

LEARNING HANDBOOK

Guidance and tools to support systematic learning before, during and after project activity in health and care

Thinking council

A thinking council is similar to a focus group and can be used either to inform future work or to tackle a specific problem that is experienced in a project. The aim is to pass knowledge and experience from a group to the one person in need of support.

Tool	Time	Resources	Physicality	Interactivity
Thinking council	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★

When?

A thinking council can be carried out at any point within the project process:

- It can be used before a project starts, much in the same way as a [‘before action review’](#), to gather existing knowledge and lessons learned before embarking on a piece of work
- It can be used during a project, particularly if a member of the team is experiencing difficulties in delivering the desired outcomes, or if there has been an adverse event
- It can be used after a project has been completed to gather the experiences of the team and record lessons learned

Who?

The people involved in the ‘thinking council’ will depend on the stage at which you are carrying it out.

You can choose to carry out a ‘thinking council’ within your team to determine existing knowledge or to understand the experiences of the team during or after a project.

You may also want to go externally and learn from topic experts – this is more useful if you are experiencing specific issues during a project that need to be addressed at the time to ensure effective delivery.

A facilitator is also required to introduce the task and assist participants.

How?

The overall time required for the session is around 30 minutes, depending on the number of participants.

An effective ‘thinking council’ requires a facilitator. This can either be the person in need of support from the group, but it is often most useful when the facilitator is entirely independent of the activity so they can focus on time-keeping and ensuring the focus of the ‘thinking council’ is maintained throughout.

The ‘thinking council’ is usually carried out face-to-face and begins with a key question or problem being written and displayed so that all of the group can see it. The facilitator will

introduce the concept of the 'thinking council' and give the person in need of support a few minutes to provide context on the key question / problem posed to the group.

Before group discussion of the question / problem begins, the facilitator will give the group an opportunity to ask questions about the task and the focus of the 'thinking council' to ensure everyone understands. The key question / problem can be refined during this process, until a final question / problem is agreed before beginning.

The facilitator will then give each member of the group two minutes to share their response to the question / problem posed. This is an opportunity to share opinions, experience, knowledge and intelligence of the area of interest to help the person in need of support reach a solution or idea of next actions required to progress their work.

The person sat to the right of the group member talking for their allocated two minutes, is tasked to take notes. This can be done using a notepad that is then passed around the room to capture all data on one document, or through sticky notes.

Once the two minutes are up, the person to the left begins their two minutes and the role of note-taker moves on. This continues until all members of the group have taken turns speaking and taking notes for two minutes.

By the end of the session, the person in need of support will have a record of all of the inputs through the notes / sticky notes; a range of ideas and experiences to draw upon to develop their work further; and connections with others that can be later followed up should a particular thread of what is shared prove to be most relevant and interesting.

It is recommended no more than ten people participate in a 'thinking council' at once and a limit of two questions to be asked within one hour. This will ensure everyone in the group has sufficient time to think and discuss in a meaningful way.

Things you need:

- Facilitator
- A comfortable space so participants are at ease sharing their knowledge and intelligence
- Whiteboard or flipchart
- A notepad or sticky notes
- Pens
- Timer

Further reading:

- Time to Think – [Time to think council](#)