WHAT WORKS SCOTLAND

Collaborative Action Research Report

June 2017

Collaborative Action Research Report:

Fife Partnership Innovation Team exploring the Family Fun Model

Written by Dr Hayley Bennett

University of Edinburgh, What Works Scotland

Co-produced by the Family Services Partnership Innovation Team, Fife

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.

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. 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. It relates to the **Collaborative Action Research** (CAR) Workstream.

What Works Scotland is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Scottish Government www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Dr Hayley Bennett, Research Fellow, University of Edinburgh. On behalf of What Works Scotland, Hayley led the work in the Fife CAR programme.

The content of this report is based on the information the practitioners submitted in their populated inquiry template. Thanks to all who contributed to the work and the content of the template.

Thanks also go to:

- Kevin Lowden, Glasgow University, for supporting the group to populate the reporting template in the final stages of the work.
- Tamara Mulherin for assistance extrapolating information from the populated inquiry report.
  Sharon Murphy, Fife Council, for acting as the What Works Scotland contact throughout the process, assisting throughout the Fife CAR programme, and supporting the inquiry groups.

Contents

1. Introduction and background 1

1.1 Background to What Works Scotland CAR programme in Fife 2
1.2 Brief introduction to collaborative action research in Fife 3

2. Collaborative action research inquiry: Context and topic 5

2.1 Community planning context 5
2.2 Inquiry topic: Family Fun 5
2.2.1 Background to the family fun project in Kirkcaldy 7
2.2.2 Reflections on the Family Fun model in Kirkcaldy 8
2.2.3 Family fun project and local community planning 9

3. The inquiry process 10

3.1 Family Hub Partnership Innovation Team 10
3.2 Data collection 10

4. Research findings 13

4.1 Act strategically but be socially aware when seeking to engage parents 13
4.2 Ensure school and community workers collaborate 15
4.3 Hold sessions directly after school to improve participation 16

5. Learning from the collaborative action research process 17

5.1 Fostering positive relationships 17
5.2 Practitioners conducting research 18
5.3 Relational practices and collaborative working 20
5.3.1 Pre-conditions for successful CAR 20
5.3.2 Familiarity with collaborative learning approaches 21
5.3.3 Diversity and competing workplace logics 21
5.3.4 Uneven understanding of CAR group purpose and activities 21
5.4 Working with university partners and using evidence 22
5.5 Actions 24

6. Discussion 26

7. Conclusion 27

References 27

1. Introduction and background

This report was written by **Dr Hayley Bennett**, Research Fellow, University of Edinburgh and a member of the What Works Scotland team.

On behalf of What Works Scotland Hayley worked with practitioners based in Fife to design and co-produce a broad Fife programme that:

- follows the principles of collaborative action research (CAR)
- focuses on the use of evidence
- encourages critical reflection, and
- suits the agendas, needs, and interests of the practitioners and their working context.

From March 2015 to December 2016 three inquiry groups, known as Partnership Innovation Teams (PITs), created and undertook collaborative action research inquiries as part of a Fife CAR programme.

Fife's vision for working with What Works Scotland centred on using the opportunity to explore ways of working and collaborating. Consequently, the action research work presented here is part of a collaborative learning process and is not a rigorous evaluation of specific programmes or interventions.

Hayley worked to develop and coordinate the wider programme to provide broad CAR resources; broker evidence; arrange and facilitate 'home retreats'; and act as a critical friend to individual practitioners or each inquiry group. Hayley also provided technical research advice and support for various parts of the change process on a one-to-one basis or as part of the broad programme.

As part of the co-produced and agreed CAR programme, the practitioners requested tools and structures regarding the process for reporting the learning. Hayley designed and tested an inquiry reporting template to help the practitioners capture their work and provide an indication of what practitioners may choose to cover in an inquiry or research process. The report also helped to introduce an ethos of reflective learning and acted as a tool to encourage collaborative practice. This report is based on some of the contents of the populated family PIT template. Unless otherwise stated, all sections using quotation marks draw from the practitioners' populated template and are directly drawn from their comments and reflections on undertaking the work.

This report outlines the inquiry work of one of the collaborative action research teams involved in the Fife CAR programme. The contents of this report reflect the work and contributions of individuals within the team.

The team includes (in alphabetical order):

- Julie Anderson – Headteacher, Burntisland Primary School, Fife Council
- JP Easton – Area CLD Team Leader Glenrothes Area, Fife Council
- Leah Levein – Local Development Officer Kirkcaldy, Fife Council
- Mandy MacEwan – Community Education Worker Glenrothes, Fife Council
- Catriona Maclean – Analyst, Fife Council
- Julie McCallum – Family Work Coordinator Central Area, Fife Council
- Margaret McVeigh – Project Worker, Fife Gingerbread
- Chris Miezitis – Projects Officer/CEW, Fife Council
- Tricia O Brien – CEW Family Participation Worker Kirkcaldy, Fife Council
- Laura Thomson – Policy Officer, Fife Council
- Izzy Whyte – Local Development Officer Kirkcaldy, Fife Council
- Rowan Young – Community Education Worker Glenrothes area, Fife Council

Plus:

- Hayley Bennett – University of Edinburgh and What Works Scotland. Critical friend and Fife programme
- Kevin Lowden – University of Glasgow and What Works Scotland. Critical friend

For further information regarding the CAR programme in Fife please contact:

- Sharon Murphy, Policy Coordinator, Fife Council
- Dr Hayley Bennett, University of Edinburgh, and What Works Scotland

1.1 Background to What Works Scotland collaborative action research programme in Fife

This report outlines one of three collaborative action research (CAR) inquiries operating simultaneously in the Kirkcaldy area between March 2015 and December 2016. All three inquiry projects involved groups of Fife-based practitioners working collaboratively to investigate a 'wicked issue'. The Fife application to What Works Scotland identified an interest in working through the research process in a way which would bring together the central Fife Council and Fife Community Planning Partnership (CPP) functions with local community planning and area-based activities. The groups of practitioners are known as Partnership Innovation Teams (PITs). Drawing on their knowledge of their working context, the small group of practitioners involved in the What Works Scotland application identified, and engaged with, colleagues and external practitioners to create inquiry groups. In early discussions with the Fife applicants, What Works Scotland suggested that it might also be worth considering involving non-local government workers due to the nature of the community planning context. Some practitioners in each team and the overarching Fife strategy group invited and sought to bring in a range of different professionals including third sector, police officers, and health workers. However, in practice by the end of the two year period all of the teams are predominately comprised of Fife Council employees,

although there is much variation regarding professional and departmental backgrounds, and locality.

1.2 Brief introduction to collaborative action research in Fife

Collaborative action research (CAR) is type of action research that emphasises the importance of collaborative practices to bring about change. CAR inquiries also unite research activities with individual and collective critical reflection.

> *"The 'collaborative' aspect of the phrase collaborative action research places an emphasis on the social, relational and interactive aspects of the conduct of action research…the distinctive features of this approach are in the mutual benefit of people, with differing but complementary knowledge, skills, responsibilities and sometimes social status, working together in trying to achieve change in a shared aspect of their work and life."*[1]

As an approach (rather than a discrete social research methodology), CAR inquiries include an eclectic mix of activities and data collection methods depending on the research topic, expertise, and inquiry aims. The principles of the CAR approach emphasise reflection, empowerment, and enacting change throughout a research process. The CAR process creates a space for action whereby practitioners examine their own practices, knowledge, and activities to achieve better understanding and improvement.

Four aims of the What Works Scotland CAR approach in Fife

1. Undertake an empirical research inquiry
2. Create a collaborative process (involving a range of practitioners and the What Works Scotland research fellow)
3. Encourage changes to practice through creating spaces for learning and critical reflection
4. Involve the use of evidence and data (relative to capacity and resources)

In this CAR programme What Works Scotland encouraged practitioners to engage in group dialogue to advance learning across professional, departmental, and organisational boundaries. Furthermore, within the CPP context, CAR offered an opportunity to develop communicative spaces to reduce existing collaborative limitations such as differences between professional languages, values, and working practices.

Adopting an ethos of co-production, practitioners identified their own inquiry topics and drawing on the skills and expertise in the group to establish and undertake research inquiries. The Fife application to What Works Scotland included an identified leader of each

[1] Townsend, 2014, 117

group. The PIT leader also sat on the over-arching strategy group and attended What Works Scotland national retreats. These individuals were responsible for championing the collaborative action research process, shaping and leading the research and learning activities, and encouraging the group to work collaboratively to move through their inquiry. What Works Scotland provided a range of methodological and process support as well as offering knowledge brokerage and links to university resources. What Works Scotland also provided facilitation support through home retreats and in some of the PIT meetings where requested.

The learning and experience of this PIT provides insight into some of the challenges of collaborative working. These issues are discussed in details towards the end of this report as such issues and support needs impacted on the pace of the research work, and the extent to which the group were able to complete action research cycles. As discussed in more detail later in the document, in practice What Works Scotland was also required to produce a range of extra resources and direct interventions to introduce and reassure those practitioners who had not previously encountered action research, collaborative learning, or critical reflection. In this context, some practitioners sought additional support regarding some of the relational aspects of this work, particularly during the early stages of setting up the groups and when faced with collaborative issues.

2. Collaborative action research inquiry: Context and topic

2.1 Community planning context

Fife is one of 32 community planning partnerships (CPPs) in Scotland. Community planning is a governance mechanism that seeks to bring together a range of statutory partners to collaborative to identify and deliver services.

The Scottish Government states that:

> *"Effective community planning brings together the collective talents and resources of local public services and communities to drive positive change on local priorities. It focuses on where partners' collective efforts and resources, can add most value for their local communities, with particular emphasis on reducing inequalities"*[2]

Fife's community planning activities came into practice in 1999 through the establishment of the Fife Partnership and their production of the first Community Plan (2000 – 2010). Alongside Fife Partnership, a board and executive group work together to put priorities into practice and shape service provision across the public, voluntary, and private sectors in Fife. In theory, the Partnerships groups work together to channel their resources. Partners are currently working towards the outcomes identified in the most recent community plan: *Fife's Community Plan 2011 - 2020*.

Fife Council has also established seven areas in Fife, each with its own Area Committee consisting of all the local councillors in that area and each with its own Local Community Plan (LCP). The application to What Works Scotland specifically focussed on one of the seven areas, Kirkcaldy, which has its own Local Community Plan. The application to What Works Scotland included three broad topics linked to existing community planning work in Kirkcaldy: welfare services, family services, and school interventions.

2.2 Inquiry topic: Family Fun

It is within this context that the 'Family Services' Partnership Innovation Team decided to focus on how to engage parents in services. The group chose to specifically explore the 'family fun' projects operating in Kirkcaldy to understand 'what works' and develop reflective learning. The collaborative action research inquiry outlined in this report took place between March and December 2016. This inquiry group met seven times during this period including PIT meetings and sub-groups working on specific parts of the data collection and writing processes.

[2] Scottish Government, no date
http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Government/PublicServiceReform/CP/HowCPWorks

The PIT team that undertook this inquiry developed from an earlier attempt to establish a CAR group to look at a different topic (a co-located family hub approach). As such, it grew from a range of previous (and ongoing) What Works Scotland support and interactions including facilitated sessions, events, home retreats, and national retreat activities, as well as the parallel CAR activities taking place within the same locality. The group also received support, guidance, and advice through one-to-one What Works Scotland critical friend interventions, and through support from other Fife-based practitioners engaged in the What Works Scotland programme (although outside of the PIT group itself).

The strategy group system also offered a space through which the PIT lead and others involved in the work could share issues, reflections, or learning to their colleagues and the What Works Scotland team. As such, although some of the practitioners involved in this group originally faced difficulties for a number of months identifying a research topic and inquiry team, over time there was an improvement in understanding which enabled a small number of individuals involved from the start of the CAR programme to identify a topic and create a revamped inquiry team in April 2016. This new PIT consisted of 14 core members, most of whom are employed by Fife Council in various departments or localities. The membership involved practitioners from a range of different professional backgrounds. There was also much variation in their day-to-day ways of working and regular places of work. Although most practitioners had not worked together before (and some had never met previously), some practitioners knew each other and had worked together previously.

Local government: Based at the 'centre' with Fife-wide functions

- Policy Officer
- Analyst (Research team)

Local government: Kirkcaldy-based practitioners

- Two Local Development Officers
- Family Participation Officer
- Seconded Early Years Coordinator

Local government: based in other localities in Fife

- Family Participation Officer (Central Area)
- Community Education Worker (Glenrothes)
- Community Learning and Development team leader (Glenrothes)

Third sector

- Project Worker

What Works Scotland representatives

- Research Fellow, University of Edinburgh
- Plus occasional extra support from a Research Fellow, based at the University of Glasgow

2.2.1 Background to the family fun project in Kirkcaldy

The practitioners identified and agreed to focus on the existing family fun projects operating in Kirkcaldy as they felt that this topic would enable them to understand activities that offer the joining up of different aims: increasing parental engagement with schools and providing access to adult learning.

Practitioners' notes: context and development of the Kirkcaldy Family Fun Project [3]

The Family Fun project began as a partnership project between Kirkcaldy Community Learning and Development staff (Fife Council), third sector and family support staff with the Pathhead Primary School team [in Kirkcaldy]. The headteacher of Pathhead Primary School identified a need to better engage vulnerable parents in the school setting as well as improve links with the wider community. Likewise, whilst engaging with local parents, the Community Education Worker [Fife Council] observed that although it had been challenging to involve these parents in adult learning based opportunities, many did request activities they could enjoy with their children.

It was discussed and agreed that they would run a four-week pilot of non-threatening, informal provision where families could come along to the school and spend quality time with their children engaging in simple, low cost activities. The sessions were set up for an hour-and-a-half after school one day a week and offered a variety of activities as well as a healthy snack. All activities were provided free of charge.

An evaluation demonstrated the success of the four-week pilot, and they continued to run them. The sessions have continued since, with families moving on and others joining.

The original stated aim of the Pathhead Family Fun sessions were:

- Improved relationships between school and families
- To promote positive interaction and relationships between parents and their children
- Increase parents' awareness and engagement in their child's learning
- To promote and allow easy access to informal adult learning opportunities

Most of the PIT members worked directly on, or were aware of, the original Family Fun projects before they joined the PIT.

[3] I have drawn practitioner quotes and boxes from the populated inquiry report. What Works Scotland encouraged the PIT lead to work collaboratively with all members to populate the templates throughout the process.

Practitioners' notes: development and delivery of the Family Fun project

Evaluations have consistently demonstrated that parents enjoy the benefits of the protected time spent with their children. An important additional outcome is that parents, again consistently, report feeling more comfortable in the school environment and feel more at ease approaching school staff for support in a range of situations. The staff at the school reported increased levels of engagement with parents keen to learn more about their children's school life and how they could be a larger part of it. A facilitated self-evaluation highlighted the parents had recognised that Family Fun was the start of their adult learning journey with many using the knowledge gained from community learning and development (CLD) staff facilitating the sessions to springboard to other learning opportunities, volunteering and involvement in community initiatives.

The Pathhead model was consistently well populated with around 20 to 30 parents, carers and children attending each week. As a result of the Pathhead experience and recognition of this approach as a way to engage families in a non-threatening and meaningful way, Family Fun has been spread across the four Neighbourhood Development Areas in Kirkcaldy with sessions running in Burntisland, Kirkcaldy West, Templehall Primary and Valley primary schools servicing the communities highest in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) rankings.

2.2.2 Reflections on the Family Fun model in Kirkcaldy

Those individuals within the group who work directly on the Family Fun model observed that the success of the Pathhead Model has "*not always been easy to replicate*".

Practitioners' notes: replicating the Family Fun model

Within each specific school setting, support staff have varying levels of experience and knowledge, dependent on their own background. The support staff felt that this created some disparity in approach and knowledge, particularly in the ability to facilitate and signpost families to access additional services and the range of skills required to successfully engage families in a more informal group work session. They also identified that availability of school staff to support the sessions has varied between schools, and the sometimes temporary and transient nature of supporting staff in general has been a challenge.

The practitioners identified that this inquiry would fit within the Kirkcaldy Area Local Community Plan and key priority area 'Family, Early Years and Young People' theme. The practitioners also identified that the community planning local priority is closely aligned to developments within a children's services context and particularly Fife Council's recent

investment in a transformational change programme focusing on early intervention and prevention. Known as the Family Nurture approach[4], this change programme focuses on improvement in service planning and applying a strength-based and multi-agency approach. The practitioners who were familiar with this approach consider that its core focus is community engagement and empowerment. As such, the PIT thought that learning from the inquiry into the family fun project would be able to contribute to the wider discussions regarding engaging families in services.

2.2.3 Family fun project and local community planning

Many of the practitioners involved in the family PIT are possess a community learning and development professional background. They felt that family-fun and this inquiry linked to Fife CLD's recent 'Family Learning Practice Framework' and the learning from this inquiry would align with a range of services and policy directives regarding the Early Years Strategy, work with Children and Families and the Family Nurture Hub approach. Similarly, they identified a link to the Fife 'Parenting Strategy.'

[4] For further information on Family Nurture approach in Fife please see: http://www.fifedirect.org.uk/topics/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.display&p2sid=950B470B-FE88-25C1-90393AD0F09F532C&themeid=2B4D39FB-1CC4-E06A-5201AAA15FE8C653

3. The inquiry process

3.1 Family Hub Partnership Innovation Team

Following the Fife CAR programme and key principles outlined in Section 1 of this report, this inquiry involved the creation of a team of practitioners involved in early years, community development, and family services from a range of professions, departments, and organisations. By working through an inquiry together the CAR approach would provide a space for the group to question, challenge, and explore the viewpoints and activities of other organisations and professions. It would also bring together individuals working in other parts of the system and shed learning and insight into how different professionals understand and enact their work. After a number of meetings and discussions the group decided to specifically explore:

"How can organisations work better together to improve outcomes for families at a local level?"

They then decided to focus on a specific question:

"Why are families participating?"

The group sought to better understand the design and delivery of Family Fun initiatives so that other localities within Fife (primarily Glenrothes), could understand what works and how they could develop their own version of the approach. With Glenrothes practitioners being at an early stage of initiating their own version of the Family Fun approach, this inquiry served an immediate purpose as it enabled the bringing together of individuals working in different localities within Fife to explore learning across localities.

Practitioners' notes

The need to improve access to services for families, to build on families' strengths and to help to develop their individual capacities sits within a context of austerity cuts, shrinking services and the impact of welfare cuts on families. Temporary and transient staffing populations can often provide an additional challenge to statutory and third sector family support services.

3.2 Data collection

The team identified a data collection and research plan to undertake between May and December 2016. The data collection plan focussed on facilitating focus groups and undertaking interviews with existing and previous Family Fun participants (parents). The group chose to use qualitative data collection methods. In a PIT meeting the group discussed various approaches. One PIT member noted in the report template that they felt that:

> *"Face-to-face engagement with participants in focus groups and interviews, rather than using questionnaires or Surveymonkey etc., would help to tease out more in depth responses."*

The practitioners discussed what they sought to better understand and decided that they would undertake the research with the sites where Family Fun had been operating the longest. It was determined that group members from Glenrothes would undertake the focus groups and interviews as they also felt that:

> *"…the facilitation and personal engagement this offered with participants was an opportunity to glean at first hand a potentially deeper understanding of the views of these participants."*

The policy officer and analyst produced consent forms and, along with practitioners from Glenrothes and some of those directly involved in the Family Fun project in Kirkcaldy, they carried out two focus groups with parents from Pathhead and Burntisland primary schools' Family Fun projects. They hoped that around six parents would attend each focus groups, however only three parents were involved in the Burntisland session and two at Pathhead. They also found that during the data collection process some of the parents at both groups had speech and learning difficulties. The facilitators reflected that this had an impact on both how fully the questions could be answered and how fully they had been understood. They also carried out four single interviews with participants from Pathhead, Kirkcaldy West, and Burntisland primary schools. They did not target specific parents but asked all parents if they would like to be involved. The practitioners involved in facilitating the focus groups felt that their own practitioner experience was "*key to teasing out authentic, or 'real' feedback from those that participated".*

The data collection part of the process involved many of the team. The policy officer and analyst also coordinated the collection of questions and took notes at the focus groups. The Glenrothes-based practitioners conducted the interviews and focus groups, alongside the interviews by the community development work engaged in the original Pathhead project.

Practitioners' notes: process of identifying questions to capture the different interests across the group

A total of 56 questions were compiled by PIT members electronically and grouped into 'Before, During & After' participation in the Family Fun sessions. These were then distributed back to the PIT group for feedback and comment. The staff involved in organising the focus sessions and interviews then refined these into 20 more informal questions which the interviews and focus groups would be based on. These were then edited and softened so as to be more suited to the Family Fun environment.

Following the data collection process with parents, the Glenrothes Community Learning and Development Manager facilitated a discussion with the Kirkcaldy-based staff involved in delivering the Family Fun project. These colleagues shared their thoughts and learning on their experience running the programmes.

4. Research findings

The group's capacity and comfort with designing and undertaking a research process was relatively low[5] and, as this inquiry started later in the timespan for the What Works Scotland programme, the group were working to a shorter time period. As such, whilst they were able to collect data and undertake cross-learning, there was perhaps a relatively less rigorous analysis process than may be expected when conducting social research or than took place in the other two PITs in Kirkcaldy. That said, some of the practitioners did collectively discuss and identify key learning and were able to reflect on the process of undertaking interviews and focus groups.

The following section outlines the practitioners' key learning for those seeking to replicate the Family Fun project.

4.1 Act strategically but also be socially aware when seeking to engage parents

In terms of publicising Family Fun to potential parents, the school and community education staff felt that the opportunity should be open to everyone, but also that specific parents who may benefit most would be informally invited as part of a discreet targeting process. The practitioners noted that posters placed around the school and leaflets being dropped into children's school bags are common and standard ways that schools tend to advertise and invite parents to take part in available school activities. However, for some Family Fun activities, staff targeted specific families to the sessions in discreet or tactful ways. Some parents had expressed awareness that that they had been specifically approached by teachers, when other parents hadn't.

Some of the practitioners reported that there had been some backlash and negativity from parents when they thought that they had been targeted to attend the sessions. However, one of the parent interviewees recognised that there were benefits to this targeting.

Identifying and targeting only some parents or families can negatively impact involvement and engagement

[5] Based on professional researcher's diary and practitioners' emails.

"…where I was at that stage – heavy duty social work involvement, kids being put back on the register for six months, I was in a bad place and my kids missed out on an awful lot. It was a way of getting my time back with them I suppose".

The practitioners also noted that the initial annoyance felt by the parent who had been "targeted" was overcome through engagement and conversation with the community worker, and they still participated in the sessions and were described as having gained a lot from attending.

The practitioners noted that as the Family Fun sessions developed, word of mouth and encouragement from parents who were already engaged, led to an increase in attendance from other parents (including those that staff had initially sought to work with). Parents spoke consistently across the interviews about encouraging other parents to come along.

"Why did you come to Family Fun?"

"I saw it advertised at a parent's night. I knew other people who were already going which encouraged me to go"

"I have encouraged others to go and get involved. No-one told them to go. "

The social element/interaction of the session was a key factor in attracting parents to the groups. There was also a consistent emphasis on protected time to spend with their children.

"What is the best thing about Family Fun?"

"Just having that time with your kids, meeting up with friends and their kids too."

"Being able to interact with your kids in a fun environment. In the house it is different and more stressful, too stressful"

"What motivated you to come?"

"More socialisation. I feel isolated. I have no friends locally. I like it."

"…children are hungry after school!"

The PIT team note that the basic attraction of a snack also emerged as a possibly more important aspect than they had previously realised. PIT members also identified that adult participants in some of the sessions have been signposted on to further learning opportunities. The practitioners felt that this was as an important outcome for the initiative. They also note that parents emphasised the fun element as a key draw to attendance.

4.2 Ensure staff in schools and community workers work collaboratively to develop and run sessions

The PIT identified some practical aspects of initiating and developing the family fun sessions. For example, the importance of headteachers as a champion of Family Fun activities and that their buy-in is vital to the sessions working. Interestingly, the practitioners noted that the headteacher felt that the teaching staff needed to maintain some distance from the running of the groups; if they were seen to be using the sessions as an opportunity to "grab" parents that were otherwise difficult to engage, parents may be may dissuaded from returning. The PIT practitioners involved in the Kirkcaldy programmes noted that Family Fun works best where there was flexibility and prioritisation around providing school-based support assistants to help run the groups.

4.3 Have the sessions at the schools directly after the school day to improve participation (from both staff and parents)

Some of the PIT's discussions highlighted how to ensure buy-in and engagement from school staff and parents. They noted highlighted some very practical ways to improve the likelihood of success including running the sessions directly after the school day and providing food.

"If I were to go straight home after school then I wouldn't take time to do things with the kids. I'd just go back to household chores – getting the tea ready, tidying up. By staying straight after school I dedicate that time to playing with them. I also enjoy the social interaction with other parents and families too."

5. Learning from the collaborative action research process

By analysing the populated inquiry template and drawing on the experience over the course of the work, it is possible to highlight a number of areas for discussion.

5.1 Fostering positive relationships

Some practitioners noted a positive outcome from the work. The most noticeable outcome was the improved relationship between some of the Glenrothes and Kirkcaldy practitioners, as well as an improved central and local connection.

Practitioner's notes: fostering relationships

New relationships have formed between Glenrothes and Kirkcaldy practitioners. There is an aim to develop similar Family Fun inputs in the Glenrothes setting and to continue to share practice and learning into the future.

It is important to recognise the value of this new working collaboration between these areas. Within the areas of Glenrothes and Kirkcaldy there are neighbourhoods and localities that all have their own idiosyncrasies and individual characteristics and nuances. There are also differences in the local partnership networks and cultures in Kirkcaldy and Glenrothes. This is in part due to the individual characters of the officers and colleagues involved locally and their respective relationships to each other and to their areas.

However, the agreement and plan to continue to share learning across these two areas will hopefully demonstrate how a model template approach can be tweaked and moulded to respond to all of these individual and varying local and professional contexts.

As improving relations between different parts of the community planning system was the primary aim of the original Fife application to What Works Scotland this is a positive outcome from this work. The Glenrothes-based staff stated that the process and opportunity to learn about the details of designing and delivering projects across places was valuable, and that the CAR approach has created working relationships that will help with future cross-location working.

> *"I'm glad I did get involved and glad that members of the Glenrothes team got involved as we have adopted and adapted 'Making the Links' approach and we, as a result of the focus group discussions and evaluations, found out much more about Family Learning which we will apply in Glenrothes".*

A further aim of some of the strategy group had been to use the What Works Scotland opportunity to strengthen the links between workers engaged in community development

activities and schools within particular neighbourhoods. Feedback from this inquiry suggests this has been a positive outcome from creating the PIT.

Practitioners' notes: links

Stronger links have now been made with the school staff teams, as there are now dedicated workers in each school including early years officers and teachers. Feedback from staff has been very positive especially valuing their observations of relationships between parents and children.

The original application emphasised strengthening the central-local relationship and improve the understanding between different practitioners in different parts of the system. This PIT included a range of local practitioners and a policy officer and analyst based at the centre. Whilst the different professions have often had different views on ways of working, speed of activities, and management of tasks (which created some difficulties and interpersonal tensions) most practitioners who continued throughout the process showed commitment and effort to trying to make this work.

Practitioners' notes: central-local relationships

Another key new working relationship has developed between front-facing community engagement staff and policy officers. The policy officers involved have a community planning remit in their posts, yet previously had had little working relationship with these frontline staff.

This process has allowed staff involved in direct engagement and practice to work more closely with staff involved in the development of policy and planning. There has been a new appreciation on both sides for the other of the differing cultures, approaches and skills that each has. There is now, between these workers, the beginnings of a dialogue that should strengthen links between policy and practice.

5.2 Practitioners conducting research

What Works Scotland asked the PIT members to share their reflections on undertaking the CAR work. A key feature of this group was the unevenness and difference between experiences and views of the CAR process and conducting the research work. As this quote from the template demonstrates some practitioners found the work familiar.

> *"In terms of my own practice being challenged or affirmed through this process – I do not feel that my practice was challenged in anyway. I feel that I will be able to take the learning from this, for example all the recommendations as to why this approach works and in particular how this best suits families."*

However, some individuals (although not all) did struggle over the course of the work to understand the principles of collaborative action research or the basic technical aspects of undertaking a research project. There were also difficulties with this group regarding the uneven understanding and ease of technical and non-technical research processes and data collection methods. Some in the group were not as keen as their colleagues to adopt a research mindset, or engage in action research. Using a research approach to explore practice and learning drew conflicting views about the data collection process. One PIT member spoke positively about engaging in the research process:

> *"During the focus group I feel that the participants engaged very well and I felt that I was able to engage with them and encourage them to share their thoughts quite easily. I feel that the participants felt comfortable in answering their questions honestly and that by making them feel at ease, the answers we received could be used to shape future projects across Fife".*

Similarly, another practitioner stated that they:

> *"Enjoyed the focus groups and the chance to spend time talking to staff about the Family Fun/Family Learning sessions, the benefits of them to the families and to the schools too."*

However, some others felt that the interviews and focus group approach did not effectively gain the views from parents or attract parental engagement and that their own training and skills in engaging with parents could have led to greater understanding of the programmes. This may be the case as many of the group had community development backgrounds and previous experience using innovative methods in community engagement. Other PITs chose to use their existing skills and capacity within the inquiry process and it is not clear as to why alternative processes were not discussed or put forward during the Family PIT meetings or the national and home retreats (which covered research design process and data collection tasks).

Nevertheless by the end of the programme the group had pulled together a relatively sound data collection plan and some practitioners did attempt to gather data and draw on their own experiences to effectively share learning between Kirkcaldy and Glenrothes. The addition of the Glenrothes staff and new focus did improve the focus and relational aspects of the group work, leading to a refreshed enthusiasm for some of the existing group members.

The group experienced some difficulties writing up the work at the end of the project, and some of the practitioners appeared to find this challenging and onerous[6]. Compared to the other groups it is likely that this was because the writing process was undertaken in a relatively short time period rather than throughout the final six months of the CAR process. There was no requirement for the group to write up their inquiry, particularly if it was to challenging or problematic. However, What Works Scotland offered additional support, and Fife colleagues prioritized supporting and providing input to the template, which enabled the PIT leader and a PIT colleague to populate the reporting template and submit some reflections.

5.3 Relational practices and collaborative working

This CAR process was relatively long compared to the inquiry presented here. It took 13 months to go from the initial phase of What Works Scotland meetings to the point where the PIT lead identified the research topic covered in this report. The PIT had explored other topics during this time, however it took many months for some of the practitioners involved to identify a research topic that would interest a range of people and sustain an inquiry group. It can be a challenging environment with staff turnover, a range of changes to service provision, and practitioners employed in temporary positions or on secondments. The research experience presented in this report also highlights difficulties regarding the capacity and skills as well as the time restrictions as issues to consider when undertaking a CAR process.

PIT members offered a variety of views about the collaborative process. Below, I outline a number of themes that can be identified from analysing the populated template and the notes and interactions over the process.

5.3.1 Pre-conditions for successful CAR

The CAR literature and practical guides often emphasise the need for a range of pre-conditions for undertaking action research or collaborative learning work. This includes those taking part being 'activists' or champions of collaborative working, adopting an 'inquiring mind', as well as a range of technical knowledge, and relational practice skills[7]. Although it was not the fault of specific individuals or the group as a whole, at times this PIT struggled due to some of the pre-conditions not being in place at the individual or group level. For example, some practitioners were mandated into the group and as such, it was not always the case that individuals were champions and advocates for the collaborative action research approach to learning and developing. During the initial stages some of the

[6] It is worth briefly noting that the reporting process, including written outputs and the template for support the writing process were originally requests for more support from the Fife team, and also developed through a co-produced process. See Fife CAR programme overview document: whatworksscotland.ac.uk/casesites/fife
[7] See Fife CAR programme overview document for further information whatworksscotland.ac.uk/casesites/fife

group also struggled to identify an inquiry topic that would directly link to their existing work tasks and responsibilities.

5.3.2 Familiarity with collaborative learning approaches

For a number of practitioners involved in this PIT (in the previous and current configuration), ideas and terminology around action research or collaborative inquiry were completely new and, for some, this was unnerving. There were various levels of understanding and some practitioners appeared anxious at times with the approach. Some seemed to expect What Works Scotland to give detailed directions and decisions for them to implement or assume that What Works Scotland would intensively project-manage the inquiry process or solve relational problems within the group. This was a difficult expectation to address. However, the difficulties were compounded because other members of the group sought less parameters and directions and were reluctant to draw on the What Works Scotland offers of evidence-brokering or critical friend guidance to undertake data collection and analysis. Collectively the different levels of experience, skills, and speed of understanding the work impacted on the working of the group and benefits of doing CAR.

5.3.3 Diversity and competing workplace logics

This PIT group was completely new; some of the practitioners had never met before the What Works Scotland project and most of the practitioners involved in this PIT did not work in the same physical locations. Although there were improvements over time, bringing together a somewhat diverse group of practitioners, skills, values, and workplace logics can create both negative and positive developments. By creating a PIT group format, What Works Scotland sought to provide space and sanctuary, within which the practitioners could work together to identify and develop insight and learning into an area of interest to their work. The CAR model can create collaborative and innovative spaces where individual practitioners are empowered to think critically and to look at issues pertinent to them. However, creating such 'open' spaces in workplaces and contexts where practitioners may be more akin to a strict ordering of activities and behavior can also create difficulties. In this case some practitioners may have found this approach daunting or unnerving.

5.3.4 Uneven understanding of CAR group purpose and activities

Some practitioners shared frustrations regarding their experience in the collaborative process. Their concerns included issues around leadership, direction, enthusiasm, and general organisation. Unlike the other CAR groups in this context that faced similar issues at the early start up stage, this group continued to experience this problem throughout much of the research process. Many practitioners who had sought to join the group or stayed

> *"Participating in the PIT was not easy as I came late to the process and it was a bit awkward coming to a meeting where I couldn't tell how committed people were and if they knew what they were doing?"*

involved in the group shared some concerns or queries (outside the formal communication arrangements) that they did not understand or see the direction of the work, know how they could contribute, or felt unable to fairly contribute to how the work was being shaped. Whilst this experience did not occur across all three PITs, it raises questions regarding the PIT format and whether creating the space for inquiries, new working relations, and different power relations can also be disruptive if the group is not well developed or working with a shared vision and group coherence

> *"There was definite learning in some of the uncomfortable PIT meetings (where I didn't know what people were contributing and how much I could get involved, etc.) and reinforcing how to work in groups/manage situations."*

There was an uneven understanding between members and some ambiguity about the purpose and activities of the group. This created a substantial amount of extra work for both What Works Scotland and some of the strategy group who had to manage the interpersonal dynamics and organisational problems throughout the two years. Over time, some individuals in the group did start to reflect and identify what actions could help to improve the group dynamics and working. Some practitioners also stated that they found the process of CAR and the learning cycle familiar, and their reflections demonstrated an ease with some of the key aspects of the work.

> *"I feel that because I have good interpersonal skills I was able to engage very quickly with the focus group and was able to quickly gauge the impact of attending these sessions and the impact it had on their lives. I was able to question and challenge any comments that were made during the focus group and also the PIT meetings"*

The PIT experience demonstrates the possible variation between individuals within one group and the impact this has on the important socialisation and grouping expectations of collaborative work. A key piece of learning for those initiating collaborative learning processes is the role and training provided to group leaders and also how to foster peer mentoring support for those individuals who are less akin to the nature of collaborative work.

5.4 Working with university partners and using evidence

To create the CAR process and support PIT groups, What Works Scotland co-designed and arranged various support 'tools' including the broad Fife CAR programme[8] and the offer to broker evidence and information, and act as a critical friend. However, for CAR to work well alongside the technical research skills, we (both What Works Scotland and the practitioners

[8] See Fife CAR programme overview for further information

involved in this PIT) have collectively learnt that the approach assumes and requires a range of existing skills within a group such as:

- Relational skills: to work with and articulate views to challenge or support PIT colleagues
- Organisational skills: to keep a disparate group of practitioners working together
- Leadership skills: to think critically and engage with others in a dialogic approach
- Communication skills: To identify and communicate a vision and engage relevant colleagues

Although there was improvement over time and there were positive experiences from the Family Fun inquiry and the contributions of some of the new members, this PIT group experienced some relational and organisational difficulties throughout the project. It is likely that some of the issues relate to a range of issues within the context, but also misunderstanding regarding roles and responsibilities.

Throughout the process it appeared that some of the practitioners' understanding of support differed from the information provided by What Works Scotland throughout the process[9]. For example, some conceived support to mean directing decision-making, or managing the relational aspects. What Works Scotland staff attempted to provide external evidence for the group to consider in PIT meetings, offered a learning trip to other locations in Scotland to understand other approaches to parental engagement, and offered to broker a seminar speaker to bring evidence to the group. However, some practitioners requested support that equated to the researcher managing the PIT and doing work tasks on behalf of the PIT, others sought basic administrative support.

Some of the issues shared in the final template regarding a lack of understanding of the process or roles were not raised in the spaces where Fife colleagues engaged in the process could offer support and guidance (for example, preceding strategy group meetings or the November home retreat). Such issues also raise questions about the 'space' that is created using the CAR approach. Where there is less accord amongst a group, the allocation of tasks and responsibilities can raise strains between PIT members, particularly during times of organisational restructuring and service reductions when individuals already have full workloads or limited time to commit to the inquiry. As such, despite engagement, resources, and much more intensive support than offered in the original What Works Scotland offer to the case sites, when undertaking a co-produced CAR inquiry it remains difficult to understand whether individuals are fully aware of the work, engaging in resources, or confident with managing an inquiry process.

What Works Scotland tried to reduce confusion and difficulties by explaining roles and responsibilities, and by introducing or encouraging critical reflection so that individuals

[9] See Fife CAR programme overview document for more information whatworksscotland.ac.uk/casesites/fife

within the PIT identified problems but also considered how they could contribute or lead solutions[10]. Similarly, through home and national retreats What Works Scotland sought to encourage practitioners to discuss difficulties and share solutions across PIT groups and across the four What Works Scotland case partners (Aberdeenshire, Glasgow, Fife, and West Dunbartonshire). However, it would have been beyond the scope of the arrangement to directly intervene to manage particular issues between colleagues; ultimately it was up to individual practitioners and their line managers as to how they engage in the work, their enthusiasm for adopting an 'inquiring mind', and how they seek to solve interpersonal problems.

Despite the challenging journey, it is likely that the group would be in a better position to understand and utilise evidence brokering offers in the future, now that it has worked through a CAR cycle.

5.5 Actions

At the November home retreat What Works Scotland provided facilitated time and tools for the practitioners to identify an action plan. Many within the group engaged in learning and identified a number of planned actions from their work.

[10] Further information is available in the Fife CAR programme overview document whatworksscotland.ac.uk/casesites/fife

"I have a pilot planned, taking forward the recommendations from the focus groups and report. I have built up relationships with colleagues in other areas of Fife due to this piece of work and they have agreed to facilitate an evaluation of the pilot project that will run in Glenrothes."

"Since taking part in the PIT and facilitating the focus group I have taken this learning and the recommendations as to why certain Family Fun sessions have worked and applied it to the start of planning a brand new project in Glenrothes. I have been in touch with a local primary school to begin a pilot in January 2017. We have taken on board all the recommendations from the findings of the focus groups and the interviews."

"The basic model for Family Fun remains unchanged but in response to some of the feedback from each school we have changed such things as the structure of the sessions with more focus on eating snack together at a specific time to encourage quality family mealtime. Also more age-appropriate activities are available especially now for older children. The parents at Pathhead stated that they would like to see activities that were suitable for the upper aged children of the school "for example, sports activities or family cooking."

"It is hoped the What Works Scotland process and findings will promote further support from Education and Children's Services in the allocation of staff and resources to enable continuing Family Fun/family engagement sessions to continue to flourish and develop within the school setting."

"The way we advertise and select families is now more discreet as it was noted that some parents felt singled out. So although it is mainly targeted work, the publicity will go out to the whole school and the school team will prioritise the families they have identified as 'most in need of the service'."

"Feedback from the CAR process, PIT group discussions, interviews and focus groups with current participants will further develop the Family Fun delivery in targeted neighbourhood areas in Kirkcaldy."

6. Discussion

This PIT work highlights two area of discussion. The first relates to the inquiry itself into parental engagement in activities at schools:

1. How can practitioners with expertise in community engagement use these techniques in collaborative action research processes? What techniques might improve upon traditional social research approaches when exploring engagement?
2. This research explored why parents engage, focussing on those parents using the service. Further research may want to consider those parents who do not engage: Are they getting support elsewhere? What are the barriers to engagement?

The second discussion relates to capacity issues that should be considered when initiating a CAR project in the complex multi-agency and multi-professional setting:

1. Collaborative action research works best when practitioners are open to this style of working and keen to engage in critical reflection and inquiry processes.
2. The PIT process requires clear leadership and understanding around responsibilities. This must be defined through a discursive process ensuring that adopted roles reflect strengths and skills of group members.
3. Some group members may look to external partners to communicate interpersonal difficulties rather than engaging in dialogue within the created spaces for such discussions, such as the facilitated home retreats or the PIT meetings.
4. Even with additional tools or assistance, some practitioners may find it difficult to write up their reflections or the research work.
5. Some practitioners may be unfamiliar with the critical friend role or equate facilitation to leadership.

Questions:

1. Would incorporating a formal peer mentoring system improve upon some of the difficulties experienced by this group?
2. What other forms of facilitation or tools for discussion could improve group work?

7. Conclusion

This report presents the experience and learning of one of three collaborative action research teams operating in Fife between as part of the What Works Scotland project. The inquiry in Family Fun services focused on understanding why parents engage. Whilst going through this process in a collaborative manner the group also shared learning on how to improve working and communicating together to explore such initiatives, gained insight from one locality to influence learning and the development of initiatives in another locality, and developed working relationships that can be developed for further dialogue and learning.

After a range of What Works Scotland and Fife colleague interventions and resources, alongside some determined colleagues, the PIT lead was able to form an inquiry group involving a range of team members to undertake an inquiry towards the end of What Works Scotland process. There were problems and issues and, compared to the other two PITs in Fife, the research activities in this group were relatively limited. Nevertheless the experience of this group offers valuable insight regarding collaborative learning and the use of CAR in particular contexts and settings. It highlights the importance of the pre-conditions to undertaking such work, and the extent to which CAR initiatives engage in particular contexts. Despite the difficulties, there were pragmatic actions and the inquiry led to tangible learning for some practitioners.

For What Works Scotland we are keen to continue to explore and share learning on issues such as the variation of capacity, skills, and resource demands to undertaking public service reform based on the concept of collaborative governance. Furthermore, there is an increasing desire for universities to engage and work more closely with non-academic partners. In this way it is useful to understand the complexity of this relationship and the assumed activities and roles that academics may experience, or the difficulties some practitioners experience when faced with what they perceive to be 'new' terms or concepts.

References

Townsend, A. (2014). Collaborative Action Research in Coghlan, D., and Brydon-Miller, M. Eds (2014). *'The Sage encyclopaedia of action research'.* Sage publications, Thousand Oaks.