

Reflections on the What Works Scotland initiative

A summary of key learning from taking part in the What Works Scotland initiative
Justine Geyer, Scottish Government, August 2019

Introduction

What Works Scotland (WWS) was an innovative research collaboration, funded jointly between the Scottish Government (SG), the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. WWS launched in June 2014 and was funded until the end of December 2018.

The ambition in commissioning WWS was that it would seek to be innovative and creative in its approach and, taking the lead from the Christie Commission, develop a collaborative approach to exploring what works in public service reform and bring together the Scottish Government, Community Planning Partnerships, national bodies and academics.

This collaborative approach can be seen in:

- The collaborative funding partnership between SG and ESRC; and their desire to work collaboratively with WWS
- The collaboration between Edinburgh and Glasgow universities to form WWS
- WWS establishing a collaboration with public and third sector partners to support research impact and legacy

- The broad use of collaborative approaches across the WWS programme to support research, inquiry and learning, including the specific application of Collaborative Action Research (CAR) methods in four case site areas.¹

The remit for WWS to explore public service reform in Scotland², in the context of the implementation of the Christie Commission's recommendations, was ambitious. It involved WWS working in a complex, multi-agency, public service landscape and drawing together a cross-disciplinary academic team reflecting a broad spread of knowledge and experience in housing, health, community engagement and participatory democracy, welfare and anti-poverty, evidence use, education and, social and public policy.

To capture the learning at the conclusion of WWS, a reflective exercise was undertaken inviting everyone who had played a part in WWS over its four-year period, from the ESRC, the Universities and Scottish Government. The participants were asked to respond to a set of questions via email; or to attend a facilitated reflections event in December 2018. Notes made on the day by the event facilitator and from two scribes were combined with the written responses and analysed. This short report draws out the key learning from this exercise.



¹ More information on What Works Scotland can be found at: <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk>

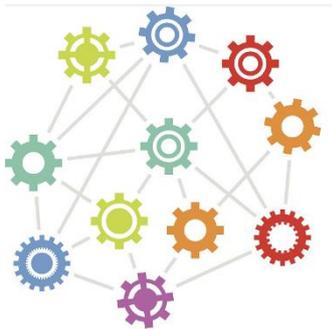
² Key messages about public service reform in Scotland: <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/key-messages-about-psr-in-scotland>

Key Achievements

The following are reflections on some of the key achievements of WWS.

The importance of collaboration for WWS placed a premium on a relational approach. WWS developed an extremely broad set of networks and relationships across public services. This is expected to endure beyond the funding period.

WWS, through running a series of workshops, seminars and other public engagement activities acted as a focal point through which a diverse range of public sector workers, community leaders, academics and the third sector could come together and share ideas and inform action. The convened, shared spaces focused on research and evidence that challenged established thinking, facilitated and enabled learning and experiences to be shared between different public service professionals and across public service organisations. Feedback signalled that these were highly valued as often rare opportunities for public services to reflect collaboratively on the challenges and opportunities of public service reform and putting Christie into action.



WWS modelled a new approach to research in the complex arena of multi-agency public services. Through a range of collaborative approaches, and specifically collaborative action research, WWS facilitated public services to generate or use research evidence to reflect on their practices and to put that learning into action.

WWS was creative and innovative in communicating research evidence and supporting its use in practice. It produced a wide variety of evidence-based resources on public service reform themes. These resources included evidence reviews, research reports, practical toolkits to put evidence into practice, event reports, policy briefings, a regular newsletter, webinars and regular blogs.

These covered, for example, areas such as collaboration, public service leadership, outcomes working, community engagement and participatory budgeting.



WWS was highly successful in increasing its profile in the public service landscape and building interest and demand for its resources. For example, it reports website visits increasing from 5,500 early on to over 18,000 by the end of 2018.



WWS contributed to capacity building, spreading and embedding new practices. WWS was a key contributor to the evolution of practice and learning on a range of public service reform areas these include: the spread of use of evaluability assessments; changing discourse on public service leadership; progression and embedding of participatory budgeting; and growing of collaborative working practice. There was a clear sense that WWS has acted as a catalyst, helping to build confidence in both public servants and academics to work in a different, more inquiry focused way.

Challenges and Learning from What Works Scotland

Contributors reflected on the wider public service environment in which WWS was working, highlighting the challenges presented by austerity and related organisational change to reduce costs and increase efficiencies. Alongside this, there were Westminster and Holyrood elections and the EU referendum. Together, this led to volatility and uncertainty across the public services working with WWS.

In such an environment, this presented a particular challenge to the WWS collaborative approach. It served to reinforce the importance of sustained investment in, and commitment to, relationships. As one contributor commented “people were worried about keeping the show on the road while we were coming in trying to get them to change.”

Other key challenges for the WWS initiative have been:

- Establishing meaningful collaboration;
- Building shared understanding and expectations of research impact; and
- Communicating impact.

Establishing meaningful collaboration

Collaborations are important to help foster more relevant policy related research, build connections between and across sectors and improve the impact of research. However, these require a lot of effort to both establish and maintain. The following reflections from the WWS experience provide some thoughts that may be of interest to those wishing to establish collaborations in the future.



Allow time for collaboration to become established. Establishing meaningful collaboration takes time and this should be factored in to the funding model. A reflection from WWS is to include a year ‘zero’ before an official

launch to provide the time required to establish research teams, build cross-sector relationships and stable professional networks.

Put in place mechanisms and resources to support building a collaboration.

Collaborations occur through investment of time, energy and processes to support their development. Clear plans and tools to develop relational practice need to be in place at the outset. There also has to be space to allow for critical reflection on progress of the collaboration, as well as the research.

All those in the collaboration need to see themselves as equal partners in the process.

All partners need to sustain equal commitment. This requires clear support from senior levels in all organisations to help with handling administrative barriers and competing priorities that may exist within and across institutions. This can be a challenge with widespread time pressures and rapidly changing policy agendas. The role of knowledge exchange and secondment staff can help support engagement but cannot wholly mitigate where commitment is equivocal.

Ensure there is a clear policy sponsor for the initiative and/or clear engagement strategy.

This may be less of an issue where research is conducted within a clear policy or practice area, such as policing or education. However, where the remit is broad, as with public service reform, and where the approach and knowledge exchange is based heavily on relations, this presents a real challenge.

Supporting and sustaining a consistent approach to collaboration. Collaborations, by their very nature, are heavily influenced by the people involved. Building relationships takes time, and effort to sustain. A collaboration is helped if there is a continuity of key personnel, but this is not always realistic to expect. In unstable contexts, maintaining collaborations places additional burdens such as recording the evolution of a research programme, as well as developing the tools and providing the support to enable newcomers to catch up. This type of work needs to be acknowledged and sufficiently resourced.

Consider alternative procurement routes and funding models, and with acceptance of a greater degree of risk. The power dynamics in a traditional commissioner and commissioned model are not helpful for developing a meaningful collaboration. A different way to fund such research collaborations is worth considering.

Managing risk and uncertainty. There are inherent risks involved where a venture like WWS is exploratory and experimental/developmental. It is beneficial to recognise this from the beginning and to agree the need for all partners to work with uncertainty and ambiguity.



Building shared understanding and expectations of research impact

One of the key strengths of WWS was its broad and varied approach. This, however, meant that whilst there was a shared understanding about its broad remit, there was not a shared expectation around what the centre was expected to achieve. The learning from WWS suggests this can be improved through a range of means.

Clearly defining the topic area outcome expectations at the start of a project is not always possible. This is especially the case where a flexible approach and grassroots development is required. A strong policy sponsor who understands the fluid nature and inherent risks involved regarding potential impact can help where this occurs. Transparency, good communications and a strong collaborative set up can support a process that allows for a shared understanding to emerge over time.

Including more 'players in the system' at the start to ensure that there is a wider understanding by all involved of the aims and objectives and what the initiative is trying to achieve and how also helps. Whilst this can increase complexity, the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. This should include having partners more closely involved in development of proposals and on funding allocation panels.

It is worth thinking carefully about how a research initiative is communicated, and the related use of 'branding'. The WWS name was clear and secured significant and widespread profile and recognition. But it also led to unanticipated expectations that it could deliver a simple answer to 'what works?' in the form of a 'blueprint for action' or 'recipe for success'.

Communicating impact



A key component of any research is the ability to be able to communicate what it is about, the implications of findings and demonstration of impact. This can sometimes be a secondary consideration to the design and undertaking of the research itself, however, it is important to monitor impact and progress towards achieving impact, even if it is unclear what the impact may look like initially. It is also acknowledged that some impacts take a long time to become evident and hence there also needs to be clear recognition, particularly from policy makers and funders, of the time taken for some impacts to be realised and to accept intervening indicators of potential influence.

There is considerable value in including staff with a specific knowledge exchange role and the potential for two-way secondments between academia and the policy/practitioner environments. Communication specialists, knowledge exchange experts and two-way secondments can be a valuable addition within any collaborative research centre, especially where the research topic is deliberately broad and evolving. They are also essential where the range of audiences for the research are broad with differing interests and requirements. It is unrealistic to expect academics alone to have the breadth of capacity and capability to meet these diverse requirements and expectations. Such specialist roles can help develop a clear communication strategy early on.

Ensure key expertise and experience, such as a project manager and communications staff, are included in proposals and in place before launching. Successfully running an initiative with multiple collaborative partnerships, across institutions and with a substantial focus on relationships, both within the team and with other partners, requires a large range of skills and substantial administrative input. The central role of the administrative project manager and communications staff in WWS were emphasised clearly in the reflections process.