

**Collaborative
Event Report**
October 2015

**Collaborative Action Retreat Report:
summary of Retreat held in June 2015**

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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

A further nine areas are working with us to enhance learning, comparison and sharing. We will also link with international partners to effectively compare how public services are delivered here in Scotland and elsewhere. During the programme, we will scale up and share more widely with all local authority areas across Scotland.

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
- Healthcare Improvement Scotland
- Improvement Service
- Inspiring Scotland
- IRISS (Institution for Research and Innovation in Social Services)
- Joint Improvement Team
- NHS Health Scotland
- NHS Education for Scotland
- 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 WWS **Collaborative Action Research** work stream.

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1. Background

At the heart of the What Works Scotland initiative is a programme of Collaborative Action Research (CAR) that is being taken forward with representatives from four case study Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs): Aberdeenshire, Fife, Glasgow and West Dunbartonshire.

The aim of this work is to: build capacity and capability in the use of evidence to support local improvement projects; and capture evidence from practice as to what works in achieving public service reform. It started in January 2015 and will continue to December 2016.

The WWS team are working with the four case study partners, supporting them to develop small action research projects on issues identified by them as important in improving public services locally. A key element of the WWS approach to support their action research is the organisation of a series of collaborative retreats.

Collaborative retreats are intensive, residential events for representatives from the case study partners and WWS. The aims of these events are to:

- Support case study partners to plan and implement successful action research projects in their local areas.
- Foster effective learning and sharing within and between case study partners and the wider WWS team.
- Enable WWS to capture learnings and evidence emerging from across case study partners to inform the development of findings and recommendations about *what works* in public service reform.

2. Format of the retreat

The retreats provide an important opportunity to support case study partners to take forward their action research projects, and for WWS to capture learning about the nature of the public service reform issues with which case study partners are wrestling. To facilitate this, written notes were taken of the discussions along with audio recordings, with the written consent of attendees.

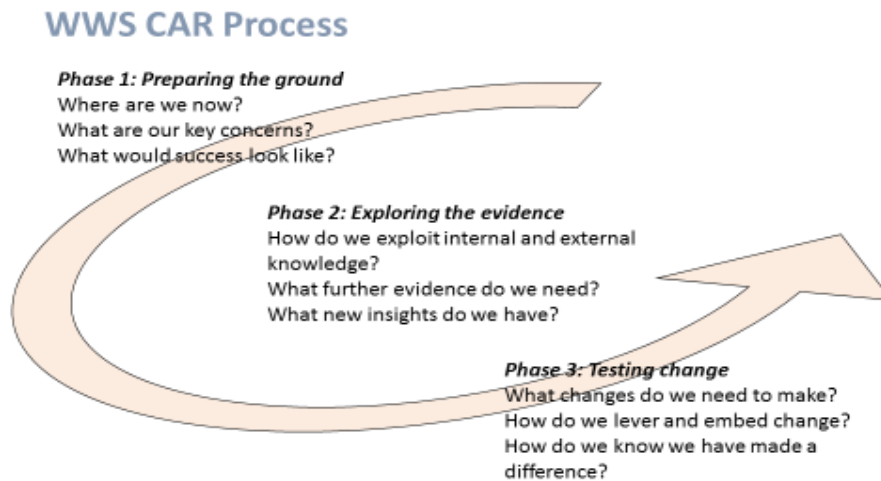
The first retreat was attended by up to five representatives from each of the case study partners, and the WWS team including PhD students and post-doctoral fellows.

Prior to the retreat, each case study partner worked with their local WWS team to prepare **context reports** on the three improvement projects which will form the focus of their collaborative action research. These reports prompted reflection on the background to the development of the projects, an assessment of their current status and the immediate challenges they were facing, and identified the information and evidence that informed them - and where there were important evidence gaps.

In the first session on day one of the retreat, each of the case study partners presented key information and learning on which they had drawn to prepare the context reports. The retreat programme also included facilitated small-group discussions on themes in community planning and public service reform, and presentations from the WWS team on doing action research, research tools and methods and further refining improvement project aims and associated research questions.

The diagram in figure 1 summarises the WWS collaborative action research process and the three phases that comprise each research cycle.

Figure 1 WWS Collaborative Action Research Process



Each case study partner worked intensively with their local WWS team on the second day to specify the aims of their improvement projects, refine their research questions, start to identify what success would look like and the likely membership of the local teams to take forward the action research.

The retreat concluded with each partner presenting on the outline approach they intended to take forward.

This short report provides a summary of discussions at the first retreat:

- First, three cross-cutting or thematic issues that contribute to successful reform:
 - partnership;
 - community engagement; and
 - budgets.
- Second, learning specific to each case study partner.
- Third, issues in relation to research capacity when conducting collaborative action research.

The report concludes with a summary of the findings of the retreat evaluation and a reflection on key learning for future work.

3. Thematic discussions

On day one of the retreat participants discussed a range of shared thematic interests. The larger group split into discussion tables to share knowledge and experiences across case study partners, concentrating on partnership working, budgets, and community engagement.

Partnership working:

Participants from across the four case studies reflected on issues such as working with third sector organisations and other public sector organisations in their delivery of CPP initiatives. Many of the participants with front-line facing or delivery tasks mentioned the ways in which they worked with

and built relations with key individuals (for example, housing department, fire service, third sector organisations, and schools). There was much discussion about internal partnership working, that is, the ways that individuals within the council worked with each other, cross-departmental working, and importantly the link between the strategic CPP processes and the local CPP activities.

The group highlighted the opportunities that are provided through partnership working such as sharing knowledge and workload, as well as providing common vision and more holistic services. The group discussed the challenges to effective partnership working ranging from issues such as competing aims and objectives, to practical problems arising from budget and investment constraints. The group also highlighted how important it is to discuss, challenge and analyse the way that a partnership is working in order to improve it.

Budgets:

Perhaps unsurprisingly, budgets and resourcing arose as a key discussion topic. The group felt there is room within the CPP context to align long term investments with the annual budget and use pilots to develop ideas into good practice. They also spoke about how mapping the funding of a project or service can create a positive working dialogue between different actors. However, the discussion covered detailed reflections on the accounting and management of budgets, for example, reflecting on the tendency for managers and accountants to favour annual budgets and the impact this has on front-line service development and delivery. There was also much discussion about how to align budgeting practices with preventative spending, whether transitional funding is a possibility, and how this might work in the context of shared budgets and multi-agency working.

Community Engagement:

Throughout the retreat many participants spoke about their recent or on-going efforts to increase community engagement. For example, in Glasgow community engagement is fundamental to their area-based 'Thriving Places' initiative and in Aberdeenshire community-wide consultation is a key aspect of their health and social care integration work. The group reflected whether they were actually better at community engagement than they give themselves credit for? Key themes from the discussion focused on building trust, sharing power, sustaining these relationships, and managing expectations. The group also highlighted negative issues such as consultation fatigue, and the responsibility of community engagement within the CPP framework. The conversation also focussed on how to measure the effectiveness of community engagement, how to increase take-up and involvement from the community in formal processes, and how to improve on the established processes. A representative from Glasgow gave an example of how they improved community engagement and how they continue to reflect and work on this at the neighbourhood level. Specific issues raised included how to teach new skills to existing employees and those who have not traditionally been involved in community engagement.

There is a clear connection between this theme and the Community Engagement & Capacity Building (CE) workstream in the WWS programme. In particular, ongoing work reviewing and revamping the National Standards for Community Engagement, and the one-day conference in October on 'People who make a difference in communities' (which features research from four countries). A commitment was made to clearly link this work to some of the case study areas, so that retreat participants and other partners can be engaged in ongoing developments as part of the CE workstream. This will also be more clearly articulated in the 2016 work plan.

4. Research questions and collaborative inquiry

On day two of the retreat the case study partners worked on developing their CAR inquiries.

Aberdeenshire

The Aberdeenshire Team(s) have further developed two local research strands. Firstly, in seeking to support developments in health and social care integration in the Shire, they are looking to learn from an existing community links worker project(s) about 'the how' of building local community capacity (Cycle 1) before later developing practice in a new area(s). Secondly, in focusing on improving the workings of the CPP, they will initially map (Cycle 1) the sharing of different evidence between 'the local', e.g. local community planning partner groups, and 'the centre', e.g. the Board. Both projects will also enable the Shire and WWS, as part of CAR and its wider research, to think more generally and critically about public service reform, e.g. 'the Christie agenda'.

Fife

Fife discussed their context and their central aim for the WWS work. They highlighted the importance of processes and improving the link between the strategic and the local. This broad aim guided the development of research questions that focus on the processes and ways in which projects are established, the role of different actors, and questioning how information and knowledge is shared within the different layers of the CPP process. These questions and aim will shape the inquiries into the family hub approach, welfare hub in Kirkcaldy, and the schools initiative.

Glasgow

Glasgow explored how they could use collaborative action research to help to evidence Community Budgeting, in-work poverty and their Thriving Places work. As Community Budgeting was at an early stage, it seemed timely to create an internal team to devise a suitable evaluation framework with WWS support. CAR might become a helpful method to support evidence gathering on in-work poverty, for example, to understand the City Council's own practices in terms of staff development. The team were interested in finding ways to understand the types of tensions and synergies experienced by professionals in area-based collaborative partnerships such as Thriving Places, and how this might link to social justice outcomes. However, Thriving Places revealed multiple pressures of complexity, scale, reporting and resources experienced by officers, suggesting that creating an 'artificial space' for collaborative action research in Thriving Places would be a more complex process.

West Dunbartonshire

West Dunbartonshire has prioritised three topic areas for action research: Neighbourhood Joint Working, Community-led action planning and Community Profiling. The first, Neighbourhood Joint Working, focusses on how to achieve genuine collaboration and empower officers at the front line to act. This topic considers how joined-up working can lead to new practices and how barriers can be overcome. Areas that might be addressed include the scope for reallocation of resources and approaches to sharing sensitive information between partners. The second, Community-led action planning, entails balancing competing priorities and interests as well as supporting communities to do more for themselves through asset based approaches. Key areas for research include how to engage people in this approach and how to assess the capacity within communities to run projects for themselves and provide the type of support they might need. The third topic, Community Profiling, is closely associated with the other two action research projects. Community profiles, will be developed with support from WWS, Glasgow Centre for Population Health and the Information Services Division (ISD). The data from community profiles could provide the basis for discussion and development of community-led action plans and inform improvements in joint working.

5. Research capacity

One of the issues emerging at the retreat was how participants could and should develop and sustain the capacity to conduct collaborative action research (CAR) with WWS support, including drawing together teams from within their CPPs to do this (known as Partnership Innovation Teams).

Participants spoke about the importance of collaborative action research needing to fit in with the flow of participants' work, not feeling like an added burden. It was highlighted across the four CPPs, large and small, that participants were very busy in their existing roles, some working in a particularly impactful context of austerity, restructuring and job insecurity. Working in a more strongly evidence-informed way within a CAR model needed to dovetail with this.

There are varying degrees of complex structures, hierarchy and authority in which participants are working. This might raise complications for some participants in trying to participate in CAR. Many participants would have to negotiate permission to take part. Participants also thought about capacity issues in terms of developing Partnership Innovation Teams, being conscious of others in their CPP becoming involved and potentially having comparable accountability and work pressures to themselves. For some participants, professional roles, lines of accountability, relations between partners across professions and common understandings were less certain than for others. This could make developing Partnership Innovation Teams to lead CAR projects feel a more challenging prospect.

There were capacity uncertainties in terms of participants developing an understanding of how CAR might specifically work in their context, what the time commitment might be, which people would need to be involved, the costs and benefits of doing some of their work in this different way, thinking about what the focus of their research questions might be, and gaining a clear enough sense of the support that WWS might provide as they go through the process. Participants worked towards understanding and addressing these issues at the retreat, and all at different paces, reflecting their contexts.

One case study partner had drawn together a Partnership Innovation Team relatively easily, with a focus on one specific CAR project, and including some officers with existing research skills. This suggests that the capacity issues set out above are not necessarily present in all contexts.

6. Learning from this Retreat and looking to the next one

Analysis of the retreat evaluation forms in tandem with discussions amongst the WWS team have provided a rich picture of the retreat experience and of how together we can learn from and develop the process for the future Collaborative Retreats and the other planned local events.

The Evaluation Forms indicated high numbers of the participants (from 75% to 85%) scoring the Retreat positively (4 or 5 out of 5) for the broad themes of:

- learning a lot across the Retreat as a whole
- feeling better prepared to undertake an inquiry, and
- enjoying the process and valuing the balance of activities.

Key areas that people commented on as valuable included:

- research planning;
- the opportunity to talk with those from other areas and CPPs; and
- feeling more confident about the nature of their local inquiry.

The local teams were also shifting focus to their 'next steps' and comments here illustrated significant challenges ahead, which the WWS team is committed to working with them on, including:

- the need for wider local discussions and establishing a local team(s);

- winning support from key managers and stakeholders; and
- the need to generate capacity and resources within existing work plans and timescales.

Areas for valuable future learning were also flagged-up, including:

- community engagement;
- data collection methods and CAR methodology;
- access to support from national partners on data analysis; and
- learning more about WWS' work and its own research agenda.

Encouragingly people were positive about the accessibility and inclusiveness of the event. Yet, there was also further learning here too, for instance, the need for the right size of text for all presentations and for greater variety of activity and pace; the intensity of the Retreat was valued in generating progress but was also challenging.

WWS' own discussions have highlighted the energy and commitment at the event; the value of the time to reflect at and before – via the context report – the Retreat; and the critical engagement from both local and WWS researchers alike. In moving forward we are committed to work collaboratively with our case study partners to co-produce future retreats as well as the programme of support ongoing within the case study areas in order to:

- balance learning skills and knowledge with progressing the local inquiries;
- explore options, alternatives and learning styles
- improve accessibility, inclusiveness (equality) and flexibility.

7. Conclusions

Reflecting on this first collaborative retreat highlights some important lessons for the future work of WWS as well as the public service reform agenda as a whole.

- Case study partners are working across diverse areas of public service and in diverse geographical contexts. However, it was clear from discussions that they were experiencing many common issues.
- Issues of process feature prominently. This reinforces the focus of the 'Scottish approach' - which seeks to increase the pace and scale of public service reform through shared learning and a partnership approach to understanding how things work; and the importance of WWS adopting a research strategy sensitive to this.
- An emerging emphasis on the role of place-based approaches to improving outcomes for communities.
- Context matters. It is clear from the contextual reports and the discussions at the retreat that although many of the issues and proposed solutions are the same, contexts differ. If the processes of action research are to flourish, it is vital that support is provided in a way that is flexible and responsive to local pressures and opportunities.

It is important to highlight that the analyses and discussion in this report are preliminary. They serve as a spring board for the future work of the WWS team and the case study partners.

Between now and December 2016, the WWS team will continue to work with the four case study partners to take forward their local projects and to capture learning from across the sites. This work will include further Collaborative Retreats as well as local events.

Further information will continue to be published on the WWS website:

www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk