THE ROCKY ROAD TO DEVELOPING A TOOLKIT

Developing a toolkit can be a challenge at the best of times but can be downright daunting when:

1. You have never developed a toolkit before;
2. The toolkit is for staff working in a different profession from your own; and
3. At the start of the project, the problems to be addressed and the solutions to be provided by the toolkit have yet to be established.

Not the easiest task then yet this was the one presented to the research team of the newly established MAX project back in January 2013.

A CLEAR DESTINATION AND A PROMISING START

MAX stands for **maximising the value of survey data in adult social care** and the scope of the project was straightforward: to develop tools – or, as it turned out, an entire toolkit – to support local authority (LA) staff to use more data from the Adult Social Care Survey (ASCS) and Personal Social Services Survey of Adult Carers in England (PSS SACE or Carers' Survey) to inform local policy and performance improvement.

While we may not have been toolkit experts, several members of the project team had been involved in the development of the surveys and we all possessed the skills needed to establish and implement an appropriate research strategy. So how difficult could it be?

Very, as it turned out.

AND THEN CAME THE ROCKS….

139 staff from 95 local authorities (LAs) took part in our initial fact finding activities and provided us with a wealth of information to work with.[i] A little digging down into this data, however, showed us that providing the support they wanted would not be such an easy task. It was clear that a one-size-fits-all approach would not be suitable for the design of this particular toolkit and that the individual elements contained within it would need to be resource-sufficient (i.e. not require additional resources to implement) and encourage engagement with the surveys.

In addition to these challenges, our initial sourcing of existing guidance showed us that there was already a plethora of potentially useful information freely available online; so what could our toolkit possibly contribute?
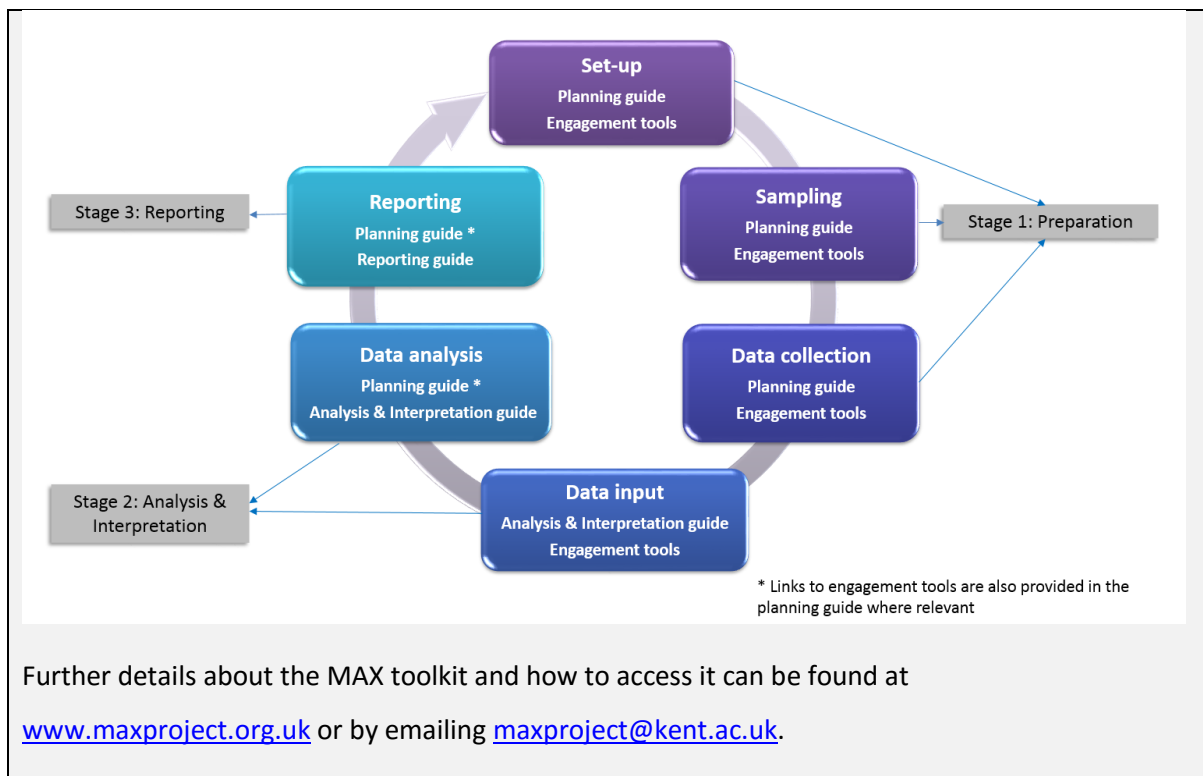
SO, WHAT WERE OUR SOLUTIONS?

The contribution of the MAX toolkit, on reflection, was quite obvious; LA staff are busy and a condensed overview of the possible strategies LAs may like to implement was required. Identifying potential solutions to the other challenges, however, was not so easy but, after a lot of brain-storming, experimentation and major revisions, I think we got there in the end. The final toolkit is much bigger than we initially planned for and, to maximise flexibility and accessibility, is provided in a variety of formats. The individual tools can also be selected and/or modified to fit local needs and are based on software (e.g. Excel, Word) that are used in most organisations.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The road to developing a toolkit has been a long one, fraught with many unexpected twists and pot holes, and the odd steep hill and roundabout thrown in for good measure. These challenges have stretched our capabilities and we learned a lot about the importance of reflection and the value of tough scrutiny. The feedback from our most recent consultations would indicate that the project output (the MAX toolkit) will hopefully provide LA authority staff with the support that they wanted.

So our efforts have not been in vain. And, you never know, perhaps now we in the MAX project team can say a thing or two about how to develop a toolkit?

About the MAX toolkit

Further details about the MAX toolkit and how to access it can be found at

www.maxproject.org.uk or by emailing maxproject@kent.ac.uk.

We are keen to hear from potential and current users of the MAX toolkit so please feel free to get in touch with us at maxproject@kent.ac.uk.

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[i] See the MAX working paper, available at www.maxproject.org.uk, for further details