
Reflecting on what works in developing authentic relationships in complex settings

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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.

What Works Scotland 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
- Improvement Service
- Inspiring Scotland
- IRISS (Institution for Research and Innovation in Social Services)
- NHS Education for Scotland
- NHS Health Scotland
- NHS Health Improvement for Scotland
- Scottish Community Development Centre
- 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.

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Introduction

This paper presents emerging learning on the importance of building successful relationships in order to support change around public service reform (PSR) when working within the complex dynamics of Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs). It is based on ongoing research by What Works Scotland (WWS) across CPPs and other public services.

Developing authentic relationships that are durable, sustainable and honest has been a key component of What Works Scotland's work, and central to success in working with the complex dynamics of CPPs. What Works Scotland has adopted a collaborative approach as we have sought to engage and work with partners and develop joint ways of working. To be successful relationships have to be robust and strong enough to make interruptions, allow disagreement and introduce challenge.

Key points

The insights and experiences over the past 18 months suggest the following eight considerations are key to building authentic relationships:

1. time
2. personalised connections
3. establishing and developing critical relationships
4. nurturing authenticity
5. understanding the context
6. rethinking accountability and ownership
7. using expertise appropriately
8. articulating benefits and impacts

1. Time

Working co-productively and developing useful and productive relationships takes time and this is the single most important element to emerge from our research and all the other factors derive from this. Time allows trust to emerge. People have to know that you can be trusted, not just in terms of your ability to deliver, but also that what you do deliver is effective and useful and to help develop mutual understanding and co-dependency. Without the investment of time authentic relationships that enable both sides to pass judgement, comment or criticise can become problematic. Relationships are dynamic and are affected by context both in terms of location but also in terms of who the relationship is between, and what constitutes a good relationship varies depending on the person and their position within the CPP. Time allows the creation of space and gives those seeking to work alongside the CPP the ability to respond to and meet the needs of a complex and at times overloaded system. By taking time to work with people we have been able to learn from practitioners about their work, priorities and journeys, and understand better how and when to input our specialist knowledge and skills to support and value. This is core to successfully building relationships and many of the themes we discuss below highlight the importance of time. Further, the high churn in staff turnover within CPPs represents a

challenge and often people leave projects midway through with new people joining. This means that at times you are nurturing people at different stages of the relationship-building process. It is important to develop a flexible working practice where people are open, reflexive and responsive to changing levels of resources and demands to take this into account.

2. Personalised connections

Where we have worked with those who deliver the services or who work in the front line, *personal* relationships have been key. Relationships are nurtured by making emotional connections through informal conversation and require space for these to develop. The relationship gradually builds up and is not confined to what happens in meetings but arises through making active contact outside formal meetings. Sometimes this includes finding personal 'common ground' by talking about matters outside of work such as friends, family, outside interests, upcoming events and so on. The role of safe spaces, away days, residential courses and shared experiences where we have brought people together has been key to this sort of work and has helped us to build up strong relationships with workers from a range of professional backgrounds at different levels within the system.

3. Establishing and developing critical relationships

Proving our usefulness, demonstrating how we can help and the connections we can offer has helped to develop and build good relationships. Some relationships have however been more instrumental than others and generally, in these relationships we are rarely, if ever, in a position to critique. Here anything we say about an intervention tends to be descriptive rather than critical. At times, when we have adopted a slightly critical approach this has affected the relationship in the short term. When this happened we kept the channels of communication open and continued to offer support through forwarding useful documents. Through stepping back whilst maintaining contact we were able to rebuild the relationship, being prepared to step back for a time is, we have found, often a key to success knowing how and when to re-engage and at what level.

4. Nurturing authenticity

Good relationships require nurturing and they are not just about what happens in meetings, to make relationships work takes both commitment and time. Time spent getting to know who you are working with not only lets you know who it is you are dealing with and their role in the CPP or other organisation, but you also learn how they think and operate and how they are likely to react to news. This knowledge can then help you formulate the best way to deal with them and is particularly helpful when deciding how to communicate ideas that may include some criticism of current practice. Taking time to build up relationships enables the deepening of relationships allowing them to become more natural and authentic.

5. Understanding the context

Building up relationships was a slow process and at the start of our project with the CPPs we spent considerable time developing our own understanding of the context, e.g. local policies, data and other relevant reports and surveys which reflect the local community. It also involved asking people about their work, their communities and neighbourhoods and exploring our role at meetings and the boundaries. This helped us to establish our credibility in the locality and gave those we worked with space and time to develop ideas. Whilst this initially made some uncomfortable, in that it marked a significant change from the way they usually work where space for proactive planning is often at a minimum, and on occasions made them frustrated at the time we took to develop concepts with them, they now understand why we took such an approach and appreciate what we were trying to achieve.

6. Rethinking accountability and ownership

In developing relationships we have had to challenge assumptions about roles and responsibilities of individuals and teams. This has involved creating a safe space that allows individuals and teams to rethink how they interact and react to us and to each other. We have had to change the models of accountability, making it clear to those we are working with that they are in charge of and own the change process and that we are there to support them and add knowledge. At times this has been difficult as those we have worked with often find themselves in situations where they have little control. It is also important to remember that sometimes we have worked with groups of people who do not have relationships with each other, all of whom may also be bringing their own priorities and agendas and therefore internal relationships may also require attention. It is also important to recognise that you will not get all people to work with you but you can get a critical mass to engage and this can act as a catalyst for change.

7. Using expertise appropriately

If you have credibility in the topic area and knowledge this can help build up trust but there has to be substance and this has to be at a practical level. It is important however to make sure that the relationship does not become too uni-directional and too much about top-down information giving. This involves humility, not appearing as the expert or talking down to people but at the same time it is also important to be clear with CPPs about the knowledge and expertise that you are able to add and how you can help either strategically or practically. Negotiation and co-production are essential for relationships to flourish. Being human, admitting mistakes and acknowledging your limits both in terms of capacity and also importantly knowledge helps. The people we are working with are the experts in the area and know much more about the history, structures, processes, practices and procedures that frame the way that communities, services or projects run and this has to be acknowledged. There is sometimes a real artistry here and this can be a hard line to

negotiate and one of the key lessons we have learned is that occasionally it pays to appear less knowledgeable for strategic purposes.

8. Articulating benefits and impact

Time, as we have shown throughout this paper, is central to the process of building authentic relationships. It helps to build trust, both in terms of having faith in the information provided but also in terms of understanding. Our approach in developing a new way of working has required a leap of faith for some and we have had to take time to try and negotiate this change in working practice and demonstrate how this can help to reduce workload in the long term. Often new initiatives are seen as supplementing and adding to currently overloaded work practices rather than replacing less efficient processes. Here again relevant topical knowledge helps and so too does honesty, admitting for example that this is a new initiative and that 'we are learning together'. This is an ongoing challenge and with less and less staff and less and less job security developing new ways of working can be seen as a luxury.

Closing note

In this paper we have focused on the relational aspects of our work, presenting what works in building and sustaining strong and useful relationships.

To conclude, it is important to point out that what we have presented should not be regarded as a panacea for building authentic relationships. Neither are they a toolbox of formulaic recipe; building and sustaining relationships is far too complex a process and it is very dependent on context. Each consideration will play out in different ways in different settings and will be unique in their construction as determined by the individuals involved. They do, however, serve as a useful reminder of the important elements that require attention and the complexity of the process of building authentic relationships in dynamic and complex settings with limited capacity and high levels of challenge and high levels of support for change.