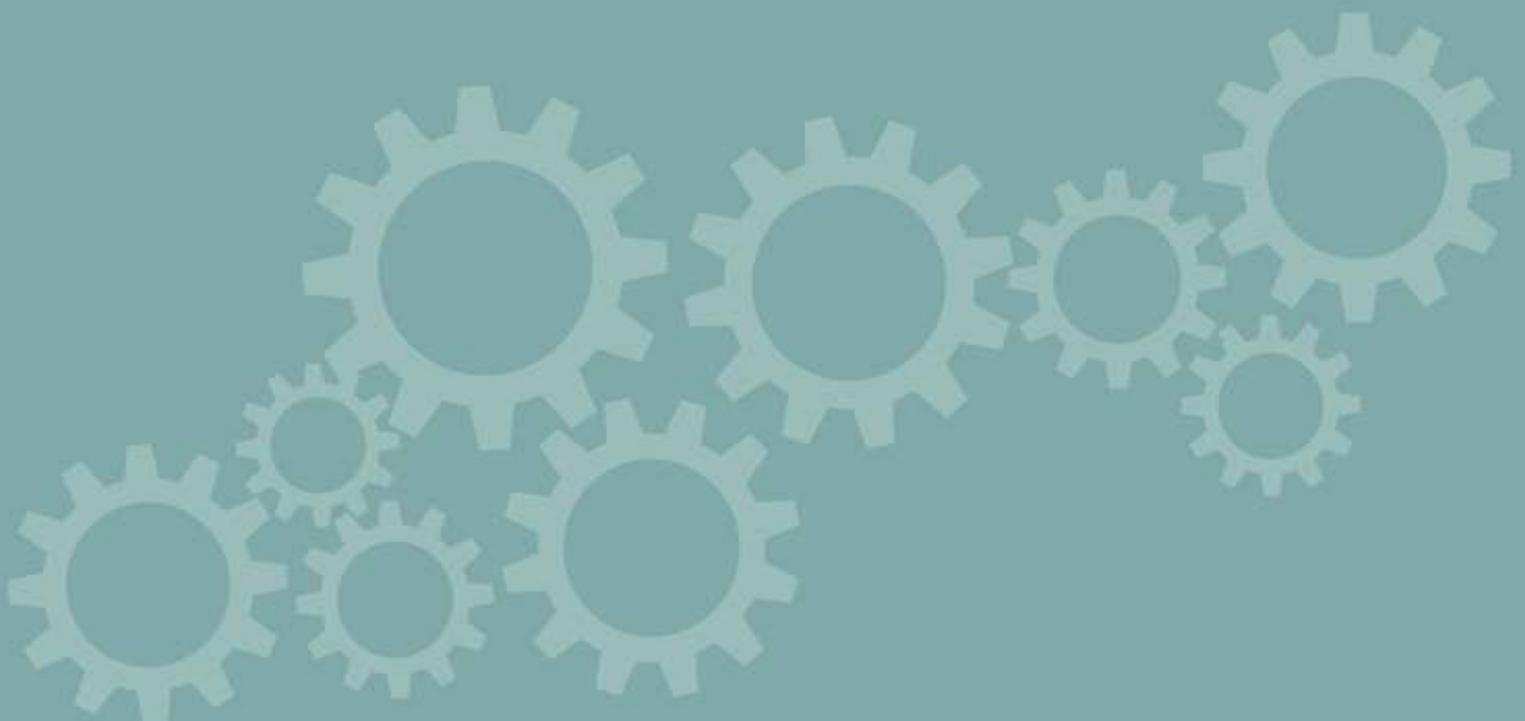# Making Data Meaningful – evidence use in a community planning partnership in Scotland

Dr Claire Bynner and Dr Anna Terje

**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

We have also linked with international partners to effectively compare how public services are delivered here in Scotland and elsewhere.

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 evidence to action workstream.

**Dr Claire Bynner** and **Dr Anna Terje** are research associates for What Works Scotland, based at the University of Glasgow.

## Acknowledgements

# Contents

# Summary – Key messages

This report provides insight from an ethnographic study of evidence use in the everyday practice of reforming local public services in Scotland. The data is drawn from an in-depth case study of a single local authority area and includes interviews with 20 participants in community planning including service providers, community members and research and policy officers. This case highlights the complex and diverse ways in which public services use a wide range of evidence in decision-making processes. While the findings of this study are not generalisable across all Scottish community planning partnerships (CPPs), they provide important insights into the types of knowledge and evidence that become meaningful in this context, and why.

Our study suggests that CPPs operate in a context of continual change, presenting a challenge to evidence-use. Evidence is used in community planning for a wide range of reasons, but the focus is increasingly on the need to target and prioritise resources in a context characterised by financial constraints and pressures. Statistical tools that claim to provide a more reliable source of evidence will have limited impact on public service reform without understanding and respecting the types of knowledge that are valued in day-to-day work and the ways in which different forms of knowledge and evidence interact.

Evidence use in community planning is a craft that involves valuing and interweaving different forms of evidence and knowledge – recognising that evidence becomes meaningful through communication. This shifts attention away from hierarchies of evidence to improving the nature and quality of communication and co-production of policies. The problem in policymaking is not a lack of evidence, or even its variable quality, but how it is communicated and the extent to which there is an opportunity for collective learning and deliberation.

## Key findings

- Statistical data on poverty and inequality can be highly emotive and can alienate local people if not communicated sensitively.
- If evidence is to be meaningful it needs to be interpreted and contextualised. There is a skill for service providers in 'speaking the right evidence language' in the right context, such as when communicating with potential funders. This is a skill that takes time and experience to develop.
- Stable collaborative relationships are needed for effective evidence sharing across services. Departments and services need the institutional capacity to work with different types of evidence and knowledge in collaboration. It is important to avoid over-burdening members of staff with too much evidence and focus on the types of evidence that are useful in their working contexts.

- Aristotle's three types of knowledge are relevant to the types of evidence and knowledge that are useful and valuable in community planning: empirical knowledge craft knowledge, and practical wisdom. The craft knowledge of frontline workers is a highly valued form of knowledge and is developed through experience of working in the community.
- Evidence becomes meaningful through communication. Evidence to action entails recognising and valuing different forms of knowledge and weaving these together to reveal new insights and understanding. There is a need for community planning processes to provide more opportunities for engaging with different types of evidence and knowledge.
- The knowledge of those operating at the front line needs to be valued and recognised by strategic managers and policy makers. 'Ideas forums' and 'solutions forums' are examples of approaches that could make better use of this knowledge.
- A desirable Scottish approach to evidence in public policy entails integrating empirical evidence, craft knowledge and practical wisdom in a way that recognises the value of all three. This requires understanding, recognition and respect for different types of knowledge, providing a basis for using evidence wisely in the ambition to achieve positive outcomes through public service reform.

# Introduction

This What Works Scotland research project sought to understand how evidence is used in a public service reform context in Scotland through the study of one community planning partnership (CPP). The research presented in this paper arose out of a project undertaken by What Works Scotland to produce local area data, resulting in the publication of 16 neighbourhood level community profiles, covering a range of indicators including health, education, employment, income and housing.

The data analysts were asked to produce the data in a format that would be easily accessible for local service providers and residents. Despite the interactive and easily downloadable format of the data, the extent to which the community profiles were applied in practice was disappointing. A paper on the initial findings from this project (Bynner & Whyte 2016) concluded that there were a number of barriers to evidence use in this context, including the capacity of staff, different terminologies and scales of analysis used across services, and capacity and commitment to working collaboratively with evidence. Further research was needed to explore and understand these challenges in more depth.

What we already know about how evidence becomes meaningful in contexts such as CPPs is fairly limited. Research on the relationship between evidence and policy has generally ignored the fact that evidence, and its usefulness, is interpreted by policymakers in different ways, by different people, in different contexts. To incorporate evidence into decision-making, we need to understand the 'sense-making' that results in knowledge and evidence becoming part of the process of achieving change (Gabbay and le May, 2004). This entails giving greater attention to the situated experience of *evidence-use in everyday policymaking* (Oliver et al. 2014) and the forms of knowledge and skills (Ward, 2017) that are crucial to 'making data meaningful' in contexts such as CPPs.

To bridge this gap, What Works Scotland undertook an in-depth study of a single CPP area. In exploring how data can be made 'meaningful', we sought to uncover how evidence becomes useful so that it can be acted upon. Our starting point was the recognition that without a better understanding of how evidence is interpreted and used in practice, the considerable time and effort that goes into producing robust and detailed statistical analyses can be likened to shouting in the wind – no-one hears the message!

## The Scottish policy context

Scotland is relatively well-placed to deliver on a shared agenda for evidence use in public service reform. The advantage Scotland has over other parts of the UK is it's *'particularly strong sense of shared ownership of the strategic direction'* deriving from the Christie Commission and the National Performance Framework (NPF) (Alliance for Useful Evidence & Carnegie Trust, 2016). The Christie Commission, established by the Scottish Government in

2010, developed a set of recommendations, set out in the resulting Christie report (2011), emphasising the need to increase empowerment of communities in making decisions regarding service delivery and design, in order to balance reduced resources with the need for service improvement. CPPs align to the NPF through their local outcome frameworks that require local public services to work collaboratively to achieve meaningful and measurable change. Overall, the strategic direction in Scotland points towards a more evidence-informed, participatory, collaborative, performance driven and place-based approach to public service reform.

Community planning partnerships (CPPs), operating across the 32 local authority areas, are regarded as key delivery vehicles for this agenda. The Local Government in Scotland Act (2003) mandates local authorities to develop partnerships across public services, sectors and organisations, and to engage citizens and communities in service re-design and delivery (Scottish Government, 2016). In addition to embedding practices of partnership working, community engagement and collaborative leadership, the Scottish Government has emphasised the need for CPPs to develop 'a complex understanding of the needs of local areas over time' (Scottish Government, 2012). This complex understanding of place should be based on robust data, community engagement, making use of the knowledge and resources of local and national agencies in the field of public service improvement.

The Community Empowerment Act of 2015 aims to provide communities in Scotland with the power to use their assets to better address local priorities and assert influence. Increasing community participation while at the same time increasing efficiency can be contradictory policy priorities and difficult to reconcile in practice (Bynner, 2016). A diverse range of knowledge and evidence is needed to make judgements about the most appropriate way to use limited public resources, as well as collaborative processes to turn evidence into workable policies.

## Evidence to Action – what is it?

The approach of What Works Scotland to 'evidence to action' (how evidence is acted upon), is distinct from the approaches that dominate other What Works centres in the UK and evidence-based policy more widely. This policy agenda aims to produce ever-more sophisticated analyses of data to identify 'what works' on the assumption that if policy makers can find the 'right' intervention then the policy problem can be clearly defined and ultimately, 'solved'.

As early as 1973, a paper by Rittel and Weber argued that policy problems are fundamentally different in nature to scientific problems. Policy problems are 'wicked', 'messy' and difficult to define and pin down. An alternative to the evidence-based policy approach is to understand policy making as essentially discursive activity, involving communication, reasoning and deliberation over alternative responses to complex issues, in

which there is no perfect, ideal or straightforward solution. The focus on communicative processes in policy making is central to the What Works Scotland approach and the methodologies we have used, including collaborative action research.[1]

The What Works Scotland approach:

1. **Explore** evidence including local learning of what is and isn't working.
2. **Combine** research evidence, data, local evaluation, knowledge and experience.
3. **Build** new evidence through evaluation and collaborative action research.
4. **Link** evidence to action through co-producing research.
5. **Share** learning with others.

## About this research

This report provides insight into the use of evidence in the everyday practice of reforming local public services based on an in-depth case study of a single CPP. The findings highlight the importance of recognising, valuing and integrating empirical and experiential knowledge and examining the craft of 'making data meaningful'.

Early in this study it became clear, that a wide variety of evidence and data is used on an everyday basis in processes of service redesign and engaging communities in local decision-making. In this report, we therefore use the terms 'data' and 'evidence' interchangeably to refer to all the information available to and used by practitioners in their day-to-day work.

The research examined a CPP area characterised by socio-economic inequalities, high welfare dependency and high levels of crime. The CPP was also under considerable strain as local public services adjusted to substantial budget cuts and service restructuring, alongside new statutory requirements to engage in partnerships and involve local citizens in decision-making. This case study demonstrates how budget pressures manifest, the constraints they can place on evidence use, and how these issues are negotiated by public service staff.

The public services we were primarily interested in were housing, cleansing, greenspace and policing, as well as the function of a centralised team of policy, planning and performance officers. The data presented here is drawn mainly from interviews with managers and front line staff directly involved in service delivery at a neighbourhood level.

This report seeks to address the following questions:

- **What types of evidence are actionable, for whom, why and when?**
- **How can evidence be made meaningful in this context?**

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[1] For more information on the What Works Scotland approach to collaborative action research, see http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/the-project/our-approach-to-collaborative-action-research/

- **How can community planning partnerships be supported to make more effective use of evidence?**

To answer these questions, we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with key actors involved in the everyday work of community planning and evidence use:

| Interviews | Numbers |
|---|---|
| Public service professionals working in neighbourhood services (housing, cleansing, greenspace and policing) | 8 |
| Strategic directors | 2 |
| Policy, planning and performance officers | 6 |
| Community members [2] | 4 |
| **Total** | 20 |

*Figure 1: Interviews conducted as part of the case study*

The interviews were supplemented with ethnographic data obtained from observations of 12 local partnership meetings, eight of which were operational and three that were strategic. This gave us the opportunity to examine interactions and communication between practitioners, resulting in a more holistic understanding of how partnership work in this context was enacted. The researcher took on the role of 'observer as participant' (Gold, 1958), with only minimal direct involvement in meetings. A narrative of the content of meetings was recorded in writing, with discussions summarised and key quotes captured verbatim over the course of meetings.

Having interviewed and observed a wide range of practitioners from a variety of services, working both on operational and strategic levels, data saturation was reached and we decided that additional interviews and observation were unlikely to result in new themes emerging. The coding of the data was based on a framework developed from the literature – this allowed us to frame the data reported here around Ward's Knowledge Mobilisation model (2017), exploring **why** knowledge and evidence are mobilised, **whose** evidence is being mobilised, **what type** of evidence is being mobilised, and **how** evidence and data are mobilised.

The findings are presented below and are structured into three parts:

**Part 1** Answers key questions for **evidence to action in community planning** – Why use evidence in community planning? Whose evidence is used?

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[2] Data from interviews with community members has been included where it helps to provide nuance, context or deeper understanding of the role of evidence in policy work that involves engagement and dialogue between public service workers and communities.

**Part 2 How does evidence become meaningful**? This section examines the types of knowledge that are valued in community planning. It also outlines two ways in which evidence can be made useful – through communicating it in a way that takes into account the context in which it is being used, and through providing opportunities to deliberate and discuss different forms of evidence collectively.

**Part 3 Examines implications for a Scottish approach to evidence use**. We outline ways in which CPPs can be supported to make effective use of evidence in their work, and the absence of an outcomes-based approach to evidence in our research findings. Finally, we conclude by summarising our findings and in light of these, what a desirable Scottish approach to evidence use in public policy would look like.

This study offers an example of evidence use within one CPP, drawing on data collected over a period of eight months. As such, it provides a snapshot of how certain public service practitioners experience and enact evidence use in the specific context they work in. The findings of this study are not generalisable across all Scottish CPPs but they provide an insight into the types of evidence that become relevant and meaningful in this context and why.

# Part 1: Evidence to Action – why, whose and what type?

There are a wide range of models and theories of evidence to action (E2A), knowledge to action (K2A); knowledge transfer and exchange, and knowledge mobilisation. These terms are interrelated, overlapping and not always clearly defined. Words such as 'knowledge', 'evidence', 'data' and 'information' mean different things to practitioners in different fields. This can make the interpretation and synthesis of these different models difficult (Wilson et al. 2010; Mitton et al. 2007). In 2010 Ward identified 28 models; in 2010 Mitchell found 47; and, in 2012, Tabak found 61 models. There are more than 100 terms meaning or related to knowledge mobilisation (McKibbon et al. 2010) and 71 reviews of the research literature in the fields of health, social care and education (Davies et al, 2015).

The E2A field is therefore incredibly complex, and Ward (2018) warns that when examining evidence use, there is a risk of falling into a 'knowledge mobilisation swamp'. As knowledge types are complex and overlapping, creating even more models of E2A processes may not be worthwhile and only add to the complexity and 'murkiness' of the field. Instead, we focus on providing insights into evidence use in community planning, a context that is currently not well understood.

Ward (2017) advocates exploring how groups of people produce, share and use knowledge together to address real world problems, through asking a set of simple why, who, what and how questions. The proceeding section applies Ward's model to address the following questions that have been used to organise and analyse the evidence from our single case study:

- Why use evidence in community planning?
- Whose evidence is used?

## Why use evidence in community planning?

In this CPP, evidence was primarily used to plan services, evaluate services or projects, and target resources within set parameters. Figure 2 outlines the main uses of evidence in the CPP, including examples of evidence use, and the types of evidence that prominently featured in the study.

| Why use evidence? | To develop new policies and programmes (Ward 2017) | To change practices and behaviours (Ward 2017) | To develop local solutions to problems (Ward 2017) | To prioritise, improve performance and seek funding |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Examples | Implementing new legislation evaluating the success of programmes, developing or improving programmes | Implementing policies and practices, investigating complaints, incentivising citizens to take more responsibility | Finding local solutions, reducing costs, define and identify responsibilities of local service professionals, to challenge professional assumptions; obtain evidence from under-represented groups | Targeting or prioritising services or resources to areas, justifying strategic actions/decisions on resourcing, performance and benchmarking, applying for external funding |
| Types of evidence used | Scientific evidence, local databases and surveys, professional experience and observation, community engagement | Local databases and surveys, professional experience and observation, community engagement | Professional experience and observation, community engagement | Scientific evidence, local databases and surveys, professional experience and observation, community engagement |

*Figure 2: Uses of evidence in the CPP*

**Developing new policies and programmes**

Public service professionals used evidence to develop new programmes and to improve those already in place. New legislative requirements could serve as a catalyst for increased evidence use and community engagement to inform service re-design. The Waste Regulations Act 2012 required changes to waste collection and recycling. Evidence was used to benchmark and evaluate whether implementing these changes made a difference to recycling rates. Participants generally found evidence useful in these contexts if it could be acted upon and was produced in response to a clearly defined issue or problem, and could be used to evaluate the success of a service.

**Changing practices and behaviours**

Evidence was used to enforce and to investigate complaints. An officer working in housing services explained that the evidence collected by the service must meet certain parameters and be dealt with in specific timescales. The Council data storage system enabled officers to link data on incidents and issues such as failure to recycle properly to individual properties. A range of data sources were used, including photographic evidence and letters in rubbish that had been dumped, giving the name and address of the person responsible. Officers then used the evidence to identify 'those in breach of tenancy agreements'. A strategic director described evidence as useful if it could be used to *"trigger or incentivise people to take more responsibility"*. Taking responsibility was seen as especially important in the context of austerity. Pre-empting the argument that this unfairly shifts the responsibility for public service cuts to local communities, the director argued: *"It's not to pass the buck. It's just the reality"*.

**Developing local solutions to problems**

Developing local solutions to issues and reducing costs was a key driver for local collaboration across services and with local residents. Communicating across services to share knowledge was central to operational CPP meetings and officers regularly shared their professional observations regarding issues in the community across services. Partnership working helped to define and identify the responsibilities of local service professionals. One participant also spoke of shared learning across services through the secondment of staff, for example an antisocial behaviour liaison officer from the police joining the council team. This type of collaboration could help by *"opening up of a lot of doors"* and allowing staff to look past the specific work they do to wider issues of poverty and inequality in the community, potentially challenging service-specific assumptions. Working in partnership with organisations in the third sector also helped public services engage with those less likely to interact with service professionals through community events and meetings organised by the Council.

One participant pointed out that while developing partner relationships was central to developing local solutions, their own core business required expertise, resources and time, all of which were constrained. This meant taking a more selective approach to collaboration:

*"What you need to do is pick and choose the right things to collaborate on and identify who the right partner is to collaborate on with them and then it's a process of negotiation."*

Indeed, partnership work may not be most effective or appropriate in all contexts, and evidence shows that ineffective partnership work can even lead to poorer outcomes (Cook

2015). The shift to partnership working in smaller localities within the larger local authority area could also mean that one professional may have to attend multiple local meetings, further illustrating the potential for over-burdening and reducing the capacity to engage with new evidence.

**Prioritisation, improving performance, and funding**

Using evidence to target services, benchmarking and applying for funding may be more apparent in community planning than in other sectors, as national performance outcomes are monitored through performance indicators. Managers spoke of using evidence for performance and benchmarking, with one manager commenting that as a public authority, they had to be shown to be 'doing the job'. Policy, planning and performance officers used evidence to demonstrate that services were meeting performance expectations, and to identify specific service areas that were performing badly. Evidence could be useful in geographically targeting, allocating and prioritising resources and was also used to justify and defend strategic decisions on resourcing. One such example is where the police used evidence to justify a reduction in police officers in attendance at football matches, despite public pressure to increase numbers. The evidence relevant to this context was professional experience, the views of event organisers, and the 'factual evidence' of incidents at football matches. Finally, public sector cuts had increased the need for external funding, necessitating evidence-use when applying for such funding. One participant described the importance of providing evidence-based data in funding applications to demonstrate the need for additional resources.

In sum, there are multiple reasons for evidence-use in community planning and these vary across tasks and contexts. Drivers include developing and improving existing service delivery programmes; incentivising citizens to take more responsibility; resource prioritisation and allocation (including targeting services to particular neighbourhoods); monitoring performance; as well as developing local solutions to policy problems. Working collaboratively can be beneficial in finding solutions to local issues, but also difficult in this challenging working context. This can lead to CPP partners being less willing to work collaboratively as this approach may not be seen as appropriate in all contexts. As resource constraints increase, there is also likely to be a greater need for evidence to prioritise and target resources and to support external applications for funding. Our findings echo those arising from an Evaluation Support Scotland roundtable discussion on improvement of evidence use (2018) – evidence is used to make good decisions and informed choices, using money wisely and ensuring impact is achieved.

# Whose evidence is used?

The key actors engaged in policymaking and evidence use in community planning are difficult to identify and map. We have adapted Ward's (2017) 'knowledge donor' groups to categorise the key sources of evidence in our research. The following groups of policy actors were identified in this study as being key sources of evidence:

- Citizens and communities involved in local decision-making and planning processes
- Front-line and managerial service professionals – managers and operational staff across a range of public and third sector services
- Academics and governmental/professional bodies producing empirical and/or theoretical evidence.

**Citizens and communities**

Service users are a key source of the evidence used in community planning, as well as their advocates and representatives, such as community groups, charities, and service user groups. Almost all participants mentioned speaking to the public as a form of key evidence gathering for helping inform decision-making. This was done through either public or service user consultation, public forum meetings, community evenings, or face-to-face meetings with individuals or groups. This also echoes Escobar et al's CPP survey findings (2018), which indicated that public consultations were a method that community planning officers use to obtain evidence.

While a range of methods were used to gain knowledge from the public, one participant complained of over-reliance on questionnaires and survey responses with "hundreds of consultations" taking place, potentially leading to 'consultation fatigue'. Besides questionnaires and face-to-face interactions, engagement methods included emails, "community statements or case studies", as well as attending working groups and holding tenant scrutiny panels. This type of data was valued because of the greater depth of information provided compared to 'tick box' questionnaires.

Evidence from the public could challenge organisational assumptions. For example, a housing manager spoke of an instance when a local resident had argued that mental health should be given the same medical priority as physical disability in housing allocation:

> *"She felt that her mother's mental health was being made worse by the housing situation that she was in…that made us stop and say, 'well, why don't we do that in housing allocation? Why is it only physical disabilities?'."*

Community engagement presented methodological challenges of inclusion and diversity. It was difficult to reach certain groups and ensure that all views were represented. Communication and reporting back to the public was not always adequate, and public services did not always act on the responses they received. Some public service

professionals regarded the knowledge gained from community engagement as less reliable and thus less valuable than scientific data. A police officer described a situation where residents believed that there had been a rise in public disorder despite evidence of reported incidents on their local systems showing a reduction. For this service, evidence needed to be "factually based and presented so it can be quantified and responded to". A strategic director in the field of health argued that community engagement is "wholly about anecdote, the opposite of what could be regarded as reliable evidence".

**Frontline service providers, professional networks and partner organisations**

During operational CPP meetings, public service professionals frequently shared their observations relating to cleanliness, vandalism and public safety, and sought solutions through cross-service collaboration. Officers used these informal observations as evidence to develop responses to local problems. Evaluation Support Scotland's report on their roundtable on evidence use (2018) also found that participants felt that frontline practitioners were key in communicating the needs of service users, along with their reflections and observations. Other professionals were also an important source of data and evidence. This could be colleagues in their own local authority area or other councils where networking events and benchmarking took place. Particularly useful were sectoral networks with organisations facing similar challenges, or national networks such as COSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities). These networks for evidence sharing were most commonly within their own profession or service area and were less likely to occur across different services. Escobar et al's (2018) report on CPP officials also found that research from governmental departments and agencies, as well as professional bodies was commonly used as evidence in their work.

However, Escobar et al (2018) found that almost 70% 'often' obtained evidence through partnership with others, while at the same time, only 33% felt they made full use of partner's data sources and expertise in data analysis. Escobar et al conclude that this raises questions around the extent to which capacity within CPPs is being used and the level of confidence in sharing evidence across services, indicating that despite data and evidence being shared, the full potential of data sharing may not be currently realised. Possible causes suggested by this study are that institutional changes and organisational restructuring makes it more difficult to form stable collaborative relationships and there is bias towards one's own data being more trustworthy and relevant.

Arguably, the professional role of the 'Community Planning Official' is the one that is least understood. This may be because CPOs lack a clear professional identity or institutional space within public sector departments. These professionals are 'boundary-spanners' (Williams, 2012). Their work involves collaboration across departments and organisations. They may also have a specialist role as public engagers (Escobar, 2017, 2015) involving communities in policymaking and/or governance processes; and as knowledge brokers

(Ward et al., 2009) working with different sources of data and research. Those working as part of the Policy, Planning and Performance team in particular played a key role in translating and communicating evidence to different audiences, from strategic directors who needed data for benchmarking, to providing relevant data to the CPP, and making neighbourhood data accessible to community members.

**Academic research and policymakers**

Academics were the least used source of evidence identified in this research, with only one participant mentioning academic research as a source of information. This finding is supported by other research with users of social policy evidence. McCormick (2013) found that while academic research is highly trusted as a source of evidence in the UK, it is rarely used. Escobar et al's survey of CPP officials (2018) also found that the majority of respondents only sometimes or seldom obtained evidence from academic institutions, and a survey of public health professionals concluded that academic research evidence is rarely seen as relevant in decision-making processes (Oliver and de Vocht, 2015).

Finally, there was no mention of decision-makers and those responsible for commissioning services or designing local policies, such as service directors and policy makers, as possessing evidence and knowledge that could be mobilised. Programme developers producing services and programmes were also not mentioned and these categories from Ward's (2017) model were therefore absent from this study.

In sum, evidence in community planning comes from a wide range of sources – including the local community, frontline professionals within and across organisations and sectors, as well as, to a lesser extent, academics and policymakers. Sharing data and forming and maintaining collaborative relationships across services can be challenging in contexts of restructuring and institutional flux, which can lead to mistrust in data from other services. The challenge is finding creative and effective ways to engage the community, to avoid overburdening them and to collect evidence that is relevant and helpful for community planning. Community planning officers play a key role in this as 'boundary-spanners' working across organisational divides but they need support to collect and communicate evidence.

# Part 2: How does evidence become meaningful?

We now turn to addressing Ward's **what** and **how** questions:

➢ What types of evidence are valued in community planning?
➢ How is evidence mobilised in this context?

## What types of knowledge and evidence are valued?

While thus far we have discussed evidence and data, we will now focus on *knowledge,* as we describe the different 'ways of knowing' discussed by participants. These included both empirical and scientific forms of evidence and knowledge gained in less easily identifiable ways such as through professional experience and judgement.

Through our research, we identified three forms of knowledge that were key to community planning and processes of public service reform. We have adapted Aristotle's model of knowledge types (2009) and used this as our starting point: 'episteme' or scientific knowledge; 'techne', or skill and craft; and 'phronesis' or practical wisdom (see figure 3). The types of evidence valued by participants in this study can be understood through this adapted knowledge types model.

| Knowledge types | Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (350 BC) | Ward's typology (2017) |
|---|---|---|
| **Empirical** | Episteme To know (Gr)<br>Scientific knowledge<br>Orientated towards knowledge that is universal, invariable, context independent.<br>This type of knowledge is highly contested by academics who argue that all knowledge is subjective and constructed | Research findings, quality and performance data, population data and statistics and evaluation data |
| **Craft** | Techne- Craftsmanship, craft or art (Gr)<br>The technical application of knowledge to produce an outcome/achieve a goal<br>Pragmatic, variable, context dependent, practical, instrumental rationality | Practical skills experiences and expertise |

| Practical wisdom | Phronesis (Gr)<br>Principled action based on values and ethics; to engage with uncertainty<br>Pragmatic, variable, context dependent. Oriented toward action.<br>Based on deliberation and judgement | Professional judgements, values, beliefs and intuition |
| --- | --- | --- |

*Figure 3: Aristotle's three forms of knowledge*

## Empirical knowledge

Empirical knowledge, or 'episteme', is generally defined as what can broadly be called 'scientific evidence' – produced using robust and reliable data. For Aristotle, this type of knowledge is invariable and context-independent. But knowledge resulting from qualitative research is also a form of empirical knowledge, defined as evidence that tests the validity and strength of a claim. Empirical evidence includes statistics, research findings, data from evaluations and population data.

Participants mainly derived empirical knowledge from statistical data. All public service professionals used empirical knowledge in their work – In benchmarking exercises, evaluations and for performance indicators. The evidence included statistics from national and local governments, regulatory bodies, organisations within the professional field, as well as the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation data to target services to more deprived areas. In one case, a strategic director described how he used performance data as a catalyst for new ways of working. The data, described as *"very damning"*, prompted the director to implement change. The director recognises the importance of benchmarking data in measuring and reflecting on performance, but also sees this type of evidence as a way to justify and support changes that he *'instinctively'* felt were needed:

> *"I think the fact that [the evidence] was benchmarked was helpful. It's core data and that effectively holds up a mirror to the organisation and to its performance. So it was very enabling and it allowed me to make changes that instinctively I thought needed to be made but I had the evidence base to push on."*

While some of the data used by participants were national statistics, a significant amount was derived from local surveys of citizens. Our findings indicate an over-reliance on data from these surveys, leading to 'consultation fatigue', as acknowledged by public service professionals. Local data were the most highly valued and used by participants in this study,

both public service professionals and community members[3]. All public service officers mentioned evidence from their own local systems or databases and also spoke of surveys which could provide basic counts of people as well as evaluative feedback on specific issues in their service areas. However, it is difficult to determine the quality of the data from these local surveys.

Participants noted that statistical data, including local data, needs to be relevant, reliable and up to date. One participant said: *"you're obviously relying on that data being correct"*, and another spoke of the fact that *"it's got to be relevant, and it's got to be up to date, that's the only thing. So …somebody's got to take ownership of it".* This highlights the importance of staff with a role in ensuring that datasets are reliable and regularly refreshed.

Statistical data was also criticised for its limited ability to provide insight into individual experiences and the local impact of socio-economic changes such as austerity and welfare reform. One service manager described statistical data as insensitive to the local context: *"it under values or doesn't provide the full picture of the work that's going on".* A strategic director also noted that while statistical data was useful for strategic planning and benchmarking, it could be difficult to make it relevant and meaningful to the everyday work of officers at the front-line. One participant argued that qualitative research (such as focus groups) combined with statistical profiles could provide more useful insights in examining how changes to services are perceived. Constrained resources limited the ability to justify spending on qualitative research.

One participant suggested that statistical profiles were only needed by those who don't have '*on the ground*' experience of the community the profiles describe. The suggestion is that this type of empirical evidence is not needed by those with extensive practitioner knowledge, and it is to a discussion of the role of experience as a form of knowledge that this paper now turns.

## Craft knowledge

Public service professionals in our case site valued professional knowledge and experience above all other forms of knowledge. Adapting Aristotle's knowledge types, we call this type of knowledge craft knowledge, or 'techne'. Craft knowledge is built up through professional training, working and/or living in a community, and is drawn on in the day-to-day work of public service professionals, particularly those working at the frontline. This type of knowledge is valuable when making practical and technical decisions in your working context.

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[3] See also Oliver and de Vocht's (2015) survey of public health professionals where their findings demonstrated the importance of local data.

A few officers gave examples of situations where professional knowledge and experience was used as evidence and how this, rather than externally produced or validated evidence, was used to justify decisions. The value of the craft knowledge gained through years of working in an area was often stated, and the more involved an officer was in his or her community, the more confident they felt making decisions about services for that community. This links back to the perception that empirical evidence such as data profiles can be seen as redundant for those working in an area. One participant commented:

> *"If we don't know what some of the issues are now, we'll never know […] I've been doing this kind of thing for 30 years, if I don't know by now you should take me out and shoot me."*

An example of the use of craft knowledge came from a waste collection service that needed to be re-designed to meet specific needs of a locality within the operational and budget limitations of the service. An officer described an estate that was architecturally designed in such a way that made it difficult for residents to recycle. With the Waste Regulations of 2012, local residents could no longer use *'the traditional black sack system'* and were required by law to use recycling bins and had to find a solution to the problem. Evidence was used in this case to identify options and practical solutions to waste management. Local practitioners applied their 'craft' knowledge to choose the final preferred option:

> *"We engaged an organisation that specialises in waste management consultancy. They helped us to identify options that we felt would deliver our waste diversion targets with the resources we have. We gave the choice to the householders as to which option they preferred. One was pretty much discarded by the householders.… There was close to 50/50 split for … two options but within those two… we had a preference in terms of our knowledge of how we could deliver that service operationally. We had to persuade the elected members and point them towards the option that we preferred."*

This example shows how the officer made use of their experience in the field to make a series of considered judgements in their decision-making throughout the process, while drawing on various different forms of evidence along the way to reach the best possible outcome for the service and the tenants.

At the strategic level, the value of craft knowledge, particularly of those working on the frontline, was widely acknowledged, with one director arguing that:

> *"…people working on the ground, have a better grasp of the actual experience of our tenants and our customers … [they] are often best placed to make comments for improvement but …the least likely to be listened to…The statistical data, the dry data tells you there's a problem. The fieldworker or the front line worker tells*

*you the customer experience of that problem. They also often come up with [most] interesting solutions."*

While the craft knowledge of front line workers was valued, more could be done to create spaces for this type of knowledge to be used in decision-making processes. The proposal from this director was to "*create a platform… not just managers, staff of all trades*" and to organise "*ideas forums, solutions forums*".

Craft knowledge also entails the ability to draw on the 'right' type of data for the right purpose. This was exemplified by participants, both public service professionals and community group members, having knowledge of the type of evidence needed for successful funding bids. Part of the craft of the new public service professional is therefore the skill to '*speak the right evidence language'*.

## Practical wisdom

Practical wisdom, or phronesis, is a form of knowledge grounded in experience. What distinguishes it from craft knowledge is that it is rooted in practical reasoning and reflective judgement, requiring deliberation. There are many interpretations of phronesis and, as a concept, it is ambiguous enough to be attractive to many policy fields. Phronesis was used by Aristotle to describe a style of thinking and behaviour that he respected in a statesman or a leader – an individual who is able to deliberate over values, ethics and different courses of action. In the health and social sciences, phronesis is interpreted as a form of professional rather than political knowledge. Here, we discuss an example of practical wisdom enacted through a process of practical reasoning based on professional experience. Deliberations over the right course of action with consideration for values and what is practical and achievable can take place at the level of the individual or can be a collective process.

An example of the use of practical wisdom came from a local housing manager who described how changes to a waste collection service led to problems of neighbourhood decline: "*bins were overflowing, people not correctly recycling… the problem was lots of rubbish lying around the streets*". Meetings were held between officers from housing, cleansing and environmental health services to seek a collaborative solution. The initial approach to this problem was to strengthen enforcement and 'incentivise' local residents to change their behaviour, but underpinning the cleansing problem were more complex issues of mental health:

> *"Mental health can be a challenge in all aspects of our job. You're asking somebody to recycle …when really some mornings they don't even want to get up and wash their face. So that is a big challenge…mental health is a massive problem for us…The Housing Officers are quite skilled in it, albeit that nobody's actually trained in dealing*

*with it…. However, lots of time is spent with tenants trying to get an understanding, bringing in colleagues from Cleansing that are skilled in the knowledge of recycling and encouraging people. But sometimes you can't. Sometimes there is no solution. Then you have to get your colleagues from mental health services at the Health and Social Care Partnership, and that can be challenging in itself."*

A problem that was initially presented as an issue of cleansing and recycling was later revealed through the **practical wisdom** and experience of the officer as a more complex issue of mental health.

The type of 'what works' evidence that policy makers often find attractive is evidence of how to 'nudge' the public to behave differently through incentives and other mechanisms. As the example above demonstrates, evidence can be used for enforcement. Addressing 'problem behaviours' is in practice far more complex and requires a different form of practical wisdom and understanding of different interpretations of the problem. This example reveals the limitations of a quick-fix evidence-based approach and the need to engage with and reflect on the different ethics and values underpinning the work of public services, recognising dilemmas, and drawing on practical wisdom and professional judgement.

## How is evidence mobilised in community planning?

We now turn to discussing how evidence is mobilised in community planning in our case site. Again adapting Ward's model for knowledge mobilisation (2017), we identified two distinct ways in which this was done:

- Communicating evidence in a context-sensitive manner – dissemination, synthesis and presentation
- Building relationships – connecting stakeholders and making data meaningful through communication.

### Communicating evidence in a context-sensitive manner

Participants in this study reported that evidence needs to be translated and dissected, produced at a local level and sensitively communicated to the community. Communicating evidence effectively and making it meaningful therefore meant putting the data into the 'right' context. One participant's view was that evidence can be either too general *"if it gets too general it's not useful"*, or it can contain too much detail and *"overcomplicate service delivery"*. It is necessary to "*dissect it to see what it means to services"*. Communicating evidence effectively involved contextualising it and knowing what supplementary data was needed.

The issue is not merely the availability of good quality data, but also the capacity of local staff to analyse data and provide this 'context'. The knowledge exchange role is a specialist role performed by members of the policy and performance team for the local authority and community planning partnership. Individual services also relied on their own analytical services. Here, a police officer describes the data he received from the police analyst unit:

> *"It's not just a 'data dump', it's not just a list…, they put it into context, they compare it to the average year to date figures, they compare to the last month…If they are telling me there has been six serious assaults in [an area] in the last month, they are able to tell me that in all those cases the victim and the suspect were known to one another and if it has been in a public space or a private space."*

It was also important that the evidence was on the right level, with one participant noting that community profiles need to be on *"local"* and *"identifiable"* areas. Finding data at the appropriate scale is difficult, as Escobar and his colleagues report. The CPP officer survey (Escobar et al, 2018) also found that 43% of respondents struggled to find data at the appropriate spatial scale. In our study, community profiles allowed services to focus on specific areas where localised approaches to issues such as recycling or levels of crime might be needed, rather than high-level authority-wide campaigns. From the perspective of the community, evidence needs to be presented in an accessible format for it to be useful. One community member explained that if local people were to be more involved in community planning, the evidence and data used to inform the planning process needed to be in a format they could understand.

Another important aspect of the communication of evidence is how 'negative' evidence is presented, particularly to local residents. Two participants mentioned that statistics can be used as *"league tables"* and this can *"stigmatise"* areas by presenting them in a negative light. People with strong community attachment and identity may react badly to the publication of negative evidence on their local neighbourhood. One public service professional explained the importance of presenting this type of evidence to local communities by *"putting it to context"* and being *"quite tactful"*. The effective transmission of evidence relies to some extent on the skills of front line professionals to communicate evidence sensitively.

## Creating knowledge and building relationships through communication

Evidence becomes meaningful through communication - a process that creates knowledge and builds relationships between the different stakeholders involved in community planning. Through communication of evidence, data, research and other sources of information become meaningful and can lead to shared understanding. Attention needs to be paid to the quality of the communication processes between stakeholders that produce accepted ways of seeing and understanding the issues in a community.

If evidence is to become meaningful, our research demonstrates that something more than good 'transmission' needs to take place. First, recognition of diverse forms of knowledge as having equal status as a way of knowing and understanding the policy problems. Second, a circular or multilateral rather than uni-directional understanding of knowledge exchange. This dialogic model of E2A views the communication of evidence as a process of combining plural forms of knowledge with the purpose of developing shared meaning and understanding.

What happens when different forms of knowledge are conflicting? How is it possible to balance the persuasive power of emotive single cases and practical knowledge against statistics? This politics of evidence use is particularly prevalent in the so-called 'post-truth' era (Davis 2017). Deliberative processes are designed to address these tricky issues by providing opportunities for participants to step-back from their starting positions and assumptions and to weigh and judge different types of knowledge and evidence on the basis of agreed criteria. Take the example of democratic innovations such as mini publics [4] which draw on diverse forms of knowledge and evidence as part of a deliberative approach to citizen engagement and can provide useful insights for policy makers.

Our findings suggest that calls for 'better communication' of scientific evidence, 'more robust evidence' and more 'evidence based decisions' provide only a partial answer to the question of how knowledge and evidence could be used more effectively for public service reform. Multiple sources of evidence are needed to understand and respond to policy problems. Much as an artist creating a collage uses various materials to create a picture, in practice the public service professional uses the sources of evidence available to solve practical problems and do their job.

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[4] A mini public is an assembly of citizens, demographically representative of the larger population, brought together to learn and deliberate on a topic in order to inform public opinion and decision-making (Escobar & Elstub 2017)

# Part 3: Implications for the Scottish Approach to Evidence Use - *how can CPPs be supported to make more effective use of evidence*?

What are the implications of our findings for the Scottish context? We begin by considering the role of outcomes in evidence use and formulate recommendations for supporting CPPs in using evidence in a way that is effective and meaningful in this context.

## An outcome-based approach to evidence?

A key theme of public service reform in Scotland is the outcomes based approach, embodied in the National Performance Framework and in the recommendations from the Christie Commission, now enshrined in the Community Empowerment Act. On 'outcomes', our research participants were silent. While performance measurements and benchmarking featured strongly, the language of outcomes (as articulating the wider changes in society that public services aspire to) was conspicuously absent. Echoing our findings, Coutts and Brotchie (2016) note that *"it is difficult to find evidence that the performance framework has stretched very far from central government"* (p.6).

Possible reasons for this are that an outcomes based approach is already assumed as framing approaches to performance and measurement and the National Performance Framework, or that the language of outcomes remains nebulous and abstract – at the level of the long-term strategic change rather than the operational immediate everyday challenge of re-designing services. Findings from the CPP survey (Escobar et al 2018) certainly suggest that CPP officers feel they are using evidence to understand the distribution of positive and negative outcomes across their area, with 70% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.

Further research is needed as it remains unclear whether outcomes focussed approaches are informing the approach to service redesign in practice and explicitly, although implicitly outcomes may be occurring. If outcome-based evaluations were built into service re-design from the outset, a culture supporting continuous and shared learning with partners and through peer networks could be cultivated. A barrier to this improvement cycle is likely to be:

- the time and capacity of officers
- the need for quick and efficient ways of conducting this type of research
- the extent to which decision makers are willing to engage in deliberative processes of decision making in which difficult choices and competing interests and values are brought out into the open.

Let us examine these challenges.

## Supporting CPPs to make effective use of evidence

The potential barriers to an explicitly outcome-focussed approach to service-redesign and evaluation processes also play a part in the problems CPPs have in effectively using evidence, as we have demonstrated throughout this paper. We now set out the ways in which CPPs can be supported in this regard.

## Address lack of capacity and establish stable collaborative relationships

All public service professionals mentioned constraints in staff time and financial resources when discussing barriers to evidence use, noting that this restricted how evidence was presented or produced. The ability to get data in the right format or for smaller local areas and keeping data up to date requires time and resources which were not always available. This echoes the findings of the CPP officer survey (Escobar et al, 2018), where 61% reported that they did not have enough capacity to conduct research. The survey found no significant differences across roles and levels in terms of reporting lack of capacity as a key barrier to evidence use. Our research supports this finding as both managerial and front-line staff felt that a key challenge was "*just getting the time*".

Participants mentioned institutional changes and service restructuring as key causes for this lack of time and capacity. Work "*gets divvied up"* and there is an increased workload as well as loss of knowledge, skills, networks and relationships, resulting in less time to engage with evidence and research. Restructuring not only affected departments within the local authority but also partnership working. Different partner organisations have different priorities and, while still happy to share data, capacity and resource issues limit the sharing of data not directly aligning with their own priorities. It can also be difficult to simply get hold of someone within the organisation who has the time or authority to share the data required. Despite the challenges of service restructuring, one participant recognised these changes as an opportunity to improve evidence use:

> "*Sometimes it's difficult penetrating into particular professional groups because particular professional groups are maybe not particularly interested in change…There's an opportunity at the moment because public services are being so radically restructured."*

The Community Empowerment Act places a "statutory obligation" on key public services to participate in community planning. While partners are required to attend partnership meetings, they may have different priorities and sometimes it was necessary to *"cajole and support people to do their bit ".* Different partners also use different types of evidence that can make integrating evidence a challenge, requiring time and resources.

Stable collaborative relationships that enable evidence and knowledge to be shared in a way that is effective and meaningful need support to develop. Requiring staff to work in partnership without a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities risks public service professionals becoming disengaged. Overburdening staff with too much evidence without the capacity to engage with it can also mean that the types of evidence actually relevant and useful to their working context are overlooked.

## Integrate and value different types of knowledge

A comprehensive approach to evidence use in public service reform requires a deeper understanding and appreciation of different knowledge types, including the professional craft of service re-design, and value-based knowledge gained through processes of deliberation. In 2016, the CPP where this research took place asked What Works Scotland to produce community profiles that would provide practitioners and communities with more accessible localised data, to fit into a process and model of community-action planning and decision-making. The shared ambition was that the profiles would be meaningful and useful to both service professionals and communities. This approach overlooked the importance of other forms of knowledge that were crucial to achieving reform, such as the experience of public professionals and their craft in designing services and engaging with citizens, as demonstrated in the findings of this study.

The implications from this research and the example of the 'community profiles' (Bynner and Whyte, 2016) is that neither empirical knowledge, craft knowledge nor practical wisdom, is sufficient on its own to provide the knowledge needed to address complex policy problems. Making data meaningful in public service reform entails weaving together these three fundamentally different forms of knowledge and practice (see Figure 5 below).
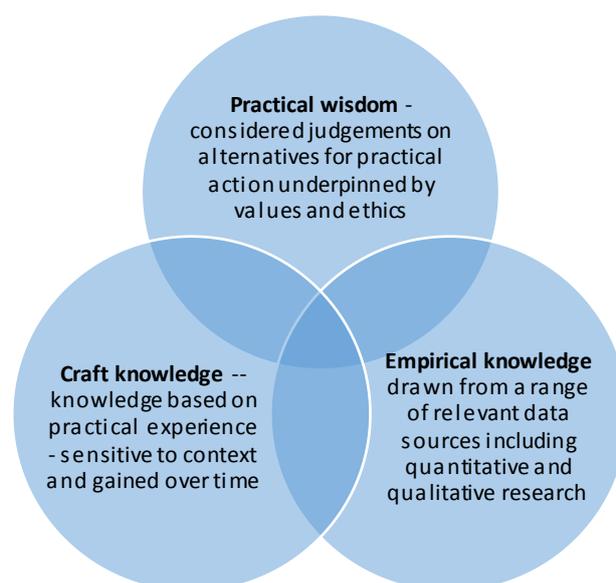


*Figure 5: Model of knowledge types for public service reform*

Academics themselves operate within a system of assumptions about useful knowledge which limits the extent to which they can fully engage with and appreciate the skill and craft of public servants, processes of deliberation in this context, and the inherent challenges involved (Boswell and Smith, 2017). Greater attention should be given to recognising and valuing different forms of knowledge and evidence and how these are supported, strengthened, and interwoven in a balanced way in approaches to public service reform.

## Shift to a language of 'inquiry'

One strand of the What Works Scotland programme has been collaborative action research projects in four CPPs across Scotland. These projects have brought professionals and practitioners from very different backgrounds together into groups to coproduce work involving evidence. What was powerful about these CAR projects was that officers across multiple sectors, including knowledge exchange officers and policy officers, were part of the process of 'making the evidence meaningful'.[5].

One of the learning points from this experience is that through processes of co-production across multiple levels of the partnership, frontline workers are listened to and their craft knowledge recognised and valued by senior officers. A collaborative inquiry group provides a 'sanctuary' where it is possible to share this knowledge and experience, while in other contexts that knowledge may not be valued to the same extent (Henderson and Bynner 2018).

Our making data meaningful research highlights how the knowledge of different people in the system is often unequal. Drawing on the learning from CAR and Making Data Meaningful it is easy to overlook how important it can be to simply bring people with diverse perspectives and knowledges into the same room and into a co-production process that values equally their knowledge, skills and experience. An example of a tool for bringing people together to collaboratively discuss both strategic and on the ground issues in a community is the Glasgow Game[6]. It enables diverse groups to use local health and wellbeing data to understand the complexity of the local context and consider creative solutions to issues, while promoting relationship building and discussion.

Indeed, the relationships formed across diverse levels and skills of a partnership are probably as, if not more important than the outcome of that work written up in a policy document or report. Yanow (2009) suggests that the type of reflective practice required by professionals is one of 'passionate humility' and an attitude that accepts that 'science' is grounded at least in part in an attitude of doubt. This entails a shift in attitude, away from 'a language of certainty' to 'a language of inquiry'.

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[5] See Coryn Barclay's blog on CAR in FIfe: http://whatworksscotland.blogspot.com/2018/05/knowing-how-putting-research-into.html
[6] Available at: http://www.understandingglasgow.com/using_the_data/glasgow_game

# Conclusion: using evidence wisely

This study suggests that CPPs operate in a context of continual change, presenting a challenge to evidence-use. Evidence is deployed in community planning for a wide range of reasons, but the focus is increasingly on the need to target and prioritise resources in a context characterised by financial constraints and pressures. Although the emergent Scottish approach places significant emphasis on co-production with service users and communities, there appears to be confusion about the types of knowledge being produced and the role of different actors as producers, interpreters and consumers of evidence. Statistical tools that claim to provide a more reliable source of evidence will have limited impact on public service reform without understanding and respecting the types of knowledge that are valued in day-to-day work and the ways in which different forms of knowledge and evidence interact.

The craft of evidence use in community planning is a craft that involves valuing and interweaving different forms of evidence and knowledge –recognising that evidence becomes meaningful through communication. This shifts attention away from hierarchies of evidence to improving the nature and quality of communication and co-production of policies. The problem in policy making is not a lack of evidence, or even the variable quality of the evidence available but the quality of the communication and the extent to which there is an opportunity for collective learning and deliberation.

Levitt (2013) points to the flaws in seeking conclusive proof from one type of evidence based on 'objectivity' and 'truth' and argues for the contingency of evidence and the aim of using evidence 'wisely'. Our position paper argues that a desirable Scottish approach to evidence in public policy entails integrating empirical evidence, craft knowledge and practical wisdom in a way that recognises the value of all three. This requires an understanding, recognition and respect for different types of knowledge, providing a basis for using evidence wisely in the ambition to achieve positive outcomes through public service reform.

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