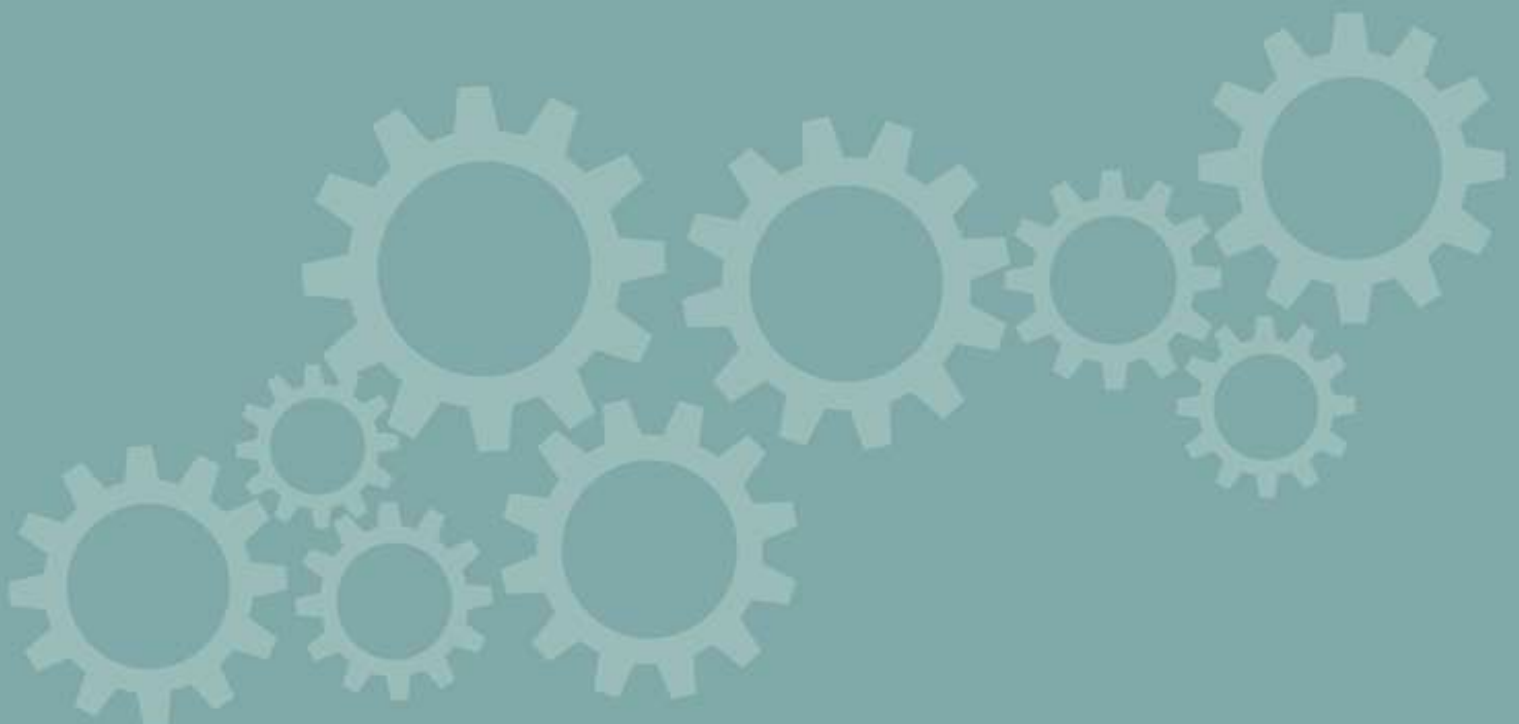

**Collaborative Action Research Report:
Working in Partnership to Support
Students with Additional Needs**

Written by Dr Hayley Bennett

University of Edinburgh, What Works Scotland

Co-produced by the School 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. 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 Organisation)

This is one of a series of papers published by What Works Scotland to share evidence, learning and ideas about public service reform. This paper relates to the What Works Scotland **Collaborative Action Research** Workstream.

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Acknowledgements

This paper has been written by Dr Hayley Bennett (What Works Scotland Research Fellow, University of Edinburgh). This report is based on, and part of, a wider programme of co-produced work with a team of practitioners based in Fife. Thanks to all those working in the partnership innovation team who undertook this inquiry and those colleagues who supported their work.

Thanks also to Tamara Mulherin, What Works Scotland Doctoral Researcher, University of Edinburgh, who supported the production of this report.

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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 programme of work 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 focused on using the opportunity to explore ways of working and collaborating within their community planning system. As such, the collaborative action research work presented here is part of a collaborative learning process, focussing on creating change and relationship improvement throughout the research process.

Details of the Fife CAR programme including what What Works Scotland provided, roles and responsibilities, and aims and activities can be found on the What Works Scotland webpage. Briefly, the What Works Scotland research fellow worked to introduce, develop, and coordinate the CAR programme to; create and support space for the practitioners to undertake their inquiries, 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)

- Jennifer Davidson - Depute Rector, Kirkcaldy High School, Fife Council
- Liz Easton – General Secretary, Kirkcaldy YMCA
- Mark Hutchison – Programme Manager, Kirkcaldy YMCA
- Sandra Martin – Integration Manager, Fife Council
- Catriona Maclean - Partnership Analyst, Fife Council

- Sonia McCathie - Community Education Worker, Fife Council
- Linsey Neilson - Community Education Worker, Fife Council
- Saiqa Naseem - Policy Officer, Fife Council

For further information about the School PIT and work in Kirkcaldy please contact Sandra Martin, Fife Council.

For further information regarding the Fife CAR programme please contact:

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

As part of the co-produced Fife CAR programme, the practitioners requested tools and structures regarding the process for reporting their learning. As a result of these requests (and working with some of the practitioners) 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 encouraged critical reflection, supported learning, and acted as a tool to foster collaborative practice. This report is based on some of the contents of the populated template for the schools 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 represent their comments and reflections on undertaking the work.

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 that operated 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 were 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 predominately comprised of Fife Council employees, although

there was much variation regarding professional and departmental backgrounds and locality.

1.2 Brief introduction to collaborative action research

Collaborative action research (CAR) is type of action research that emphasises the importance of collaborative practice to bring about change. CAR inquiries 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 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)

What Works Scotland encouraged practitioners to engage in group dialogue to advance learning across professional, departmental, and organisational boundaries. Reflecting the multi-agency and collaborative nature of the community planning context, CAR offered an opportunity to develop communicative spaces to reduce collaborative limitations such as differences between professional languages, values, and working practices.

Adopting an ethos of co-production, the What Works Scotland CAR approach in Fife involved practitioners identifying their own inquiry topics and drawing on the skills and expertise in the group to establish and undertake action research. The original Fife

¹ Townsend (2014, p.117)

applicants identified a practitioner to lead each PIT, 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 offered a range of methodological and process support, as well as offered knowledge brokerage and links to university resources. What Works Scotland also provided facilitation support through home retreats and in some PIT meetings (where requested). Due to a range of factors, some practitioners sought additional support from What Works Scotland, leading to the creation of 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 reflection².

The remainder of this document provides some insight into one collaborative action research project that brought together local practitioners to explore partnership working with schools.

² Further information on the What Works Scotland offer and CAR in practice can be found in the Fife CAR programme document on the What Works Scotland website

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 Schools PIT, which initially sought to explore a schools intervention programme that offers alternative activities for some high school students. During the refinement processes the group membership and focus changed and in early 2016 the group decided to focus more generally on approaches to partnership working with schools, and how organisations can better respond to the needs of young people with additional support needs. This report shares the work undertaken by the Schools PIT over two years, incorporating two cycles of CAR inquiry, but the focus of this report is primarily based on the second cycle covering March 2016 to December 2016.

³ [Scottish Government website: How Community Planning Works](#). Accessed 25.1.17

2.2 The context: Schools, education, and local community planning

The practitioners involved in this PIT had links to the local community planning structures, specifically the Family, Early Years and Young People's Group. As community educators, and given their association with the localised features of community planning, they demonstrated an understanding of the connections between educational outcomes, the links with local and Fife wide community plans, and, critically, the role partnership working played with schools to address the needs of young people with additional support needs.

According to their populated template, the Schools PIT operated from an understanding that educational underachievement has a long-term impact on individuals' lives that is related to future success in the labour market, poor health, risky behaviours, and levels of civic engagement; and which also links to how the UK economy performs over time. The PIT drew on a range of evidence and data to show that those most at risk include young people who truant, are excluded, engage in offending and those with poor literacy or numeracy skills. Other influential factors include gender, health, low family income and parents' education and unemployment⁴. The PIT also recognised the Scottish Government's vision for the children and young people of Scotland, that they need to be: safe, nurtured, healthy, achieving, active, included, respected and responsible", but that this can only be realised if all professionals working with children and young people pull together to plan and deliver top-quality services which overcome traditional boundaries. The PIT believed that working together to improve educational outcomes for all children and young people to support them to achieve their potential is fundamental.

The PIT engaged with the following data or publications as part of its inquiry process:

- **Fife Council, Education and Children's Services Directorate Plan 2014 – 2017.** Articulates the common vision across the Directorate: improving life chances for all – with aspirations including improving educational outcomes for all learners, better employability skills, reduce educational inequity, and enhanced opportunities for vulnerable groups to break the cycle of disadvantage.
- **KnowFife Dataset – Kirkcaldy Locality Profile.** Used as part of the local community planning process in setting the outcomes for the area.
- **Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 2012 data** - identified that the Kirkcaldy area had the largest share of all of the committee areas of Fife's most deprived datazones (24.1% of the 20% most deprived datazones in Fife) and that this share had increased from the previous SIMD publication. Looking solely at the education domain rank of the SIMD, based on school pupil absences, pupil performance on SQA at stage 4, working age adults with no qualifications, progression to higher education, and young people not in full-time education,

⁴ [The Cost of Exclusion - Counting the cost of youth disadvantage in the UK](#). Princes Trust report

employment or training – the number of datazones in the 20% most deprived was also increasing - meaning more local areas were doing “badly” in terms of the educational outcomes. This evidenced the need for the local community plan to include outcomes around families, early years and young people and established sub and working groups to facilitate this. Partnership working with schools was core to achieving this.

- **Scottish Government: Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC)** - A Guide to Getting it right for every child, a core component of which is consistent high standards of co-operation, joint working and communication where more than one agency needs to be involved, locally and across Scotland.
- **Scottish Government: Raising Attainment** – increasing the ambition, aspiration and expectations of every child and young person.

3. The inquiry process

At the start of the CAR process in Fife, this PIT sought to explore a specific schools intervention programme. Initially, alongside a policy officer and analyst, only a small number of those who were directly involved in this work made up the PIT, this included a practitioners working in the YMCA who delivered the schools intervention programme. These members undertook a mapping exercise to help identify other partners. The original PIT members also sought to recruit additional members at an event that brought together a range of teachers and practitioners working with schools across Kirkcaldy. For a number of reasons this inquiry did not get underway. This includes difficulties identifying an inquiry question and space and ownership of the work as there was a separate evaluation of the programme taking place at this time, and various operational decisions that lay outside the remit of the PIT. As such, the group realised that in order for CAR and the inquiry process to work, the group needed the space and autonomy to undertake an inquiry and to be able to ask individuals to allocate their time to an additional group. In early 2016 the group reformed. The inquiry work presented in the following sections reflects the second inquiry.

3.1 Taking stock and changing the inquiry question

Although inquiry one did not prove fruitful as an inquiry topic, it did help the practitioners to consider their role within the group, and work through the shared experience and understanding about what was needed if the group was to continue. Once the original schools PIT explored and found that it was too complicated to undertake collaborative action research on their initial topic there was a period of reflection to reconsider what their aim and focus would be. As is the case in many CAR projects, it took time for new group of practitioners to figure out their interests, contributions, scope, and individual roles. Drawing on the practitioners' reflections from the template, it appears that agreeing and working on a shared inquiry topic was also complicated as there were quick changes to programmes, work areas, and priorities (out of the control of some of the individuals within the PIT) whilst the group was working through the early phases of work. Importantly, they found that their inquiry topic had to be an area of work they could engage in and influence.

Colleagues within the wider Fife CAR programme supported the PIT during this transition. The strategy group identified and approached a colleague to engage in the work. This colleague was engaged in working on school reforms and joined the strategy group and became the school's PIT lead. The new PIT lead (Sandra Martin) joined the group with an initial idea for the inquiry focus. Through dialogue with the existing members of the group they shaped this idea into an achievable research plan.

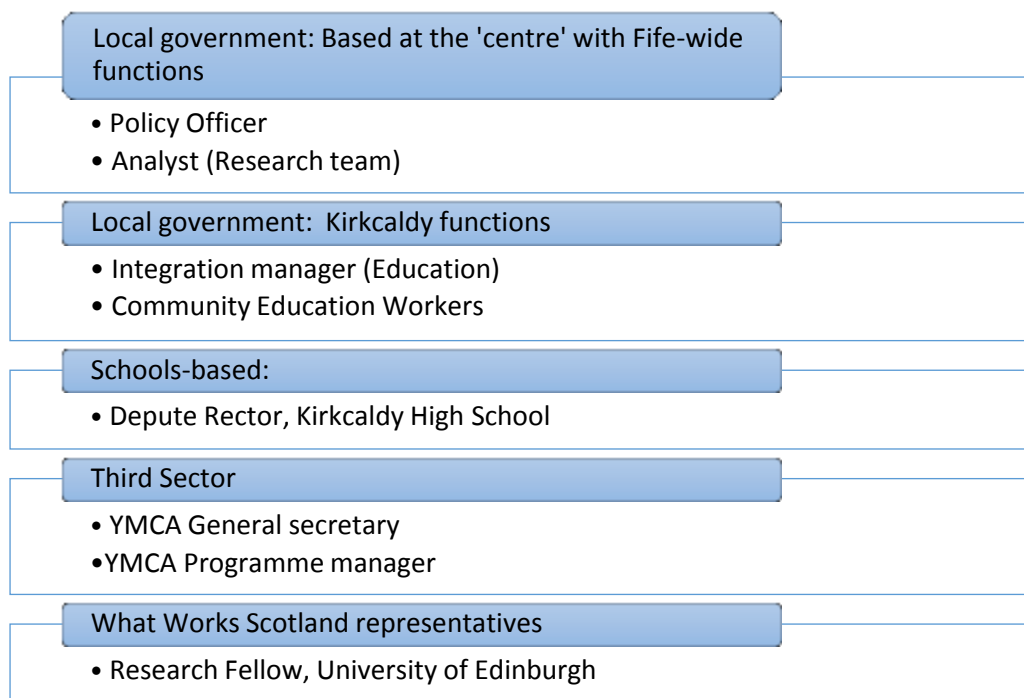
The new PIT membership involved some of the individuals who had remained engaged with the process from cycle one. In the first meeting of the new inquiry, all PIT members agreed that supporting young people with additional support needs requires collaboration. They

agreed a shared vision and understanding that “whilst schools play a critical role, other organisations and departments and policy areas within Fife Council play an important role in working together with the school”.

The PIT’s new inquiry question became: *“How can schools work better in partnership to support young people who need additional support?”*

Whilst the original members from the YMCA were less involved in inquiry two compared to inquiry one, the group kept communication open and YMCA practitioners attended subsequent focus groups and became more involved towards the end of the process.

Over the course of the life of this PIT there have been eight types of members comprising Community Education Officers, Policy Officer and Analysts, Family and Community Support Integration Manager, high school Depute Rector and representatives from the YMCA.



For inquiry two, the School’s PIT met six times for PIT meetings and once to run the focus groups. Members also participated in facilitated sessions, events, and national retreats as part of the wider What Works Scotland Fife CAR programme⁵. At the time of writing this report, the group had planned further meetings and indicated that it will remain active while it carries out the actions that came out of this inquiry.

⁵ See Fife CAR programme overview document: whatworksscotland.ac.uk/casesites/fife

4. Data collection and analysis

4.1 Survey

The PIT produced a data collection plan to explore partnership practices between schools based practitioners (e.g. teachers, educational psychologists), and practitioners based in other public and third sector organisations (such as youth workers, community development, community education workers, and so forth). The first step involved two PIT members preparing a short questionnaire using their existing knowledge of partnership meetings and partnership working in a school setting. They shared the questionnaire with other members of the PIT group for comment and testing, as well as with a member of staff from a local high school to ascertain whether the questionnaire was clear. Due to the number of high schools in the Kirkcaldy area and the limited timescale, the group agreed to focus their research on Kirkcaldy High School because the depute rector was a participating PIT member. This option was both a collaborative and pragmatic way to progress with work.

To understand the extent to which partnership experiences differed amongst types of practitioners, the survey required respondents to provide details of their job title and workplace, along with a brief description of their experience of partnership working. The questionnaire consisted of eight questions; each comprised of a statement and a four-point scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) with a “don’t know” option (but no neutral response). The survey also included a ‘free text comments and feedback’ section for respondents to elaborate on their choice.

The PIT asked for responses to these statements:


1. Partners share a common vision
2. Partner representatives take ownership & responsibility for making things happen
3. Partner roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and accepted
4. Agendas are set and owned by those tasked with delivery
5. Purpose/direction and membership is reviewed periodically
6. There is regular attendance at meetings by all partner representatives
7. There is contribution at meetings by all partner representatives
8. All partners have an equal say in decision-making

A further four open-ended questions then asked the following:

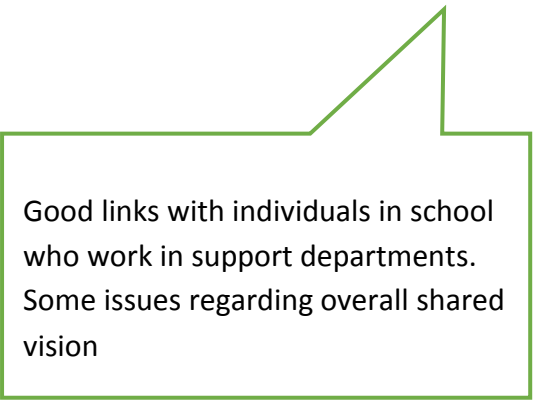
1. What do you think are the key components of an effective partnership?
2. What do you think are the advantages of partnership working for your organisation?
3. What challenges does partnership working present in your organisation?
4. How could partnership working be improved within your organisation?

During mid-2016 (over a four-week period), the PIT distributed the questionnaire to key staff within Kirkcaldy High School and to 37 individuals from partner agencies involved with Kirkcaldy High School. The partnership analyst collated, coded, and grouped the responses, and then shared the findings with PIT members. At this stage, the group identified that the partner responses to the questionnaire had been poor (five respondents), and agreed to re-open the questionnaire for a further two weeks, having re-sent requests to non-respondents. The re-release resulted in a further five responses, which the group felt provided a more balanced view (with almost equal proportions respondents representing school, council, and other partners).

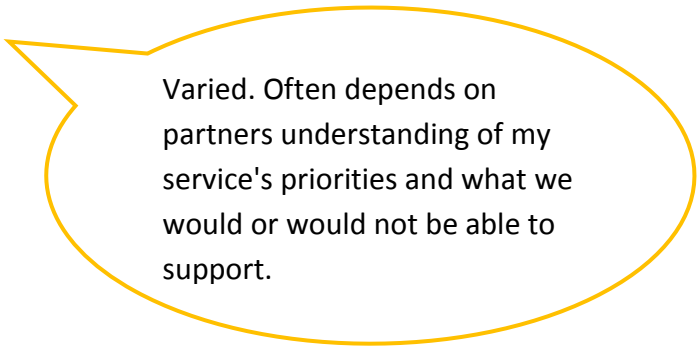
4.1.1 Describe your experience of current partnership working - A selection of responses



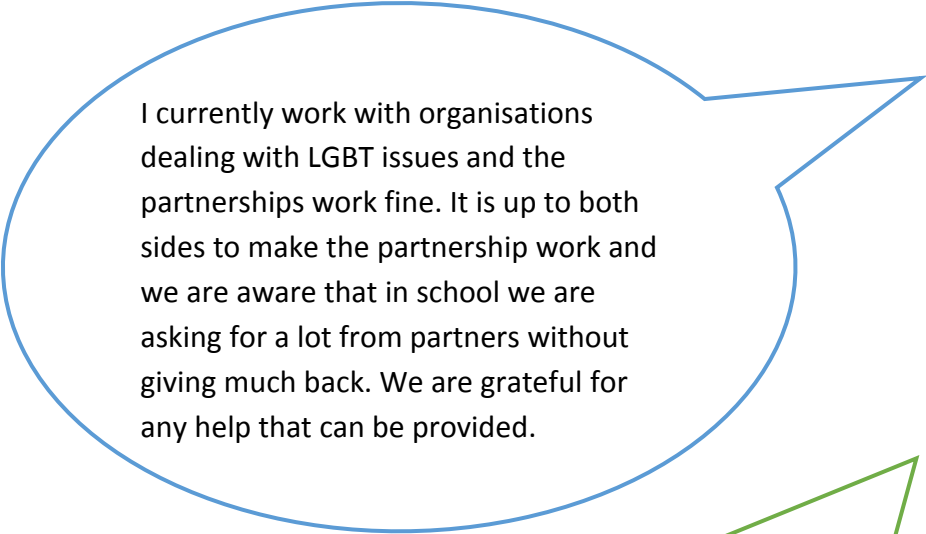
I feel that I have had positive experiences working with partner professions. I recently started to cover the Kirkcaldy area and found that, following meetings and having met professionals face-to-face, relationships were formed. However this appears to depend on individuals and personalities.



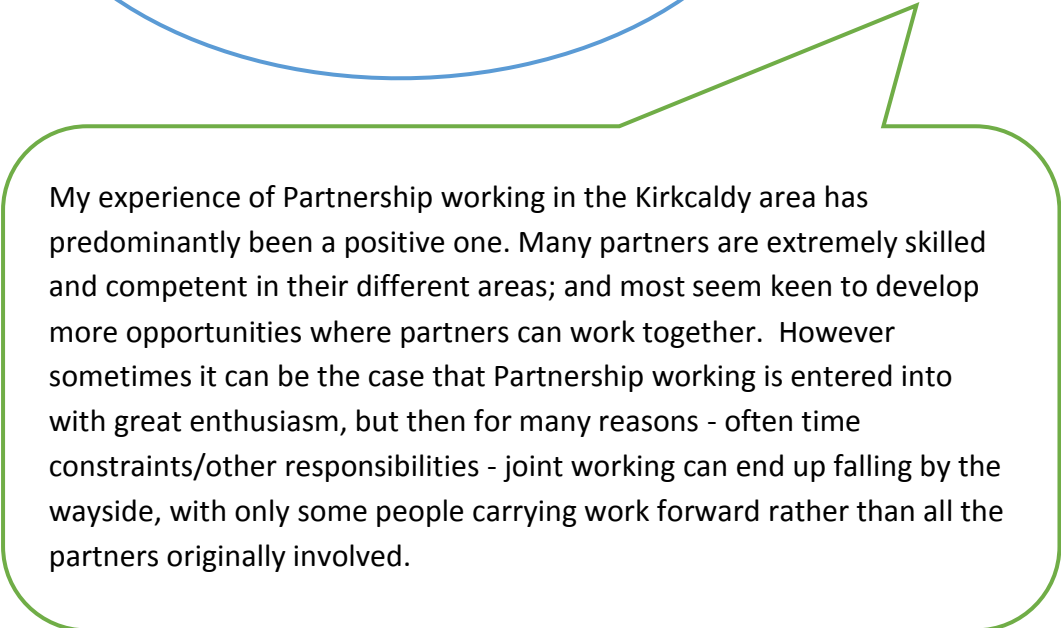
Good links with individuals in school who work in support departments.
Some issues regarding overall shared vision



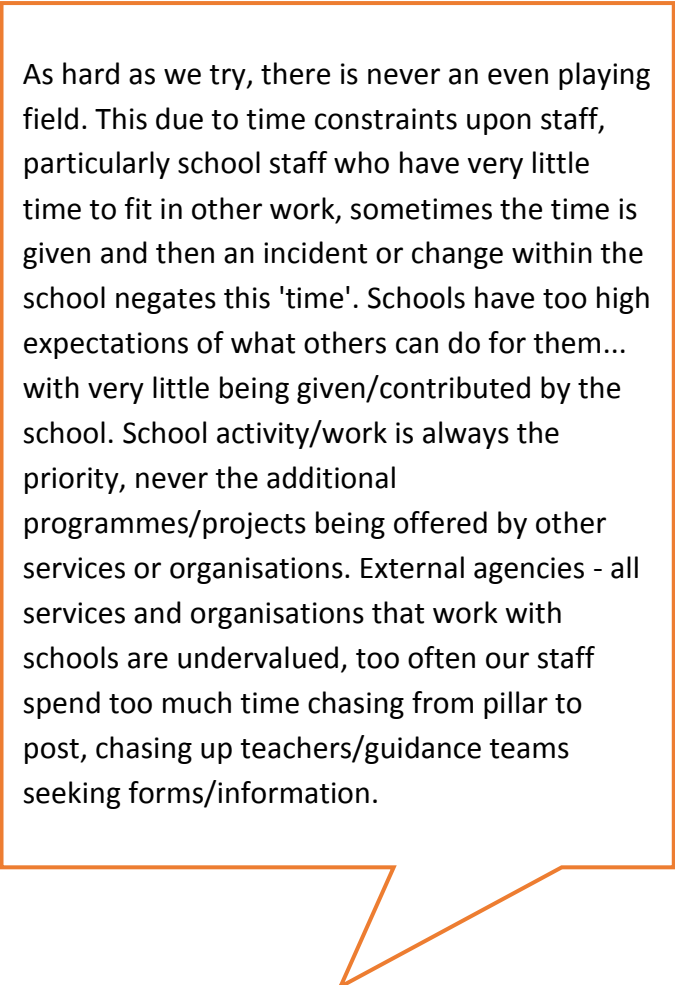
Varied. Often depends on partners understanding of my service's priorities and what we would or would not be able to support.



I currently work with organisations dealing with LGBT issues and the partnerships work fine. It is up to both sides to make the partnership work and we are aware that in school we are asking for a lot from partners without giving much back. We are grateful for any help that can be provided.



My experience of Partnership working in the Kirkcaldy area has predominantly been a positive one. Many partners are extremely skilled and competent in their different areas; and most seem keen to develop more opportunities where partners can work together. However sometimes it can be the case that Partnership working is entered into with great enthusiasm, but then for many reasons - often time constraints/other responsibilities - joint working can end up falling by the wayside, with only some people carrying work forward rather than all the partners originally involved.



As hard as we try, there is never an even playing field. This due to time constraints upon staff, particularly school staff who have very little time to fit in other work, sometimes the time is given and then an incident or change within the school negates this 'time'. Schools have too high expectations of what others can do for them... with very little being given/contributed by the school. School activity/work is always the priority, never the additional programmes/projects being offered by other services or organisations. External agencies - all services and organisations that work with schools are undervalued, too often our staff spend too much time chasing from pillar to post, chasing up teachers/guidance teams seeking forms/information.

Responses	% Agreement	%Disagreement	%Don't Know
a) Partners share a common vision	79	21	0
b) Partner representatives take ownership & responsibility for making things happen	84	16	0
c) Partner roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and accepted	74	26	0
d) Agendas are set and owned by those tasked with delivery	89	11	0
e) Purpose/direction and membership is reviewed periodically	68	21	11
f) There is regular attendance at meetings by all partner representatives	47	42	11
g) There is contribution at meetings by all partner representatives	79	21	0
h) All partners have an equal say in decision-making	89	11	0

4.1.2 What challenges does partnership working present in your organisation?

One respondent stated that they thought there were no challenges to partnership working. For brevity the What Works Scotland research fellow has grouped the remaining responses to this question into three main themes; resource demands and expectations, time, and missing partners. There were also some cross-cutting issues, such as responsibility for managing and coordinating partnership working.

1. Resource demands and expectations

Sometimes our partners have high expectations of our roles and this can lead to conflict which I feel can deflect from the families who we work with and who should be receiving the attention.

Demand outstrips capacity fairly constantly as the service is seen as helpful and effective

Enough staff to cover the referrals we could receive.

The partner agency not fully understanding each other roles, and service protocols.

We sometimes do not have the capacity or the resources to deliver what is being asked

2. Time constraints

Time for meetings, occasionally if companies have resourcing problems then this can put a pressure on the link

Coordinating partners and finding times that suit everyone. It is difficult to find enough time to put into maintaining partnerships and to work on effective partnerships.

Time to co-ordinate is difficult for the Depute with this on her remit. Clarifying what partners can offer to all helps improve engagement.

When services are busy, partnership working can fall down the list of priorities and communication can become less frequent and

effective, which can become frustrating for other partners involved. Time itself can be a challenge when trying to work in partnership: fitting additional work in to already busy diaries; finding slots where all partners are available etc. In the past it has sometimes been left to one organisation to do the bulk of the work that other partners failed to do, which can then lead to an unwillingness to work in the same way in the future.

Time is a key challenge - time to review and develop, but also school timetabling to fit around college times. For us it also managing partnership working across many schools.

3. Missing partners

If partners do not follow through any tasks they have agreed to complete as per any Child's Plan

It's difficult when key partners are missing from the partnership and time can also be a challenge.

The challenges are when partner agencies are reluctant to get involved.

Difficult to move cases forward when partnership agencies do not attend planning meetings. Difficulties when agencies are not prepared to become actively involved in working with young people in order to provide support deemed necessary.

Lack of communication. Non-attendance (at times no apologies given) at meetings. Non completion of relevant paperwork e.g. well-being indicators.

Attendance at meetings sometimes. Withdrawal of services e.g. Penumbra (know this was external factors).

Some organisations, due to time limits, cannot be present at all meetings or do as much as the young people would like. Some organisations use volunteers or change members of staff so there is less continuity.

4.2 Focus groups

After analysing and discussing the questionnaire responses, the PIT decided to explore some of the issues in more detail. A key aim for the group was to encourage an understanding of partnership working that goes beyond attendance at meetings, and considers the day-to-day and wider activities that comprise and improve collaborative working.

The group adopted an inquiry approach that utilised their existing skills sets and capacity. The Policy Analyst and Policy Officer, trained in using the KETSO⁶ facilitation tool, offered their skills to facilitate the focus groups. With roots in action research, KETSO is a trademarked facilitation and engagement tool aimed at producing interactive group dialogue. The PIT focus groups considered the question: “How can schools work better in partnership to support young people who need additional support?” and discussed the themes:

1. Participation
2. Roles and Responsibilities
3. Common Vision
4. & Other



Data captured on KETSO “leaves”

To ensure a mix of roles and relationship experience in the discussions, the PIT decided to purposively allocate the 13 participants into two groups. The Analyst and Policy Officer facilitated each table, providing an overview of the work and inquiry, detailing the session, and explaining the PITs aim. Using a KETSO kit, the facilitators asked participants to consider what was working well, what wasn't working well, what opportunities there were (to bring about change) and to identify three priorities from the discussions. The facilitators captured the data on “leaves” (part of the KETSO kit) at the time of the event.

⁶ Ketso is a hand-on facilitation tool which can be used for creative action planning. It offers a structured way to run a workshop, capture the discussion and ideas and is designed to allow all participants a say and encourage effective engagement. <http://ketso.com>

Reflecting the buy-in from the headteacher, the focus groups took place at Kirkcaldy High School. Some of the PIT members participated in the focus groups, reflecting their roles as frontline workers involved in school partnership arrangements. The group identified two aims of undertaking focus groups in this way. First, it could provide information for their inquiry work. Second, bringing people together to discuss partnership could in itself be an action that leads to improved partnership working and relationship building. Furthermore, reflections from PIT members highlighted the extent to which they valued the work of the Policy Officer and Analyst, and that through this process they had developed a greater understanding of the skills that the colleagues in the centre possessed.



Data captured on KETSO “leaves”

What Works Scotland organised the audio recording, explained ethics and consent on the day, and arranged transcription. The facilitators wrote up the information captured on the KETSO leaves. Prior to the event the PIT team collaboratively discussed the KETSO notes and identified two priorities to focus on further:

- knowing who the partners are in the area
- the type of service that they can provide

The PIT members reflected that the focus group served two further purposes in relation to these two questions. First, the participants left the session with a greater understanding about the services and people available to them as participants had highlighted and discussed information during the session. Second, it added to their insights on partnership

working by bringing in a wider range of views and knowledge. Although the PIT noted that that focus groups did not provide any particularly surprising insights on partnership working, they:

- provided useful time to reconnect
- reiterated that partners were thinking along comparable lines
- demonstrated that there was more buy-in than anticipated
- opened the group up to potential new PIT members

Consequently, using a focus group approach to gather data enabled the PIT to not only collect data, but also enact change by advancing collaborative working and providing a facilitated space for discussion about the difficulties and possibilities for improvement.

4.3 Research findings and learning

The PIT inquiry found that a number of responses to questions about partnership working focussed on relational practices and emphasised the importance of knowing potential partners. The practitioners felt that the focus groups highlighted that many people working in schools were only aware of the services that they currently use and don't routinely question whether another service is available (that might be more appropriate for the young person at that time).

The PIT identified the following learning points:

Sharing	The need to encourage more sharing of good practice
<p><i>“ensuring that examples of good practice are disseminated dissemination politically, strategically and along the way with colleagues and partners, both locally and wider to increase continuity”</i></p> <p><i>“I think there is at all levels, including strategically. And if we were, if something was working, like somebody else's that works well, you know, share it with others to see if that could fit and work for them”.</i></p> <p><i>“Promote shared good practice better, up the line, politically...”</i></p>	
Resources	The need for time and resources to liaise with partners and enable effective partnership working
<p><i>“it's having the time to do that, you know. We've had conversations, even about sharing something basic, like our SE (Social Education) resources, between the schools, to save everybody coming up with a similar course. You have the</i></p>	

conversation, and four years later, you've not had the time to meet up"

"time is one of the things that I've put down, also. Because in our last one, about what works well, we spoke about relationships. The relationships have to be worked on, and built upon, and there needs to be some sort of contact"

"I could do with increased time, to allow the greater communication. Because the majority of my week is still spent teaching. So therefore, it's pretty easy to get involved in a game of phone tag, and before you know it, three, four days have gone passed since information was requested"

Time

Importance of spending time getting to know your partners

"The need to have understanding of the people you work with, their roles and remits at a local level. Joint networking and development sessions for staff, services and partners events facilitate this understanding – particularly as there has been substantial changes when staff turnover has been high. A suggestion of open days similar to those for pupils, could be organised, for partners and services at the start of a new school year."

"when you have that key relationship, so they get it, they know what it is your service is about".

A specific suggestion is the possible creation of a directory of services or a web programme (such as an app) to ensure that there is up-to-date information on the Kirkcaldy area and the type of service and activity on offer. However, the group's work also highlighted the importance of relational and social ways of working and ensuring individual practitioners adopt partnership working through *both* formal meetings and everyday practices.

5. Actions

'If you always do what you've always done, you'll get the same result'

Once the PIT had completed a cycle and start to implement changes, they also reflected that:

- Relationships were being developed and strengthened.
- They need to continue to take the time to step back and look at what changes have happened, and include all partners as part of the reflective process.
- They had to make a conscious decision to share findings and practice (both good and bad) with others who have participated in the process and across the partnership. In the populated template the PIT stated that they intend to take findings to local community planning structures (Family, Early Years & Young People Group) to develop work further.
- Measuring outcome will likely involve qualitative rather than quantitative work.

A specific outcome of this CAR cycle was the agreement that there will be a partnership day planned into the school calendar at Kirkcaldy High School. Although it is still in the early stages of development, the PIT intends to use the opportunity to engage all partners that work directly with young people with additional support needs.

At the end of the direct involvement with What Works Scotland the practitioners in the PIT stated that they intended to continue as a PIT, embedding it into existing collaborative and partnership arrangements:

"However, it may be the case that the group becomes a sub-group of the Family, Early Years and Young People (FEYYP) themed group of the local community planning structure. The role and remit of the PIT group, is still to be drafted, and will look at broader partnership working within the FEYYP themed group and ensure work contributes to strengthening existing plans and strategies to address inequalities and local priorities".

The current PIT members note that they will review and broaden the membership of the PIT and create an action plan in early 2017. They will also consider how to spread engage with other schools within the Kirkcaldy area and the need to gain commitment to the process as part of broadening the PIT group.

5.1 Reflections and learning on doing collaborative action research

The PIT members reflected that bringing together new people to build an inquiry team was challenging. They highlighted difficulties initially engaging with others and getting people to join. Some of the early concerns centred on "the risk of meetings becoming talking shops" with little action coming from them, given members were busy and had expressed that the

process was “getting in the way of the day job”. For some members the process of creating change and action through dialogue and discussion was unnerving and a very real frustration at the beginning of the inquiry process; there was a range of individuals with different experience of working in teams or using meetings as spaces to discuss and negotiate interests. Some practitioners shared that they were more familiar with meetings based on a set agenda and a list of predetermined actions to follow. As such, they did not recognise the ‘open space’ of the early CAR meetings and that What Works Scotland was not the inquiry lead. That said, What Works Scotland observations of the latter stages of the group showed much development in group dynamics and leadership, and a happy medium between engaging in different views and dialogue and the PIT lead directing the identification of tasks and deadlines. Furthermore, over the course of the inquiries there was an increasing ownership of the CAR process, and understanding of what is involved in inquiry work.

“Meetings need to have a point and purpose to them – whilst in the first stages of the inquiry it was important to get to know who everyone was I feel that meetings where there was lack of clarity was when people became frustrated with the process and disengaged. If people cannot see that something is happening or that plans are progressing then enthusiasm for the project diminishes. PITs need to use the skills, knowledge and expertise of all partners within it. It is important to recognise that all partners have a valid contribution.”

Over time, the practitioners increased their effort to ensure that each meeting had a clear purpose, that members had specific actions, and so members became more comfortable with the process and clearer on what they were doing (individually) and what they were trying to achieve (collaboratively). An interesting and noteworthy development in relation to this PIT is the way that the group developed to balance task-based working with the inclusion of critical reflection. The PIT members highlight in their final report that “immediately after specific events there was time to reflect and discuss what had been learned before collaboratively deciding on the next steps”.

“There were some challenges at the beginning in terms of our understanding of process and purpose of the PIT and I felt that there was a lack of leadership and ownership. In cycle 2 there was a clearer direction and everybody knew what the purpose was. I think I was able to contribute to the PIT although as a result of missing two meetings I wasn’t able to contribute the inquiry topic in cycle 2 which on reflection I recognise the importance of making sure that I get the information from those meetings. I think that both relationships and networks have become stronger as a result of the process.”

The group also recognised that, “it will be challenging to sustain reflective practice, measure it and embed it into wider practice”. This is an important aspect of the context; some practitioners do exhibit and embed reflective practice in their professional framing of how to undertake their work, whereas for others it is outside the expected remit of how to go about their day-to-day practice.

In the template What Works Scotland asked, “*What did you learn whilst going through the process?*” The PIT reflected that there has been much more honest open conversation taking place at the PIT group. The members were not afraid to speak about issues and this led to better relationships within the group. Given this experience, the PIT regarded that, as a group, they gained momentum to drive things forward as a partnership. PIT members also noted that there were a wide range of challenges in their day-to-day work areas and felt that if the group worked together to join up some of their processes, they would be in a stronger position to collaboratively support each other and create opportunities for better outcomes for children and young people. In addition, they expressed that there is now a better understanding of the challenges facing the third sector and how this might affect how they go about their partnership work. This learning and the insights from practitioner’s individual reflections point to the critical place of relational practices, and suggest that processes like CAR provide space and time for such practices to evolve.

PIT members also reflected on the experiences in being part of the CAR process. The template acknowledged that each PIT member would experience the work differently. The practitioners’ reflections show a distinct pattern of experiencing a lack of clarity at the outset. However, they all place significant value on partnership working as fundamental to their work. Over the course of their experience they all indicate in some detail that the process has influenced them in some way, be it their practice, their connections with other colleagues, their understanding of other’s contexts, and the raising awareness of the issues facing young people with additional support needs. It is clear from their comments that they regarded the process as complicated but positive. They note that the relationships that evolved through the experience appear to reflect their primary concern; that collaborative effort, centred around school, is key to ensuring young people with additional needs are supported.

PIT members reflected on the learning and experience of working through the inquiry process. Reflecting the dual nature of this work - the learning from the research plus the experience of working collaboratively to produce the knowledge - the following quotes demonstrate:

The CAR process offers a space to give or explore different experiences of community planning

“As a referrer to Community Learning and Development projects⁷ prior to my involvement in the project, while I certainly valued their involvement and support, I also viewed their engagement with a little frustration, uncertainty and a bit of cynicism. Having been a Guidance teacher for many years I have seen many projects come and go from a variety of different groups being set up as a cure all for the difficulties faced by young people in our community. The inception of many projects

⁷ Many CLD projects are linked to community planning processes and funding in Kirkcaldy.

felt political and their existence was often limited. I have, at time, been wary of signing young people (many of whom are extremely vulnerable) up for a project which may not last the course and where the agenda may not be the needs of the core group. I am in no doubt that my practice has been impacted upon positively by my involvement in the project. The time and space to talk to colleagues about a shared aim of working towards the best outcomes for young people has been invaluable. Recognising my own lack of knowledge and awareness of the challenges faces and being able to share my thoughts on how practice could be changed has been extremely worthwhile.”

Respondent 1

The value of improving and developing contacts for immediate improvement of day-to-day working

“I have made contacts with people that I either hadn’t met before or hadn’t worked with before. I now have points of contact in work areas that I didn’t have before. Even within our own team / office I work more closely with other staff than I used to. You learn what other people do and take that knowledge away for use in future (often unrelated) projects... I have a better appreciation of the constraints and issues that face operational staff and the issues of logistics which on paper may seem trivial but in reality can take a great deal of effort to overcome.”

Respondent 2

The process can shed light on the parameters around projects to reduce frustrations

“I’m a community education worker and partnership working with both voluntary and statutory sector is embedded into the role. The benefits of partnership working were affirmed through the process, but it also highlighted some of the challenges, for example having to encourage people to participate in the PIT, survey etc. The PIT has helped colleagues in Education in particular to get a better understanding of our processes e.g funding and this has improved our partnership working because they are now aware of our service, constraints and timescales and reasons why some programmes are withdrawn. It is how this is cascaded further than just the PIT members”

Respondent 3

Working collaboratively in this way can create empathy and understanding

“Throughout this process, I have become more aware of some of the challenges of partnership working, gaining a better understanding of how partners work and their organisation constraints, but at the same time have also affirmed that we do in fact have some very strong links with key players/staff within schools. To begin with, in the first cycle, I was unsure what my role was and got caught up too much on the PIT

being schools work driven. Once I had a better understanding of the 'partnership' focus [cycle 2] I was able to understand the process more clearly and play an active role and use schools work as an example. Once the membership of the group was ironed out this too helped to clarify."

Respondent 5

5.1 Learning

It is important to note that once the group identified an inquiry and progressed with it, there was much less dependency on, or confusion about the role of, What Works Scotland. By the time of the home retreat in November 2016 the group appeared to work comfortably together and were appreciative of the skills and knowledge each other could bring to the group. This PIT provides a really useful example of how CAR can work in the multi-agency context.

There is key learning for those seeking to develop a CAR approach in this context:

- A group of diverse views may offer the most systematic change, however smaller groups with positive relationship histories can “hit the ground running”. For the group to develop and progress it became a smaller, more familiar group of practitioners. Once the group was functioning and clear on its aims, there was scope for the current members to bring in more diverse views or values from practitioners.
- The group worked in an asset-based way by focussing on the skills and knowledge of people within the group to undertake the second inquiry. However, it wasn't until much later in the process that individuals felt comfortable to share their previous skills and knowledge, (such as previous facilitation training) that could be a robust and confident way for them to undertake data collection. It takes time to build trust and understanding.
- When the group got a new leader who had previous training in similar inquiry based or improvement models, the group was able to work more confidently at identifying and undertaking an inquiry.
- The process matters as much as the output. In this sense, working together, having meetings and conducting focus groups in the school develops and improves the context in which the individuals will continue to work.
- The practitioners aligned their inquiry with existing work aims in their environment, experiential knowledge, and local data. This approach ensured that the time they spent on learning and action would align and improve their existing and ongoing work areas. On the whole the group sought little support for the original role of

What Works Scotland (evidence brokering) focussing instead on useful experiential evidence and making immediate changes to social and relational practices.

- From a What Works Scotland perspective, this PIT offers great insight and learning about the CAR process and the group work required to create and progress with a multi-agency and multi-professional inquiry process. At the end of the What Works Scotland involvement it appears that the group has developed to a stage that it could effectively engage with university partners to consider evidence from elsewhere and collectively engage in more challenging knowledge generation.

6. Questions for consideration

Regarding partnership working in and across schools and other agencies:

- How can schools or their partners create systems or tools to share service information across professional and organisational boundaries?
- How can different professions develop daily relational practices across organisations to support young people?

When setting up or revising a CAR group:

- At what stage might it be useful to widen a smaller group of familiar workers into a more complex collection of practitioners to work as the inquiry team? To what extent will later members be able to shape and influence the inquiry process? And now might the timing affect power relations within the group?
- To what extent did an assets-based approach to undertaking CAR improve the inquiry process?
- What facilitation tools would be useful within PIT meetings to encourage and support individuals to share and offer existing skills as part of the inquiry process?

7. Conclusions

This report covers the working the partnership innovation team (PIT) exploring partnership working in schools in Kirkcaldy.

The report outlines the research design process, inquiry activities, actions and learning. It also provides details on the collaborative action research process and the way that the group developed over time and worked together to investigate partnership working to support young people.

The inquiry highlighted a number of local issues regarding partnership working, this included the need for more time and resources for organisations and individual practitioners to know what is available for young people, and create the relationships across organisational boundaries to access services and support. The PIT found that partnership working goes beyond attendance at formal meetings, and should include day-to-day collaborative practice based on relational and social interactions with other practitioners and organisations. The practitioners involved in the inquiry found that by working together they improved their working relationships and knowledge of others' issues and ways of working within their context.

Reference

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