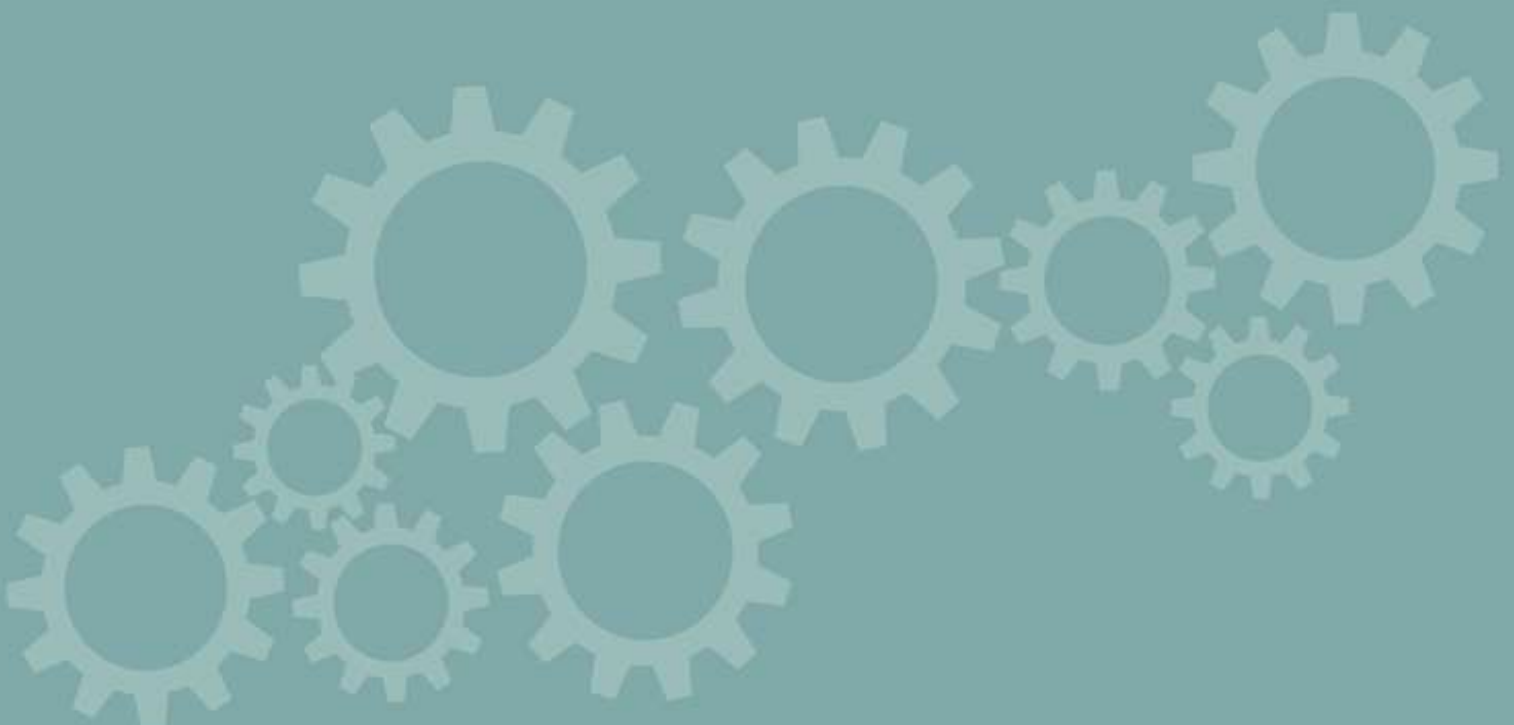


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**Report from the second Fife Collaborative  
Action Research Home Retreat:  
Critical Reflections and Lessons on  
Implementation**

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**Dr Hayley Bennett, What Works Scotland and University of Edinburgh**



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. This paper relates to the What Works Scotland **Collaborative Action Research** workstream.

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## Contents

Acknowledgements .....	1
Summary .....	1
Introduction .....	4
Reflections on the process prior to the home retreat .....	5
What did we do?.....	7
Programme and purpose of the day .....	7
The bigger picture .....	8
Step 1: Articulating and sharing the inquiry design process and achievements to date.....	9
Summary of the three inquiry research projects .....	10
Connecting the work to agendas and activities outside the PIT .....	10
Step 2: Reflecting and communicating their experiences of collaborative working: What Works in Collaborative Inquiry?.....	13
Step 3: Critical reflection.....	16
Critical reflections from the policy team.....	17
Strategy group .....	18
Step 4: Identifying recommendations and next steps .....	21
Learning and action plans.....	21
Changes to community planning.....	22
Evaluation forms and feedback.....	23
Conclusion: What did we learn? .....	25
CAR does encourage workforce development and change .....	25
Setting up collaborative action research projects: Roles, responsibilities, and expectations .....	25
‘Partnership working’ versus ‘collaborative practice’ .....	26
We’re getting there!.....	27

## Summary

As part of the What Works Scotland (WWS) project, What Works Scotland researchers are piloting and developing Collaborative Action Research inquiries with practitioners in four case sites across Scotland. In July 2014 Fife Council applied to be one of the case site partners working with WWS on issues of public service reform and tackling 'wicked issues' to improve community planning in Fife. The practitioners put forward three broad topics to investigate; a welfare hub, a family hub, and a school intervention programme.

Collaborative Action Research (CAR) is an approach to conducting social research by bringing together a range of individuals to identify a research problem, explore data, identify findings, and implement actions. In What Works Scotland practitioners work together in inquiry groups known as Partnership Innovation Teams (PITs).

As part of the CAR activities, What Works Scotland design and host a number of national and 'home' retreats with and for the practitioners engaged in the inquiries. These retreats involve creating spaces for discussion and dialogue, problem solving, skills development, and the advancement of collaborative working practices. Home retreats are tailored events which form part of the overarching CAR programme of work in Fife. They are a tool which WWS can use encourage collaborative working and provide a space for the inquiry groups to progress their work. Home retreats also enable What Works Scotland to gather data on public service reform.

What Works Scotland designed and delivered the first home retreat in Fife in October 2015 when the groups were in their infancy. On 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2016, What Works Scotland held a second home retreat with 27 attendees as part of the CAR programme in Fife. This report provides an overview of the activities on the day, details of some of the tailored facilitative activities, and critical reflections and learning on the CAR process to date. The purpose of the 2016 home retreat was to:

- provide a space for the different inquiry groups to articulate their inquiry work to date and continue to develop their inquiries
- build a community of practice around collaborative action research in Fife
- encourage a day of critical reflection of individual practice and collaborative working
- identify next steps and share key learning

This report does not provide specific detail of the individual inquiries and Partnership Innovation Team (PIT) research findings; these can be found in the co-produced inquiry reports on the Fife webpage on the What Works Scotland website.

Through the CAR work, the What Works Scotland researchers are gaining a better understanding of the relational practices involved in community planning and multi-agency working. We are able to explore the Christie Commission's concepts for the Scottish Approach and understand the complexities of public service reform.

**Key insights and reflections regarding collaborative action research and public service reform identified at the Fife home retreat:**

- Difficulty sustaining consistent attendance and commitment to the work during times of organisational restructuring, temporary employment contracts, and job changes. The flux and turnover of individuals we have experienced co-producing collaborative action research inquiries likely mirrors the on-going lived experiences of collaboration for those working locally. Changeable attendance created challenges including a prolonged period of time creating and establishing inquiry teams, and additional resources for practitioners and What Works Scotland to develop new relationships and coordinate involvement on an on-going basis.
- Uneven understanding across practitioners (working within the same system) of University partners and researchers. This includes roles, added value, and expectations. There is much variation between practitioners regarding how to bring local data, research, and an understanding of the working context together with high-quality evidence from elsewhere to advance programme design and policy-making. This led to some confusion regarding roles and opportunities.
- Despite a number of interventions and support materials over the past 18 months, there remains much variation with regards to professional skills and capacities. Some individuals are able to understand and undertake a CAR approach and collaborative learning model more quickly than others.
- There is a need to better understand and acknowledge the ‘invisible work’ involved in undertaking collaborative activities in a complex multi-actor and multi-professional environment. This is particularly important as there are resource implications supporting and developing collaborative working. Evidencing and sharing these activities with the public policy community and the academic literature on CAR should be one of the aims of the What Works Scotland researchers’ reports throughout 2017 and 2018.
- The experience in Fife echoes existing CAR literature on undertaking CAR; CAR works best in localities and with individuals who have the required pre-conditions, skills and capacity. In Fife, CAR has worked well where individuals take ownership for their own contributions, learning, and development compared to those who are more akin to receiving pre-identified delegated work tasks or are unfamiliar with critical reflection and collaborative learning. Working across groups (and case sites) through the retreat process and by creating communities of practice appears to help spread good practice and provide peer support to assist individuals into adapting to the CAR process.

As identified in this report, and the associated Fife CAR overview report, adopting a CAR approach can create a number of challenges. Overcoming these challenges takes time and requires input and reflection from all involved to understand the barriers and identify solutions. Although difficult, CAR can encourage workforce development and change by encouraging practitioners to become better aware and more informed of the working styles and practices of other professions and organisations within their context. However, building the skills and system for CAR creates a number of unexpected tasks and activities, and can disrupt pre-existing expectations regarding roles and responsibilities for group interactions, organisational tasks, and problem solving.

A notable feature of undertaking the Fife CAR work is the difference between ideas of partnership working and the practice of working collaboratively at the individual and small group level. The skills and resources required to collaborate together, identify shared aims and interests, find ways of combining different professions and organisations, is extremely complex; it involves a range of social and technical skills, the ability to align across numerous agendas, and emotional intelligence and initiative to create communicative spaces where different practitioners can cooperate in a constructive way to improve their understandings of issues and service needs.

## Introduction

In this report, Dr Hayley Bennett, University of Edinburgh and What Works Scotland research fellow leading the collaborative action research programme with the Fife case site, outlines and reflects on the second What Works Scotland Fife home retreat held on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2016 in the Adam Smith Theatre in Kirkcaldy.



In July 2014 Fife Council applied to be one of the case site partners working with What Works Scotland on issues of public service reform and tackling ‘wicked issues’ to improve community planning in Fife. The practitioners put forward three broad topics to investigate; a welfare hub, a family hub, and a school intervention programme. As we started to create inquiry teams - known as partnership innovation teams (PITs) - to investigate these issues we collectively refined the broad topics to focus on specific research questions. To support this work I act as the research contact for What Works Scotland, and connect to individual practitioners, the PIT groups, and the overarching strategy group. We (the practitioners involved in the original application, assigned policy officer, and I) created the strategy group in 2015 to help oversee the work, solve problems, and identify possible research team members. Each PIT team sought to complete an inquiry by the end of 2016.

Figure 1: Fife CAR programme structure

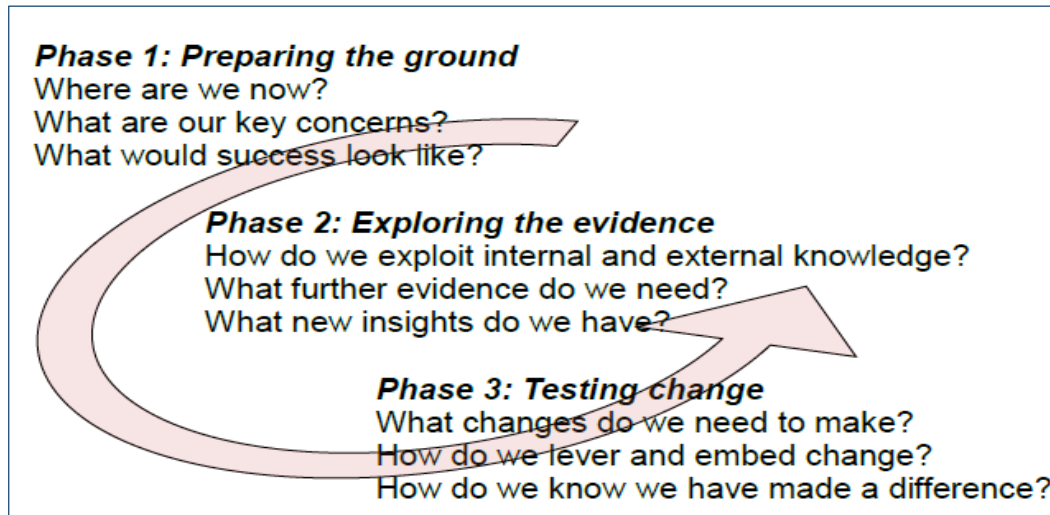


To date, work has involved over 70 practitioners with approximately 40 more engaged individuals. Whilst I’ve been involved in over 90 in-person meetings through the PIT sessions, individual mentoring, and strategy meetings, there have also been many more meetings between individual practitioners and sub-groups which cannot be easily captured. The home retreat was not a stand-alone event, and fits within the programme of work and community of practice being developed within Fife to support collaborative learning.

The first home retreat took place in October 2015 and was the first time many of the practitioners had met or come together to form inquiry teams. One year on, many of the PIT groups are close to completing a research process and sharing their findings. The CAR programme comprises a researcher providing advice and guidance to understand the CAR approach, direct advice as a critical friend, and support to create a community of practice in Fife. To encourage the conditions to undertake CAR, I have also provided direct support to build PIT teams, encourage dialogue and team working, and help problem-solve group dynamics. To ensure real collaboration and shared responsibilities, this work is co-produced

through day-to-day interactions and activities. The home retreats are a tool to develop collaborative inquiries. This 2016 home retreat built on the existing CAR resources by providing a space for critical reflection and preparing a next step action plan. We drew loosely on the CAR cycle diagram, encouraging the uniting of research, reflection, and action.

Figure 2: CAR cycle



## Reflections on the process prior to the home retreat

Designing and delivering a CAR programme with diverse practitioners is complex. Over the past 18 months, I tailored and adapted the CAR programme to respond to practitioner preferences or to reflect particular capacity issues. As such, the CAR work here followed a mutable programme to ensure that there was a shared, broad understanding of the parameters and nature of the work. The contents of this programme were an iterative process, built on communication, dialogue, problem-solving, capacity-building, and mentoring.

Working collaboratively across departments, organisations, and professions is difficult and raised unexpected barriers that altered the pace of the research process. To keep the work moving and improve the inquiries some of the Fife Policy Team took responsibility for relational tasks including problem-solving, coordinating, organising, note-taking, and motivating. To maintain momentum and link the inquiries into on-going work areas, a number of practitioners also sought to link PIT inquiries with local agendas, work tasks, and policy changes.

Not all of the What Works Scotland CAR sites held home retreats or used them in the same way as occurred in Fife. Fife home retreats reflected demand from the practitioners, and were an opportunity to help build research processes and collaborative dialogue. Home retreats did not involve presentations of research and evidence from elsewhere, or guest speakers or presenters on substantive topics (as these type of presentations form part of the PIT work and wider programme of activities). One aim of this home retreat was to help the groups to collectively see how far they travelled and how close they were to completing



some of the research projects. As such, home retreats formed part of the relational aspects of the CAR approach.

It was the responsibility of practitioners to lead the content of their inquiry discussions, drawing on expertise and knowledge to shape the research process. Practitioners were also responsible for the interpersonal and tasking arrangements within the PITs.

Many of the practitioners successfully understood and utilised the CAR approach. However, this distinction between responsibilities was an on-going discussion with some of the practitioners, specifically those more accustomed to working with contracted researchers who shoulder all the research and reporting process. Similarly, some practitioners were more familiar with group work based on pre-determined, delegated tasks. This CAR programme challenges this view and, as such, to varying levels it was an on-going process to establish boundaries and manage difficult conversations about roles and responsibilities both between What Works Scotland and the practitioners, and between different practitioners and departments within the PITs.

Throughout the CAR programme in Fife, I openly discussed and shared information on the methodological approach and CAR programme structure with the intention that the practitioners could better understand CAR, and be able to adapt and better match future CAR activities to their needs. As a professional researcher, my ethical position involved explaining and teaching the CAR approach to practitioners; I was not piloting CAR *on them*, but co-developing a CAR approach *with them*. As such, part of this home retreat involved encouraging individuals to reflect on the CAR process and suggest ways that they could or would improve the process if they were to continue to use a CAR approach in the future.<sup>1</sup>

For many, CAR wasn't always easy to initiate, manage, or progress. There were times where individual practitioners or groups of professions struggled to see how they fit in the process, or how this approach could improve working practices and knowledge on specific project design. Similarly, the co-production ethos underpinning the work meant that WWS did not provide practitioners with a detailed, fixed programme of work with pre-determined allocated tasks between practitioners. Some practitioners did not recognise this feature or found it difficult to adapt their practices to this approach. Nevertheless, after many months, the groups began making headway with their research projects, created good working relationships, and generated context-relevant and rich insights into improving service provision.

The remainder of this report outlines the design of the home retreat and some of the learning from the day, including my reflections and suggestions as a 'critical friend' which may be of interest to the practitioners working in this CAR programme, or for researchers planning on establishing a CAR programme in similar public service reform contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> What Works Scotland research fellows from across all four case sites will share a number of reports, research notes, methodological tools, and reflections on CAR in the context of public service reform and Community Planning throughout 2017. These will be available here: [www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk](http://www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk)

# What did we do?

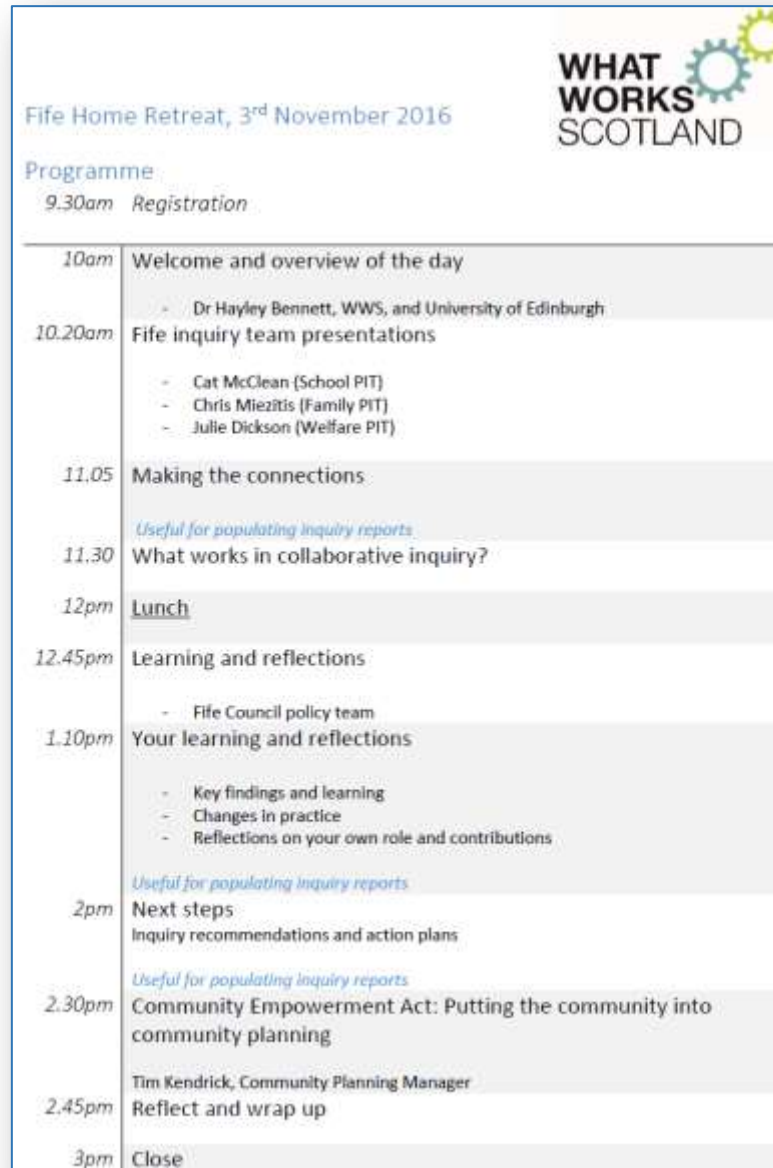
## Programme and purpose of the day

As a key part of the Fife CAR programme this home retreat served to support the practitioners in the writing process, identify learning and sharing opportunities, and introduce practitioners to the importance of critical reflection in collaborative action research work.

To do this, I sought to use this event to provide a broad structure and space to enable collaborative working and the identification of actions and improvements. What Works Scotland provided table facilitators who also acted as critical friends with each group throughout the day, questioning, prompting, and helping to capture discussions and decisions. However, as with all stages in this CAR programme, it is the responsibility of the individual practitioners and PIT groups to define and lead their inquiry work, discussions, and

contributions within each section. As such, whilst I designed a broad plan (in discussion with some of the Fife policy officers) to fit within the wider Fife CAR programme, the practitioners and inquiry groups populated the individual discussions and developments of each section over the course of the day.

After discussions with some of the practitioners (specifically the policy officers and the lead contact, Sharon Murphy) I designed the home retreat to follow three steps. First, to create a space where practitioners from across the three Fife inquiry groups could share their research findings from their inquiries and start to develop a community of practice. Second,



Fife Home Retreat, 3 <sup>rd</sup> November 2016	
Programme	
9.30am	Registration
10am	Welcome and overview of the day
	- Dr Hayley Bennett, WWS, and University of Edinburgh
10.20am	Fife inquiry team presentations
	- Cat McClean (School PIT)
	- Chris Miezitis (Family PIT)
	- Julie Dickson (Welfare PIT)
11.05	Making the connections
	<i>Useful for populating inquiry reports</i>
11.30	What works in collaborative inquiry?
12pm	Lunch
12.45pm	Learning and reflections
	- Fife Council policy team
1.10pm	Your learning and reflections
	- Key findings and learning
	- Changes in practice
	- Reflections on your own role and contributions
	<i>Useful for populating inquiry reports</i>
2pm	Next steps
	Inquiry recommendations and action plans
	<i>Useful for populating inquiry reports</i>
2.30pm	Community Empowerment Act: Putting the community into community planning
	Tim Kendrick, Community Planning Manager
2.45pm	Reflect and wrap up
3pm	Close

Figure 3: Home Retreat programme

I wanted to encourage a larger group dialogue about collaborative working. Third, I wanted to introduce or encourage individual practitioners and small groups to engage in critical reflection on their research findings as well as the CAR process itself. Critical reflection is a key part of a collaborative action research approach as it supports the continual interchange between conducting research, identifying actions, and understanding ‘what works’ (including how and why). During the day, both the practitioners and I collectively sought to capture reflections as part of the final reporting process.

## The bigger picture

The day-to-day part of the CAR process involves getting very close to aspects of daily work and often acutely experiencing the more difficult aspects of working in collaborative ways. To date, many individuals have experienced times where this has been challenging or un-enjoyable. As such, I wanted to start the day with two slides to remind everyone of some of the bigger issues about tackling ‘wicked issues’ and highlight that working together has the potential to reduce some of the inequalities that are well evidenced in much of the research literature. I gave a very brief 10-minute overview reminding the practitioners what we mean by ‘wicked issues’ and why tackling inequality is something we could all contribute to.

### Slide 1: What are ‘wicked issues’?

When is an issue a ‘wicked’ one? What does this mean? Whilst many people interpret this to refer to an evil issue, something that is morally unacceptable, the term ‘wicked issue’ grew from an understanding that many issues cannot be tackled through one-off interventions or policies, but instead are stubborn and resilient. The complex and messy nature means that unwrapping a layer or address one issue may involve various different stakeholders and cross numerous agendas. To conceptualise something as wicked means there are no right or wrong solutions; all actions lead to consequences and need to be understood and acted upon by various stakeholders and actions. As such, understanding and address a wicked issue requires action, reflection, and collective learning.<sup>2</sup>

### Slide 2: Inequality

Research, evidence, and data tells us that issues such as inequality cause long lasting and far reaching societal issues. Collectively, we know that income inequality causes shorter, unhealthier and unhappier lives. Numerous research projects demonstrate problems of inequality and the difficulty in tackling the outcomes as well as the causes. For example, research continually demonstrates that wealth is a strong predictor of life expectancy<sup>3</sup>. For a number of years various levels of government, public, third, and private sector actors have sought to address issues of place-based inequalities, yet area based disadvantage remains a striking issue and impact on life chances<sup>4</sup>, and despite decades of research, social exclusion continues to impact on the quality of life of individuals. Recent research into young people shows that household poverty and neighbour deprivation are both strongly related to violence.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For an accessible read on ‘wicked issues’:

<https://www.theguardian.com/social-enterprise-network/2012/jun/08/wicked-problems>

<sup>3</sup> Hills, 2015

<sup>4</sup> Bailey, et al, 2016

<sup>5</sup> McAra and McVie, 2016.

## Step 1: Articulating and sharing the inquiry design process and achievements to date

After brief hellos and a warm-up activity led by JP Easton (a member of the Family PIT) presenters from each of the three inquiry groups outlined a summary of their research design process and current stage of work.

Sharon Murphy, policy coordinator asked each presenter in advance to produce presentations (in any format they were most comfortable with) that covered the research process, including research questions, data collection, analysis, and findings. I hoped that through the process of producing the presentation and then listening to the other processes this would help each team to better understand where they are, what they have achieved, and what their colleagues have been working on and what they could learn from.



Figure 4: Example presentations from welfare and school PITs



## Summary of the three inquiry research projects<sup>6</sup>

	<b>School PIT</b>	<b>Welfare PIT</b>	<b>Family PIT</b>
Research question	<i>How can we improve partnership working with schools to support young people with additional support needs?</i>	<i>How can we share data and knowledge better to help those affected by welfare reform?</i>	<i>How and why do families engage in family fun sessions?</i>
Data collection method	Pilot research at Kirkcaldy High School (KHS), survey to practitioners at KHS, focus groups using KETSO facilitation tools.	Explored Stat-Xplore database, created vignettes for table discussions at a one-day welfare reform event, focus groups.	Interviews with practitioners working at schools running existing family fun sessions, focus groups with parents using family fun sessions at this site
Stage by the time of the home retreat	Identifying key themes, analysing the data, writing up the report	Writing up the report	Group analysis and identification of key themes

Table 1: Summary of three PIT inquiries in November 2016


### Connecting the work to agendas and activities outside the PIT

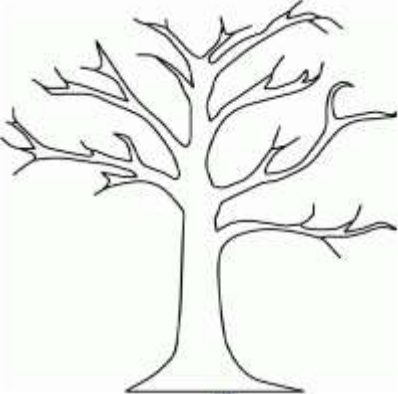
Many of the practitioners involved in the inquiry teams had been working together to initiate an inquiry or conduct research for over 12 months. To do this they often focused on specific work areas or parts of a ‘wicked issue’. At the home retreat they were at a stage in the process where it was useful to think about how the inquiry work fits into local agendas or wider policy activities. In some PIT meetings practitioners regularly tried to link the inquiry into other work areas. In the following activity I wanted to formally stimulate and capture thoughts on how the inquiry work might bring about various changes.

I asked each PIT to collectively think about “making the connections” and provided a range of prompts. What Works Scotland research fellows facilitated these discussions leading to each PIT, collecting their answers on different parts of a specially created ‘connections tree’ facilitation tool. The activity helped create a shared understanding of the context for the work. The findings from this activity contributed to the production of the final inquiry reports.

<sup>6</sup> Note: The full details of these research inquiries will be provided in the upcoming reports published in 2017 on the What Works Scotland Fife CAR page.

# 1. Making connections





- What existing groups or work could the PIT activities link to?
- What have you already started to link to?

- 15 mins on PIT tables.  
- Strategy members circulate

Figure 5: Slide from the day as part of the making the connections activity

### Examples of the Schools PIT on the day

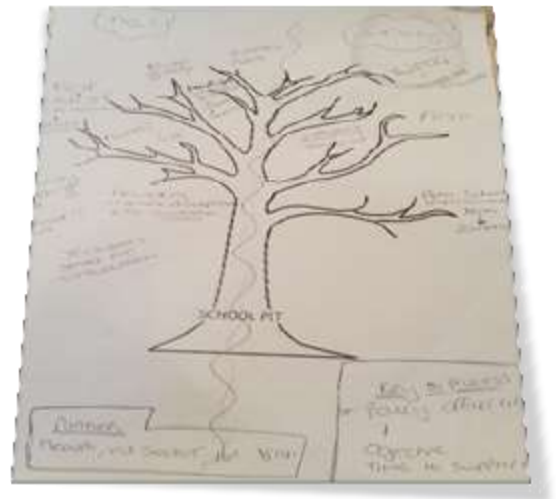


Table 2: School's PIT identified connections

New Groups (Where the PIT could link in)	Existing
Cluster Head teacher Meetings	YWPDG (Youth Work Partnership Development Group) – could be extended
Partners Event	Fife Early Years Partnership.
Focus Group (Previous participants + parents + referrers)	Operational – School Work Delivery Group
Young People / Children's Service Plan Consultation	Area School Improvement Team - Sandra
FEYP (Fife Early Years Partnership) – sub group to be developed – link to strategic group	GIR (Getting It Right)- Sandra
Parents?	
Survey With Young People – external support (perhaps What Works Scotland or other research support)	
Networking In-Service Development – KHS – Guidance	

## Step 2: Reflecting and communicating their experiences of collaborative working: What Works in Collaborative Inquiry?

In the final morning session I asked the practitioners to take a step back from the content of their inquiry work, get on their feet, and intermingle across groups.



Using a facilitated group process I asked everyone to reflect on the process of collaborative working. The aim was to help create a culture where different viewpoints or difficulties are openly discussed. In this way individuals can consider their personal or organisational role in resolving obstacles.

To answer the two topics I had set, practitioners could draw on their work in the What Works Scotland CAR programme or their wider working experiences. The practitioners self-selected to join one of two sessions:

1. Good examples of the skills and resources needed to do collaborative inquiry work
  - i. Individual level
  - ii. System level
2. Working collaboratively across organisations, professions, or departments.
  - i. Hardest parts for you and why barriers?
  - ii. How could you address these

Table 3: Summary of discussion group two

Hardest part	Overcome barriers
Buy-in and consistent attendance or input	Getting more focussed, clarity, smaller, (only council staff and specific role?)
Don't take it personally	Encourage people to reduce "defensiveness"
Data protection- understanding rules/different interpretation	Clarify with individual and guidance (personal, phone calls)
Identify correct person (role) in schools	Use 'in-service days' to find out who
Different agendas and opinions of what we are doing	Reflective leadership, don't have to be a manager to help in time of confusion.
Being accountable - do things outside the meetings and make the time	Identify a lead
Reprioritising your time to work on the project	Getting the right focus, clarity helps
Concept, aim, getting clear, but big issues around time	Management providing resources



Having research questions decided for you (from above)- at the first national retreat	Need a blank sheet and to build ownership
Playing catch-up with research and knowledge if you join late	Induction guide and quick catch-up doc
Partnership-working 'getting over that everybody benefits from it' – but needs time (integral to our job and not an add on)	Needs a strong organisational message from all people Needs organisations to be explicit
'Research' is something all organisations can do? Not accepted as necessary	Changing our mind-set regarding different organisations- openness and reframing to work towards a common goal
Context and culture and understanding- different partners e.g. DWP.	Communication and relationship-building

Prior to the event I thought that many practitioners would discuss the difficulties of working with others who may have less research experience, different professional terminologies or processes, or the dominance of council procedures (as these issues have been

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*Critical friend reflection: If individuals within each PIT noticed the need for leadership and socialising tasks, who did they think would be responsible for undertaking these? What stops people taking the lead or filling the gaps?*

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discussed in the PIT meetings). However, whilst some of these issues did arise, practitioners focussed primarily on the CAR process and identified a number of barriers they experienced over the past 18 months.

A number of these issues echo my early notes regarding the deficient local leadership and ownership of the research work<sup>7</sup> and processes around forming a group. At different times in the process each PIT expected that I (as the What Works Scotland contact) would problem-solve issues with individual colleagues or group dynamics (beyond the scope of my original role to provide technical research advice and broker evidence). Individuals within the policy team (who were only expecting to support some aspects of the inquiry work) also raised similar issues at different times in the process regarding their 'invisible work' organising and encouraging the PIT groups to progress with the inquiry work.

Other issues that echo earlier field notes include the limited communication between individuals and different departments, and difficulties for individuals who join the group later in the process. Whilst the practitioners identified some ideas to reduce these problems (such as providing 'late-joiners' with an info pack, or improving communications between groups), it was still unclear *who* they identified as being responsible for such coordinating and socialising tasks. Some of these issues may be context specific; CAR has a proven track record in school settings where there is a stable cohort of practitioners working in a limited geographical space (often the same school building) or across one professional stream (e.g.

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<sup>7</sup> A topic which was the focus of a number of phone calls at the end of 2015, and specifically outlined in a critical friend document I provided in the March 2015 strategy meeting.

education). Yet, in the last two years the council and other partners have undergone various restructuring processes, and employ a number of practitioners on temporary contracts. Some practitioners have left their posts during the last two years. Furthermore, many individuals involved in this work are not based in the same offices, work in the same departments or organisations, or come from the same professional background.

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*Critical friend reflection: When setting up CAR processes in this complex multi-agency environment it is useful to have very clear roles and responsibilities to cover coordination and group socialisation tasks (as well as specific research and reporting tasks) which are then clearly communicated across the wider group and updated throughout the process.*

*This may be a difficult discussion and should be facilitated to reduce conflict and encourage openness regarding skills and capacity. I'd suggest that this step is essential and should be added to the existing CAR steps, particularly in contexts where CAR is not an embedded process or where there is less understanding of each other's roles.*

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### Step 3: Critical reflection

The afternoon sessions served two main purposes. First, the feedback from many of the practitioners in the weeks leading up to the event highlighted the need to use the home retreat as an opportunity for the PITs to come together to populate their final inquiry reports. Second, whilst we have discussed critical reflection throughout the process, I wanted to include a short presentation and some activities that sought to introduce or ensure that most people within the room and CAR process have a shared understanding of undertaking critical reflection as part of their working practices. A number of professions include critical reflection as part of their professional training or in-work continuing professional development. For example, education, community learning and development, social work, and some health professionals (such as nurses) have critical reflection built into their core competencies.

#### Reflective practice

*“Reflection is the examination of personal thoughts and actions. For practitioners this means focusing on how they interact with their colleagues and with the environment to obtain a clearer picture of their own behaviour. It is therefore a process by which practitioners can better understand themselves in order to be able to build on existing strengths and take appropriate future action. And the word ‘action’ is vital. Reflection is not ‘navel-gazing’. Its aim is to develop professional actions that are aligned with personal beliefs and values”<sup>8</sup>*

Critical reflection refers to the capacity to discover norms or assumptions about working practices and our role in the workplace. For many, this involves incorporating simple actions into existing ways of working, such as asking for feedback. It can take more structured forms, such as keeping a diary, systematically logging and thinking about the learning from each project or activity, or keeping a journal outlining the context and actions and how one fits within and works with people in this context. There are some aspects of critical reflection such as valuing personal strengths, trying to view things objectively, and incorporating empathy and understanding into personal practice, that are particularly relevant in collaborative environments.

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*Critical friend reflection: The key is to think about individual practice within the working context, reflect on what role we play in situations, and learn how we can contribute to improving or changing particular outcomes.*

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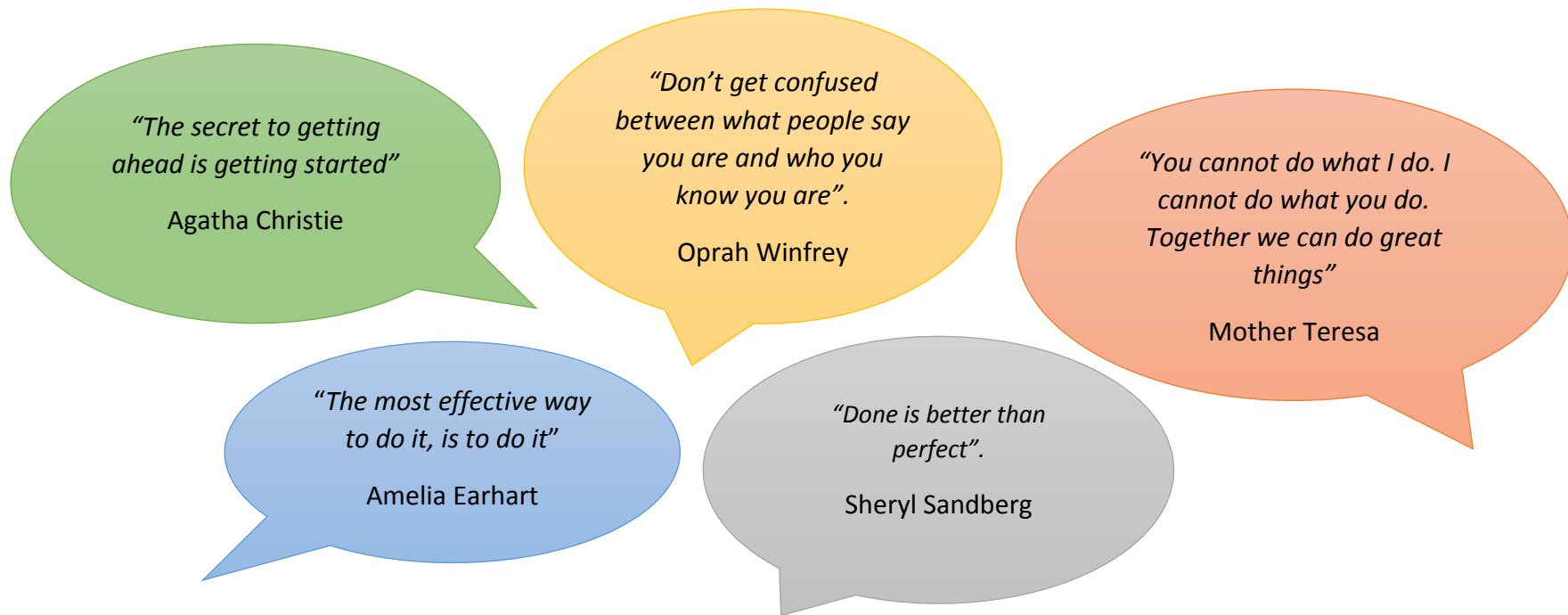
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<sup>8</sup> Somerville, D., Keeling, J. (2004) *A practical approach to promote reflective practice within nursing*. Nursing Times; 100: 12, 42–45: <https://www.nursingtimes.net/Journals/2012/11/30/v/l/x/040323A-practical-approach-to-promote-reflective-practice-within-nursing.pdf>

## Critical reflections from the policy team

Throughout the CAR process I have asked some of the policy team members to reflect on their role, what they are learning, and what they are finding difficult. This event offered an opportunity for them to present some of these reflections back to the wider group. Two policy officers presented their reflections on being involved in the CAR process. Prior to the event they had met with other colleagues from the policy team to gather their thoughts and feedback. The policy team highlighted a number of topics. This included the local-central relationship within the CPP structure and how they have made sense of their role in the PITs and the wider CAR approach. They noted that unlike most CAR work, they were mandated into each PIT and did not always see how their input was valuable to their own workloads and work interests, and that they had become the unofficial organisers in the PITs and strategy group. They also discussed how the work sometimes challenged existing practices and how they better understood their own preferences and habits.

The policy officers' presentation centred on a range of quotes that they used to frame their reflections.



## Strategy group

A key part of the structure for the CAR work in Fife was the strategy group. We created the strategy group shortly before the June 2015 retreat to fulfil a number of purposes to support the inquiry process. Sharon Murphy, Fife Council Policy Officer, spent time during 2015 trying to build a strategy group with membership covering a range of organisations involved in community planning in Scotland with the aim of offering a link to bring in other practitioners and viewpoints to the inquiry work. For various reasons, over time the membership retreated closer to a Fife Council group, however, it maintained a key role in the wider structure of the CAR work. The group met seven times between May 2015 and December 2016. The group comprises of a range of managers, What Works Scotland staff, and the leader of each PIT who discussed the inquiry process and shared learning.

The three PIT leaders are:

- Julie Dickson, Community Learning and Development team leader, Welfare PIT
- Liz Easton, YMCA and now Sandra Martin, Integration Manager (Family & Community Support Team), for the School's PIT
- Chris Mietzies, Projects Officer, Family PIT.

At the home retreat I asked the strategy group members (those who were not in a PIT) to reflect on some of the key aims and functions of the strategy group's activities over the past 18 months. To encourage critical reflection and as a basis for the preceding action planning activity, I also gave the group members a list of key functions and asked them to consider each one.



After doing this I asked each member to use three green dots for items they think the strategy group did do well, and three red dots for items that the group did less well. After feeding back to the wider group, it was suggested that the PIT groups and other individuals could offer the same reflection on the strategy group. The PIT members placed one green dot on what they perceived as working well, and one red dot on what was perceived as not working well. Not all attendees completed the task. Nevertheless it enabled a conversation about the structure and function, created a space for various views to be heard, and provides an indication of the changes that could be made in order to strengthen the supporting role of the strategy group and ensure that it links the PIT inquiries to other activities and agendas within the council and CPP partners. See the full results in figure 6 below.

The strategy members identified two key points:

### 1. Areas for improvement

- Communication with the rest at the council and Fife partnership
- The opportunity to influence other agendas, work areas, and activities

### 2. Link to the PITs, reporting back, and encouraging participation

One practitioner noted:

*“The strategy group has been most effective when it has had a specific topic or question to address:*

*Who are we trying to influence?*

*What should happen next with the school PIT?*

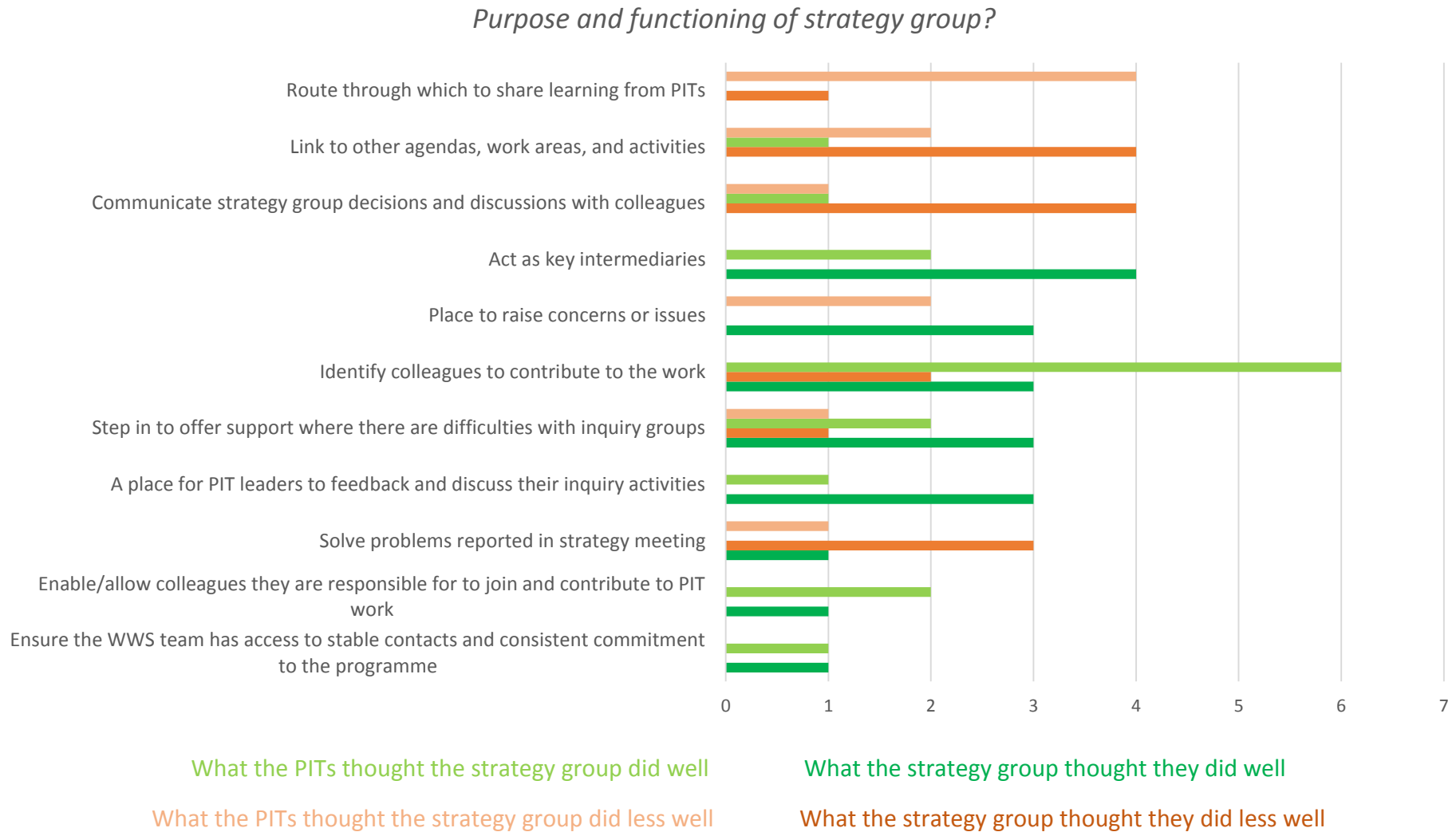
*Who have been the key intermediaries?”*

The group identified possible changes to improve the functioning of the group and connecting the learning and sharing to other agendas and activities in Fife:

- Consider expanding the NHS representation where possible to include other areas and sections.
- Perhaps bring in someone to help link the learning to wider council restructuring and reforms.
- Shake up the meeting formats including some facilitated sessions.
- Consider how to improve how the leaders of the inquiry groups feed back to the wider strategy group and how individuals from the strategy group can gain a better insight into the PIT activities.



Figure 6: Results from the 'dot' exercise



## Step 4: Identifying recommendations and next steps

### Learning and action plans

The remainder of the afternoon was allocated to time for each PIT group to populate their report templates and directly gather reflections and inputs from others in the group. Each PIT and the strategy group populated an action plan. For example, the strategy group highlighted the need to share the learning with the Fife Partnership Executive Group, and try to influence other workforce development agendas currently taking place within the council. The content of these action plans will be discussed in the final inquiry reports.

Recommendation, affirmation or good practice	Action to be taken	Date for completion (Approximate)	Action by (be specific)	Success indicators
<p>e.g. Learning: GWP statistics data for particular neighbourhoods and groups helps us to understand potential impact of sanctions, and improve service planning and targeting of resources.</p> <p>Recommendation: Ensure that there is a greater understanding of factors and motivations for welfare sanctions data at neighbourhood level!</p>	<p>Share learning and provide support for the Statistics database, produce reports or information sessions to local community planning teams and elected members</p> <p>Comm's strategy ↳ Info scripts ↳ Area meeting ↳ Reading Hub</p>	June 2017	<p>Joe Bloggs, Data specialist, policy unit</p> <p>Advertising notices through existing forums:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Welfare and poverty group</li> <li>- Newsletter</li> <li>- Email to NHS data group for GSNicity</li> </ul>	All local community planning officers attend a sanctions information session, great number of registered initiative users.
1 Communicate WWS Scotland + case work across the Partnership.	Report to Fife's March 2017 include together Rec. 2 + partnerships Part of the way for 3	March 2017	TK, DC Policy Team PITs Comm. Team	Awareness of WWS work Collab Learning
2 Capture the learning from the PITs	Later in report to Fife - value of process - link to Fife's Fife	March 2017	Sadie + Fife's Fife Team WWS	Influence on Policy + Practice in Fife Fife's Fife Agenda
3 Build in a sustainable infrastructure for Collaborative Learning for Fife Partnership	Final report - learning from PITs	June 2017	Joe Bloggs WWS	Collaborative learning understood + visible within Fife

Example of notes for an action plan

To enable the sharing of information and dialogue across organisational communication systems, the practitioners and I use Knowledge Hub. The Improvement Service operate Knowledge Hub as an online filing and sharing system to support communities of practice.



## Changes to community planning

The home retreat offered a great opportunity to outline some of the wider policy changes affecting the community planning context and the future working environment of both the central policy officers and local practitioners.

In the final session of the day Tim Kendrick, Fife Council's Community Planning Manager, provided an overview of the new changes such as the Community Empowerment Act, and the need to engage more with residents and communities during service planning. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act includes a requirement for CPPs to engage with community organisations and to focus on disadvantaged neighbourhoods. A key inclusion within the Act is the introduction of 'participation requests' whereby community organisations can request to play a formal role in decision-making processes and groups.



In theory, the Act supports community organisations to manage or buy assets, provides rights to communities regarding the identification of needs and to request action to be taken, and be involved in service planning and provisions. In practice, community planning will now involve the development of Local Outcome Improvement Plans and a greater emphasis on disadvantaged communities within planning areas. Further information on community planning in Fife is [on the Fife Council website](#) and information on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act is [on the Scottish Community Development Centre website](#) and the [Scottish Government website](#).

Tim outlined how the policy team and local community planning officers work on understanding and implementing these changes. Following the home retreat they held an event on 17<sup>th</sup> November 2016 (in partnership with What Works Scotland) aimed at building partnership working and collaborative approaches to tackling wicked issues across Fife<sup>9</sup>. They presented some of the findings and outcomes from the [Fife Strategic Assessment](#) process, and identified the next steps for a range of forthcoming events to develop the partnership and community engagement work.



<sup>9</sup> See report on the What Works Scotland blog: <http://whatworksscotland.blogspot.co.uk/2016/12/policy-to-practice-taking-community-planning-and-a-better-fairer-fife-to-next-level.html>

## Evaluation forms and feedback

For this event the What Works Scotland evaluation forms focussed on encouraging reflection and critical thinking about how the retreat activities might change practice or collaborative action research plans.

***“What have you learned today that you will take in your day-to-day work?”***

*“Need to make much wider links between What Works Scotland work and other plans and strategies, e.g. Fairer Fife, Ways of working, Fife Partnership”*

There are two key messages from the completed evaluation forms. The first message is that many practitioners (more than half of respondents) identified learning about “linking and connecting” (the use of the tree, links between policy and practice, where services can work better together, appreciation of who is out there, connecting to wider partnerships/initiatives).

*“Greater appreciation of who is out there and improved contacts for the future”*

*“Draw on and bring in policy and wider links – as people do benefit from this”*

The second message relates to individual work practice; how to incorporate the linking and connecting into the person’s day-to-day working practices. This includes understanding the process, acknowledging that collaborating is difficult and a continual learning process.

*“Perseverance is important to maintain momentum”*

*“Using the reflections in my practice and in particular be aware of culture and context of partners”*

*“That sometimes I need to not be kneejerk in my responses – others have similar experiences”*

*“Ensure that collaborative practice is a continual learning process and important that teams are mindful of this”*

***“What did you find the most useful and why?”***

To this question, practitioners identified learning (includes sharing) and hearing (includes listening) as the most recurring themes (13 responses/20). Feedback highlights some relief at hearing that all PITs are confronted with similar operational challenges. Perhaps the absence of any specific detail on what participants heard or learnt might point to the fact that the event sought to create “time out to reflect” or “time to come together.” Though less prominent, some participants welcomed the opportunity to have some time to come together to work on the CAR report (three responses/20) whilst others (three responses/20) emphasised the fact that the “next steps” have been drawn up.

- Group discussions, learning what other PITs are doing + community planning info
- Learning how each PIT operates and the challenges faced
- Listening to the perspectives of the policy team, as I tend to focus more on the area workers
- A chance for the PIT group to meet in a new setting and discuss successes and challenges of CAR process + What Works Scotland research work
- Tree exercise – opportunity to consider next steps + opportunity to work towards finalising the report
- The time to come together as a PIT and finalise the CAR report (or time to make changes)
- Working through the CAR report together as a PIT rather than at your own PC
- A chance to hear more about the other PIT groups
- To come together with the other PIT groups and share learning
- All information was useful, networking was good
- Table discussions both within and amongst the groups
- Sharing of information
- Exercise on identifying next 3 steps: helps bring learning down to specifics
- The workshops were most useful – mostly reaffirming my experience and hearing from others + learning reflections input was good
- Time out to reflect + refocus on what we need to do next – Sharing learning
- Hearing about the other PITs and their work – having a plan for the work going forward
- Hearing about and sharing PIT experiences, e.g. making connections section and presentations
- Reflecting on the role of the strategy group and planning next steps
- Hearing about progress made in other PITs
- Taking stock of where individual PITs are at and identifying similarities in the process + critical reflection session was extremely beneficial and improved the understanding of the relationships

## Conclusion: What did we learn?

As What Works Scotland researchers we are continuing to learn and develop a number of key findings on three topics:

1. The nature of public service reform and how this plays out at the local level in the community planning context.
2. To what extent, and in what forms, the collaborative action research approach transfers to this environment and is a useful approach for conducting and understanding research or as a form of workforce and service development.
3. Policy as practice and the ways that different professionals and organisations collaborate and combine to tackle inequality and complex 'wicked issues'.

Throughout 2017, the four What Works Scotland researchers will produce and share a number of detailed reports outlining some of these findings in more detail. However, from this event and the Fife CAR programme to date there are already a number of learning insights:

### CAR does encourage workforce development and change

Throughout the process a number of practitioners became more aware of the working styles and practices of other professions, organisations, and individuals. New relationships and working arrangements developed. As relational practices continue to develop and individuals become better aware of particular policy changes, programmes of work, local initiatives and activities, the relational practices lead to a system that encourages partnership and collaborative working and a healthy alignment of interests and activities. As such, often the impact and outcome of the CAR work can happen within (and largely outside) of the inquiry process or PIT group.

The applicants to the What Works Scotland programme put forward a request to focus on ways of working and the link between the central and the local in the community planning process. Through the CAR work there was a visibly stronger link between the two sides of the community planning context and the individuals involved. There were also some individuals who gained a knowledge about undertaking research and others who have increased their understanding of individual critical reflection. However, it should be noted that, without efforts to spread some of the learning to others in the system, some of these connections will have a limited impact on longer term improvements, particular since the recent Fife council restructuring process has created a slightly different group of policy officers at the local community planning level who were not involved in this work.

### Setting up collaborative action research projects: Roles, responsibilities, and expectations

What did we learn about doing CAR in this context that could be lessons for future work? Embedding and initiating the CAR process was much more complex and difficult than originally anticipated by the What Works Scotland founders and original Fife applicants to the programme. The complexity of relationships, the context of instability and restructuring,

and the diversity of skills and capacities presented a number of hurdles and barriers that complicated the simple 'professional research advisor' to practitioner model. For example, where the original design imagined that the What Works Scotland researcher would provide arms-length technical advice on particular methods, acting as a challenging critical friend or broker for research reports or external speakers for a small number of hours each week, in practice a CAR approach in this context required considerable project management, stakeholder management, and socialisation tasks to get the work set up and moving.

Building the skills and system required to undertake some CAR creates a number of unexpected tasks and activities. This included regularly explaining CAR as an approach through different mediums and intensive mentoring of some groups or individuals. Originally some practitioners also expected that I would identify research questions, identify PIT members, organise rooms, undertake all the data collection, write all the reports, and so forth. Where I have altered expectations to make the boundaries clearer, some of these tasks fell on a small number of practitioners and individuals who chased up work, rectified issues, and coordinated group working. As a CAR team in Fife we collectively reflected on the importance of these, often 'invisible' (but time consuming), tasks to collaborative working. Questions therefore arose about the nature of these tasks; who's responsibility, what skills are required, and how to account for this invisible and often underappreciated work that appeared to be central in effective collaborative working. As such, the inquiry research reports only represent part of our collective learning and the What Works Scotland impact in Fife; there is also much to share on embedding CAR, the skills and resources required, and the nature of workforce change.



### **'Partnership working' versus 'collaborative practice'**

The [What Works Scotland evidence review on partnership working](#) shows that the notion of different public, private, and third sector actors working in partnership has been a dominant idea for public service reform for at least two decades. It also demonstrates that there is much research into what does and doesn't work when setting up new partnerships. To date, however much research and understanding on this topic focuses on very formal, often high level partnerships. For example, the Christie report defines working in partnership as an 'outcomes-based approach' in public service organisations. In the community planning context this involves working in partnership to deliver agreed outcomes between local authorities and the Scottish Government or as a way to align public service provision. At a local level, "the relevant public service organisations should be able to come together to work in partnership, to design and deliver an integrated pattern of service provision for the area" (Christie Commission report, point 5.5).

What we learnt as part of the CAR process is that for partnership working to function well beyond the high level boardroom tables and decisions, there needs to be a shared

understanding and culture of collaborating between different professions, and between practitioners and communities. Whilst 'partnership working' is clear on the policy page and in formal arrangements, the skills and resources required to collaborate together, identify shared aims and interests, find ways of combining different professions and organisations, is extremely complex; it involves a range of social and technical skills, the ability to align across numerous agendas, and emotional intelligence and initiative to create communicative spaces where different practitioners can cooperate in a constructive way to improve their understandings of issues and service needs.

This home retreat created a space for the PIT groups to continue to progress with their research inquiries. It also sought to help build the collaborative arrangements and develop the skills and relationships required to generate changes and improvements to tackle 'wicked issues'. Being able to collaborate well and spread learning across professional and organisational silos may improve service design and delivery.

## We're getting there!

Finally, this event shows that despite barriers and difficulties, we (the Fife practitioners and I) made progress. All three PITs have since completed inquiry reports in 2017. We have learnt a lot about partnership working and collaborating at the local level, and the need to improve the connections and interactions to create relational practices to help ensure that services and processes work well together and meet the needs of communities and individuals. We know a lot more about individual practices and professional norms of different practitioners.

We also know what we would recommend to others embarking on a CAR process, and how we might change and improve our own approach, spread and share our learning and ensure that future organisational changes understand our experience.

It has been a complex process, requiring a range of skills developments, responses to the unstable working context, and gradual practice change.

However, by creating a sustainable and relational basis for collaborative action research I'm confident that the practitioners' future work will move more quickly. I'm looking forward to the future for these groups, and what actions they put in place from the work we have been doing.

