

---

**Supporting Collaborative Action Research:  
Developing a more systematic approach**

---

Christopher Chapman and Mark Hadfield



## **What Works Scotland**

What Works Scotland aims to improve the way local areas in Scotland use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform.

What Works Scotland is working with Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) and stakeholder partners to achieve its aims, namely to:

- Identify and better understand what is working and not working in public service delivery in Scotland, and how we can translate knowledge from setting to setting
- Contribute to the development of a Scottish model of service delivery that brings about transformational change for people living in different places across Scotland

**This Working Paper is one of a series of papers that What Works Scotland is publishing to share evidence, learning and ideas about public service reform.**

**Professor Christopher Chapman** is Chair of Education and Public Policy and Practice, and Director of the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change, University of Glasgow.

**Professor Mark Hadfield** is Director of the Masters in Educational Practice Programme at Cardiff University

What Works Scotland (2014-2017) is a collaborative between The Scottish Government, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the University of Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow.

[www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk](http://www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk)

## **Contents**

|   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. Introduction & Context.....                                      | 1 |
| 2. Workshop Approach.....   | 1 |
| 3. Summary of What Works Scotland approach to CAR.....              | 4 |
| 4. Conclusion .....   | 4 |
| Appendix 1- Model of WWS Collaborative Action Research Process..... | 5 |

## 1. Introduction & Context

This document describes the approach followed by the What Works Scotland team in carrying out a 'mini-inquiry' exercise to develop the WWS Collaborative Action Research framework. A WWS team workshop considered the following specific questions to inform initial development of an outline CAR approach:-

- *What are we trying to achieve in terms of outcomes for all the key stakeholders?*
- *What are the main practical problems and professional tensions we face in our work?*
- *How can we discipline our approach to supporting and reporting on our work?*

These guidelines provide a tool which may assist anyone in the early stages of developing a Collaborative Action Research exercise to help establish an initial approach, consider the nature of the enquiry and identify appropriate processes to take work forward.

Appendix 1 provides an illustration of this Collaborative Action Research process model.

## 2. Workshop Approach

The What Works Scotland Team participated in an interactive workshop facilitated by Professor Mark Hadfield, from Cardiff University.

The intention of this exercise was not to come to a single agreed approach, but to build a shared understanding across the team of how to ensure similar levels of support can be provided to each of the four What Works Scotland Case Study Areas, and how best to facilitate WWS being able to 'read across' the different CAR projects.

The overarching question for the day was deliberately open:

### **'What is the work?'**

*By which we mean: 'What is our role, approach and aims in supporting CAR?'*

The following sections describe the structure of each workshop session and the questions considered.

## **Session 1**

Key question: *What are we trying to achieve in terms of outcomes for all the key stakeholders?*

Purpose of this session – to consider the overarching outcomes we are trying to achieve and for whom. This involved an exploration of the different agendas we see as being in play and the relative weight and importance we give to each of them. The sorts of issues this session explored were:

- What is the relative emphasis we giving to achieving change, generating knowledge, and producing professional insights?
- How do we balance the needs of participants with those of funders?
- Whose voices do we fear are being silenced or not listened to?

## **Session 2**

Key question: *What are the main practical problems and professional tensions we face in our work?*

This session explored the process issues we face in each of the three key phases within a CAR process (refer to diagram at Appendix 1):

- Preparing the ground
- Exploring the evidence
- Testing change

We used ‘artifacts’ related to the piece/strand of work within each case study theme to work on a current example, e.g. Contextual Analysis, initial plans, protocols, handouts, presentations, notes form meetings etc. Some artefacts may relate to the whole case study area (e.g. contextual analysis) and others may relate only to a specific piece/ strand of work (eg. meeting notes).

Researchers were asked to bring along 6-8 of these artifacts (for each Case Study/Research Topic) that would allow them to:

- Re-construct the process, or key phase of a piece of CAR
- Illustrate the issues they have faced
- Illuminate the team’s role in supporting the approach.

### **Session 3**

Key question: *How can we discipline our approach to supporting and reporting on our work?*

In CAR we are asking participants to adopt **a more critical and systematic approach to change.**

The role of the WWS Team is about supporting our Case Study Area partners in this process, and drawing lessons learnt from across the CAR in a disciplined and systematic way. Having started this process by developing an overarching model based on the three key phases (in the previous session), Session 3 moved our work forward as we explored the possibility of developing a set of tools that we would use across each Case Study. The idea being that by consistently using a small number of tools across projects we significantly enhance our ability to read across the different CAR processes and learn from them.

In this session we asked participants to bring along the tools they were currently using, or have used previously, when supporting and reporting on CAR. These could be tools to frame thinking or tools to collect data (for example, the contextual analysis of the case study).

Participants also considered which phase these tools might be used in and examples of the kinds of outputs each tool generated in other projects.

### **Reflections**

The final session enabled discussion of learnings and next steps in particular:

- Understanding the iterative nature of the CAR process and how to manage this. The objectives and outcomes of the original enquiry may change as we go through this process, which is ok - as long as we UNDERSTAND the basis on which the changes arise.
- Thinking about 'what counts as success?' in terms of action for change.
- The role of the researcher in this process, for example - activist, actor, architect?
- The need to **think about process before structure**. Most projects start with structures (such as systems reporting mechanisms and/or groups) already in place.

### 3. Summary of What Works Scotland approach to CAR

#### *Developing process and structure to support the enquiry:-*

| Process  | Structure  |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify a shared focused concern</li><li>• Problematise the issue and generate questions</li><li>• Collecting evidence, making changes to practice and monitoring and evaluating the impact of the change</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Supported by an 'WWS Research Team' of critical friends</li><li>• Structured opportunities for collaborative learning including WWS retreats and individual case study events over three year period</li><li>• Led and coordinated by a '<b>Partnership Innovation Team</b>' (see below)</li></ul> |

#### **What is the Partnership Innovation Team (PIT)?**

- Located at project level within each team
- Requires senior level sponsorship and support
- Usually a membership of 6-10 people
- Diverse range of experience and expertise (cross hierarchical)
- Committed activists, drivers and coordinators of CAR dimension of their project
- Develop an expertise on CAR
- A key link to the resources within WWS

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper outlines the initial approach taken by What Works Scotland in formulating Collaborative Action Research enquiries for the four Case Study Areas within the WWS initiative. These guidelines provide a tool to help inform initial thinking for the establishment of any collaborative action research project.

Further information about the progress of the Collaborative Action Research projects within each Case Study area can be found at the What Works Scotland website:

<http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/>

## Appendix 1

### Model of WWS Collaborative Action Research Process

