

Introductory summary: At the frontier of collaborative and participatory governance

Eight key discussions to support putting Christie into action – reflective learning with practitioners from Aberdeenshire CPP



Summary: Research Report

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This short summary introduces the reflective learning report that emerged from an action research process undertaken by James Henderson and Nick Bland with Aberdeenshire Community Planning Partnership (CPP).

The full report, an executive summary and a summary of the eight key discussions, are available on the What Works Scotland website at <https://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/publications/frontier-of-collaborative-and-participatory-governance>

Sources for quotes and references are available in the full report.

The report - *At the frontier of collaborative and participatory governance: Eight key discussions to support putting Christie into action* - seeks to inform ongoing dialogue and research to support collaborative and participatory public service reform in Scotland by offering rich discussions of 'theory and practice'. Or, in plainer speaking, 'What are we're doing, and why, and for whom?'

Reform in Scotland often continues to be framed, eight years on, through the Christie Commission's (2011) broad narrative. Its thinking can be understood as part of a wider international trend away from 'traditional' top-down and business-focused approaches (New Public Management) and in search of more pragmatic, empowering and democratic approaches – or collaborative and participatory governance (Bryson et al. 2014, for instance). This report imagines ongoing dialogue on theory and practice as taking place at the 'frontier' of reform and related social change, and as a wrestling with 'wicked social problems' e.g. stubborn inequalities and their destructive long-term impacts on people, society and the state/public sector.

The focus of, and evidence base for, this report

Sustaining a research focus: given the richness of the reflective discussions in the report, a more particular, ongoing focus is sustained across the whole by exploring this frontier of collaborative and participative governance via three broad assumptions – that such governance requires:

1. **Complex coordination of public services** through the development of effective multi-layered and cross-sector partnership and participation (centrally, local area, local community).
2. **Social vision:** more equitable society and sustainable state finances via preventative approaches, inclusive economy, and local empowerment (Christie Commission).
3. **Public service learning culture – via systems-focused action research:** using reflective and practical action inquiry to engage wicked issues and seek service, systems and social change.

None of these assumptions are new nor does the report simply assume that their pursuit and integration will ‘work’. For instance, emphasis within policymaking on partnership, participation and action research emerged in the UK in the late 1960s (if not before) – and on prevention in the 1990s (if not before). However, the evidence base as to their potential to create a more equitable society is limited: optimists would point to their potential to support service and social innovation; pessimists argue that they won’t impact on the dynamics locally, nationally and internationally that have deepened health and income inequalities since the 1980s in the UK.

What is distinctive at this frontier of aspirations for change articulated through the Commission is the scale of ambition, and so challenge, for Scottish public services and society. By focusing discussions through these three assumptions, there is the potential to sustain ongoing dialogue and research to inform change across services, systems and society.

Evidence base: The report builds from the action research process with Aberdeenshire CPP and a number of interweaving collaborative inquiries involving both local and centrally-based practitioners and partners. Reflective learning is offered through interview material from 23 practitioners working with the CPP partners and within and across layers of partnership and participation – central, local area, local community. Other What Works Scotland research material and further evidence helps to inform the developing discussions in Part 2 of the report.

Exploring: partnership and participation, social vision, and action learning

1. Complex coordination of public services through partnership and participation

“Unless we really think about what it is we want to change in these systems, and then change the attitude of the people that work in these systems, we’re on a hiding to nothing. And that does not take away from the quality of the work [with What Works Scotland] that’s been done, because the quality of the work is excellent. But what impact is it going to have. ...it’s like setting little fires, and you have to keep on stoking those fires, for them to keep going. ...Culture change is hugely difficult and takes a huge resource. ...Because the only other thing that changes culture is disaster.”

(Research participant)

The discussions in Part 2 illustrate the emerging key practices and tools that are being used to strengthen collaborative and participatory processes – and as alternatives to top-down and business-led thinking – for the coordination of public services provision. These include:

- **Facilitative leaders and supporting networks** that can work across layers – central, local area, community – and organisations and sectors to build shared leadership (Bynner, Escobar & Faulkner, 2017).
- Long-term relationship-building and investment in **independent local civil society** e.g. community organisations, equalities groups, local trade unions branches – to generate the needed levels of challenge to change services and systems; and to build local capacities.
- **Local democratic practices** that make visible the political nature of public service decision-making across: services, sectors and management; political/local leadership; communities and citizens – and so build deliberation and accountability (Escobar, 2017; Bland, 2017a).
- **Independent, external facilitation** of partnership and participative processes to build trust and provide constructive disruptions that develop leadership (Bland, 2017b).

Well-known examples of processes of collaborative change are highlighted, e.g. health and social care integration in Torbay (Thistlethwaite, 2011), administrative systems in Newcastle City Council through partnership between management and trade unions (Wainwright & Little, 2009). Yet, these ran the course of a decade and required committed, intentional local leadership and political support. Further, they illustrate the diversity of what collaborative working can mean, and show the different expectations, circumstances and problems partnerships are working within, and their constraints e.g. reducing inequalities. Across the practitioners, there was recognition of the realities: a ‘steady’ pace of change, organisational barriers and the need for sustained commitment. And alongside this, for some, questioning to as to whether and how collaboration can provide sufficiently powerful processes to lead and support effective longer-term change across partners and sectors.

2. Social vision: equitable society, sustainable state finances, and pragmatic approach

“In some ways we’ve done amazingly well thinking about this in terms of root causes ... But in some ways it feels like it’s slipping away from being a partnership approach to, okay, you go ahead and do that. So, how do we herd the cats ...” (Research participant)

The discussions across Part 2 (particularly 2.7) offer material for considering the development of a multi-layered preventative partnership and participation concerned for inequalities and social vision. They illustrate the complexity of work not only in terms of coordinating partnership, but in working out what types of policy and practice might be effective locally in actually impacting on (health) inequalities, and what can realistically be achieved through such partnership and participation.

They illustrate, too, the challenge of seeking to find ways to invest in preventative approaches whilst continuing to run ‘for now’ reactive services. There can be ‘quick wins’ – e.g. delayed discharge (bed-blocking) – but a wider agenda for change – such as a cross-cutting public health agenda impacting on economic, social, political, environmental determinants of health – requires complex longer-term collective strategies and development. Developing practices are highlighted including early work on a Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (2017); collaborative action and learning; sharing targeted data; and shared management structures. Yet, this continues to feel like an understanding of theory and practice in its infancy: slow building towards multi-layered preventative partnership, participation and investment.

However, the Christie Commission – and the wider public health and inequalities agenda (Marmot et al., 2010; Craig, 2014) – make the case that what is or isn’t happening ‘now’ in terms of inequalities and population health – e.g. early years, ‘healthy ageing’, anti-poverty – is already deciding the state and society’s future funding, service and social challenges: there is then an urgency for change now!

The report (2.8) therefore points to a key role for public service partnerships in advocating for and supporting change in other areas of policymaking e.g. welfare reform, economic development and sustainable infrastructure. These areas are largely beyond the evidence base generated in this report, but one area is illustrated – local economic, social and sustainable development. Examples are given of community ownership and enterprise which can provide complementary investment to that of public services in preventative approaches through local trading activity and building social capital. Further the potential for a related local economic development via the procurement and employment strategies of larger local public, publicly-owned and third sector bodies e.g. ‘Common Wealth model’ (Jackson & McInroy, 2017) are similarly brought into the discussions.

A variety of local hub-type models – public and community sector (Watson, 2017; Henderson, Revell & Escobar, 2018; Danson & Whittam, 2010) – can inform dialogue on local partnership and local development approaches.

Whilst CPPs can offer advocacy on the (urgent) development of local infrastructure through community planning, spatial planning and community-led local place plans. Given a shift to more pragmatic collaborative governance, there is scope for creative thinking on public and social/community ownership and enterprise, not just private, to invest in ‘prevention’.

3. Systems-focused action research to inform public service culture and social change?

“...There is a fear that services will be overwhelmed by demand. This has appeared in many policy documents, and has done for over ten years now. We are hearing of examples everywhere, from NHS staff shortages, recurrent winter crises, increased waiting times, care management teams struggling to cope with demand, shortages of care at home and so on. This doesn’t really change the main findings ...about what may work at a local level, but we may have to act much faster, and genuinely try approaches for which there is little available evidence but which may seem ‘right’ at a local and community level.”

(Participant in Aberdeenshire ‘Prevention’ report, 2018)

The report provides material for deepening discussions of the potential of systems-focused action research to support culture change within public service partnerships and for related social and systems change. More formalised action research processes and more informal ‘collaborative learning and action’ are explored by highlighting: the work between the CPP and What Works Scotland – centrally and locally; other action learning within the CPP; and, related examples: Beyond Action Learning (Soutar, Warrander & Henderson, 2017); Pioneering Collaborative Leadership (Bland, 2017b).

Key issues are illustrated, in particularly the potential role of action research to build, not only abstract knowledge (reporting), but embodied knowledge (individuals and their practice learning) and embedded knowledge (through networks and shared learning), and to seek to generate knowledge that is credible and relevant to key stakeholders – practically in developing day-to-day policy and practice; and reflexively in building understanding of policy and social systems/options.

What the report doesn’t seek to do is offer evidence as to the effectiveness of a systems-focused action research in creating public service change and wider social/systems change – that is well beyond its scope. What it can do is provide ‘fuel for the imagination’ for supporting the planning of pilots that explore and evaluate its potential to inform culture change for collaborative and participative governance. For instance, the report highlights the importance of building:

- senior and political support across partners and stakeholders – and sustaining this
- local inquiries and wider participant forums and networks across layers and sectors.
- safe spaces for collaboration – and supporting ‘constructive disruptions’
- reasonable job security for participants (Brunner, Bennett, Bynner & Henderson, 2018)

There is potential here to take a considered risk and invest in piloting, monitoring and learning from a systems-focused action research approach across the layers of a suitable public service partnership such as a CPP. And, further, integrating this approach with other key elements that can support investment in local preventative approaches e.g. local hub development; local economic, social and sustainable development strategies; integration with public sector procurement and employment. This report and supporting materials provide fuel for the imagination and can be used to open-up discussions of strategies and of practice development.