



# Knowledge is Power

equalising power relationships through  
community-led action research

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# 1. Introduction

In Scotland, we speak the language of ‘community empowerment’. In recent times, the benefits of independent community-led action have increasingly been recognised - community organisations and groups coming together to help change things for the better, in their local areas, or for the people they relate to and work to support. New legislation means that communities can take ownership of land and buildings. They can get involved in how the decisions that affect them are made, and how public money is spent.

Over the last few years many communities across Scotland have had the opportunity to be involved in action research programmes designed to support them to conduct their own inquiries into the issues they feel most important, help them garner local support, widen their networks, and experiment with innovative ideas. The results have been remarkable.

Spanning issues such as fuel poverty, isolation and mental health, heritage, the environment and access to good community facilities, community organisations have been able to develop new projects, lever in funds and provide essential local services.

**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? We wanted to find out.**

This paper sets out the findings of a series of conversations held with and between community organisations who have been involved in action research processes as part of the work they do. Here they explain how action research has helped them make the changes they want, and what support for a continuation of this work would mean for them. Through a process of collaborative inquiry, the community organisations identified what the key features of a practical support resource should include.

Finally, they set out their case for why this work is so important, and why investment should be made available to support them, and organisations like them, across the length and breadth of Scotland, to help deliver the best possible outcomes for citizens and communities.



## 2. Exploring the potential for supporting community-led action research in Scotland – with practitioners

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-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.

Between October 2016 and June 2017, SCDC and the Poverty Alliance engaged with people from ten community-led organisations. We reflected together about how practitioners of community-led action research, working or volunteering at a local level, can be supported to develop the skills and confidence they need to play a strong role in supporting the autonomous and authentic voice of communities in determining their own futures.

As we began this work, we felt it was important to get to the nub of what community organisations thought about action research, and how they felt the process would be of benefit to them in the future. We wanted to know what might make action research processes work well, have relevance and be useful. We also wanted to know what would be unhelpful, and where challenges might lie.

In short, we wanted to begin designing a project, process and resource from the ground up.



### 3. Participating organisations

The community organisations who shaped this paper cover a wide geographical spread: Fife Gingerbread, Inverclyde Community Development Trust, Active Communities in Renfrewshire, FUSE Youth Café in Glasgow, and the Citadel Youth Centre in Leith.

They are diverse in nature: Development Trusts such as Cranhill and Inverclyde, which operate in specific localities and places; the thematic and identity focus of Glasgow Women's Library and West of Scotland Regional Equality Council; the media activities of Plantation Productions; the supported employability work of GalGael.

They also all have different levels of experience of community-led action research. Some are very experienced having worked over several projects, others are relatively new to the approach but have found it helpful, even transformational, in their projects and communities. (See appendix 1).

Citadel Youth Centre

Cranhill Development Trust (Cranhill DT)

Fife Gingerbread

FUSE Youth Café

Glasgow Women's Library (GWL)

GalGael

Plantation Productions

West of Scotland Regional Equality Council (WSREC)

Inverclyde Community Development Trust (ICDT)

Active Communities Renfrewshire



## 4. Our inquiry

Our inquiry started with two facilitated discussion days which involved a range of people from policy backgrounds, funders, academia, and the community sector. However, we realised that many community organisations – the very ones we hope to reach through such a resource – those so vital to the empowerment agenda itself – were unable to attend due to time and budget constraints. Therefore, supported by a funding contribution from Scottish Government, we designed a process to shape the programme which focused on the full participation of ten community organisations.

With the help of this funding contribution we carried out our own action research by working alongside community-led projects and covering their costs of participation. These were projects that had worked with SCDC and the Poverty Alliance before. They were keen to take part because they had already been involved in community-led action research processes and they maintain an ongoing interest in research activities. They are also sector leading in their respective fields.

At the end of the interview process, 14 people from the participating organisations came together at a workshop at the Glasgow Youth Theatre to deepen these conversations towards giving the idea of a support resource shape, form and direction.



























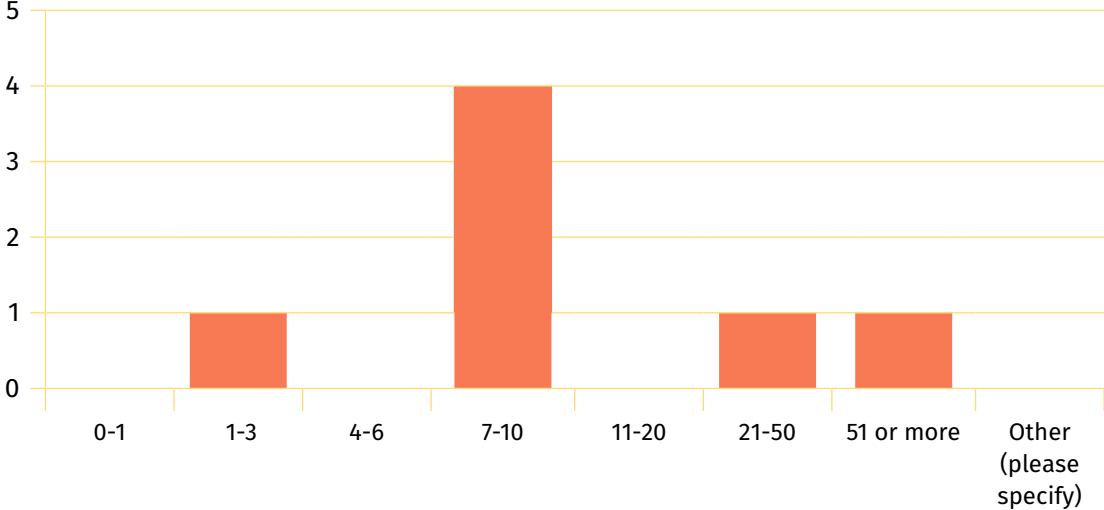




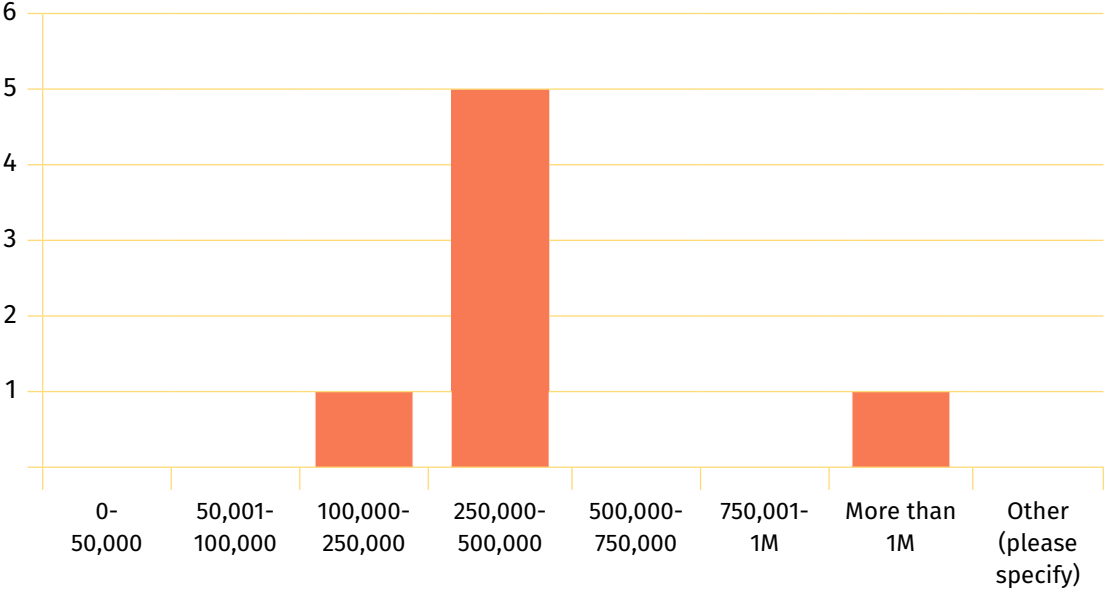
<b>Glasgow Women's Library</b>	Rights and equality, heritage, history, arts, and culture, 3 <sup>rd</sup> party reporting, awareness raising, education	Involved in the SCoTTS programme with SCDC from 2014-2017	Research built into ongoing work (e.g. women's history tours), use and participation in research activities. Involved in SCoTTS ongoing action research programme
<b>GalGael</b>	Employability, community building-furniture making/ community-arts and media	GalGael Involved in Learning Through Doing Action Research programme with SNH and SCDC	GalGael carried out community-led research through the Learning through Doing Programme into the enablers and barriers to people engaging and volunteering in the outdoors programme.
<b>Plantation Productions</b>	Arts and media charity; social inclusion and participation	Recommended by GalGael	Use research methods in creation of content
<b>West of Scotland Regional Equality Council</b>	Social inclusion, community building, equalities, 3 <sup>rd</sup> party reporting, education	Involved in the SCoTTS programme 2016-17	Use of creative methodologies to empower and explore issues; independent research; contribution to evidence gathering
<b>Inverclyde Community Development Trust</b>	Community Development Trust offering training and volunteering opportunities, cultural, social and arts activities, community building activity, social inclusion, befriending	Involved in the SCoTTS programme 2014-17, participated in other projects and workstreams with SCDC	Participated in SCoTTS programme, carried out community-led research into carers' experiences, co-creators of peer reviewed academic research and practice.
<b>Active Communities Renfrewshire</b>	Community organisation focusing on health and wellbeing that delivers physical activity, community sport and health and wellbeing classes and programmes.	Involved in a 4 day community led action research training and mentoring programme delivered in Renfrewshire and funded by HSCP.	Active Communities have used their learning to train local volunteers to undertake neighbourhood research into community needs. As well as other actions such as the installation of traffic lights as a community safety measure.



# Approximately how many 'full time equivalent' staff does your organisation employ?



# What is your organisation's approximate turnover?



## Appendix 2:

### What do we mean when we say ‘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.”*

By Community-led we mean research defined, undertaken, analysed and evidenced by members of the community themselves. It is therefore research OF and BY the community and not, as is traditional, ON and TO the community.

By Action Research we mean a range of research practices that focus on knowledge creation involving local people and/or practitioners trying out, developing and learning from different ways of doing things. It thus explicitly sets out to bring about change.

By community-led action-research we mean the process by which people living in communities (of place and interest) decide what matters, how to gather evidence about it, what action to take together to make things better – and then commit to keep learning by tracking whether this action resulted in the outcomes that were intended.

In this way, community-led action research can build an evidence base towards influencing policy and decision making. It should not be confused with being a particular method. However, it is a process of learning towards achieving better outcomes for people – such as social justice, citizen control, empowerment and positive social change. It is a way to describe effective community development practice.

## Appendix 3:

### How can community-led action research contribute to the principles of community empowerment?

Examples of delivered and prototype-community-led action research projects suggested by projects	Principles of community empowerment and public service reform
<p>Organisations' close links with their communities, and intimate understanding of their situations make them well placed to co-produce responses to both acute and general issues:</p> <p>Citadel Youth Centre recognise the importance of involving current and former service users in designing services. The centre has become a 'one-stop-shop' for many – even after they have left the service. Involving current and former service users will ensure that the priorities for the medium to long term are responsive to community need and interest.</p> <p>Inverclyde Community Development Trust note the value of their befriending service. However, they identify challenges to volunteering generally, and the possibility of new and innovative approaches to service design. This is timely as the integration of Health and Social Care continues. They propose working with current befrienders and service users to co-design new approaches and ways of developing the 'social side' of social care.</p>	<p>Effective services must be designed with and for people and communities – not delivered 'top down' for administrative convenience. Partner agencies need to support these processes.</p> <p>The skills, talents and capabilities and capacities of the public, third, academic, community and private, should be drawn upon to deliver better outcomes.</p>
<p>Increasing participation in planning and decision-making structures is easier said than done. However, community organisations actively support their members to do just that:</p> <p>Active Communities Renfrewshire recognise the importance of community-led action research across a range of areas. Impacts have included improving road safety and more responsive childcare. Citizens have increased in their ability to act and participate in planning activity (e.g. decision-making forums) and have influenced change in their communities. Moreover, individuals within communities have become more confident as a result of undertaking action research.</p>	<p>Public bodies work with and support communities (of place and interest) to understand their needs and aspirations. Because of this shared understanding, communities can participate effectively in decision making structures.</p>
<p>The community and third sector contribute immensely towards preventative spend – through community health and wellbeing; employment and training; social inclusion and connections; empowerment, participation and activism; building confidence and capacity:</p> <p>Fife Gingerbread and Cranhill Community Development Trust describe the need for investment in impact and monitoring activity – to demonstrate immediate impact and the true value of their preventative work. This is often costly work – empowering community organisations to do this work in a robust, quality controlled manner would allow organisations to demonstrate their impact and value even more effectively.</p>	<p>Prevention of social and health issues and inequalities is increasingly important.</p>

<p>It has been recognised in various quarters and for various reasons that ‘what we’ve tried hasn’t worked’, or what we’ve tried is no longer sustainable.</p> <p>Leaving aside the politics and economics of these arguments – the search for new solutions which will unpick structural injustice is current. Traditionally, these ‘big questions’ have been left to ‘experts’ of various types: communities and their representatives have been recipients or field-testers of others’ ‘big ideas’. In the expansive spirit of our empowerment environment, we highlight the possible contribution of our community organisations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• GalGael and Plantation Productions wish to explore the contemporary nature, meaning and value of ‘community’, and the ways in which it might be grown and developed in the context of public service reform.</li> <li>• Citadel Youth Centre and GalGael highlighted a need to understand contemporary community experience of poverty and social exclusion, the changing nature of work and the impact this has across a wide range of policy domains, working with those affected to devise solutions and actions.</li> </ul>	<p>The causes of poverty, exclusion, disadvantage – and their reproduction - must be identified, understood and tackled.</p>
<p>Previous rounds of public service reform and improvement have bequeathed a considerable data-gathering and monitoring infrastructure – coupled with various monitoring, control and bench-marking regimes. However, community-derived knowledge and expertise offers complementary ways of gathering data and planning for outcomes:</p> <p>Glasgow Women’s Library and West of Scotland Regional Equality Council note the challenges associated with reporting and recording hate-crime statistics. These manifest themselves as a lack of understanding around both <i>extent</i> and <i>impact</i> of these issues. They propose additional and community derived mechanisms for reporting prejudice and hate-crime that can work in tandem with, and fill in the gaps missed by, official statistics. Thereby enhancing knowledge and directing resources and action more efficiently.</p>	<p>Data-gathering, performance monitoring and oversight should be improved to support delivery of outcomes.</p> <p>Communities should be involved in the development of local outcomes, and agencies must know and understand the needs of communities.</p>
<p>Community organisations often have an interest in local planning activity – but can struggle to make an impact as a result of inbuilt power imbalances. The Community Empowerment Act should counteract these iniquities, and community-led action research should be an important method of supporting community participation:</p> <p>FUSE Youth Café (in Glasgow’s East End) highlighted the need for community led action into the proliferation of betting shops, anti-social behaviour and problematic licencing in their locality. In this example, the community is being damaged by poor licencing and planning decisions. Gathering evidence could help reverse the trend for low-value and problematic economic and social activity.</p>	<p>The Community Empowerment Scotland Act (2015) requires public bodies to involve communities in planning activities, and has specific guidance around supporting communities to do this. The forthcoming Planning Bill is likely to deepen communities’ rights to participation in planning.</p>

