Collaborative Action Research: Insights from What Works Scotland

Challenging research roles?

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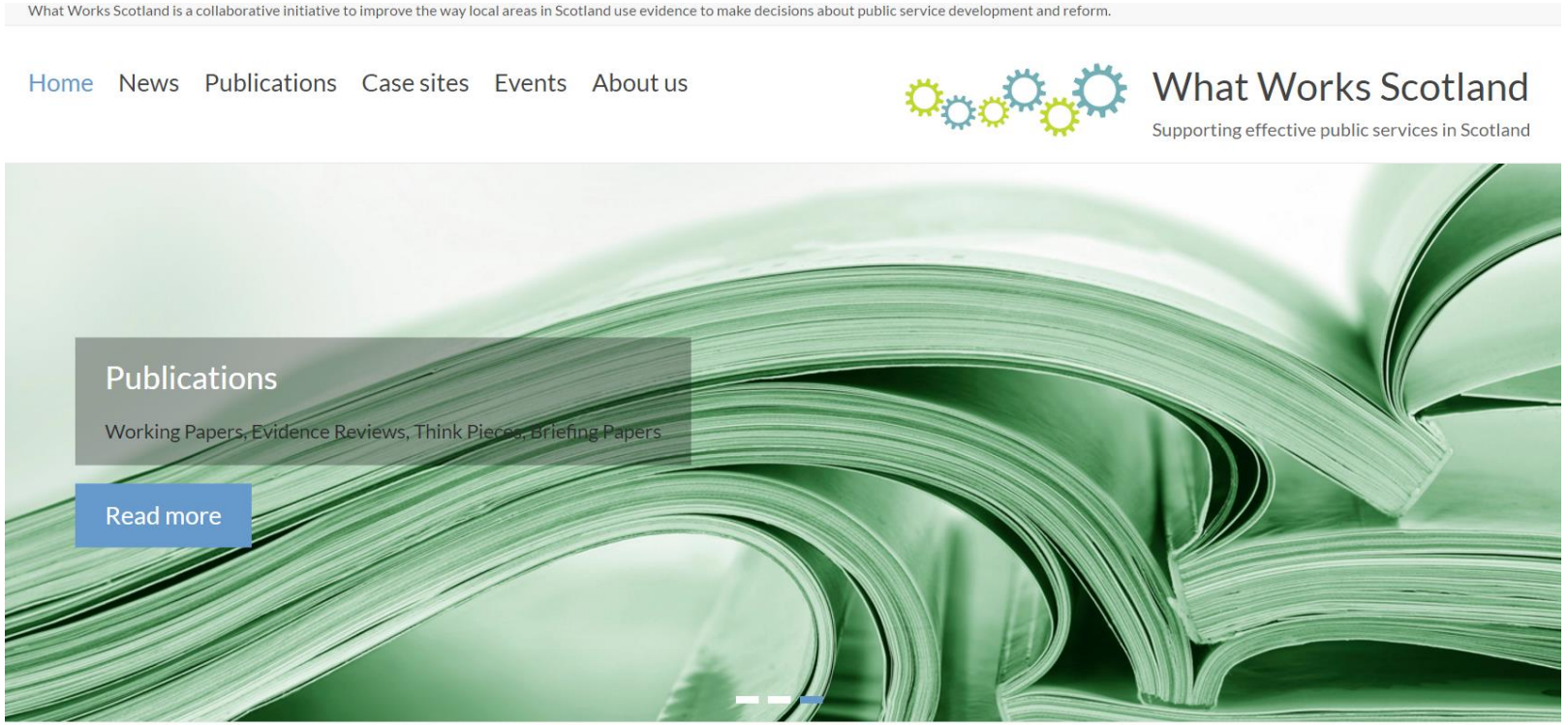
Purpose

Introduction and insight

- What Works Scotland
- Collaborative Action Research (CAR)
- Collaborative research work in multi-agency partnerships

Detail

1. How CAR can be designed and operationalised
2. When and why CAR might be a useful approach
3. What challenges to consider if you are already planning on a CAR project (and how you might overcome these)



WHAT WORKS SCOTLAND

Purpose: "To use evidence to transform public services for all of Scotland's communities to flourish"

Find out more:

whatworksscotland.ac.uk

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Context for WWS

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Public policy context

- Public Service Reform in Scotland
- Christie Commission

"Public service providers must be required to work much more closely in partnership, to integrate service provision and thus improve the outcomes they achieve"

- Focus on Community Planning Partnerships

University collaborations

- Funding attached to collaborations between Universities and non-academic organisations
- Across institutions
- Interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary
- Rise of 'Knowledge exchange' culture
- Rise of impact agenda

Evidence Based Policy Making

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REMAKING GOVERNANCE

Peoples, politics and the public sphere

WICKED PROBLEM.

noun | wi-kəd | prä-bləm

a problem that is difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognize.

Why Collaborative Action Research for WWS?

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Changing notions of:

a) **Context.** Public services' new demands, greater complexities, swifter change, different ways of working; requires research approaches embedded in changing service environments

b) **Research paradigms.** Can CAR reach the parts that other research approaches can't? Beyond 'what works' into *how* reforms work; *why* they work. [Christie changed the hardware; CAR may understand software]

c) **Impact & knowledge.** Break through hierarchical models of knowledge generation and transfer – co-produced, situated knowledge, cross-agency

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Re-wind: foundations of Collaborative Action Research

- A research approach - not a research method
- Background
  - From 1940s Action Research (Lewin) to Collaborative Action Research
  - **Collaboration**: non-researchers, often with support from "professional researchers"
  - **Action**: involves practitioners/citizens following an action research cycle (plan, act, observe, reflect) on a topic of their concern
  - Adopts an inquiring stance; uses critical reflection skills
  - Disrupts the field (unlike ethnography, interviews etc).

"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."* Townsend (2014; 117)

WWS CAR workstream (set-up)

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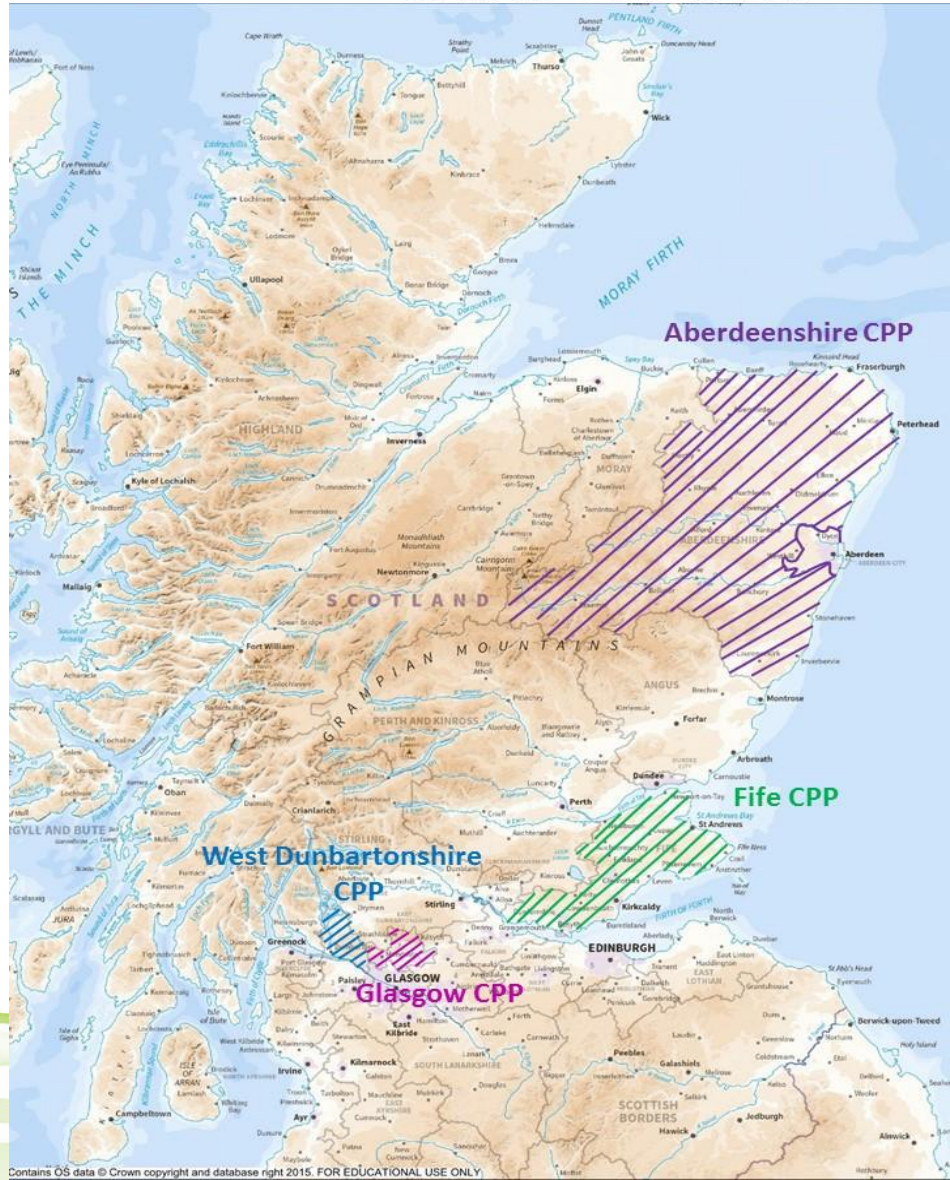
- In 2014 CPPs applied to work with WWS
- Four CPP partners selected (case sites)
- Multiple, co-produced CAR groups (PITs) in each CPP

Not a 'one-model' approach:

- ➢ Different CAR topics proposed by each CPP
- ➢ Different CPP partners in CAR groups
- ➢ Diversity of practitioner experience and seniority in CAR groups

Professional researchers involved Jan 15-Dec 16ish



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WWS research

- **1st order: Their inquiries**
- **2nd order: Our research** - WWS researchers also collecting research data on Public Service Reform-in-context. E.g.
  - How do public service workers collaborate?
  - How do they generate, conceptualise, and use evidence?
  - How does governance work in practice?
  - What are we learning about public service/university relationships?
  - What helps and hinders spread and sustainability?

Overview of CAR inquiries – CPP 1

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- **Welfare 'hub and spokes' model** (co-location, changed priorities)
- **Welfare reform and data sharing** (influence, data gathering, dialogue across professions, challenging assumptions)
- **Family 'hub and spokes' model** (tried to explore different agencies, couldn't agree a vision or create a team)
- **Family fun sessions** (Sharing learning across localities, critical reflections on operationalising, interviews with staff and users)
- **School intervention programme** (Couldn't agree a topic, clash with operational decisions)
- **School partnership** (focus groups, case study of one school, reflections on improved relationships, dialogue between professions)

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Local Government: Community Learning and Development leader (place-based)

Third sector: appeals & advice manager

Local Government: Policy Officer (central)

DWP: JCP partnership manager (local)

Local Government: Research Officer (central)

Third sector: front-line anti-poverty worker

Local Government: Front-line welfare rights worker

Third Sector: front-line support specialist (local)

Local government: front-line job club worker

Local Government: Housing leader (place-based)

Overview of CAR inquiries – CPP 2

- **PB evaluation toolkit** (exploring international & Scottish evidence; drafting & piloting toolkit metrics. Tension: the keen people v. the right people, **finalising PB eval toolkit**)
- **Practitioner-produced case studies** (evidencing area-based practice; 'contracted' CAR; 'learning together' process *e.g. what is a case study?*; collaborative support. **Two case studies completed.** Tension: demanding process, voluntarism)
- **Evaluability Assessment of area-based initiative** (multiple public services **reviewed and clarified theory of change for area-based initiative**; WWS facilitated, recommended evaluation method. Tension: Is it CAR?)
- **Glasgow-Fife joint PB fact-finding Paris visit** (1st order learning (CPPs): Paris PB model & technical aspects; 2nd order learning (WWS): how do public service workers learn on international visits?). **Three reflective blogs published; new relationships formed**.

Health Improvement Worker (NHS)

Community Development Worker (Housing Association 1)

Analyst (Cultural Services)

Democratic Services worker (Council)

Community member/citizen

Researcher/ facilitator (WWS)

Community Development Worker (Housing Association 2)

What is CAR in multi-agency partnerships giving us?

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- Understanding of processes (not just an "output moment")
- Insights into how practitioners actually see, generate, comprehend, and work with evidence (in practice and in context - unsanitised)
- Outcomes of 1st order inquiries make sense to practitioners in their context (shift from hierarchical models of knowledge transfer)
- Potential for 'depth relationships' with practitioners (beyond instrumentalism)
- Trigger for renewed dialogues with policy-makers, researchers, practitioners, universities (a. about collaborative approaches, b. about public service reform)
- A complement to other research approaches

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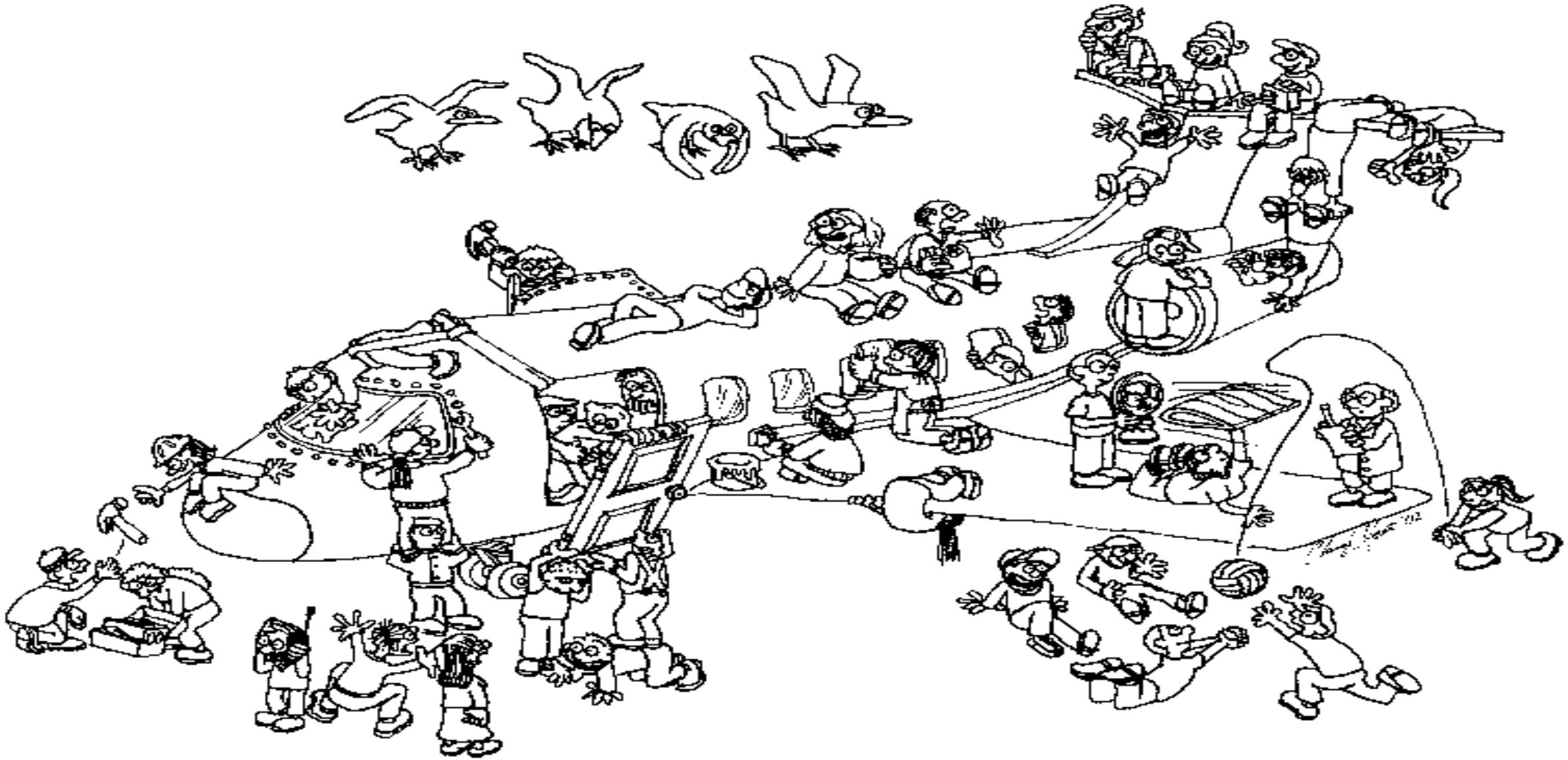
Challenging research and challenging researchers

- Various challenges: some specific to particular contexts, others more general
- Social research challenges: Getting in, getting on, getting out…also challenge our understanding of research roles.
- PSR challenges
- Research design and ethical challenges

Getting in

- ‘Gatekeeping’ is complicated (multiple layers; ongoing process)
- Selling or conveying CAR is difficult (it’s a new idea)
- Understanding and adapting to local micro-politics (it’s specific)
- Managing (mis)representation (of researchers, research programme, CAR)
- Investing time with no surety of an output, future involvement, project deliverables, academic outputs.



Getting on

- Staff churn and organisational restructuring
- Who is ‘leading’? Tensions in sharing power and responsibility
- Unevenness of previous practitioner experience with:
  - research, universities, collaborative working, critical reflection, inquiring stance, group work
- Managing expectations, getting commitment (‘contracted CAR’)
- High intensity time/skills ‘pulls’ for researcher
  - mentoring, guiding, organising, knowledge brokering, teaching, producing materials, attending meetings, emails and phone-calls

Getting out

- Trust issues? Researcher becoming an ‘outsider’ again
- CAR at point when things are getting going, relationships strong
- Practitioner learning from involvement in the CAR process v. producing traditional research output (e.g. final report) – synergies/contradictions
- Impacts of: restructuring and organisational change during CAR work; degree of senior management buy-in (impact on impact)
- Sharing learning (and using the space to raise strategic issues)

Opportunities	Strains	Reflections and advice
Flexible and adaptive to context and capacity	No outline or plan for people to recognise, or trust in process, get authorisation/permission to participate	Invest time in building trust and making the role and responsibilities clear at the start: Repeat, repeat, repeat!
Can change existing ways of thinking or working	Can cause anxiety for practitioners, involves time developing new relationships	Facilitation training, hire facilitators as extra resource. Identify and acknowledge pre-conditions required
Bring together a mix of values and views in same work or discussion- (change and action)	Unevenness of groups and between individuals in terms, Can create large demands on researchers	Multiple teaching materials, different mediums, develop champions who can share information what you are not there. Set boundaries
“see” more of their world leading to more informed research into reality of public service reform	Time demands	Ensuring ethics and consent cover this ‘insider’ role. Repeat throughout that you are collecting data.

CAR: learning points for PSR

1. CAR provides a strong model to drive through PSR and develop new evidence-informed, cross-public service initiatives.
2. Having time to reflect and plan, using evidence, on policy and practice developments is too rare. It is an essential element of CAR and is helpful for practitioners in CPPs.
3. There is potential for developing cross-CPP Communities of Practice made up of professionals that are working on shared topics, concerns, needs or outcomes.
4. CAR provides the space and opportunity for both public services and third sector CPP partners to become learning organisations.
5. Facts and values - surfacing the ultimate role of public services: using evidence to transform public services

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- http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/

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