
**Creating effective partnerships
to deliver public services**

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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

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

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

February 2016

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The Evidence Bank model is being further developed as part of What Works Scotland.
<http://www.crfr.ac.uk/projects/current-projects/evidencebank>



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1. Background

Partnership working is central to the public services reform agenda across the UK and beyond, yet it can be difficult to create and sustain effective partnerships. Community Planning Partnerships working with What Works Scotland (WWS) identified partnership working as a key issue at the heart of public service reform.

What Works Scotland's Evidence Bank produced a review of research and other evidence about partnership working, 'Partnership working in UK public services', in response to this need to inform the development of practice in this area. It highlights findings and high-level messages to help thinking and prompt discussion about how to improve partnerships.

On December 3rd 2015, WWS held a day-long event in Edinburgh to launch the review and explore the evidence on partnership working with those working in and with public services.

The event shared key findings and stimulated discussion and reflection over implications of the findings for partnerships delivering public services. WWS partners and a wide range of other stakeholders explored the evidence about effective partnership working, including how it relates to their own setting and gathered experiences and reflections.

The event was Chaired by Steven Marwick, Director of Evaluation Support Scotland, and attended by over 60 delegates working in and with partnerships to deliver public services, including Community Planning Partnerships, health and social care partnerships, local authorities, the third sector, policy makers and influencers.

2. Evidence on partnership working

The evidence review 'Partnership working across UK public services' and accompanying briefing presents a range of evidence about partnership working aimed at people who wish to use this to inform both policy and practice. They highlight findings and high-level messages on key issues to help thinking and prompt discussion about how to improve partnerships. The review and briefing were produced by the WWS Evidence Bank, and written by Dr Ailsa Cook who presented the findings at the event.

Key findings of the evidence review:

The public sector reform agenda is littered with multi-agency partnerships, for example community planning, neighbourhood planning, children's services and health and social care integration. Across the UK partnerships are often formally mandated by policy. Partnership is seen as necessary to address complex issues, like health inequality, local regeneration, increasing employability or decreasing pressure on hospital beds.

From our review of research and other evidence, we know that partnership working in UK public services is a complex process shaped by structural, cultural and social factors. Developing and sustaining effective partnership working is challenging in this context.

There is very little evidence linking partnership working in the UK public services to improved outcomes. This is, in part, because of the methodological challenges associated with conducting robust evaluation work within such complex systems.

The research evidence highlights a range of features of effective partnership working, such as being clear about partnership aims, objectives, roles and responsibilities and being flexible and responsive in the way that they operate. How these features contribute to partnership effectiveness are shaped by a number of factors, including the motivation for any partnership and the agencies and sectors involved.

There are no 'one size fits all' solutions to improve partnership working. Organisations and individuals need to engage with the complex context in which they work to address structural, cultural and social factors influencing effectiveness.

Key considerations for improving partnership effectiveness:

The review highlighted some key messages for ensuring partnership effectiveness:

- Be sure that partnership is the right approach to address the issue.
- Be clear about aims, objectives, roles and responsibilities and ensure understanding is shared by all partners.
- Establish a dedicated management structure for the work of the partnership and ensure strong, reflective and responsive leadership.
- Ensure performance management systems are meaningful and tailored to the work of the partnership and information is shared with and of value to all partners.
- Support staff to develop skills, confidence, trust and relationships required for effective partnership working.
- Involve all partners in decision making and maintain strong links between the operational and strategic functions of the partnership.
- Be mindful of the impact that power relations have on partnership working, work to maintain equal and transparent relationships between partners.
- Engage with the complexity of partnership work – developing in-depth understandings to find tailored solutions to local partnership issues.

The evidence review and accompanying briefing can be found here:

<http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/publications/evidence-reviews-briefing-papers/>

A resource pack to support discussing and using the evidence can be found here:

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

3. Partnership working – experiences and reflections

Presentations on experiences and reflections on partnership working were shared by:

Kate Bell, Change and Innovation Manager, NHS Lanarkshire

Eliot Stark, Chief Executive, STRiVE

Paul Blackwood, Station Manager, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and leader of Operation Modulus

Alasdair McKinlay, leader of the community planning and empowerment unit and the Public Bodies unit within the Scottish Government's Local Government and Communities Directorate.

The presentations are shared at:

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

4. Partnership working – delegate discussions

Over the course of the rest of the day delegates were provided with opportunities to reflect on the presentations and evidence presented in the review through engagement in small group discussions. Specific tools derived from the evidence review were created to facilitate discussion and are available online at

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

Analysis of the issues raised by delegates during these discussions has led to the identification of some key themes.

Investment in the foundations of partnership working

This was a theme raised across the different tasks on the day and echoes a strong finding from the evidence review. Delegates highlighted the importance of long term and stable funding arrangements to allow partnerships to grow and develop. Ensuring the partnership is 'owned' by all partners was also highlighted. Central to achieving this is taking time to agree the aims and objectives of the partnership and to communicate them clearly with all partners. One group highlighted that this was particularly important in the context of fluctuating staff teams; a clearly articulated aim allows new people joining the partnership to quickly find their feet. Finally participants emphasised the need for partnerships to invest time in working out logistics, for example creating opportunities for teams to be co-located.

Skills for partnership working

Delegates identified a range of skills important to effective partnership working, including leadership, change management, project management, mediation and dialogue. While the 'boundary spanner' who can work across organisational boundaries is important to effective partnership working, participants reflected that this role does not necessarily feature in partnerships. Such a role can be challenging, and requires a particular skillset and competencies, personal qualities, emotional intelligence and the ability to manage difficult relationships. Mentoring, shadowing or secondments could support boundary spanning work, though it was noted that secondments can also bring disruption.

It can be both an expectation and assumption that those working in partnerships (including at senior levels) have the skills and qualities that help effective partnership working. This is not necessarily the case; openness about the skills and experience required, and where there are gaps (for example by completing a skills matrix) could help. One group suggested that a change management toolkit could support effective partnership working.

Understanding success and evidencing improvement

The issue of how partnerships should be measured and assessed was raised across the groups. It is important that approaches to measurement and evaluation do not seek to attribute outcomes to specific interventions, but instead understand how partnerships have contributed to outcomes. Given the complexity of partnership activity, delegates highlighted the importance of focussing on evaluability, i.e. what can be meaningfully measured within this context. There was a strong sense that a focus on outcomes is important to understanding success, and that this should include the views of and outcomes for people accessing support.

Several groups emphasised the importance of learning and reflective practice to ongoing partnership improvement. Having the space and learning environment for reflective practice can help develop trust and offer opportunity to ask the 'so what' questions important to move thinking and practice forward. Delegates saw this as an important part of developing the skills for partnership working.

Relationships

The relational dimension of partnership working was raised consistently by delegates who emphasised the importance of a good relationship and having the right people around the table to making good decisions. The importance of good dialogue in this context was emphasised to enable partners to work through difficulties and tensions. Delegates highlighted the dynamic nature of partnerships, which can have both a positive and negative impact on partnership working. One group shared examples of how small changes, such as a change in one or two individuals can have a significant impact on partnership dynamics. Finally one group discussed the importance of balancing investing in core relationships, with

keeping partnership processes open and inclusive, particularly to a range of third sector organisations.

Power

Making explicit and working through power inequalities was identified in the evidence review as a critical factor in promoting effective partnerships. In their reflections on power, delegates highlighted that:

- Establishing common goals is important, and unequal power differentials may mean that reaching agreement will need to involve difficult negotiation. Acknowledging power differentials may help this process. This openness is linked to the need to have honesty and trust from the outset.
- Funding can affect the power balance in partnerships since those partners with larger budgets may be able to exercise more influence. Larger budgets are most likely to be found within the statutory sector, which can impact on discussions around for example current health and social care integration.
- Which partner and individual takes on the role of 'lead' is important. Funders, such as government, can ascribe power to an organisation by specifying which partners are 'lead' (and therefore decision-makers) and which have an advisory role. Community Planning Partnerships can find that decisions are made, and therefore power resides, out with the partnership body. It was queried whether there is a perception that statutory organisations have responsibility for steering partnerships, rather than voluntary sector organisations, and it was noted that sometimes it's important that the 'obvious' partner does not take the lead role. Roles can be addressed in part through the selection of the Chair, and by agreeing which areas of work are collaborative and which are individual.

Partnership environment

There were a strong sense amongst delegates that the environment in which their partnerships were operating was challenging. Austerity, structural constraints and a current context of insecurity experienced by many CPPs were all identified as challenges.

5. What delegates thought of the event

We asked delegates for feedback following the event, and fifteen completed evaluation forms.

All those delegates agreed that as a result of attending the event they were aware of the findings of the evidence review 'Partnership working across UK public service' and had reflected on and explored implications of the findings for partnership working with

professionals from a range of sectors. They mostly agreed, and some partly agreed, that they had reflected on how the evidence relates to their own setting and experiences, and had begun to identify opportunities to improve partnership working in their context.

The findings from the evidence review were seen as accessible, relevant and very interesting. Delegates felt the reflections and experiences of partnership working shared by our invited speakers were interesting and informative, covering a range of areas, and would welcome hearing more about these.

Participants valued hearing others' experiences during discussion sessions, which drew on knowledge from a range of professionals which delegates might not usually have the opportunity to work with, and which raised important issues.

Overall, delegates enjoyed the event and felt that there was a positive atmosphere for discussion, and were stimulated to think about partnership working.

Delegates felt the best things about the event were the quality of the evidence presented, high quality speakers, well-facilitated discussions, the mix of people and organisations taking part, and the enthusiastic participation of delegates who were open and honest, offering constructive challenge.

6. Next steps

The What Works Scotland team are working with Community Planning Partnerships and other WWS partners to explore how the evidence on partnership working can help public service reform.

Delegates will share the evidence review and the discussions from the day with colleagues and other networks, and think about how they can share learning across teams. They also indicated they will draw on the evidence review to inform partnership working, policy, strategic planning, and other research work.

The 'Partnership working across UK public services' evidence review and briefing, resource pack to support discussing and using the evidence, and presentations on experiences and reflections on partnership working are available online at

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