



Collaborative Event Report

Collaborative Action Research Fife Home Retreat Report 7th October 2015

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

We are working with Community Planning Partnerships involved in the design and delivery of public services (Aberdeenshire, Fife, Glasgow and West Dunbartonshire) to:

- learn what is and what isn't working in their local area
- encourage collaborative learning with a range of local authority, business, public sector and community partners
- better understand what effective policy interventions and effective services look like
- promote the use of evidence in planning and service delivery
- help organisations get the skills and knowledge they need to use and interpret evidence
- create case studies for wider sharing and sustainability

A further nine areas are working with us to enhance learning, comparison and sharing. We will also link with international partners to effectively compare how public services are delivered here in Scotland and elsewhere. During the programme, we will scale up and share more widely with all local authority areas across Scotland.

WWS brings together the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, other academics across Scotland, with partners from a range of local authorities and:

- Glasgow Centre for Population Health
- Healthcare Improvement Scotland
- Improvement Service
- Inspiring Scotland
- IRISS (Institution for Research and Innovation in Social Services)
- Joint Improvement Team
- NHS Health Scotland
- NHS Education for Scotland
- SCVO (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations)

This is one of a series of papers published by What Works Scotland to share evidence, learning and ideas about public service reform. This paper relates to the WWS **Collaborative Action Research** work stream.

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Contents

Background	1
Collaborative Action Research Inquiries	2
Preparing the ground.....	2
Purpose and format of the October home retreat	3
Attendees	3
Retreat programme	4
Learning for future work.....	5
Issues and reflections	6
Conclusions	7
Appendix 1.....	8
Nine Action Steps.....	8

Background

At the heart of the What Works Scotland initiative is a programme of Collaborative Action Research (CAR). WWS seeks to support collaborative working to build capacity and capability in the use of evidence; and capture evidence from practice as to what works in achieving public service reform.

This report outlines some of the recent work with representatives from Fife Community Planning Partnership, specifically the first Fife 'Home Retreat' on Wednesday 7th October 2015. By supporting practitioners to develop small collaborative inquiries, WWS and the Fife team are working together to explore processes and issues in community planning and public service reform. Through this process we bring together a range of public and third sector representatives to form collaborative inquiry groups that will systematically research and understand a particular issue in order to enact effective changes.

WWS is continually supporting the Fife team using a number of techniques. This includes:

- A dedicated **research associate** who helps set up the inquiry process, project manages the WWS input, brokers extra research and academic support, acts as a critical friend throughout the process, and co-produces the overarching CAR approach
- WWS **national retreats** that bring together the four case partners and practitioners from across Scotland to share learning and create networks
- A series of complimentary **home retreats** that support the development and progress of local action research inquiries
- Training, seminar support, and specific **capacity building** with practitioners to complete their collaborative inquiries

Whilst the national retreats are targeted at all of the partners, the nature and content of home retreats in Fife, West Dunbartonshire, Glasgow, and Aberdeenshire varies depending on the context and stage in the CAR process.

Home retreats also differ from the national retreats as they are shorter (1 day maximum), and locally co-produced. As such, they do not involve partners from elsewhere.

WWS home retreats:

- Provide detailed support to case study partners to plan and implement successful action research inquiries in their local areas
- Are responsive to the capacity of the practitioners and needs of the local groups
- Provide customised methodological support material
- Facilitate and support the development of inter-organisational relationships in localities
- Are accessible to all team members and practitioners involved in the local action research work
- Enable WWS to capture learnings and in depth evidence emerging from single case study partners to inform the development of findings and recommendations about what works in public service reform

Collaborative Action Research Inquiries

The home retreats are an integral part of the Collaborative Action Research process as they help support the practitioners in their inquiry development. Figure 1 summarises the WWS collaborative action research process and the three phases that comprise each research cycle.

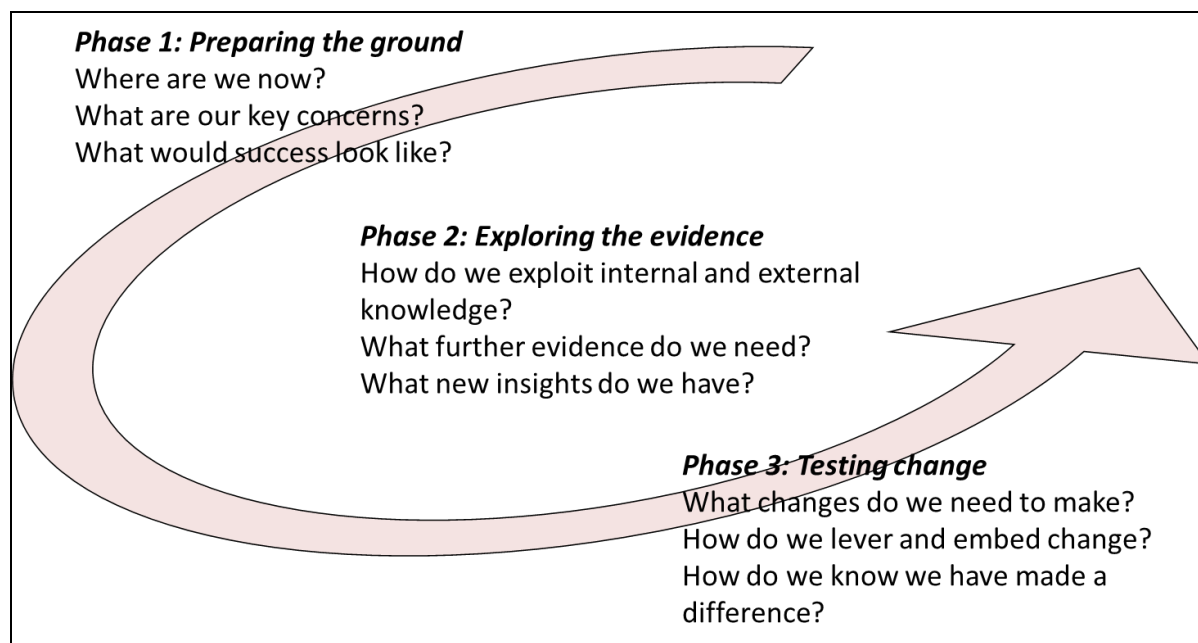


Figure 1: The Collaborative Action Research cycle

Preparing the ground

Representatives from Fife applied to WWS to explore community planning processes in three topics: a welfare reform initiative; the integration of family services and neighbourhood planning in a neighbourhood hub; and a schools initiative targeting high school children with complex needs. The group is keen to focus on the process of community planning and, by focussing on the lessons to be learnt in Kirkcaldy, they hope to share knowledge and improve local community planning both here and further afield.

Throughout 2015 the Fife group have been committed to the WWS approach and invested time and energy to move through phase one of the CAR cycle. Briefly, prior to the home retreat this has involved the following activities:

- Establishing a strategy group comprising of representatives from different departments and organisations involved in local community planning in Kirkcaldy
- The strategy group has met regularly and narrowed down their interest areas, aims, and purpose
- Produced three contextual reports (one for each inquiry area)
- Presented and communicated these aims and intentions to the Community Planning executive group in Fife and to other influential actors in the context
- Representatives from the group attended the WWS national retreat in June where they; decided on an aim statement, started to identify other individuals to join three new Partnership Innovation Teams (PITs) and the strategy group

After the National June retreat:

- The Fife group undertook a large amount of activity to reach out to departments and organisations to identify individuals to join the PIT groups
- Undertook a 'sphere of influence' activity to ensure their work is effective
- Each PIT group met between 2 and 4 times to identify gaps in membership, map existing knowledge, and identify shared interests and ideal outcomes of working together
- Arranged and recruited new members who were invited to attend the home retreat
- Further developed their thinking on research questions and specific inquiry focus

Purpose and format of the October home retreat

The home retreat provides an important opportunity to support case study partners to take forward their action research inquiries and for WWS to capture learning about the nature of the public service reform issues with which case study partners are wrestling. This particular home retreat in October 2015 was tailored to the Fife context, building on the previous activities since the June retreat, and reflecting the needs of the practitioners involved. Building on the discussions and work that took place over the summer it specifically focussed on ensuring that new members understood the background to the work, and were able to network, communicate, and influence the research topic. Through the sessions in the retreat WWS also sought to increase and develop co-governance in the inquiries, and provide a basis to ensure that each PIT can operate autonomously.

Attendees

27 practitioners attended this home retreat. All attendees are engaged in the development of the CAR inquiry and improving community planning processes in Kirkcaldy and Fife.

- Strategy Group: 12 individuals (some are also engaged in PITs)
- Welfare PIT: 8 individuals
- Family PIT: 6 individuals
- Schools PIT: 7 individuals

Individuals engaged in the process are employed in various departments within Fife Council, Police, and Kirkcaldy schools plus local third sector organisations including, Citizens Advice Scotland, YMCA, Fife Gingerbread, and more. There is a large and varied mix of job families including community learning and development professionals, youth workers, teachers, statistical analysts, community planning policy officers, council research officers, third sector managers, third sector front-line neighbourhood workers, early years workers, neighbourhood development staff, police officers, departmental managers and so forth.

The variety of job titles, departments, and employers is a key aspect of the community planning context where individuals from various roles must co-produce and co-govern local initiatives. As such, in Fife the WWS inquiries replicate this situation and seek to improve the community planning relationships through the inquiry process itself and the findings in the final inquiry reports.

Based on suggestions by practitioners involved in the PITs the event took place in Cluny Clays, an activity centre with conference facilities on the outskirts of Kirkcaldy. It was the view of some practitioners that holding outside of regular work areas would enable individuals to avoid distractions from other meetings and workloads, and help position the WWS work as part of a broader collaborative approach cutting across various organisations. To capture learning and identify future support needs WWS staff (with the consent of all attendees) produced written notes and audio

recordings of all the table discussions and group work. All attendees were asked to complete a post-retreat survey where they were asked about capacity levels, previous collaborative experience, previous research knowledge, and factors influencing their commitment to the work. This report draws on some of this data¹.

Retreat programme

The retreat began by splitting the room into two groups who participated in a meta-planning activity facilitated by the WWS team. To enable communication between individuals who did not know each other, to ensure that all participants felt involved, and to surface any different perspectives or experiences, each practitioner was asked to provide answers to the question:

What three things are needed for professional partnership working?

Following this session the WWS Fife research associate gave a presentation describing and outlining the CAR model, highlighting the work achieved so far and introducing the main principles that underpin CAR. The aim of this presentations was to reiterate the main principles of collaborative research and introduce key ideas to individuals who had not been involved to date.



Figure 2: Guiding principles

Following this presentation a WWS colleague introduced a potentially useful 9 step plan as a way to think about operationalising the inquiries (see appendix 1). During lunch participants were able to network and discuss their work areas before returning for the afternoon session.

For the afternoon the participants split into their inquiry groups to bring new members up to speed, work on refining research questions, developing working relationships and plans, and identifying possible research design processes. A WWS facilitator supported each PIT table and WWS staff shared documents highlighting the main principles of the work, and used tailored documents simplifying some of the main CAR points to progress the inquiry discussions.

¹ This data will also feature in CAR research reports due to be published throughout 2016

Questions to consider whilst defining your inquiry

Is it small-scale, contextualised and local in character?

Is it of interest and/or use to everyone in the PIT?

Does it involve reflection and could it bring about changes in practice?

Is it participatory, providing opportunities for communities of participants to investigate collaboratively issues of concern within their situation?

Is it based on systematic data collection and analysis which becomes the basis for changes in practice?

At the close of the retreat each PIT provided feedback to the larger group on their next steps. One group is continuing to recruit new members and therefore requires further WWS support and facilitation to create an effective working dialogue and shared understanding between members. A different PIT is undertaking a collaborative mapping stage before identifying research questions in order to ascertain their shared priorities and existing work areas, and the final PIT is moving into the second stage of the cycle and is about to start data collection and event planning.



Learning for future work

The October retreat has already led to some changes within the Fife WWS group structure including bringing new people on board, initiating events and sessions to progress inquiries, and increasing the confidence of most attendees in the work. For many participants the retreat was their first involvement in WWS and the PIT teams. Of the respondents who have completed the post-retreat survey to date, 100% found the retreat useful for learning more about WWS, 93% for understanding CAR, and 86% for progressing with their inquiries.

There is an intention to have a home retreat in October 2016 to compliment the inquiries and support the PIT practitioners. Each PIT is at a different stage of progressing their inquiries and therefore future home retreats may take a different format and approach depending on the needs closer to the time. During 2016, guided by the overarching CAR cycle model, we will co-produce an adapted and operational inquiry process reflecting the context, capabilities, and individuals involved.

Of the practitioners who responded to the post-retreat survey, 84% said that they would find events summarising research findings from relevant research projects elsewhere useful to their inquiry work, 66% would like methods training to undertake the work, 76% would like one day retreats, and 71% would like on-line resources, 69% would like facilitated sessions, but only 25% would like more meetings. Consequently, during 2016 we will collectively need to develop a blended and varied approach to working together that reflects the breadth of practitioners with various needs, experience, and working styles.

Issues and reflections

Reflecting on the meetings pre-and post-retreat, along with the retreat itself there are a number of early findings and points of interest:

1. Overall the Fife team have made much progress since June 2015 and after the October home retreat the speed of this progress is increasing as people are more confident with the CAR principles, getting a better understanding of others in the team, and focusing on their inquiry topic.
2. Some practitioners have previously completed collaborative learning modules. However, **many participants have limited or no experience with collaborative research or learning methods** and as such there are various levels of previous knowledge and cultural practices within the group in each stage of the process. This is an important finding with regards to the methodological approach in this context.
3. Collaborative action research models are often accomplished with co-located professionals (such as teachers working in a school). In our groups individuals are in different offices and sometimes towns. **Location variation** brings added complexity to the practicalities of this work as organising meetings, finding a shared language and level of understandings and ensuring everyone moves through the process at a similar speed is difficult. As a consequence **CAR in the community planning context involves a more complex and slightly longer 'preparing the ground' stage than would be expected in other working environments.**
4. There is a mix of understanding regarding the terms 'data', 'evidence', and 'research'. This is not an issue specific to Fife yet it requires attention and discussion over the course of 2016.
5. Many practitioners are on temporary funded posts or their workplace is undergoing public sector downsizing, restructuring, or redundancies. For example, a number of the group are on secondments from other organisations or geographical areas. Throughout 2015 a number of agencies involved in the inquiry work have undergone organisational restructuring. **A consequence is that we may be developing capacity and working collaborations with teams that are inherently unstable.**
6. The mix of professional backgrounds, identities, organisational arrangements, and competing priorities means that **capacity building in terms of research and co-governing or collaborative working is complex to facilitate, support, and deliver.** Yet it is necessary that we try to do this in order to understand, influence, and improve the practical ways of working that are fundamental to effective governing through community planning. How we share information in terms of the WWS process, CAR, or community planning requires multiple translations and tailoring.

Conclusions

Reflecting on the first Fife home retreat highlights some important lessons for the future work of WWS as well as the public service reform agenda as a whole. As highlighted in the national retreat report in June, case study partners are working across diverse areas of public service and in diverse geographical contexts. We can also see from this home retreat that they are working in different organisational systems and facing different workplace pressures. However, it was clear from discussions that despite differences in professional and organisational backgrounds all are keen and dedicated to improving the services and ways of working in order to better support residents in Kirkcaldy. Furthermore, most respondents felt that working collaboratively and improving collaborations was a key aspect of their job. Many practitioners were aware of the 'Scottish approach' and key Christie principles and they are keen to find effective, localised ways to put these into practice through the WWS work. There is an appetite for support and new ideas and the members and representatives involved to date are making progress with their inquiries.

The WWS collaborative action research approach is proving to be challenging yet there is potential for innovative findings about ways in which collaborative, practitioner led research can operate and create change in the complex, local community planning context. To ensure that the process brings success as much as the final inquiry report, we will collectively seek to understand such issues and reflections throughout the course of 2016 to ensure we can develop a working model suitable for the CPP context (and other complex partnership governance arrangements) that also retains the benefits of collaborative research and partnership working.

Finally, and most importantly, collaborations and partnership working take time. They are not a quick fix to public service reform or easy to achieve, even in areas where there is commitment and history of collaborations. Relationship building, developing a shared understanding and dialogue, learning about the different perspectives and how to bend and jointly produce new initiatives is a long process and one that requires tailored support and investment from practitioners.

It is important to highlight that the analyses and discussion in this report are preliminary. They serve as a spring board for the future work of the WWS team and the case study partners. Between now and December 2016, the WWS team will continue to work with all four case study partners to take forward their local projects and to capture learning from across the sites. Further information will continue to be published on the WWS website: www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk

Appendix 1

Nine Action Steps

Adapted from the 'Nine Action Steps for CAR in educational settings' by the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change team at Glasgow University

There are **nine** action steps that can be used to guide and plan CAR and it is important to recognise that they are likely to overlap. Consequently, the implementation of the plan that is developed will involve a set of interconnected actions. Many will occur in parallel and it is likely you will move back and forth between phases and action steps. You will revisit ideas and refine understanding and actions. Taking a more detailed look at each specific action step in turn:

Action Step 1. Analysis of context- This involves generating an overview of the current situation and defining a focus for the enquiry. Practitioners involved in the collaborative research will need to think about what they already know about the situation- What their 'hunches' are and what evidence is readily available. What further evidence is required to enable them to develop a set of enquiry questions? By producing a contextual report outlining the narrative of their shared work areas, the group can start to critically think about the history and context of their work and proposed enquiry topic and by doing so, can consider how evidence and systematic data shape their existing and future work.

Action Step 2. Agreeing enquiry questions- Strategic questions are crucial in adopting an enquiry-based approach. They determine what information is needed and how it should be collected. These questions must be generated by practitioners themselves. This ensures the focus is on 'real world' issues and that the findings of the investigations will be meaningful and relevant. This is why it is so helpful to have members involved in the collaborative research team who have different perspectives on the enquiry topic (policy officers, front-line delivery practitioners, and in some cases service users). The questions should be refined to ensure they are specific to a particular answerable topic that is within the remit of the context you operate in. For example, it might not be appropriate for a neighbourhood level group interested in anti-poverty to begin an enquiry into macro-level tax and benefit issues or chose a very general question, "how can help people who experience poverty?". Questions need to be specific, localised, and measureable. They should match the nature of your work area.

Action Step 3. Agreeing purposes- At this step it is important to clarify the collaborative research team's shared understanding of the questions and issues in hand before checking them out with a broader group. This involves reflecting on what the initial 'hunches' and considering what analysis of the existing evidence suggests. Discussions include priorities for action and thinking about who needs to be involved. At this stage the collaborative research team may decide additional evidence is required. This phase is about generating a wider constituency and ensuring the issues the collaborative research team is raising resonate more widely across the partnership or organisation. This process may lead to the recruitment of new members so you should consider how you will inform and support the new members to catch up with the process you have been through so far.

Action Step 4. Making use of available expertise- Here the collaborative research team will need to identify what expertise exists within their group, the partnership, the wider programme and beyond? What are the gaps in the expertise? And from where/ how can these gaps be filled? It is at this action step that specific methodologies such as reflective interviewing might be employed to support partnership working. It is key that practitioners critically reflect on the knowledge they have and explore how their new collaborators could use or add to this knowledge. For various reasons it may not be possible to recruit all the people you think you need in the group. Although this may

temporarily slow down your enquiry, you should record the learning, reflect on the situation, and make a note of where there may be data or knowledge gaps so that you can reflect on this in your final report.

Action Step 5. Collecting data- Previous work has shown that such evidence can provide a powerful means of moving groups forward, not least because it may provide 'surprises' that challenge the assumptions of practitioners as to what happens within their practice community. There is a wide range of evidence available to those involved in collaborative enquiry. (This may include observations, interviews, focus groups surveys, existing programme evaluations). It is also likely to include statistical material that is readily available within one of the organisations involved in the group or national statistics data (particularly in regards to issues of unemployment, housing, and health). This gives a general picture of what is happening in relation to the issues under consideration. What is then needed is a much more specific analysis of the local situation, using qualitative data, probably including evidence provided by fellow practitioners or service users.

Action Step 6. Making sense of the evidence- Each collaborative enquiry team will need to analyse the evidence and orchestrate a widespread discussion within their workplaces. It is here that involving representatives from other departments or organisations in these discussions, not least because 'outsiders' can helpfully ask questions and spot issues, trends and themes that 'insiders' may overlook. Where this is well led, it is a means of drawing people together around a common sense of purpose. Other projects note this process is a particularly effective means of encouraging innovation and experimentation. Clearly, the most important role of the collaborative research team is to coordinate and stimulate this analytical process.

Action Step 7. Deciding action to be taken- Having established areas for development, it will be necessary for the collaborative research team to formulate strategies for involving the wider practice or workplace community to move forward. Here, the overall approach is based on the assumption that *practitioners and organisations know more than they use*. Therefore, the logical starting point for development is with a detailed analysis of existing ways of working. This allows the best practices to be identified and shared, whilst, at the same time, drawing attention to ways of working that may be creating barriers. One of the most important aspects of formulating the strategy is moving beyond the spreading of accepted best practice by innovating new practices. This requires injecting new ideas, and evidence from other sources. Planning the actions that are needed is likely to be relatively straight forward; the challenge for the team is to find ways of getting everybody involved to implement them.

Action Step 8. Implementing a strategy- The collaborative research team will need a plan for implementing the intervention they have developed as a result of their analysis of the situation. This will involve identifying the resources required to support the change, a plan of action which moves from initiation to implementation through to embedding the change so it becomes an established norm or way of working which is sustainable in the longer term.

Action Step 9. Monitoring impact- As the collaborative research team moves forward with its plans, it is necessary for the changes implemented to be carefully and frequently monitored. Gathering evidence about what is happening as developments progress is crucial. This will determine their impact on the experiences of service users or other practitioners and other associated outcomes. Examples include informal comments made by staff or service users, or video recordings of meetings or activities. Whilst the work of the collaborative research team is key in coordinating this, senior and middle managers must also be involved in order to encourage an 'inquiring stance' throughout the workplace. This phase is supported by the collection of a diverse range of evidence of impact to offer a 'fuller picture' than can be provided by relying on accounts or statistics alone. As the collaborative research team comes to the end of this part of the process they will be in a position to analyse the new context they have created and thereby enter the next spiral of the cycle.