

# Creating Consensus: Life Study Project

## The Need

Life Study is the new UK Birth Cohort Study, which will track the development of up to 100,000 babies. It will form a rich and unique resource for research to improve the lives, health and well-being of children, both now and in the future. The first draft of the Life Study Scientific Protocol was produced in July 2012 and sets out the proposed data and sample collection for the study for those participants who will be recruited during pregnancy.

The Centre for Facilitation was called in to oversee the prioritisation process at a series of consultation meetings and to steer the discussion towards a focus on the aims of Life Study. The Life Study team recognised that the initial Draft Protocol was lengthy and would place too great a burden on participants so an extensive prioritisation and cull of question areas had to take place with very limited time to complete the task.

The participants in the first part of the consultation were academics from a broad range of disciplines spanning both the social and biomedical sciences. Concern was that in prioritising instruments for the Draft Protocol, conflicts would arise between these broad disciplines. It was vitally important that a consensus was reached and a shared sense of ownership of the Draft Protocol was created.

## The Events

The Centre for Facilitation designed the processes, the agendas and then facilitated a series of meetings, each with 20-170 participants. At the heart of each meeting was the protocol and consultation.

1. To seek agreement between representative parties about the recommendations which would go forward to the Steering Committee for sign-off
2. To gain agreement from the Steering Committee that the recommendations could go to the academic community for consultation
3. To include 170 academics and policy makers with an interest in this study to gain their valuable insights
4. To involve potential participants ( mothers and fathers) and secure their perspectives
5. To demonstrate to the Governing Board that all their criteria had been met to gain their seal of approval.



## The Results

With the guidance of the Centre for Facilitation, tough decisions were made without significant conflict occurring and a very large volume of work was completed in the short time frame available. The facilitators created an environment that was creative and positive, encouraging each committee member to think about the larger picture and to put aside any individual interests. In discussions, it was particularly impressive that committee members were prepared to critique subject areas within their own disciplines and to support the inclusion of other disciplines at the expense of their own. Moreover, the structuring of the environment meant that constant reminders of the focus on child outcomes were present for committee members and time was not wasted on irrelevant discussion.

The Centre for Facilitation were very well-prepared for each meeting that they facilitated, having carefully devised a detailed plan for each day that included using a variety of methods to maintain engagement and enthusiasm. The facilitators' ability to change direction, be flexible and adapt to suit the changing needs of the meetings was also invaluable. An important outcome for the study was the achievement of a final protocol through consensus rather than any type of voting process.

The Draft Protocol was well received at the public consultation and was endorsed by the Governing Board. The favourable reception of the development process and final Protocol was strongly influenced by the clear sense of ownership and consensus demonstrated by the SSC and their championing of the work done by the Life Study team and members of the Scientific Working Group.

## Comments

*"The facilitators were excellent, the focus on consensus also worked extremely well."*

*"Clear structure for the day I attended, a lot of advance preparation by the core team plus facilitators, excellent balance by facilitators between urging us to keep to time, and then when not spelling out options for what could be done in remaining time"*

*"Open & frank discussion around issues"*

*"I would think this is just about as good as it gets for this sort of process"*

## More Information on Life Study

<http://www.lifestudy.ac.uk>