

Action Planning Toolkit

The logic and methodology for making community action plans to change things for the better

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|---|----|
| Action Planning Toolkit | 1 |
| 1 Action Planning and Recording Systems | 2 |
| 1.1 Importance of planning | 2 |
| 1.2 Making an apple pie | 2 |
| 1.3 Action plan for health and well being | 3 |
| 2 LEAP for Wales planning logic | 4 |
| Appendix 1 A community action planning diary | 7 |
| Appendix 2 A Community action plan in a digital diary | 12 |
| Appendix 3 General logic diagram for an action plan | 14 |

“At its simplest the Community Action Plan identifies a goal and a list of actions which will enable the community to reach that goal. The Plan should have two main audiences, the local community itself and the agencies and organisations whose help and support will be needed to deliver the actions set out in the Plan. The Plan should be written with these audiences in mind.

The purpose of a Community Action Plan is to share the vision of a community with a range of stakeholders. In particular the plan will need to show the aspirations and solutions identified by the local community on the basis of evidence and their local knowledge. It should be ... developed and owned by a variety of people with a stake in the community. It should set out realistic actions and targets against which local people can review progress and decide whether things have improved. The Community Action Plan is not a one-off, and should be reviewed and developed over time.” Cardiff City Council, 2012



1 *Action Planning and Recording Systems*

1.1 Importance of planning

Planning is the intellectual or 'thinking' part of management. It is about recognising the goals that are important and what must be done to reach them. Planning is about sharing this process with others so that agreement can be reached; it is about communication; it is about learning. With few exceptions, planning is recognised as an essential component of all areas of human endeavour: If planning for action is not done and records of what was achieved are not kept, there will be constant changes of intention, methods, etc., because every person who takes over will want to try something different and there will be nothing to stop them. Therefore, the main purpose of action plans is to ensure that there is continuity and stability of effort. Without an effective plan communities are vulnerable to inconsistent management, which can result in a waste of resources and the worsening of problems that prompted management in the first place. Management plans not only bring many benefits to what is being managed but also to the organisations or individuals charged with their management. Importantly, a management plan is not 'set in stone'. It is always active and subject to changes resulting from monitoring its effectiveness.

Advantages of the adoption of action planning and recording by a community are:

- information sharing
- active participation
- empowerment
- continuity of effort
- building a community profile and keeping it up to date.

1.2 Making an apple pie

To help new volunteers to get involved with the logic of action planning, the analogy of making an apple pie may be used.

(i) The Objective

- The objective in making the pie is to provide a pleasurable eating experience. This is the desired outcome, which is **monitored** by its taste.

(ii) Barriers to action

- To make an apple pie needs certain inputs which essentially remove barriers to making the pie. These are:
 - A skilled and motivated cook,
 - A recipe.

The quality of each of these will have a significant impact on the quality of the final product.

(iii) The Project

Making the pie is a project carried out to meet the objective. It has to be scheduled in terms of gathering the ingredients and accessing an oven (**the resources**), then following a recipe (**the methodology**) by preparing the apples, mixing the pastry, setting the oven and baking the pie for the required time at the required temperature.

Again the quality of the process will affect the result.

(iv) The Output

The output is the pie itself.

(vii) The Outcome

The outcome is the result of the pie i.e. the meal. Eating the pie is in fact the objective of managing its production, and the properties of the pie, i.e. its state or condition, determine the quality of the eating experience. A performance indicator would be whether or not the pie is eaten; another would entail diners evaluating the experience of eating it on a 1 to 5 scale. In turn, measuring the performance of making a pie would be likely to lead to a feedback review as to whether the process was adequate to achieve the desired outcome. This is the process of monitoring. The project schedule may well change as a result of this feedback about the outcome from monitoring.

Thinking about making apple pies helps in understanding the ideas behind planning, recording and monitoring. In particular, the analogy helps clarify what outcomes a community was hoping to achieve and the way in which they would monitor their achievements.

1.3 Action plan for health and well being

(from Hightown Communities First Action Plan, Wrexham)

(i) Objective

To improve community health and well being with respect to depression, smoking, obesity, sense of isolation and local health services.

(ii) Barriers to action and projects to remove them

Barrier: Lack of health information in the community

Project 1: Health information session

Project 2: Leafleting

Project 3: Annual health check

Project 4: Health Day

Barrier: Health improvement activities

Project 5: Smoking Group

Project 6: Weight Training

Project 7: Trim Trail

Project 8: Local Health Services

Barrier: Access to healthy foods

Project 9: Diet Clubs

Project 10: Local Food CoOp

Barrier: Social inclusivity
Project 11: Welcome Sessions
Project 12: Welcome Pack

(iii) Outcomes

Population level performance indicators that measure levels of depression, smoking, obesity, sense of isolation and local health services.

2 LEAP for Wales planning logic

LEAP stands for ‘learning, evaluation and planning’, which is the title of a community framework document designed by the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) to support a partnership approach to achieving change and improvement in the quality of community life (Fig 1).

‘LEAP for Wales’ is a development of the Scottish initiative as a community planning procedure, which incorporates the feedback logic of the conservation management system (CMS) software, used by UK Environment Agencies and Wildlife Trusts to produce conservation management plans for nature sites. Making a community LEAP for Wales is based on answering the following seven questions (Fig 2).

- 1 What are the issues that bug the community?
(Identifying the need)
- 2 What does the community want to see happen?
(Setting the vision and the specific objectives)
- 3 What are the barriers preventing the community getting where it wants to be?
(Determining the limiting factors of the objectives)
- 4 How will the team know when they have overcome the barriers?
(Setting measurable outcomes as performance indicators)
- 5 What work has to be done?
(Scheduling resources and actions)
- 6 What progress is being made?
(Monitoring by measurement of outcome with performance indicators)
- 7 Who needs to know the outcomes?
(Feedback reports to the team, partners and funders)

The SCDC says their LEAP framework should be useful to community organisations; local authorities; voluntary sector organisations; and policy makers, particularly those involved in community well being programmes, community planning partnerships, community regeneration programmes, and social inclusion and social justice initiatives.

It encourages critical questioning to ensure that all those with a stake in taking action for environmental improvements are working to a shared agenda.

The LEAP framework emphasises self-evaluation, encouraging participants to take joint responsibility for planning and evaluation throughout a project or programme.

It is a learning-based planning and evaluation framework to support good practice in community working to improve the quality of community life.

It helps identify the difference a community hopes to make, to plan more effectively, work in partnership with each other and other members of the community, and learn the lessons from the experience.

The LEAP framework can be used in different contexts, to support the work of different sectors at project, programme and policy level. It is particularly useful as a tool to support partnership working and the production of community action plans.

Fig 1 The original LEAP logic diagram (2005)

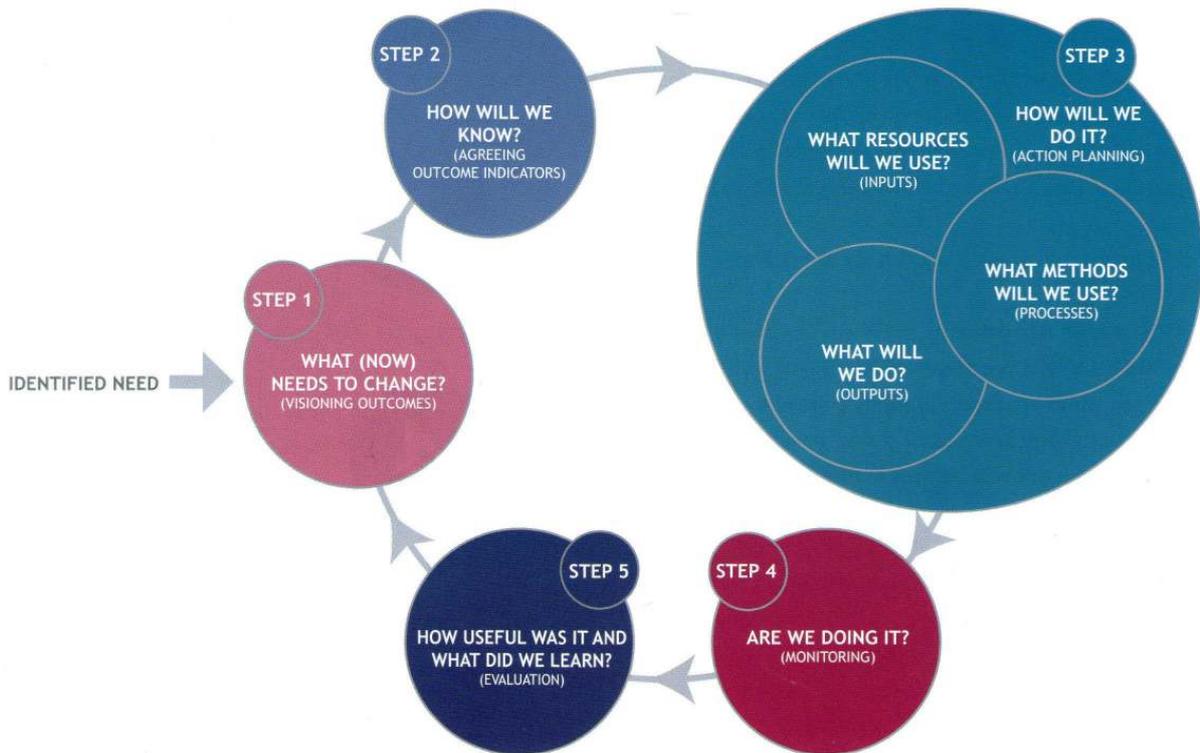
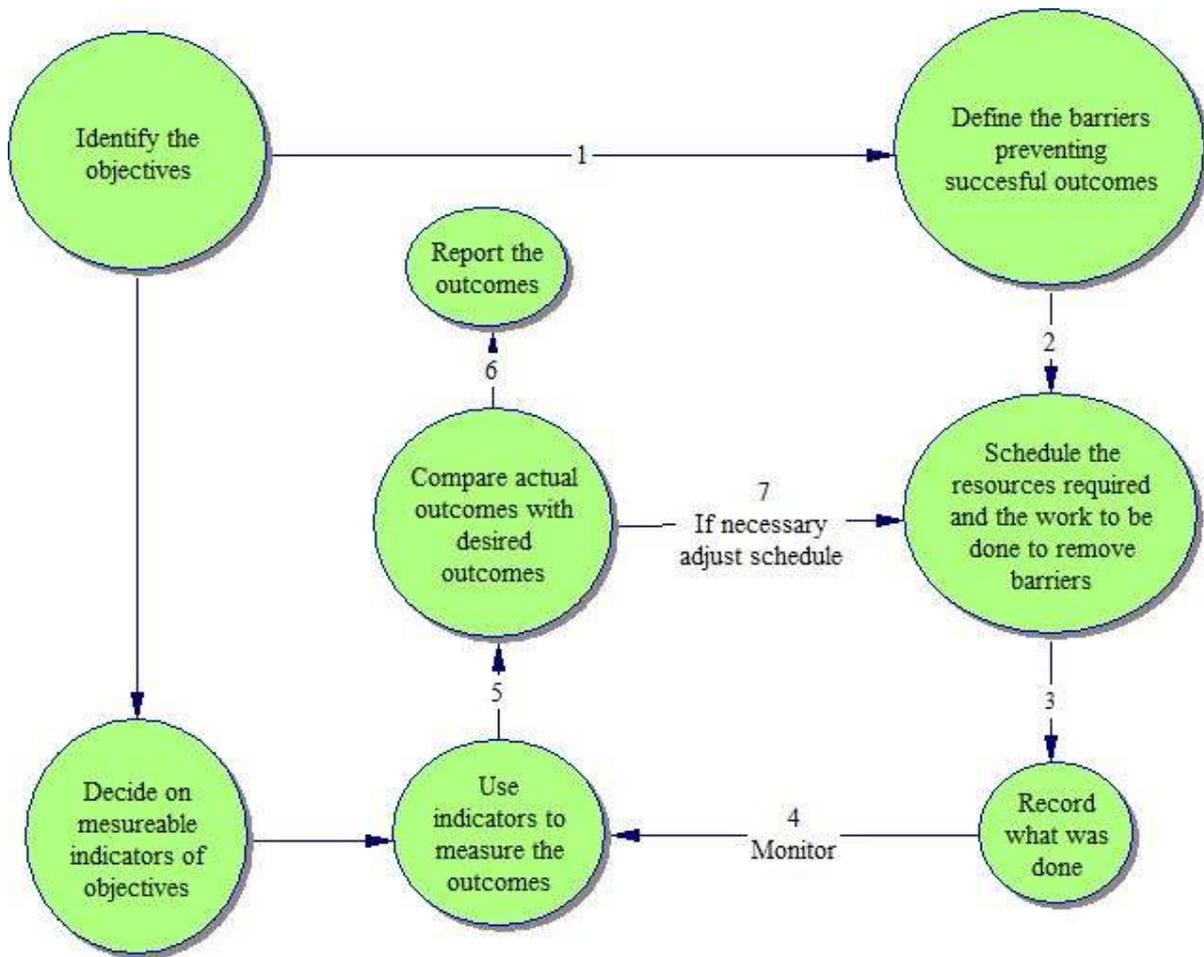


Fig 2 The LEAP for Wales logic diagram



Appendix 1 A community action planning diary

(i) What is an action planning and recording system?

A community action planning/recording system is essentially a diary in which work (a project) is scheduled to overcome a barrier to meeting an objective. When the start date arrives, the work is either done or skipped. In the first case the results of the work are entered into a diary for that date. In the second case the reasons why the work was not done are recorded for that date.

After the work is done a monitoring project is scheduled. This is in order to record the outcome of the work (with a performance indicator) in relation to the objective.

A paper diary or a collection of 'To Do' lists can be used to record a simple sequence of actions and monitoring. However, a digital diary is essential for a situation where several barriers to action are being managed. This is because addressing each barrier really requires a separate diary and each day may have to support more than one entry. Furthermore, a flexible hypertext function is required so that links can be made from each task to its monitoring project and from projects to photographs, maps and support documents, such as job descriptions.

(ii) Example of an electronic diary

CSoftLab Advanced Diary fulfils the aforementioned requirements. It supports multiple diaries and multiple entries for a single day. This makes it easy to operate an action plan with several objectives; e.g. for a village biodiversity plan with several greens, woods and ponds or for a community action plan addressing several social outcomes, such as crime reduction or improving bus services.

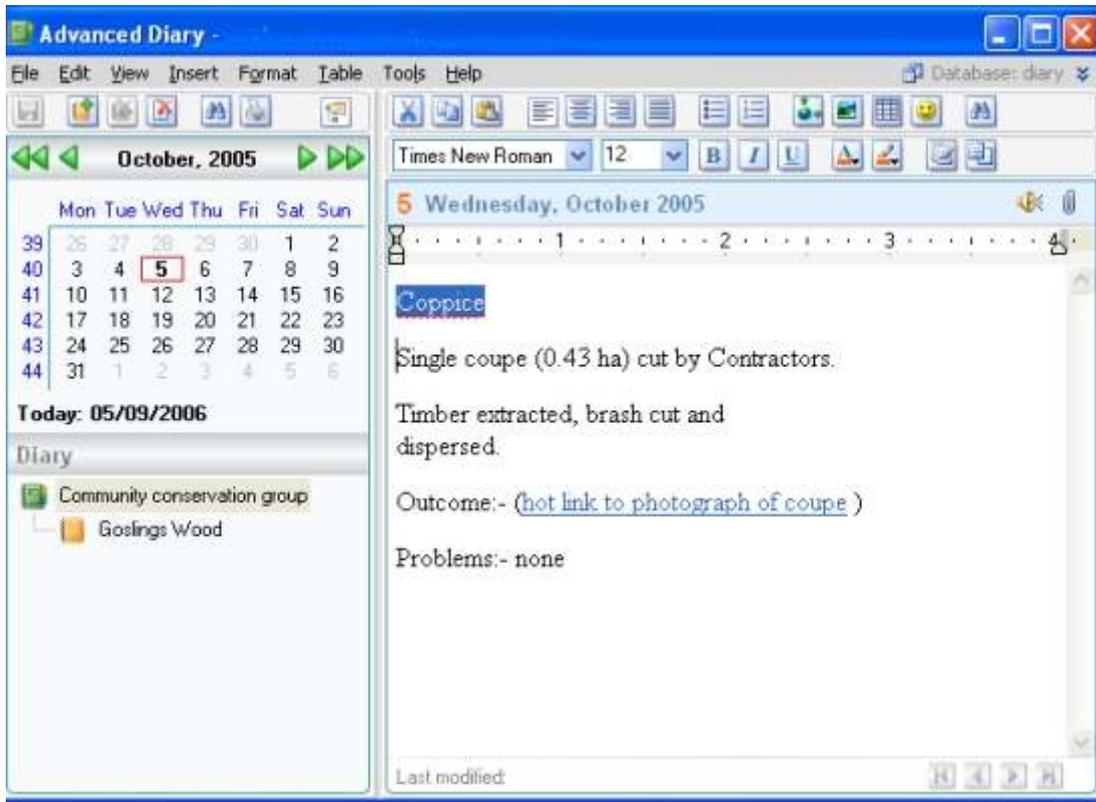
The Advanced Diary is really a simple relational database which is clearly structured and easily searched. Interlinking one entry to another is possible as well. Individual entries or all entries can be extracted for communication as html files or archived in an RTF format. There is a comprehensive built-in Help System.

The following picture (Fig 1) is a screen shot of a date page in which a task for a community woodland was scheduled and monitored on a particular day. This is just about the simplest entry that could be made for a community action plan. It records when a wood was coppiced (5th October, 2005) and what outcome of this job was in the form of a linked photograph.

The underlying concept of the diary is that each entry is actually a multipurpose document, with many pages, which supports rich text formatting, backgrounds, images, tables, hyperlinks to the Internet or local files, as well as to any records in the database. With no mandatory fields to fill in there are no restrictions on how it should be used. However, if top down standardisation of entries is necessary, templates can be made and specified for importing into new diaries.

Data can be exported as **RTF** or **HTML** files. A built-in Print option allows editing of reports before printing, and saving reports as RTF or HTML files. Moreover the diary supports voice recording. One of the most valuable aspects of Advanced Diary for community use is its ability to share data with others on a network.

Fig 1 Screen shot of calendar format of an electronic diary



(iii) Adding pages

There are two ways to add pages.

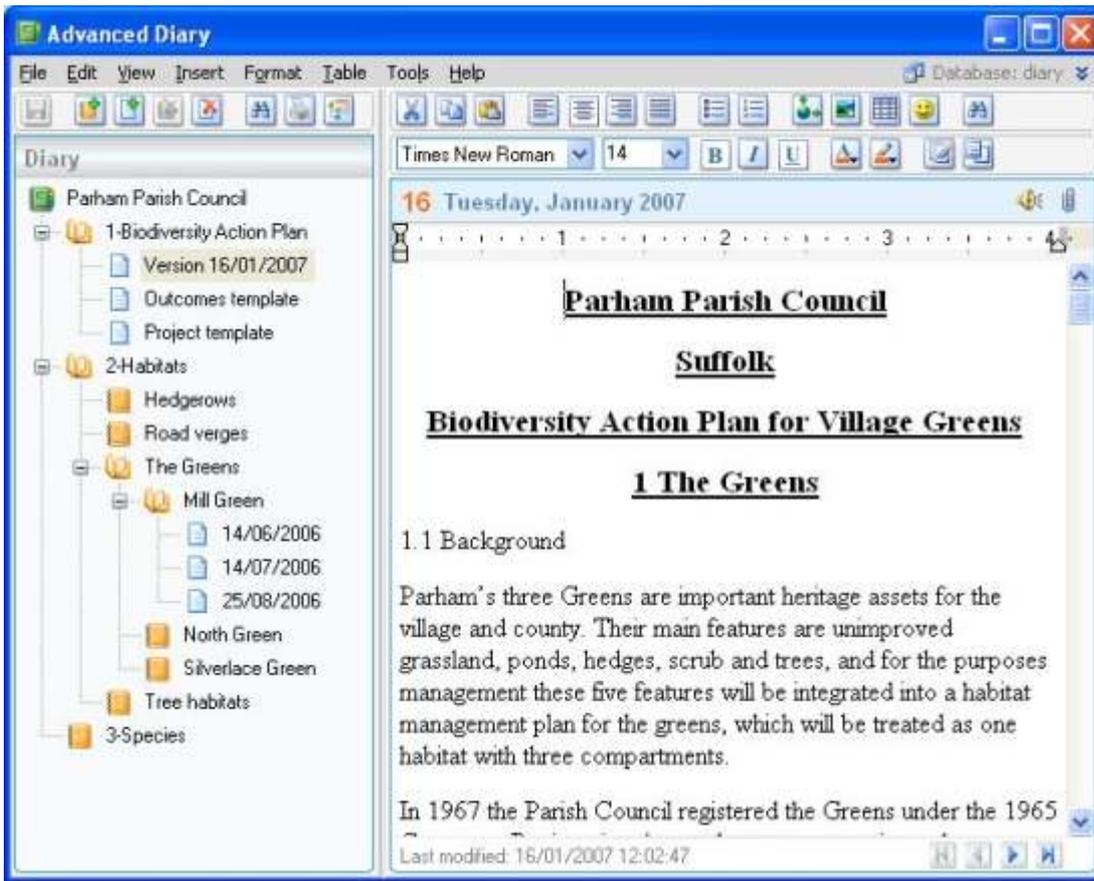
The **calendar mode**, as the name implies, shows a calendar (Fig 1). A page is added by simply clicking on a date, in this case Wed 5th October 2005, in the calendar. A new page, in the right hand pane, is automatically linked to that date and a user can access it by simply clicking on that date in the calendar or on its icon in the left hand pane. The page icon is initially labelled with the date it was created but this can be replaced by a name.

The **document mode** (Fig 2) displays an 'entry tree'. In this mode a folder can be added and named. Diary pages for particular dates can be added to each folder. These pages are actually the dairy entries. Entries can be added to a folder by highlighting a folder, and choosing a date/name for the new entry.

From the file tree a desired entry page can be opened immediately without reference to the date in the calendar when it was produced.

Either mode can be accessed from the 'View' menu. Since both modes are useful in their own unique ways, it's smart to switch between them, depending on the situation.

Fig 2 Screen shot of a page of in the document mode of a village biodiversity action plan



(iv) A village community action plan

The above figure (Fig 2), is a screen shot of a village biodiversity action plan. All its elements are revealed as a file tree. The latest action plan was added to a diary page on 16th January 2007 and is open in the right hand window. The habitats to be managed are hedgerows, road verges, village greens and trees. The Mill Green folder has been 'opened' to reveal three actions that were scheduled for three separate days in 2006.

(v) Additional operations

There is no limit to the information that can be added or attached to each entry page. If there was a bird count scheduled for a biodiversity action plan, there could be a hot link from this page to an Excel spreadsheet containing the results. If there was an accident, the report on it could be attached to the day it happened. You can also go to any attached information from a list of all attachments. The diary can therefore be regarded the community's multimedia archive of its plans, scheduled actions and outcomes, day-by-day, year on year, for communication or audit.

Because of its short learning curve, and intuitive structure and flexibility of use, volunteer managers can customise their entries according to their preferred ways of working. It can cope with a simple 'this is what I did' approach, or a more complex scheduling/recording/reporting system which follows the planning/recording logic of a relational database. Thus, the diary is adaptable to the manager and will quickly become the day-to-day starting point to reach the jobs to be done, the objectives and the barriers to action and the list of projects tied to them, with the dated outcomes of work that has already been done.

You can learn about Advanced Diary at <http://www.csoftlab.com/> A license can be purchased for about £30.

22 September 2012

(vi) A Project Template

The following text may be used as a template and pasted as a diary entry to start a particular project.

When will the project be carried out?

This is a calendar item that schedules the work to begin on a particular date, and says how long it will take.

What work has to be done?

This is a summary description of the work that has to be done to meet a particular objective by controlling one of its barriers to action.

How are you going to do it?

This is a description of the work that has to be done in terms of procedures and methods.

Who will do it?

This is a list of the people who will carry out the work.

What will they need?

This is a list of any special tools or equipment required and schedules when they will be needed.

Where will it be done?

This describes where the work has to be done and is linked to an annotated map of the site.

How much will it cost?

This is the budget allowance for the work.

When will the work be carried out?

This is scheduled as a start and entry point from the calendar

(vii) An Outcomes Template

The following text may be used as a diary template for an outcomes (monitoring) project. The completed document can be used as a report.

When was it actually done?

Sometimes work schedules tend to slip so it is important to record the date when the work was actually carried out.

What did it actually cost?

Did the project fall within budget?

When was it actually done?

Sometimes work schedules tend to slip so it is important to record when the work was actually carried out.

Who actually did the work?

Sometimes there has to be a change in manpower from the time the work was originally scheduled, so it is important to record those who actually carried out the work.

Any problems?

It is important to record any unforeseen problems associated with the work, particularly those that prevented its successful completion.

22 September 2012

What was the outcome of the work?

It is important to monitor how close the work has come to meeting the objective. This is found by measuring an attribute of the objective at a suitable interval after the work was carried out for comparison with the situation at the time the work was done. This will provide a performance indicator of management.

Who needs reports?

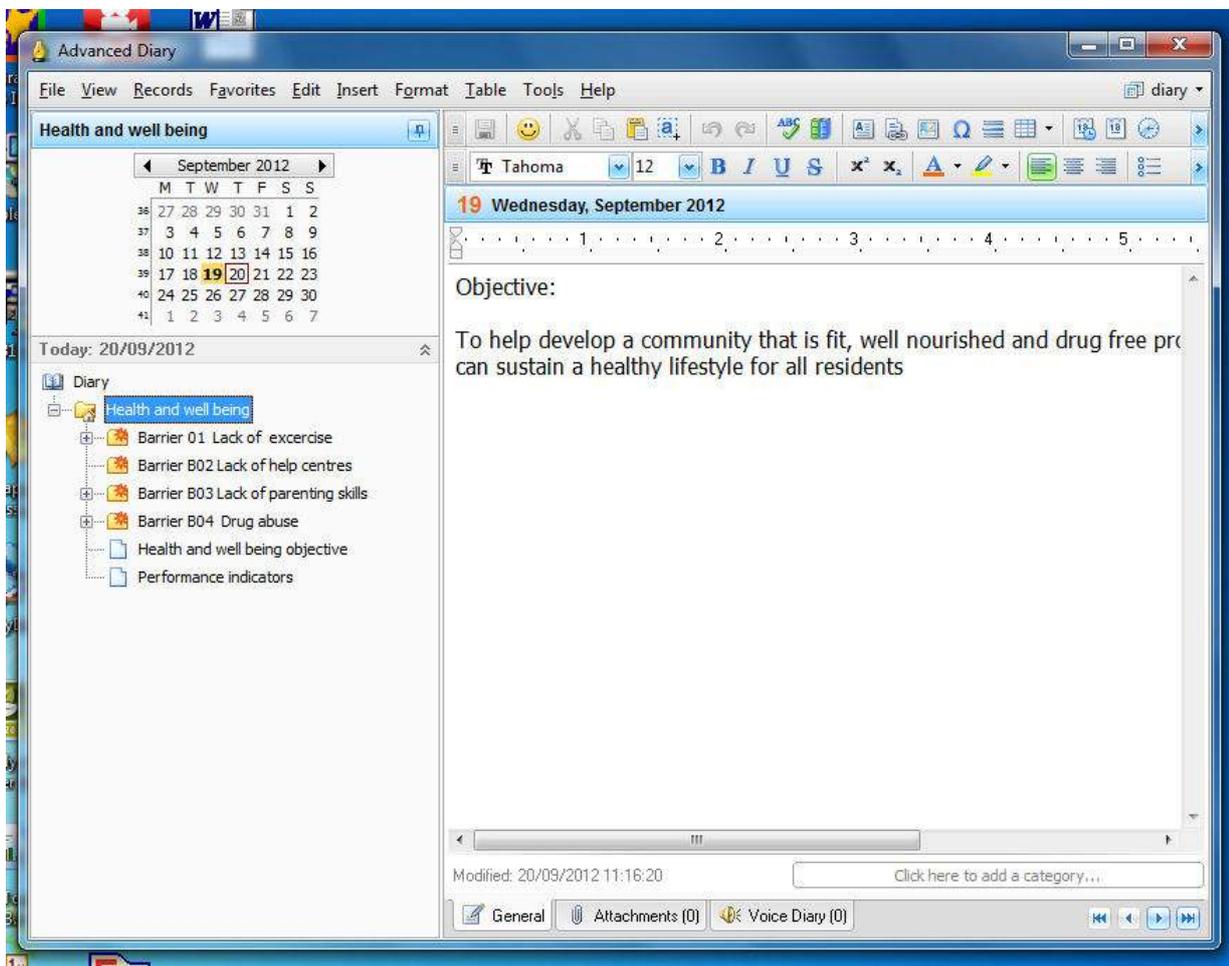
Reports on the action plan and its outcome should be sent to all those people and organisations, such as sponsors, strategic planners and members of the community.

Appendix 2 A Community action plan in a digital diary

The following two screen shots have been taken from a demonstration diary of a community action plan for health promotion. The folder ‘Health and well being’ in the left hand tree is highlighted to reveal the plan’s objective on the linked entry page in the right hand pane. This top level folder holds the objective and also the performance indicators used to measure outcomes of projects (the two page entry icons at the bottom of the tree).

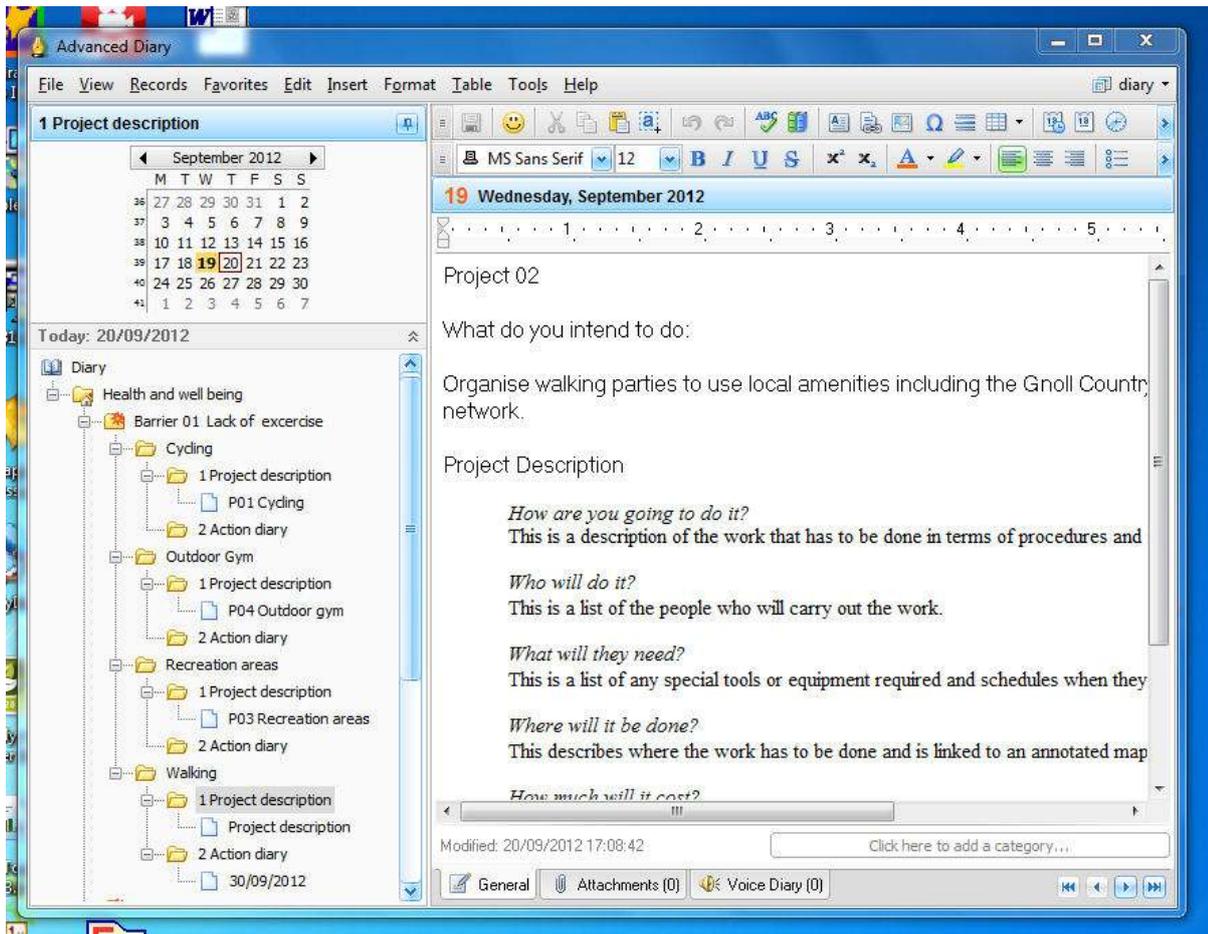
Subfolders hold information about the projects that address four barriers to attaining the ‘Health and well being’ objective. These are **lack of exercise**, **lack of help centres**, **lack of parenting skills** and **drug abuse**.

Fig 1 Action plan: objective and barriers to action



The next screen shot (fig2) shows these subfolders opened up to access information about projects designed to overcome one of the barriers, namely ‘lack of exercise’. These projects deal with four actions to overcome the lack of exercise, namely the **promotion of cycling**, the **creation of an outdoor gym**, the **creation of recreation areas** and the **organisation of walking parties**. Information about the state of progress of these actions is contained in two folders labelled Project Description and Action Diary. The Project Description says how the work will be carried out. The Action Diary schedules what is to be done, and what was done, on certain days.

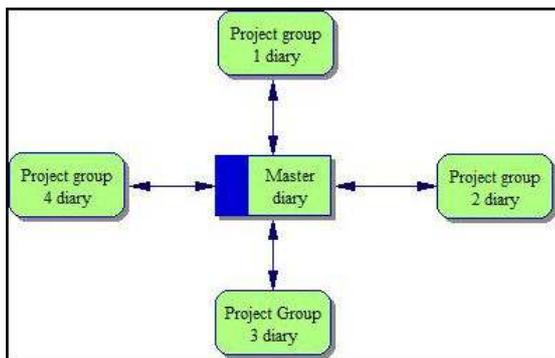
Fig 2 Action plan: objective and barriers to action



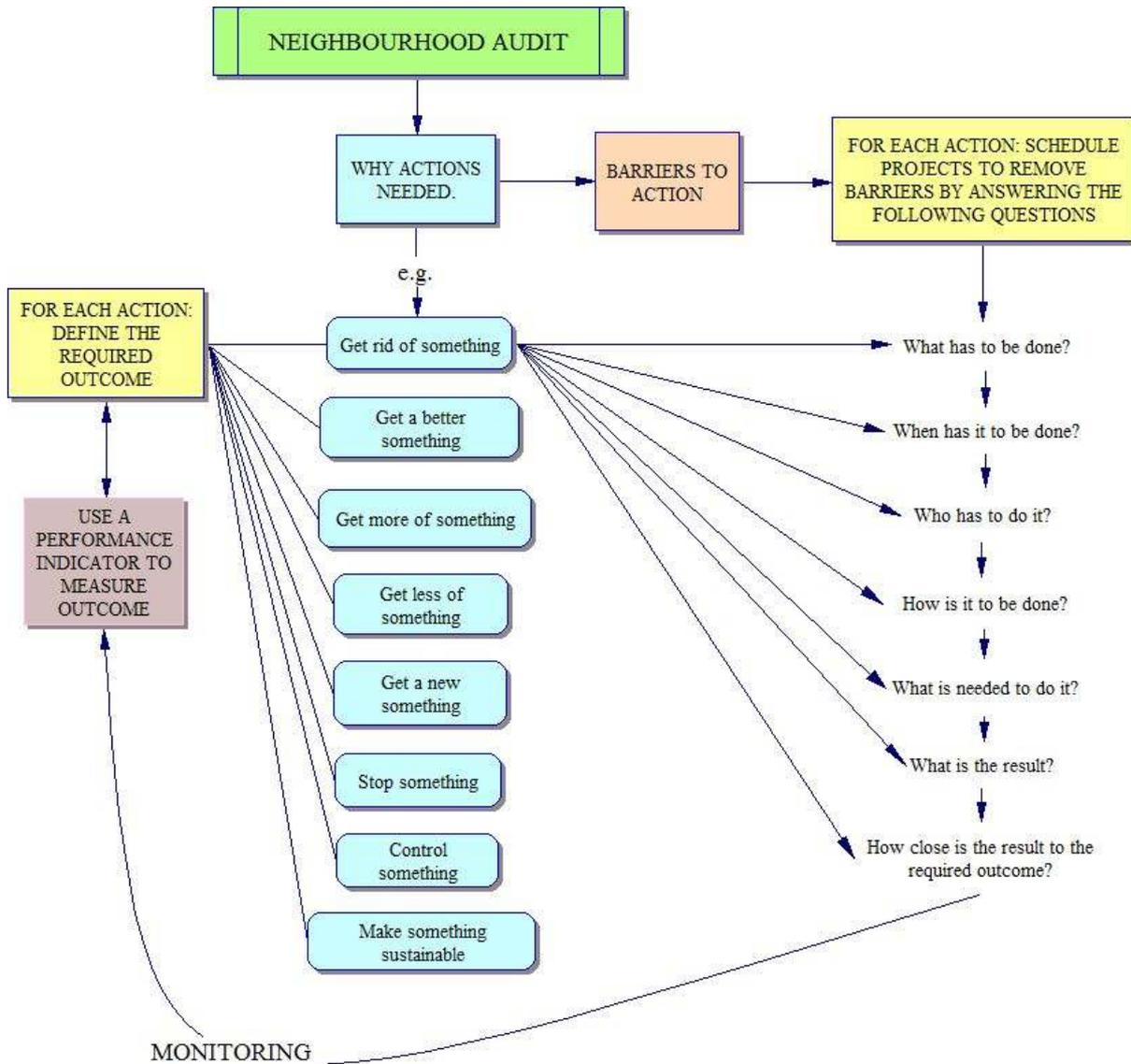
The ‘walking’ folder is highlighted and the Project Description folder ‘opened’ to show part of the description template in the left hand pane. There is one entry in the ‘walking’ Action Diary for the 30th September 2012. This is the date and agenda of the first meeting of the ‘walking group’.

In the above example, the entire action plan is contained in one diary. Where several groups of volunteers are responsible for the removal of specific barriers to reaching the overall objective, each project area could be the subject of a dedicated diary. In fact, any folder in the above diary could be exported to make a new diary. Conversely, any folder could be imported into any diary. Thus, an action plan diary network could be set up with project groups regularly sending in their diary databases to update a central master diary (Fig 3).

Fig 3 Action plan diary network



Appendix 3 General logic diagram for an action plan



A logic model is a story or picture of how an effort or initiative is supposed to work. The process of developing the model brings together stakeholders to articulate the goals of the work programme and the values that support it, and to identify strategies with desired outcomes of the initiative. These strategic plans are turned into action plans using an operational planning and recording system. As a means to communicate a programme visually, within a coalition or work group and to present it to external audiences, a logic model provides a common language and reference point for everyone involved in the initiative. It is essential for collaborative community planning, implementing a plan and evaluating the initiative. It helps stakeholders in the neighbourhood to agree on short-term as well as long-term objectives during the planning process, decide on activities and actors to remove barriers to action, and establish clear criteria for evaluation during the effort. When the initiative ends, it provides a framework for assessing overall effectiveness of the initiative, as well as the activities, resources, and external factors that played a role in the outcome.