

RTPI COLLABORATIVE WORKING GROUPS

An introduction and self-help guide

A Planners in the Workplace initiative



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INTRODUCTION

RTPI Collaborative Working Groups are a knowledge exchange and professional development initiative based on the tried and tested action learning set model of problem solving through group discussion of workplace issues. Groups will provide professional development opportunities for RTPI members through focusing on management and professional issues that group members are actually experiencing in their workplace, rather than on case studies or hypothetical situations.

Each Group consists of professionals who meet to discuss workplace problems and professional issues affecting them. The process is straightforward. The Group discusses a topic and the issues associated with it, develops courses of action to resolve the issues, and reflects on the outcomes once action has been taken. Groups can last for a short period of time to discuss specific themes, or develop as long-term management support mechanisms, creating a self-sustaining group that provides practical support and guidance to its members. In addition to workplace issues Groups can discuss particular projects or themes reflecting national, regional or local interests.

This collaborative approach to professional development can promote a wider professional understanding amongst all those working within the planning system. It can help raise professional standards, develop management ability and leadership skills, and address organisational issues such as culture change. Groups can provide real support to individuals, helping them to become better planners, better managers and better leaders in the workplace.

THE BENEFITS

Professional development

Through the discussion of workplace issues, individual Group members will benefit from the professional knowledge and expertise of others, helping broaden and deepen their own understanding of the many challenges facing professionals in the workplace.

By collaborating with others, Group members will be able to reflect on their own knowledge and experience and evaluate it against the knowledge and experience of others, helping improve their own performance and deepen their understanding of their professional environment.

Organisational improvement

A well-rounded professional can offer a deeper knowledge and appreciation of the perspectives of all those who work within the planning system. By developing their own management capability and leadership skills in the workplace, Group members can exercise greater professional confidence through influencing their employer's systems and organisational structures, helping improve the organisation's performance and quality of service.

Membership of a Group can also introduce an awareness of the requirements of all those who use the planning system, challenge negative working cultures and help improve standards.

Membership of a Group can help to:

- develop your management, decision making, problem solving, communication and leadership skills.
- enhance your professional confidence in the workplace.
- deepen your understanding of the planning system and improve the way it operates.
- facilitate positive discussion, in a local, regional and national context, on planning and development and the implications of decision making.
- broaden your understanding of key issues facing many built environment professions, local communities and elected members, helping to improve external working relationships.
- offer professional development opportunities and contribute towards your CPD obligations.



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Case study - example 1

I joined an action learning set whilst employed in a management position within a local authority planning department. It grew out of a women's management course and included staff from other council services. I found the experience extremely beneficial because I was able to share my biggest problems in a supportive and confidential setting. The others didn't tell me what to do, it doesn't work that way, but their questions and comments helped me see issues from new angles that led to deeper insights and more creative ways to tackle problems that had previously seemed intractable. Sometimes it helped me realise that I was trying to solve the wrong problem.

It was certainly time well spent and led to more productive working and job satisfaction. What I learned in that setting I still apply today and is very relevant for the teaching and research I do in people and organisational management – and everything else. Several of us were single parents with small children, so we met after work in a social work office that had play facilities. Where there's a will, there's a way!

I would highly recommend collaborative working groups as a potentially powerful method of learning and personal development and well worth the commitment.

Marilyn Higgins MRTPI, Senior Lecturer, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh

Case study - example 2

My previous authority made extensive use of 'action learning' in many different capacities. The impact was highly positive, particularly in improving relationships between colleagues in different parts of the Council, helping transform the "corporate culture". The Council has improved its performance rankings and was recently awarded 'four stars' by the Audit Commission and described as 'improving strongly', so it works!

Example One:

A task not directly related to the work situation.

On a residential course, with no previous notice, about a dozen of us, mostly unknown to each other, were given the task of putting on live entertainment at a home for people with a range of disabilities in less than 24 hours time. The really interesting part was the group dynamic by which we decided what to do, and who would do it. The exercise would have been much less effective without the real performance at the end, which gave a point and an "edge". Afterwards we discussed with a facilitator the process by which we had taken decisions, who had contributed what, etc.

Example Two:

A task related to the work situation.

A time-limited group of officers from all parts of the authority was set up to come up with ideas for the best use of the Council website (this was around ten years ago, when websites were less well developed.) We gave a presentation on our ideas to the Council's Management Team. Again, the full benefits were not so much the results we came up with, but the process by which we organised ourselves, broke the task into separate parts, and brought it all together again.

Chris Clarke MRTPI, Regeneration Manager South Tyneside Council (retired)

THE PROCESS

There are four stages to each Collaborative Working Group meeting.



Identifying and clarifying the problem

A Group member explains a difficulty they are experiencing in the workplace

What is the problem experienced by the Group member (or the Group collectively)? What actions have contributed to the problem? Does the Group agree this is a real issue, or is it a symptom of a deeper issue? Questions and discussion within the group will clarify the position.



Problem solving

The Group discusses the difficulty, develops a deeper insight into the surrounding issues, and generates potential actions.

The problem is discussed by the Group, with each Group member applying his/her knowledge and experience to help understand the nature of the problem and related issues.



Agreed action

Deciding the best course of action to take

Reflecting on the discussions within the Group, the Group member with the issue will need to combine his or her own experience with that of other Group members. It is important that this becomes a learning experience for the individual Group member, helping deepen his or her knowledge and understanding and see other solutions to the issue.

The member then decides how he/she will address the issue and take it forward.



Reflection

Reporting back to the Group

At the next meeting the individual member(s) report back on progress made. This enables the individual with the workplace issue, as well as the Group as a whole, to reflect on the discussions and their own experiences.

This collaborative approach will build a professional rapport within the Group. Members will develop the confidence to discuss their own professional views and performance and, if the Group agrees, provide mutual support outside of Group meetings. Group members will also learn about their own capabilities and individual authority and that they are not alone in the issues they face.

HOW TO FORM A GROUP

Groups are free to join as membership is voluntary but individuals must bring a commitment to their own **professional** and **personal development**. Established good practice shows that successful Groups are created because of the underlying commitment of Group members to their own development. Group members have a duty to discuss openly and freely their opinions, experiences and concerns on a particular topic so that knowledge and experience can be shared, and areas for personal performance improvement can be identified and addressed.



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We suggest two types of Collaborative Working Group: planner-orientated and cross disciplinary.

- **Planner-orientated Groups** will help improve leadership, management, communication and problem-solving skills.
- **Cross-disciplinary Groups**, in addition to the above, can also bring together a variety of disciplines helping group members resolve localised problems encountered in the planning system, promote good practice, foster local/regional discussion and promote a wider professional understanding between all those responsible for creating sustainable communities. They can also combine public and private sector management expertise to help introduce new approaches and perspectives.

Groups will require a **facilitator** during the early stages of their development. The role of a facilitator is different to that of a chair. A facilitator takes responsibility for creating an environment that focuses on a positive learning experience for all, encouraging Group members to discuss the real issues that concern them.

The role of the facilitator is to:

- work with the Group to set the ground rules for discussion, including time allocated for the meeting and issues around confidentiality.
- help Group members challenge their own thinking and reflect on the experiences of others, enabling a deeper understanding of issues faced in the workplace.
- ensure that Group members are focused on the member who is presenting an issue, and manage the meeting so that everyone is able to contribute.



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Over time Groups can develop this skill themselves and become self-facilitating. Other Groups may be formed by individuals who have experience of action learning or who are confident that they can facilitate the discussions. Some Groups, particularly those dealing with senior managers, will require an experienced facilitator.

Good practice suggests that participants in a Group are drawn from a variety of backgrounds¹ using whatever professional networks are felt to be appropriate. We suggest that between 5 and 8 people is the ideal number for a Collaborative Working Group. The Group meets on a regular basis, perhaps once a month for an initial 6 month period. It may be that some Groups have a short life-span, whereas others will exist for longer periods of time.

The format of meetings can be open or structured around particular issues depending on the requirements of Group members and the length of the meeting. We advise that meetings should last between 2 - 3 hours to allow effective participation and discussion.

We suggest that a mutually convenient venue for all group members is identified. It may be that an employer² is able to provide accommodation at no cost, recognising the value of staff development. RTPI in Scotland, Wales, the Irish Branch sections and RTPI English Regions may also be able to assist in locating a suitable venue.

¹ Some suggested examples are provided at the end of this advice note.

² Supporting Collaborative Working Groups could be used as part of the evidence employers require to achieve RTPI Learning Partner status.

EXAMPLES

In forming a Group you will need to decide what the focus of the Group will be, for example, should it promote greater cross-disciplinary understanding? Should it deepen understanding of management issues? Individuals can then be invited to join the group. They can be approached directly via their employer, their professional institute, or through any other network available – whatever you feel is appropriate. Groups can also be formed by individuals who are clear about the Group's purpose and what they would gain from meetings.

The following are examples of what you might like to consider, but local needs and interests should always influence the type of Group developed.

Example 1

Cross-disciplinary

Cross-disciplinary working Groups should consist of built environment professionals from a mixture of professional backgrounds, for example

From Local Authorities

planners, architects, surveyors, economic development professionals, town centre managers, landscape architects, urban designers, elected members.

From Government departments

(inc. devolved Governments and Regional arrangements for England)
planners and other built environment professionals.

From Consultancies / Developers / House Builders

planners, architects, surveyors, landscape architects, economists, self-employed consultants.

From Not for profit / charitable organisations

Planning Aid volunteers, community planners.

Outcomes:

- provide built environment professionals with a greater understanding of the planning process.
- combine public and private sector expertise in decision making and problem solving.
- address organisational culture change through a wider understanding and appreciation of all those who use the planning system.
- facilitate positive discussion on planning and development issues within the local/regional geographical area.
- develop practical solutions to ensure better planning applications, improved working relationships and positive engagement with the community and other stakeholders.
- improve decision making and service delivery.

Example 2

Public Sector

Public sector working groups should consist of planners, or a combination of planners, economic development professionals and other built environment professionals from:

Local authorities / Councils

Devolved Governments

Government offices (England)

Regional Development Agencies



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Example 3

Management and performance development (middle and senior management)

Representatives from public and private sector organisations, either from a mixture of planning backgrounds or cross-disciplinary, including:

From Local Authorities

Heads of Service/Chief Planning Officers, senior planning officers.

From Consultancies

Senior planning consultants, Directors, self-employed consultants.

This example can also be cross-disciplinary and include other public/private sector professionals such as architects, surveyors and engineers

Outcomes:

- develop strategic thinking and performance in partnership with others.
- enable group members to develop their personal managerial style and communication skills, improving their performance in the workplace.
- promote a wider understanding of the different experiences and approaches of other local, regional and national government organisations.
- help to address culture change issues within the public sector.

Outcomes:

- combine public and private sector management expertise to improve efficiency, decision making and professional confidence.
- address culture change through improved service delivery.
- provide a wider professional knowledge exchange for operational/managerial problems.
- discuss LPA planning policy and strategically driven perspectives.
- promote good practice and a wider professional understanding between all those working within the planning system.

FURTHER INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE

Collaborative Working Groups form part of the RTPI Planners in the Workplace (PIWP) initiative. For further information and guidance please contact the RTPI's PIWP Manager on 020 7929 9494, email piwp@rtpi.org.uk or visit the RTPI website www.rtpi.org.uk.

Whilst we respect the confidentiality of Group discussions, the RTPI will endeavour to maintain links with Groups to ensure key themes and outputs that arise from discussions can be developed as topics for other Groups, identify the need for improved RTPI practice guidance and disseminate good practice.

Collaborative Working Groups can form part of the evidence an employer will need to demonstrate that they are eligible to become an RTPI Learning Partner. Further details on the RTPI Learning Partner initiative are available from the RTPI website.



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41 Botolph Lane London EC3R 8DL www.rtpi.org.uk

Registered Charity Number 262865

RTPI in Scotland, 57 Melville Street Edinburgh EH3 7HL www.rtpi.org.uk/rtpi_in_scotland/

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For all other purposes please contact the Royal Town Planning Institute.

All forms and documents referred to in this guidance are available from www.rtpi.org.uk

Planners in the Workplace (PIWP)

A service designed to help RTPI members develop as planners, as managers and as leaders in the workplace. Through PIWP we offer a range of support services including;

Guidance on workplace and practice issues

A personal support service to help RTPI members' problem-solve a wide range of issues facing them in the workplace.

Management information and guidance

A range of information and guidance notes designed to support self employed consultants, small to medium-sized businesses and larger public sector organisations.

For further information on the initiative and how it can help you please visit www.rtpi.org.uk

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