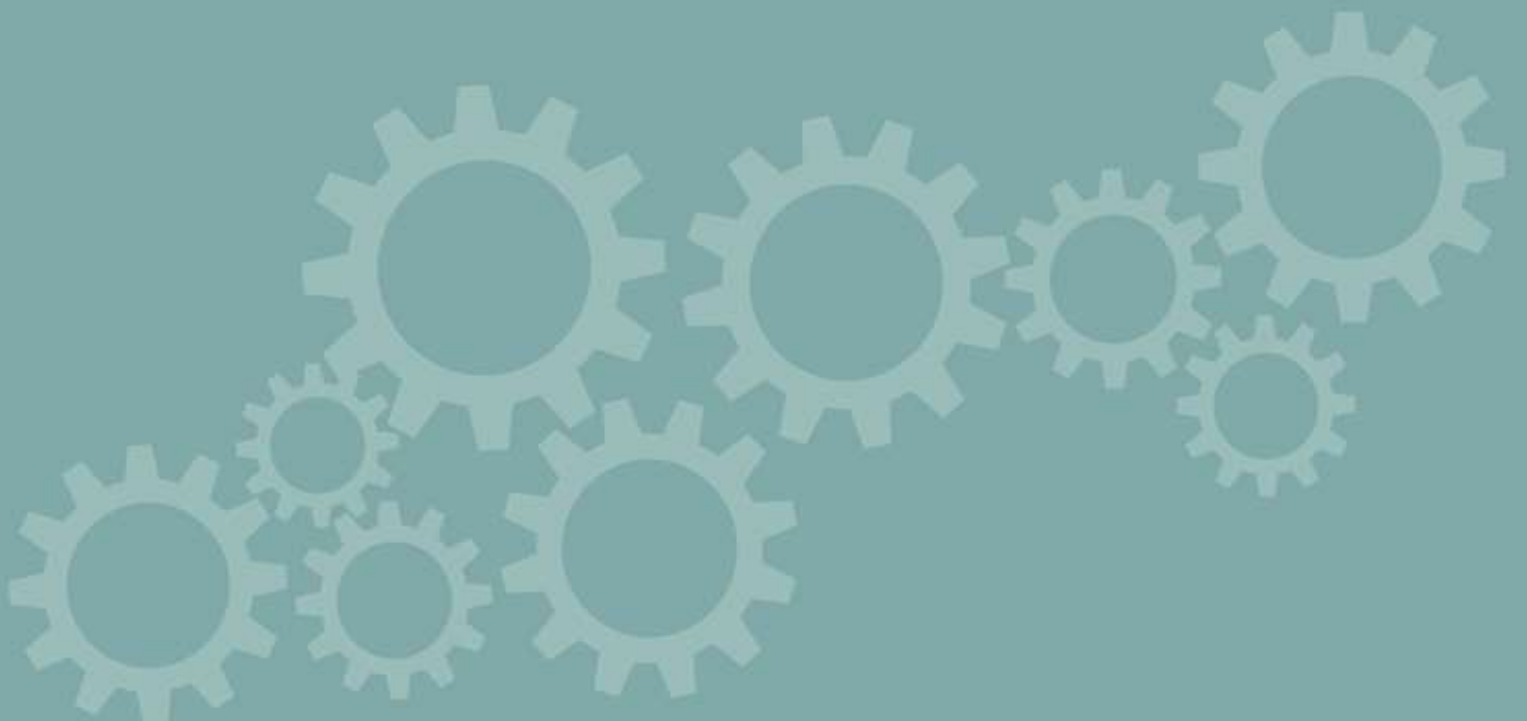


**Action Research
Report**

June 2017

**Reflections and learning from the Fife
collaborative action research
programme 2015-2017**

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Cat Maclean, Laura Thomson, Coryn Barclay



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.

WWS brings together the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, other academics across Scotland, with partners from a range of local authorities and:

- Glasgow Centre for Population Health
- Improvement Service
- Inspiring Scotland
- IRISS (Institution for Research and Innovation in Social Services)
- NHS Education for Scotland
- NHS Health Scotland
- NHS Health Improvement for Scotland
- Scottish Community Development Centre
- SCVO (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations)

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

Collaborative Action Research workstream.

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Purpose

The authors of this report bring together the learning from the three Partnership Innovation Teams (PITS) and their experiences within the Fife Collaborative Action Research Programme. The purpose of this report is to share the learning from this experience, and contribute to the knowledge and understanding on undertaking collaborative action research (CAR) in multi-agency context.

Audience

The audience for this report includes:

- All those directly involved in the Fife CAR programme
- Colleagues of those involved in the work, including managers within Fife Council and others involved in community planning and collaborations in Fife
- Academic researchers interested in collaborative action research
- What Works Scotland colleagues and partners involved in collaborative research or public service reform in Scotland.

Report authors

This report is a co-produced output between practitioners in Fife and What Works Scotland. Specifically:

- **Dr Hayley Bennett**, Research Fellow based at the University of Edinburgh, acted as the 'professional researcher' on behalf of What Works Scotland in this CAR programme. In this report she wrote the background section, co-wrote section one (with a What Works Scotland colleague), and oversaw the production process.
- **Sharon Murphy**, Policy Co-ordinator, Fife Council, acted as the main What Works Scotland contact. Alongside her colleagues in the policy and research team (**Cat Maclean and Laura Thomson**), she wrote section two and coordinated the process within the Fife case site.
- **Coryn Barclay**, Research consultant, Fife Council, produced section three based on her reflections and experience as a member of one of the PITs and the Strategy Group.

The main authors of this report have also drawn on a wide range of contributions from colleagues involved in the Fife CAR programme. We'd also like to acknowledge comments from **Tim Kendrick**, Community Planning Manager, Fife Council.

We structure the report as follows. We provide a brief background to the report, highlighting some of the Fife CAR programme characteristics and organisational arrangements. Following this, in section one Hayley Bennett draws on the inquiry templates and reflects on piloting CAR in a multi-agency context. In section two, Sharon Murphy, Cat Maclean, and Laura Thomson reflect on their role supporting the inquiry groups and Fife

CAR programme. In section three, Coryn Barclay reflects on the experience of undertaking action research within her own organisation and shares her learning and advice for others.

The learning we present in this report suggests that the process of translating CAR into a workable and beneficial approach within this context requires a greater consideration of the pre-conditions, skills, and resources to undertake CAR. We find this includes a familiarity with inquiring processes and an inquiring stance in the workplace, time to learn and share language and ideas, new types of facilitation and leadership within small groups, complex relationship building, and an emphasis on reflective practice. We also demonstrate the different roles and issues to consider for those who are undertaking action research within their own organisation and working context, and those who are professional or academic researchers seeking to undertake collaborative research outside of traditional academic research spaces.

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Background

Dr Hayley Bennett, Research Fellow, University of Edinburgh, acted as the main What Works Scotland contact for the Fife CAR programme. Here she provides a brief overview of the nature of the Fife CAR programme.

Based on our reflections from undertaking the CAR activities, this paper presents some of the learning from the co-produced Fife Collaborative Action Research (CAR) programme that took place between March 2015 and January 2017. The Fife CAR programme forms part of the [What Works Scotland Collaborative Action research workstream](#). The workstream centred on four What Works Scotland research fellows (one attached to each site) piloting CAR within the multi-agency community planning context. However, through the co-production process, CAR took various forms and involved different arrangements and activities in each of the four What Works Scotland case sites. As such, the learning here should not be generalised to cover the experiences and findings in other localities.

Fife's vision for working with What Works Scotland centred on using the opportunity to explore ways of working and collaborating in the context of community planning. The CAR learning we present here is part of a collaborative learning process and is not a rigorous evaluation of specific programmes or interventions. Over time, the Fife CAR programme came to involve a number of key features:

- One overarching Strategy Group comprised of practitioners based in various managerial positions and from across a range of organisations including What Works Scotland.
- Groups of practitioners working together in three Partnership Innovation Teams (PITs).
- Three research inquiries (one associated with each PIT).
- A co-produced plan of activities and events covering the whole CAR programme.
- Intensive What Works Scotland support for critical reflection, dialogue, collaboration, and the creation of inquiry spaces.

As the assigned What Works Scotland research fellow, I worked with practitioners based in Fife to design and co-produce a broad Fife programme of activity that:

- followed the principles of collaborative action research (CAR)
- focused on the use of different types of evidence and research
- encouraged critical reflection
- suited the agendas, needs, and interests of the practitioners and their working context, and
- offered flexibility for groups of practitioners to shape, and operationalise.

With Sharon, I developed and coordinated the wider Fife CAR programme of activities. My initial role involved seeking to broker evidence, arrange and facilitate ‘home retreats’; and act as a critical friend to individual practitioners or each inquiry group. I also provided technical research advice and support for various parts of the change process on a one-to-one basis or as part of the broad programme as requested or needed. As part of the co-produced CAR programme, the practitioners requested tools and structures regarding the process for reporting the learning. With members of the policy and research team at Fife Council, I designed and tested an inquiry reporting template to provide an indication of what practitioners may choose to cover in an inquiry or research process, and to help to capture and record their inquiry work. The reporting template also sought to encourage reflective learning and acted as a tool to engage in collaborative practice. You can find further information on the Fife CAR programme in the Fife section of the What Works Scotland website¹. We have based sections one and two on our analysis and reflections of the contents of the three populated PIT reporting templates. Unless otherwise stated, all sections using quotation marks draw from the practitioners’ populated templates.

Collaborative action research in Fife

Collaborative action research (CAR) is a 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 inquiry aims. The principles of the CAR approach emphasise reflection, empowerment, and enacting change throughout a research process. The CAR process creates a space for action whereby practitioners examine their own practices, knowledge, and activities to achieve better understanding and improvement.

¹ Fife section of the What Works Scotland website whatworksscotland.ac.uk/casesites/fife/

² Townsend, 2014, 117

Four aims of the Fife CAR programme

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 the Fife CAR programme, I encouraged practitioners to engage in group dialogue to advance learning across professional, departmental, and organisational boundaries. Furthermore, within the community planning partnership (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 Fife CAR programme involved practitioners identifying their own inquiry topics and drawing on the skills and expertise in the group to establish, lead, and undertake research inquiries. There was an appointed leader in each group who also sat on the over-arching Strategy Group and attended What Works Scotland national retreats. These individuals were responsible for championing the collaborative action research process, shaping and leading the research and learning activities, and encouraging the group to work collaboratively to move through their inquiry. I provided a range of methodological and process support as well as offering knowledge brokerage and links to university resources. I also provided facilitation support through home retreats and in some of the PIT meetings where requested.

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) functions³ with local community planning and area-based activities. We refer to the inquiry groups 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 multi-agency nature of the community planning context. Some practitioners, who were involved in the PITs or the overarching Fife Strategy Group, invited a range of professionals to join the inquiry teams; for example a variety of third sector workers, police officers, and health workers. However, in practice by the end of the two-year period all of the teams were predominately comprised of Fife Council

³ Some of the central Fife employees produced section two of this report based on their critical reflections of their learning through the process.

employees, although there was much variation regarding professional identities, departmental backgrounds, and regular workplace localities.

All three inquiry projects involved groups of Fife-based practitioners working collaboratively to investigate a 'wicked issue'. At the end of the CAR programme in Jan 2017, the three inquiry groups included:

1. Welfare PIT: Exploring data and knowledge sharing in relation to welfare sanctions
2. Family PIT: Exploring 'Family Fun' programme across different localities
3. Schools PIT: Exploring how schools engage in and understand partnership working between different organisations

CAR originates from an applied, practitioner-oriented approach to knowledge generation and use. For the last twenty years, it has been strongly associated with educationalists and forms a key part of workplace development and professional practice in educational settings. However, piloting CAR in a multi-organisational, multi-site, and multi-professional setting (to explore a range of different public policy issues) takes it beyond its previous functions and context. In Fife, our CAR programme has incorporated collaboration both *within* and *between* different types of complex organisations.

Section one: What can we learn from Fife about complex inquiry teams?

Dr Hayley Bennett (and Tamara Mulherin)

As the professional researcher aligned to the Fife CAR programme, I read and analysed the content of the PITs reporting templates with great interest. In this section I briefly draw attention to two key characteristics of the Fife CAR programme:

1. The inclusion of a **diverse membership** from multiple agencies and professional backgrounds;
2. The **creation of new inquiry groups** and the importance of understanding the processes for working with others and managing group work.

Diverse membership

Multi-agency

All three PITs acknowledged the value of having diverse representation from different organisations as this offered insight into different organisations, their cultures, constraints, and roles. Having a diverse range of organisational perspectives helped build a more extensive understanding of the 'big picture' in which many practitioners work, and also strengthened relationships between organisations. PIT members found some of these relationships and insights useful both within the PIT work and also for other work tasks. For example, in the case of the Welfare Reform Group, the participation of the Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) helped to change preconceptions and reduce tensions between some organisations working at the front-line, and offered space for productive discussions:

'The resulting link to the DWP was of great benefit to the group, showing a willingness by all parties to work together to further the work of the PIT'

(Welfare PIT).

Getting involved in a collaborative endeavour also brought to the fore two main issues.

First, shared barriers can materialise when organisations want to work together to address a particular issue. For example, the Welfare PIT highlighted issues around data protection and the limits to information sharing.

Second, whilst having something in common might provide extra impetus to tackle things together, for the Schools PIT, there seemed to be a trade-off between having multiple perspectives from different organisations, with a need to progress with an inquiry process. Some practitioners identified that being in a smaller group enables a greater capacity to manage the group's direction and the work required. Similarly, when the Family PIT

restructured it identified the need to start as a smaller group to identify a purpose and aim. Nevertheless, despite some reflection that smaller groups increase the speed of the CAR process, all the PITs recognised that they would have benefited from the knowledge and skills of other perspectives associated with having a wider membership, especially with regards to the NHS.

'... it was thought that Health and Social Work would have been of most benefit to have as core members of the PIT'

(Schools PIT)

'Membership on the Family PIT is very heavily weighted toward Fife Council – there is only one third sector rep, and no partners from NHS.'

(Family PIT)

'NHS, unfortunately, were missing from the membership of the group but this is a huge area and it would require narrowing down in which NHS service would be most appropriate.'

(Welfare PIT)

With regards to multi-agency working, the issue appears to be less about not wanting to work with others, and more about the skills needed to facilitate and manage more diverse and perhaps conflicting organisational agendas or opinions.

Widening organisational involvement can also impact on group sustainability. Increased numbers of organisations involved in a CAR process could 'lighten' the workload or provide momentum for the PIT to continue, or reducing the responsibilities on specific individuals. Learning from this work suggests that each PIT leader needs to consider the most suitable stage within the development of the group or of the process to involve a wider range of organisations or perhaps citizens (such as service users or community representatives). There is a balance between a group that knows each other well and can work through a process quickly, and a creating a wider membership offering insight into other organisational cultures and activities.

Multi-professional

The CAR programme involved different types of staff. Each group sought to include a range of frontline practitioners, as well as the more strategic and research staff from the corporate areas of Fife Council. The three groups reflected that having different types of roles, even from within the one organisation, added to the process. All three PITs reflected that the absence of particular roles may have detracted from the process.

'This inquiry has demonstrated the great potential benefits of bringing more front line staff together with Policy Officers and managers. The Policy Officers involved in this PIT have reflected that they have an improved understanding of what happens on the ground across Fife. PIT members have agreed that those staff involved have a greater overall empathy and appreciation of the value of roles not previously familiar to them.'

(Family PIT)

'It was therefore valuable that the group membership evolved in a number of ways, bringing in workers that operated at a more strategic level or at a research level, and bringing in representatives from other organisations.'

(Welfare PIT)

The PITs acknowledged that the work required to get a group started and recruit participants was not always straightforward. This was especially noticeable when seeking to include people unfamiliar with the “designing the plane while flying it” (Herr and Anderson, 2005, 69) character of the CAR approach. They reflect that without a predetermined work plan (with clear time and resource details) it can be difficult for people to feel able to find and justify the time to participate (due to work place pressures). As previously noted, two PITs reflected that starting off with a small group but then widening out at a later stage might have been a more effective way to initiate the CAR process. However, future PIT leaders should balance this reflection with concerns about the effort to bring new members ‘up to speed’ at a later stage. This includes finding ways and time to invest in supporting new members to catch up on group socialisation and inquiry activities. At the 2016 Home Retreat, all the Fife practitioners discussed and recognised these difficulties:

'Bringing together new people to build an inquiry team is a challenging process. At the outset there were issues and frustrations around getting people to join the PIT. A lot of time and effort then took place to approach and recruit interest from education practitioners.'

(Schools PIT)

The experience of the three PITs offers important learning about creating multi-agency and multi-professional groups. Practitioners joined the groups in various ways, including self-electing, responding to an approach from existing PIT members, or being delegated by their managers. The reasons why someone became a PIT member seemed to affect their contribution to the work, particularly during difficult periods. From a What Works Scotland perspective, I was keen to emphasise throughout the programme that CAR is an approach best suited to activists who are enthusiastic about the issue under inquiry or the learning approach. We know from existing research that activists can often motivate others to join, are open to adopting an inquiring mind, and are able to communicate their vision to others

to encourage collaboration and lead groups. However, whilst there may have been some tensions, in the Fife CAR programme the inclusion of both activists and mandated team members also offered some stability. Trying to ensure stable membership is an important part of undertaking CAR in a multi-agency context where a number of organisations are also undergoing restructuring processes and organisational change.

Working with others

Relationships

A common thread woven through the practitioner reflections relates to changes to working relationships. Collectively, even those practitioners who were less familiar with CAR work and found it more challenging, noted strengthened relationships between individuals and some organisations. Their reflections demonstrate how one impact of this research approach centres on creating and utilising relationships. This seemed to be particularly true for the Welfare PIT⁴ and the work they undertook in their inquiry into data sharing:

'Knowing the people. 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.'

(Welfare PIT)

Both frontline practitioners and those in central positions viewed having a relationship with each other as improving both policy and practice, as it generates improved understanding of the 'wicked issue' at the centre of the CAR inquiry being undertaken.

'There is now, between these workers, the beginnings of a dialogue that should strengthen links between policy and practice'.

(Family PIT)

'Relationships have changed based on this PIT work - Frontline worker involvement, Councillors hearing from customer facing, people facing staff telling the heart wrenching stories. Councillors now have Gingerbread posters on their walls!'

(Welfare PIT)

⁴ More information on the learning and work of the Welfare PIT can be found in its inquiry report: whatworksscotland.ac.uk/casesites/fife/

'There has been much more honest open conversation taking place at the PIT group. The members are not afraid to speak and better relationships exist with people on the group'

(Schools PIT)

They appear to regard these relationships as a means to progress other related work and as part of their daily practice to work collaboratively, spread learning, and undertake critical reflection.

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

(Family PIT)

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

(Schools PIT)

Even with the variation in size and experience, all of the PITs brought together a mix of people from the frontline of various organisations with colleagues from the 'centre'. CAR enabled the sharing of experiences and insights from those working directly with citizens on a daily basis and those working on policy implementation or team management. It became apparent in the reports that all the PITs, even during difficult stages of the work, valued this exchange in learning from each other's position and that, over time, this enriched their understanding of the inquiry topic. The wider CAR structure (including the PITs, Strategy Group, and activities through one-off events) also provided a platform for recognising the range of decisions that are taking place in these different roles, as well as means to share experience and ideas for change with those in senior and/or political positions. The reflections of the PITs indicates that the CAR process has facilitated relationship building, and that the value of these kinds of inter-personal relationships should not be underestimated in terms of positive inter-organisational working.

Group work

In the Fife CAR programme, group work played an important part in the approach to conducting an inquiry and within the overall experience. Practitioner reflections highlight how group dynamics and group facilitation can play a role in fostering constructive

relationships. Effective group dynamics can then create the space for self-directed learning about the inquiry question.

'By making sure that each meeting had a clear purpose, although not necessarily a formal agenda, and that people were specifically tasked with actions, it felt like people were more comfortable with the process and clearer on what they were doing and what the group was trying to achieve. Following events taking place (focus groups) allowing time to reflect and discuss what had been learned was a valuable component in collaboratively deciding on the next steps.'

(Schools PIT)

When drawing upon good group work practice, the CAR process appears to yield three types of understanding: increased awareness about each other's organisation and context, learning and experience in CAR, and knowledge about the 'wicked issue'. This combination of understanding contributes to the actions each group then initiated.

'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.'

(Welfare PIT)

'the main focus for this group has been to drive the evidence gathering process, from identifying an initial line of inquiry to facilitating the focus groups and interviews, then gathering and analysing the information gleaned'

(Family PIT)

'The cycle was a success because it has generated learning and change. There was a clear forward direction from meeting to meeting throughout the months since May. Identifying specific key next steps and delegated actions for each upcoming meeting was crucial.'

(Family PIT)

'There is an understanding across the partnership that there are a wide range of challenges and if we work as partners together and join up some of the processes we will be in a stronger position to collaboratively support each other and create opportunities for better outcomes for children and young people.'

(Schools PIT)

Conversely, collaborating is a 'negotiated social activity' (Townsend, 2014) and the relational dimension to CAR is not easy or straightforward. Many of the practitioners identified times where working together proved difficult. As we can see across the experiences of the three PITs, the different groups experienced different group dynamics at various points throughout their inquiry process. We need to consider who and how best to facilitate and manage such tensions, and the different approaches and skills that may be required to do this effectively. When undertaking and engaging in CAR in multi-agency contexts, professional researchers need to be aware of issues of power, expected roles and responsibilities, and pre-existing relationships. Practitioners, particularly leaders and activists, need to understand and employ a range of skills and competencies to ensure group related issues don't hamper future inquiry work.

The reflections from the PITs raise questions about CAR more generally as an intervention in public sector reform. Much of the learning appears to highlight a lack of clarity about CAR as both a research and an organisational change approach. Related to this is uneven understanding of the CAR process and its associated language, as well as confusion about the role of the researcher/critical friend. For the Welfare PIT that meant having support early on with regards to the process of creating the research question and drawing on the skills of the critical friend but then the group moving on with the inquiry.

'The PIT suffered a little in the early stages due to member uncertainty over how to transform their local issues into a broader research question. This issue of progression was helped by Hayley taking more of an active role in the group, helping to distil our vision and give us clear direction. From this point onwards the PIT had a defined research question and a clear sense of progression, which helped immeasurably in the following months.'

(Welfare PIT)

The Family PIT however, framed CAR as 'traditional research rather than an action oriented form of inquiry that does not necessarily prescribe specific methods.

'We learned that the best way to get information from the groups we work with as part of a CAR process is most likely to be to use our own working practice based methods of engagement. We fell into the trap, possibly, of thinking that we had to use the more traditional research approach of focus groups and interviews.'

(Family PIT)

Whereas the Schools PIT, regarded the process as supporting collaborative change.

'As a result of the CAR process the PIT has gained momentum to drive things forward as a partnership which was needed.'

(Schools PIT)

We can see the different experiences even though the groups were part of one wider CAR programme and operating in a shared context. The different experiences across the PITs of undertaking an inquiry, working with external academic partners, and creating and managing group interactions raises further questions about what each PIT expected or knew about CAR in advance, the existing skills within the groups, and the resource demands and perceptions of the role of the university researcher in relation to group management.

Existing literature on CAR in other settings appears to presume a pre-condition of group self-management or existing working relationships. In our context, the process of group socialisation and group management presented a range of additional tasks for the professional researcher, PIT leader, or the practitioners supporting the work. Managing group dynamics (particularly when the researcher is not present to act as a facilitator) requires consideration. Drawing on the experience of this programme, future researchers should give early attention to capacity and skills within groups and systems, as group issues can increase resource demands. There needs to be a recognition of the specific capabilities involved in collaborative group work and that resources will be necessary to enable groups to progress constructively. Facilitation will not eliminate all disagreement or conflict and should instead enable the sharing of different opinions to challenge and question the existing understandings and frames of problems and solutions.

Section two: What did we learn in Fife about undertaking CAR?

*In this section, **Catriona Maclean, Sharon Murphy, and Laura Thomson**, three Fife Council employees based in the Policy and Research teams, share their learning and reflections on their experience as part of the CAR programme and through review of the three learning reports.*

How and why were the policy and research teams involved in Fife CAR programme?

Fife's original application to What Works Scotland outlined that "staff from across all partner agencies would be made available to support the case study". In addition to this "dedicated staff resources have been identified to support the case study work". This included policy support, analytical support and management support both at a strategic and area level.

Our CPP manager and the original applicants decided at the start of the What Works Scotland activities to spread the work across the Policy and Research teams, allocating a policy officer and analyst to each of the three Partnership Innovation Teams.

"The thinking behind spreading the work across the team was to both share the workload and to give everyone the opportunity to participate and learn new skills. We were just about to go through managing change and there was talk that policy officers would be aligned to work at an area level, therefore it was felt this would provide an opportunity to test this prior to implementing the new structure."

Policy Co-ordinator

Has your role been stable throughout the process?

The Fife Council restructuring brought with it a number of changes including:

- Policy Officers moving from a Community Planning Team to a generic Policy Team.
- Analysts moving into the Council's Research Team in April 2016, having moved to Fife Council from Police Scotland in January 2016.
- New managers taking on line management responsibility for Policy Officers and Analysts (previously the Policy Co-ordinator's role).
- Local Community Planning Policy Officers providing support to Local Community Planning (not involved in the PITs).

The Policy Team retained a central support role and provided ongoing support to the three PITs and to the Strategy Group.

The three authors of this section had different roles in the Fife CAR programme: support to the Strategy Group (Policy Co-ordinator); member of the Family PIT (Policy Officer), and member of Schools PIT and Family PIT from June 2016 (Analyst).

“Our experience in Community Planning varies, with one member of the team working in Community Safety for 6/7 years, in a multi-agency setting on operational tasking and co-ordinating groups, another member of the team move from a focussed environmental post to a generic policy role and I have worked for 20 years supporting partnerships at a strategic and local level in a number of policy areas. We therefore have different professional backgrounds, skills and experience.”

Policy Co-ordinator

What do you identify as the key learning from the Fife CAR programme?

By reading the three populated PIT templates, and drawing on our direct experience with the work, we collectively highlight six reflections from our collaborative action research work in Fife:

Getting to know people

A common theme across the three inquiry groups was the need to spend time getting to know others and gain a better understanding of their role and remit.

“The importance of having individual contacts where the person is a known entity and a “face” can be attributed to them – not only makes contact and collaboration more likely but encourages it”

(Extract from Schools PIT report).

We believe that partnership working is heavily reliant on the enthusiasm of passionate individuals, however this results in risks in terms of sustainability if, for whatever reasons, those people are unable to continue to contribute or attend. We also found that there is a range of challenges regarding getting to know people through a CAR process. These include the impact of colleagues employed on temporary contracts (which come to an end during the process) resulting in uncertainty or people moving on, lack of cover for frontline staff and part-time positions. Based on our experience we feel that including a “socialisation” stage is important when setting up something new and people coming along are expected to know why they are there and what their role is. We feel this is an essential step to building good working relationships and it is worth investing time in bringing people up to speed if they join at a later stage, however people tend to skip this stage in the process.

Clear focus and sense of common purpose

We find that it is important to be clear about why we are coming together and how this relates to existing work. In the early stages of establishing CAR groups, we faced numerous barriers, as it was often difficult for PIT members involved in frontline delivery to separate the work they were undertaking from the collaborative action research element, which was focussing on exploring the *processes* surrounding the work.

We feel that the inquiry process worked well once there was **clear direction and focus** and those involved had agreed tasks and deadlines to work towards. For example, after a period of time finding a shared interest and aim, the preparation for the welfare reform event and the vignettes sub-group (where staff were working together to discuss examples) involved co-produced but clear delegated tasks and actions. The Family PIT initially struggled to agree a focus. We then used a template to gather possible ideas and had a dedicated meeting to go through the suggestions before choosing one area to focus on.

Making the connections / links to existing and other work

The aim of the Fife CAR work was to focus on processes and ways of working within the CPP process. However, interlinking work streams or operational groups in the community planning structure were also operating at the same time as the CAR process. Some of the PITs found it difficult to identify a relevant inquiry topic whilst avoiding too much overlap with other groups. The CAR groups offered an opportunity to help or influence the other work, but also a hindrance in terms of who had the lead for taking actions forward. Reflecting on the process and drawing on the reflections from others, we note that some practitioners appreciated the links between the frontline and strategy/policy as it provided an opportunity to feed frontline views to senior management – even if this was a “warts and all” picture. We find that this highlights the need for an environment where colleagues can share honest reflections of processes and practice without fear of retribution. This is something that we think could be explored further as part of the current restructuring, in particular to look at how learning can be built into the work programmes of the Local Community Planning Groups, and who else might need to be involved. This may also link to Fife Council’s organisational programmes such as Unwritten Ground Rules⁵ and the How We Work Matters framework⁶.

Time and permission to get involved

One of the main findings we identify is that people need to be given the time to participate. In an era of budget cuts and a shrinking workforce, we found it difficult asking people to

⁵ Unwritten Ground Rules and the use of Check Mates are part of the Council’s approach to engaging employees to provide feedback on beliefs and feelings that affect the way people act.

⁶ How We Work Matters sets out guidance for Council staff on two elements of their role – what they do and how they do it.

dedicate time to a process where the initial outcomes weren't immediately clear. We found bringing together new people to build inquiry teams was challenging. At the outset there were issues and frustrations around getting people to join in and a lot of time and effort took place to approach and recruit new members who wouldn't traditionally come to the table (e.g. DWP, Education). Often, we found that members of the Policy and Research Team had to invest time and energy behind the scenes to make this happen; however we feel that not all colleagues appreciated or acknowledged these 'hidden' efforts. From our experience, it is clear that behind the scenes or invisible support is also important for supporting collaborative work and involves organisational skills and ensuring there are lines of responsibility for arranging meetings, chasing up, or co-ordinating action.

Throughout the process we felt that there were uneven rules regarding involvement in the work. Those of us closest to the original applicants to What Works Scotland were committed to the process; in part because our managers had agreed to provide resources to support the work in the original application. As such, we did not have the same original reasons for being part of the work and had fewer options regarding withdrawing our involvement during the difficult periods. However, others (both colleagues and practitioners in other agencies) were able to withdraw their involvement without consequence, thus creating a somewhat uneven participation experience.

The dedicated support referred to in the original application was the policy team and analysts – the only people who left from this team were staff who moved into new jobs. As the project went on we reflected on this and thought it would be a good idea to try and keep individuals involved if they were still working in a community planning role. The thinking behind this was due to ongoing changes and further anticipated changes due to restructuring. This is something that would require further consideration depend on the role someone is undertaking as it may lead to conflict or capacity issues.

“When participants felt “strong-armed” into the process, then negative attitudes and an aura of passive aggression soured the process.”

(Family PIT report)

We feel that there is more benefit in having enthusiastic participants with the right attitude at the table than a reluctant person with the right job title.

Working together

One of the main issues across the PITs was the difficulty at the beginning of the process when the direction of the inquiry was unclear. We found that in the early stage of the "question setting" having a large membership in the groups hampered the process. With all participants having busy schedules there was a feeling that this process was “getting in the way of the day job”. This observation came from our experience of working as part of the PIT groups and our perception that participants did not always see the connection between

the action research and their own roles. We feel that the research gained traction and made progress once there was a clear purpose, leadership, and when the focus of the inquiry directly related to team members' work. The allocation of tasks or actions assisted in this. On reflection, through our experience we learnt that, in a multi-agency setting, having a small core group of committed practitioners helped to move things along more quickly in the set-up stage. It may be more beneficial to increase the number and variety of members after this stage.

We found that the language we use is important in trying to carry out the CAR process. We initially struggled to understand the CAR language and adapt our working practices to the CAR approach and subsequently found it difficult to explain to others the intended purpose of the inquiry approach. We feel that this, and the language around CAR, may have acted as a barrier for a proportion of the participants, and may have contributed to their disengagement in the early stages.

Prior to What Works Scotland we did not have much experience working with academic organisations and found this was an additional layer of complication. As outlined in the original application, the original What Works Scotland applicants' intention was for the policy and analytical roles to support this work locally through support to both the Strategy Group and the PITs. This put us in an interesting position as we did not feel like full members of the PITs and saw our role to support them and assist where we could.

It is important to recognise the level of change that was taking place during the course of this work and the impact this had on the members of staff involved. The researcher often provided one-to-one guidance and support for staff members as this was not readily available within the organisation. The support we received from the Research Fellow was invaluable to the success of this work and, on reflection, both ourselves and other members of the PITs often relied on this, often seeking guidance and reassurance for things that we could have either done ourselves or received locally. With hindsight, we feel that many of the skills needed were already available 'in-house' and we have grown in confidence in understanding our role in future work of this nature. We did not realise this early on because we saw this as something new and that there were experts involved. This was evident when it came to co-producing an event or the Home Retreat.

We have engaged in a number of events since completing the reporting template. These have provided time to reflect and discuss what we have all learned. One of the challenges for all will be how we, and our colleagues, can maintain and embed the good practice of reflection.

Communications and support systems

Communication is an area that we find challenging in a number of settings and where we try to look at different approaches to improve things. This was also evident through the CAR work with common difficulties including changes in staff attending meetings, personal

preference of individuals on how they like to receive information and keep up to date on what is happening and how communication works between different groups or levels within an organisation. For example, those who took on the role to feed back to the PITs from the Strategy Group and vice versa.

One suggestion from the Research Fellow was to create a 'story so far' document. This was a useful way of collating all key documents and storing them in one place. We would recommend this approach for future work as this was a good way of seeing how things developed over time.

As part of the Fife CAR programme, we tried to use a common platform for sharing information (i.e. The [Knowledge Hub](#)) to assist communication. The Knowledge Hub⁷ (KHub) is an online platform that enables collaboration and information sharing. To encourage communication and to act as a library to assist collaborators who missed events or meetings we (the Policy and Research Team) invested time developing our skills using KHub, ran training events targeting colleagues involved in the inquiry work, and shared information with others. However, we feel that this has been a missed opportunity; whilst it is a potentially useful resource and a great way of sharing information and ideas, in our work to date only a limited number of people used it regularly and effectively. Although we do not know the exact reasons, it is possible that others involved in the work perhaps did not have the confidence or interest to use it. As such, we found that a number of group members would miss the documents on KHub and we had to continue to use email for communication. How we improve communication in collaborative working is an area that would benefit from further exploration. For example, within the PIT inquiries, many frontline staff, working in a range of policy areas, referred to the need for staff and service directories, however, based on the experience with KHub and inquiry research findings, we feel that this may need to go alongside face-to-face contact and additional forms of communication (frontline staff also highlighted they were more likely to refer people on to services and partners they knew about first-hand).

Since our involvement in the CAR process we have set up further KHub Groups for Community Planning and Fairer Fife, and are planning to continue exploring if this is a useful tool to assist the work we do. We have also been involved in setting up a development session for staff within our own section and intend look at further ways of bringing staff together as part of a newly established service development group.

⁷ [Knowledge Hub https://khub.net/documents/10192/12688712/Knowledge+Hub+Data+Sheet/b3f4aa7b-bfd8-484d-85ac-fa1073ea33f0](https://khub.net/documents/10192/12688712/Knowledge+Hub+Data+Sheet/b3f4aa7b-bfd8-484d-85ac-fa1073ea33f0)

Section three: Surviving collaborative action research

*In this section **Coryn Barclay**, Research Consultant in Fife Council, shares her reflections on being an insider action researcher based on her experience of being involved in both the Strategy Group and Welfare PIT.*

Through the Welfare PIT, practitioners from both the frontline and the centre have been working collaboratively to explore how partners can better work together to prevent and mitigate the impact of welfare sanctions on individuals. Here are my reflections on what it's like to be involved in researching an organisation from the inside⁸, what it means for how we work with others to change the way we do things, and how to survive it.

Staying alive

Thinking about public service reform, you might think it would be to your advantage to be 'inside the machine' to initiate change from within. Yes, being inside the system does give you a good understanding of the local context but as you are both researching and challenging the system, while needing to work as part of the system, being an insider researcher is not without its risks, both personal and professional. As an insider, it is important to find a way of balancing your role in the enquiry with negotiating and surviving the process. It's a fine line to tread. You need to be willing to invest your whole self into the process and be aware of the risks and opportunities. The demands of this can be difficult to manage at times. You need to be both independent, but able to work well with others. Be careful not to burn bridges, as you still need to be accepted as part of the system at the end of it.

Start where the system is

Getting started is harder than you might think. When you are immersed in a system it is difficult to disentangle what led us here from where we want to go. Part of getting started was to create the space, through the Welfare PIT, for discussion and reflection. This came about through a shared and pressing interest in responding to changes around welfare reform and mitigating the impact for individuals. It's important to have empathy with the system and the people in it, particularly if you are coming in to an existing system as an outsider. While research is not a new concept for me, co-producing the inquiry with the group is quite a different way of working from traditional research (such as delivering specific research to meet a client brief). It is important to be sensitive to the current

⁸ Headings courtesy of Shepard (1997) rules of thumb for change agents, from Coghlan, D. and Brannick, T. (2001) *Doing Action Research in your own Organization*.

situation, and to go with the flow, and for the group to be open to going on the journey together, wherever it may lead.

Never work uphill

Collaboration can be hard but rewarding work. It is important to work *with* the system, not *against* it. Throughout the process we have worked on the areas that have been most promising, and have been very mindful of other work that is happening in other parts of Fife, such as the Fairer Fife Commission. We have been able to use our experience from the welfare reform inquiry in Kirkcaldy to make connections to other related work to help us achieve our aims. We have been able to draw on other work to make the most of timing and opportunities, and make progress further and faster by working with rather than against the system.

Innovation requires a good idea, initiative and a few friends

You can accomplish more together than on your own. Finding the right people who were ready for the idea and getting them to work together was key to our local enquiry. There was already a group of practitioners working more closely together in Kirkcaldy around welfare reform and anti-poverty issues. Those who were willing were invited to be part of a deeper collaborative inquiry process running in parallel to the day-to-day work. Additional policy and research support was provided from the centre, which helped to make links between the strategic and local level. I joined half way through the process as the group had asked for my support to understand the current situation in Fife, and then wouldn't let me leave. Not everyone who started that journey stayed with us until the end but for those who did, we have a stronger working relationship through the process and a greater appreciation of our respective roles and abilities.

Load experiments with success

We needed to work at building success along the way. We decided to use the vignette method as a way of opening up conversations with partners around a very sensitive topic. In developing the vignettes, we drew on the knowledge of a range of practitioners from within the group. Testing out the vignettes as a group highlighted the range of knowledge and experience that we had between us, gave us a deeper understanding of the work that we do day to day, and a new basis for working together going forward. Through the CAR process we were able to change relationships with partners, notably with DWP.

Together with What Works Scotland, we planned a Kirkcaldy Welfare Reform event, with a mix of people from the frontline in Kirkcaldy and others with a Fife-wide or strategic role. Through the event we wanted to raise awareness of what is happening around welfare reform, through presentations from external speakers, and an interactive myth-busting session. The event was successful in creating space for discussion about how partners could

work together and share knowledge and data to prevent or mitigate welfare sanctions, and in making wider links, i.e. to Fairer Fife recommendations. The collaborative nature of the process was important for building and taking ownership of our inquiry.

Light many fires

Our local collaborative research has not happened in a vacuum but has been taking place within a wider system of public service delivery and reform in Fife. Understanding the interconnection between different parts of the system has been an important element of how we have taken our work forward. To effect change in a system, you need to light many fires in different parts of the system. Key to the process has been understanding who the key intermediaries – the firestarters – are. Understanding the interdependencies in the system, knowing when to start a fire, knowing when to draw back, and when to fan the flames again to keep movement going in the system has been important for creating the conditions for change. Don't be afraid to create ripples in the system.

Keep an optimistic bias

If you are involved in a service that is at the frontline of welfare reform changes, you can't help but be optimistic that the work you are doing will make a difference to individuals who need help and support. It has been important to focus on the collective strengths of the group, and not on the differences that can be a source of conflict. Stay focused on what you are trying to achieve, be proactive and reflective and consider where you can take action. Be realistic about the limits to what you can do, but don't be afraid to aim higher.

Capture the moment

Timing has been an important element of our enquiry, knowing what is relevant to draw on and to bring in to the discussion at different points. You learn that in the moment, as you go. There is a lot of invisible work that goes into enabling people to work together. It is important to stay in tune with yourself and the situation. The reflective and collaborative nature of the inquiry gives you a unique appreciation of the situation and of your own and others' roles within the system.

Conclusion

This report seeks to highlight some of the learning from the co-produced Fife CAR programme that took place between 2015 and 2017 as part of the wider What Works Scotland focus on public service reform in Scotland. This learning report is one of a variety of outputs from the Fife CAR programme, and focuses predominately on initiating and managing a collaborative research process.

Drawing on the content of the populated inquiry templates from the three Partnership Innovation Teams in Fife, this report highlights the benefits around multi-agency working in collaborative inquiry, but also shares our learning on the challenges in research management and group work.

Reflecting the co-produced, collaborative approach to this work, the report contains three sections, each written by a different participant within the process. In section one, the What Works Scotland researcher briefly highlights some of the positive learning regarding bringing together a diverse range of practitioners to undertake an inquiry. However, as the policy and research team in Fife Council note in section two, such collaborative ways of working can be difficult and require time and investment in processes and systems to encourage commitment and learning. In section three, a Fife council research colleague shares her learning on being an inside researcher and how to progress through the complexities and challenges of undertaking CAR in this working context.

Collectively, the authors highlight key learning points about operationalising a CAR approach in the community planning context and share these insights to those who also participated and contributed to the Fife CAR programme, to those involved in the on-going work in Fife on improving collaboration and tackling wicked issues, and also to other interested researchers and policymakers, with the intention that it will continue to stimulate dialogue and discussion about how to undertake collaborative working to improve public service reform, research, and evidence based policy-making.

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