



range of options. The approach follows a format and uses some unusual methods for data gathering and for reflecting to 'find a difference that can make a difference'.

Each person in the set gets the opportunity to present his/her most important challenge to the other members. Over a period, the action learning set works with each participant to explore their issue, create options and develop an action plan that is right for them to address their challenge. Others in the group can benefit from drawing from each other's opinions and action plans for what are often similar or shared problems.

Everyone has the opportunity to learn throughout the process regardless of whether they are presenting their issue, listening, questioning or offering thoughts and opinions. Group members will hear about progress at the next meeting, which builds on their learning and contributes to ongoing motivation to take action. As trust and rapport grow between group members, the support and challenge offered by participants develops and contributes to the life of the sessions.

Action Learning Sets can offer:

- space for individual reflective learning
- learning to take back to the workplace and translate into action
- support and challenge from peers
- the chance to work smarter and find creative ways to bring about change
- a chance to test beliefs and assumptions and learn what works
- a safe environment to explore new ways of thinking and doing
- personal, as well as professional, learning and development
- insight into how others achieve different solutions
- a chance to progress new opportunities and develop new ideas.

Action Learning Set members sign up to take part for the duration of the process (as far as is possible). It is important that everyone's views can be part of each session to ensure equity of access to the group's range of knowledge. Organisations must support the commitment of those involved. Participants need to know they have the authority to act with autonomy on the actions they commit to, and that their time is protected for attendance at the set. Offering this support is an investment in the organisation's future success and the potential benefits are numerous.

How Action Learning Set(s) support organisations and integrated working

- Action learning set(s) are ideal for supporting the development of integrated services and other collaborative ways of working. The behaviours, values and skills used during the sets, role model those that will support good outcomes in partnership work.
- Action learning set(s) are often used in learning organisations because they provide a structured way for skills to be continuously reviewed and enhanced. They encourage a culture of active learning through questioning and seeking new and better ways to do things.

- An Action Learning Set trains itself, with the help of the set facilitator, so the process models participation, responsibility, empowerment and collaboration.
- It offers an effective method for working with change.
- The final action learning set meeting can be used to present feedback about the experience and the outcomes to an invited audience. It can be useful to invite people who sponsored the Action Learning Set, people whose members may want to influence, and anyone who the group think will benefit from hearing about the outcomes and method (see evaluation in part 2 for an example format for presenting back).

What kinds of issues do Action Learning Set members discuss?

The approach is often used in workplaces, to discuss work-related issues. Members may have a wide ranging agenda or they may work on quite specific issues, like the development of new skills or the progress of a particular project. In collaboration with partners, the SSSC has run action learning set(s) to support the development of neighbourhood care, the implementation of self-directed support and other integration initiatives. The focus of these sets was around each of these policies and how people could progress them. Each person brought an issue that they were personally grappling with in relation to the change taking place. Some themes covered included exploring how to:

- raise the profile of their own work with others that need to be involved but have their own day-to-day priorities to attend to or don't see the value of the issue
- communicate in important situations with impact
- offer the support that others need whilst also meeting personal objectives
- motivate and boost morale with staff who feel demoralised by change.

Each person's 'wicked issue' is reframed as a 'How can I...?' question in order to consider it from a position of personal responsibility and to explore the measures the individual can take.

Facilitating Action Learning Set(s)

Facilitating this method requires rigour in holding to a prescribed approach along with facilitation skills that particularly support developing group trust and reflection. The process includes protected periods of listening without interruption, using open questions to gather data about the current situation and collaboratively working on solutions and developing actions (see plans and tools). For best outcomes the facilitator(s) should have knowledge and skills in facilitation, coaching, feedback and giving direction. (see introductory session and structure guide in tools and resources).

- Confidentiality** as crucial to building trust in learning together with authenticity in relation to real issues.
- Active listening** in a way that may not be easily achievable in other meetings.
- Skilful use of **open questioning** to assist the issue holder's and group's learning.
- A focus on **collaborative learning** through support and challenge to help learning.
- The integration of individual's **learning** with service and organisational **objectives**.
- Understanding** the problem better before attempting solutions.



- g) Taking different positions to facilitate **new perspectives** (eg the issue owner sitting outside the group to observe the group developing options).
- h) Ownership of an issue and working to an accountable **action plan**, reporting back on learning.
- i) Continuous learning through **review of the process** and adaptations by the group, taking responsibility for their own learning.
- j) **Reflective** practice.
- k) Facilitation to hold the **discipline** of a 'difference that can make a difference' and to challenge the group to think.
- l) Building **interpersonal skills** and understanding for group dynamics, patterns of unconscious and habitual behaviours, noticing and questioning assumptions.
- m) Being prepared to **experiment**.

Pause for reflection

Given what you know about your own skills, knowledge and values as a facilitator and/or in your work capacity, reflect on the following.

1. In what ways am I already aligned strongly with these principles and ways of being?
2. Which of these principles and ways of being feel less familiar to me or are areas I am uncomfortable with?
3. How can I use this knowledge to prepare to facilitate Action Learning Sets?

Programme, resources and tools

Introductory session

Initial event with an introduction to action learning and a message from an organisational lead reinforcing the purpose and ensuring organisational commitment to group members having autonomy to take actions forward and to have protected time.

Work will also be done to identify members' focus of inquiry and the first issue will be explored. The purpose of the session is to set the context, focus the inquiry and begin to develop group trust.

Action Learning Set meetings

Sets will meet approximately once a month until all members have explored their issue and carried out their actions.

This will culminate in a gathering where set members present on their experience of, and outcomes from the process, to an invited audience. This will help the learning to be shared and have poten

Evaluation

Reflection and evaluation are critical parts of action learning. Set members will engage in active reflection throughout the process encouraged by exercises and facilitation which support this.

When a set member has presented their issue to the group and carried out their actions, they will complete a reflective log. This tool can also be used throughout the process to aide reflective practice. At the end of the process members will be asked to complete an evaluation, which, combined with the reflective log and notes gathered throughout the sessions, will contribute to the overall evaluation of the process and short term outcomes.

To gather more robust evidence of longer term impact, evaluation can be carried out six months and twelve months following the end of the action learning set.



This ALS programme is based on the work of Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) and NHS Education for Scotland (NES) and is used with permission of programme facilitators Julia Parker, Robin Burgess and Malcolm Young.

The following tools are for the use of facilitators and participants and will support you to run a full Action Learning Set.

Action Learning Set introduction/day 1 programme with facilitator notes

Time	Activity	Key points	Purpose	Who
10:00	Tea/Coffee			'Who' refers to the facilitator or speaker who will lead each section. A set can be facilitated alone but two facilitators works well; with roles being divided or the whole process being shared.
	Welcome and introductions			
	Ice breaker		To support participants' comfort and involvement levels.	
	Setting the scene - senior manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Endorsement Local picture Support for ALS Commitment to protect time Permission to Act on Actions 	This is an important stage particularly if participants come from a culture where they need permission to act with autonomy. If participants are coming from diverse organisations or projects, consider inviting representative managers from each.	



10:40	Open debate to identify themes	<p>Current policy environment</p> <p>Challenges</p> <p>Highlight areas from Senior Manager's message</p> <p>Record on flipchart</p>	<p>Encourage the group to discuss issues and contexts that are relevant to the purpose of the action learning set. This will help people to start appreciating the wider system and to begin forming their 'wicked issue'/'How can I?' question if they haven't already.</p>	
11:00	Background to action learning	<p>Build on the information sent out to participants about action learning.</p> <p>Run through what will happen each week</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focus on action • wicked problems • open questions • back to the room • trust the process. 	<p>Cover basic theory and principles, and begin to build working agreement with the group.</p>	
11:15	Tea/Coffee			
11:30	Identify and clarify the 'HOW CAN I?' questions	<p>The facilitator attends to each person in turn to explore their issue and support them to phrase it as a 'How can I ...' question.</p>	<p>This calls for coaching skills to help the person refine their issue. People often come with issues that are broad or that do not get to the heart of what they want to explore. The facilitator supports people to clarify and define their issue.</p>	



12:30	Lunch			
13:15	Arrange the timetable	Vote for the order in which people will present their 'wicked issue'.	Invite the group to consider all of the 'How can I's?' and to organise who will present in which week. A day session can accommodate up to three 'wicked issues' (although two are preferable). This can be tiring depending on the size of the group so careful consideration should be given to the balance of feedback from the previous set and the number of new 'wicked issues'.	
13:25	First wicked issue	Follow the process in 'the structure guide' including the process for working through 'wicked issues' points 4-7.	This process supports the whole group participating in ways that enable deeper reflection. As facilitator it is important that you hold people to the principles and approaches. (See pg XX structure guide for more detail).	



14:40	Process review	Looking at the 'How' (process) rather than the 'What' (content): How might we work as an action learning set next time to get better at using its learning potential? What would we keep, what change in how we worked today? What do we notice about our own habitual or unconscious behaviours? How are we using the discipline, feedback and encouragement that we need to continue to meet and dialogue.	This helps to extend the learning for all and to keep developing the group and the focus on what the group needs	
14:50	Endings	Facilitators can use any approach that supports people identifying what they are leaving with or how they are by the end of the session. how they are by the end of the session.	This offers an ending to the day where people reflect on what they are leaving with. The group also gains a sense of the overall dynamic and it helps the facilitator to further gauge the impact.	
15:00	Finish and thanks			



Structure guide and facilitator notes for subsequent Action Learning Set(s) including the process for working through 'wicked issues'

Time	Activity	Key points	Purpose	Who
1. (20 mins)	Connecting up	Each member says a little about themselves and what matters to them today; in the 1st set meeting this includes contracting and agreeing ground rules. In subsequent meetings it includes identifying ongoing learning for individuals and group from previous meeting's explorations.	To orientate members to the task and support their participation.	Who refers to the facilitator or speaker who will lead each section.
2. (5 mins)	Clarifying the issues for the day	In the first meeting the group agree a timetable for presenting their 'wicked issues'. At the start of each set thereafter the group check in to determine if this schedule still works or would benefit from adjustment (for example if someone's issue has become pressing). Changes may also be made to the number of 'wicked issues' to be presented.	To ensure group needs are being addressed	
3. (15 mins)	Presentation of the 1st 'How Can I' by the issue holder.	Uninterrupted. The group provide active listening until the presenter is finished (see presenting Guidelines). From this section on the facilitator(s) must hold people to the rigour of the process. No dialogue when listening, no justification of feelings, only ask open questions and have the outcome the presenter seeks in mind when exploring options.	This lets the presenter say everything that they want to without the distraction of interruption. Being able to state One's case fully at the outset can be empowering. Feeling listened to can help us to feel understood and valued.	

Time	Activity	Key points	Purpose	Who
4. (5 mins)	Naming feelings each is aware of in response to the presenter	<p>Recognising feelings as important data that is often overlooked. 'I feel</p> <p>Just naming the feeling(s) in one or two words is helpful here. Analysis or explanation comes later.</p> <p>If people struggle, encourage them to notice how they feel in their body as well as what they think. This can help people to identify genuine responses rather than getting stuck in what they think they should feel.</p>	<p>Naming feelings has many functions. It offers new data to the presenter and the group about impact in different parts of the system. It also helps participants to become more aware of their own response to and part in the issue.</p>	
5. (15 mins)	Data gathering	<p>Using open questions as a key tool to open up the issue, deeper and wider, and to make new connections.</p> <p>Questions should focus on gathering data about the here and now, not speculating about future options.</p>	<p>This is core to understanding the 'wicked' issue better and within a more whole systems perspective.</p>	
6. (20 mins)	Option seeking	<p>The Presenter withdraws temporarily by moving from the group but sitting within earshot and turned away from the group. This provides an 'invisible screen' behind which the presenter can listen to the group working on their issue and developing options. The presenter takes notes. The group discuss their responses to the issue with one another, ask questions of each other and offer ideas and support to generate options.</p>	<p>This creates a different perspective and, temporarily shifts responsibility for their issue, freeing their creativity.</p>	



Time	Activity	Key points	Purpose	Who
7. (15 mins)	Action planning	The issue holder re-joins the group and responds to what s/he has heard. The group assists them to get to an action plan that is right for them in relation to moving forward with the issue. Where the group are closely involved with the issue, they too can identify their own steps forward and the interrelationships with one another's action plans.	The actions should be achievable by the next session. Some actions might be longer term in which case they should be broken down to identify shorter term actions that will lead to the longer term outcome. While the group and facilitator can contribute thoughts re actions, the decision lies with the presenter. The point is for the presenter to commit.	
8. (10 mins)	Review of the process	Looking at the 'How' (process) rather than the 'What' (content): How might we work as an action learning set next time to get better at using its learning potential? What would we keep, what change in how we worked today? What do we notice about our own habitual or unconscious behaviours? How are we using the discipline, feedback and encouragement that we need to continue to meet and dialogue to make a difference?		
9. 5 (mins)	Check out	Facilitators can use any approach that supports people identifying what they are leaving with or how they are by the end of the session.	This offers an ending to the day where people reflect on what they are leaving with. The group also gains a sense of the overall dynamic and it helps the facilitator to further gauge the impact.	

Guidelines for preparing and presenting a 'wicked issue'/'how can I?' to the group

To help in preparing to present a 'wicked issue' please consider the following.

1. Give your issue a title or headline that gains attention.
2. Explain what it is and describe what a good outcome would be when you have found a way forward.
3. Describe how the issue has come about and the context.
4. Explain who the major players are and their interests, and whether they support or are against the change.
5. Describe what you have done so far, or are thinking of doing.
6. Finish by framing the question that you would most like your colleagues in the set to work on with you.

NB When chosen, you will have up to 20 minutes to present this to colleagues.

Helping participants to prepare for presenting back to an invited audience

When group members present back their own experience and outcomes to an invited audience it serves several functions:

- Allows the group to showcase their hard work
- Highlights issues people have been grappling with and how they have been resolved.
- Can highlight issues in the wider system
- Advocates and role models a learning culture
- Can influence people around change

Supporting the group to consider their learning and what impact this has had on them personally, on their practice and on the organisation, helps reflection at different levels of the system. Paying attention to this can lead to group members delivering stories that fully capture their experience and that will appeal to a range of people.

The evaluation form below provides a useful template of areas to cover in a presentation. People should personalise their content though and deliver it in whatever form works best for them, for example in words, using slides, images, telling their story.

Helping participants to work with open questions

Some participants may be skilled in using open questions to generate data and others may need support to become familiar with this way of inquiring. The following document can be used as a guide by participants in preparation for attending and during the action learning set.

What is an open-ended question?

Before you can start effectively asking open-ended questions, you need to know what they are. An open-ended question is a question that requires a full answer using a person's own knowledge or feelings. These questions are objective and will be answered in many words.

Examples: 'Why did Jim leave before Susan?', 'How did everyone like the cake?'



Don't ask closed-ended questions

A closed-ended question is answered in a short or single-word answer. They are used to obtain facts and specific pieces of information. Examples of closed-ended questions are: 'Did Susan leave with Jim?', 'Did everyone finish all the cake?'

Closed-ended questions bring conversations to a halt. They don't invite people to elaborate, talk about themselves, or give the questioner any information about the person being questioned.

Recognise the characteristics of open-ended questions

Sometimes, people think they have asked open-ended questions when they haven't. To successfully ask open-ended questions in conversations, it is often beneficial to know the person or understand the persons' situation.

Example: When a person pauses to think and reflect; answers will not be facts, but personal feelings, opinions or ideas about a subject.

When using open-ended questions, the control of the conversation switches over to the person being asked the question, which begins an exchange between the people. If the control of the conversation stays with the person asking questions, you are asking closed-ended questions.



Know the language of open-ended questions

To make sure you actually ask open-ended questions, you need to understand the language involved. Open-ended questions begin in very specific ways.

Open-ended questions begin with the following words: 'why, how, what, describe, tell me about', or 'what do you think about'.

Although 'tell me about' does not begin a question, the result is the same as asking an open-ended question.

Closed-ended questions also have a specific language. If you want to avoid closed-ended questions, don't start questions with the following verbs: 'are', 'was', 'did', 'will', 'won't', 'didn't', 'aren't', 'would', or 'if'.



Use open-ended questions for meaningful answers

One of the main reasons to use open-ended questions is to obtain deep, meaningful, and thoughtful answers. Asking questions in this way invites people to open up, because you are showing that you are interested in what they have to say.

Specify the boundaries

Open-ended questions can be too open sometimes. Wording is very important when asking open-ended questions, especially if you are looking for a certain type of answer.

Follow up

Use open-ended questions as follow ups for other questions. These follow ups can be asked after open or closed-ended questions. Ask 'why' and 'how' to follow up and gain a lengthier answer after asking a closed-ended question.

Ask questions that can have many responses. Open-ended questions are great for discussions. They encourage different answers, and opinions.

Make sure to listen. Asking the right questions is pointless if you don't listen. Sometimes we are guilty of formulating the next question without paying attention to the answer to the first. You miss great opportunities for follow up questions if you do this. Make an effort to listen to the answer you asked for.





OPEN Feeling finding	ACTIVE Best/least	CLOSED Fact finding and catch all
Who is the... _____	Tell me how... _____	Is there any... _____
What do you... _____	Let me ask you... _____	Can I... _____
Feeling finding	Best/least	Catch all
How can we... _____	Please describe... _____	Are we... _____
Feeling finding	Big picture	Fact finding
When you are... _____	Show me how you... _____	Do you... _____
Feeling finding	Big picture	Fact finding
When do you... _____	Help me understand... _____	Can we do... _____
Feeling finding	Best/least	Catch all

This resource has been adapted from the following sources:
<http://www.nobleword.co.uk/open-questions-work-work-best/> (21.02.2018)
<https://www.wikihow.com/Ask-Open-Ended-Questions> (21.02.2018)

Evaluation

Ongoing reflection and evaluation are important elements of the process. The following document supports individual reflection, evaluation of individual's outcomes and evaluation of the overall programme.

Evaluation tool

This can be updated at the end of the programme. This also provides a structure for attendees to develop their presentations for the final session with an invited audience. This structure offers a guide to the range of information that is useful to present but members may decide on creative ways to present.

Action Learning Set Reflective Evaluation log

Every participant in the Action Learning Set(s) is being asked to spend some time reflecting on their process so far and what difference this has made. It is hoped that taking the time now for this reflection will help you to complete your final Action Learning Set Reflective Evaluation Log and to fully capture and share the impact of your work.

Please try and answer every question, including any specific examples and evidence to strengthen your account. The questions ask you to consider the impact both of your specific action as well as participation in the action learning sets.

Name of attendee and organisation	Date of completion
Activity Action Learning Sets	Location

1. Thinking about your 'How can I' question and the specific actions you took forward. What informed this action?

How did you identify your actions?

Did you get the engagement/support you hoped for/needed?



How did people react to this action/activity? Were there any surprises?

Are there any learning points for the future?

Understanding impact

What difference do you know the action/activity has made or will make? How do you know this?

What difference do you anticipate the action/activity will make and how?

How might you capture evidence about this impact in the future?



2. Thinking about your participation in the action learning set(s) more generally

What were your expectations of the Action Learning Set?

How have you found the experience so far?

What, if any difference has your participation in the action learning set(s) made to you or your work? How do you know this?

What difference do you anticipate your participation in the action learning set(s) might make in the future?

Other reflections

