The Structured Dialogue Method for learning from stories

Criteria for case study selection and manual for story circle facilitators

Paul Slatter, Chamberlain Forum
Chamberlain Forum is the neighbourhood think-and-do-tank: a forum for communities and public services to think and try new ways of working that make better places for people to live. It was set up as a non-profit social enterprise based in Birmingham in 2007 drawing on the experience of those involved in Guide Neighbourhoods, community empowerment networks, neighbourhood forums and community-led housing and regeneration initiatives.

www.chamberlainforum.org
The Structured Dialogue Method for learning from stories

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Paul Slatter, Chamberlain Forum
1. Executive summary

Stories communicate complicated ideas and experiences in a simple form we all understand; they can tell us the truth – sometimes despite the ‘facts’.

The idea of the Structured Dialogue Method for Learning from Stories is to be a way of triangulating evidence – comparing accounts against one another to test what may or may not be true - from the stories people tell. The method takes stories and enables them to be told as part of a critical, but supportive, story circle. It results in a collaboratively formed and robust theory of change: what could be done to make things better; what needs to change and what not.

Listening to stories may be a great way of finding out about communities and organisations. Public and voluntary services may learn more about how a community can best be served through stories told by its members than through the available statistics about a place.

The aim of the pilot is to test the effectiveness of the storytelling approach ‘SDM’ in influencing public service policy and delivery. Although the method has been tested as a research tool with local residents and 3rd sector organisations, it has not yet been widely used together with public services. In keeping with this central aim, the pilot will develop pairings of public services and the communities that they serve, to test the method together.

A number of potential projects have been identified across the West Midlands, including in Birmingham, Coventry, and Walsall. The following document sets out and explains the approach that will be taken in selecting pilot projects to go ahead to the delivery phase and the criteria framework that will be used to guide decision-making. It also provides an insight into the responsibilities in a facilitator in managing a SDM story circle.

2. Context of case study

selection criteria

The purpose of developing criteria for choosing pilot projects is to enable effective project planning and delivery to take place. This will require a range of information to be gathered on each prospective pilot area including;

- Information on the project theme or story issue;
- Details about the local community, and the public service partner.

The criteria will establish broad categories and parameters that help to define each project and highlight potential strengths and weaknesses. However, they are not intended to be rigid or overly comparative and ultimate decision making responsibility will rest with the judgment of the project reference group.

The most important factor in choosing a pilot, and one of the biggest determinants of success, is commitment by partners and interest and enthusiasm in the process. Without this, the project will not work. However, the following are also key factors in using SDM effectively.

- A pertinent issue that inspires interest within the community;
- A public service that is willing to engage, and is able to respond;
- A diverse group of people able to be involved, reflecting a variety of perspectives;
- Good local partnership structures.

These are by no means exhaustive, but serve as a pragmatic starting point for thinking about each project and are the basis for the criteria.

Expressed in a broader, more objective way, these factors can be broken down into the following areas.

- Story issue;
- Public service;
- Community;
- Wider context.
The diagram below shows how these areas relate to one another, where they meet, and intersect.

3. Selected case studies

The areas of Coventry, Wolverhampton, Dudley, Birmingham and Walsall have all expressed interest in piloting SDM in year two. Each area is reviewed on the following pages, according to the selection criteria (see appendix 1), and recommendations made on each area to progress to delivery in year two.

The case studies are:
- Coventry – Bell Green Neighbourhood
- Birmingham – Lozells
- Wolverhampton, Dudley and wider Black Country
- Walsall – New Deal for Communities

Each area is important and different strengths in each will affect the outcome of the storytelling process. It is expected that each pilot area will have a slightly different combination of circumstances with different themes, issues, and local contexts.

The table below breaks each broad area down into further elements, each of which has been identified as important considerations for developing an SDM project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STORY ISSUE</th>
<th>WIDER CONTEXT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Difficulty</td>
<td>• Local politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Local interest</td>
<td>• Financial planning cycles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relevance</td>
<td>• Strategic fit</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMUNITY</th>
<th>PUBLIC SERVICE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Readiness to act</td>
<td>• Ability to engage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Diversity of involvement</td>
<td>• Capacity to respond</td>
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Evidence will be presented under each element as a heading, with key points summarised and explained.

As a further guide, the following highlights in greater detail the reasoning behind each element and provides a series of questions aimed at providing focus to the response.
Bell Green is a neighbourhood in the north east of Coventry. It lies within the city’s Longford ward and is overseen by the council’s north east Neighbourhood Management team. Bell Green Priority Neighbourhood has been identified as being one of the most deprived communities in the country, with parts of the neighbourhood being within the 3% most disadvantaged super output areas in England and Wales.

The proposed story theme is to explore how the environment of Bell Green can be improved.

### Story Issue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty</th>
<th>Environmental improvements are an easily recognisable priority and the theme is not controversial. However, the difficulty related to the theme comes from the ongoing nature of environmental issues and the need to sustain longer term approaches. In a performance review of local targets, it was recognised as an area requiring further improvement.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest/relevance</td>
<td>Environmental issues are an ongoing concern for the area, identified as a priority by residents in the neighbourhood planning process.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Readiness to act</th>
<th>Over the last two to three years, the North East Area Co-ordination Team (neighbourhood management delivery vehicle for the area) has been working closely with residents to support active engagement and involvement within community planning processes. This work has resulted in the formation of a tenants and residents association BATRA (Bell Green Tenants and Residents Association) which has then led a number of other local involvement initiatives. These include:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A petitioning processes gathering support for the improvement of the local shopping centre, Riley Square;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Community meetings;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Local surveys;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Running participatory appraisal exercises in partnership with groundwork.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of involvement</td>
<td>Despite this successful engagement, the performance review of targets identified a lack of interest in some environmental initiatives, such as community litter picks. This could indicate not only some future challenges in terms of readiness to act, but a need for more diverse involvement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**WIDER CONTEXT**

| Strategic fit | Coventry City Council has invested in the process of neighbourhood based planning and delivery and has created structures – such as the area based teams – to develop services that are more tailored to local needs. Alongside a range of other priorities and objectives, the 2007-8 plan for Bell Green has identified the environment as an area for improvement. Objective: Improve the quality of the physical and general environment in Bell Green. |
| Financial planning | It is difficult to assess the scope for influencing future spending plans on a significant scale. However, it is possible that engagement with an SDM process could result in influencing local spending in the area. |
| Local politics | Engagement with councillors in the area is average, with no known sensitivities or likelihood of opposition to the process. |

**PUBLIC SERVICE**

| Ability to engage | Neighbourhood management officers are committed to the process and have identified capacity for involvement. |
| Capacity to respond | The track record of environmental services in the area leaves room for improvement. However, the view of the neighbourhood team is that there is a willingness to engage and a commitment to improving their ability to respond as a result. |
Lozells is an inner city neighbourhood just north of the city centre in Birmingham, in the Lozells and East Handsworth ward. The area has been developing neighbourhood management for the last two years and received extra resources to do so through the neighbourhood element of the safer stronger communities fund.

Lozells is an extremely diverse neighbourhood and has become associated with community tensions following serious disturbances in 2005. Drug dealing, drug related crime and prostitution have all been highlighted as areas of concern and there has been significant progress made by the police and partners in addressing these issues.

The proposed theme is to explore issues around the development of housing accommodation for prostitutes in Lozells.

### Story Issue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty</th>
<th>The issue of prostitution is sensitive in any area, particularly when it operates at street level in residential places. It is therefore a highly difficult theme, with the potential of conflict between very different needs and experiences.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>However, it is a theme of local interest and importance to residents and to services providers seeking to provide support to an extremely vulnerable group of women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>Finding effective solutions to such issues is highly relevant to local quality of life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Readiness to act</th>
<th>There is active community representation on the neighbourhood board and close involvement of resident and other community groups in developing local strategies connected with prostitution.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There is also a highly regarded voluntary organisation, Anawim, actively working with vulnerable women in the area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of involvement</td>
<td>Lozells is an area extremely rich in community and voluntary organisations. There are active and strong resident groups such as neighbourhood forums, who have a track record of diverse and inclusive involvement across the neighbourhood.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### WIDER CONTEXT

| Strategic fit | The story issue is a good strategic fit with local priorities and neighbourhood planning processes. Addressing the housing needs of street workers is part of a longer term approach to dealing with a range of interconnected problems the area faces, such as drug dealing and drug related crime. There is therefore the potential for impact on wider priorities too. Specifically, and more immediately, a review of property use in Hampstead Road is already taking place, with the view to establishing viability and appropriate development for accommodation. |
| Financial planning | Potential resources have been identified and a range of partners are already engaged in discussion. |
| Local politics | Local councillors are actively engaged within neighbourhood management and have a good relationship with partners. |

### PUBLIC SERVICE

| Ability to engage | Neighbourhood management arrangements provide for an initial capacity. There are also further resources potentially available to support further engagement from a public service side. |
| Capacity to respond | The planning process is in its early stages. In theory this should allow plans to change and respond to engagement. |
The area of potential relevance and impact is larger than any of the other possible pilot areas, extending over at least two local authorities including Wolverhampton and Dudley.

SDM would build upon previous work around citizenship undertaken in these areas through the Take Part programme and be part of the ‘joint dialogue’ process.

‘Joint Dialogue’ aims to ‘develop a shared understanding and increased awareness of what is working and the blocks and barriers to active citizenship in a local context across sectors’. The aim is for the dialogue process to act as a ‘think tank’ for the wider Take Part programme.

SDM will be used as a tool to fulfil the aims of the joint dialogue process, and will feed directly into the management of the Take Part Programme.

However, it is also intended to be able to influence wider thinking in both local areas.

| Difficulty | Citizenship is a complex issue and community engagement and empowerment is a process that many public services have struggled with. However, it is one that is in theory able to be addressed, with the importance of doing so an increasing requirement.
A more significant challenge may be to ensure an appropriate level of conflict or tension between stories and perspectives within the sphere of engagement. |
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest/relevance</td>
<td>There is widespread interest both within public agencies, and communities and the third sector.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Readiness to act | Wolverhampton and Dudley both have well established VCS infrastructure. Groups and organisations are well networked, and are active in promoting the need for active citizenship and community engagement. |
| Diversity of involvement | There is a diverse range of involvement from the third sector in Wolverhampton and Dudley, including resident groups, faith groups, volunteer sector Alzheimer’s organisations and youth workers. |
THE STRUCTURED DIALOGUE METHOD FOR LEARNING FROM STORIES

WIDER CONTEXT

| Strategic fit | Community engagement is a recognised priority within both Wolverhampton and Dudley, with each area also developing engagement strategies. The community empowerment network in Dudley remains part of the local strategic partnership in recognition of the value and importance of third sector engagement. |
| Financial planning | It is not yet clear how much scope there is for influencing future investment across the authority areas in supporting active citizenship. However, by being part of the Take Part Programme, it may be able to influence how money is spent within the project. |
| Local politics | Community engagement and active citizenship is explicitly supported politically. There is a Wolverhampton councillor involved in the dialogue process. |

PUBLIC SERVICE

| Ability to engage | Public Service representatives from the respective local authorities and PCTs have already signed up to be active participants in the dialogue process. Structures are therefore in place to be able to engage. |
| Capacity to respond | The ability of the public service representatives to respond to actions and recommendations from the SDM process might be restricted by the degree of seniority of those currently involved. This issue needs to be further explored. |
Walsall’s New Deal for Communities is a regeneration initiative working in the areas of Blakenall, Bloxwich East and Leamore. The initiative received a £52 million government grant from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to be spent on sustainable regeneration spread over a ten year period that commenced in 2001.

The work of Walsall NDC is structured around six themes:

- Employment, skills and business;
- Education and learning;
- Housing and environment;
- Crime and community safety;
- Health and well being;
- Community empowerment.

It is likely that the story theme would centre around young people and be built upon previous work undertaken around stories. However, this is still to be confirmed.
4. Manual for story circle facilitators

Introduction
If you want to run a story circle and develop a theory of change based on the stories told by people, you need a facilitator: someone who understands the Structured Dialogue Method for Learning from Stories; has thought about why it works; and is willing to make it work.

The first step to becoming a facilitator is to read through this manual and to understand how the method works in principle. There are a number of practical issues that need more in-depth treatment. These are:

- The role that stories play in communities;
- Prejudice, the learning cycle and the need for a method;
- Health and safety: ground rules for safe storytelling;
- Creating and managing conflict in a positive way;
- Critical questioning;
- The wider role of the facilitator.

The facilitator isn’t impartial. A facilitator should be open about their agenda. The story circle needs them to be active; to observe carefully, to ask questions and come up with any ideas for refining the method or extending the ways of applying it.

The method
The Structured Dialogue Method for learning from Stories is an approach to forming robust theories for change from the stories that people in communities and public service delivery tell about their experience. The Method is still evolving from the basis of work done originally by Labonte and Feather in Canada. This has been refined by experience of the work of People for Action in Leicester in 2002 and the Resident University run by Chamberlain Forum in Birmingham in 2007.

The underlying logic of the Method is to move slowly from the particular, from the first-person story and the dialogue on exactly what happened, why, and what was learned, to the general, the lessons or insights about practice that each person might take with them to their future work. The manual presents the method in nine parts:

1. Story themes;
2. Stories;
3. Story circle;
4. Ground rules;
5. Reflection circle;
6. Structured dialogue;
7. Questioning;
8. Insights;
9. Categories and deriving a theory.

Story themes
Start by choosing the themes you want the story circle to focus on. You should choose only one or two themes: too many will make it hard for the story circle to come to any conclusions. The theme(s) should provoke discussion within the group. It should be something about which people have different and conflicting views. At its heart, a good story theme is about power: about why things happen; and about who makes them happen. Theme(s) must be topical – relevant to the people listening to the story.

In summary, a successful story theme is:

- Provocative;
- Disputed;
- About power;
- Topical and relevant.

Stories
Identify your main storytellers - usually two per story circle. Help them to prepare their stories on the theme(s) that have been agreed. Stories are personal accounts. They are told from the storytellers’ point of view. Because of this they are mainly told in the first person (I did... I saw... etc). Of course, they do refer to other people and organisations, but they should stick to what the person telling the story ‘knows’ and believes rather than speculating about what other people know or believe.
The subject of a story depends on your theme(s), but in general you are looking for stories about some aspect of the relationships between individuals and organisations, or groups or institutions. Some storytellers are tempted to try to tell ‘the whole story’. Good storytellers keep the tension going and leave some questions unanswered!

Each story should take five to ten minutes to tell. If they are much longer, then the story circle is likely to ramble on without enough focus. Finally, a story circle usually includes two stories. This is because the structured dialogue method is about challenging and testing the content of stories people tell. One story should provide conflict – not too much, but just enough – with the other. The stories give the raw material for the story circle to work with and they need diverse ingredients to make a useful end product!

In summary, good stories:

- Focus on the agreed story themes;
- Are honest personal accounts of actual happenings;
- Are about what the storyteller ‘knows’ and believes;
- Say something about relationships between individuals and groups;
- Are interesting... and leave some questions unanswered;
- Take five to ten minutes to tell;
- Should conflict – not too much, just enough!

Story circle

A story circle is made up of about eight to a dozen people. As the name suggests, they sit in a circle. The facilitator recruits them with the themes and stories in mind and looks at what they will bring to the discussion. Everyone in the circle should be familiar with at least part of the content or subject of both stories and understand why the theme(s) matter. So, for example, if the two stories being told in a story circle are from the points of view respectively of a young person living on an estate and an older person living on the same estate and the theme is ‘feeling safe’, then the facilitator might seek to recruit: two or three active local residents of different ages; the local beat police constable; the local council ward officer or a housing officer; the local vicar or other faith leader; a local shopkeeper; a youth worker; and someone from a voluntary-run day centre for older people in the area. The idea is that everyone in the story circle should be someone with a relevant story to tell.

In summary, story circle participants should:

- Be between eight to 12 people;
- All know something about the subject of both stories;
- All care about the theme;
- Include the storytellers and the facilitator;
- All be potential storytellers on the agreed theme.

Ground rules

Telling the truth is a risky business and the stories you want to hear are – above all else – true (from the point of view of the person telling them). Storytellers expose themselves when they share a story. And as has been noted, everyone in the story circle is a potential storyteller. So these ground rules apply equally to everyone involved in a Story Circle. It is important to agree these rules with the participants beforehand and at the start of the session. If anyone breaks the rules, the facilitator is entitled to stop the flow of the story circle and remind participants of their commitments.

All participants agree to:

- Respect each other;
- Respect the confidentiality of the story circle;
- Listen carefully;
- Take notes to help them ask questions or share ideas later;
- Participate fully by asking questions and sharing their ideas;
- Be caring and help others in the circle take part effectively.

The reflection circle

After a story has been shared, there is a ten minute reflection circle. This is where each participant gives their initial reaction to what they
have heard. They should describe briefly how the story they've heard touches their own experience; ‘How is the story I've just heard also my own story?’; ‘How does the story I've just heard make me feel, about the story, the story-teller, my own life?’ During the reflection circle, participants don’t question each other, or the storyteller. They speak without dialogue, one at a time, quickly around the story group circle. During storytelling and the dialogue that follows, participants can and should take any notes they think might be important during the reflection circle.

In summary, the reflection circle:
• Takes place after a story has been told;
• Consists of each member giving a personal reaction to the story;
• Does not involve questions or dialogue;
• Lasts no more than ten minutes.

Structured dialogue
Dialogue is the key part of SDM. After storytellers have shared their experience in the form of a story, the circle engages in critical but respectful questioning about the experience. A dialogue isn’t the same as a general discussion. Discussions often ramble around topics in an informal, unstructured way. A dialogue is quite tightly structured and it takes place between two people at a time.

The structure allows the storytelling to provide more detail and background to what happened and offer explanations for what happened. It enables the circle to deconstruct the story and to test it to see which bits provide new insights. Through structured dialogue the circle is also able to bring these insights together to draw conclusions and plan future action. What drives the dialogue is participants’ reflection on their own experience and roles: how their stories relate to, amplify, contradict etc the stories that have been told. The dialogue triangulates elements in the stories. In this way, what comes out of a story circle isn’t just another story... but a robust theory.

In summary, structured dialogue:
• Is critical but respectful questioning of the storyteller by the circle;
• Allows the storyteller to give background and detail and offer explanation;
• Enables the circle to deconstruct the story;
• Juxtaposes participants experiences;
• Triangulates elements in the story;
• Enables the circle to construct a robust theory;
• Takes about 45 minutes per story.

Questioning
Structured dialogue works through asking open-ended questions: questions which invite people to reflect and bring in new ideas and relate new experiences to what they have heard; and to test, to try out new ideas.

Too often, people jump in with ready made theories (or ‘prejudices’) which explain what has happened in terms of what they believe about the world. Questioning is about learning; about expanding new ideas, not ramming ones we already have down everyone else’s throats!

So it is important for the group to stay in questioning mode: it’s what keeps learning going within the circle. In structured dialogue, the questions are organised around four broad categories:
• What? (description);
• Why? (explanation);
• So what? (synthesis);
• Now what? (action).

Examples are given at the end of the manual. Structured dialogue depends on getting a balance and flow of these sorts of questions. That doesn’t mean asking all the ‘what’ questions first and then moving on to ‘why’. It does mean gradually moving from more ‘what’ questions to more ‘now what’ questions as the method progresses.

In summary, questioning in the Structured Dialogue Method:
• Is open-ended;
• Pushes learning in the circle;
• Progresses from what to why, to so what and to now what questions.
This diagram shows a learning cycle – the stages we typically go through when we learn. The Structured Dialogue Method aims to turn stories of what has happened into theories of how things could be done better in future:

**Insights**

Throughout the process, participants should jot down notes of ideas and questions that occur to them. After the structured dialogue is complete, participants spend five minutes reviewing their notes and identifying the key insights and ideas they have had or lessons which they think can be learnt from the stories they have heard and the dialogue that followed.

The story circle then spends 30 minutes discussing their notes in smaller groups in order to agree a set of insight cards as the whole group. Insight cards (sheets of A5 paper are about the right size) are pithy summations of something the circle discovered: representing ‘ahah’ moments – when a learning point was crystallised. Each card contains only one idea. They can be written as notes or as sentences. They should not use jargon.

After writing them, the group reviews them to check that the insight is important and as precisely written as possible. The group can use the same ‘what’, ‘why’, ‘so what’ and ‘now what’ approach to questioning insight cards as they have applied to stories. It is common to end up with between eight and 20 separate insight cards per story.

In summary, insight cards are:

- Based on what was said in the stories and the structured dialogue;
- Drawn from discussion of notes taken by participants;
- Representations of ‘ahah’ moments;
- Subject to further interrogation using the same structured dialogue form;
- Agreed by the group;
- Likely to be eight to 20 per story.

**Categories and driving a theory**

After both stories, dialogues and insight card sessions are complete, the insight cards from both stories are organised into categories. All of the cards are used in this process; it doesn’t matter which story they come from. In making categories, the facilitator helps story circle members identify patterns among the ideas on the insight cards. The cards might be put up on a wall or laid out on the floor whilst people suggest ways of linking them.
Once insight cards are grouped into categories, the final step is for story group members to add a little more detail to their insight cards, to make sure that someone who was not a part of their group would understand the insight that is written on the card. The resulting insights grouped into categories, is the conclusion of the story circle. It is the theory on which future action can be based.

In summary, insight cards ordered into categories form the theory with which the circle concludes.
## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Case study selection criteria

#### STORY ISSUE

| Difficulty | Is it possible to address the issue/theme locally, or is solving the problem beyond the authority of local partners?  
Has the issue been tackled before? And if so, what was the experience? |
|---|---|
| Interest | How much does the issue inspire local interest?  
What evidence can support this? E.g. local campaigns, interest groups, previous consultation and involvement evidence |
| Relevance | How immediate is the issue to the lives of local people? |

#### COMMUNITY

| Readiness to act | What evidence exists to suggest the community is ready to act? E.g. are there: local groups, meetings, campaigns, etc?  
How many people have been actively involved? |
|---|---|
| Diversity of involvement | Are there people from different ages and backgrounds able to involved?  
Are there effective local networks? |

#### WIDER CONTEXT

| Local politics | Is there support for the issue / commitment to engagement from local councillors?  
Are there sensitivities that need to be taken into account? |
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial planning</td>
<td>Is there the potential for evidence from the project to influence current and future spending?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Strategic fit | Does the issue compliment local strategy?  
Does it lie inside, or outside of strategic aims and priorities for the area? |

#### PUBLIC SERVICE

| Ability to engage | Are there specific staff from the public service able to participate in the project?  
Are there existing structures or processes in place for working with local people? |
|---|---|
| Capacity to Respond | Are there mechanisms in place to enable the public service partner to respond to feedback?  
Are there known constraints and pre-existing decisions that cannot be influenced? |
Appendix 2: Further information for story circle facilitators

Examples of ‘What’ questions:
What were the problems... 
What did you need when... 
Who was it found the... 
How did that come about... 
What did you do... 
What did you feel... 
What bits worked... 
How did you...

Examples of ‘Why’ questions:
Why do you think... 
Why didn’t they react... 
Why did you feel... 
Whose interests did it serve... 
Why did it work... 
What were the important relationships... 
Why did you...

Examples of ‘So What’ questions:
What did you learn... 
What if... 
So what that means is... 
How did things change when... 
How did that affect the relationship with... 
Why does that matter...

Examples of ‘Now What’ questions:
What would you do differently... 
What needs changing... 
What should happen now...

Appendix 3: Some DOs and DON’Ts in the Structured Dialogue

Do listen for tensions or unresolved issues in the story, as it is told. 
Do take notes of the questions and answers. 
Do ask questions. 
Do not make statements or offer advice. 
Do pause at the storyteller’s answer and think, “What other information would I like to have to understand the answer better?” 
Do keep the questions and answers on the particular, what people said and did. 
Do avoid jargon 
Do not get bogged down trying to be ‘complete’ 
Do not question and answer in abstract ways.

For example:

Do not ask: “How did your work empower the community?” (Empower is too abstract).

Ask instead: “How did the community gain more control or power over their concerns as a result of your work? And what did this control or power look like?”

Do not answer: “We thought it was important to work with the community as a partner.” (Community is too broad a term.)

Answer instead: “We worked with these particular organisations because...” or “We organised this particular group or committee because...”

Appendix 4: Structured Dialogue Method Training Session Plan

Part 1 – The Theory

Why stories matter – understanding their importance
Learning points:
• All cultures tell stories – stories are the culture of organisations and communities;
• Stories can communicate complicated ideas in a simple form;
• Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts;
• The ‘truth’, is not always the same thing as the ‘facts’.

The need for a method – why stories can be difficult
Learning points:
• Not everything we hear in stories is ‘true’;
• Stories are subjective, prejudiced, and unrepresentative;
• Evidence from stories can be made more robust by ‘triangulating’ and reflecting and testing;
• Come back to it.

The Structured Dialogue Method – how it works
• Story themes;
• Stories;
• Story circle;
• Ground rules;
• Reflection circle;
• Structured dialogue;
• Questioning;
• Insights;
• Categories and deriving a theory.

Part 2 – Putting it into Practice

Ground rules – setting the tone, creating respect
Learning points:
• Choosing the right story telling space, arranging the room, etc.;
• Being critical, but respectful;
• Agreeing clear rules before the process begins;
• Ensuring sensitivity and confidentiality.

Conflict – getting the right amount
Learning points:
• Conflict between stories is essential...
• ...but there is a limit to how much the method can take;
• Preserve the conflict within stories.

Questioning – thinking sideways
Learning points:
• The need to question beyond the face value of the story;
• Thinking about what hasn’t been said;
• The learning cycle (what; why; so what; now what).

Facilitation
Learning points:
• Story telling doesn’t just happen;
• Be open about your motive as a facilitator.

Appendix 5: Partner information
Chamberlain Forum have been funded through the Every Voice Counts (EVC) programme which is the Regional Empowerment Programme for the West Midlands carrying out the practical work of the National Empowerment Partnership (NEP).