

# Collaborative Action Research and public services: insights into methods, findings and implications for public service reform



Summary: Working Paper

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This executive summary is based on a working paper written by What Works Scotland researchers Hayley Bennett, Richard Brunner, Claire Bynner and James Henderson, who facilitated collaborative action research (CAR) in four community planning partnerships and forms part of a wider programme of research by What Works Scotland.

## Key learning and insights – CAR in community planning partnerships

- Collaborative Action Research is a flexible research methodology that integrates the three key elements of collaboration and participation, research and inquiry, action and change.
- Community planning is a relational process that provides an opportunity for participants to work together to operationalise policies. This process is inherently uncertain and interpretive. CAR can support the community planning process by uncovering the values and assumptions underpinning services; and by supporting participants to adapt creatively, reflect on and even at times subvert institutional norms.
- Changing CPP priorities, skills and experience, levels of commitment and changing roles of key staff mean that flexibility is needed to adapt to change. The What Works Scotland programme adapted to this variation by offering a diversity of CAR activities in response to local contexts and institutional needs.
- What Works Scotland researchers played multiple roles in building relationships across the CPP and with participants. This included:
  1. acting as researcher-facilitators including working with multiple stakeholders; networking; writing research guidance; facilitating groups; knowledge brokering; and coordinating collaborative writing
  2. nurturing vertical and horizontal relationships within groups and across CAR activities
  3. working within the timescales and autonomy that each CAR group and context offered.

- CAR requires a commitment from researchers to adapt to organisations, practitioners and needs, and to develop context-sensitive methodologies through on-going dialogue
- Undertaking CAR in the inherently dynamic policy and practice context of community planning is challenging. Rather than adopting a single model, researchers working in these contexts need to draw on different theories, methods and models.
- CAR is a shared perspective and approach that entails integrating the key elements of collaboration and participation, research and inquiry, and action and change.

### **Collaboration and participation – key areas of learning from across the case sites**

- All CAR groups involved multiple members, each with varying degrees of involvement. Key to the success of CAR groups were core members, who committed to the process. Other participants were also essential to deepening analysis and disseminating the learning.
- CAR activities brought together members from across public service organisations, cultures and structures. The emphasis on collaboration within the CAR group mirrored the collaborative aspirations of PSR in Scotland.
- CAR can create a space for innovation and collaboration across practitioners of varying seniority, experiences and knowledge.
- All CAR groups included members with diverse prior involvement (or none) in undertaking research. Facilitation of groups was essential to sustaining inclusion.
- Each What Works Scotland researcher played a range of key roles in each inquiry group including as facilitators, researchers and advocates. Researcher facilitation poses a key challenge as to whether CAR in CPPs has the potential to be sustained independently of external input.
- Cross CAR group exchange and learning was integral to the What Works Scotland CAR approach. The programme demonstrates the potential for wider collaboration, although this requires future facilitation and resourcing. Examples from the What Works Scotland programme include:
  - Communities of Practice: building topic focussed communities of practice across practitioners in Scotland;
  - Facilitative Leadership Training: building a wider network of practitioners skilled in facilitation and collaboration and the principles of dialogue and deliberation.

### **Research and inquiry – key areas of learning from across the case sites**

- The evidence used in CAR inquiries was mainly experiential and local knowledge. Other types of evidence included statistical and desk-based sources; and evidence reviews. The use of evidence reviews proved valuable in framing events, discussions,

analysis and report writing. A key role for the researchers was in both brokering access to knowledge resources and supporting analysis of data.

- A CAR approach can help to maintain a balance between instrumental (applied) knowledge and conceptual (theoretical) knowledge. This is supported by the role of an external researcher-facilitator by creating safe spaces for more critical framing of discussions and offering specialist skills and knowledge to support CAR groups.
- The ideal of CAR seeks to blur the boundaries between the roles of the researcher and the participants. The CAR approach was both participatory (participants conduct and lead on their own research) and researcher-led (driven by the researcher-facilitator). In some cases, the researcher and participants adopted a shared approach to the tasks in the research process.
- With some CAR groups, we used evaluation tools (e.g. contribution analysis or theories of change) to support participants in considering how they might evaluate an initiative. Here, CAR proved valuable not as an approach to evaluation in itself, but as a process that helped to frame the criteria for evaluation in more critical, reflective ways.

### Action and change – key areas of learning from across the case sites

The CAR groups generated diverse outputs including formal research reports and more creative outputs (such as short films and infographics) and three different types of change-making/influencing strategies: **Systems-change** – culture change across one or more partnership structure or system; **Research skills** – the development of research skills that support longer-term change; **Christie-focussed learning** – working in relation to the Christie policy agenda.

- Arguably, the impact of CAR on influencing change in public services tends to be smaller, longer-term and in ways that are unanticipated rather than leading to ‘grand plans’.
- Given the complexities of collaborative working, it is difficult to attribute longer-term impacts on service performance and wider social and economic outcomes to CAR. However, what emerges is the evolving, adaptive nature of the CAR process and the potential for CPP partners to learn from early experiences to explore opportunities and further projects. CAR builds local capacity to work with current challenges and future aspirations for collaborative governance.

### Insights from CAR for Public Service Reform and the four pillars of ‘Christie’

CAR supports partnership working by:

- offering spaces for the practical development of a shared collaborative ethos
- engaging with senior management to build and sustain support for collaborative working
- providing a range of learning opportunities for building local collaborative capacity.

**CAR supports people (and participation) through:**

- building a shared ethos of collaborative and participative working
- highlighting the value of facilitation skills to support collaborative working and improve the quality of dialogue and deliberation in partnership work
- using local staff knowledge, diverse sources of evidence, pooling resources and budgets.

**CAR supports performance by:**

- engaging public service staff in working with diverse sources of evidence towards longer-term outcomes
- supporting local staff in developing a more informed and critical reflective practice
- facilitating context-relevant approaches
- developing Communities of Practice across CPPs in Scotland
- learning from what doesn't initially 'work' to find ways creative ways forward
- brokering knowledge and evidence resources from local, regional and national agencies.

**CAR supports prevention.** In most of our case sites, prevention did not emerge as a topic for a group inquiry. Nevertheless, CAR offers emerging insights into this highly demanding area of local policy and practice by:

- highlighting the complexity of what is needed e.g. upstream-focus, evidence use, pooling budgets and realistic strategies
- providing long-term spaces for incremental working across CPPs and other partnerships to engage on prevention and early intervention.

### **Maximising impact in the context of austerity**

CAR can contribute valuably to evidence-informed implementation of the Christie Commission agenda. However, CAR also supports a deeper, more critical understanding of the wider context and implications of PSR for collaborative governance. Using CAR in practice has highlighted the importance of the following conditions that enable PSR:

- significant commitment and support across partnerships from senior management
- staff teams and inquiry teams with reasonable job stability that supports ongoing dialogue
- further openness to critical, reflective thinking that informs dialogue on policy barriers
- a move away from linear models of evidence-based policy to context-relevant evidence use
- a willingness to share learning – both 'success' and 'failure' – more widely across Scotland.

## In conclusion

In this highly uncertain policy and public spending context, our findings demonstrate that CAR has the potential to contribute to developing the practices of collaborative governance – partnership, participation, performance and prevention – by constructively and critically engaging with current policy and practice expectations. In doing so, CAR can provide useful insights into the context and current challenges of PSR.

In providing this material from the What Works Scotland programme, we aim to support the ongoing dialogue on the development of collaborative governance in Scotland. We do not seek to present CAR as the ‘solution’ to developing collaborative governance, or for that matter, as a way of coping with the impacts of ‘austerity’. We argue that in this hugely uncertain, demanding policy context, CAR offers a shared perspective and flexible approach to address the complex and inter-related, challenges of public service change (PSR) and social change.

## About the authors

**Dr Hayley Bennett** is a research associate based at the University of Edinburgh’s Social Policy department. Her research interests are the design and delivery of policies aimed at reducing unemployment, inequality, and poverty, and she worked with community planning partners in Fife.

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**What Works Scotland** is a Scottish Government and ESRC-funded research collaboration which aims to improve the way local areas use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform.

The full report - *Collaborative Action Research and public services: insights into methods, findings and implications for public service reform* is available on the What Works Scotland website at <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/publications/collaborative-action-research-and-public-services-insights-into-methods-findings-and-implications-for-public-service-reform/>