

# SUPPORTING PEER Support



Thoughts  
for people  
wanting to set up,  
run or participate in  
a peer support  
group

## Evaluation Exchange Participants

Sharon Colvin – 3D Drumchapel  
Helen Carlin – Rowan Alba Ltd  
Sue Green – Capability Scotland  
Laura Lebec – Quarriers  
Jacky Smith – Sense Scotland  
Jan Williamson – Streetwork UK  
Jacquie Winning – PLUS  
Elaine Park – Mental Health Network (Greater Glasgow)  
Susan Maclaren – Moray Council  
Wilma Easton – Edinburgh Council

“Has met all initial expectations, sharing knowledge, experience, creativity and expertise of the group.”

The contents of this booklet were drawn from lessons learned during the facilitation of Evaluation Exchange.

This was a time-limited peer support network created by IRISS and Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS).

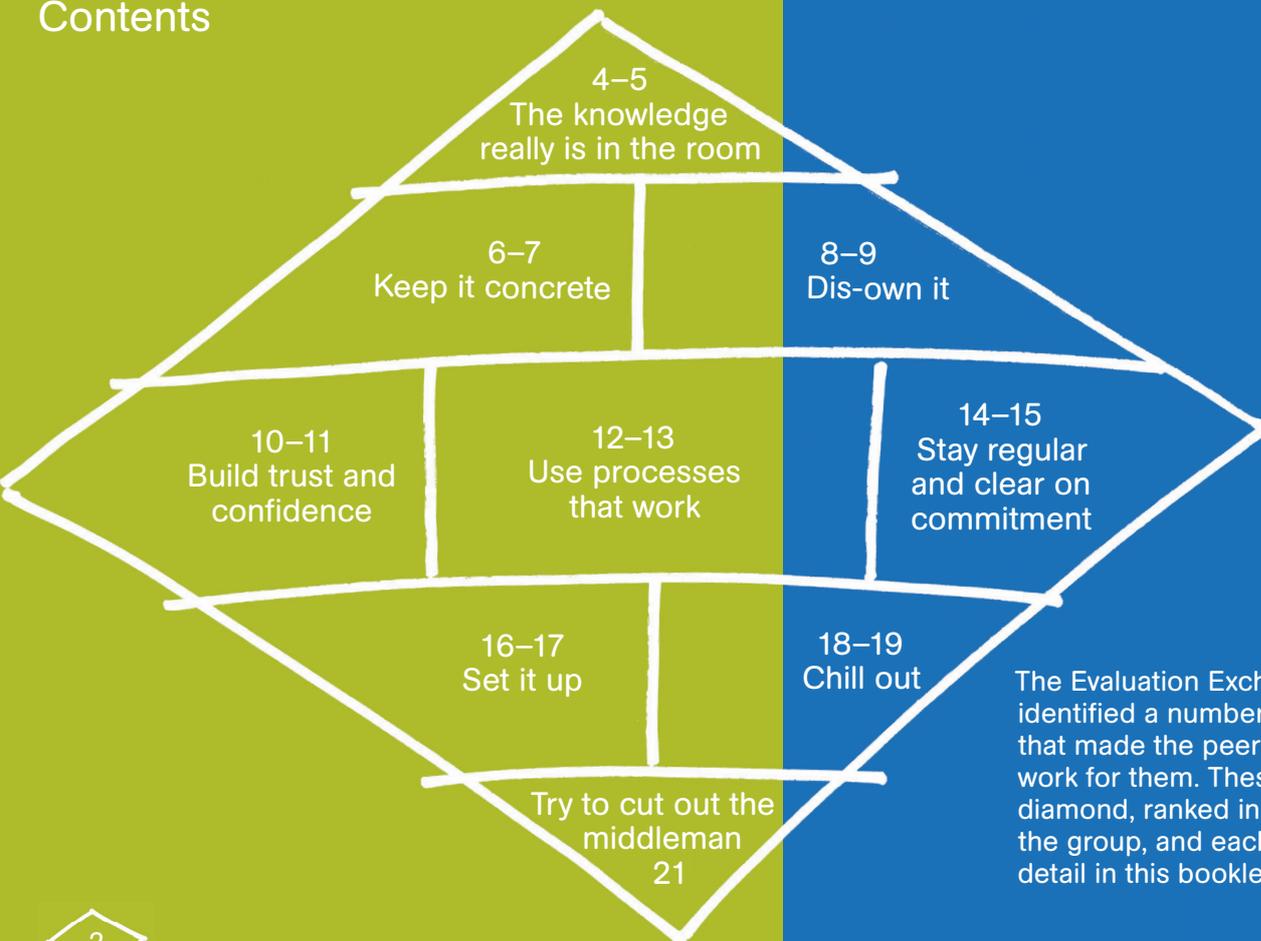
It aimed to help organisations in the social services sector to learn from and support each other to undertake evaluations of the services and support they provide to individuals in Scotland.



Further information about this project, including a full evaluation, can be found at:

[www.iriss.org.uk/  
evaluationexchange](http://www.iriss.org.uk/evaluationexchange)

# Contents



The Evaluation Exchange participants identified a number of key factors that made the peer support process work for them. These are shown in the diamond, ranked in order of priority by the group, and each is considered in detail in this booklet.

# The knowledge really is in the room

- Believe this is true and act accordingly.
- Use facilitation as much as possible and minimal training.
- Use processes which get people sharing their know as soon as possible.
- Support everyone to be confident in what they know.

“We were given the chance to group up in a way that made sense to us. The opportunity to self-select meant we could join people that we felt we could share knowledge and good practice with.”



# KEEP IT CONCRETE

Link the peer support group to a task the group members have to complete. This way it's not an add on - it's a support to do something we have to do anyway.

A focus on the concrete rather than the abstract helps to embed learning into day-to-day work outside the group.

Concrete tasks also encourage action - so lessons from the group are tried out and refined in real life and then perhaps brought back for discussion.

"All members had a project to evaluate and wanted to draw on the support and knowledge of others in the sector."



# Dis-OWN it...

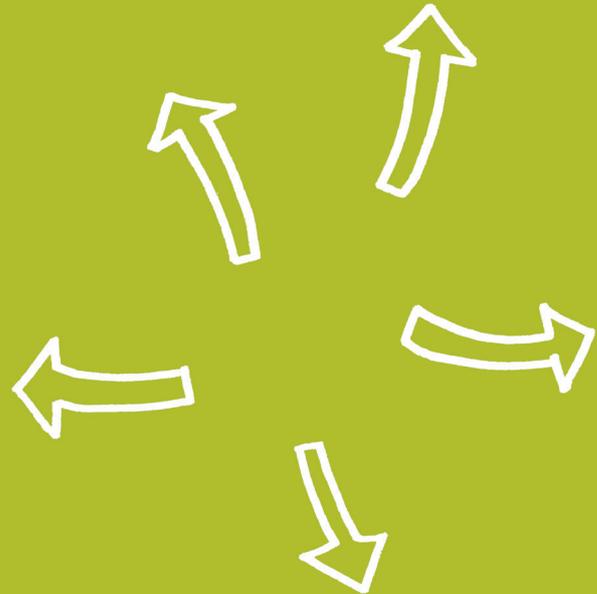
Insist the group controls 'direction of travel' from the beginning.

Step back as far as you can, e.g. support the group to take turns facilitating or divide into small groups for discussion and problem solving without a facilitator present.

Focus on the group's concerns and what they bring to the table covering whatever they need to address at the time rather than sticking rigidly to an agenda.

Use the participants' environment where possible, e.g. the group taking turns to host sessions at their organisations can increase their ownership.

“We split into smaller groups during each session to discuss progress with our evaluations and receive support.”



“There was no facilitator present in the breakout groups.”

- Openly discuss issues around confidentiality and sharing, and resolve as a group anything else that arises.
- Discuss and agree your own 'ground rules' at the outset.

# BUILD TRUST & CONFIDENCE

- Be open about facilitators' processes and agenda (if there is one).
- There are no silly questions.



# USE PROCESSES

Try mixing it up and using a number of different activities. However, if a particular method works for the group don't worry about repeating it.

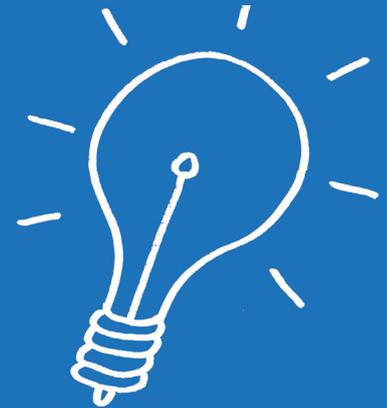
Keeping a consistent structure (e.g. check in, small group feedback, facilitator input, discussion, reflection) while using a variety of techniques within that structure can be useful.

Model different facilitation methods with the group rather than discussing them.

Use the techniques the group wants to master.

Creative methods can keep things interesting, enable us to think differently, and showcase new techniques to try out.

# THAT WORK



“Early on our group pointed out that the facilitators had talked about creative methods but mostly wrote things on flipcharts. So we started using creative methods which gave us ideas that could easily be taken back to the workplace.”

# STAY REGULAR AND CLEAR ON COMMITMENT.

A regular meeting keeps the topic for support on the priority list.

Regular meetings can support learning and confidence more than a training session.

If you can, be clear about the lifetime of the group. A short and defined period can encourage commitment to and focus on the group, and allay concerns about the burden of on-going meetings.



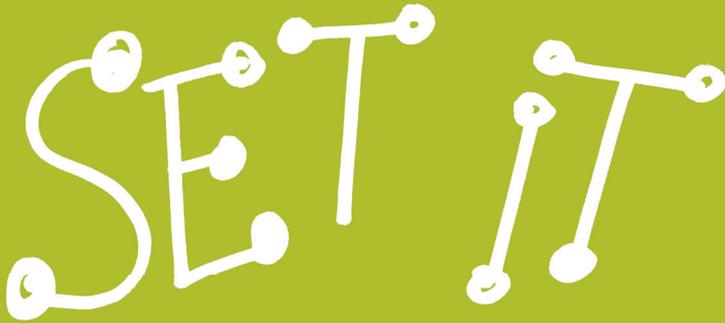
“Evaluation Exchange was time-limited from the outset.”



“Dates were scheduled in advance at regular intervals.”

Be clear on any expectations around commitment before people join the group.

Encourage forethought about what people want to get from the group even before your session, this can include an application process or a joining questionnaire.



If it's a closed group, don't be afraid to be selective so that the group members are those that will benefit most from what you can offer.

Think about the mix of people involved, e.g. level of expertise, area of work, etc. There's no right approach to this but it's important to consider.



The criteria for joining Evaluation Exchange was set out in advance and meant we had to spend time considering why we wanted to join and what we hoped to both get from the group and contribute.



# Chill out

“There was an informal approach adopted by the facilitators, helped by meeting to have lunch before each group.”

An informal atmosphere makes for a good learning environment, and helps to make the distinction that this is not a training event.

No PowerPoint...unless it really helps.

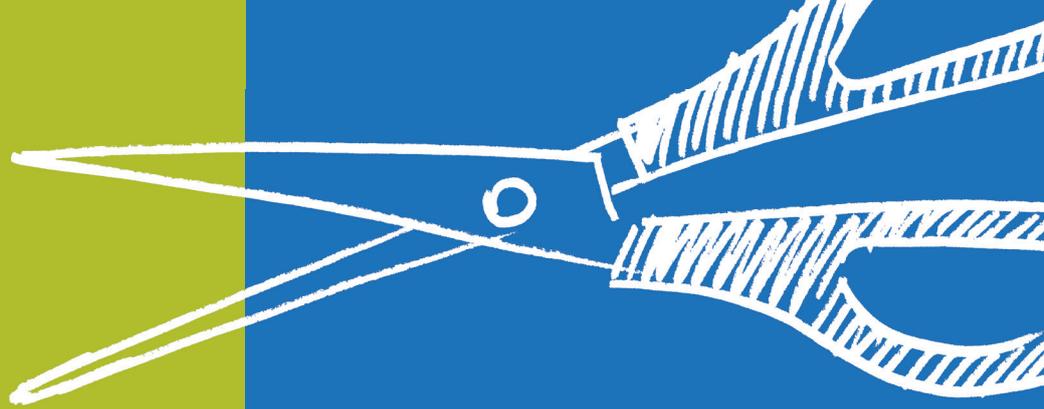
Eat together - try packed lunches if expense is an issue (when is it not?).

Laugh!

“I think the group became increasingly relaxed as time went on and we got to know each other.”



# Try to cut out the middleman



Set up ways and encourage the group to communicate directly with each other rather than through a facilitator.

Encourage the group to ask and answer each others' questions rather than looking to an expert.

How you communicate between meetings and at meetings is equally important and should be consistent, especially if you are an external facilitator.

“We set up an online space for the group to communicate independently of the facilitators.”



Written by Emma Collins, September 2013

## Acknowledgements

This project was carried out in partnership with Evaluation Support Scotland, and we thank Tom Scott and Steven Marwick for their input.

We are also grateful to all the members of Evaluation Exchange whose insights and contribution have shaped this report.

[www.iriss.org.uk](http://www.iriss.org.uk)    [enquiries@iriss.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@iriss.org.uk)

The Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS) is a charitable company limited by guarantee. Registered in Scotland: No 313740. Scottish Charity No: SC037882. Registered Office: Brunswick House, 51 Wilson Street, Glasgow, G1 1UZ



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-Share Alike 2.5 UK: Scotland Licence. To view a copy of this licence, visit [www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/scotland/](http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/scotland/) Copyright © 2013