

Rights in Action

Action Learning with Community Activists: Evaluation Report

April 2026



BACKGROUND

Rights in Action is a project working across Scotland to support communities to use human rights as a tool for change. Rights in Action is funded by the Scottish Government's Equality and Human Rights Fund, managed and supported by Inspiring Scotland.

The project has three areas of work:

1. Using action learning sets to bring together community organisations and community members to identify actions to support rights realisation and combat poverty.
2. Raising awareness of how human rights can be used as a tool in the fight against poverty through workshops and learning events.
3. Participatory research projects working with community researchers to generate learning on relationship between human rights and inequality.

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.

Disclaimer: The views in this report are those of the researchers and the action learning participants and opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Poverty Alliance or our members.

Acknowledgements: The Rights in Action team would like to thank the community activists who took part in the Rights in Action action learning sets.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report illustrates the process, outcomes, and participants' experiences of the fourth action learning set facilitated by the Poverty Alliance as part of the Rights in Action project.

Poverty is not solely an economic condition; it is also a violation of human dignity and a cause and consequence of human rights failures. Activists have long utilised human rights as a tool to combat oppression.

Over the last year, we brought together seven community activists using the action learning methodology to explore and plan action to address poverty using a human rights lens.

We undertook training on human rights and the action learning methodology. We then met online for four hours, monthly, for 6 months. Each month activists explored two real life issues they were facing, using the action learning methodology.

Actions taken as a result of being part of the project have led to activists engaging local government on rights issues, working with the media, expanding the membership and representativeness of their community council, engaging with the Scottish Human Rights Commission to highlight issues in their community, taking action to increase provision of 'free-from' food in local emergency food provision, and developing new processes and trailing the use of digital technology to membership and representativeness of advocacy groups.

Along with these tangible outcomes, participants highlighted that they found taking part in the process beneficial due to the way the structured methodology increased their capacity to explore and address problems, the peer learning which the process facilitated, and confidence they gained as a result of taking part.

All participants reported that they were able to integrate the principles of taking a human rights based approach into their activism.

Overall, the actions taken as a result of this action learning set are wide-ranging, impactful, and testament to the participants, all of whom are long-standing community activists. The evaluation highlights the value of safe and supportive shared learning spaces, and of the methodology itself, in supporting activists to make positive changes in their communities.

METHODOLOGY

Action Learning is a participatory approach that centres meaningful action. It is a methodology that involves a group of peers working on real life problems, identifying and taking actions and learning as individuals and collectively. Throughout Rights in Action, we have supported four action learning sets to use this methodology to identify and take action to drive social change.

The previous three Rights in Action learning sets brought together representatives from organisations working to combat poverty. This phase of the project brought together seven community activists with lived experience of poverty to explore and plan actions to address poverty using a human rights lens.

We undertook human rights training online and came together in Glasgow for a day to build relationships and develop a shared understanding of the Action Learning methodology. We then met online, monthly, for 6 months. Each meeting explored two real-life issues faced by members of the group, over four hours. Members sharing issues left the session with a list of concrete actions they could take. At the next meeting, each group member reported back on the actions they have taken as a result of being part of the group.

Participants filled out evaluation questionnaires at the midpoint and end of the project. This report has been written using the data collected in these questionnaires, and the records of each session, the issues addressed, and the actions that were taken.

OUTCOMES

An underpinning principle of the action learning process is anonymity to ensure people can speak freely and explore difficult problems that they would prefer are not made public. As such, not all issues that were explored throughout the project are presented in this report.

Issues explored by the group were wide-ranging and included:

- Improving representativeness and boosting impact of an independent tenants' group.
- Setting up/ better utilising community spaces.
- Building capacity and maximising impact of an activist group.
- Improving personal capacity to engage in activism.
- Managing the workload associated with their activism.
- Improving emergency food provision for people with dietary requirements, and who need culturally appropriate food.
- Advocating for reasonable adjustments.
- Advocating for tenants' rights in the face of rent hikes.

The community activists involved in the learning set have taken actions that resulted in:

- A larger, more engaged community council with many more members of the local community attending meetings
- The introduction of a 'buddy system' to support new members of an activist group.
- The introduction of a shared contact directory for an activist group to support impact.
- Invitations to speak at local authority subcommittee meetings as a representative of an advocacy group.
- Engaging with local government to challenge rights issues.
- Exploring and trialing the use of digital tools to support engagement of tenants with disabilities in collective advocacy.
- Increased membership and representativeness of an independent tenants' group.
- Representation of advocacy group at a Scottish Government Advisory Group.
- Engaging with Scottish Human Rights Commission.
- Increased provision of 'free-from' food at local emergency food service.
- Media interviews, drawing attention to issues faced by the community.

In the final evaluation questionnaire we asked participants, “What would you identify as the most important thing you have done as a result of taking part in this project?” Answers included:

- Learning to present problems from a human rights perspective.
- Identifying the limits of their own capacity and taking steps to share the workload with others.

“I’m now recruiting new members - advocates in their own right and very self-motivated. This will help to change the group dynamic. And I’ll have my work/life balance back again”.

- Getting the confidence to ‘fight back’

“I found it really beneficial to talk through all the issues and potential solutions and this gave me the confidence to fight back.”

- Learning from others.
- Learning to be more proactive about issues and concerns.
- Identifying strategies to implement methods for managing projects with less resources to support service users.

BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPANTS

We asked participants to identify the benefits of being part of the project in the mid-point and final evaluation questionnaires. These broadly fell into four themes:

1. Increased capacity to explore and address problems as a result of the structured methodology

“Learning a structured, disciplined, and practical approach to solving what initially seem like overwhelming problems...I have found ALS to be life-changing... through questions from colleagues, I've been able to clearly see where I need to focus, where I keep getting diverted, what I've already achieved towards a solution without even realising it, what concrete actions I can take. Very important for me is accountability. So, the fact that I have to report on the actions I've taken keeps me focused”

“It's been amazing meeting the group and engaging in meaning full and structured discussion. Its helped me to see things in an analytical way again with the help of the facilitators and the group members”

“Although challenging to start with it has helped me develop structured argument and action for my self and helped and encouraged my mental heath through challenge and participation!”

2. Peer Learning

“I've learned a lot of valuable knowledge from others through their examples of working in the community and tackling issues”

“I've learned so much from the group, through their own sets as well as from my own, that i can apply in my work.... Learning what other activists are doing in their areas is a boost to the spirit. It's so important for activists to hear the good stories, especially during extremely challenging times.”

“Learning how to look at issues with different perspectives. There is a wealth of experience in the group, and I learn something different every time.”

“I have learned a different approach to the implementation of learning from different voices in a community setting.”

3. Increased confidence

“Giving me more confidence and gaining new ways of communication.”

“More confident to get involved and that it is possible to make a positive change from just an idea”

4. Impacts of action taken as a result of being part of the project.

Supporting Community Involvement in Decision Making

Four out of seven participants told us that they had taken actions to ensure communities were consulted and were involved in decision making in their local areas. Actions included using online tools to gather information about what their community wants, acquiring a community space for people to meet and address systemic issues impacting integration, and strengthening a citizens' group that engages with local decision makers.

Increased Human Rights Knowledge

All participants have been better able to integrate the principles of taking a human rights-based approach into their activism, with six out of the seven participants reporting they know more about human rights as a result in taking part in the project.

“It has been a complete revelation to me, and I have enjoyed finding out about the methods and tools that this approach brings to the solving of problems in a community setting.”

“I'd already been integrating the PANEL Principles in my activism. But taking part in this set showed me more nuanced approaches, offered me more effective ways to communicate.”

“I feel like I've learned more examples of how to implement these key principles in various ways”

Peer Support

Every member told us that the group felt supportive and gave examples of how they had been supported by other participants.

“It was refreshing not to have to face these challenges on my own anymore. Instead, I was supported by a group of incredibly skilled and caring people who helped me see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

“The group always listened attentively and gave practical solutions to the problems presented. I also benefited from their far greater experience in the community.”

“i really enjoy, respect, and trust the people i'm doing this with. We do this in a safe space where i think we all feel at ease to be ourselves, to be vulnerable, to share our dreams, to cheer each other on. I always come away inspired and recharged.”

REFLECTIONS ON PROCESS

This was the first time that the Poverty Alliance has facilitated an action learning set with solely community activists. Previously, the Poverty Alliance has predominantly used action learning sets to support practice change within organisations, or wider systems.

As facilitators, we took time to debrief after each session and spent time after the set had finished reflecting on the process, and on our practice.

When we embarked on the project, we were concerned that participants may find the process frustrating, as they had different spheres of influence than the senior professionals we had previously worked with, and therefore the actions they could take would be constrained. However, throughout the process, the group, and us as facilitators, actively supported people to identify their own spheres of control and influence, mapping out where they could take concrete action, but also supporting participants to identify what was out of their control.

We reflected that it would have increased impact to be able to link this process to targeted learning opportunities and access to greater financial resource to support participants to get ideas off the ground. Being rejected for funding halted one set member's progress with their actions. However, the group was a space for learning and upskilling in itself that was highly valued by participants.

As with previous phases of the project, the time we spent in person together was vital in building the trust that allowed the group to create such a challenging but supportive environment. In a perfect world, we would bring people together in-person for an additional session.

Participants noted that attendance wasn't always consistent. If we were to deliver a project like this again, we would overrecruit to try to mitigate this.

Action learning sets are often emotive. Issues raised by participants were very closely linked to people's day-to-day experiences of their human rights and the rights issues in their communities. This real-life applicability is what made the space so helpful for people, but it is also something that needs to be considered by facilitators. Building relationships and kind and sensitive facilitation is vital to be able to support activists to explore difficult issues they may be facing in their lives and activism.

“The staff were extremely supportive in the details of the facilitation of the group which made taking part a pleasure.”

Overall, the actions taken as a result of this action learning set are wide-ranging, impactful, and testament to the participants, all of whom are long-standing community activists. The evaluation highlights the value of safe and supportive shared learning spaces, and of the methodology itself, in supporting activists to make positive changes in their communities.