Introduction
The ‘starter for 10’ series provides a starting point for managers, practitioners and researchers embarking on projects designed to implement best evidence to improve service delivery, enhance clinical practice or introduce innovations into health or social care.

Each paper introduces an aspect of evidence-based practice. We will draw on relevant literature and our experience to highlight principles and to offer practical tips. The series is produced by the Translating Knowledge into Action (TK2A) Theme of the NIHR Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care (CLAHRC) for South Yorkshire.

The ultimate aim is to help you put knowledge into practice to improve the quality, effectiveness and equity of care.

The objectives of this paper are to:

- Introduce After Action Review (AAR) as a systematic approach to evaluating the progress of projects.
- Share our practical experience of using AAR as an evaluation tool.
- Signpost further information and resources.

Where does AAR originate from?
After Action Review (AAR) was developed in the 1970s by the United States Army, who integrate this method of evaluation into their practice. AAR is also used by United States Fire Teams, and USAid. It has been used in healthcare in the UK in healthcare simulation training, and in evaluating clinical practice.

What is AAR?
AAR is an evaluation tool conducted during and after an event, project or major activity that allows team members and leaders to discover and learn what happened. It is an open and honest professional discussion that enables all of the staff involved to understand why things happened during the project’s progress, and to learn from that experience. The AAR is a continual method of evaluation that connects past experience with future actions.

AAR is a useful method of reviewing projects. A lack of on-going evaluation of projects and methods to change practice can be costly to any organisation due to redundant project work, and repetition of mistakes. A properly conducted AAR can be a powerful method to use in any organization, understanding that every action is an opportunity for learning. It can become part of the communication process that educates, informs and motivates people, by ensuring they to do the right thing. It can prevent future confusion ensuring lessons are learnt from successes and mistakes.

What are the key AAR questions?
AAR focuses on the following four key questions:

- What was supposed to happen?
- What actually happened?
- Why were there differences?
- What can be learnt from this experience?

These four questions are used in short on-going evaluations during a project. A longer retrospective AAR can be performed at the end of the project. The key features of AAR are summarised below.

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<tr>
<th>AAR Action</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
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<tr>
<td>When</td>
<td>AAR should be performed after each identifiable event within a project, and therefore becomes a live and continuous learning process.</td>
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<td>How</td>
<td>AAR can be a formal organised event hosted by a facilitator, or an informal short review between a few individuals at any stage in a project.</td>
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<td>Participants</td>
<td>The AAR is a professional discussion that includes all participants involved in a project. If more employees participate more of the project can be recalled, and more lessons can be learned and shared.</td>
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<td>What AAR aims to do</td>
<td>AAR focuses directly on the tasks and goals that were to be accomplished.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>It attempts to discover why things happened.</td>
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<td>It encourages employees to surface and discuss important lessons from the project.</td>
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<td>What it is not</td>
<td>AAR is not about problem fixing or allocating blame, it does not judge success or failure.</td>
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<td>Ground Rules</td>
<td>An integral part of the AAR process is the setting of ground rules before the evaluation. This includes the agreement of all taking part that the AAR takes place in an environment in which participants feel that discussions are confidential, open, honest and safe.</td>
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<td>What is suitable for an AAR?</td>
<td>Any event or project with a beginning and an end, an identifiable purpose and some basis on which performance can be assessed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcomes of an AAR</td>
<td>Lessons learned are shared on the spot by the individuals involved, and can be explicitly documented and shared with a wider audience</td>
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Adapted from Cronin & Andrews (2009) and Bariana & Dollery (2010)

Sharing our experiences from South Yorkshire
The TK2A team have integrated AARs during, and at the end of all clinical projects undertaken. Building AARs into the project timetable helped teams to recall information which could have been lost during the life of a long project. AARs have provided us with valuable information to inform our projects, for example:

- A large project on improving oral nutrition needed to be scaled back to make the objectives more achievable;
- Reconfiguration of services within NHS organisations was unavoidable and projects were adapted accordingly;
- A project was adapted when certain objectives were no longer achievable due to changes in the local ward evaluation teams;
- All team members should take part in the AAR. We have found that anyone who is part of the project team including administrative and support staff can offer valuable insights into how a project is progressing.
Some practical points

- A facilitator helps to ensure the AAR keeps to time, remains focused and that everyone contributes. They can ask questions to clarify the distinction between opinion and fact. They can help participants to expand on comments to provide an in-depth picture of what has happened, success and failures and ask why. The facilitator should explain their role before the AAR starts.
- Have a room layout so that team members can communicate effectively.
- Permission to record: with the team’s agreement we audio taped the AAR. Listening back to the tape in conjunction with notes made during the AAR ensured all useful information is captured.
- Remind the team that the purpose of the AAR is to learn from and apply lessons as the project progresses, or in the next project.
- Have a ‘warm up’ for example. ‘one thing that makes you smile about this project’, this is also useful to celebrate the ending.
- Start by asking the team to review the original objectives.
- Make notes on a flip charts which all the team can see, this often prompts further comment and information from team members.
- Have ‘post-it’ notes for the team to use, which can then be ‘posted’ round the room to share with the team.
- Thank the team for their work so far.

Retrospective AAR

In a final AAR at the end of a project the following questions are helpful to ask the team:

- What was the objective/s of the project? Did the ‘customer’ get what was needed? Were deadlines met?
- Go through project stage by stage, the plan and what actually happened, identifying tasks, deliverables and decision points to identify delays, efficient points, where there was lack of clarity.
- What was achieved?
- What were the successes? Why? How can we repeat the success? You can ask each individual what they feel their greatest success was, or what made the biggest difference to the project?
- What were the disappointments? Why? Focus on the activity and processes not people. How can we avoid them in the future?
- What would you do differently next time?
- What techniques and processes would you use again?
- What advice would you give to others?
- Allocate an overall marks out of ten for the project and why? What would have made it score 10 for you?

Three top tips

Over the last four years, we have learned three main lessons about using AAR. These are:

- Ensure everyone participates; the facilitator’s role is to encourage quiet members of the group to contribute to the discussion. Move on from individuals who may be dominating the conversation. Remember everyone’s experience and view point is valid in order to build a complete picture of what happened.
- Keep to time, allowing enough time to discuss the final question: lessons learnt from this experience. This may include an action plan which needs to be specific assigning designated staff to actions, timescales and deadlines.
- Ensure the ground rules are discussed at the beginning of the AAR to allow all staff to feel confident in openly discussing the event.

Conclusion

AAR is a useful method of recalling the detail of what has happened during a project. Formative AARs during a project may be short and can inform the team of any immediate changes that are needed. A longer summative AAR is useful at the end of a project. The findings from AARs can be used to influence actions and project direction either immediately or in the future.

Resources

AAR On-line resources of the application of AAR’s
http://www.fireleadership.gov/toolbox/after_action_review/referenc es.html

Further reading about AAR:


CLAHRC SY on-line literature

Our website contains details of all the TK2A projects, posters and presentations from learning events, and many other interesting resources. See http://clahrc-sy.nihr.ac.uk There is also information about the work of the other themes in the CLAHRC for South Yorkshire.

The topics in this ‘starter for 10’ series are:

- Getting started: 1) Project planning; 2) Naming and framing the topic; 3) Partnership working
- Implementation strategies: 4) Facilitation; 5) Knowledge brokering; 6) Blended e-learning; 7) Patient and public involvement
- Evaluation: 8) Capturing impact; 9) After Action Reviews; 10) Scale-up, spread and sustainability

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