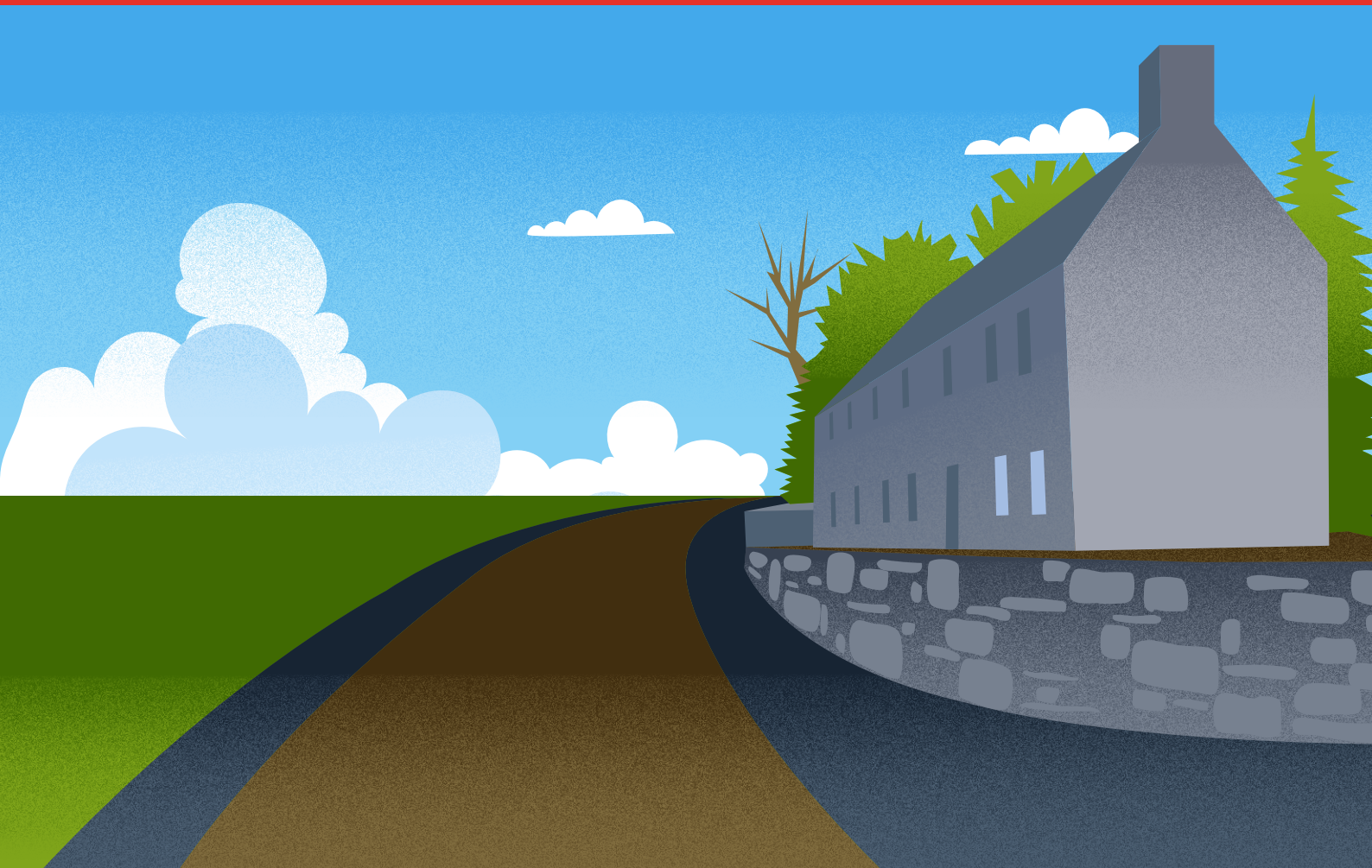


TAKING ACTION ON RURAL POVERTY: LEARNING FROM TAKING A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO THE TEST OF CHANGE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS



Learning about what works and what doesn't in taking a participatory approach to tackling the rural poverty premium is a key aim of the Taking Action on Rural Poverty (TARP) project at The Poverty Alliance. This project includes Test of Change pilots to generate learning from practical interventions that can make a real difference to the lives of people experiencing high costs due to living in rural Scotland. Investing £60,000 of seed funding is an opportunity for a tangible legacy that contributes to the ambition of achieving 'big change that lasts'.

Having now reached a decision around where to invest the seed funding for the two Test of Change pilots, we have spent some time reflecting as a team on key learning from taking a participatory approach by involving people living rurally and on low incomes as well as local organisations and national stakeholders in the decision-making process, considering the following questions:

Can taking a participatory approach to the decision-making process work?

Absolutely, though we learned that it is important to be mindful of how much we are asking of people with lived experience, build in sufficient time for meaningful participation and balance being flexible and adaptable while remaining clear about the purpose and scope

of their involvement. To ease engagement for both people with lived experience and partner organisations and stakeholders we learned that it is helpful to pay attention to how we frame complex issues such as 'systems change' – a more narrowed focus on the physical things that we are trying to change in peoples' lives through the Test of Change pilots may have been a more tangible approach. We also learned strategies to successfully engage private sector organisations and draw on their expertise to develop pilots that address the complex systems combining to create the rural poverty premium.

Is it helpful to involve people with lived experience? Where and what is the value in this?

This approach proved to be a valuable activity for both people with lived experience and the project. Members of the TARP Citizens' Panels made up of people with lived experience of living rurally and on a low-income shared that participating in the process was an empowering experience that helped them to feel less alone with their problems. TARP project staff reflected that having lived experience involvement led to practical, insightful and challenging questions being raised that challenged our assumptions, helped generate internal debate and shaped the scope of the pilots.

The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network. Together with our members, we influence policy and practice, support communities to challenge poverty, provide evidence through research and build public support for the solutions to tackle poverty. Our members include grassroots community groups, academics, large national NGOs, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups. The Poverty Alliance is recognised as a charity by the Inland Revenue. Reference No: SCO19926.

www.povertyalliance.org

Disclaimer: The views in this report are those of the project team and those participating in the decision-making process. Opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Poverty Alliance or our members.

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TEST OF CHANGE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Test of Change Pilots

Objectives of the TARP project include helping to build on the strengths of stakeholders in rural communities to create new responses to rural poverty in Scotland by learning about ways to lower the rural poverty premium. This includes identifying, investing in and evaluating one Test of Change pilot in each of the local authority areas the project is working in – Aberdeenshire and Argyll and Bute. The pilots will test practical solutions to address the rural poverty premium with a combined budget of £60,000 and are being delivered by partner organisations. We will work together with the wider community to share lessons learned from the pilots and advocate for the local or national change required to reduce the rural poverty premium. Criteria for the Test of Change pilots were as follows:

- One fundable opportunity in each local authority area.
- A combined budget of £60,000.
- Delivered and evaluated within project timescales – before September 2026.
- Address the unjust higher cost of living in a rural area i.e., the rural poverty premium.
- Alignment with at least one priority issue identified by members of the TARP Citizens' Panels i.e., fuel poverty, transportation barriers and access to health care, food insecurity, housing and childcare.

The role of the TARP Citizens' Panels

In the first year of the project, Citizens Panels of individuals with direct experience of living rurally and on a low-income were established in Aberdeenshire and Argyll and Bute. Each panel is comprised of 12-13 individuals from a range of locations across each local authority area, including two islanders in Argyll and Bute, who meet monthly online. The objectives of the Citizens' Panels are to increase opportunities for influencing local decision making and support these processes to become more participatory. The role of the panels in relation to the Test of Change pilots, was to provide input through:

- Establishing priority issues in relation to the cost of rural living to determine the scope for potential pilots to focus on.
- Feeding into the development of decision-making criteria.
- Providing feedback on the shortlisted project proposals.
- Continuing to provide oversight and support as we move ahead with implementation.

Collaboration with voluntary organisations, public bodies and the private sector

The Test of Change pilots were also promoted more widely through inviting and discussing opportunities for change with local and national stakeholders. Over 280 stakeholders were consulted via online events and individual discussions. Attendees were invited to share ideas and best practices to inform potential pilots that aligned with the priority issues identified by the panels at the following events:

- Poverty Alliance national online rural poverty event, October 2024.
- Improvement Service Rural Child Poverty Network event, January 2025.
- Local rural organisations at the Aberdeenshire Anti-Poverty Network meeting and the Argyll and Bute Anti-Poverty meet up, December 2024.
- Argyll and Bute Sustainable Food Partnership, Feb 2025.

These conversations helped guide the next stage of the process, which involved making direct contact with 52 local and national stakeholder organisations to invite discussion. This led to the development of 50 potential opportunities for change. These were reviewed in January 2025 and 11 potential projects were shortlisted based on fit with eligibility criteria and feasibility to deliver within the project budget and timescales.

Shortlisted projects were discussed in more depth with stakeholders with relevant expertise, developed into fuller briefs and presented to the Citizens' Panels for feedback. This feedback along with guidance shared by stakeholders was logged before a second, more in-depth analysis of each proposal against previously established decision-making criteria was carried out by the TARP team to conclude that two met the criteria for funding. The projects selected are as follows:

- In Argyll and Bute, we have partnered with ALLenergy to support people living on low incomes to benefit from renewable energy. This will involve developing better information and resources to support people to access energy savings through retrofit and green energy installation and working with clients and stakeholders to ensure social tenants with recently installed heat pumps and/or solar panels are on the most appropriate tariff and able to efficiently use their low-carbon heating systems.
- In Aberdeenshire, we have partnered with Grampian Credit Union (GCU) on a pilot focusing on the extra costs that low-income households experience when using off-grid heating oil supply. Using the funds, GCU will provide interest-free loans for heating-oil refills to low-income households to enable them to spread the cost of off-grid heating oil and benefit from the ability to shop around for the cheapest providers.

KEY LEARNING FROM TAKING A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

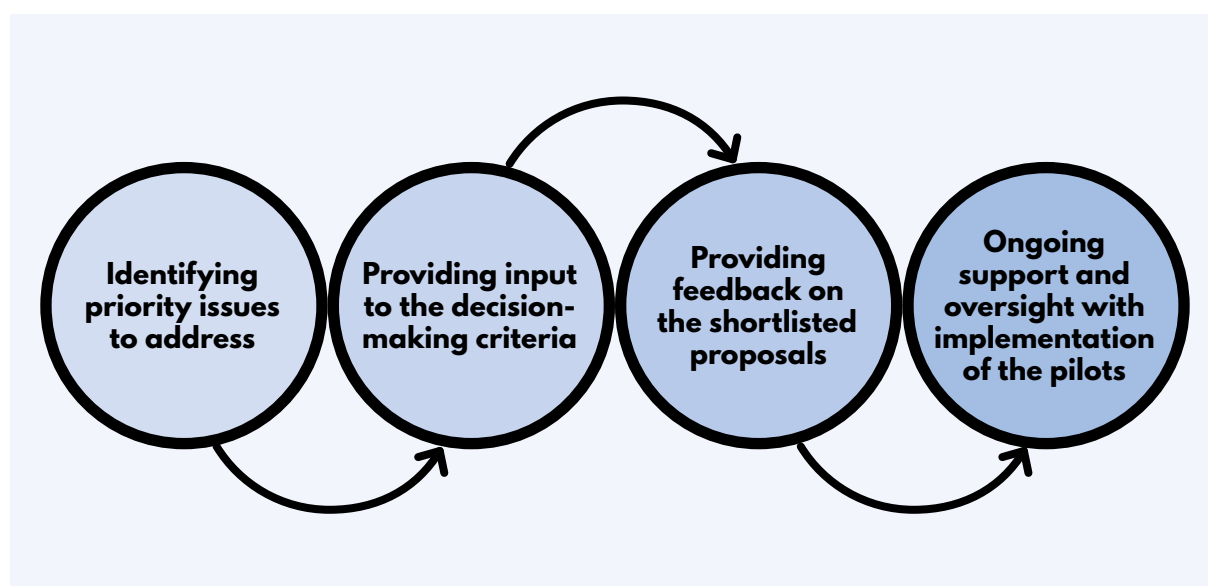
Overall, the decision-making process was a success: The process led to investment in two exciting systems change interventions with confidence that they are strategically aligned, locally relevant and timely in terms of meeting the needs of the communities they will be operating in. This was felt to be the result of the wide-ranging ways in which input to the pilots was sought

as well as sense checked against local knowledge. Securing an effective participation process required a flexible and adaptable approach, being open to trying new things, and applying rigour and integrity at each stage of the process. Taking a values-based approach driven by empowerment, partnership, dignity and respect helped to navigate areas of uncertainty.

1 Involving lived experience was invaluable to the process

Different forms of lived experience participation were involved throughout the process, including identifying priority issues to address; providing input to the decision-making criteria; providing feedback on the shortlisted proposals; and ongoing support and oversight with implementation of the pilots. Shortlisted proposals were presented

to the panels over a couple of panel sessions and then discussed in breakout rooms with feedback shared to the whole group. While there were different levels of success with each form of participation, including the voice of lived experience within this process proved to be a valuable activity for both panel members and the project.



KEY LEARNING FROM TAKING A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

“I think all the projects presented were good... It was interesting to hear about so many options, and it was good for learning about more ways of doing things.”

Aberdeenshire Panel Member

Panels were quickly able to raise and agree on priority issues to be addressed. This was done in the early stages of the project, before strong relationships had had time to develop with and within the Citizens' Panels. With a diverse group of panel members from a range of locations within each local authority area it was difficult to predict if it would be easy to reach a consensus. However, it quickly became apparent that the systems that combine to create the rural poverty premium are overarching and interconnected. Not only was agreement reached within each local authority area, but similar issues were raised as priorities across the two areas. Several panel members fed back at this stage that they felt less alone with their problems on learning that many others across rural Scotland are experiencing similar difficulties.

“It was helpful to learn that others on the panel are having the same experiences as me – it doesn't make you feel so alien in situations you sometimes feel very isolated over.”

Aberdeenshire Panel Member

Developing strong relationships both with and within the panels was key to the success of taking a participatory approach because it made it easier to be transparent and human about the complexity of the process, helping it to feel more inclusive overall.

Further on in the process, when presenting the project proposals and during the early implementation stages, having lived experience involvement has led to practical, insightful and often challenging and unexpected questions being raised that had not been considered during conversations with delivery partners. The team have been able to raise these considerations with partners, and they are helping to shape the project scope. Panel members have reported that they found this to be empowering.

“The whole process has empowered us to ask different questions and seek answers – got me thinking about things I otherwise wouldn't have.”

Aberdeenshire Panel Member

2 There are no simple solutions to addressing the rural poverty premium

The rural poverty premium is a consequence of a complex combination of factors and there are no straightforward solutions to addressing it. We learned that although reasonable to invite people with experience of the rural poverty premium to identify and prioritise issues impacting rural communities, asking the same group to design or propose solutions to these complicated, structural issues was challenging. However, we also learned that it was beneficial to have their engagement throughout, inputting to 'how the decision was made' as opposed to only involving the citizens' panels at the latter stages.

“[These are big complex issues] and I was wondering what our tiny wee group would add.”

Argyll and Bute Panel Member

To support panel members to identify solutions we brought in external speakers from local organisations working to address these issues to provide a sense of what potential pilots could look like. Having these specific examples was beneficial and an unintended outcome was that it helped increase awareness of local anti-poverty work and services.



“All processes worked well, but it was difficult to think about partnerships and institutions as I wasn’t aware of them... Wasn’t always able to contribute something new but it was a really good way of learning about new ways of doing things.”

Aberdeenshire Panel Member

“I found it very informative [hearing from] different people out there doing community projects – I learned about things I could access that I was not previously aware of.”

Aberdeenshire Panel Member

Through promotion of the Test of Change pilots with local and national stakeholders we learned that this process was also a challenge for partner organisations. Often the priorities of potential partners and stakeholders focussed on the challenges of rural living more broadly and were not directly linked to cost savings. In addition, it was not uncommon for potential partners to have a focus on firefighting critical issues in their communities, plugging immediate service gaps or seeking support for evaluation to help demonstrate the value of existing services. This generated many ideas for 'projects' but it was harder to engage in more 'blue skies' thinking required to develop proposals for 'interventions' with potential for wider systems change.

KEY LEARNING FROM TAKING A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

3 It can be hard to strike the right balance between involving lived experience and asking too much

Not every form of participation was as straightforward for panel members to engage with, and a crucial lesson learned from the test of change decision-making process was finding the right balance between involving people with lived experience and asking too much of them when engaging them in the process.

During an earlier panel session, members practiced applying the decision-making criteria to a sample of existing projects to test the criteria and get a sense of what the process would involve. The criteria focused on five key areas including the impact on the cost of living rurally, alignment with the panel priorities, partner engagement and alignment with evidence from research and policy, feasibility within project budget and timescales and prospects for scalability. Feedback was that this was a difficult exercise to complete as there were conflicting emotions around making difficult decisions when choosing pilots. For example, community-based, local projects were often deemed most effective but harder to scale up because being embedded in the community was key to their success. Equally, projects may have scored lower purely due to limitations imposed by funding constraints. It was also shared that some criteria could feel ambiguous – a project that comes into a community may be more accessible than centralised services for example, but only for those who are available at the right times or have means of reaching it. There was therefore merit in having a flexible approach to panel members' involvement at

different stages of the process.

Based on feedback, it was decided to ask for more general feedback and questions about the pilots instead of asking panel members to apply the decision-making criteria to the shortlisted proposals. Responding to the needs of the panels and the process as they emerged required flexibility in terms of exactly what role panel members would play in the process, and this may have made it harder to be clear about the impact of their involvement.



“I didn’t really know what I was expecting, I was just interested... it’s part of the creative process – it’s always going to be messy...it’s about change and finding new ways and it is hard. People get hidebound, working with systems and having to do things the same way... It was good to be a part of it.”

Argyll and Bute Panel Member

It can be hard to meet the different needs and preferences of a diverse group of people: while some panel members had found these decisions hard to make, others felt strongly about some of the proposals being put forward. These responses from panel members were surprising at times, which helped to challenge our own assumptions about what constituted a good Test of Change pilot and was particularly useful for sense-checking and generating internal debate

amongst the TARP project team. For example, one proposal to evaluate new work being conducted by an existing organisation was perceived to be funding ‘business as usual’ as opposed to something new and innovative.

We also reflected on the challenge of balancing participation with the needs of the project and a key learning from the TARP team was that adequate time needs to be built into any similar project to ensure that

participation can be done well and can be adapted to suit the needs of those that are participating. There was understanding from panel members with regards to the challenges and complexity of this process.

“I have worked with organisations in other places, like the ones you do. I understand it’s lots of steps, you can’t control them all.”

Argyll and Bute Panel Member

4 Expertise is required to effectively address the interconnection of a wide range of issues



The complexity of the wide range of interconnected structural issues that combine to produce the rural poverty premium, and the technicality of the proposed pilot interventions meant that there was a need to link in experts throughout the process to design and advise on feasible projects. In some instances, this increased reliance on external expertise to feel confident about the decisions being made and made it harder for panel members to input.

“The [Zero-Interest Loans] pilot selection looks OK though we have some concerns...It’s wishful thinking but I would have loved to find a way off the beaten track/ thinking outside of the box to find a solution that is more than asking for money – an alternative solution would have been fantastic, but it might not exist... It’s hard to find a solution that ticks all boxes.”

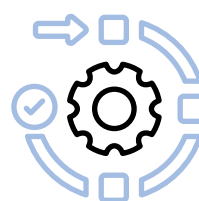
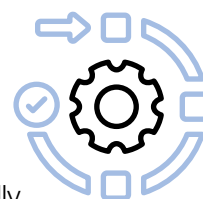
Aberdeenshire Panel Member

In many cases, acquiring this expertise required engagement from private sector organisations and the role of industry expertise was hugely beneficial to developing the Test of Change proposals and selected pilots. While one organisation cannot have expertise in every area, we learned that it is helpful to engage with industry experts as early as possible yet, due to a level of unfamiliarity when working with private sector organisations, relative to the third and public sectors, this was also an element of the process that we found harder to do. Developing a clear ask prior to engaging and finding the right contact within the organisation, which can take time, were identified as helpful steps where this was successful, as was being okay with not getting the answer you had hoped for and recognising that this doesn’t mean there’s not still scope for future collaboration.

5 The importance of defining the ‘system’ you want to impact

The wide range of stakeholders consulted through the decision-making process encouraged reflection within the TARP team on what we mean when we talk about ‘systems change’. A key lesson here relates to defining the system you are trying to impact, and it has been helpful to consider how much the language of ‘systems change’ may have helped or hindered the decision-making process. While the language of ‘systems change’ was not used directly with panel members, it was used within the TARP project team and in meetings with partners and stakeholders. A more narrowed focus on the

constituent parts of the system that we might realistically be able to impact within the scope of the pilots and the physical things that we are trying to change in peoples’ lives may have been a more helpful way of framing this: being clearer ourselves about what we mean by systems change may have helped us to better communicate what impact we are looking for from the pilots and made this an easier process for both panel members and wider stakeholders and partner organisations to engage with.



FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS



The Test of Change decision-making process generated a lot of learning across several important areas that can continue to be built on across the team and has identified possible new areas for advocacy, campaigning and development.

We are mindful not to lose sight of this and are considering how we can build on this during the final year of the project and beyond. For example, in Aberdeenshire we have continued discussions with a partner organisation in relation to a pilot proposal that was not selected for seed funding as part of the TARP project, and they are currently seeking funding from elsewhere to implement this independently of The Poverty Alliance. The same organisation is planning to take forward work from a separate proposal aiming to combine banking hubs with social supports such as access to advice, food and other anti-poverty services to help combat transportation barriers that restrict access to services in many rural areas.



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