



Knowledge is Power

equalising power relationships through
community-led action research

Executive Summary

Introduction

In recent times, the benefits of independent community-led action have increasingly been recognised and, across social policy in Scotland, we now speak the language of 'community empowerment'.

But where do ideas start? How do communities equip themselves with the knowledge they need to make sure their efforts make the most valuable differences? And how can they get the information, they need to help public agencies and funders make the best use of their investments?

Would support for community-led action research be one way of empowering communities to determine their own futures? We wanted to find out.

The power of community-led action research

"Community-led action research is not research for the sake of it, to prove a theory or to satisfy the curious. It is about people asking their own questions about the issues they experience, getting the information, and evidence they need, and testing actions for change."

From June 2016 to October 2017, SCDC and the Poverty Alliance worked alongside ten community organisations from across Scotland to identify what a support resource, designed for communities to undertake their own action research processes, would look like.

Together we identified what impacts community-led action research can lead to, what more might be needed to embed action research processes and help them work well, and where challenges might lie. In short, we began to design an action research support project, from the ground up.



Community led action research – the impacts

Through a series of interviews, conversations and workshops, community organisations highlighted how their action research activities have increased impact, developed the capacity of their community, improved community life and driven meaningful change through:

- connecting the abstract, the technical and the bureaucratic with the real, the lived and the meaningful
- building organisations, strengths and skills
- increasing participation and involvement in community life
- increasing community's sense of ownership, belonging and attachment to their culture and heritage

Together they described what was needed to help them build on this work, and help community practitioners develop a peer-led network and evidence base to help inform and address the needs of communities across Scotland.



Community led action research – the importance of guiding principles

Any support system, network or processes must be designed with and by the users. Amongst the guiding principles for a support resource, the community organisations identified:

Self-determined: Communities, and their representative organisations, must set the agenda: the field must be open for communities to choose to investigate the topics, issues and matters which they define as important and worthy of action.

People and communities as assets: Every community has its own set of skilled, knowledgeable individuals who are experts in their own lives, experiences, and communities. These assets are the foundations of community-led action research practice and the bedrock of community empowerment.

Properly resourced: Community organisations can often demonstrate an impressive array of research knowledge, expertise and engagement – as well as a deep appreciation of their communities. However, training and support to design and deliver a robust action research process is essential.

Collaborative: The experience of collaborative and creative learning between and across communities is fundamentally important. This method goes beyond simply sharing learning. It aims to deepen learning and ask different – and often bigger – questions.

Embedded: Action research approaches can be at their most powerful when undertaken within existing community-led work to support deepened learning and inform next steps in taking action on community priorities.

Of the highest quality: Community-led action research can prove the legitimacy and community-led credentials of the organisation carrying out the research activity, and provide satisfaction that any research presented is reliable.

Accepted as valid: Research carried out by community organisations is recognised for its value and its integrity, and accepted as a fundamental and credible source of evidence.



What a support resource should consist of

Participants were unanimous in their view that a resource should not just be for communities - it should be a resource for everyone with a stake in empowering Scotland's communities. It should:

- Have skilled trainers, practical materials, the development of a peer led learning network and a locus for centralising research evidence at its core.
- Be co-ordinated by a new alliance, with support and participation of communities, practitioners, academia and policy makers.
- Include the development of forums and activities to bring communities and decision makers together, to share and deliberate the research findings as a way of informing local action and national priorities.



What now?

Changing demographics and the reductions in funds for public services, coupled with the community empowerment agenda, has led to increased expectations about what communities can offer.

But ambitions for the empowerment of all Scotland's communities will not be realised with hope and words alone. Practical actions and methods which place power and knowledge in the hands and hearts of communities must be created. Community empowerment will not happen by chance – it must be made.

Ours is a watershed moment for communities across Scotland. The new demands placed on communities must be matched by investment and support which helps them realise their potential and their ambitions.

In this spirit, we collectively call for investment in a national programme to support action research led by communities, to help to continue to build and strengthen a more equal, skilled, confident and vibrant community sector in Scotland.

To help this work to continue, participants called for the following actions to be taken forward:

- The establishment of a new cross sector alliance to co-ordinate and manage a community-led action research resource
- The creation of a locus for access to practical resources, and for centralising research evidence
- The development of a cohort of skilled practitioners and trainers in action research, drawn from community organisations across Scotland
- The establishment of a fund for communities to pay for participation costs associated with their inquiries
- The development of a peer-led learning network
- The creation of spaces and opportunities for communities and decision makers to share and deliberate research findings as a way of informing local actions and national priorities



SCDC's and the Poverty Alliance's role was to provide a structure and framework through which community organisations could express their views. The community organisations represented below all have experience in research of various hues: participatory, action, community-led and traditional. Each of them are prominent and respected in their respective communities and demonstrate excellence in practice.

The participating organisations were:

Citadel Youth Centre; Cranhill Development Trust; Fife Gingerbread; FUSE café; Glasgow Women's Library; GalGael; Plantation Productions; West of Scotland Regional Equality Council; Inverclyde Community Development Trust; Active Communities Renfrewshire

