

A hand-drawn lightbulb is positioned on the left side of the slide, with three curved lines above it indicating it is lit. A vertical line descends from the base of the bulb, featuring a zigzag resistor symbol. This line connects to a horizontal line that runs across the bottom of the slide, with a small tick mark at its center. A large, hand-drawn arrow starts from the right side of the slide, curves around the top, and points towards the lightbulb, completing a circuit-like loop.

# Action learning in challenging times

Final report to 'What Works'

**Corporate Community**

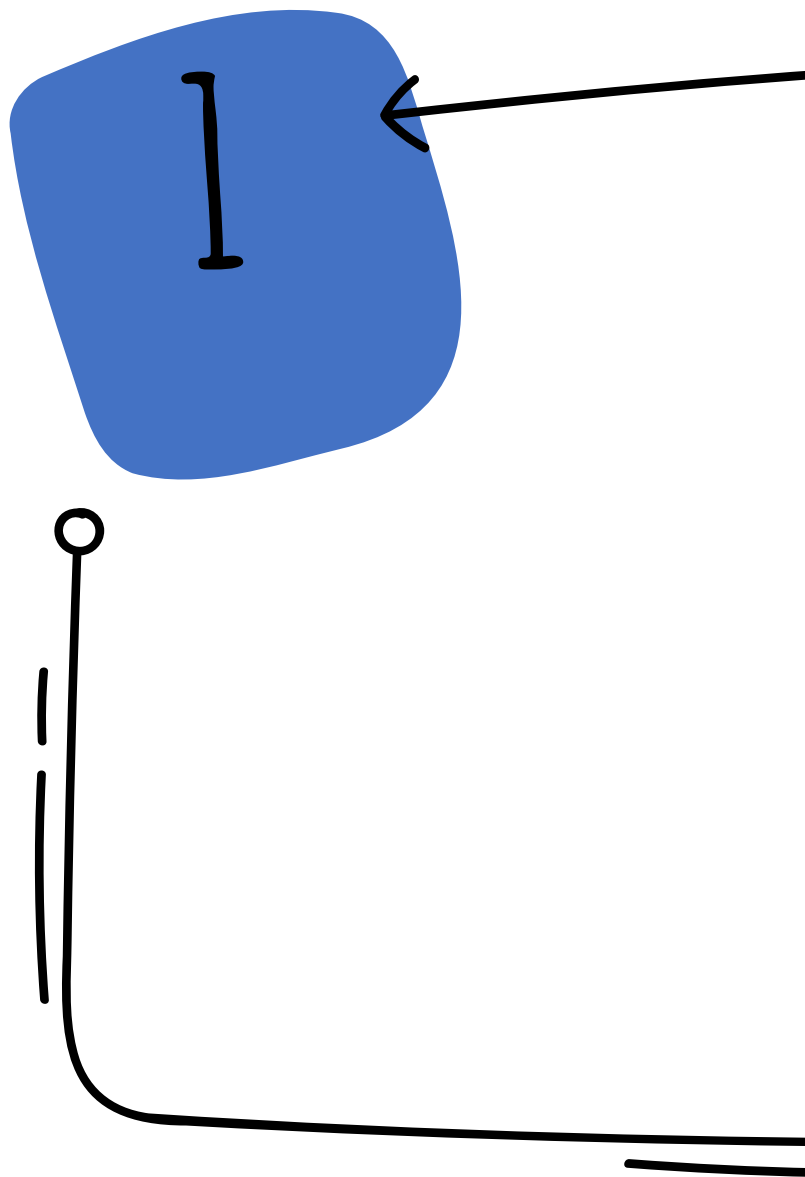
<https://www.corpcom.ie>

September 2022



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✓ Thank you	



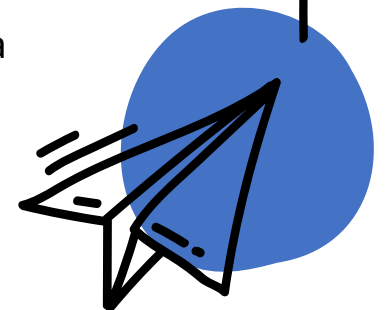
The Pioneers of Action Learning in Challenging Times

# Introduction

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth offered a free innovative, learning opportunity for practitioners working to improve outcomes for children and young people in Ireland. The programme happened between February and July 2022. In a safe and mutually respectful peer group setting, participants were invited to build their capacity to address real problems in the midst of their day-to-day roles and activities. Action learning, critical co-inquiry methodologies (1) were used to create an on-going hybrid learning space over a four month period.

The What Works initiative 'Action Learning in Challenging Times' was commissioned through a collaboration with Corporate Community, an organisational development consultancy with a strong focus on generating a spirit of curiosity and self-determination in response to uncertain and ambiguous environments.

*(1. Put simply; we use 'critical co-inquiry methodologies' to characterise a way to thinking with others and learning to ask open questions in different ways.)*

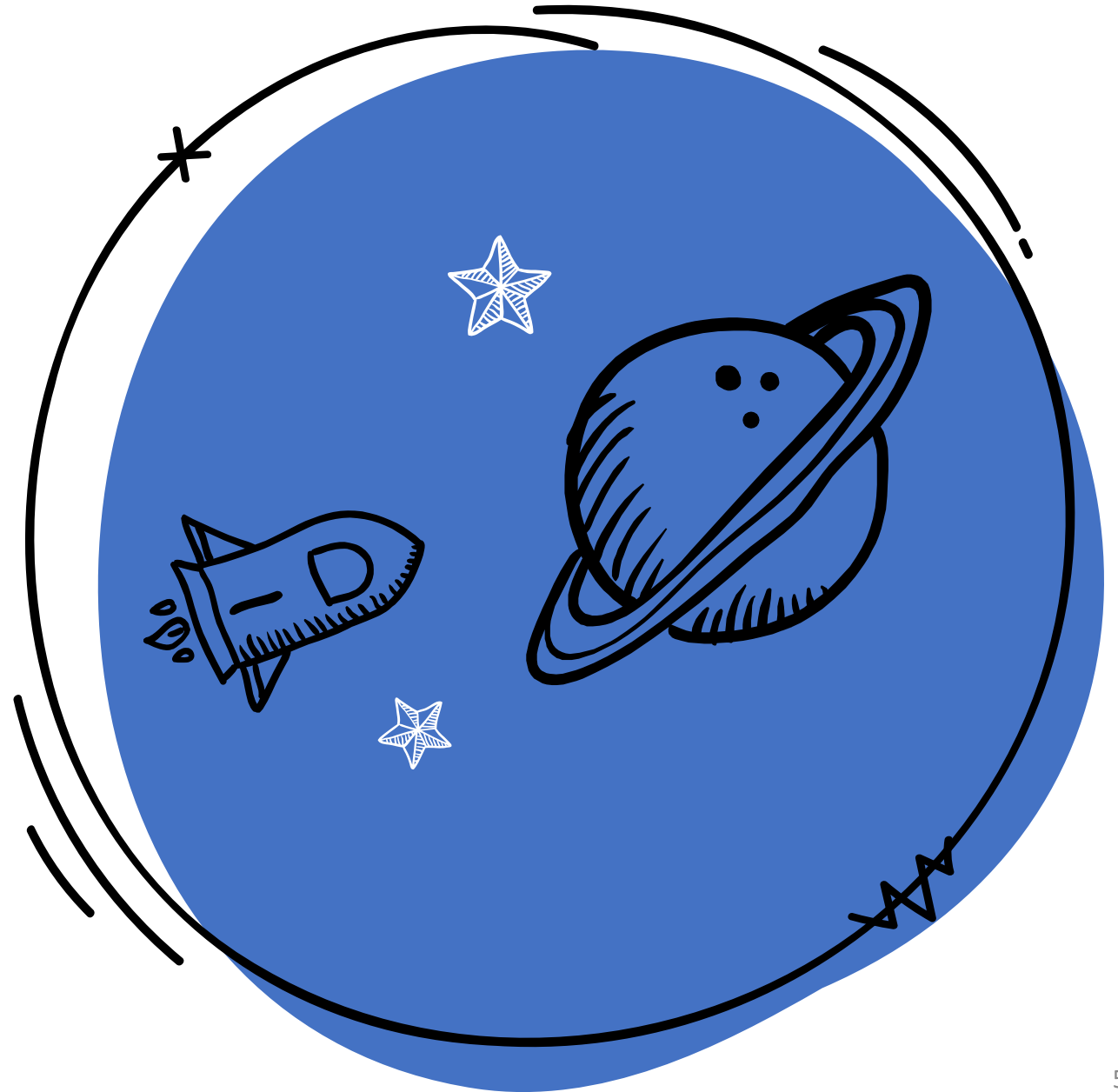


# The purpose of this report

Review 'action learning in challenging times' in the context of children and youth sectors

Highlight the learning for participants

Consider the success or otherwise of the project





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The bones of “Action Learning in  
Challenging Times”

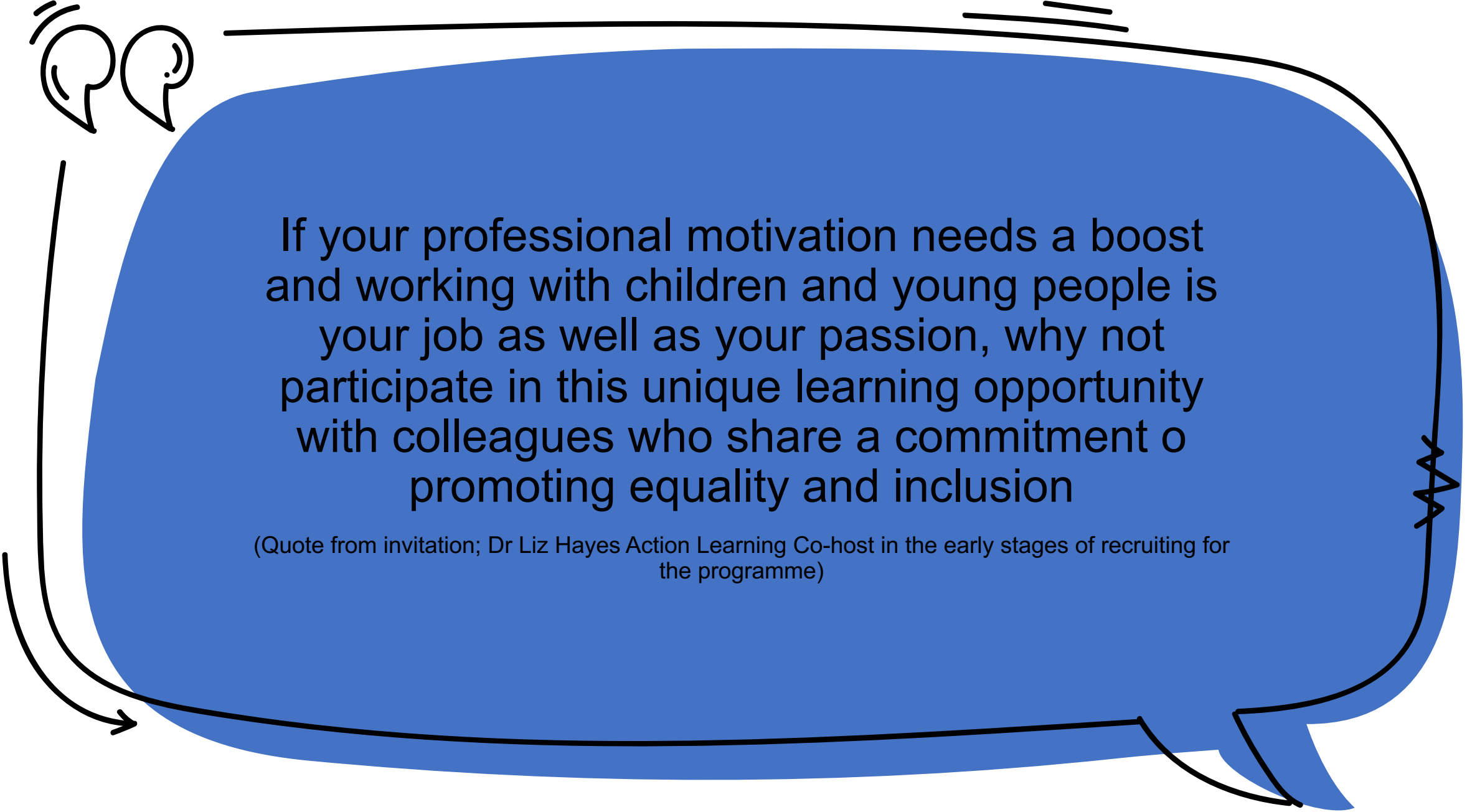
# Four purposes for 'Action Learning in Challenging Times'

Create an enabling learning space that encourages participants to appreciate, and be more confident, when using their professional judgement and lived experience

Relish the opportunity to invite support from colleagues and be willing to share expertise in the service of learning and building strong networks

Use the opportunity to investigate individual assumptions about one's own role and practice and to learn to frame complex challenges differently and act accordingly

Involve work colleagues (learning buddies) in the experience and invite engagement as everyone seeks to work together to improve the lives of children and young people



If your professional motivation needs a boost  
and working with children and young people is  
your job as well as your passion, why not  
participate in this unique learning opportunity  
with colleagues who share a commitment to  
promoting equality and inclusion

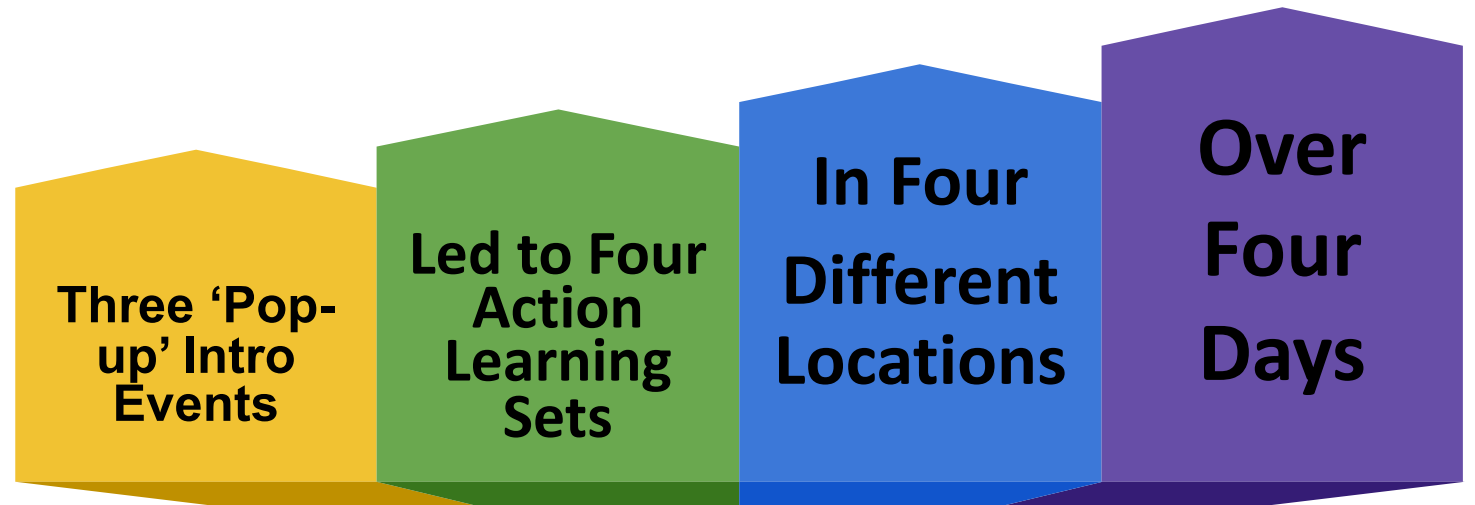
(Quote from invitation; Dr Liz Hayes Action Learning Co-host in the early stages of recruiting for  
the programme)

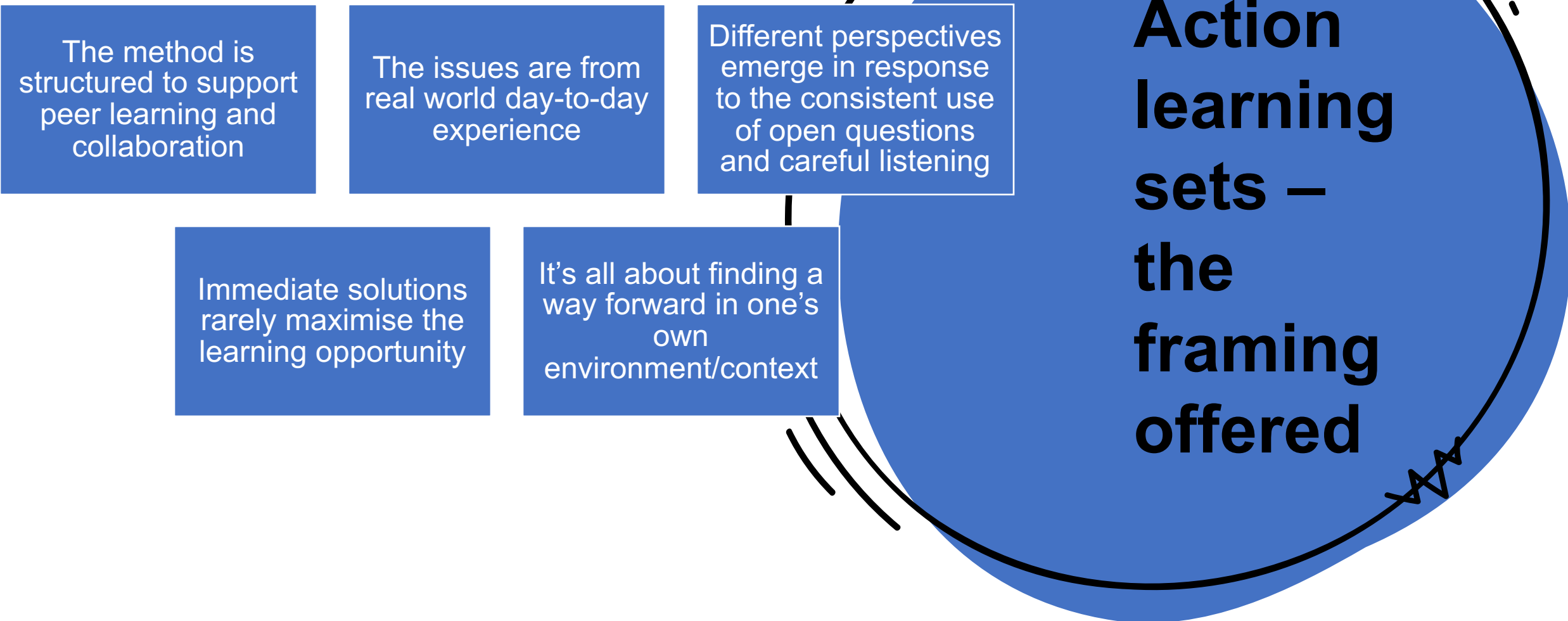


# Action Learning 'pop-ups' generate huge interest and organising in the background

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“In total that’s 70 so far definitely confirmed with completed reg. forms (for pop-up) returned and invites being sent today, and there’s another group of forms just coming in now so that’s probably close to 80 as of right now, plus whatever comes back before COB today and on Monday. I reckon it should be very close to a full-house as per the spreadsheet. The response has been exceptional in the grand scheme of it.” (Email: David Uzell 11<sup>th</sup> Feb. in advance of the pop-up action learning events the following week)



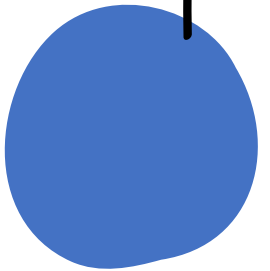


# Life happens – roles change

It's important to note that the 'What Works' team changed just at the point when the programme went live. The Centre for Effective Services came on board to take up the project management role and manage recruitment for the programme. They also played a vital role supporting participants and facilitators with working on-line with Webex and when encountering on-line difficulties.

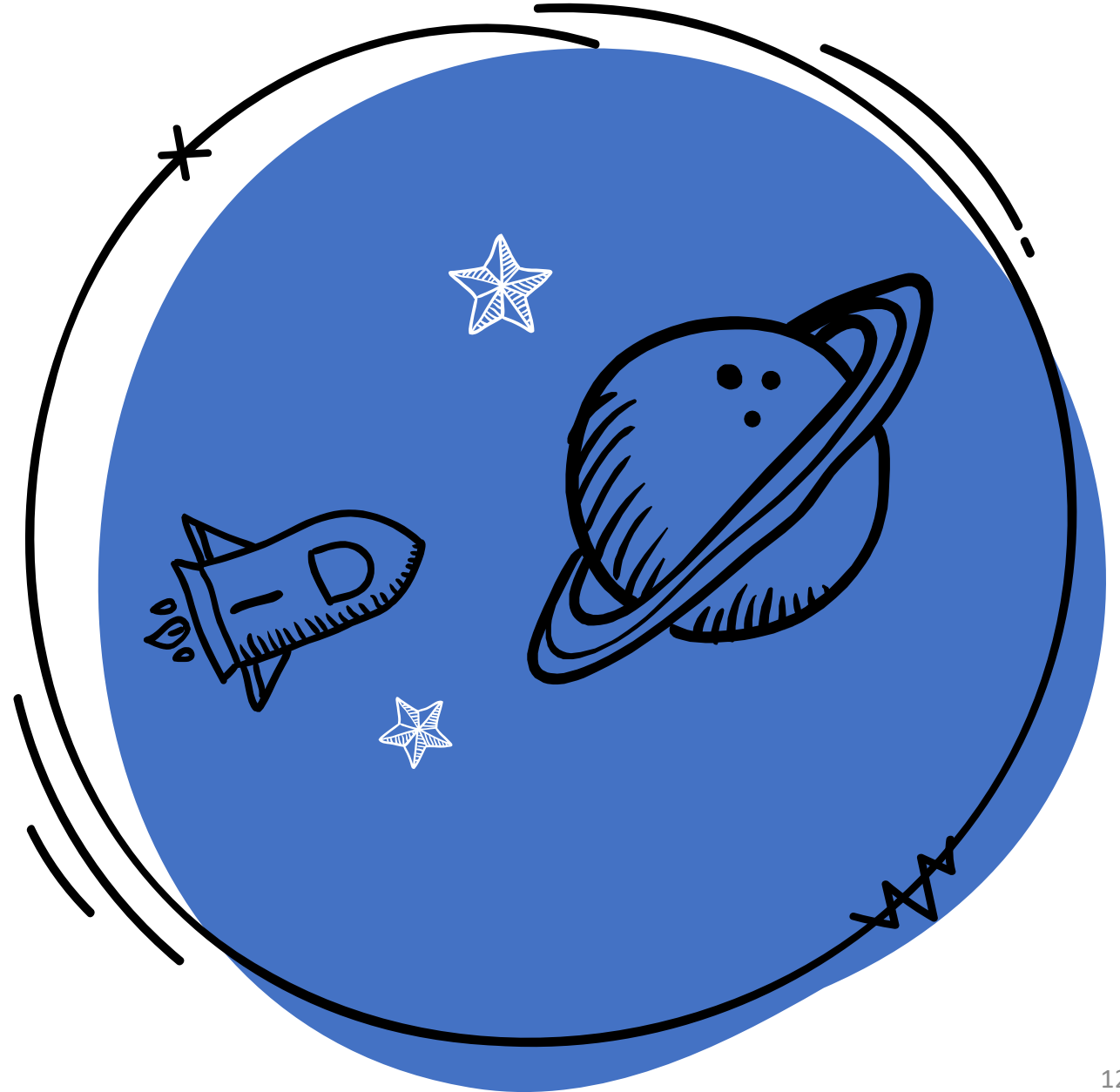
While these changes were not covid related, it mirrored how systems were adapting to working with a hybrid model in the context of Covid and managing on-going crises at the same time. The establishment of a project steering group became a key way to continue the commitment to co-design and ensure that the different role responsibilities worked in tandem in a functional and collegial manner.

In our view, we all modelled flexibility as we took the opportunity of learning how to work together when the unexpected happens. This in turn, helped to re-assure participants that they were part of something bigger than their own individual concerns and that everyone wanted them to have a positive action learning experience,



# Constant adaptation was necessary

The original plan offered 40 places to potential participants. With Covid challenges continuing, we were delighted to get a positive response from 25 action learners. Marie and Liz supplemented the action learning set days with some one-to-one sessions so that individuals could clarify their action learning goal and get some learning coach support if they were unable to attend a session





3

A hand-drawn diagram consisting of a large, rounded rectangular frame. In the top-left corner of this frame is a blue-shaded box containing a large curly brace '}'. In the center of the frame is a text box. The frame is decorated with various hand-drawn lines: a wavy line at the top, a dashed line on the left, and several curved lines on the right and bottom.

Challenging times for people  
working in services to children and  
young people



## RECURRING THEMES

- As familiar routines were disrupted through covid; it was taking time to re-adjust to interactions with parents/work in communities.
- Re-establishing connections in the physical space was especially challenging when it's tough to recruit and retain staff in the current climate
- Staff are often over-worked and busy; with some concern that goodwill and passion are exploited to fill gaps. Therefore, it's harder to prioritise longer term thinking and professional development
- Managing these day-to-challenges means there is often insufficient time for management/policy work/strategic development as more immediate crises take priority for leaders and their teams.
- Waiting lists for services especially the lack of access to more specialist support for children with additional needs. Additional concerns from day-to-day practice highlighted the on-going impact of Covid and resultant trauma for children, young people, their families and staff working in service
- The disruption to staffing rotas due to covid and related issues were a constant challenge across all action learning sets. This continued to impact on attendance and probably contributed to challenges with recruitment to the programme in the first place

# Broader systemic issues highlighted

## **It's personal**

Issues of low pay and lack for recognition for developmental/caring roles with children and young people was seen as a gender equality issue. The sector is dominated by women who predominantly take up similar roles in their personal and family lives

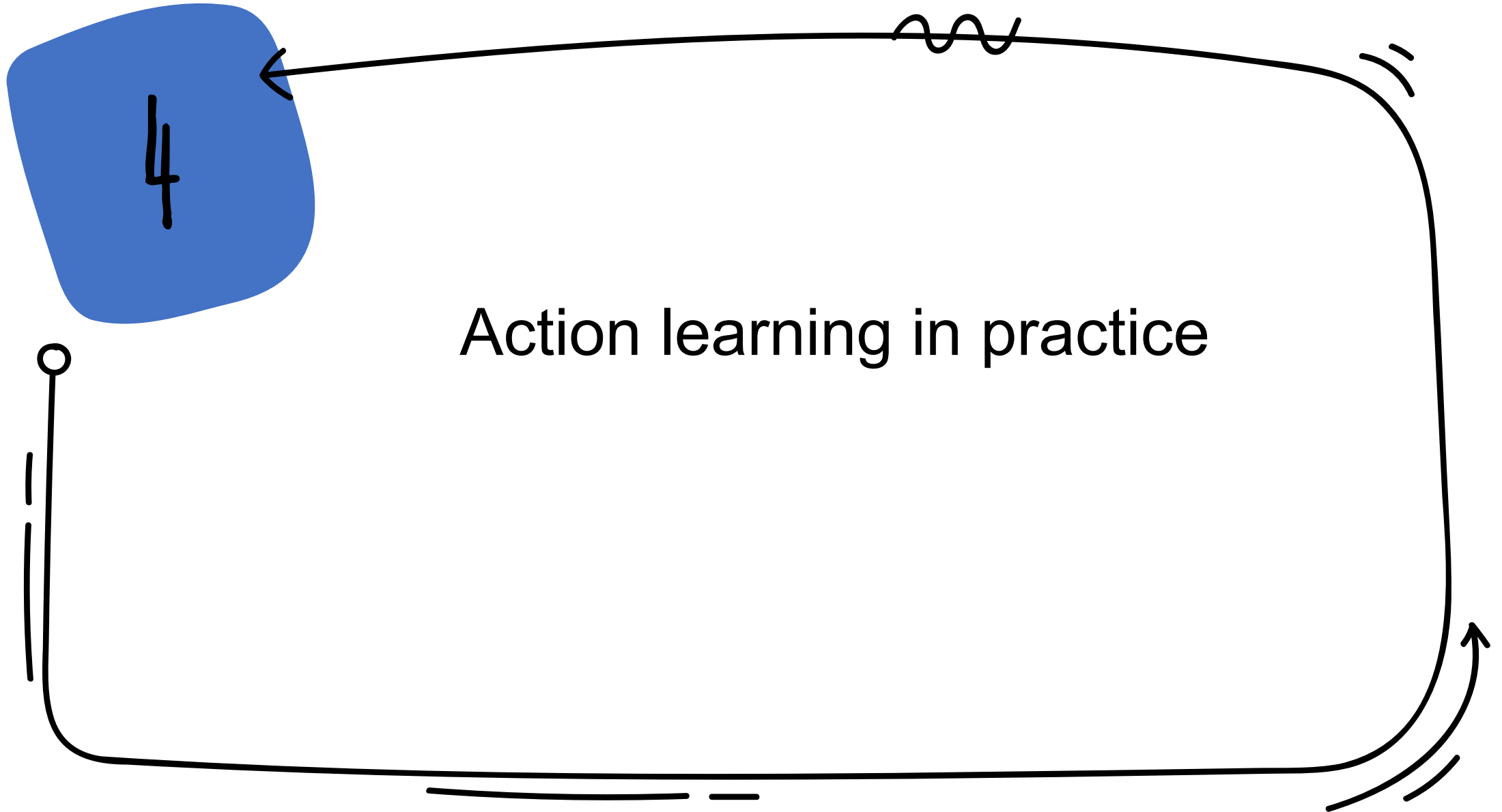
## **It's institutional**

Taking up a leadership role to create the conditions for greater collaboration and implementing change can be an isolating experience. Without career development opportunities and more attention to succession planning – services to children and young people will suffer in the long run



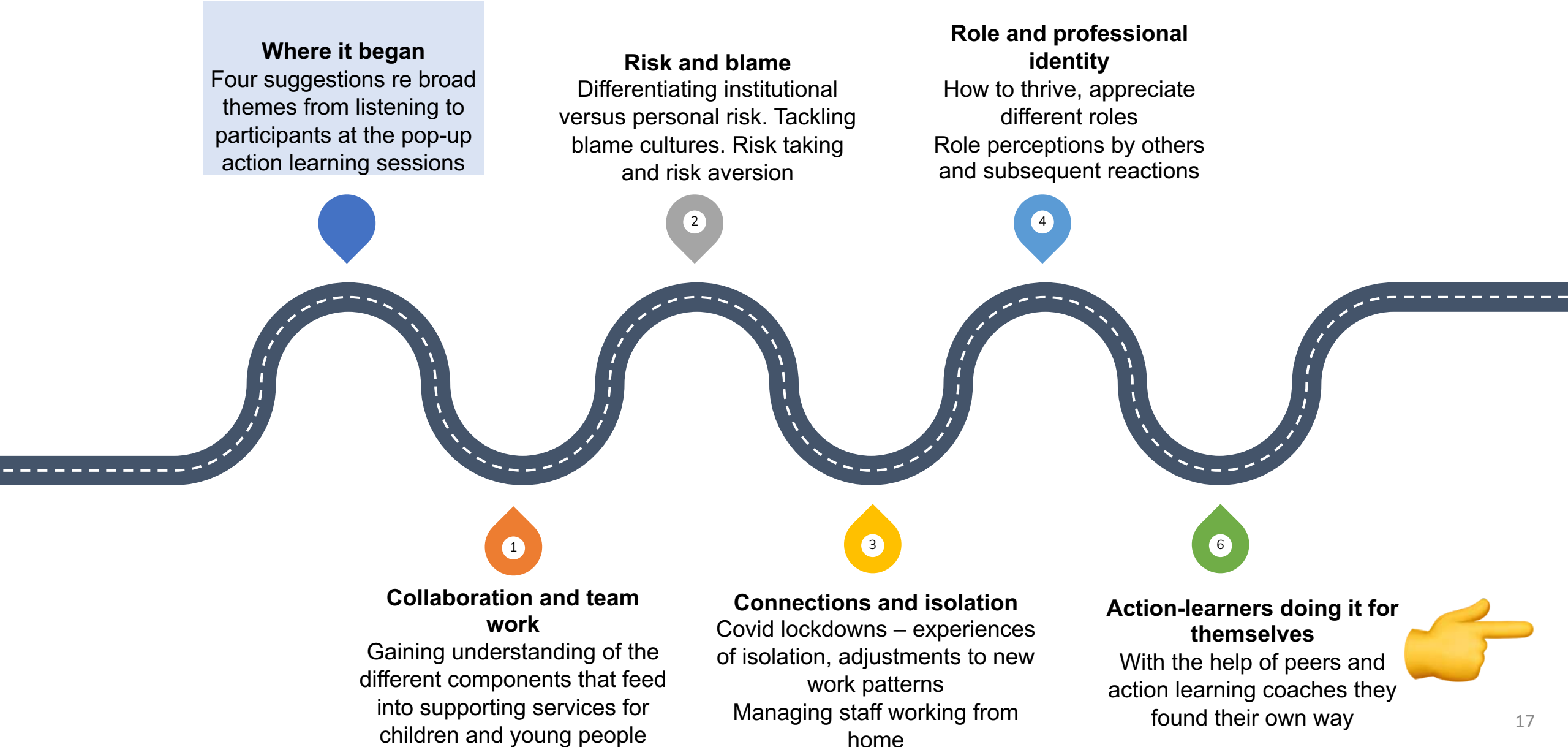
4

Action learning in practice





# Mapping possible themes for learning goals from the pop-up sessions



# A re-frame at the mid-way point

**Facilitating change** - working with others and using my influence/authority

**Adding value in my practice** - to my team, the wider organisation and other networks

**My own development** - career progression, life stage values and motivation

**Action learning** – supporting colleagues with open questions



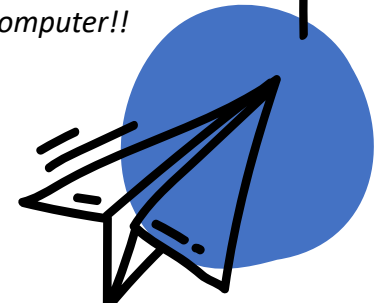
# Sharing the learning

Each action learner nominated a 'learning buddy' from their own organisation. The purpose was to have someone 'back at base' who could offer encouragement and be there as 'a sounding board' if needed. For day 4 – again in the physical space - they were also invited to participate in an action learning event where all four cohorts shared the outcomes of their action learning journey.

Each action learner prepared a poster and presented their action learning journey to a mixed grouping from the four locations. John and Catherine from the Dept. and Claire from CES participated on the day as well! The images of some of these posters accompany the next four slides where more high level learning outcomes are indicated.



*Disruption stayed with us for the duration 🙄 Liz upgraded when she replaced the missing computer!!*





# Facilitating change

- Finding ways to bring people along when habits are well established and 'it's the way it's always been done'
- Learning to value where people are at – appreciate the extent of collaboration that already exists and that has often grown over years of working together
- 'Moving forward' was commonly used as a buzz word to describe change. The language of 'Movement' was seen as a more useful way to think about change and on-going improvement

Facilitating change and working with others, using my influence

Honor  
the space  
between no  
longer and  
not yet.  
-Nancy Levin



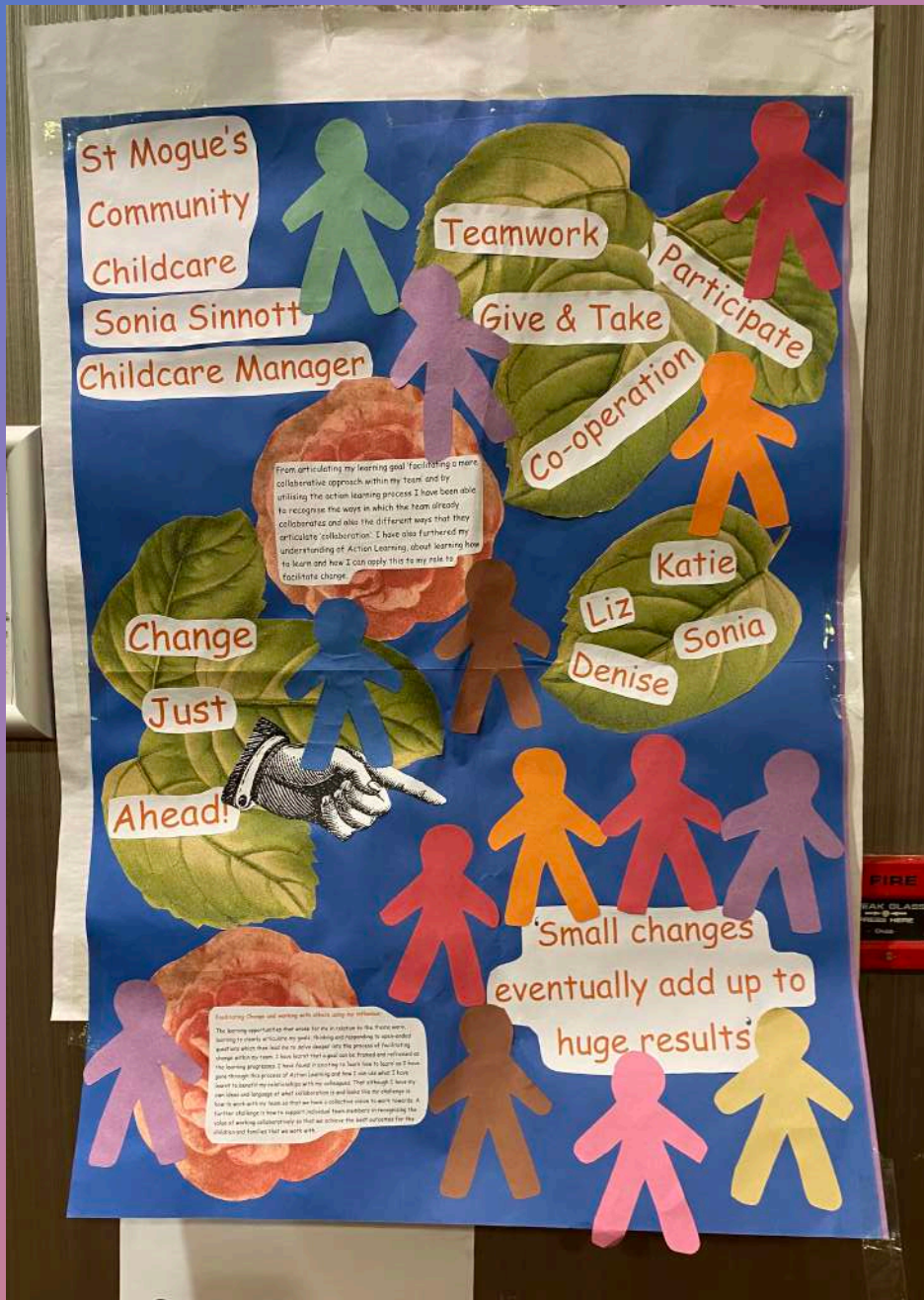
I think change can initially instill fear into individuals. Often times change is possibly not managed in ways that best support the process for everyone involved.

Some change can be so imminent that there is no



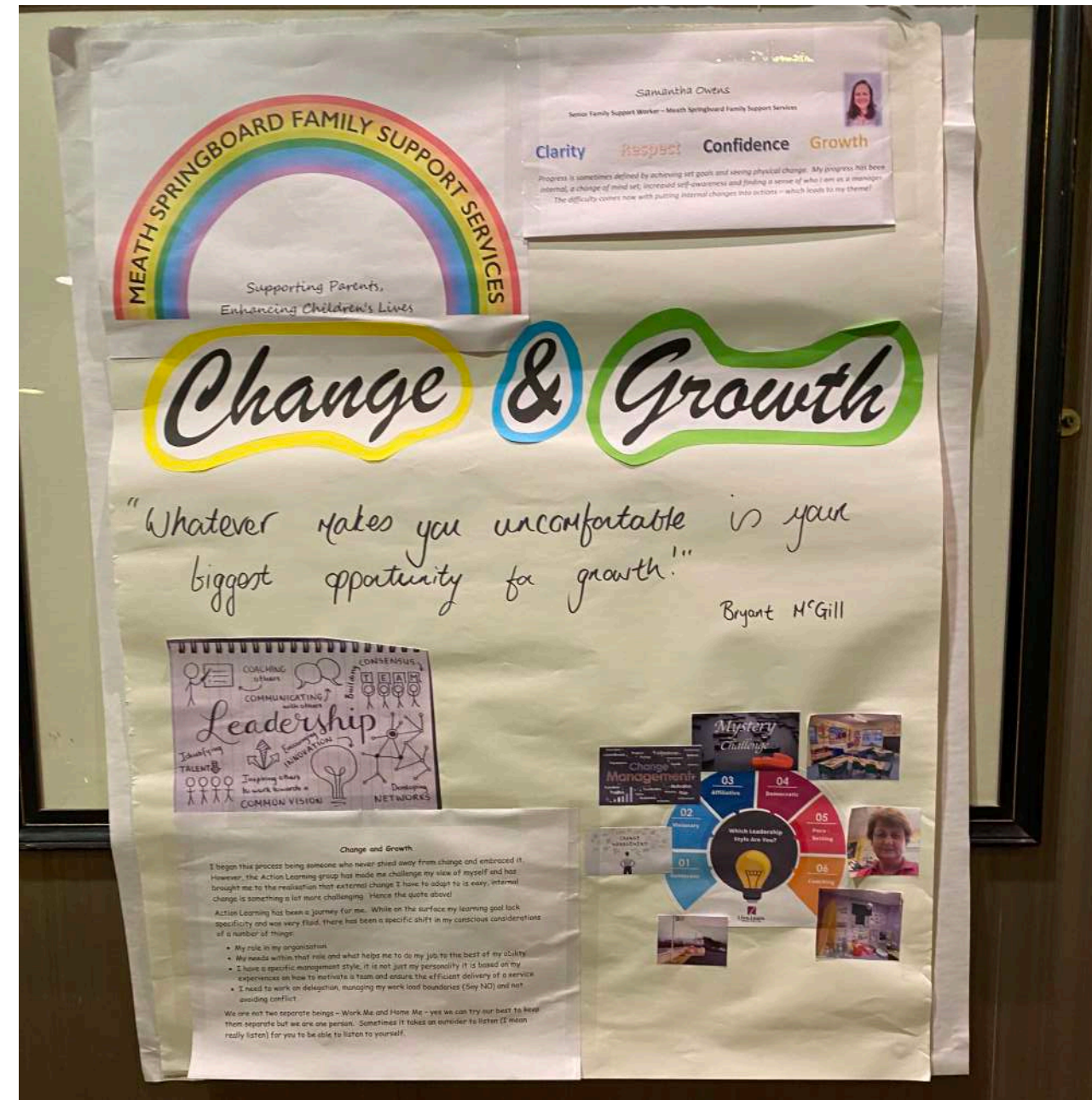
# Adding value

- Finding the confidence to offer some insight as to what might be going on with a team dynamic
- Getting a better focus on being a manager and giving permission to oneself to take time 'off the floor' and focus on supporting the wider team
- Learning to frame and re-frame goals continuously and own an opinion as to why particular actions need to happen



# My own development

- Navigating relationships featured strongly – especially with covid impacts and negotiating changes in practice
- Recognising the need to exercise authority in the manager role in small teams. How its easy to 'hold back' and not be clear about management expectations of the team
- Focus on career/life stage/succession and making choices to take action to prepare to take on a manager role



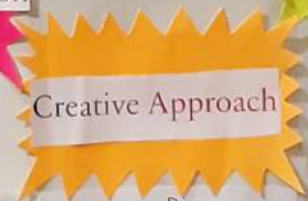
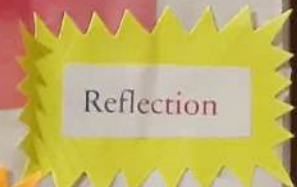
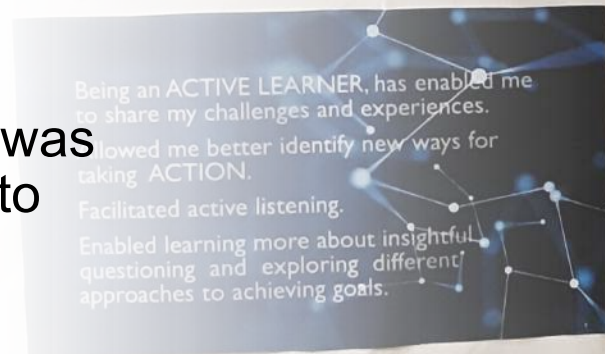


# Action learning in practice

An active learner is better able to use support and identify new ways to take more informed action

Open questions – require concentrated listening and it was hard to avoid the temptation to rush to give advice

Learning sets promote creative thinking and inspire confidence and energy to take the next step



# The voices of action learners

“Being direct doesn’t always work. Am adjusting my approach to issues and how I communicate concerns in a way that can be heard... a frank and open discussion with a parent has resulted in lovely attachment developing between her and her child”.

“I’m working on being more realistic and my managing my own expectations; Felt like I was getting nowhere, but have made things more concrete by putting policies and systems in place so everyone is clear”

“ I was able to unload in a safe place.. I’ve learned to trust myself and take up my leadership with the team....to listen better and I realise the importance of clear messaging with staff team ”

“It felt like therapy to talk to other providers. It was great to talk to those from other backgrounds; to hear how they interact with children and families”

“Covid challenges stopped us from networking. We became very focused on the immediate. Action learning was a welcome opportunity to connect and share experience after years of isolation.”





4

Yes it was a success and .....

# Lessons learned along the way

## COVID

Covid did not go away and it is to everyone's credit that the programme was designed and sustained when there was so much disruption across the system

## ISOLATION

Action learning in a covid environment required space to acknowledge the systemic and personal stresses experienced by staff at all levels of organisations. Exhaustion and busyness was ever present

## ACTION LEARNING

When action learning methodologies are less familiar, it takes time for action learners to get comfortable with the degree of self-responsibility required

## LOGISTICS

Hybrid learning is not easy when there are challenges with coverage and finding quiet spaces. On the other hand, travel was reduced and that made participation more possible for some participants

## THE MIX

The mix of participants is a vital ingredient in action learning. It acknowledges that children and young people avail of services framed by various policy and practice contexts.

## THE PACE OF LEARNING

The in-person day offered a vital connection when acknowledging 'not knowing' and defining learning goals. The pace of learning/change varied and everyone shared an update on the last day.



# For next time

## **This programme has the potential to be run again**

- ✓ Professional learning development opportunities related to solving real work challenges should continue to be offered to staff working with children and young people
- ✓ Peer learning and networking beyond one's own workplace would strengthen problem solving abilities and encourage the the resilience needed when working directly with children and young people
- ✓ Participant recruitment from diverse workplaces and backgrounds is key to creating learning sets that mirror the variety of services necessary for the development and support of children and young people
- ✓ Attention to scheduling and the mix of in-person and on-line work would help to improve access and maximise the opportunities for integration and sharing good practice

## **The alumni of 2022 are a valuable resource**

- ✓ The current participants are pioneers who found their way to this relatively small scale initiative. They are key to any recruitment for future programmes
- ✓ Action learning is a professional skill for life. Occasional follow-up sessions and the creation of communities of practice around specific themes should be considered
- ✓ Some of this group would make excellent Action Learning Coaches if supported to evolve their skills in an action learning environment.
- ✓ This would allow the programme to expand and contribute to growing services to children and young people as learning organisations



Thanks!



# you've all been great!

- X This innovative hybrid action learning programme was co-created by Dr. Liz Hayes and Marie Carroll from Corporate Community with the 'What Works' team in the Department.
- X We would like to thank the team in the Department, Denis Ryan and Catherine Hiney, who enthusiastically helped shape the early development and design of the programme and David Uzell and Ciaran Cahill for successfully handling the IT demands of the pop-up workshop with almost 90 participants.
- X Sincere thanks to John Cole and Catherine who journeyed with us on the Advisory Group and who generously welcomed each of the action learning sets to the programme. Their full participation in Day 4 was greatly appreciated by all.
- X We would also like to express our appreciation to the CES team for their handling of the technical support and logistics, especially Claire O Hagan who responded to all challenges with competence and positivity.
- X Finally, our thanks go to all of the participants in the programme, the real pioneers of this innovative approach to learning. Throughout the programme we have admired their courage and openness to learning and adaptation as well as their capacity to work collaboratively with their peers around the country. We wish them well as they continue to apply their learnings in the years ahead.