**Lessons from the Evaluation - Draft to prompt feedback & discussion –
Tom McAusland September 2005.**

I've set out in boxes what seem to me to be the main messages and implications from the
evaluation report. Some are taken directly from the reported text and some I've broken down to
more specific individual questions or issues. I've indicated where I felt there might be agreement
or disagreement with each point and possible action implications

---

**Is the level of resource too low to support the range of activities we want to
undertake and the way we have been tackling them in the past**

Yes Even if this was arguable before, the reduced level of funding in real terms for the future
makes it essential to tackle this. We are definitely in a work smarter not harder situation
This will be discussed at the next emergency steering group meeting – my own view is that

   i)   We should try a clean slate dissemination and networking initiative aimed at a new
           geographical patch and should not develop any new Devon contacts or projects. It
           could be extremely valuable to approach this as an entirely new programme : if
           Folk.us were starting again now in the new 'patch' how would we go about it based
           on our experience to date? The new patch would need to be geographically feasible
           - Plymouth? Plymouth and a nearby chunk of Cornwall?
   ii)   Continuing support for Devon contacts should be slanted towards encouraging them
           to reflect on and pass on their learning, questions and experience to colleagues and
           opposite numbers in the new patch – on the principle that the best way to learn is to
           teach.
   iii)   The learning experiences, publications etc from the new patch should be fed back
           into the Devon and national networks – eg more ongoing use of web etc

---

 Is there a 'lack of clarity' regarding the role of Folk.us?

**a) Are the documents and publications from Folk.us unclear or contradictory
about what Folk.us is trying to do?**
Probably Not Given the emphasis on document analysis in the evaluation, you would imagine
that the most recent or most salient papers may not be sufficiently clear – but on the other hand
some of the text in the evaluation report itself seemed to spell this out perfectly well eg the last 4
bullet points on p2 seems like a statement of aims and the 3 bullet points at the top of the next
page a good shorthand summary of the 'role' though described here in terms of 'core activities'
Similarly box 4 on p33 also seemed clear. The e panel of service users generally appeared to
understand what Folk.us was all about from reading the material

**b) Is there a lack of understanding about what Folk.us is doing in practice among
those of us directly involved?**
Yes. I think we accept there is not enough full up to date understanding of all the things Folk.us
has been working on or the outcomes of the various projects and initiatives we contribute to or
manage.

**c) Are there disagreements among us about the about the what the role of Folk.us
should be?**
Yes and No? Reasonable to assume there are some disagreements among us about the
priorities and directions Folk.us should follow. All of the options in box 5 on p43 seemed to me to
have their attractions. The sad thing about this evaluation exercise is that it has not brought these
to light very clearly or presented us with some alternative options to consider. I had more

sympathy with the view expressed in one of the quotations that pressure on resources tends to lead to a reactive approach rather than grand consensual strategy
ACTION. The discussion of strategy in response to renewed funding and the new steering group would be a good opportunity to nail this down, but with more limited funding I would imagine that the 'opportunistic' character of Folk.us will continue as well

d) Is there disagreement about models of user involvement in research? Or more specifically – has there been an important and confusing shift from partnership working to an emphasis on user control?

No This certainly does not fit with my experience of Folk.us. As p65 says *"Folk.us appears to have adopted a pragmatic approach to establishing user involvement in research…"* And I think the suggestion that this is 'middle ground' increasingly challenged by polarisation of user-led and non user-led organisations is simply not true. Personally I just wish there were such strong passions around about this, when in fact the practical issues of getting decent research and involvement in that to happen remains the real day to day priority. So I don't think 'it is important whether Folk.us clarifies whether or not it seeks user control' p62
I didn't find the 'typology' of models of user involvement on p41 very convincing or clear. You could make just as good a case for a 'multi-cultural' approach where the real skill lies in drawing the best from neighbouring research traditions and encouraging intermarriage.
ACTION? If the evaluation tells us that this sort of misperception about Folk.us is out there it might be important to explicitly address it as part of any new publicity or networking

e) Are there misunderstandings or confusions about the role of Folk.us among the wider range of contacts and networks we try to reach? Are academic researchers particularly unclear?

Yes Though the issue is less about 'clarity' than communication and dissemination. There are local researchers some of whom are interested in hearing about Folk.us but who we have not reached as yet in terms of marketing or effective contact making.
ACTION? There are one or two particular misconceptions it may be useful to address – eg when/if Folk.us is a channel for identifying service users who might join in specific research projects and the fact that Folk.us is not a generic user involvement support organisation. Some of the reason for any confusion about involvement in research vs more general involvement in services stems from the fact that there are still some gaps in these more generic user support networks and mechanisms
ACTION? Clearer niche marketing of Folk.us to particular audiences – better links to the wider user support channels and 'involvement in modules/pieces of that jigsaw' so that research is seen as one of the potential fields for involvement alongside service evaluation & planning, staff recruitment & training or whatever
The e-panel suggestions of priorities and training p54 seem useful
  -   identifying and demonstrating tangible benefits & impact
  -   publicising contributions of Folk.us
  -   ensuring service user and carer contribution is valued

 Do we give too much attention to primary care research and not enough to other fields?

---

a) Should we devote more attention to carers?
Not sure/it depends? My first reaction to this was mixed. I felt there had been some strong family member involvement (Kate from N Devon for example) I generally do feel that work with families can be powerful because some carer/family organisations have been particularly successful in challenging and changing things in the past. On the other hand in terms of research there has certainly been no end of research on the experience and views of carers which is often duplicated without being acted on. It is clearly a special interest of the team who carried out the

evaluation. I ended up looking back to the project which came before Folk.us in which one of the then unusual features was bringing together a group of people who included both direct service users and family members. We had uncertainties about it ourselves but it quickly showed that the users and family members had a huge amount of common experience in terms of dealing with the shortcomings and excitements of health services. So promoting models that bring both perspectives together seems to me to be better than specific projects dealing purely with the carer issues.

ACTION? Perhaps an active stance of demonstrating that both carers and direct service users can work productively together on research projects. This might be a positive way to counter the divide and rule that sometimes comes out of professional circles

The phrase that applies here and in the next two sections is 'At the very least it would be good to
        be aware of the local research initiatives and relevant contacts'

b) Should we devote more attention to Social Care research?
Yes perhaps if we can. We have been hampered by a period of stagnation in local social services research but now that Adrian is beginning to kick start things again from County Hall perhaps there will be more opportunities for cross pollination. I think our consensus would be that the evaluation report did not give enough credit for the heroic and sustained efforts that were actually made by Folk.us to work across into the social care side and the huge barriers that we encountered

c) Should we give more specific attention to secondary care?
No There were a few acknowledged examples anyway and I felt that some of the quotes and comments about how important secondary care was in comparison to primary and community settings seemed rather over the top and wrong in the report

Should we give more specific attention to contact and work with the voluntary sector & with 'user involvement teams'

Yes The voluntary sector is so much part of the culture in the SW that this seems essential and I think we do need a more clear cut communication strategy to link up with the general 'Patient and Public Involvement' strategies of individual trusts and agencies. – making involvement in research one of the specific examples and areas where the general strategy can be implemented.

Do we need to do more to acknowledge the complexity of achieving user involvement and address the challenges of different research culltures

No rubbish

Do we need a more specific strategy for Folk.us

Yes This was contained in the last grant application which had sensible and relevant steps and stages over time with a coordinated sense of direction. Now we need a strategy to cut this first proposed strategy down to what can actually be achieved.

Do we need a different working relationship with INVOLVE?

No I don't personally accept the 'keep it entirely local' message. Act local think global seems an altogether more sensible approach to me

Section 2 Lessons for Evaluation

- Make sure the level of resource available for the evaluation is proportionate to the size of the task (or focus the exercise on important issues which can be practically addressed within the time and resources)

There is some feeling that the range of questions and issues that we hoped this exercise would address was not entirely realistic and that as a result we have over-generalised information on several issues and not enough in depth concrete conclusions and recommendations to guide specific decision.
You need a realistic decision about the balance between information analysis focused on the work of the project itself vs information gathering about the wider context within which the project operates. Some of the Folk.us stakeholders ended feeling that this wider organisational context in Devon had not been adequately understood

- Whose evaluation is this anyway & whose questions and standards apply?

There is always potential for confusion among the three usual stakeholders: those carrying out the information gathering and analysis, those whose project is the subject of evaluation and those responsible for funding the project and/or funding the evaluation.
In this evaluation the overall experience - though not every one's experience at every individual action point - was that the evaluation was 'done to' the project, rather than the other extreme where project stakeholders might experience the evaluation team as facilitating, clarifying and informing an evaluation by the project stakeholders of their own past work. (client centred evaluation?). This is particularly relevant given the Folk.us emphasis on recipient/user involvement in research.
In this exercise I gather there is a sense from the project stakeholders side that 'our' standards and criteria were not picked up and used enough for the evaluation even when they were actively offered and that other criteria generated by the evaluation team were applied.

- Anticipate disagreement – and have a strategy for working with disagreement

Ideally you could approach this in more of a drip feed/bite size chunk approach rather than the big one off final report so issues could be debated along the way. Specific ideas and structures to help the recipients identify disagreement and negative views about the process/report without defensiveness eg more detailed 'evidence' More explicit inclusion of discussion of the way in which the report is received and acted on as part of the 'final report' itself

- Aim for a product/report that is a practical tool for discussion & action by the stakeholders.

I did not find the layout and logic of this particular evaluation report at all helpful in that respect. The structuring followed the evaluation process rather than following the processes and stages that those of us trying to make use of this report have to go through to use it and build action upon it. What might a better format look like?
  - Perhaps a set of discussion/stocktake questions for the steering group?
  - A set of discussion/stocktake questions for coordinator and grantholder
  - One or two alternative futures scenarios to consider to prompt easy discussion on how might Folk.us & Involve respond to these
  - A few provisional action strategy timetables to get us moving?
For me this is the difference between research and evaluation – rather like distinction between science and technology.   T