**ACTiON**

**Act**

**Evaluate**

**Share**

**A GUIDE TO PARTICIPATING IN THE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT**



**About the Action Research Project**

**Background**

Over the past year or so Inclusive NZ has been looking at how we can build an evidence base that demonstrates what employment, participation and inclusion services do and their value to disabled people and the communities we serve. We have spent time talking and working with our members and others to better understand what organisations need in terms of building their own evidence. What we learned was:

* Some organisations have the resources to employ external researchers to assist them, but many do not.
* Organisations are seeking to understand what they are doing that is making a difference, how they can work with others and how the supports and services they offer fit with the general direction of government funders and the principles of Enabling Good Lives.
* Young disabled people and their families can have different expectations of services and it is a challenge to meet these expectations while still providing more traditional supports and services for those that want them.
* Many organisations are undertaking change processes and seeking to develop and improve their structures, systems and the practical skills of their staff.
* Many organisations have questions about the best ways to collect and analyse data and evidence, and are seeking to develop their capability in this area.

To help our members address these challenges we are running an Action Research Project in 2017.

**How will it work?**

The Action Research Project is an opportunity to try working in new ways, test ideas and evaluate them. This will assist individual staff members, teams and organisations to develop their own practice and improve their skills in evidence gathering and evaluation. It will also create an evidence base for the sector so that we can demonstrate our value and show what works.

We are inviting anyone working in the sector to participate by undertaking their own Action Research. Participants will:

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| **Try It** | **Evaluate It** | **Share It** |
| * Identify a question that you would like to explore. * Research your question, using an action research framework | * Analyse the results of your research. * Publish your research findings (this could be as a poster, video, paper, etc.) | Share the findings of your research with colleagues at our Action Research Conference (30 – 31 October, Wellington). |

To assist you in participating in the Action Research Project we have developed this guide.

**What is Action Research?**

Action Research is a practical and achievable research methodology which focuses on **ACTION** (or change) and **RESEARCH** (or understanding) at the same time. It is a tool for professional and organisational development and can be undertaken by anyone, either as an individual or group effort. It is an approach that can be helpful in times of change because it can help us to challenge our assumptions and the things we take for granted. Action Research is about how we can do things better.

Action Research is an inquiry approach that begins with a question. It is based on the assumption that people work best on problems they have identified themselves.

How can we make this work better for a particular client? What community partnerships could we explore? What if we tried it this way?

What is the impact on families if we do this?

Questions can focus on an area of individual practice that we would like to improve or can help us address a wider organisational or social problem. Once a question is identified participants use the techniques of research, such as collecting data, analysing findings and making recommendations based on the findings.

There is usually little financial outlay required. The key resource is time and a commitment to seeing the project through. Another assumption of Action Research is that people learn more effectively in a collegial and collaborative environment. For this reason it is common for organisations undertaking Action Research to make it a professional development requirement and to make a project or series of projects a focus of their staff development meetings over a given time.

Organisations who use this approach say that it has benefited them in a number of ways, including:

* Improving the professionalism of their skills and systems.
* Creating greater engagement among their staff and helping them respond positively to change.
* Helping individuals identify and improve areas for their own personal development.
* Helping them address a practical issue or problem that has been impacting on a specific group.
* Providing a focus for collaboration and community or stakeholder engagement.
* Providing them with evidence of outcomes.
* Improving communication between stakeholders and confidence in service delivery.

Above all Action Research is about the gaining new skills, learning and working together and social change.

**Designing your Action Research**

There are different types of Action Research:

* Individual research, which involves an individual practitioner or staff member investigating an issue that relates specifically to their own work.
* A group of colleagues working on a common problem within their team.
* A group of colleagues working with other stakeholders on an organisational or community issue.

Individual research often focuses on a single issue. The practitioner may be seeking solutions to a problem or challenge they are dealing with, e.g. improving communication with families or residential services, or a lack of confidence in dealing with particular situations or behaviour.

Collaborative research within a team may include as few as two colleagues interested in addressing a shared issue or common problem. This could include trying a new approach for a particular client or group of clients or better co-ordinating team activities.

Organisational or community-focused research focuses on issues that are common to a wider group. An organisation, or group of organisations, may want to look at how they can involve clients in decision-making structures, trial a new service, or find ways to make public transport more accessible in their local community. This will generally involve a team of staff working together to focus the question, gather and analyse data and involve others as necessary. It is frequently beneficial to have a person act as a facilitator or convenor to help ensure the research plan is co-ordinated and kept on track.

**Steps in Action Research**

Action Research follows a process very similar to reflective practice. It includes several phases, which may be repeated:

1. Identification of a challenge or problem
2. Collect data
3. Analyse data
4. Action
5. Evaluation and Next Steps

**1. Identify a challenge or problem**

It is important to spend time identifying and focusing the right question for your research. It should be a single question that is meaningful and relevant. What is something you have noticed or wondered about? The topic should also be something over which you have influence. Is it something of interest and worth your time and effort?

There are several criteria to consider when crafting your question. The question should:

* Be a higher level question – not a yes/no
* Be stated in plain language, without jargon
* Be concise
* Be meaningful
* Not already have an answer

Once you’ve decided on your question develop a plan to help guide you through the process. (Our **Action Research Plan Template** is one way that you can do this.) One of the things you will need to consider are ethical issues that your research may raise. This could include things like privacy, consent to use information, managing power dynamics between staff and service users and keeping people safe when they disclose information.

**Example:**

I’ve noticed that our individual planning process doesn’t work as well as it could for our younger service users.

My research question is going to be: *How can we improve our individual planning process for younger service users?*

**2. Gather data**

Gathering data is all about better understanding your research question. Organisations have a wide range of existing data and information that can be used for Action Research, such as:

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| * Reports to funders * Client portfolios * Newsletters * Questionnaires * Self-assessments * Interview notes | * Personal or individual plans * Meeting notes or minutes * Photos or digital stories * Attendance records * Surveys * Focus groups |

Select the data that is most appropriate to your research question. You may want to create a new data set by conducting a survey or a series of interviews that are specific to your topic. You may also want to look at some existing research or literature relevant to your research question.

It is important not to rely on one data source. Most research methodologies suggest that using at least three sources *(triangulation)* is necessary. This helps you to cross check and identify trends and themes.

**Example:**

I’m going to:

1. Check a sample of the personal plans for younger clients to see who has made progress with their goals.
2. Interview some families to see what they think of the process.
3. Run a focus group with some young people to hear their thoughts.

**3. Analyse Data**

Once you’ve collected your data the next step is to understand what it is telling you. What are the particular themes or trends that have emerged?

Organise the data in a way that makes it easier to identify the particular information that is important to your research question, e.g. gender, age, length of time using a particular service.

**Example:**

The data told me that:

* 35% of young people have made progress against their goals in the last 12 months.
* 4 out of 6 families think that we are asking young people to set goals before they are ready.
* Young people want a chance to try some things and hear about what other people are doing before we set goals.

**4. Action**

Depending on your research question you may want to have one or more action phases. This is when you try something new or different to test an idea or try something different based on your evidence. If you are testing an idea and want to understand its impact then you might build an action phase into the beginning of your research. You would then collect data to help you understand how well this idea worked.

You can also undertake the action phase after you have collected the data. This is particularly useful when you are using the data to help you figure out a new or different way of doing something. You may also have a second action phase after you have collected data to help you refine your idea. Either way it is important that you evaluate each action phase.

It is important to have a plan of action that helps you focus how to make a change and study that change.

**Example:**

I’m going to trial a different process with the group of young people in the focus group. We are going to plan some ‘taster’ activities together over the next two months and then discuss how we found them. After that I will re-do the personal plans with each young person, and then present them to their families.

**5. Evaluation and Next Steps**

The final phase is about what you have learned. The aim of the evaluation is to understand what has changed as a result of your action, e.g. knowledge, skills, attitudes, practice. Did your idea have the impact you anticipated? Why, or why not? What does the data you have collected tell you about the impact of your action?

Action research is designed to be useful, so it is important to finish the process by identifying next steps. Are there any additional questions raised by your research? Are there improvements or revisions you could make to your systems or practice? What changes could you make to improve results? Is there a recommendation you would make?

You can write your research findings up in a variety of ways. A long written report isn’t necessary (unless you really want to write one!). You could make a powerpoint presentation, a short video-clip, a poster, a short written report or give an oral presentation to your staff or board. It’s important that your findings are delivered in a way that is accessible and practical. You want your findings to be of use.

**Example:**

The group really enjoyed planning and doing the taster activities. At the end of the two months the majority of the group had clearer ideas about setting goals for themselves. The new approach did not work for one person who already had a clear idea about what they wanted to do. I shared what I learned at a staff meeting. We discussed the findings and as a result we are going to….

**How to take part in the Project**

Taking part in the Action Research Project is straight-forward. All you need to do is:

1. Register your project with Inclusive NZ. The registration form is on our website at [www.inclusivenz.org.nz/action](http://www.inclusivenz.org.nz/action) .
2. Undertake the research itself.
3. Share your findings (in the format of your choice) at the Action Conference in Wellington on 30 – 31 October.

Once you have registered your project you will be able to access the resources and support we will be making available to participants.

**Resources and Support**

Inclusive NZ is also here to support you through the research process. We will be running regular webinars on different aspects of research, such as ethics considerations, interview techniques and conducting a survey.

One of the principles behind Action Research is that we learn best in a collegial environment where we can share ideas and talk through issues. Throughout your Action Research Project you may wish to organise regular check-ins with your colleagues at work about your progress. We can also link you with others who may be undertaking similar research around the country and organise facilitated video-conferences so that you can talk with one another.

Need a mentor? We can connect you with an experienced person who can help keep you and your project on track, and walk you through any issues that may arise.

Need a facilitator? Some projects, especially collaborative ones, may benefit from having an independent facilitator. We can provide this for you through our One Fish Solutions service.

**Ideas**

Looking for some ideas for your Action Research project? The options are endless! Here are some topics you might want to consider…..

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| **Service-user led projects** | **Working with families** |
| * I want to try…. * Peer support... * Skills and confidence for self-advocacy * Involve service users in evaluating our service * Micro-enterprise * Maximising opportunities for employment outcomes | * What do families expect and want from us? * Working with families who want something different. * Checking our communication with families is right. |
| **Organising ourselves** | **Working with the community** |
| * Reviewing our management roles * Working in isolation * Is our legal structure right? * Options for client management systems * Putting Enabling Good Lives Principles into practice. * Explore a particular theory or practice | * Community mapping * Working with other services * Building a partnership * Changing an attitude * Advocating for a community change * Employer partnerships * Plan a community project |