

**Creating a community of reflective practice - supporting children and mothers in recovery from domestic abuse, Cathy Sharp<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This paper outlines the action research approach to a recent evaluation of the Cedar (Children Experiencing Domestic Abuse Recovery) pilot community groupwork programme for children, young people and their mothers who were in recovery from domestic abuse.

The evaluation provided a systemic and reflective approach to evaluation which is likely to be of interest to others who are concerned with the generation and use of evidence in all areas of public action and policy.

Our perspective was that if research is to be worthwhile, it should contribute to changes in practice as well as report the outcomes of the programme. The design of the evaluation process created and blended multiple sources of evidence of all kinds, including the perspectives of the children and mothers, in a series of different types of reflective and participatory spaces. This approach has meant that emerging evidence arising from the implementation of the pilot has been trialled, interpreted and subjected to the hard test of complex live practice.

The evaluation used a number of innovative approaches to involving programme participants and professionals in the generation and analysis of narrative and story-based evidence, including the use of composite stories which allowed the voices of children and mothers to remain in the foreground.

The interim and final evaluation reports are both available (Sharp, C, et al 2010; Sharp, C et al 2011). The work was done primarily by myself and Jocelyn Jones. Gina Netto and Cathy Humphreys also contributed by acting as our critical friends<sup>2</sup>.

## **Introduction**

This is a rare opportunity. In my work as a consultant and action researcher, there is often not time, space or resources to dwell on the lessons of each project. Imperatives move us swiftly onto the next project. From early beginnings in collaborative and policy-related research, I've moved through various research-related roles in academia, government and the third sector. As a sometime commissioner of research for government, I have sometimes felt that there is too little to show for the public money spent on research; I accept that the relationship between research and practice is complex, but am motivated by a passionately held view that research should be a learning process and that it should contribute to changes in practice. The latter part of my own journey has been supported by my involvement in the *Action Research for Professional Practice* programme at the University of Bath, England and some nine years of consultancy under the banner of my company, *Research for Real* based in Edinburgh, Scotland.

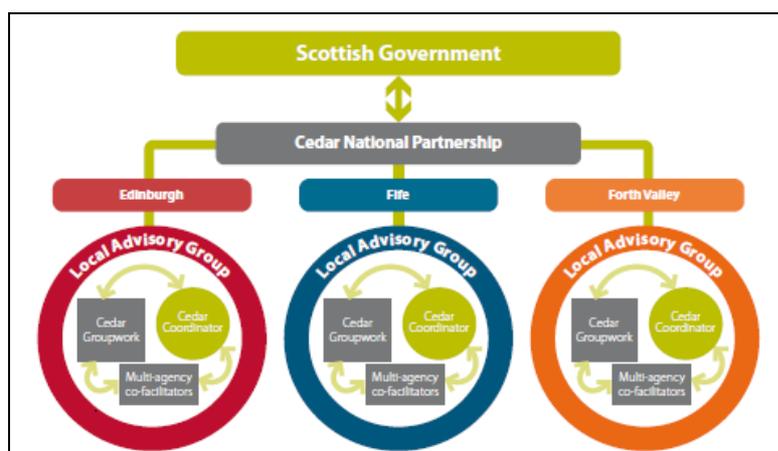
### **A brief overview of the content of the Cedar programme and national pilot programme**

Cedar is a 12 week group work programme for children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse. They are encouraged to recognise and understand the importance of their feelings and given opportunities to deal with them constructively. Concurrent groups for mothers run just prior to the children's group session. The programme is an evidence-based approach with origins in the Community Groupwork Treatment Programme (CGP) developed in Ontario, Canada (Larry Marshall, Nancy Miller, Sandra Miller-Hewitt, Dr Marlies Sudermann, and Lynn Watson, 1995)<sup>3</sup>.

In Scotland, domestic abuse is increasingly regarded as an issue for children. Children and young people themselves view domestic abuse as something that is happening to them as well as their mothers (Stafford, A and Smith, C, 2009). The development and evaluation of the Cedar projects in Scotland was one of thirteen priorities identified in the Scottish Government National Domestic Abuse Delivery Plan for Children & Young People; this plan was itself influenced by the unique perspectives of children and young (Houghton, 2008). This influence continues through the efforts of *Voice Against Violence* (VAV), a group of eight young experts who have first-hand experience of domestic abuse, who continue to work with the Scottish Government and now includes some Cedar graduates (Voice Against Violence).

A Cedar National Partnership was led by the voluntary sector through Scottish Women's Aid and included social work managers from three local authorities. These authorities had Scottish Government funding to pilot the programme between 2008-2011 in the City of Edinburgh, Fife and Forth Valley (covering Stirling, Falkirk and Clackmannanshire council areas). Each of the three areas employed two Cedar Coordinators responsible for managing and co-ordinating the group work programme. Local statutory and voluntary sector agencies donated staff time to co-facilitate groups alongside the coordinators.

**Figure 1 The Cedar Pilot in Scotland 2008-11**



Multi-agency Local Advisory Groups (LAGs) were established in each of the pilot areas. These comprised the Cedar Coordinators, their managers and a small number of other staff from key partner agencies in each locality, usually managers. Many of these partner agencies made referrals and provided staff to co-facilitate Cedar groups. The co-facilitation approach was an important aspect of the programme and Cedar proved to be a powerful and unique way for professionals to learn together in practice about the impact of domestic abuse on children.

The first Cedar groups started in January and we started our work in February 2009. The pilot formally ended in March 2011. The continuation and extension of the programme is subject to various national funding bids and local funding decisions.

The pilot programme structure was important in providing some of the 'architecture' for building-in inquiry processes.

### **An action research approach to evaluation**

The project brief for evaluation asked for action research but the timing meant that Cedar was launched and established without a clear idea amongst those on the ground of how it would be evaluated. This situation was tricky, although not unusual. We needed to address and work with a diverse range of people and confront the cultural barriers to evaluation practice and evidence use of which we were well aware (Sharp, C and Robertson, L , 2008).

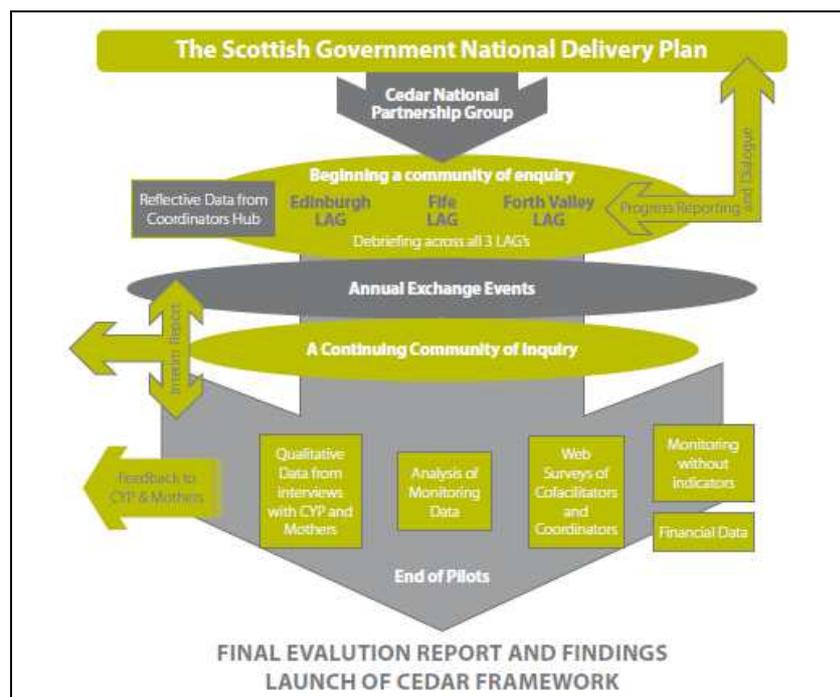
In our approach to the evaluation, we saw children and young people as social actors who have their own understandings and perceptions. We sought to overcome existing power imbalances between adults and children (including their mothers) and to generate ways for them to tell us about their experiences, whilst ensuring they were safe. Our approach also needed to be sensitive to the obstacles to participation in a research process by women who have experienced domestic abuse.

We saw our approach as a '*knowledge-based practice approach*' to evaluation designed to blend the views of children, young people and mothers participating in the programme, with the views and experience of practitioners and formal research or evaluation evidence from elsewhere (Humphreys C, Berridge D, Butler I, Ruddick, R., 2003). This approach was dynamic and emergent, intended to support both self and peer reflective practice, encourage wider dialogue and the sharing of lessons. We wanted the emerging evidence about how Cedar in Scotland was working to be used; not to produce a description of good practice (Sharp, 2005). Through this approach we expected to draw in others over time and as the

programme itself developed. We also were keenly aware that it would be important to generate trust and confidence in the ethics and integrity of the approach and so, the validity of the findings.

Figure 2 shows a simplified representation of the different elements of the evaluation. The main modification to the programme structure was the inclusion of three cross-pilot **Exchange Events**. These events offered opportunities for all the professional parties involved to meet and mix to consider purposes, analyse and validate evidence and reflect on practice in a more formal and structured way.

**Figure 2 Cedar evaluation – an action research approach**



The evaluation team acted as ‘critical friends’ to the pilots, ensuring that the review of evidence was systematic, facilitating and recording discussions, providing challenge and reporting emerging ‘findings’ in ways that facilitated further testing, reflection and sharing of learning to influence practice and report both processes and outcomes.

We used many standard data collection techniques, adapted wherever possible to involve people in the analysis of the emerging data, and a number of more innovative methods. These are shown in the boxes in Figure 2. Narrative approaches were important, but we did not neglect the statistics or the cost-benefit analysis. Important principles of the approach were to provide voice, feedback and support for ongoing positive and creative modifications to the Cedar programme.

For example, we developed a **monitoring and evaluation framework** through an appreciative story-sharing process at the **First Exchange Event** that was described as “a *relatively painless way to discuss monitoring and evaluation*”. Other comments also illustrate that our different approach was positively received:

*“...it was fantastic to be able to have people start talking immediately about how this will affect women and children”.*

*“When I heard there was to be an external evaluation, I thought ‘oh God’....I’m going to get judged....I was filled with trepidation....[but].what immediately came across about the whole action research style was that it’s about helping us to do a really good job, not judging us....[in my role as a coordinator]....I find that very supportive”.*

Over a cycle of meetings, the LAGs used this framework to analyse and discuss available data including programme referral and assessment data. This helped them to explore how the pilots were working, what was working well and what needed to change. The data also included ‘real-time’ accounts from coordinators and others about stories, incidents, examples and experiences that they considered to be significant in some way for the development of the programme.<sup>4</sup>

The **Coordinator’s Hub** was co-facilitated initially by one of the evaluation team and supported individual and peer critical reflection, particularly around practice issues relating to referral and assessment processes and decisions. Insights from this process were also shared at LAGs.

A small number of **short briefing notes** were circulated across the three pilot areas and (latterly) to the Government. These highlighted some of the issues that arose including key lessons, but also uncertainties or contradictions revealed by the process.

The **Cedar National Partnership** also brought the three pilots together and provided an additional forum for further review.

There were two further important sources of feedback data.

**In-depth qualitative interviews** were conducted with children, young people and their mothers in both 2009 and 2010. Initial analysis was supported by reporting selective quotes to each LAG; key messages were then sent to the interviewees and the wider Cedar professional community.

Three separate **web-based surveys** were undertaken with coordinators and co-facilitators. These surveys built a profile of the coordinators and co-facilitators, sought their views on the practical arrangements for groups and their perspectives on the outcomes of groups for participants. Importantly, they also asked about their experience of group work processes and facilitation, their views of their own individual learning and any impact on their wider organisations<sup>5</sup>.

The **second Exchange Event** in November 2009 was attended by over 40 people from across all three pilots, the National Partnership and the Scottish Government. The event centred on a series of small group discussions using World Cafe principles (World Cafe, 2011) which allowed collective sense-making, the formulation of lessons of the pilot to date and implications for the remaining period of the pilot.

The **interim evaluation report** in May 2010 was important in synthesising and reporting on all the emerging evidence.

The **final Exchange Event** in December 2010 was attended by around 60 people from across all three pilots, including (significantly) **Cedar Graduates**, Coordinators, Co-facilitators, members of the National Partnership, the Scottish Government and people from third sector agencies and local authorities from other areas of Scotland. Cedar graduates were supported to participate in the final Exchange Event by the efforts of the pilots. Two young people and a number of mothers made significant contributions to the day as equal and active participants by telling stories, participating in the group discussions and highlighting key issues to report to funders.

The programme statistics and financial data were reported to this event, but the focus was on nine **Cedar 'stories of practice'**. They were composite stories based on themes from across many of the narrative sources. We chose them to synthesise and reflect the broad range of themes that had been raised across the evaluation activities. At the final Exchange Event these stories were **'told' by volunteers** for whom they had some resonance; story tellers included Cedar graduates, Coordinators and Co-facilitators. One story from the set of nine is included in Figure 3 below. The stories were analysed through a dialogical group process which drew out key themes and learning and from which the participants together developed recommendations<sup>6</sup>. All these stories are available as audio files on the Cedar website.

**Figure 3: Story “It’s not my fault, other kids have it”**

*I’m Alana and I’m 15 years old. I finished my group a few months ago and now my younger brother is doing Cedar. My little sister was born much later and our Dad had left when she was born. First to start off it was a bit “Ooh!” because I have never really talked about like the hurting and shouting – the domestic abuse - in our family before because my Gran, my Dad’s Mum, and my Dad say “It’s all over and done with”. My Mum used to say that as well.*

*I liked how we didn’t have to talk about things that had happened to us if we didn’t want to in the group. Having snacks there and drinks on the go just helped to make it a nice atmosphere. And I liked how we all became friends in the end. We all did enjoy it I think? Yeah, ‘cos everyone had been through it, so anything I did say, everyone knew what I meant. They gave us a really good understanding of domestic abuse, and also sneaky ways of getting stuff out of you by making you have fun!*

*Basically, I learned about how domestic abuse can actually change your life. You think “Oh if only I was a little bit older, I could’ve stopped him. I could have stopped them from doing what they did”. And you start to blame yourself. But the group helped you to understand that it’s not your fault, it’s their fault, and they shouldn’t be doing that. Cedar gave us a clear definition of what domestic abuse was. It’s not just like physical abuse, it covers verbal, financial, sexual abuse. Coming to the group has really helped me a lot, in understanding about it. It’s helping my brother too. Yesterday he said to our little sister “hands are not for hitting” when she had a wee temper tantrum. He really liked the volcano but I found the iceberg thing really useful because we had all these emotions under the surface that we were hiding, and we couldn’t really tell people about it. So it helped us just learn everything about it. It makes you feel like you’re not alone; other people actually did go through it. I think it would be quite intimidating just to see someone on your own about it.*

*I was noticing that I was getting really angry over really stupid things. I would be all the way up at number ten - that’s the angriest and everybody else was just like number three or something. I’d be like, “that’s a bit stupid to be angry about”. So that helped me a lot to understand, and to just calm down a lot more. They helped me understand that if I’ve got something to say, say it, but say it in a nice way. I’m getting along with everybody in the house a lot better now - just treating them well, with respect and stuff like that. So it’s a lot easier, instead of being a bit jealous of how they have been brought up compared to me. My little sister is at the age where I was when I was going through all of that, I get a bit like “you are so lucky you don’t need to put up with any of that”, but even though I shouldn’t because she is just having a normal childhood. She was too young to understand what was going on. And me and my younger brother understood.*

*I just feel like everything’s done now, so I don’t need any support in my life, it’s just like a normal teenager’s life now so I can deal with it by myself. I also realise that I had a different childhood to my little sister and loads of other children and young people out there, but it makes me the person I am today. I’m in my last year at school, so I’m glad that I went in that group because I’ve got all my exams coming, so I can knuckle down this year and get on with them. Before in a test I’d be sitting there wondering about something else but now I can just try and get on with my work. So it’s a lot easier. The teachers say I’m doing much better now and my last report was much better so I hope I do well.*

## Reflections on creating a community of inquiry

This experience of the Cedar pilot and evaluation process has been an example of creating a *community of inquiry within a community of practice*, or what might be called a 'community of reflective practice'. Communities of practice (CoPs) have been defined as *professionals* who share a common language of practice, and through which experiences and knowledge are shared to foster new approaches to problem solving and improvement (Bate, S. P and Robert, G., 2002). Taking the CoP concept further, communities of inquiry are noted to flourish where there are opportunities for real face to face working, extended social contact, joint learning sessions and other informal, creative opportunities for exchange and co-creation of knowledge by working together.

Through action research-led inquiry, the Cedar CoP has extended that co-construction of knowledge by including the perspectives and active participation of programme participants. Action research has been used to break down the division between those who produce evidence and those who use it and has supported the co-creation of new knowledge directly useful to practice. This kind of embedded inquiry or 'co-production of knowledge' can be a way to re-invent and customise interventions or programmes that were developed elsewhere and also evaluate their effectiveness in the new context (Sharp, 2005). More broadly, when confronted with complexity, uncertainty and 'wicked' issues, to which no previously tried or known solution seems to apply (Grint, Undated), co-production (Boyle, D., Coote, A., Sherwood, C., & Slay, J , 2010) is a good response which draws on the widest expertise and perspectives and promotes engagement and local ownership of shared, yet tentative, solutions.

As evaluators, we were active 'brokers' of inquiry by *joining in* with the Cedar community of practice, supporting the professionals delivering the programme to make connections across professional, organisational and geographical boundaries. We paid careful attention to retaining the integrity of children's voices at each stage of the project, including making the findings as accessible as possible to the children and their mothers.

Another part of our task was to integrate multiple perspectives from staff and group participants and to find ways to draw on and share their experience and wisdom in order to make these forms of knowing explicit. Much experience is not made explicit – perhaps not even brought to awareness by those who have it. In a certain sense some of the *knowing* doesn't actually happen without the sharing<sup>7</sup>.

Participation in public services is often understood to be about consultation with or the more active involvement of service users or beneficiaries in a programme design, delivery or evaluation. Here, the professionals delivering the programme and the evaluators were also participants; as our desire was to achieve dialogue and participation, then our own voices must also be heard, and whilst not privileged over that of children and mothers, also not minimised. To minimise might seem democratic, but it recreates the '*classic subject-object research relationship*' in which experts study communities (Jacobs, 2010). This does seem to be a key factor that sets this approach aside from most current approaches to evaluation.

### *What helped to change the evaluative culture?*

Cedar was an ideal programme in which to adopt this approach; the programme values were strongly child and mother focused (Loosely, S., Drouillard, D., Ritchie, D., & Abercromby, S, 2006). The programme content and delivery were based on theories of experiential learning, empowerment and dialogue that are the foundations of participatory practice. Furthermore, a strong strategic commitment to extending participation within one of the pilot local authority areas was also influential in mobilising the wider involvement of programme participants.

There was a palpable shift in understanding of and support for this approach to evaluation. The approach had to tackle deeply embedded thinking about what evaluation should be able to deliver or at least, what some may have been afraid others think it should deliver. Here I want to mention the key factors that I believe helped to make that shift, based on feedback from each Exchange Event and from a final review of the evaluation process held in summer 2011.

### *Understanding and measuring impact*

From the earliest days, the evaluation approach had to confront the common desire to be able to **attribute** long-term and far-reaching outcomes directly to Cedar<sup>8</sup>. The programme had the potential to **contribute** to a wide range of cross-cutting outcomes and policy agendas, both nationally and locally, for example, educational, drugs and alcohol, criminal justice, social care and child protection. Yet, the kind of positive outcomes that were expected went beyond the gift of any single agency or service; given the complexity and wider systemic influences on outcomes for children and young people, 'proof' of wider change is an unobtainable and unrealistic goal. Establishment of what would have happened without the intervention is also conceptually, practically and ethically difficult. I think that people generally accepted these arguments at an intellectual level, but remained worried about funder's expectations. In some of the LAGs, there were revisited discussions about the need for some kind of longitudinal sample design.<sup>9</sup>

These were important conversations to have, to establish the ground for the evaluation and develop trust and confidence in what it *could* demonstrate. What seemed to help was to explicitly articulate the **theory of change** of the programme. The earliest story-based work had started this process which culminated in the development of an 'impact map' – a kind of complex wiring diagram that of all the connections and impacts that might be expected. The discussions were probably more useful than the diagram; they helped us to be honest and realistic in the claims we made for the programme and to focus the evaluation on the process improvement and those outcomes for both programme beneficiaries and agencies that were within their influence.

Probably the most useful breakthrough in this respect was a quote from a mother in the 2009 interviews. In describing how Cedar brought about a transformation in her way of thinking and concrete changes in her parenting, she said: *"It's definitely through the eyes of a bairn, Cedar, isn't it?"* This kind of depth of insight, empathy and reframing could provide the best chance that both children and mothers would be able to sustain the learning from groups and were set on the *right pathway* for the longer-term outcomes and wider impacts. This suggested that evidence of the impact of the programme on the mother-child relationship would be particularly important in generating confidence that these outcomes could be sustained.

Whilst the theory of change was valuable, three other aspects of our approach were probably more important in bringing about a different attitude to evaluation. These are feedback as a form of motivation, the participant voice and the related use of stories.

### *Feedback as motivation*

Feedback arising from the more routine ways in which data was shared and analysed collectively was an important motivational factor. This is often missing, yet such feedback is vital:

*“All life thrives on feedback and dies without it. We have to know what is going on around us, how our actions impact others, how the environment is changing, how we're changing. If we don't have access to this kind of information, we can't adapt or grow. Without feedback, we shrivel into routines and develop hard shells that keep newness out. We don't survive for long.”* (Wheatley, Margaret and Kellner-Rogers, Myron, 1999)

This is feedback as a form of dialogue that motivates, builds on itself and draws others in. It was a chance for praise and recognition of the contributions of others.

The statistics were also valued as providing feedback, for example, that publicity efforts were bearing fruit. Discussions of gaps helped air some of the attitudinal and unvoiced barriers to referral. Our continuing involvement was important in *facilitating feedback* by supporting the flows of information and intelligence and *‘keeping the minds of those running the project open to change and keeping the dialogue open’*.

### *Participant voice*

*“Sometimes in action research what is most important is how we can help articulate voices that have been silenced. How do we draw people together in conversation when they were not before?”* (Reason, 2006)

The feedback from children, young people and mothers was especially valuable in reassuring the staff that their efforts were making a difference, helping them to decide what they should keep doing and what might need to be altered. This ‘participant voice’ was a *‘valuable reality check’* for the programme and the evaluation:

*“You are hearing from families what they feel is the difference, rather than from professionals what they have observed. Some of the outcomes might be 'soft' and difficult for professionals to measure but have real impact to the families”.*

The feedback gave them confidence to tailor the revered ‘evidence-based’ programme to suit their context and local needs. This was quite a departure from some earlier discussions that had suggested that something that is ‘evidence-based’ could or should not be altered.<sup>10</sup>

The interim evaluation report does seem to have been an important crystallisation; the written report helped people to see a bigger picture and recognise the different strands of the work coming together. In a way it held up a mirror to the programme to allow them to see themselves afresh, take stock of progress and chart the remaining challenges (Wadsworth, 2001).

### *The value of stories*

The many ways of using narrative and stories throughout the process helped to make it real to people, allowed for acknowledgment and sharing of the emotional content and impact of the work and so generated a *‘sense of ownership of the evaluation’*.

Story-based forms were used in different ways throughout the work. These stories revealed hopes and fears for Cedar from the start and helped to liberate, legitimise and share the

emotional and tacit elements of the work. Narrative accounts and stories illustrated what the narrators liked and didn't like about their experience of Cedar; what mattered to them and what worked well for them; the things that caused anxieties or conflicts and what gave them comfort or reassurance. They revealed much about the deeper issues and meanings that they attached to their experience; the assumptions, values, expectations, ways of seeing and emotions of which they may not always have been aware, may have found to be 'undiscussible' or chosen not to speak about. As a result, they showed "*key 'touch points' or 'experience hot spots' – both good and bad - towards which interventions or new actions would need to be directed*" (Bate, P and Robert, G, 2007).

After hearing and analysing such accounts, it was a natural next step to consider what recommendations for policy and practice should follow on. For newcomers the 'stories of practice' acted as a form of dissemination and a way of really understanding *how* the programme worked, as well as what it had achieved<sup>11</sup>. This kind of understanding of the 'how' cannot be achieved without narrative.

*The offer of action research: to bring a different world into existence*

It is clear that if you create the right structures and processes you can encourage an appetite to engage in all aspects of the 'evaluation' process and build interest and capacity to engage with evidence because it is seen as directly relevant to the work in hand.

Yoland Wadsworth's work shows how important it is to create spaces and opportunities for consumers and professionals to come 'side by side' in safety to give each other feedback (Wadsworth Y. 2010). This doesn't necessarily always mean getting people together in the same room; the Cedar evaluation has used this approach by creating a variety of spaces and ways in which perspectives and experience can be shared.

There is a sense that this approach to evaluation has strengthened the outcomes of the programme. It certainly gives confidence that the programme was robust and can deliver the intended outcomes and provided rich learning about how it works and for whom. We can be confident in the findings as emerging evidence arising from the implementation of the pilot has been trialled, interpreted and subjected to the '*hard test of complex live practice*' (Wadsworth Y. 2010) Here, action research has supported the palpable growth in confidence in the Scottish model of Cedar and greater clarity about the core elements or 'guiding principles' which must be retained, and the local adaptation, which was, and will remain, necessary to make it work in each area.

The experience of evaluation alongside a pilot programme of this nature has illustrated a number of challenges and this is instructive for those interested in wider debates about the use of pilots, evidence-based practice and 'roll-out'. The future of such 'pilot' programmes may be limited, not least because of the changes in the wider funding climate. However, the debates about evidence use and generation suggest it's worth asking "*When are you ever not 'piloting'?*" Questions about how we should act and what difference we're making will always be with us. We will always need to talk to each other about what we ought to be doing if we wish to bring about a different world.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Cathy Sharp is an action research consultant based in Edinburgh, UK. [www.research-for-real.co.uk](http://www.research-for-real.co.uk) With acknowledgement and thanks to Jocelyn Jones, Cathy Humphreys and Gina Netto.

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<sup>3</sup> This was initially introduced and evaluated in the London Borough of Sutton (Debbonaire, 2007) and is now being adopted more widely in the UK and in Australia. (Bunston, 2006)

<sup>4</sup> We called this a '**monitoring without indicators**' process.

<sup>5</sup> This was supplemented in 2010 by telephone follow-up interviews with co-facilitators to provide fuller understanding of their experience of running Cedar groups.

<sup>6</sup> This was adapted from the Storydialogue method for health promotion knowledge development and evaluation, Labonte, R. and Feather, J. (1996) *Handbook on Using Stories in Health Promotion*. Ottawa: Health Canada

<sup>7</sup> This powerful observation was made by one of the social work managers involved in the process.

<sup>8</sup> This desire to find a way to demonstrate the connections between important 'upstream' (preventative) contributions or interventions and downstream (remedial) goals is universal.

<sup>9</sup> Scottish Women's Aid had always resisted this on ethical grounds.

<sup>10</sup> The way in which the term "evidence based programme" is used is an example of the perceptions of research by non-experts: it has been suggested to me that this term can be a badge that '*allows us to feel ok about using this programme – we will not be criticised for wasting public money, it will "work".*'

<sup>11</sup> The stories of practice remain a good way to understand the Cedar programme and can be accessed here: <http://cedarnetwork.org.uk/the-network/voices-from-the-project/>