight. A key principle of action learning is that a reliance on programmed knowledge alone is not enough to address challenges; questioning insight is also required.

Since Revan’s time, action learning has been used extensively across a wide range of sectors and in numerous contexts. There are a number of approaches to action learning, thus it cannot be reduced to a single technique. However it can be described as “an approach to individual and organizational learning. Working in small groups known as ‘sets’, people tackle important organisational or social challenges and learn from their attempts to improve things” (Pedler and Abbot 2013).

2.1 Key Features

Action Learning can take a variety of approaches but there are a number of key features common across action learning initiatives.

- **A Group:**
  Action learning is a social rather than an individual activity, therefore it cannot be done without a group. The size of the group is typically 4 to 8, but there can be more or less members. In action learning, the group is usually called a set. Sets can be formed for the purposes of engaging in action learning, or (as in the case of CYPSC’s) action learning can occur within previously existing groups. Set members all have a contribution to make and everyone’s contribution is viewed as equally valuable.
• **Ground Rules:**
In action learning, participants should be supportive and non-judgmental, proactive in questioning others, active listeners and committed to helping each other develop. Ground rules agreed at the outset of an action learning initiative can encourage these behaviours and encourage the development of trust within the set. Trust within a set means that set members can be open with each other and this in turn facilitates learning with and from each other. Set members should take ownership and responsibility for upholding and managing ground rules, which can be revisited regularly.

• **An Action Learning Problem:**
Problems provide the impetus for learning within an action research set. Problems are the focus of group discussions, critical analysis and reflection and can consist of individual issues of set members or collective issues facing the whole set. For individual issues, set members take turns to be a ‘problem holder’ and present and reflect on a problem, while other group members and the facilitator act as ‘critical friends’. A critical friend asks questions to help the problem holder define the problem, question their assumptions, critically analyse the situation and come up with potential solutions. For group issues, the group works together to engage in reflection and questioning to critically analyse the problem and decide on potential courses of action to address it.

• **Questioning:**
Questioning helps set members to deepen their understanding of the problem at hand. All set members should engage in questioning as ‘critical friends’ in order to fully explore and define the problem. Critical friends’ behaviours include active listening, asking insightful questions, and giving and receiving feedback. Rather than jumping in and offering solutions, they instead ask fresh questions. Critical friends are committed to supporting learning and development within the group.

• **Action:**
Inherent in action learning is carrying out actions to address the problem at hand. Reflecting on those actions leads to learning, resulting in cycles of further reflection and action.

• **Critical Reflection and Feedback:**
Action learning is concerned with more than just solving a problem; underpinning the action learning approach is the idea that learning and action are interdependent. During action learning, group members challenge and support each other in learning from action, using reflection and feedback.

2.2 Different Approaches to Action Learning

There are differences in approaches to action learning depending on whether group members are from the same or different organisations, what types of problems are addressed and the type of meeting. These differences are outlined in Table 1.
Each of these types of sets can have a facilitator to lead the action learning activities or they can be self-managed action learning (SMAL) sets i.e. without a facilitator. In SMAL sets, the role of facilitator is rotated among set members.

### Table 1: Different Approaches to Action Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Meeting &amp; Set Membership</th>
<th>Problems Addressed</th>
<th>Common Uses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face to face set meetings with members from different organisations</td>
<td>Each member brings their own problem</td>
<td>Commonly used in leadership development – managers from different organisations come together in an AL set. This type of approach could be used by CYPSC’s. The set addresses a group problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face to face set meetings with members from the same organisation</td>
<td>Each member brings their own problem</td>
<td>Commonly used in leadership development – managers from the same organisation come together in an AL set. The set addresses a group problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual set meetings. Members can be from different organisations or the same organisation.</td>
<td>Each member brings their own problem</td>
<td>Useful when individuals from geographically distant organisations or one organisation with geographically distant divisions wish to come together in an AL set to learn with and from each other. The set addresses a group problem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 2.3 Problems versus Puzzles

Puzzles are issues that can be solved because they already have solutions. Puzzles often need expert input. For example, when each CYPSC initially had to set up working group structures and terms of reference, it may not have been immediately clear to members how to do that. However, a set of written procedures along with consultation with the Department provided the expert advice needed. 

Puzzles do not merit or need an action learning intervention. Problems on the other hand are messier, more complex and have no single right answer. Many of the issues faced by Children’s and Young People’s Services Committees are problems. Take child poverty for example. This is not an issue that has a single clear cut response. Instead, it is a tangled, complex and multifaceted problem that crosses agency boundaries and involves numerous potential courses of action. Sorting out one issue related
to child poverty may result in the development of another, which means that ongoing intervention is required. Action learning can be a powerful approach to such ongoing intervention because it allows a group time and space to engage in cycles of exploring different facets of the problem, gaining new insight through asking and answering challenging questions, coming up with different courses of action, experimenting by trying out some actions and exploring the impacts of their actions.

2.4 What Happens in Set Meetings?

Sets meet on a regular basis over a set period of time e.g. once a month for a year. In set meetings, problems are presented, clarified and reframed. Problems can be at the group or individual level. Set members support and question each other with the aim of developing a better understanding of the current problem and finding new ways of working. Once the problem has been teased out, goals and actions are determined. Between meetings actions are taken; these actions are reflected on and explored at subsequent meetings; learning gained from the experience is captured: and the cycle begins again.

The types of issues that are surfaced during action learning set meetings may be related to power, responsibility, roles, group goals, workload etc.

Chapter 4 provides more detailed guidance on set meetings.

2.5 Should the Set be facilitated by an Outsider or Function as a SMAL Set?

Although Revans favoured self-facilitated action learning sets, having an experienced facilitator working with the sets can be helpful. This is not always possible however.

In self-facilitated action learning sets, the role of facilitator is rotated through the group. It is important that facilitators bear in mind that they are not there to offer expert advice or to solve a problem. Instead, the role of facilitator is to guide a group or individuals to engage in critical reflection in order to find solutions to their own problems.

A facilitator may choose to keep notes of the meeting and circulate an overview of the learning and the agreed actions to the group after the meeting, or ask a nominated person to do this. If the latter option is chosen, the role of note-taker can be rotated.
Chapter 3. Some ‘P’: Information on Collaboration

In the chapter 2, the formula $L = P + Q$ was introduced and it was highlighted that although action learning does place emphasis on tacit knowledge of practitioners and their ability to find solutions to problems through reflection and questioning, that ‘programmed knowledge’ also has an important part to play. This chapter provides you with ‘P’ by highlighting the features of effective collaboration. This will give you a benchmark against which you can compare your working group.

3.1 The Benefits and Challenges of Collaboration

Effective interagency collaboration has been shown to have a positive impact on the lives of individuals, families and children. There are also benefits to collaboration at an agency level including shared risk, increased access to resources, greater efficiency, greater co-ordination, better learning opportunities, increased staff satisfaction and more innovation. However, to achieve these benefits, there must be true buy-in to collaborative working at management level, a willingness to give collaborative efforts time to develop and a willingness to acknowledge and find commonalities between the goals, cultures and norms of different organisations.

Interagency collaboration can be challenging for various reasons. It may be difficult to agree on joint goals due to the differing and sometimes competing goals of individual agencies. There may also be macro-level disincentives to collaborate such as government policy or market forces. Sometimes, collaboration is hampered simply by the practical constraints of bringing member agencies together on a regular basis. Additionally, there may be power disparities between agencies that manifest themselves in interagency meetings. For example, if one agency provides funding for another, this can make it difficult for the funded agency to fully engage in discussions that might challenge the funder.

During the action learning initiative with the Kerry CYPSC working groups, the difficulties associated with collaboration within the CYPSC were highlighted. These included issues at an individual and group level. You may be able to relate to some of these issues.

Collaboration in CYPSCs - Difficulties at an Individual Level

- Balancing work commitments and working group commitments
- Understanding one’s role within the working group
- Understanding profession-specific language used by others on the working group
- Communicating information about the CYPSC and working groups back to one’s own agency
- Regular attendance at meetings

Collaboration in CYPSCs - Difficulties at a Group Level

- Defining the vision and role of the working group and the CYPSC as a whole
- Recognising and defining overlaps between the work of each working group and other working groups, other agencies and other inter-agency initiatives
- Unequal distribution of work between working group members
- Ensuring that there is effective vertical and lateral communication within the CYPSC
- Ensuring that working group achievements are communicated to others
- Evaluating the work of the group in an accurate and cost-effective way
- Getting buy-in from all agencies and getting support from management of those agencies
• Aligning agency objectives and working group objectives
• Operating in a constantly changing world
• Dealing with power disparities between agencies

3.2 How to Recognise Good Collaboration

There are a number of elements that are common to groups that are collaborating successfully. These are listed in Figure 3. You may find this list useful as a tool for reflection and critical analysis of your working group processes.

Groups that are collaborating successfully:

- Are characterised by an atmosphere of trust and respect where individuals are comfortable speaking up in meetings and communicating with each other outside meetings
- Have effective leaders who encourage the development of this atmosphere of trust and encourage input from all group team members when decisions are made
- Have discussed and agreed realistic goals and objectives which are regularly reviewed
- Have developed an action plan which is regularly discussed and updated
- Celebrate progress and learn from mistakes
- Are characterised by individuals learning from each other
- Are not afraid of constructive controversy and have a way to deal with conflict
- Have figured out how to deal with the differences that arise due to individuals coming from different backgrounds
- Are made up of individuals who know their role and are comfortable clarifying any confusion
- Have ways to evaluate success
- Divide work fairly
- Are made up of people with appropriate skillsets and the autonomy to make decisions
- Are made up of individuals who recognise that negotiation is often necessary to make decisions and that power-plays may be part of this negotiation process
- Communicate with stakeholders
- Are aware of their goals and evaluate them regularly

Figure 3: Features of Effective Collaboration

3.3 What can you do to Help Collaborative Efforts?

There is no magic formula that ensures good collaboration. However there are a number of things that individuals can do to help achieve it. Asking yourself the questions in Figure 4 will help you reflect on whether you are encouraging the development of effective collaboration within your working group.

Reflective questions for CYPCS working group members

In working group meetings do you:

- Celebrate progress?
- Listen attentively to others in a respectful way?
- Provide constructive feedback?
- Take part in decision-making and speak up in discussions?
Leading Collaborative Efforts

There is no single ‘correct’ way to lead collaborative efforts but successful teams often have leaders who are able to adjust their leadership style based on the task at hand. For example if a group is facing a deadline on a specific task, a more directive form of leadership is often more effective, while if a group is engaged in discussions on their vision or goals, a more transformational form of leadership, where decisions are shared among group members, is more effective. If you are a working group chairperson, the questions in Figure 5 will help you reflect on and explore your use of power.

Reflective Exercise for Working Group Chairpersons: Reflection on your Use of Power

What sort of leader were you at the last meeting you held? (e.g. Did you ask for input? Did you assign tasks? Did you encourage shared decision making?) Do you think this style of leadership was effective? Could you have done something differently?

Who chairs meetings? Who sets times, locations and agendas for meetings? Who decides who should be at meetings? How can making these decisions be a form of using power? Is it being done effectively?

Are you aware of power-plays occurring between group members? Are you able to manage them? Could you do anything differently?

In collaborative efforts, the behaviour of group leaders can have an impact on group processes and thus, encourage or discourage collaboration. If you are a working group chairperson, the reflective
exercise in Figure 6 will help you reflect on how you chair meetings to allow you to encourage the development of behaviours which encourage effective collaboration and reduce behaviours which impact negatively on collaboration.

**Reflective Exercise for CYPSC Chairpersons: Creating an Atmosphere which Encourages Engagement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Celebrate progress?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use positive language?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Make new people feel welcome?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encourage input from all group members in discussions and decision-making?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Aim for a number of small achievable and realistic goals so that individuals can build trust and develop a belief in the group’s abilities as they work towards and achieve those goals?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lead regular evaluation of the group’s long and short term goals?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Acknowledge your own mistakes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Build in opportunities for groups to chat and socialise so that people can get to know each other?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encourage fun?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Discourage disrespectful behaviour?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ensure that work is evenly allocated?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ensure that the meetings achieve something rather than simply being a discussion forum?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ensure that individuals leave the meeting knowing what actions they must take before the next meeting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Keep the working group updated on the work of the CYPSC and other working groups?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Communicate information about the work of the working group to stakeholders outside the group including the CYPSC and other working groups?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Remind the group regularly about working group aims, objectives and agreed actions all of which are examined and updated on an ongoing basis?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Established ground roles for interactions within committee meetings that encourage respect?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Led the development of an agreed protocol to deal with conflict and discourage disrespectful behaviour?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Established with the group how working group processes and activities will be evaluated?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 6: Reflection - Creating an Atmosphere which Encourages Engagement*
Chapter 4. What Might Action Learning in CYPSC’s Look Like?

This chapter provides you with information on how your working group might engage in action learning to improve inter-agency collaboration and to address working group goals. As highlighted in the introduction, Kerry Children’s and Young People’s Services Committee working groups engaged in action learning over the course of nine months between October 2013 and June 2014 with the aim of improving their collaboration. Some of their experiences will be utilised as case study examples in this chapter.

Whether to have set meetings facilitated by an external facilitator, or to have a SMAL (self-managed action learning) set is a decision that will have to be made at the outset of any action learning initiative. The Kerry CYPSC action learning activities were facilitated\(^3\) thus, the case study examples will reflect this. However, similar activities can occur in a SMAL set, where the role of facilitator is rotated between members.

If you are a member of a facilitated set, the guidance in this chapter will provide you with insight on ways in which you might engage in action learning and provide you with guidance on being a problem holder and critical friend. If you are a set facilitator, Sections 4.2-4.5 will be of particular interest as they provide guidance on introducing action learning and embedding it in working group meetings.

4.1 What Skills should Action Learning Set Members Develop?

To get the most benefit from being a member of an action learning set you must have or want to develop the following skills and qualities:

- Good active listening skills.
- Asking timely and pertinent questions.
- Patience and a genuine interest in other peoples’ learning.
- Analytical and summarizing skills.
- An awareness of the importance of getting input from everyone
- The ability to reflect

As a member of an action learning set, it is important that you commit to the process and commit to being a critical friend in set meetings. You can do this by:

- Coming to meetings regularly
- Being supportive but challenging by encouraging people to examine their taken for granted assumptions and encouraging set members to come up with potential solutions and actions.
- Being prepared to admit your own ignorance and being selfless – i.e. do not ask questions with the intention of illustrating your own knowledge or expertise.
- Encouraging others to explore how and why they act and be prepared to explore that yourself.
- Generating action
- Undertaking planned actions between set meetings
- Holding back on immediately offering advice - engaging in questioning instead

\(^3\) By Dr Denise O’Leary from the Institute of Technology Tralee
• Listening actively
• Asking timely and pertinent questions
• Being conscious of not ‘hogging’ the time
• Challenging the assumptions of others in a supportive way
• Supporting others in their experimentation

What is reflection?

You learn best by doing, and the most effective learning occurs if you not only do, but also take the time to think about what you are doing, how you are doing it, what you did well and what you would do better next time. This type of deep learning can be achieved through a process of reflection where these types of questions are examined both ‘in the moment’ as well as after an event has occurred.

Engaging in reflection:

• Helps raise self-awareness
• Develops critical thinking skills
• Helps examine responses to situations and ways to do things differently if necessary
• Provides an opportunity to ‘deconstruct’ experiences in order to learn from them

To truly benefit from engaging in reflection, it is important to engage in ‘double loop’ as well as ‘single loop’ learning. Single loop learning occurs when reflection and action has a goal driven focus, meaning that the immediate issue is addressed without the underlying cause being addressed. Double loop learning occurs when underlying assumptions, values and goals are questioned in the reflective process. Individuals engaging in double loop learning ask themselves questions like: Why did I approach the situation like that? What did I assume? Why did I assume that? How would the situation look if I reframed it? Action learning encourages double loop learning as group members ask these type of questions of each other.

4.2 Structuring CYPSC Action Learning Set Meetings

Action learning set meetings can be stand-alone or can be integrated into working group meetings. This can be the choice of each working group. When this action learning programme was piloted with the Kerry CYPSC, action learning sessions were integrated into working group meetings. The experiences of the Kerry CYPSC suggest that to facilitate action learning, working group meetings should be extended e.g. by 30-60 minutes (See facilitator’s reflection in Figure 7).

Ideally, when set members are addressing individual rather than group problems, a half-day session works best, with each member presenting their problem and taking questions and reflections from the group for 20-25 minutes. In this type of approach, the facilitator summarises learnings either after each ‘problem holder’ or after all the discussions. However, CYPSC working group meetings are shorter than half a day (even if extended as suggested above) and also require a portion of meeting time to be dedicated to operational and procedural discussions, so an alternative approach is required. One solution could be to have members present their problem/action at every second meeting rather than every meeting. However, this approach may not suit large working groups. Accordingly, an alternative
approach was trialled with the Kerry CYPSC. When addressing individual problems, the group was broken into pairs or small groups where one person acted as problem holder and the other(s) as critical friends. Each small group/pair then fed back to the larger set at the end of the discussion. This allowed simultaneous discussions to be held.

Even when dealing with group problems, it may be useful at times to have small-group discussions dealing with different aspects of the problems. As highlighted by one participant in the Kerry CYPSC collaborative skills development programme:
“Breaking team meetings into smaller groups (was) very beneficial to discuss specific topics as it focused the participants on the topic and allowed for broader discussion”

4.3 Introducing Action Learning

Action learning can be introduced to working groups one by one, however, to do this properly takes time. It is recommended to instead give a brief (5 minute) overview of the action learning intervention in working group meetings highlighting what the intervention entails and what participants should expect. This brief introduction should be followed by a half-day workshop to which members of the CYPSC and all working groups are invited where an in depth introduction to action learning can occur. This was the approach taken when piloting the action learning programme with the Kerry CYPSC.

4.3.1 Before an Introductory Session

Before an introductory workshop/meeting participants should be briefed about what to expect at the session, given material to read about action learning and collaboration (e.g. this handbook) and asked to engage in reflection about opportunities or problems they encounter when collaborating within the CYPSC. This can be done by e-mail. The request in Figure 8 provides an example of how to prompt reflection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompting Reflection Before an Introductory Workshop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Please reflect on the problems/opportunities/issues that relate to collaboration within the CYPSC. Below are some questions that will help you formulate a problem/issue/opportunity and reflect on it:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Describe the problem/opportunity/issue in one sentence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Why is this important – to you? To your agency?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How will you recognise progress on this problem/opportunity issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Who else do you think would like to see progress on this problem/opportunity/issue?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What difficulties do you anticipate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What are the benefits if this problem is resolved/opportunity is taken – To you? To your agency?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 8: Reflective Questions before Introducing Action Learning*

4.3.2 Structure of an Introductory Workshop

Useful inclusions in an introductory workshop are: *introductions, the background and theory of action learning, theory of collaboration and practice sessions.*

**Introductions**

Although often used in action learning sets which are meeting for the first time, introductions or icebreaker exercises are not strictly necessary in the context of the CYPSC, since working group members may have been working together for a while. However it can be useful to engage in an icebreaker exercise, since creative or humorous ways to encourage people to introduce aspects of themselves can model different ways of communicating, highlight that a new way of working and learning is being introduced and encourage quieter members to speak up. Examples of icebreaker exercises are listed in Appendix A.
Background and Theory of Action Learning

In an introductory workshop, the background and theory related to action learning should be introduced. Because action learning differs from many people’s prior experiences of addressing problems or learning, it is important to clarify what action learning involves and also to explore participants expectations.

Theory of Collaboration

An introduction to the theory and practice of collaboration should also be included. Highlighting the characteristics of good inter-agency collaboration provides a benchmark for participants in examining their own working group processes. In addition, highlighting how difficult collaboration can be, shows them that it is not unusual to struggle in collaborative efforts.

Practice Sessions

It is important that the workshop is not dominated by sitting and listening exercises. Practical exercises are important and participants should be given the opportunity to ‘try out’ action learning early in the workshop. Later in the workshop, they should also be given the opportunity to use action learning to build on the pre-workshop reflection exercise.

Appendix B contains the agenda for the Kerry CYPSC Collaborative Skills Development Programme introductory workshop, which may be useful as a template.

**Practice Session 1:** Exercise 1 provides an example of how participants can try out action learning by practicing key skills. This exercise helps people to become aware of and practice critical friend skills that are important in action learning such as active listening, asking insightful questions and giving and receiving feedback.

**Practice Session 2:** A second practice session can involve dividing attendees into their working groups and asking them to discuss, reflect on, question and deconstruct some of the issues they face in attempting interagency collaboration. This ensures that each group are well prepared for their first action learning session in a working group meeting.

### Exercise 1: Practicing the Skills of Critical Friendship

1. Participants work in groups of 4, rotating roles. The groups consist of a problem holder, a critical friend and two observers – one observes the problem holder while the other observes the critical friend. Participants are given an overview of the roles of problem holder and critical friend as outlined below and observers are given copies of the questions listed at the end of this exercise. Group members are asked to be respectful and helpful, and to keep the problems presented to the group confidential. Times for each problem holder are allocated.
   (Groups of 3 are also effective. In these groups there is only one observer)

2. The problem holder present any issue in their working life on which they would like to change or improve their approach. The issue needs to be one that is feasible, definable and actionable and also one that is not open to a simple technical solution.
3. A critical friend is someone who: listens; is supportive and non-judgmental; is prepared to ask questions; challenges assumptions; supports others experimentation; and is committed to helping the group learn and develop. The critical friend, rather than offering solutions, challenges, probes and asks fresh questions in order to help the problem holder make sense of the problem and develop potential courses of action.

4. During the problem holder/critical friend discussion, observers remain quiet. Once this discussion is over, observers give feedback to the critical friend and problem holder. The questions below provide prompts for what can be useful to observe during the interaction.

5. At the end, in a group discussion, the group draws conclusions that the activity provokes.

### Observing the ‘critical friend’
- Who talked most?
- Did the critical friend listen to the problem holder?
- Did he/she ask questions to help explore the issue?
- Were these questions on areas that seemed more of interest to him/her than to the problem holder?
- Did the critical friend ask questions or summarise points back to check his/her understanding?
- Did he/she offer solutions? Had the real problem been identified? Was it appropriate to offer solutions? How did the problem holder react? Did this help the problem holder?
- Were there things the problem holder appeared reticent about? How did the critical friend respond?
- Did the critical friend challenge the problem holder at all? How?
- Would you have found this critical friend’s style helpful yourself?

### Observing the Problem Holder
- How clearly did the problem holder articulate the issue?
- Did he/she listen to the questions or comments?
- Did he/she use the questions to help explore the issue? Did he/she appear defensive?
- Did the problem holder appear open? Was he/she inclined to stick to his/her own views? Was the problem holder able to be self-critical?
- Were there times where the problem holder appeared contradictory? How did the critical friend respond to this?
- Who controlled the discussion? How?

### 4.4 The First Action Learning Set Meeting

The venue should be neutral, quiet and private, with space to move around. Having a flip chart or white board available can be useful, as it allows participants to capture and summarise discussions. The meeting can begin with agenda-setting, which is an activity during which the meeting agenda items and timings are agreed.

Agenda items for a first action learning set meeting could include introductions, setting ground rules, briefing on action learning, choosing a problem and summarising actions.

1. **Ground Rules**
   It is important for each group to set a small number of ground rules for themselves, to cover issues such as confidentiality, behaviour and commitment, and to talk through how these rules might work
in practice. All Kerry CYPSC working groups established rules for their action learning sets. Figure 9 lists the ground rules established by one of the groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ground Rules Established by One Kerry CYPSC Working Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• We will Maintain Confidentiality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Differences of opinion will be handled professionally - differences will be accepted and respected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We will all engage fully and contribute and if an individual expresses an opinion the group will not fall into ‘groupthink’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We will engage in active listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We will treat everyone in the group with respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We will embrace conflict and deal with it in a constructive way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We welcome challenge and constructive criticism – we agree not to take things personally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We will act professionally at all times</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 9: An Example of Ground Rules*

Confidentiality is a key ground rule. For example, it is common in action learning sets to agree that an issue could be discussed outside the group in general and anonymous terms, but that the identity of individuals would be protected.

2. **Briefing on Action Learning**

If members attended an introductory workshop, then only a few minutes needs to be dedicated to this agenda item and the facilitator can remind participants briefly about the philosophy of action learning and the key ideas of action learning. A facilitator may choose to follow this by inviting discussion and reflection on the expectations of group members.

If no introductory workshop was held, group members should be given pre-reading on action learning and collaboration. Then, during the meeting, they should be given a more in-depth introduction to the philosophy, theory and key ideas of action learning and collaboration. Additionally, participants should be given the opportunity to practice the skills of critical friendship as outlined in Exercise 1.

The facilitator’s own behaviour is important. A facilitator should model active listening and questioning rather than slipping into expert solution-giver mode.

3. **Choosing a problem**

Reflecting on, and working to address, problems provides the opportunities for learning within action learning sets. As highlighted earlier, only some problems are appropriate to address using action learning. A problem must be real, significant, actionable and challenging. It must also be definable, have potentially feasible solutions and provide opportunity for learning. Action learning is a
contextualised and dynamic process and participants may begin by working on one problem but new priorities may emerge in the process.

Problems can consist of individual issues of set members or collective issues facing the whole set. Problems become the focus of group discussions, critical analysis and reflection.

- For individual issues, set members take turns to be a ‘problem holder’ and present and reflect on a problem, while other group members and the facilitator ask questions to help the problem holder to question their assumptions, define the problem, critically analyse it and come up with potential solutions.
- For group issues, the group works together to engage in reflection and questioning to critically analyse the problem, develop potential courses of action and decide what actions will be taken and by whom.

Once work on a problem begins, whether each individual is working on their own inquiry or the task is a group one, the first step is diagnosis, which involves the group asking questions. Questions should provide space for reflection, allow assumptions to be explored, challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, and be supportive yet challenging. Examples of questions are listed in Figure 10. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but gives an indication of the types of questions group members might usefully ask.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Useful questions to ask when initially addressing....</th>
<th>Individual Problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group Problems</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What are we trying to do?</td>
<td>• Define the problem in one sentence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Why is it important to do this?</td>
<td>• Why is this important to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What is stopping us from doing it?</td>
<td>• Why is it important to your organisation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Why must it be that way?</td>
<td>• Why is it happening?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Who knows about this problem?</td>
<td>• Why must it happen that way? Have other approaches been tried?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Who have we spoken to about this?</td>
<td>• What is stopping you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Who can do something about this problem?</td>
<td>• How do you feel about it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What are the causes of the problem?</td>
<td>• Who have you spoken to about this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What might we try?</td>
<td>• Did their views conflict with yours?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What might be the consequences of these actions?</td>
<td>• Who can do something about this problem?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What would need to happen to help the group succeed?</td>
<td>• What have you tried so far?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What has been tried so far?</td>
<td>• What worked or didn’t work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Why must it happen that way? Have other approaches been tried?</td>
<td>• What are you going try?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What worked or didn’t work?</td>
<td>• What might the consequences be?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What will progress look like?</td>
<td>• What would need to happen to help you succeed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do we need more information or expertise?</td>
<td>• How will you know if you are making progress?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What will each group member do before the next meeting?</td>
<td>• Do you need more information and how will you get it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What help or support do you need?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What do you want from the group?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Useful clarification questions                        |                     |
|                                                      |                     |
| • Are you saying that...?                             |                     |
| • It sounds as if....                                 |                     |
| • Have you checked your assumption that....?          |                     |
| • You said.... What do you think are the causes?      |                     |

Figure 10: Useful Questions when Initially Reflecting on a Problem
The Kerry CYPSC working groups worked on both group problems and individual problems. Initial sessions involved each working group reflecting on how they might improve their collaboration. They then chose an issue to address which related to the work of their working group. Over a number of meetings they then followed a cycle of planning, undertaking and reflecting on action as a group.

In the second half of the programme, rather than focusing on a group problem, working group members were asked to reflect on what they as individuals, and representatives of their agencies, might do to improve the collaborative processes within the working group. Over several meetings, they went through cycles of planning, undertaking and reflecting on individual actions.

4. Summarising Actions

People should leave each meeting knowing what they and everyone else will be doing before the next meeting, therefore it is useful for the facilitator to note agreed actions during the meeting and summarise them at the end. For example, after a first meeting further research and information gathering may be required to help clarify a problem and the actions might involve gathering this data.

4.5 Further Meetings

As highlighted in Figure 11, action learning consists of cycles of developing understanding, choosing courses of action, testing them out, reflecting on what happened and learning from the experience. Action learning set meetings support this exploration and learning. There is no fixed pattern to an action learning set meeting but it may involve a catch-up where members share actions and developments since the last meeting, a period of questioning and reflection on those actions and developments and a learning review where members summarise and discuss what they have learned.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps in a Cycle of Action Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1: Reflect, ask and answer questions to improve understanding of the situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: Formulate courses of feasible action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3: Choose a course of action and test it out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4: Reflect on what happened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5: Compare expectation and experience, draw conclusions and plan another cycle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 11: Steps

Once a problem has been stated and explored, it is time to test out a possible solution. This is often called experimentation and usually happens between meetings. If individuals are taking action on individual problems, they will decide on and commit to testing a possible solution during an action learning session and take action before the next session. If a group are working on a group problem, different members of the group may address different aspects of the problem between meetings. In interagency groups such as the CYPSC Working Groups, this may involve individuals taking on different aspects of the work. Alternatively working groups may choose to work together on aspects of the problems, in which case they may have sub-group meetings to manage the operational attributes of the work.
Individuals bring back the results of their experimentation to the next action learning meeting. Questioning is used to help reflect on results, what the results mean and what was learned in the process. Figure 12 provides some useful reflective questions for this phase of an action learning cycle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Useful Reflective Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• What was the issue?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What actions were undertaken?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What were the intentions/expectations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What happened?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What made this happen?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Who else was involved?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How successful were the actions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What was different from what was expected?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What were the blockages?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What helped?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Why did it work/didn’t work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What feedback has been received?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What has been learned from the experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What remains confusing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Who has the power to help?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is other information or expert knowledge needed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have relationships changed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What were the assumptions? Were any of these overturned?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Has the goal changed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• If these actions were to be taken again, should anything be done differently?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What should we do more/less of?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What would have to happen to enable things to be done differently another time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Where stage is it at now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What next?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Useful clarification questions

| • Are you saying that...? |
| • It sounds as if.... |
| • Have you checked your assumption that....? |
| • You said.... What do you think are the causes? |

*Figure 12: Useful Questions for Reflecting on Actions*

Action learning does not depend on formal instruction and theory. Instead it is a form of facilitated learning that depends on individuals within a group learning from and with each other through inquiry and reflection on action. However, as is highlighted in Revans learning formula \( L = P + Q \), knowledge from books, journal articles, experts etc. has a part to play and should be utilised when necessary. During cycles of action learning, reading material on collaboration was provided to Kerry CYPSC working group members. Additionally, ‘P’ in the form of data on CYPSC activities was provided to the groups by different members when necessary.
4.6 Putting it all together – Case Study Example

In each cycle of action learning, through a process of questioning, members reflect on actions taken, learn from the process and plan another cycle. Case Study A illustrates the cycles of action learning that occurred for one of the Kerry CYPSC working groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study A: The Action Learning Cycles of One Kerry CYPSC Working Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action Learning Session 1</strong> (Half-day introductory workshop with all working groups)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All working groups were given an introduction to the philosophy, theory and practice of action learning and of collaboration. In practical exercises participants were given the opportunity to engage in action learning, to practice critical friend skills and to reflect on the issues related to collaboration in CYPSC working groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action Learning Session 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A brief overview of the action learning programme was outlined &amp; ground rules were agreed. Members reflected on problems/challenges/opportunities faced by the group that they wished to address in the action learning sessions. Members agreed that achieving clarity on the purpose and goals of the group would be an appropriate focus for the action learning initiative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action Learning Session 3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The group reflected on its goals. During the session the group developed a number of objectives that they wished to address. Each member reflected on their agency’s objectives and their own personal objectives. Members agreed to undertake research to clarify individual agency objectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action Learning Session 4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The focus of the third session was to identify and prioritise actions related to addressing the working group aim and objectives. First, existing agency objectives were reviewed and examined for alignment with working group objectives. A number of agencies were in the process of reviewing their objectives at the time, so working group actions were agreed on the understanding that they were dynamic and may change. In between meetings the group began working on a number of the agreed actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action Learning Session 5</strong> - Half Day Workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was a Kerry CYPSC half day Planning Workshop held which was attended by members of all working groups. During the workshop, objectives and actions proposed in action learning sessions 1-4 were examined and refined by the working group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action Learning Session 6</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants worked in small groups consisting of:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A Problem holder – to reflect on and evaluate personal actions taken to advance the work of the working group and commit to further action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Two critical friends – to prompt the problem holder to identify solutions to the problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles were switched during the exercise, allowing all individuals in a group to act as problem holder. Members reflected on what was stopping them from living up to their full potential as a CYPSC working group member and committed to taking action to address a problem they identified. Members worked on individual actions before the next meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action Learning Session 7</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members were asked to reflect again on what they could do as individuals to improve their work within this working group and to reflect on and evaluate the actions they had taken since the previous action learning session. In pairs, members took turns to act as problem holder and critical friend and engaged in reflection and questioning. Members committed to taking further action before the next meeting. As this was the last action learning session, working group members also discussed how they might continue to include reflection in working group meetings and continue to develop as an effective group. The group discussed the barriers which had been addressed over the course of the action learning initiative through: reflecting on and clarifying the purpose and functions of the working group; identifying working group actions; and identifying actions to align the work of each agency with work of the working group. Members noted that over the course of action learning intervention, the group had achieved much greater clarity on its role and goals, which in turn had increased the group’s effectiveness. Members also noted that action learning had allowed them the space to improve collaborative relations within the group and this had also led to greater group effectiveness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What did the other Kerry CYPSC Working Groups Address using Action Learning Cycles?

Each of the working groups initially focused on achieving clarity on their role, goals and objectives. They then reflected on and worked through the problem of not being clear about their role and the associated barriers, such as appropriate membership, overlap with the work of other interagency groups and overlap with other working groups. Each group then went through process of establishing clear objectives with defined actions and outcomes. As a result of this increased clarity of purpose, working groups are now more effective.

The Youth Participation Working Group for example, established clarity on its role and defined appropriate actions. As a result the group has managed to embed youth participation across the whole CYPSC structure, something members had previously struggled with. Similarly two other working groups, established clarity of purpose through action learning and as a result identified an area of overlap in their work. They went on to develop ways to work together, making both groups more effective and ensuring that duplication of effort did not occur.

4.7 Some Tips on Facilitation

In action learning, facilitators are not there to ‘fix’ the problem. Their role is to create the conditions within the set which will encourage action learning. They are also there to facilitate the development of critical friend skills of set members by encouraging them to support and challenge each other. As highlighted by Pedlar and Abbott (2013) “The trick for a facilitator is to be helpful without succumbing to an expert role, thus taking the power and focus away from the set members.”

Facilitators need to be critically reflective about their own behaviour and assumptions and pay attention to how well the set is operating. Good facilitators don’t get drawn into the discussion but instead focus on what is happening within the discussion and how this impacts on how well the group is functioning. They encourage productive team behaviours and discourage unproductive ones.

To encourage fruitful group discussion and to encourage the development of skill sets of other set members, facilitators should model critical questioning skills by asking relevant and timely questions. The questions provided earlier in the handbook may be useful in this regard. Facilitators should also model active listening skills. Summarising learning at the close of a discussion and at the close of set meetings can be an effective means of doing this. Facilitators must also recognise that different people have different learning styles and take account of that when designing workshop or meeting activities. Additionally, facilitators must recognise that different people may react differently to the same situation. For example (as was the case in one Kerry CYPSC Working Group) one group member may report that being part of a working group makes them feel empowered while someone else may find the experience frustrating.

Different degrees of formality work for different groups but it is often useful to include the following elements:

1. An agenda can be useful for keeping discussions on track. This can be agreed by the set at the beginning of the meeting.
2. There should be some record of what was discussed and agreed in meetings. Facilitators may choose to take on this role themselves, or assign it to someone else.
3. People should leave each meeting knowing what they and everyone else will be doing before the next meeting.
4.8 Feedback from Kerry CYPSC Action Learning Sets

Six Kerry Children’s and Young People’s Services working groups engaged in action learning. Both qualitative and quantitative feedback was sought and both types of feedback are reported on in this section. Feedback from members of all groups highlights the benefits that action learning can bring.

4.8.1 Qualitative Feedback

Working group members highlighted a number of benefits of engaging in the action learning initiative including increased focus in working groups, better communication and collaboration, more interaction with other agencies and improvements in group dynamics.

**Increased Focus**

Initial action learning sessions with each of the working groups highlighted some level of uncertainty among group members on the role and goals of their working group and their own role within the group. Accordingly, as highlighted in chapter 2, reflecting on and clarifying the role of the working group and individual roles was a facilitated activity that occurred with each group.

The programme was successful in this regard as a large proportion of survey respondents observed that action learning sessions resulted in increased clarity on the role and goals of their working group and as a result, working group meetings became increasingly focused on achieving these goals.

“The working group now constantly reflects on the core purpose & how objectives might be achieved”

This increased focus was linked by respondents to enhanced working group effectiveness.

“We are clearer in our objectives, which enhances effectiveness”

“Working groups are more work focused and not merely discussion forums, which helps maintain momentum”

The action learning programme also resulted in increased clarity on the roles of individuals within the group, which resulted in more effective meetings.

“Meeting are more organised now – I can see where everyone’s roles link and we use this to get the most potential”

Participants also noted that an increased emphasis on children and young people was an outcome of increased clarity on roles and goals.

**Collaboration and communication within and between working groups**

Lack of knowledge about other working groups, their remit and their activities was a problem that was highlighted during action learning sessions. Before the action learning intervention, information about the activities of other working groups was generally not shared. Accordingly, participants only had general awareness of the existence and the work of other working groups.
A number of groups chose to work on these issue and respondents reported that improvements in communication are ongoing:

“There is a greater sense of actions being taken to develop communication and collaboration across groups e.g. broadening membership of our working group; newsletter updates; inter-group engagement on shared objectives etc.”

Additionally, structural changes were undertaken, which are still in their initial stages but are proving successful thus far - Because action learning sessions highlighted for the youth participation working group their underpinning role across all working groups, the group introduced a change to CYPSC working group structures and processes by asking for a youth/child participation representative from each of the other working groups:

“Our working group has a Youth/Child Participation representative who attends at least two of the Youth Participation Meetings per year. This means real communication across the working groups and a shared understanding of each other’s tasks/goals etc.”

Additionally, during action learning sessions, the Child and Youth Mental Health Working Group identified an area where their goals overlapped with the Parenting and Family Learning Working Group, leading to the establishment of a temporary sub-group with members from both working groups.

“Collaboration across working groups has improved i.e. the Infant & Toddler Mental Health initiative which has established a sub-group between C&YMH and P&FL working groups.”

Cross-group activities also proved successful in providing information to participants about all working group activities. The October 2013 and March 2014 workshops which were held in the ITT were attended by members of all working groups. These networking events allowed working group members to meet each other and get information on the activities of other working groups:

“I found it very helpful. It was a way of us finding out about what the main committee was about and how we as a working group fitted into the bigger picture, help us to be able to ask questions to get an overall picture of where we are at and where we are hoping to go in the future.”

Participants noted that an annual networking event should be a feature of ongoing CYPSC activities.

Greater interaction with other agencies

Action learning facilitated working groups to reflect on and re-examine their core purpose, aims and objectives. Resulting actions taken by members often involved greater interaction with services and agencies not represented on working groups:

“As a result of engaging in action learning, we are seeking input from various services and initiatives within the community which may inform, or be an area for development, for our working group goals.”

The process of examining core purpose also involved some groups examining their membership. In the case of two working groups, it was acknowledged that as the remit of the group had changed from the remit at initial set up, representatives from some agencies were no longer needed on the groups. In other cases, working groups decided that they needed representation from additional agencies in
order to effectively address their goals. Thus, a number of changes in membership occurred as a result of the action learning initiative.

**Participation**
One problem highlighted by some of the working groups was that it was difficult to have well-attended meetings due to work commitments of all members and institutional-level prioritisation elsewhere:

“The CYPSC work is often seen as something extra you have to do on top of a very heavy work load already. You do not get receive any recognition from the Department or your own agency for the work you do/contribute to the CYPSC!”

One of the outcomes of the action learning programme noted by respondents on a number of working groups was “better participation of members attending”. This may be linked to the fact that members felt the groups were becoming increasingly effective.

**Group Dynamics**
Action learning facilitated an examination of and reflection on group processes:

“Dynamics were shown – why we work the way we do and the way we should work”

Exposing group dynamics in this way allowed group members to reflect on and take on action on possible changes. Additionally, participation in the action learning programme encouraged participants to reflect on their own contribution to group dynamics.

“As an individual I have been prompted to be more reflective of my participation and contribution”

Reflection on personal attitudes and behaviour led to behaviour changes that could impact positively on collaborative efforts:

“Now I try to set more realistic goals and targets and when working with other agencies”

Many participants noted a number of differences in meeting processes due to action learning. Greater levels of consultation, better communication, more openness and better planning were all mentioned as being a direct result of the programme:

“Listening more, more open to new ideas”

“More consultative, ensuring greater input from all attendees”

“More open communication, more time given to ideas thrown out”

“More organised”

“Better communication within the group”

“Better planned and action directed”

4.8.2 **Quantitative Feedback**

The qualitative feedback reported in section 4.8.1 is backed up by quantitative data from respondents which was sought in June 2014, one year after the completion of the initiative. Twenty participants
provided feedback, although only 17 of those provided quantitative feedback. The responses of those 17 are recorded in Tables 2 to 5.

As highlighted in Table 2, feedback was very positive; none of the 17 respondents felt that the time dedicated to action learning was wasted time, and 94% of respondents (16 out of 17) felt it helped their working group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action Learning DID NOT help my working group</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The time dedicated to Action Learning was</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: Feedback on the Value of Action Learning*

**The Impact of Action Learning on Communication**

Respondents were asked to rate the impact of action learning on communication within the working group. As is highlighted in Table 3, respondents were positive in their responses. Some changes were striking - They reported that communication within the group improved (82% agreed or strongly agreed), that the programme has helped them work more effectively as a group (88% agreed or strongly agreed) and that the group has a better sense of its goals and objectives (88% agreed or strongly agreed). Another change was less striking, but still positive – 70% of respondents reported that there was a sense of being more open in meetings after the programme (although this lower figure may have been due to the fact, as noted by one respondent, that there was a good sense of openness to begin with which did not need to be improved on). However, only 41% of respondents reported that they were more likely to speak up in meetings, highlighting an area on which working groups, and particularly chairpersons, will continue to focus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>It would have happened anyway</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication within the group improved because of the Action Learning initiative</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because of the Action Learning initiative the working group now has a better sense of its goals and objectives</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action Learning helped us find a way to work more effectively together</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am more inclined to speak up in meetings now</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is more of a sense of people being open with each other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3: Impact of Action Learning on Communication*
The Impact of Action Learning on Working Group Processes

Respondents were also asked about the impact of action learning on working group processes. Again responses were positive and, as highlighted in Table 4, the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the programme helped the working group in achieving its goals (76%), led to greater understanding of individual roles and responsibilities (64%), changed the group dynamics in a positive way (76%) and led to more efficient meetings (76%) as highlighted in Table 4. However, when asked if work is now more evenly distributed only 41% agreed or strongly agreed and only 35% of respondents reported that reflection is continuing in working group meetings, highlighting areas for ongoing development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>It would have happened anyway</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The action learning initiative helped my working group achieve some of its goals</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I better understand my own roles and responsibilities within the group</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The work is now more evenly divided</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working group meetings are now run more efficiently</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The time dedicated to action learning changed our group dynamics in a positive way</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even after Denise stopped coming, we continued to engage in reflection within our meetings</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4: Impact of Action Learning on Working Group Processes*

The Impact of Action Learning on Interaction with the CYPSC as a whole

Because some working groups chose to use action learning to work on their interaction with other working groups, respondents were asked to rate the impact of action learning on their interaction with the CYPSC as a whole. Their feedback highlights the positive impact of action learning on inter-group collaboration within the Kerry CYPSC. 70% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had learned more about other working groups and the CYPSC because of the programme and 76% felt the programme increased their sense of being part of the wider CYPSC group. Similarly, 76% agreed or strongly agreed that their working group now contributes more effectively to CYPSC goals.
### Table 5: Impact of Action Learning on the Interaction with the CYPSC as a Whole

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>It would have happened anyway</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I learned more about other working groups and the CYPSC because of the Action Learning programme</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My involvement in the Action Learning programme has increased my sense of being part of the wider CYPSC group</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My working group now contributes more effectively to CYPSC goals</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 4.8.3 Summary of Lessons Learned

The Kerry CYPSC action learning initiative was designed as a pilot programme which could be rolled out to other CYPSC’s, thus it is important to examine the lessons learned. In general, working group members found their engagement with action learning both useful and enjoyable, and appreciated the skills they developed. They also found it beneficial that action learning was integrated into working group meetings. However because the action learning set meetings take time, in any future action learning programme, working group meetings should be extended by 30-60 minutes for the duration of the programme to allow participants to take full advantage of engaging in action learning.

Bringing working groups together in two action learning workshops was particularly useful as it gave working group members an appreciation of their significance and that of their working group in the whole CYPSC system. As well as facilitating working groups to share information, the workshops also allowed inter-agency information sharing. Any future programme should include action learning workshops or session to which members of every working group and the CYPSC are invited.

Action learning was undertaken in Kerry with CYPSC working groups only and not with the Children’s and Young People’s Service’s Committee itself. Yet, action learning is often used in management and leadership development and has been shown to enhance leadership behaviours, suggesting that action learning initiatives in other county’s CYPSCs should include sessions in committee meetings as well as working group meetings.

It is clear from the feedback that participants in the action learning initiative in Kerry CYPSCs found it of benefit. Because working group members were facilitated to step back and examine the way they worked with each other and how the group collaborated with other working groups, they were able to take action to improve both. This suggests that engaging in action learning could be of benefit to all CYPSCs across Ireland.
Useful Reading

**Action Learning**


Coghlan D. and Brydon-Miller M. (editors) *Encyclopaedia of Action Research*.

**Collaboration**


Appendix A – Examples of Icebreaker Exercises

Icebreaker Exercise 1:
Introduce yourself to the group telling something you think they would be surprised about

Icebreaker Exercise 2:
Participants choose two from a selection images, one that represents something about themselves, the other that represents their hopes for the programme

Icebreaker Exercise 3:
The facilitator asks participants to group themselves into three different areas of the room by how long they have been in their working group: eg group 1: less than six months, group 2: 6 months to 18 months, group 3: Over 18 months. Have them list the advantages and disadvantages of the length of time they have been a working group member. Ask one member of the group to share the results of the discussion with the other groups.

Icebreaker Exercise 4: ‘You’re sadly mistaken’
The facilitator brings an obscure looking object to the group. This is passed round each individual who has to introduce who they are and offer an opinion as to what the object is, as creatively as possible. As each person takes it from the previous individual, they start with ‘you’re sadly mistaken, this is not [what the object was just described it as] it is a .....’
# Agenda

**Kerry CYPSC Collaborative Skills Development Programme - Introductory Workshop**

**October 4th 2013 10.30-1.30**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Facilitator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10.30</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Oliver Mawe, CYPSC chairperson and Claire O’Toole, CYPSC co-ordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.45</td>
<td>Action learning – An introduction to the background, theory and practical application</td>
<td>Dr Clare Rigg, ITT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>Action learning in action – practice session 1</td>
<td>Facilitated by Dr Denise O’Leary and Dr Clare Rigg, ITT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.45</td>
<td>Break</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>Collaboration – An introduction to the background &amp; theory</td>
<td>Dr Denise O’Leary, ITT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.20</td>
<td>Action learning in action – practice session 2</td>
<td>Facilitated by Dr Denise O’Leary and Dr Clare Rigg, ITT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>Summary overview of the morning &amp; next steps</td>
<td>Dr Denise O’Leary, ITT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>