

# Surrey Appreciative Inquiry and Learning (SAIL)

## A Guide to the Process

### 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2021



*A huge thanks to Gary Wallace, former Director of Public Health in Plymouth, for his generosity, enthusiasm and wisdom - helping us to bring these ideas to Surrey.*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Many of us long to help children, young people and families as soon as a problem occurs, before they move into crisis. Many of us are frustrated by the silos which prevent us serving children and families the way we want. We long to find a new, different way of working together, interagency, to serve families holistically. Many of us know that we need to listen to families more and find ways of responding as a system, not just an individual agency, and to customise our services and responses to meet each individual where they are at. Surrey is on a mission to create major systems change, to break down operating silos across the sector and to transform multi-agency delivery.

Over the last 6 years multiple agencies in the Plymouth area have developed some very different ways of working, building on an approach called Appreciative Inquiry (AI). The work they have done has helped very successfully to address many of the issues described above, using Appreciative Inquiry to achieve system change. We believed that the Plymouth methods could be extremely helpful in Surrey and in late 2020, Surrey Youth Focus, with financial support from Jamma International, organised Masterclasses for a range of Surrey professionals to understand the Plymouth approach. These sessions were delivered by Gary Wallace, the former Director for Public Health Plymouth. Since then, SYF has continued to roll out further sessions based on Gary's material. We are very pleased to say that the ideas have been extremely well received in Surrey and are now being used in a number of places.

We are particularly attracted by the simplicity of this approach: the processes are quite simple and easy to understand. For people with previous experience of Appreciative Inquiry, please note that the techniques used in Plymouth differ from other implementations of Appreciative Inquiry - they do ask 'negative' questions, such as "Tell me about a bad day" whereas AI purists typically seek out the positive only. For this reason, we are giving this approach a slightly different name from standard AI: Surrey Appreciative Inquiry and Learning (SAIL). This does not reflect a change from Plymouth's approach, and is a working title that we hope people find easy to remember.

SAIL is about getting to the heart of an individual's lived experience by collecting individual stories in the first person and drawing out themes to reveal the information that agencies need in order to offer assistance that is much more appropriate and targeted for individuals. The more that is understood about an individual's life the more opportunity there is to find ways to make a difference. Typically, there is no single thing that makes the difference to a person or group in bringing about improvements in their lives. The SAIL approach supports this change by working across every level of the system: end users, families, communities, professionals, commissioners, service teams, etc.

## CONTENTS

This document aims to support professionals to carry out the SAIL process by explaining the key steps, their context and providing practical “do’s and don’ts”. The material presented here is gathered from Plymouth’s and Gary’s, extensive, real-world experience and advice.

It outlines the 5 steps of the process and then, for each of the steps, provides details on what to do and tips and advice about what’s important and why. There’s also a real individual story from Plymouth provided as an example.

## PROCESS OVERVIEW

These are the five steps<sup>1</sup> that are described in this document:

1. Decide on the area of inquiry
2. Develop open questions to ask individuals
3. Collect the individual stories
4. ‘Sense-making’ – review and understand what individuals experience
5. Take action – make changes and/or devise experiments to understand more deeply

*Iterate the process again, from the beginning*

Despite the simplicity of the process, we believe that it has the power to transform the system and the support given to residents. Just starting to use some of the ideas will show benefits. However, we believe that following the process methodically will increase the effectiveness and power - there are a number of subtle benefits of individual elements or their interactions that are valuable to appreciate. We have aimed to highlight these points to assist anyone adopting the process.

---

<sup>1</sup> These steps map very closely to conventional Appreciative Inquiry: Define, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver

## STEP 1 - DEFINE INQUIRY AREA

### Define the area of inquiry – what do you want to know more about?

#### What is involved

- i) Work together with other teams, departments or organisations so that you have a range of people involved from across the system. It is likely that you will collect stories that require action from various parts of the system, so it's important to include people from different parts of the system.
- ii) Explore the area of inquiry that you would like to consider, without thinking about current service offerings.
- iii) Think from the perspective of the individuals, not from the perspective of the service, team or organisation.
- iv) SAIL is mostly focusing on changing user services/experiences. However, these techniques can also be used to explore issues with teams, departments, etc.
- v) Once drafted, think about who else you might want to get buy in from for the line of inquiry.

#### Notes/tips

- See this as an opportunity to gather completely new information.
- IMPORTANT: this is about finding out about people's lives, not whether they meet particular thresholds for particular services.
- Remember that, almost certainly, you will be finding out information that other agencies can make use of. Therefore, think as broadly as you can.
- Think about areas that you don't know about.
- Challenge any assumptions about what you do know: how complete is your knowledge?
- If a professional has a strong belief about how a problem should be solved or a course of action, make sure that the definition is broad enough to get an objective understanding of what citizens really need.

#### Example Lines of Inquiry

- Find out about how and why people use green spaces or open spaces.
- Find out more about the lives of children who are obese and the factors which lead to their obesity.
- Find out about the lives of smokers.
- Find out more about the lives of smokers and the factors which influence their smoking.

## STEP 2 - DEVELOP OPEN QUESTIONS

### Develop 'open questions' – what are you going to ask people?

#### What is involved

- i) Get relevant team members together to create the 'open questions'.
- ii) If possible, work across different agencies. It's useful to engage people with differing views on the help or support that might be needed to get a wider perspective.
- iii) Create questions that are as open and simple as possible.
- iv) Create questions that do not pre-judge the answer, do not set an agenda or do not have a specific goal. This leaves space for any sort of response.
- v) The goal is to understand whatever is present for the individuals—their 'lived experience'—which can vary hugely and can't be anticipated.

#### Notes/tips

- See below for examples of open questions.
- Cross-agency working creates an opportunity for different groups to work closely together, to develop relationships and build more trust.
- Don't ask specifically about services being offered, keep the questions neutral.
- Don't be tempted to use your 'perfect' question; it's probably too specific.
- Avoid thinking about service thresholds.
- The most valuable responses could well be those that give a totally different perspective on the person's life and are not remotely connected to the work or perspective of the person asking the questions.
- Example: as part of a smoking cessation service inquiry, a smoker who had previously avoided engaging with various services was given dental treatment, as the inquiry process revealed that for many years he had been embarrassed at the state of his teeth. This led to an improvement in self-esteem.

### Developing Open Questions

#### Example 1

A standard question that works well is to ask about daily life:

*Tell us about a typical day*

Depending on the responses to the first question, this can be followed up by asking:

*Tell us about a nightmare day*

*Tell us about a good day*

#### Example 2

Be careful not to make assumptions in your questions. For example:

*Tell us about who you would talk to if something was bothering you or you needed help.*

This assumes that the person would actually talk to someone (eg, they might just hide in their room). Aim to keep the question more neutral and simpler.

*What would you do if you were worried or needed help?*

### Example 3

If possible, avoid more than one question in a sentence.

*Who or what makes the most difference to you and your family and why?*

They will probably tell you the 'why'. If they don't, that can be a follow-up question.

*Who or what makes the most difference to you and your family?*

*Why?*

### Example 4

Finding out about what people like doing is valuable because it helps connect to positive aspects of their lives.

*If you go out, where do you go?*

*Where do you love going?*

*How often do you go out?*

*How do you feel when you go out?*

### **Food for thought**

*Interviewer: "We're just going to ask you one question: What's the question we should be asking?"*

*"The question has to catch people where they are, to meet them where there is the most energy and relevance for them, and then use that energy to go deeper." Finn Voldtofte<sup>2</sup>*

---

<sup>2</sup> The Art of Powerful Questions, Vogt E, Brown J, Isaacs D, 2003

## STEP 3 - COLLECTING STORIES

### Going out to the public to listen

#### What is involved

- i) Seek out a variety of people from across the system who are willing to help ask the questions. We have found people are often happy to do this alongside their day job.
- ii) The listening is ideally done in pairs – aim for the two people to come from different parts of the system, or with different perspectives – it’s powerful if they hear the same story.
- iii) The work is done in pairs so that one person can be the primary listener – asking the questions and focusing on listening to the individual’s story, so that they really feel heard. The other person records the response.
- iv) Ask the open question(s) of the individual concerned.
- v) The second listener records the individual’s story as verbatim as they can.  
IMPORTANT: write down the responses in the first person (“I am a single mum with 3 children...”).
- vi) Record everything — don’t censor content.

#### Notes/tips

- People are encouraged to talk openly, revealing what their lived experience actually is and describing other, less obvious factors affecting or influencing them.
- Just the process of being listened to can create relationship and build trust between the teller and the listener(s).
- There are multiple ‘people’ benefits to collecting 1<sup>st</sup>-person stories:
  - Simple – there’s no magic to capturing a story in the 1<sup>st</sup>-person – just write it down
  - Consistent – as the story is the exact words of the individual there is no information lost, interpreted or unintentionally filtered by the listener(s).
  - Empathy – capturing the whole story in the 1<sup>st</sup>-person means it remains a real and personal experience that people connect to and empathise with, whenever it is read: *“If we can get the words of a person in your mouth in the 1st person it builds empathy; it’s almost impossible to read those stories and not feel empathy for that woman and her circumstances.”*<sup>3</sup>
  - Powerful – hearing a 1<sup>st</sup>-person story read aloud can create empathy long after the initial process involving the first listeners and hold its power each time it is heard by others.
  - Neutral – the 1<sup>st</sup>-person story benefits from not being a visual record, avoiding the listeners’ automatic or subconscious judgements about an individual’s circumstances, clothes, accent, demeanour, etc.
  - Persistent – so often the information about an individual’s experience is diluted by the time it reaches key decision makers. The reality of someone’s life and the actual needs of them as an individual are often reduced or lost.

---

<sup>3</sup> Gary Wallace, from an SYF Masterclass.

- Sharing – many people across the system can benefit from the information gained from one story. The individual is telling it from their point of view, not the system's.
- There are several 'data' benefits of first-person stories:
  - Simple – there's no complexity to capturing and recording the data. Everyone has the right technology – initially pen and paper and then a simple text document.
  - Consistent – the data is consistent across different listeners and across different agencies
  - Shareable – there are no barriers of format, training or technology in sharing data (appropriately anonymised)
  - Evidence – the stories form a set of data that will support, and provide a clear evidence base for, service decisions and offerings.

## STEP 4 – SENSE-MAKING

### Understanding what people are telling us

#### What is involved?

- i) Seek out a variety of people from across the system who have an interest in the chosen line of enquiry or been part of the story collection.
- ii) Make sure that you have a high quality scribe who listens carefully and records the conversation in detail.
- iii) Read each story out loud, slowly, in turn. IMPORTANT: do this in the FIRST person.
- iv) Share and explore what you notice, what are the meta themes e.g. connections, coping strategies, environment, identity.
- v) Consider what the story tells you in terms of Mastery (good at something), Autonomy (control), Purpose (make a difference).
- vi) Think about what the young people are telling you, both directly and what they reveal indirectly.
- vii) Consider what the story tells you for the a) the young person, b) for an individual organisation or c) for the system - What can we take away to action?
- viii) Agree what needs to be researched in more detail. It is highly likely that you will want further information and hence it may be appropriate to do further iterations of SAIL to explore some themes in more detail.
- ix) As a group, agree an action plan that you believe will help improve the lives of children and families. Starting small experiments to find out what will happen if you change one bit of a service or system is highly recommended, rather than 'big bang' transformational approaches.

#### Notes/tips

- Be aware of your own unconscious bias as you read or listen to the story.
- Children and young people are not a homogenous group and care is needed to identify similarities and differences.
- Be open as you share your response with colleagues, how did the story feel to you, did it trigger any thoughts.
- The person reading the story might miss what is being said as they are concentrating on the reading.
- Giving credit and feedback to CYP who have completed these stories – they have taught us things!
- This process gives the opportunity for CYP to expand their stories – more powerful than a survey which might have returned shorter, single word answers.

## EXAMPLE STORY - OUT OF LOCKDOWN

These are the words of a female young carer age 16 in Surrey who was asked about her experiences related to lockdown.

- 1) We would like to know about your 'day'.
  - a. Tell us what most days are like at the moment
  - b. Tell us about a bad day
  - c. Tell us about a good day

*It's nice to have a lie in now as school is finished. I'll help prepare breakfast for mum and help her pick out an outfit. I'll help her dress if she needs help. Then I'll have some time out and then we have dinner as a family.*

*My bad days depend mainly on if mum is having a bad day. If she is, I'll stay with her. It's not really physical stuff that makes it a bad day. It's more the emotional impact. Trying to cheer her up, chat, make her feel better and take her mind off things.*

*Again, my good days are linked to mum. If she's ok then I can have a happy, non-worrying day.*

- 2) Tell us what lockdown was like for you.

*I liked spending time as a family as this can be quite rare. Dad works and I go to school (so does my brother). So we are in and out. During lockdown as we were together ALL the time, it sounds funny, but we got to know each other better. I also liked that as we were all together in the house, I knew that everyone was safe.*

*What did I dislike? Well, it's funny that I said I liked us all being together, but at the same time, I couldn't get away from people annoying me! Or having to look after mum. Not that I minded but I didn't get a break. School is a break. Seeing my friends is a break. Also the repetitive nature of the whole thing. It was good at the beginning as it was unusual but as time went on, it got a bit boring. There are only so many box sets that you can watch. We don't have family near to help but before lockdown friends used to pop in. Obviously that all stopped and I missed that.*

*Mmmm – how have I changed? I think that I've become more patient. I also don't procrastinate as much. I just get on with things. Not sure why that is!! I learnt to have to use other things to relax/distract me. My friends would usually provide a lot of that but it's not the same on the phoen or zoom. So, I loved colouring – those pattern books. I could do them for hours!*

*I learnt that I don't always have to go out. Yeah, I love being with my friends but I learnt to enjoy my own company.*

### 3) Tell us about the next few months in your life.

*I've just finished school, so I'm REALLY looking forward to summer. Hot weather, seeing friends. That kind of thing. I was meant to be going away with my friends but we had to cancel; as everything was all booked up. I'm now just going away to Ireland to see family. I'm quite concerned that corona will come back and we'll all be back where we started. Everyone is getting out and about and acting like it's all over but it's not. I'm frightened all this will lead to another lockdown or there will be another spike and there will be lockdowns. I'm angry when I see people not wearing masks. They still should be. It's not the June deadline yet. They should be wanting to protect others. It's good that everyone is getting vaccinated although my mum and dad haven't been yet. I'm not sure why mum hasn't. She's vulnerable because of her illness. I'll have to ask her.*

*I'm definitely going to see more of my friends now and do all the things that we haven't been able to do recently. We're all quite good at doing the social distancing thing – although we do forget sometimes. It's hard you know?!*

*I'm a bit nervous about getting my GCSE results but there's not a lot that I can do about that now! They were difficult but I guess everyone found them like that. I'm hoping to go to my sixth form to do my A levels. I'm nervous about results day.*

## Appendix - Ethics

It is, of course, really important to consider the ethics of research in advance. If carrying out research in a multi-agency way, it is important to be clear in advance:

- Which agency will be responsible for handling any safeguarding disclosures that might arise. This most likely will be the agency who carries out the interview. For example, if interviews are carried out across a range of schools, then each school would have responsibility for the interviews done in their school.
- How there will be central oversight on disclosures, in case a piece of research leads to a number of disclosures – one person should be aware of them all to investigate and understand the causes.
- Children under 16 should not be approached or interviewed without the consent of a parent or guardian. Consent forms relating to interviews with under-16s should be agreed and signed by both the interviewee and a parent or guardian and retained. Some organisations may already have ongoing consent in place, others may need to seek consent explicitly for this work.

It is very important that you let the child or young person know:

- What you will do if they make any disclosures that give you safeguarding concerns, according to the safeguarding procedures of your organisation.
- What to do if they subsequently change their mind about sharing their story.
- What to do if they have a complaint about the research.

Below is some guidance from Surrey County Council's ethical framework, used by their Ethics Panel prior to approving research.

- **Principle 1: Participation based on valid informed consent** (i.e. is the project asking participants to express their consent to participation and recording the answer?).
- **Principle 2: Enabling participation** (i.e. is the project taking measures to avoid the systematic exclusion of particular groups in society from participating?).
- **Principle 3: Avoidance of personal and social harm** (i.e. is the project taking reasonable measures to ensure it is unlikely to cause a participant to suffer, in their body, mind, economically or socially?).
- **Principle 4: Non-disclosure of identity and personal information** (i.e. is the project team planning measures to ensure that the data of the people who have given their time or views are held safely, and that nobody learns about their participation if they don't have a right to do so? Is the project GDPR compliant? Has it received approval from SCC's Information Governance?).
- **Principle 5: Ethical application and conduct of projects** (i.e. is the planned approach creating inequality, involuntarily discriminating, damaging vulnerable categories, causing breakdown in trust relationships with partners? Will our findings be fed back to the community that generated them and any other stakeholders in a transparent way? Are participants informed of complaint procedures?).