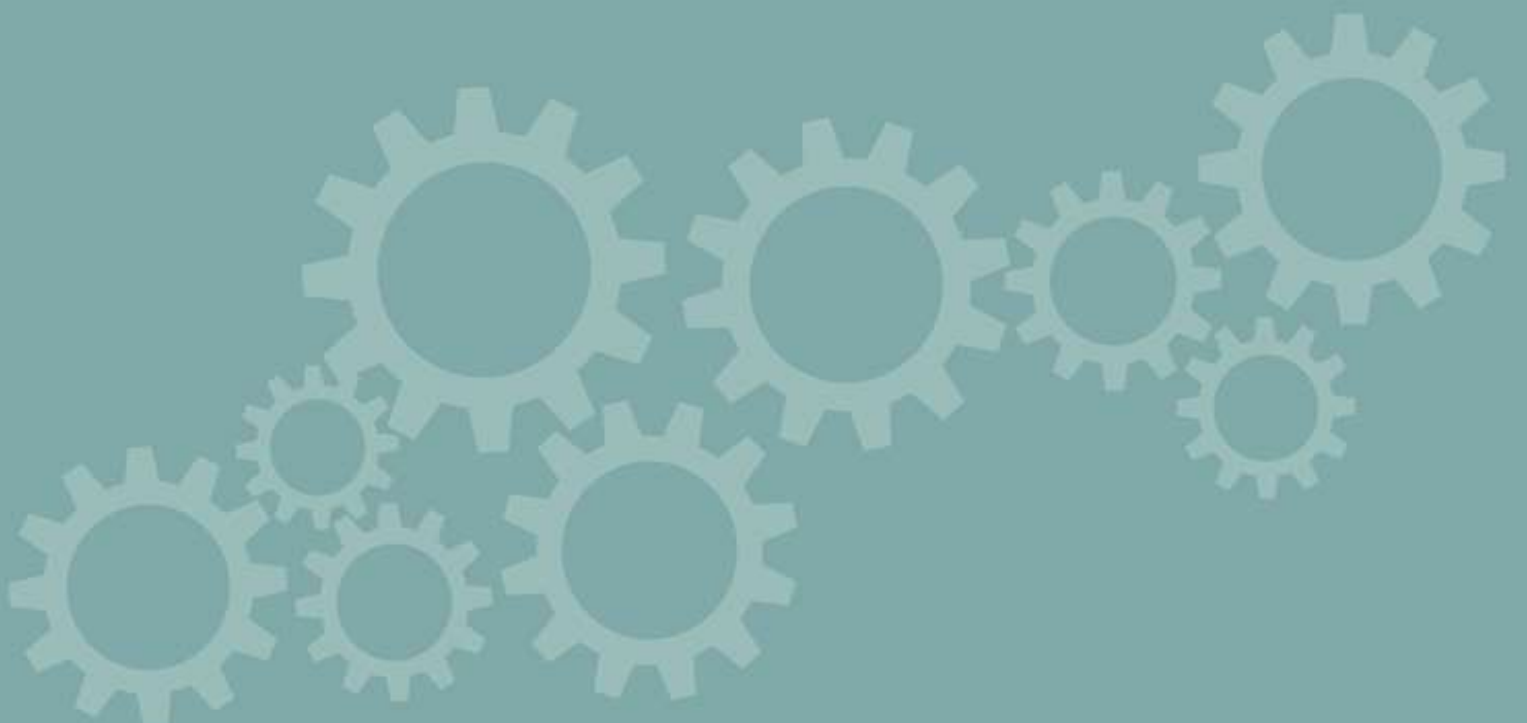# WHAT WORKS SCOTLAND

Collaborative Inquiry Exploring Data and Knowledge-sharing Practices in Responses to Welfare Sanctions

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University of Edinburgh, What Works Scotland

Co-produced by the Welfare Partnership Innovation Team, Fife

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.

This paper has been produced by **Dr Hayley Bennett** (What Works Scotland Research Fellow, University of Edinburgh).

Contents

1. Introduction and background

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

On behalf of What Works Scotland Hayley has been working 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. As such, the action research work presented here is part of a collaborative learning process rather than evaluations of specific programmes or interventions. Specific details of the Fife CAR programme including what What Works Scotland provided, roles and responsibilities, and aims and activities are in the next section: 1.1 Background to the What Works Scotland collaborative action research programme in Fife.

The What Works Scotland research fellow 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. However, the practitioners involved in the inquiry work undertook the action research, led their inquiry work, and should be considered as the main contributors and authors of the work presented in this report.

The core team includes (in alphabetical order)

- Coryn Barclay – Research Consultant, Fife Council
- Julie Dickson – Community Learning and Development Team Leader, Fife Council
- Kerry Jones - Support Worker, (Making it Work), Fife Gingerbread
- Myrian Lazo - Advice Services Manager, CARF
- Saiqa Naseem – Policy Officer, Fife Council (came in after Tricia left)
- Gary Smith – Analyst, Fife Council
- Andrew Wallace – Lead Officer, Housing, Fife Council

Plus Hayley Bennett, University of Edinburgh and What Works Scotland.

Previous members of the group include[1]:

- Debra Martin - Work Service Manager, Department for Work and Pensions
- Sal Henderson – Housing Lead Officer, Fife Council
- Tricia Spacey – Policy Officer, Fife Council
- Stephanie Gardiner - Community Education Worker, Fife Council
- George Murray – Community Education Worker, Fife Council
- Gemma Fraser – Senior Analyst – Fife Community Safety Partnership

Individuals who have also engaged in the group include:

- Robert McGregor – Policy Manager, Fife Council
- Gail Jackson, Furniture Plus
- Suzy Goodsir, Development Manager, Greener Kirkcaldy

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

- Sharon Murphy, Policy Coordinator, Fife Council
- Hayley Bennett, University of Edinburgh, and What Works Scotland
- For further information about the welfare reform PIT and work in Kirkcaldy please contact:
- Julie Dickson, Fife Council or Coryn Barclay, Fife Council

As part of the co-produced Fife CAR programme, the practitioners requested tools and structures regarding the process for reporting the learning. The What Works Scotland research fellow designed and tested an inquiry reporting template to help the practitioners capture their work and provide an indication of what they may choose to cover in an inquiry or research process. The template also supported reflective learning and acted as a tool to encourage collaborative practice. This report is based on some of the contents of the populated template for the welfare reform group. Please note, not all of the work of the group or associated changes are captured in this report. 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.

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[1] Change to employment was the primary reason for leaving the group.

1.1 Background to the 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). To set up the inquiry groups, the original applicants to WWS identified and engaged with new members drawing on their knowledge of their working context. 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 years 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

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."* [2]

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 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.

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[2] Townsend, 2014, 117

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, the What Works Scotland CAR approach involved practitioners identifying their own inquiry topics and drawing on the skills and expertise in the group to establish and undertake action research. There original Fife applicants to WWS identified a leader in each group who also sat on the over-arching strategy group and attended What Works Scotland national retreats. These individuals were also 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. 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 encountered action research, collaborative learning, or critical reflection previously. Each PIT also required different support or sought different types of interactions with the WWS research fellow.

The remainder of this document provides some insight into one collaborative action research project that brought together local practitioners to explore benefit sanctions and data sharing in Kirkcaldy.

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 collaborate 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."*[3]

Fife's community planning activities started in 1999 through the establishment of the Fife Partnership and its production of the first Community Plan (2000 – 2010). Alongside the 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 Partnership's 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 also included three broad topics linked to existing community planning work in Kirkcaldy: welfare services, family services, and school interventions. This report shares the work of the welfare group, which initially sought to explore a 'welfare hub and spokes' inquiry, but during the refinement processes collectively agreed to focus on data sharing and inter-organisational working in regards to benefit sanctioning in Kirkcaldy.

2.2 Inquiry topic: welfare reform

Policy context of the research topic

As part of the UK social security system, the Department for Work and Pensions, via Jobcentre Plus, can 'sanction' citizens in receipt of out-of-work benefits such as Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and Employment Support Allowance (ESA). When imposed, a benefit

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sanction leads to a temporary reduction or removal of benefit payments. In practice Jobcentre Plus (JCP) employees can raise a 'doubt' regarding whether an individual citizen has met their job-seeking requirements outlined in their 'Claimant Commitment' (a contract all citizens must sign when applying to access social security). Not all doubts are converted into an individual receiving a sanction and reduction of social security payment. However, once a doubt is raised many individuals' income ceases until JCP decision-makers have decided whether to implement a sanction, review the doubt referral, or respond to an appeal regarding the doubt.

Between October 2012 and June 2016, JCP offices raised over 395,000 doubts in Scotland, leading to the implementation of over 332,000 sanctions. As such, just under 85% of all doubts were converted into the removal of benefit payments. In Fife, JCP offices have raised over 36,000 doubts during this time, of which 84% led to a sanction being implemented[4].

Statistical data[5] provides an overview of the extent to which the relatively recent act of benefit sanctioning occurs within the locality. However, it does not shed light on the ways that a variety of organisations and practitioners:

- provide services or support to residents to meet their claimant commitment (and thus help prevent individuals being the subject of a doubt)
- influence and locate resources to provide services and support for people affected by the sanctioning regime
- support individuals to appeal JCP decisions once a doubt has been raised
- respond to need once an individual has been sanctioned and may require anti-poverty support such as through housing, health, food, or fuel services
- collaborate and work together to understand the sanctioning process and impact of sanctions on individuals and communities.

As this research demonstrates, in practice, many organisations and individual practitioners working in at the local level are seeking to understand the sanctioning process and its impact on residents, service provision, and collaborative ways of working. The practitioners involved in this CAR project also sought to reduce the impact of sanctions and incidences of acute poverty that may occur when benefit payments are removed.

This inquiry builds on existing partnership working and collaboration through Kirkcaldy WRAAP (local Welfare Reform and Anti-Poverty group). The WRAAP model is operating as a key component of local community planning in each of Fife's seven areas. Outside of the What Works Scotland project, some of the group members were also involved in creating a guide for residents at risk of receiving a benefit sanction.

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[4] For further information on benefit sanctioning please see
https://www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/en/articles/benefit-sanctions-and-what-to-do-about-them
[5] Available from StatXplore https://sw.stat-xplore.dwp.gov.uk/webapi/jsf/login.xhtml

3. The inquiry process

3.1 Welfare Partnership Innovation Team (PIT)

The PIT leader and colleagues involved in the strategy group sought to establish a team of practitioners working in different organisations or departments in order to build a range of views and experiences about welfare reform in Kirkcaldy. By working through an inquiry together the group questioned, deliberated, and better explored each other's viewpoints and activities.

After a number of facilitated discussions the group decided to explore:

Welfare PIT inquiry questions
• How can we improve our knowledge of what data is available across partner agencies in Fife?
• How can we use this to prevent people from being sanctioned?
• Or better support those who have been sanctioned?

The group met 21 times including PIT meetings, facilitated sessions, events, and home retreats. For much of the time of the inquiry the group included:

Local government: Based at the 'centre' with Fife-wide functions
- Policy Officer
- Analyst (Research team)
- Research consultant (Research team)

Local government: Kirkcaldy-based practitioners
- Community Learning and Development team leader
- Housing Officers
- Community Education Workers

Third Sector
- Support worker, Fife Gingerbread
- Advice services manager, CARF

Other organisations
- Work Service Manager, Department for Work and Pensions

What Works Scotland representatives
- Research Fellow, University of Edinburgh

4. Data collection

The group sought to better understand existing and accessible data and knowledge. This section of the report explains how the PIT group did this.

4.1 Explored publically available statistical data

The practitioners considered how to better understand the numbers of local people receiving a sanction including key characteristics such as age, location, and job centre rates. Having previously used the StatXplore database to explore national sanctioning patterns, the What Works Scotland research fellow suggested creating a small sub-group with the Fife Council research officer and analyst to explore the database. Afterwards, the analyst discussed possible trends or themes to investigate with the frontline staff and then produced a number of briefing documents with key trends for Kirkcaldy. He also shared the work with a Fife Council colleague who went on to become skilled in using the database interface. The PIT collectively examined the reports, finding that the data mirrored their frontline experience (that younger men and particular locations were affected most). Managers used the information to update, inform, and influence colleagues and elected members. Whilst useful for academic research, the practitioners noted that the time lag in StatXplore reduces its immediate use for responding to need on the ground and the pace of their service delivery environment. One practitioner also felt that there was still some work to do regarding figuring out how best to incorporate this information into their existing data systems.

> *"I have been uncomfortable with some aspects of the research, i.e. StatXplore exploration, and whether we have really bottomed out how low we can go with this, and how we can make this data more readily available, i.e. through KnowFife Dataset."*

Although there is still some work to do, the accessible database has become a new resource that can now be understood and accessed locally when planning services and designing approaches to tackle poverty. When asked what changes have been implemented based on the PIT work to date, one PIT member said:

> *"Statistics – I am still quoting those stats – they are fab. Stats in a very accessible form which enable us to tell the story and get the evidence"*

4.2 Gathered views and perceptions about data sharing

On 18th May 2016, the group successfully designed and delivered an event titled, *Strengthening partnerships for a Fairer Fife: Working collaboratively with data that matters.* The PIT group planned and designed the event, identifying immediate aims and actions as well as data collection activities.

As well as offering data collection opportunities, the event contributed to building a wider community of practitioners interested in anti-poverty partnership working in Kirkcaldy. The PIT identified fairly early in the process that it would like to connect its activities and learning with existing agendas including Fairer Fife Recommendations and the welfare reform operational groups. They also identified the need to share the learning to some colleagues or elected members who may be less well informed on the impact or distribution of sanctions and poverty in the locality. As such the group agreed that it was important to invite a range of individuals with varying levels of frontline experience working on issues around welfare reform, alongside key influencers in the locality, and colleagues in other departments who may not be directly involved in welfare reform but whose actions and work areas have an influence on the work of colleagues or citizens during times of need. A number of influential people attended the event including the leader of the council, three JCP managers working in Fife, and a wider range of third sector practitioners and managers.

Everyone in the PIT group played a role on the day, sharing the presenting, facilitation, and data capturing tasks. One PIT member highlighted this as a key part of their learning from the process:

> "Instead of the senior team, the PIT did the presenting and took on roles outwith comfort zones."

The practitioners viewed the event as a valuable opportunity to collect data from a variety of individuals and organisations, all of whom had differing levels of familiarity with the issue of welfare reform. The practitioners felt that capturing information from the mix of attendees – practitioners immersed in welfare reform and those who had little direct experience of the topic – was essential in helping to form close links across Kirkcaldy practitioners. The PIT group noted that:

> "While the event was intended to improve collective knowledge and promote data-sharing, equally important was to promote shared understanding of welfare reform, challenging any perceptions that attendees might have."

Forty-two people attended the event, from a range of organisations. Attendees were purposely distributed around the room, across four tables, to ensure that representatives from similar areas or organisations were dispersed, allowing for the greatest information-sharing to take place.

When designing the event the group also wanted to include research findings and evidence from 'scientific' research projects produced by professional researchers that covered some of the larger issues about welfare reform. The event provided an opportunity to present findings from 'Destitution in the UK' , the 2016 report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation[6]. This report defines destitution in the UK, looking at how many people are affected, who

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[6] Fitzpatrick *et al* (2016)

they are, and the main pathways in and out of destitution. It looks at the impact and experience of those people directly affected.

The Child Poverty Action Group presented findings from its [Early Warning Project](#), their framework for collecting and analysing case evidence about how welfare changes are affecting the wellbeing of children, their families and the communities and services that support them.

The inclusion of such speakers ensured that the event provided a variety of views and discussions at different levels (from the very local case management to broader trends about the impact of poverty on different social groups). Although What Works Scotland helped broker some of this work, this PIT was able to build on existing capacity and expertise as some practitioners regularly engage in knowledge and research brokerage.

Data from the event was collected in four main formats:

1. Myth-busting responses

One of the PIT members prepared a series of questions in advance based on local and national data. She posed these questions to the audience to test their understanding of welfare reform and sanctions. All event attendees (including the PIT members) voted anonymously using interactive voting pads (Turning Point software). When revealing the audience perceptions, the PIT member followed up with information about the national or local picture. The group decided to intentionally place this session at the start of the event, using real data to challenge participants' assumptions about sanctions and welfare reform.

2. Recordings of table discussions

The group developed a series of vignettes based on real-life welfare reform experiences in Kirkcaldy. The process of producing vignettes involved bringing together frontline practitioners with others within the PIT to share examples of their work[7].

At the event the PIT members used two vignettes at each table to prompt discussion. Participants were asked to consider how case workers might engage with the individual, what services could offer support, how partners could better work together to share knowledge or data, and what could have been done to prevent or mitigate the situation. With ethical consent we recorded table discussions of the vignettes which covered issues such as single parenthood, debt, housing issues, learning difficulties, healthy eating and lack of food, sanctions and appeals processes, adult learning and employment support initiatives, and the role of schools and GPs. The resulting discussion was recorded, transcribed, and later fully annotated.

3. **Wall comments**

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[7] The group also tested the vignettes in a PIT meeting prior to the event. This was a really useful discussion to better understand the views of people with the PIT group and enhance the relationships within the PIT.

We placed key issues on the walls at intervals around the room and encouraged participants to record their thoughts. The four questions were:

1. What data or information would you like to be able to access?
2. Advocacy services – How, why, where?
3. What data knowledge could you share?
4. What partners would you liked to have seen here?

The simple method of post-its on paper allowed attendees to answer anonymously, potentially encouraging more honest responses.

4. Event evaluation

We issued attendees with an exit questionnaire, asking them to score the event and the presentations and discussions within, on a number of different aspects. Free text fields also invited comment on what participants found most useful, whether they found any aspect of the day difficult, whether the right people were in the room, and what they would like to know more about.

Collectively, the event and data collection activities helped to not only generate knowledge for the PIT members, but also develop dialogue across participants and build relationships across individual practitioners and organisations.

5. Data analysis

We used audio equipment to record each table discussion at the welfare reform event and What Works Scotland provided transcripts. As a group we collectively reflected on the transcripts and themes arising over the course of the day.

Through a facilitated session we sought to highlight key themes and concepts, and the practitioners split into sub-groups to explore the learning from each topic in further detail.

The PIT felt that this experience provided "*valuable insight into the views of event attendees on welfare reform.*"

Some of the practitioners then adapted the analysis process to better suit their needs and experience. They used an analysis matrix to populate five key themes: referrals, resources, knowledge, data protections, and who.

The data from the event evaluation forms indicated that in relation to the event itself, participants enjoyed the event and appreciated the contextual information and the networking opportunities the event supported.

6. Research findings and learning

The PIT identified and discussed a range of key findings and learning. These reflections relate to their research inquiry as well as undertaking the work through a collaborative process.

6. 1 Positive working relationships

In terms of sharing knowledge and data across practitioners and organisations, the PIT found that most practitioners at the event highlighted the importance of positive working relationships across agencies. They particularly highlighted the benefit of identifying and improving relations with agencies such as DWP that are central to the sanctions process.

> *"There's almost, to some extent, let's demonise the Department of Work and Pensions, because they're having to roll this out. But I think we need to get over that and develop the relationship [as] that's going to be best for the client or the customer; the person that comes for your advice service. So it's making those links; developing those links are really important..."*

The practitioners also noted the importance of having a 'human face' as point of contact and that they are more likely to pick up the phone to someone they had met face-to-face. They felt that this finding links to the idea of 'social knowledge'; the importance of staff to not only know the specifics of the legislation, but also how this could be applied in a local context. There was much agreement at the event and within the PIT on the importance of specific individuals and practices that lead to the development of informal connections that help share information and knowledge. Some attendees at the event suggested that that such avenues could also be formalised, increasing the effectiveness of partners working together.

> *"Maybe we could think more about how the partners might work together to share knowledge or data to improve the situation. And I think one of the things for me is that knowledge is social, it's about knowing who, knowing what and knowing where as much as data information that you hold."*

6.2 Data protection

One focus of this inquiry was the extent to which data protection and the different understandings of data sharing have an impact on working practices at the frontline and on service design. At the event (and throughout the CAR process) the provision of data, and practitioners knowing what is available, emerged as a significant issue. Practitioners highlighted how people's understanding of data protection (and a lack of clarity between organisations about what they could do) was a barrier to knowledge-building; particularly, as one attendee noted, when organisations *"err on the side of caution"* by engaging in little to no data sharing.

The practitioners noted a number of key issues regarding data protection:

- Discrepancies across services and within services; workers were often reluctant to share information due to an unfamiliarity with key legislation. Participants agreed that failure to share any information not only had significant ramifications for the quality of service that members of the public received, but increased the difficulties faced by organisations in trying to assess the wider context of the problem at hand.

- There was general agreement that Fife had a variety of resources that could facilitate information-sharing, but they were not used to their full potential, due – in part – to concerns over data protection. The DWP becoming users of 'Fort'[8] was identified as a desirable goal, allowing them to more easily share information and referrals with other services. As one person remarked at the welfare reform event:

  "We have got the tools in Fife, which nobody has, nobody else has got a referral tracking system, to my knowledge. So it's actually being able to join that up. I think we probably don't do ourselves justice in some respects…"

- How individuals and organisations interpreted Data Protection legislation had a noticeable impact on its subsequent application. The consensus was that uncertainty over the nature of the legislation led to many users erring on the side of caution, thereby choosing not to share valuable information. The practitioners felt that this not only hinders the ability of services to help users, but means that users are constantly faced with retelling their story and recapping their past experiences, leading to the risk that they may eventually choose to disengage from any service interaction.

  "There seems to be a real difficulty about… or an inconsistency of approach about what organisations need and don't need, that comes down to interpretation of complex law, but it's data protection."

- Event participants discussed the practicalities of having a shared mandate that would allow easier transfer of information between partners, and a shared standard to work towards. While participants were agreed that this would be desirable, there was some scepticism about whether such a method could be successfully introduced and receive sufficient buy-in from all partners.

- Participants discussed the long-term benefits that would be achieved by upskilling staff members and giving them the confidence to handle large amounts of data. This was deemed important due to workers often having to cover a wide area, or take on a referral and attempt to understand the work that had gone on to date.

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[8] "Fort" is a programme for sharing some information on people accessing different services in Fife

"What if we had something … around… the bigger picture. By upskilling people you're giving them the tools to be able to do that and to feel confident to do that and not to be fearful."

6.3 Referrals

Many event attendees and PIT members discussed how best to support individuals and the complexity of understanding personal multi-faceted situations. They recognised that a key issue when supporting individuals is the referral process, whereby different agencies can connect individual citizens to existing support networks or services.

"A referral is something quite daunting for a vulnerable person. Now I could describe the person I am making the referral to. Who she is, what she looks like; I can describe the organisation and agencies"

One issue that the event attendees discussed was the ways that citizens may *"fall through the cracks"*.

A number of attendees at the welfare event and some within the PIT particularly noted the role of the NHS in improving referral processes and existing systems. The practitioners felt that there was a key role for health professionals in these discussions and in improving referral systems between agencies, particularly in community-based activities. They identified that one action to improve the current arrangement could involve developing the awareness of community-based NHS staff regarding what other
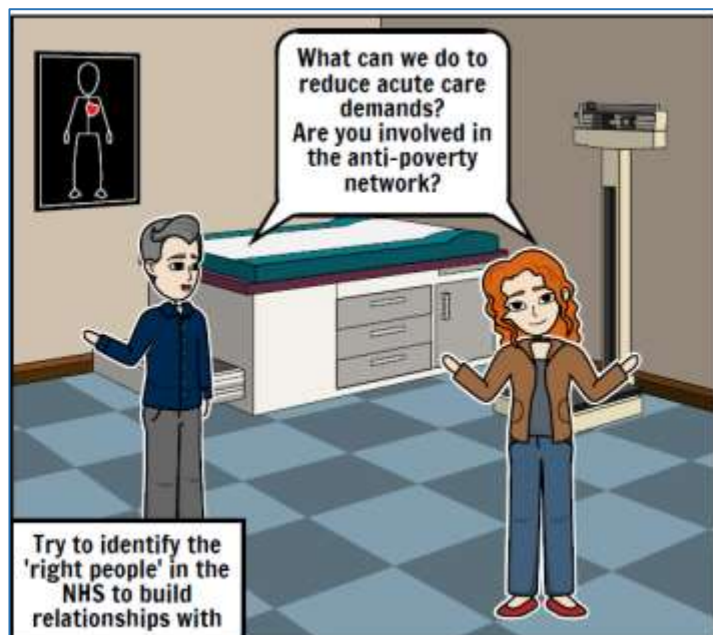
services are available locally. Some attendees noted how some NHS affiliates are reluctant to share information and highlighted that the NHS, (and GPs in particular) would regularly interact with a huge number of people who would benefit from being referred to other services, but that there was currently no mechanism in place to allow this.

"Most people will engage with a health professional whether it be a dentist whether it be GP, it's kind of part and parcel of life, but that's as much as I think health should be a key player, it's also a big thing for them to know as well every place possible that they could [support people]."

The scale of the NHS and, linked to this, the large number of GP centres across Kirkcaldy, left participants unclear about the best point of contact to progress these issues, and what would be of greatest benefit.

One event attendee felt that:

> "Healthcare deal with health, it doesn't go any further."

However, within this discussion some participants agreed that the NHS/GP services represented a valuable source of detailed information, some expressed concern about whether there was a capacity issue involved. The concern appeared to centre on whether improving referral routes with the NHS would lead to resource strains for the receiving services.

> "You don't want every single potential advice service/support worker/key worker/doctor's surgery phoning up… you'd never get on top of your workload."

Nearly all practitioners agreed that what works best to support citizens and improve people's lives involves social and relational practices, social networks, and an ability to gather knowledge about services in the locality. However, they identified that this approach is comparatively resource intensive and may be running contrary to the current public policy context where funding cuts and reductions to services is commonplace in various

> "When people move on, relationships need to be built up again, with knowledge and connections potentially being lost as a result"

localities and different levels of government. A particular problem in this regard is the role of temporary funding for services and short-term contracts of frontline staff. The group felt that we all often undervalue what people know, and there is therefore a challenge for staff trying to build long-term topic and relational knowledge when employed in short-term posts.

> "The frontline staff knowledge and skills and experience is so critical. I just think that we undervalue it. There's so much with all of this work that we know, we talk about…But the short term contracts approach, how do you get staff that have long-term knowledge of who/what/where and good relationships with who/what/where if they're on a 12 month contract or if the project pops up and then has to disappear."

6.4 Frontline staff and service continuity

There was widespread support for the commitment and enthusiasm of workers involved with supporting people affected by welfare reform, and the PIT recognised that individuals could have a transformational effect on work areas. In short, they collectively agreed that

*"it is the people who make a difference".*

However, they identify that

"it is difficult for staff to know everything about what is available, and it is not clear how much individual staff know about what's out there to support a particular client. We know that some services are doing work around this but it is not always as joined up as it could be. Staff don't always know what is happening at a very local level. There are directories, but it is difficult to keep information up to date, with limited resource".

The PIT note that there is an assumption that everyone knows about the changes around welfare reform but they felt that there is a lot happening and it is hard for individual staff knowledge to keep pace with developments. As one event attendee noted

"I think you assume a lot of frontline staff know what's happening but there's still benefits coming in. It's new to DWP, never mind frontline staff [elsewhere]."
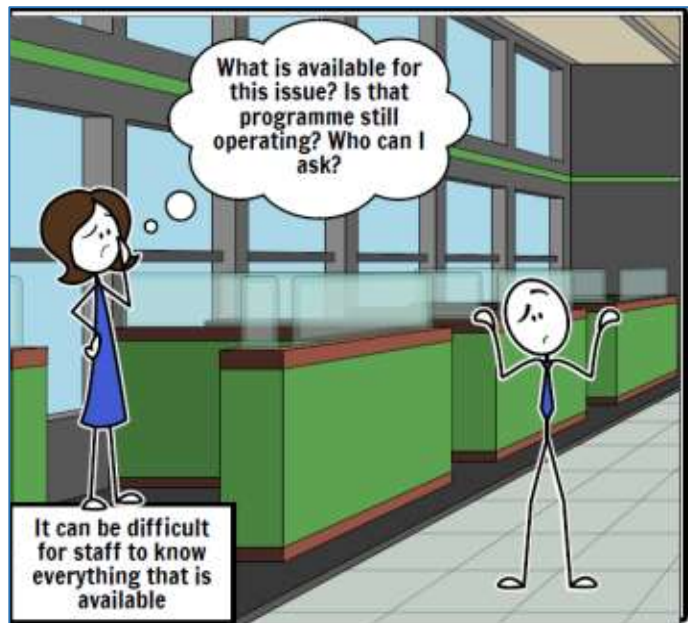
Event participants were in agreement that it was a desirable goal to pull together relevant information and services, for the benefit of both staff and service users. This was deemed of particular importance due to the potential for staff changes and funding gaps, and to prevent any knowledge being lost. Attendees described this joined-up approach for services as working well in Kirkcaldy, but acknowledged that it was an ongoing task to keep resources up-to-date, and this was often difficult when no specific person had responsibility for its maintenance.
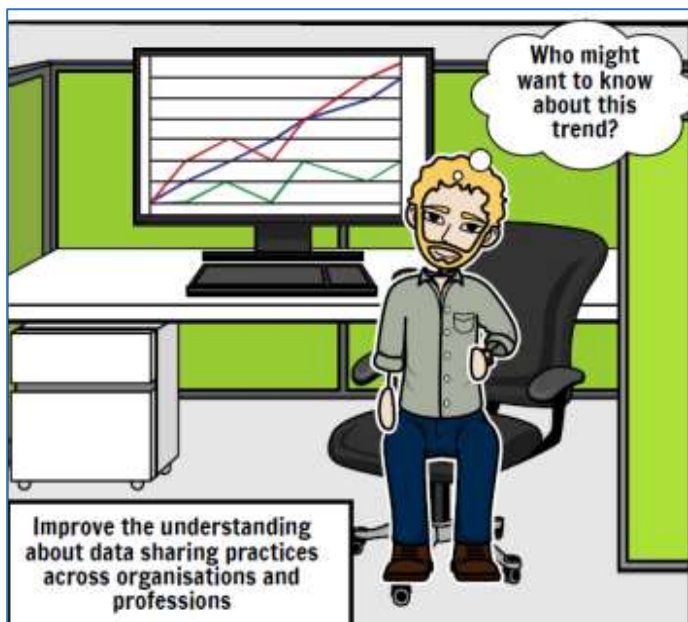
"We're trying to pull together a list of all employability services in Fife. We're never going to get it perfect, but the more we can do to make it easier for the workers to identify all the different services there are then the better it's going to be."

The group also highlighted the ways that these issues cut across sectors. For example, they noted that keeping staff knowledge up-to-date was thought to be particularly challenging in the voluntary sector, where there were concerns over funding, contracts, remits and other issues.

"If you're a frontline worker who covers the whole of Fife. You've got to know about seven areas, which is really challenging in that there is some projects that are valid in some areas and not in others".

7. Learning from the collaborative process

In the template What Works Scotland asked, *'What did you learn whilst going through the process?* The group spoke positively about the collaborative aspects of the work and recognised the value in each other and the opportunities to learn about different organisations, work areas, and practices. For example,

> *"I learned that all groups want to do their best to support customers and how lack of knowledge of the different support available can impact on this. Once communication channels were opened it became clear who different agencies were able to work together and worked through 'red tape' by keeping the focus on the customer at all times to ensure they were given full support".*

It appears that one of the most noticeable benefits from using the CAR approach has been the improved relationship between individuals working in different parts of the system, specifically the inclusion of the DWP into the PIT. Most of the practitioners acknowledged the importance of the DWP's involvement in the work.

> *"They have opened their doors as partners. E.g. DWP Careers Fair now involves partners coming, we are now working together"*

> *"Biggest change? Reframing our language when talking to colleagues in DWP"*

Another key finding from this work has been the benefit of bringing frontline staff into discussions with others working in policy or more senior positions across a range of organisations. This appears to have helped people to realise the reality of service delivery and the ways that frontline staff support the citizens they work with. As one frontline PIT member noted:

> *"There have been some noticeable relationship changes as the group has progressed. To my eye there was evidence of a growing bond between participants over time, with everyone working together really well in the build-up to the event and in the aftermath. It was clear that the group gained a lot from Debra (DWP) being part of the group and from her willingness to engage, and it was also evidence that the group was beneficial to her, giving her points that she could take back to the job centre and pass on to staff and management"*

> *"It makes us actually feel part of shaping something… it's been a big thing. You are bringing the words from the front line to a bigger forum."*

In fact, one direct action of this PIT group is the plan to encourage all the seven area leaders to bring a frontline perspective into the existing WRAAP groups operating in each of the seven areas in Fife to ensure that there is a range of views during decision-making discussions.

"What did I learn? The importance of the people at the coalface and the unfiltered communication to senior people, hearing the warts and all"

It has also helped to raise and share experiences of those residents accessing support services and help different practitioners to reflect on the ways that their services interact. Some of the PIT members recognised that they had gained a fuller appreciation of the variety of work going on around welfare reform, and the

"Councillors hearing from customer facing, people facing staff telling the heart wrenching stories. Councillors now have Gingerbread posters on their walls!"

role of different agencies, and how they interacted with each other. They found this insight really useful for helping to understand the support that a citizen could receive.

This group succeeded at some of the relational aspects of undertaking CAR, with individuals demonstrating an ability early in the process to identify shared interests, recruit and engage with new members by bringing them into the process, and making positive relationships that will continue after the What Works Scotland project. One of the practitioners noted that this was due to the fact that some of the group already knew each other, and that some of their existing meetings and ways of working are similar to the PIT meeting format where individuals are able to engage in dialogue, question, and share different perspectives.

"This inquiry has not happened in a vacuum. We've been sensitive to, and aware of, developments in other paths, such as the Fairer Fife Commission and recommendations around how partners can work with the DWP to prevent and mitigate sanctions. Relationships formed through this inquiry have also helped to progress other pieces of work."
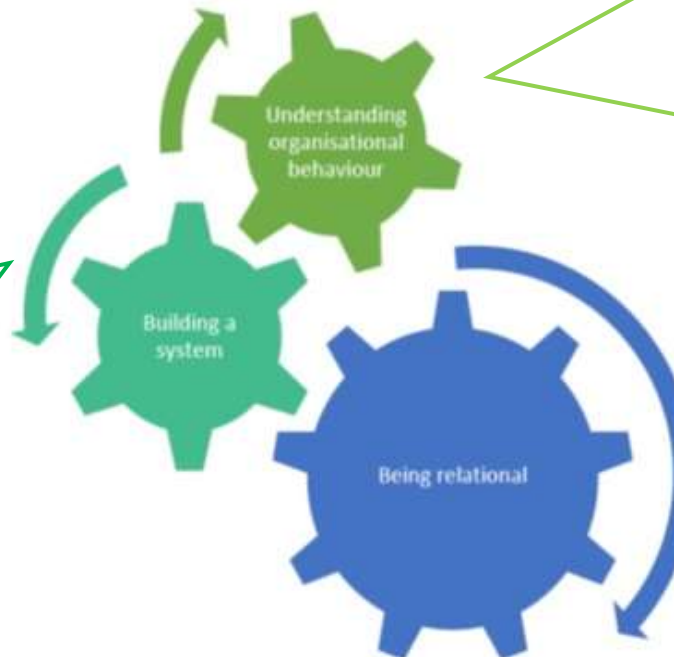
"The CAR process and PIT Group has given me greater insight into really understanding how the services delivered by the Jobcentre were once perceived, I have fed this back to staff encouraging them to build their own stronger relationships with partner organisations. We have had a number of partner organisations into the Jobcentre, encouraging them to see the work that is undertaking. There is a growing partnership hub working out of the Jobcentre and we are seeing customers opening up more to us allowing Work Coaches to give them the support they need without fear of reprisals."

Understanding organisational behaviour

Building a system

Being relational

"Making things real for colleagues in policy and politicians as well… Nothing better than meeting real people. Hearing the stories. Get out more. The power and impact of that is lasting."

8. Actions

As is the nature of many action research projects, individuals within the group implemented a range of actions and changes to their practice throughout the process. For example, when the group explored the StatXplore database, one of the PIT members trained up a colleague to ensure that the skills were available outside of the PIT work. Other specific actions include linking the work and the individuals in the PIT to the larger Fairer Fife work, and creating links and bringing services from third sector organisations into the job centre.

A noticeable change in the wider context in which they work is the increased engagement of others within the system in the discussions and work around welfare reform and supporting people experiencing poverty.

"We have secured the backing of the Leader of the Administration [who attended the welfare event] who has committed to taking the findings from the Welfare Reform PIT to all seven areas"

A tangible output from the work include a set of vignettes and the skills to create vignettes. Many of the group found this to be a useful format for broaching difficult discussions about service provision with other agencies without encouraging discord and blame, and suggested ways to refine this to work within their context (e.g. ensuring that the discussants aren't too familiar with a specific case). Some of the practitioners also critically reflect on their work and practice and how this links to others. For example, in their reflections one practitioner asks:

"How should we be framing our language - clients, customers, parents?"

The practitioners provided their reflections and thoughts on the actions that had occurred throughout the process and what their future plans might be, based on or drawing from the work they have done as part of this CAR process. It is worth noting that these practitioners not only identify specific actions, but also seem to better understand the processes involved in creating change and the ongoing activities of how to shape and improve their working environment and every day activities.

"Changes in how partners work together, particualrly a more open relationship with DWP, exemplified in referrals to Kerry and Stephanie, and lines of communications between DWP and other agencies."

"Friendships came from this"

"One of the key things appears to a greater emphasis on collaborative working, and increased recognition of how PIT members can support each other's work for mutual benefit."

"Relationships have changed basd on ths PIT work: frontline worker involvement; councillors hearing from customer-facing, people-facing staff telling heart-wrenching stories. Councillors now have Gingerbread posters on their walls!"

"I see a change from a year ago, in working with housing, I recently had a case where a client had arrears but did not know what this was for. The client asked me to advocate on their behalf. The Housing officer was very helpful and was able to pull out relevant information with appropriate permission in place, that enabled a payment plan to be on place. Housing appear to be seeing things differently recognising that other organisations are wanting to help."

"clearer and or open communication channels, names, email addresses and contact numbers of key Jobcentre personnel shared with key partners. This has led to strenthening existing partnerships and building new relationships with other organisations."

8.1 Future plans

In terms of completing a cycle of inquiry and implementing change, the practitioners acknowledge that major changes have yet to be implemented. However, in linking the findings to Fairer Fife Commission (Recommendation 19) they feel that they will be able to monitor the success of changes through the Fairer Fife Action Plan and Programme.

In relation to the group continuing in its current format after What Works Scotland's involvement ends, it is anticipated that it will continue using pre-existing arrangements as some of the Welfare Reform PIT group members have been a subset of Kirkcaldy WRAAP (Welfare Reform and Anti-Poverty group). This group was already up and running in Kirkcaldy with a focus on welfare reform and anti-poverty. However, whilst this group will continue without the direct involvement of colleagues from Fife Council's Policy and Research teams or direct What Works Scotland support everyone in the group has made longer-lasting working relationships from this work which will likely enable new networks and relationships, including between What Works Scotland, academia, and particularly with the What Works Scotland research fellow.

The group continues to operate and has identified other agencies (such as health organisations, food providers, and other council departments such as benefits and revenues), who could contribute to their ongoing relational practices to ensure that the design of service and their delivery is understood by many who are involved.

9. What Works Scotland remarks

There are many benefits and positive outcomes from this work. Most of these stem from the commitment and contributions of all who have engaged in the group, which built on some of the existing interpersonal relations and approach to collaborative work by these practitioners in Kirkcaldy. Whilst there were demand needs and extra support required from What Works Scotland than would be expected in many CAR projects early in the process, over time the group was self-sufficient, able to effectively draw on each other's strengths, and value different views and experiences. Despite overall positive outcomes regarding the welfare event and the efforts to create a local community of practice around issues of welfare reform, it is important for What Works Scotland to also acknowledge some of the identified difficulties of undertaking a CAR approach for this purpose.

First, some practitioners in the group found the added workload involved in arranging an event difficult. This view is also echoed from What Works Scotland as this required greater administrative input than was originally expected. However, due to the fact that many people were contributing in ways that was outside their regular work tasks and at busy times, there was an atmosphere of collegiality about undertaking some of the extra work in order to achieve their shared goal. That said, if CAR was to become a more regular way of working, much consideration would need to be given to the realities of such tasks on individual workloads.

Second, similar concerns were raised regarding the analysis of the learning and findings from the event, summarizing this work into report outputs or documents, and the related time implications. This raises some questions about the nature of the work involved in undertaking research more generally, particularly through a co-produced format which can take longer and involve more dialogue and discussion about identified findings. When establishing and implementing CAR it is worth considering the extent to which practitioners with busy day-to-day jobs can also engage in a systematic research process and an equitable division of work, particularly during times of organisational restructuring and workplace change.

Finally, as with all the PIT groups a number of practitioners did leave the group during the process. On the whole this was due to changes in their employment status although a small number of practitioners did not 'tune-in' to the CAR approach easily and some struggled to see the value of their contributions or the potential benefits to their work. There is some useful learning for What Works Scotland regarding using CAR in the multi-agency context where there are a range of different organisational logics and professional practices as well as a variety of workplace personalities and approaches.

9.1 Questions for consideration

Drawing on the work undertaken by this PIT and the reflections they shared with What Works Scotland, practitioners and policy-makers engaged in welfare reform in Fife or further afield may want to consider the following questions:

1. How can organisations assist staff to create communities of practice (involving frontline and strategic staff) to understand major changes to multi-level legislation such as anti-poverty work and welfare reform?

2. What other localities or topics would benefit from the creation of co-produced one-day events akin to the welfare event presented here? How likely is it that there is the capacity to bring together a range of speakers and evidence from further afield alongside local discussions about services and ways of working?

3. To what extent do you think it is useful to provide support within and across organisations to enable ongoing communication and relationship building between front line staff and others within the system, such as elected members and senior staff from other departments or areas?

4. The involvement of the DWP representative in this group and their contributions, willingness to engage, and openness to share learning across organisations was extremely appreciated by those working to support residents in Kirkcaldy. What conditions and individual skills are required to create positive working relationships between agencies (as demonstrated here with the DWP)? How can these practices be encouraged and nurtured in different organisations?

5. How data protection legislation is understood and implemented creates new practices and working parameters for many frontline staff. Ultimately these practices and processes affect service provision and the support that individuals receive. What are the barriers to establishing a common data sharing and knowledge exchange guidance tool across a range of organisations or departments? Who might need to be involved in this conversation to make this work?

10. Conclusions

The welfare reform partnership innovation team has been working on issues around data and knowledge sharing using a collaborative action research approach. Their inquiry involved exploring the DWPs' StatXplore data set, using external evidence to create discussions and persuade others, collecting local data on perceptions and challenges, and producing local research into the practices around working collaboratively to reduce poverty (and the experience of poverty) in Kirkcaldy. By bringing a range of different professionals into the group, PIT conversations were regularly informative and useful for those involved, and new relationships developed.

> *"I gained a fuller appreciation of the variety of work going on around Welfare Reform, and how different agencies interacted with each other. Gaining an insight into how different agencies operated was very useful, helping me to better understand the support that a client could receive and the potential issues that could affect this"*

The CAR process involved opening channels of communication to improve partnership working and it is important to acknowledge the practitioners in the group led and undertook the work collectively through a series of meetings and sessions. This brought different information to different people, and a space to contest and unpick diverse viewpoints.

Further information:

See Reflections on StatXplore on the What Works Scotland blog

Reference

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.