



Taking Action on Rural Poverty

Final external evaluation report

July 2026

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“I cannot praise the project highly enough...
absolutely fantastic.”¹

“I couldn’t speak more highly of this
particular project.”²

"It has been powerful, what has been achieved."³

¹ Oversight Group Member 1

² Citizen Panel Member 2

³ Anti-Poverty Network Survey respondent

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Taking Action on Rural Poverty (TARP) project has been highly successful in achieving its overall aims, demonstrating strong evidence of positive impact across all four revised project objectives. Compared with the interim evaluation, every objective showed improved performance with all objectives and outcomes now assessed as *Good* or *Very Good*.
- The Citizen Panels have been key to the project's success. They have provided a meaningful and authentic mechanism for people with lived experience of rural poverty to influence local and national decision making, while delivering significant personal benefits for participants including increased confidence, knowledge, social connection, purpose and wellbeing.
- The quality of the project's approach to lived experience has been consistently praised by participants and stakeholders. The work was widely regarded as respectful, compassionate, non-tokenistic and professionally delivered, with particular recognition of the expertise of the locally based Development Officers.
- There is strong evidence that lived experience has directly influenced policy and practice, including changes to local housing policy, childcare provision, health and social care planning, funding criteria and national policy discussions. Stakeholders described access to lived experience as one of the project's greatest strengths and an important influence on better decision making.
- The project substantially strengthened collaboration between organisations through local Anti-Poverty Networks and the National Learning Partners Group. These networks have increased knowledge, confidence, relationships and collective capacity to advocate on rural poverty, while creating a strong legacy of ongoing collaboration beyond the life of the project.
- The project successfully increased awareness and understanding of the rural poverty premium among organisations, public bodies and policymakers. It introduced a shared language around rural poverty that has become embedded in local and national discussions and has informed policy development, including within Scottish Government.
- Although two Test of Change pilots were completed, rather than the four that were originally planned, they generated valuable practical and strategic learning. The value of this work lay not only in the content of individual pilots themselves but in the wider insights generated about systems change, partnership working and participatory approaches that can inform future work.
- The TARP team demonstrated a strong culture of reflection and continuous learning throughout the project. The team actively used reflective practice, responded positively to recommendations from the interim evaluation and embedded learning both within the project and more widely across the organisation.

- The project made a substantial contribution to local and national influencing and campaigning. Through evidence, lived experience and partnership working it informed local campaigns, Scottish Government policy development, parliamentary engagement, ministerial discussions and national anti-poverty activity, while consciously enabling local organisations and people with lived experience to lead wherever possible.
- Stakeholders consistently valued the project's collaborative style, describing Poverty Alliance as an enabling, respectful and trusted partner that built local capacity rather than taking ownership of campaigns or community action. This approach was seen as central to both the project's credibility and its sustainability.
- Delivering the project across two rural locations created valuable opportunities to compare learning across different contexts while providing mutual support for project staff. However, stakeholders also recognised that concentrating equivalent resources within a single location may have enabled even deeper place-based systems change.
- The evaluation identifies comparatively limited success in engaging the private sector. While some positive relationships were established, particularly in advisory roles, influencing private sector organisations to change policy or practice proved very challenging.
- Several important lessons emerged for future programmes. These include the importance of clearer planning for project legacy from an earlier stage, stronger communication across different project workstreams, greater sharing of learning between stakeholders, clearer definitions of the role and purpose of key project elements (e.g. Oversight Groups and National Learning Partner Groups), more detailed and integrated resource planning and greater attention to communicating project outcomes and impact.
- Many stakeholders believed that three years was insufficient to achieve the level of systems change sought. While recognising the significance of securing three-year funding, there was widespread support for longer-term investment to build on the relationships, trust, evidence and momentum established by the project.
- Overall, the evaluation concludes that Taking Action on Rural Poverty has been a highly successful and influential project. It has established effective models of participation, strengthened collaboration across sectors, influenced policy and practice at local and national levels, increased understanding of rural poverty and created a strong foundation on which future work can build. Continued investment would enable the significant learning, partnerships and momentum generated through the project to achieve even greater long-term impact.

2. INTRODUCTION

This final evaluation aims to present evidence on the extent to which the Taking Action in Rural Poverty project (TARP) has met the objectives it was funded to deliver. In addition, it aims to inform future related projects for both Poverty Alliance and the Robertson Trust. The report build on the results of the interim evaluation completed in September 2025.

Data sources for this final evaluation are:

- Online anonymous survey of Citizen Panel members (7 responses, response rate of 33%)
- Focus group with Citizen Panel members (7 participants)
- Interviews with all 6 Oversight Group members
- Online anonymous survey of national learning group members (3 responses, response rate of 43%)
- Interviews with 3 national learning group members
- Interviews with 3 national policy stakeholders (one of whom was also a learning group member and one a member of a local anti-poverty network)
- Online anonymous survey of local anti-poverty network members (29 responses, response rate of 12%)
- Interviews with 6 local anti-poverty network members
- Interviews with all 5 members of the Poverty Alliance project team
- Facilitated reflective discussions at 4 monthly project team meetings

Data was collected May to June 2026 except for reflective discussions at team meetings, which was undertaken February to May 2026.

3. SUMMARY OF PROGRESS AGAINST OBJECTIVES

As noted in the interim evaluation the objectives and outcomes for the project evolved over time with the project the Poverty Alliance team formally reviewing these, and slightly amending them, at the halfway point in the project. Objectives increased from three to four (the new objective more specifically focussed on policy influencing) and each objective was slightly revised.

Table one (overleaf) summarises progress against each of the revised objectives and outcomes.

The remainder of this report offers more detail on findings in relation to each of the agreed objectives, integrating evidence from all the data sources. In doing so consideration is given to each of the key delivery mechanisms within the project i.e.

- Citizen Panels
- Oversight Groups
- Local anti-poverty networks
- National learning partner group
- Test of Change pilots

While some of these elements are featured in sections focussed on specific objectives they have all been considered for their impact across the project as a whole.

The final section of the report includes additional, wider reflections that have emerged through conducting this final evaluation and which may be useful for the Poverty Alliance and the Robertson Trust to consider.

Table 1: Summary of progress against revised objectives

	<i>Status at Sept 2025⁴</i>	<i>Status at July 2026⁵</i>	<i>Summary comments – July 2026</i>
Objective 1: We create opportunities for people with direct experience of poverty to influence decisions made by community and voluntary organisations, the private and public sector to address the poverty premium.	Good	Good	High volume of consistent evidence from Citizen Panel participants, Oversight Group members, project team members and wider project stakeholders including those in the voluntary and public sectors. More limited evidence of opportunities for people with direct experience to influence the private sector.
Outcome 1.1: Cost of living rurally panels are an important part of collaborative efforts in Aberdeenshire and Argyll and Bute's to address rural poverty	Good	Very Good	High volume of consistent evidence from Citizen Panel participants, Oversight Group members, team members and wider project stakeholders, including those in the public sector, voluntary sector (working nationally and locally) and from those in national policy related roles.
Outcome 1.2: Local participation processes are improved and more effective in addressing the poverty premium	Fair	Good	Evidence of individuals involved in the project taking good practice from the project into their own work and organisations. High levels of commitment to maintaining participation processes expressed by local authority representatives in both project locations.

⁴ Ratings were based on the assessment of the author, drawing on the quantitative and qualitative evidence gathered during the interim review. Ratings at this stage were based on a three-point scale: Poor, Fair, Good.

⁵ Ratings are based on the assessment of the author, drawing on quantitative and qualitative evidence gathered during this final evaluation and building on the interim evaluation report. To allow scope to consider further success in some areas ratings are now on a four-point scale: Poor, Fair, Good, Very Good.

Objective 2: Connections and collaboration between rural organisations are increased and strengthened as community and voluntary organisations are supported to network and undertake anti-poverty work.	Good	Very Good	Consistent evidence from interviews with a wide range of participants and stakeholders that connections and collaborations have been increased, strengthened and deepened. Even in areas where networks previously existed the added value of the project focus on a) poverty and b) rurality is particularly noted.
Outcome 2.1 We support connections for rural organisations with anti-poverty networks, to increase capacity to advocate effectively for the adoption of solutions to the rural poverty premium	Good	Very Good	Consistent evidence from interviews with a wide range of participants and stakeholders that capacity has been increased in terms of knowledge, confidence and motivation, and through the establishment of new connections/relationships. In addition, some evidence of the project providing initial short term resource capacity to enable advocacy work to be undertaken.
Objective 3: We learn about what works and what doesn't in tackling the rural poverty premium. With a particular focus on the participation of those affected.	Fair	Good	Two of the four Test of Change pilots initially planned have been completed with clear evidence of learning from both the content and process of each one.
Outcome 3.1 Evidence and learning is generated from all parts of the project: policy advocacy, test of change pilots, collaboration	Fair	Good	Strong evidence of team members using reflective practice on a routine basis and identifying learning from across all parts of the project. Team meetings and individual one to ones provide specific space for this, and the external evaluation process has further been actively used to support this.

Objective 4: Poverty Alliance influence local, national and UK actors to implement solutions to the rural poverty premium	Fair	Good	Strong evidence of the project influencing change in policy and practice in both local authority areas. National stakeholders also able to identify ways in which the project has influenced and will continue to influence those working at a national level in policy and related settings.
Outcome 4.1 The Poverty Alliance drives or supports local and national campaigning activity on key rural poverty issues	Fair	Good	Clear evidence of the Poverty Alliance supporting campaigns in both local authority areas and of using experiences and results from this project to influence at a national level. Both locally and nationally this work has been proactive and reactive i.e. creating their own opportunities and responding to those that arise.
Outcome 4.2 Decision makers come to the Poverty Alliance for expertise on rural poverty	Fair	Good	Strong evidence of local authority teams in both local authority areas proactively seeking, welcoming and using Poverty Alliance knowledge and experience. More limited evidence from national stakeholders but some clear examples of this being the case.
Outcome 4.3 Decision makers are better informed on the solutions to the rural poverty premium (and rural poverty more broadly)	Fair	Good	Local and national decision makers (and wider stakeholders) from a range of settings give clear evidence of increases in knowledge.
Outcome 4.4 The rural poverty premium is a more prominent consideration of anti poverty campaigners	Fair	Good	Clear evidence of local organisations using knowledge, confidence and skills gained from the project to inform their work, including in campaigning. Also, evidence from national stakeholders.

4. PROGRESS AGAINST OBJECTIVES

4.1 Objective 1

We create opportunities for people with direct experience of poverty to influence decisions made by community and voluntary organisations, the private and public sector to address the poverty premium.

Outcome 1.1: Cost of living rurally panels are an important part of collaborative efforts in Aberdeenshire and Argyll and Bute's to address rural poverty

Outcome 1.2: Local participation processes are improved and more effective in addressing the poverty premium

Citizen Panels were established in Argyll and Bute and Aberdeenshire in April and May 2024 and over the lifecycle of the project 15 participants have been involved in each one. 75% of participants have remained active members of their panel throughout the project and Development Officers managed membership over the two years to ensure a rolling membership of 10-12.

4.1.1 Citizen Panels

The creation of the panels is widely acknowledged to have been the most successful aspect of the project. The care taken in establishing the panels and the way in which Poverty Alliance have continued to support them is routinely and proactively highlighted by a wide range of project stakeholders as very high-quality work.

“I’m particularly impressed with the lived experience Citizens Panel – absolutely terrific.” (OSG1)

Citizen Panel members themselves have had an overwhelmingly positive experience. Participation as panel members is cited as bringing a wide range of benefits including increased knowledge, increased confidence, reduced isolation, a greater sense of purpose and a sense of increased self worth.

“It’s been really good. It’s helped me become more confident in speaking” (CP1)

“It’s been really nice to meet lots of people as well... it’s been the best part too, because I am quite an isolated person myself.” (CP6)

“It’s opened up people I can talk to on one thing or another” (CP5)

“On the factual side, you know, there is a whole lot of stuff I’ve learned that feeds into the rural premium.” (CP2)

“I feel like I’ve got a lot more knowledge on bigger issues that are going on in the world, in the local communities.” (CP4)

“There’s been a sense of purpose in being involved with the panel” (CP1)

Table one summarises the positive feedback from the Citizen Panel survey in relation to the personal impact of participation as a panel member and the legacy regarding intention to continue working on rural poverty and community representation.

Table 1: Citizen Panel member agreement with impact and intention statements

Statement	Level of agreement		
	<i>Somewhat</i>	<i>Significant</i>	<i>Total</i>
Increased knowledge of anti-poverty services	29%	71%	100%
Impact on managing income and cost of living	71%	29%	100%
Reduced isolation	43%	57%	100%
Increased social connections	43%	43%	86%
Increased collaboration between organisations	43%	43%	86%
Ability to influence decisions	43%	29%	72%
Increased confidence	29%	71%	100%
Confidence work will continue	43%	57%	100%
Intention to continue working on rural poverty ⁶	n/a	n/a	100%
Intention to remain active in community representation	n/a	n/a	86%

n=7

⁶ This question required only a Yes or No response

4.1.2 Lived experience as skilled work

A clear theme in stakeholder interviews was recognition of the time and skill needed to work with lived experience sensitively and effectively. The two Development Officers were often highlighted for their expertise generally, and particularly in working with lived experience.

“Lived experience work is not easy... it maybe sounds easy, but you need to know your stuff before you do it so I think (the Development Officer) was a really good representer...spreading the message of the importance of lived experience work... and showed by example how it could be done well. (APN2)

Panel members spoke of “the care, the respect” (CP2) coming from the team, and feeling “respected and valued” (CP7). There was no sense of being “judged or frowned upon” (CP4), with the approach led by team members experienced as “compassionate” and “supportive” (CP6). Interviewee comments on the overall skill levels of the locally based staff included:

“She’s approachable, she’s easy to chat to, she’s engaging, she’s informative, she’s knowledgeable. She’s all the right things in a project leader that you want.” (OSG5)

“Because of who she was... in the community development team, her academic background, there’s a lot... we got a lot for our money.” (OSG2)

The authenticity of the TARP approach to lived experience was also noted.

“I mean, there are lots of people saying they do it, but just doing it for real, in kind of, it’s difficult to not use either romantic or condescending language, but I want to say a humble way, I think is one of the things that makes a difference.” (LPG1)

“I don’t think it’s a tokenistic approach.” (APN3)

The additional challenge of delivering work of this type, over an extended period, when working largely online (a necessity in the large and diverse locations within the project) was also noted by wider TARP team members.

“It shouldn’t be underestimated how hard it is to do that work, engagement work, online... those groups are still together and feel like there’s still energy and enthusiasm and interest” (SM2)

4.1.3 Growth in knowledge

For locally based public sector staff having the opportunity to work with lived experience, and the additional capacity the project brought to do this, has been helpful in enabling them to effectively influence senior stakeholders in their organisation on the value of this approach.

“I know colleagues in other council services have had some fantastic feedback from the panel, which was really, really useful” (OSG1)

“... it gave additional capacity around this... so we’re getting more services and more partners coming and asking about lived experience, and how to get people more involved in decision making...without the capacity and the work of this project it wouldn’t have elevated it so quickly to that level.” (OS4)

Access to lived experience had also increased knowledge and understanding across a wide range of stakeholders, and in some cases in very significant ways with an expected long-term impact.

“When you hear lived experienced stories of people who are really, really struggling, parents who have got very, very little disposable income and the demands of kids and the rest of it... you never lose that. Once you’ve heard that you never lose that.” (OSG5)

“It’s actually being able to see, here’s the lived experience of these people that they cannot apply or access the same services they would have if they lived in Stirling or Edinburgh” (APN1).

The strength of the work with lived experience is clear as one national stakeholder describes their organisation as “probably quite reliant” on the project for accessing it (NS1), confirming the importance of current local efforts to secure resource to enable this to continue (see section 4.1.4)

4.1.4 Lived experience influencing change

Panel members and wider stakeholders were able to cite several examples of decisions by community and voluntary organisations and the public sector to address rural poverty being positively influenced by participants with lived experience. These are discussed in more detail in section 4.4 and include:

- Changes to housing policy in Argyll and Bute
- Reducing planned closures in nursery services in Aberdeenshire
- Influencing plans for health and social care developments in Argyll and Bute
- Changes to criteria for funding schemes managed by the TSI in Argyll and Bute

For Panel members the opportunity to influence decisions was an important aspect of their involvement and a source of pride and happiness.

“The one thing is that I’ve learned that my voice can make a difference.” (CP1)

“It’s just made me happy to be involved in things... and our voices do matter, and they’re heard and it could make a difference.” (CP4)

“I hope that our voices will make a difference and the work can inspire others to do something similar.” (CP6)

While the focus of objective one is predominantly local, national stakeholders also commented positively about the value of the lived experience work and the impact it has had on their own practice and in turn decisions made by policy makers.

“(TARP) have brought people along with lived experience of poverty that we’ve been able to directly hear from, and that’s incredibly valuable. It really helps to keep the issues faced... it helps us to keep them at the forefront of our mind whenever we are developing policy.... I’ve found we’ve been able to have more impact on ministers or provide more well-rounded advice... because we’re able to kind of lift evidence.” (NS1)

This national stakeholder, working in a policy role within Scottish government, spoke at length about the value and impact of lived experience:

“... to hear directly from people who are living in poverty, or who are being affected by various government policies that are potentially pushing them further into poverty, or making things difficult is incredibly eye-opening... I think being able to share lived experience... helps to land the message in a clearer way and it just cuts through all the jargon and the nonsense language that we use as civil servants.”
(NP1)

Access to lived experience was described as a powerful way to reduce “filters between communities and policymakers” (NS3).

Although overall Citizen Panel survey responses were very positive there was some evidence of the need to better communicate outcomes from various project activities and show members more clearly how their work had influenced decisions and made a difference.

“I am unable to see the benefits to the community.” (CP Survey respondent)

See section 4.3.5 for further exploration of connections between various aspects of the project.

4.1.5 Legacy of lived experience

Oversight Group members in both local authority locations expressed strong commitment to continue to ensure appropriate mechanisms are in place for ongoing access to lived experience, although notably at the time of final evaluation in one location plans are awaiting final confirmation, dependent on funding. For this area to lose the Panel or the opportunity to work with lived experience was described as a “shame” (OSG3) and a “disaster” (OSG1). In this location, where working with lived experience was particularly new, there were differing views on whether, without the ongoing support of Poverty Alliance, the approach would be retained.

“The legacy around that for the council is to have people that are experiencing the issues that maybe we don’t necessarily experience... certainly not at a senior level with the council, to help drive our policy and change the way we think about how services need to be delivered.” (OSG1)

“...low (confidence). I think everybody’s up for it in principle, but it requires admin time... it’s not just a bit of admin time here and there. There’s a lot more connection... that’s above the skill level of most of my team to be honest” (OS2)

In the second location, where some lived experience work had been underway before TARP began, the project has helped refine and improve practice and some stakeholders were confident would be retained, while others were not.

“Locally it’s just reinforced the fact that we need to have local voices around all the decisions we make...because of the project it’s now got to a more strategic level... more like business as usual.” (OSG4)

“I honestly think that the poverty related lived experience voice won’t go away. I think it will always be there.” (OSG5)

“Lived experience is good... it’s a buzzword... We need to make sure that whatever we have heard people say is translated into policy, so that there’s a better outcome for people... so I’m hoping it will (continue) but being a sceptic sometimes...” (OS6)

Notably those less confident that lived experience would continue were members of Oversight Groups, but working outside of local authorities. Local authority members in both locations had greater confidence that the focus on lived experience would continue. This may be because of having greater visibility of work underway to secure funding and/or, in the case of Aberdeenshire, the training that had already been delivered in working with lived experience, for local authority staff. Connectedness across project stakeholders and their level of awareness of various aspects of the project is discussed in section 4.3.5.

4.1.6 Private sector engagement

The project secured comparatively limited engagement from the private sector, something acknowledged by a wide range of project stakeholders. Many of these were not surprised by this and some described engagement with the private sector as generally very difficult.

“My general view of private sector involvement in (this geographic area) is it’s pretty poor” (OSG2)

“Private sector sometimes tends to be notoriously difficult to engage with”. (OSG5.)

Despite this there remained a view that engaging the private sector would be helpful in addressing the poverty premium.

“I think they’re incredibly important... I think the third sector and the public sector often hold the information and the systems and the skills needed to help address rural and island poverty, but not funds and there’s lots of funding in the private sector that could be leveraged in... In any kind of work like this, when you’re trying to achieve something transformational that operates across all systems at the community level or even societal level you need public, private and third sector all bought in and delivering.” (NS1)

Private sector engagement was described by the project team as challenging to secure in the first instance, and even more challenging when seeking to influence decisions in this sector. In one example, project team and Citizens Panel members secured discussions with a large bus company, with a view to securing free transport for those attending DWP appointments. While the company responded to requests for engagement, and subsequently entered discussions about bus fees, they were ultimately unwilling to cover the costs of free journeys.

Generally, the TARP team reflected that the experience of Poverty Alliance as an organisation was that despite the apparent logic of the private sector having funds to support projects of this type, there was limited evidence of these being made available. One national learning partner group stakeholder did however refer to fuel poverty support scheme funded by BP with a budget of £500k.

“I was aware of another organisation... that had been given half a million pounds by BP to address fuel poverty and just gave money to people, whereas the TARP approach was more sustainable: it was led by the people in the place, determining what would be useful.” (LPG1)

This example was cited as poor practice in terms of how funds were managed and was contrasted with the thoughtful approach taken by TARP. Regardless of the views on how this scheme was managed, it is a clear example of private sector funding being made available for a key issue in rural poverty.

At the time of final evaluation TARP work is continuing with a large supermarket chain, with the goal of influencing on the cost of food. This is an area of focus that emerged directly from a Citizens Panel and something a national learning partner group member acknowledged the TARP team were “working (on) very actively”(LPG2). It is unclear if/how this work will continue after project end. See section 5.5 for further exploration of planning for project end.

In the facilitated workshop to explore the emerging findings of this final evaluation the project team highlighted their work with UKIFDA⁷ as an example of successful working with the private sector. UKIFDA were described as crucial in helping develop team member understanding of issues in off grid oil, informing the way in which the test of change in Aberdeenshire then evolved. Notable here though is the extent to which the private sector partner was engaged in an advisory role, rather than as an organisation the project was seeking to influence to make a change.

The team also noted the time intensive work needed to engage the private sector and how, with limited overall resources, they have needed to make difficult decisions about where to focus efforts for most impact. The importance of this focus was also noted by the learning partner group member when reflecting on private sector involvement.

“The challenge perhaps is that there are all these avenues that you can follow and I think the Poverty Alliance have been very good at choosing a few of them, not all of them, and focussing in.” (LPG2)

The team did however also acknowledge, as noted in the interim evaluation, that private sector engagement is an area in which they have less experience and confidence, and this may have contributed in part to progress with this sector.

⁷ UK and Ireland Fuel Distributors Association - the trade association for the liquid fuels distribution industry

4.2 Objective 2

Connections and collaboration between rural organisations are increased and strengthened as community and voluntary organisations are supported to network and undertake anti-poverty work.

Outcome 2.1 We support connections for rural organisations with anti-poverty networks to increase capacity to advocate effectively for the adoption of solutions to the rural poverty premium

4.2.1 Anti-poverty networks

Anti-Poverty Networks were established in Aberdeenshire in April 2024 and in Argyll and Bute in May 2024. Over the lifecycle of the project 10 – 12 organisations have been involved with the Aberdeenshire network, and between 7 and 14 in Argyll and Bute. A total of 9 meetings were held in Argyll and Bute and 8 in Aberdeenshire. Some later events were opened to organisations from both areas and attracted up to 41 attendees.

A survey exploring experiences of these networks was circulated to a broader community of 240 network contacts held by the TARP team, with 31⁸ responses received, representing a response rate of 13%. Survey results showed positive changes in several areas specifically linked to the TARP project objectives including engagement in anti-poverty advocacy and collaboration and knowledge of local services. Table 2 summarises these results.

Table 2: Impact of anti poverty network engagement for members

Activity	Impact	
	<i>Stayed the same</i>	<i>Increased</i>
Involvement in anti-poverty advocacy - personal	65%	35%
Involvement on anti-poverty work – organisational	54%	46%
Increased collaboration between organisations	8%	92%
Awareness of local anti-poverty services	11%	89%

n=26-31 (of the 31 overall survey respondents 26 had attended at least one event)

⁸ A total of 31 responses were received although response rates to individual questions varied. Results in the table are shown for the responses to that question. The minimum number of respondents to a particular question was 26.

Comments on both personal and organisational engagement in anti-poverty advocacy suggest that where no increase in this is reported, this is due to respondents feeling they are already doing extensive work on this.

Perhaps the strongest indication of success from survey results of that 100% of respondents to the question (90% of survey respondents overall) indicated they intended to continue networking and collaboration after project ends, showing a clear legacy from the project.

Seven network members were interviewed as part of this final evaluation, and almost all described the experience as entirely positive and beneficial. Interviewees frequently highlighted how involvement in the networks had both “deepened” (APN3) and “strengthened” (OSG1) existing connections, in part because of a clear focus on a particular topic.

“The collaboration with community groups and third sector, I think that has been strengthened because of their network that they’ve developed, and they’ve got a specific focus.” (OSG4)

In addition, the creation of the anti-poverty networks had also expanded individual and organisation networks, creating new connections and specifically in relation to work on rural poverty.

“It’s absolutely extended the network massively and usefully (APN4)

“It has connected me to people whose organisations I knew of, but whose work I might have been aware of in a peripheral sense... it’s given me a wider reach of ‘we can’t help you but we know a man who can’...so in terms of broadening our awareness of what’s out there for the people that we support that’s been really beneficial.” (APN3)

Clear in this second quote is the way in which these extended networks are being used to directly support people experiencing rural poverty, which is supported by comments from a survey respondent.

“Everyone helping each other to help our clients.” (APN Survey respondent)

Attending network meetings increased attendees' knowledge in three key ways:

1. growing knowledge of the nature and impact of rural poverty (often through access to lived experience as explored in section 4.1)
2. growing their knowledge of existing services and sources of support related to rural poverty (as seen in the quotes above)
3. growing their knowledge of research and evidence to advocate for solutions to the rural poverty premium.

A cited example of this third way was a TARP Development Officer supporting an anti-poverty network member by sourcing and sharing research on the relationship between poverty and mental health, to help them challenge a view previously held by a local authority member. The network member describes the value of this as “being able to open up dialogue” with their own local authority funders. (APN3)

There were several examples of how engaging with the networks had led to increased collaboration between local organisations. In one example a credit union representative learned about a roadshow undertaken by the local foodbank, an organisation they were not previously aware of. Through this new connection were able to piggyback on existing foodbank operations, joining them on their roadshow as a way of raising awareness of credit union services within the community.

“If it wasn't for the project (this) wouldn't have happened because ... I didn't know there was a van going around... a food bank or food pantry kind of van... So being part of the project made us aware of that, and it wasn't just making us aware of that, it was also connecting us to the charity that was doing it and I was happy for us to tag along.” (OSG6)

As a result of this collaboration several people subsequently joined the credit union.

For some network members engagement in the network collaboration had extended to international organisations. One anti-poverty network member was invited by the project team to attend at event at the European Parliament and was subsequently invited by an Icelandic organisation to visit Iceland to collaborate on rural poverty work. These international connections and collaborations were helpful in practical terms (i.e. in developing knowledge), and they also positively contributed to the sense of confidence and ambition that network member had for their work on rural poverty.

“I think what it’s done is it’s allowed us as an organisation and me as a development worker to have to see a bigger picture and to have grander schemes than we might have had otherwise. I think without some of these connections, without some of the inspiration, without some of the stories I’ve heard I might very well have done a good job, I’d have put on events, I’d have done information sharing, I’d have done benefits maximisation... but at the end of the day 10 years down the road, the landscape won’t have changed.” (APN4)

Clear here is how the combination of extended networks together with access to lived experience come together to inspire “something transformative” (APN4).

Key to increasing confidence for network members was the reassurance of working alongside others facing similar challenges and having their existing work and plans supported by peers.

“I think it’s just been beneficial in the sense that seeing that this is not a single sector issue and that actually many people involved want to know more about this... It was more of an affirmation that it was going the right way.” (APN1)

“... there’s a full spectrum of different organisations...working across a variety of different sectors so that’s been good to see what people are doing, to see the challenges they are facing and to know that it’s not just us that are facing those challenges.” (OSG3)

Just one network member expressed slightly negative views about the network and these centred on a potential lack of clarity on the purpose of the network and a desire for a greater focus on action.

“My aim is always I look for changes, to actually do an action, to make a change rather than just speaking about it from different angles... with the network I wasn’t sure what is the outcome?... The network itself, I think the idea is great, but I couldn’t see the outcome.” (APN2)

There is perhaps scope for greater capturing and sharing of actions that have occurred because of the network, however it is also important to remember this was the view of only one interviewee.

4.2.2 National learning partners group

The National Learning Partners group was established in June 2024 and over the lifecycle of the project was attended by 7 organisations. Six meetings were held and on average 4 -5 organisations attended each one of these.

A survey exploring experiences of these networks was circulated to the 7 members, with 3 responses received. While this represents a response rate of 43% care should be taken in interpreting responses given the very small sample size.

Table 3: Impact of national learning partners group engagement for members

Activity	Impact	
	<i>Stayed the same</i>	<i>Increased</i>
Involvement in anti-poverty advocacy – personal	67%	33%
Involvement on anti-poverty work – organisational	100%	0%
Awareness and understanding of rural poverty	0%	100%
Confidence to take action on rural poverty	0%	100%

n=3

As with the results of the anti-poverty network member survey where engagement in anti-poverty advocacy work is shown not to have increased comments from respondents indicate this is because they and/or their organisations already had this embedded in their approach. One interview respondent described engagement with the group as offering helpful “confirmation” and “triangulation” (LPG3) of things they were aware of in their existing work.

In interviews learning group meetings were described as “incredibly helpful” (NS1) because of the breadth of people involved.

“There are so many incredibly skilled and knowledgeable people on those learner partner calls that you know, you kind of leave them and your mind is almost buzzing with all the potential opportunities or links that could be made.” (NS1)

One national stakeholder described the way in which the group meetings had directly influenced the core brief on rural and island poverty for their directorate within the Scottish Government, and particularly regarding language used.

“The learners partners meetings definitely helped kind of shape those points into a language that was just plain accessible, getting the points across quickly.” (NS1)

They went on to note the strong legacy of increased connection and collaboration the project had created.

“The connections that have been formed and the network that exists... even once the project concludes that doesn’t take away from the fact that these people know each other now, they know who to reach out on specific issues.” (NS1)

There is further evidence of this from survey respondents with 100% indicating an intention to continue networking and collaborating on anti-poverty work.

National learning group members also noted the way in which the TARP project had increased capacity around rural poverty, something considered particularly valuable given the relative lack of this overall.

“... having that expertise in the rural sector is. It’s very rare, you know, there’s a lot... we carry quite a policy burden across a very small number of expert organisations and they have taken up quite a lot of that institutional space, positive institutional space of being experts and being trusted and also, you know, enthusiastic and evidence-driven...” (LPG2)

The positive feedback on the value of this group from attendees is reassuring given staff member reflections that the purpose of the group was initially unclear and which it would have been helpful to clarify.

“... we were not clear at the beginning about what the purpose of that group was...was that group there to meaningfully drive the sort of strategy of the program? Was it there to help us disseminate and share our learning. Or was it there to actually, sort of drive the evaluation and the learning process itself? ... it's never been completely clear what the purpose of that group is...” (SM2)

4.3 Objective 3

We learn about what works and what doesn't in tackling the rural poverty premium. With a particular focus on the participation of those affected.

Outcome 3.1 Evidence and learning is generated from all parts of the project: policy advocacy, test of change pilots, collaboration

Attendance at monthly project team meetings has enabled insight into the way in which reflecting on practice is embedded in the culture of TARP team operations. Observed and facilitated discussions offered many examples of reflecting on progress and learning from both successes and challenges. This was further enhanced by the team's openness to take part in a facilitated discussion on the emerging findings of this final evaluation, in which we explore together various topics that are featured in this report.

Section 4.1 shows clearly the quality of the work undertaken regarding participation of those affected by the rural poverty premium and the extent to which not only the TARP team have learned about this, but others in networks, learning groups and oversight groups have also learned about the value of working in this way and the skilled approach needed to do so effectively.

"The meetings have helped to improve my understanding of what interventions are working... and why poverty might be experienced differently in rural and island communities." (Learning Group survey respondent).

4.3.1 Test of change methodology

Test of change pilots were intended to pilot approaches to solutions that would make a significant contribution to tackling the rural poverty premium, delivering change in each location and generating learning that would be applied more widely. The test of change process and pilots themselves have provided a particularly rich opportunities for learning both in terms of the methodology and the specific aspects of each pilot.

"I have really valued the team's framing of test of change as learning... very hard when you're in it and you feel like it's not working... I don't think it worked, but I think there is learning from that." (SM4)

The project team have reflected at length on the process of working with test of change methodology and have mixed views.

"... the tests of change, whilst obviously complicated... they have both provide a genuine basis for us to do policy and influencing work, which is rooted in, unique

might not be the right word, but in our learning... on its own terms it hasn't been very effective... but what has been effective is the fact that we have generated specific learning about a part of the system...it's not ours, it's with the people we've worked with, right? But it provides that kind of unique angle which we don't always have when talking to MSPs." (SM2)

"My instinct is to say... I wouldn't do it again. Because it was a huge piece of work and it was such a significant stressor for the team." (SM3)

Team interviewees do highlight a range of key insights that have been generated as a result of the use of test of change methodology, including;

- the need for clarity with Citizen Panel members (or equivalents) with regard to where decision making lay on which test of change pilot would be taken forward (as in the interim evaluation some panel members described not believing that they had a voice in this: "I am 100% convinced that they had already selected the two projects" (CP1))
- the extent to which it is realistic or ethical to seek solutions to rural poverty from those with lived experience – something referred to as a potential "unfairness" (SM4) within the approach
- the time required to generate, explore and consult on ideas and then to establish pilot activities
- the risk of over consulting on potential ideas for pilots, in a desire for completeness in participatory approaches and the potential impact on pace i.e. "to be seen to be trying really hard to make sure we'd investigated all the possibilities" (SM1)

Crucially the team have reflected on the "mismatch" (SM2) between the initial ambition for tests of change (i.e. to make a shift in the overall rural poverty system) and the level of resource (both in terms of finance and time) available.

"I think we could probably have done TARP for three years just doing the test of change and really embedding them... It seems to require quite a lot... it needs time and energy." (SM5)

"The funder talks about big change that lasts, and I don't think you're going to do that with 15 grand or 30 grand over 2 or 3 years, like that's impossible." (SM4)

In addition, some members of the team have reflected on the potentially unhelpful shift in dynamics with local organisations emerging from the test of change methodology.

“I think there’s a bit of a risk that in terms of the relationship between Poverty Alliance and the local organisations it was slightly at odds with the rest of the project, because it put us in that position of being an outside organisation who then came in with money. And sometimes that’s kind of a power thing, it’s like we’re the bigger organisation, we’ve got the money, and you know, you will dance to our tune.” (SM1)

The breadth and depth of the team’s reflection and consideration of learning on test of change as a methodology is clear.

4.3.2 Test of change pilots

The content of the test of change pilots themselves also provided rich learning. In Argyll and Bute, the partnership with Allenergy to develop resources to support effective use of retrofit energy technologies installed by housing associations was considered “really successful” (SM5). This involved developing:

- resources for social housing tenants to support them in making effective use of the energy systems installed
- resources for staff to better support tenants
- case studies for use in influencing work.

The impact of this work locally, and the reach of this work extends beyond Argyll and Bute, both in terms of practice and influencing is clear.

“...they’re making a huge impact in supporting vulnerable people with reducing their fuel costs... it’s been great, a really useful test of change project... it’s been hugely beneficial, there’s no doubt about that.” (OSG1)

“... we will be disseminating that out across all of the housing associations that we work with already across Argyll and Bute and the Highlands. We’ll also be sending it on to the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations... sharing it with Highland Council... with MPs, MPSPs, local councillors, because there’s a lot of money being spent on these retrofit technologies that’s been wasted. So, we hope that the work we’ve done and the resources we have will actually influence change going forward.” (OSG3)

In Aberdeenshire the test of change involved working in partnership with Grampian Credit Union to give access to loans for the purchase of oil. Applications and approvals were low and reflecting on this the team, and wider stakeholders, identified several reasons for this including;

- the range of alternative sources of funds that individuals could access without going into debt
- the presence of alternate providers of financial support who were known and trusted locally
- the lack of flexibility in processes of application and award within the credit union (they were described by one interviewee as a “stickler for process” (OSG5))
- wider local organisation resistance to signposting those experiencing financial difficulty to debt (“I’ve had money advisers say to me that... they don’t want people to borrow” (OSG6)).

A key learning when reflecting on both test of change pilots has been the importance of relationships and values alignment between partners. This is clear in these two contrasting quotes from TARP team members.

“They, as a team, made it great, because they’re really invested in what they do.” (SM5 on the Argyll and Bute test of change)

“I think we chose the right type of partner. I just don’t think we had the relationship with them that was open enough to have some of these conversations.” (SM4 on the Aberdeenshire test of change)

Reflecting on low take up of the scheme in Aberdeenshire the choice of partner was described as “not trusted” (OSG4) due to lack of familiarity i.e. they did not proactively promote themselves in the relevant community and worked only online. Here the Oversight Group member goes on to reflect their key learning about this:

“... if we had done some awareness raising about credit unions, and that affordable credit and getting access to that and did it in a different way, I think the uptake of that... that could have been handled differently.” (OSG4).

Team members also reflected on the impact of the relatively short timescale for this pilot.

“It would be really interesting to run the (test of change) for longer. I feel like we were making progress in the space about that access to credit... I think there’s more work we could have done around there and actually we are having conversations at the moment with a credit union... in Fife... about using that kind of model elsewhere... I think that could have been interesting giving it time, time to breathe.” (SM5)

Notable in reflective discussions with team members, through attendance at project

meetings and in final evaluation workshops to explore emerging findings, is the extent to which the team carry a sense of disappointment regarding the test of change aspect of the project. This remains despite being able to identify some positive impacts and a great deal of learning. To some degree this reflects the extent of personal investment in the project staff members held and the sense of responsibility they felt, as well as the depth of their reflective practice.

“I really desperately want it to work for people and make people’s lives better.”
(SM4)

Wider project stakeholders helpfully present a balancing view about the value of the TOC pilots, including regarding how they may make an impact across Scotland.

“The test of change pilots... we were able to suggest those as potential blueprints that could be expanded across other rural and island places for the next Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan... it did kind of open the door to that conversation with other parts of Scottish Government about, like, here’s some stuff that’s happening at a rural and island level that’s working well.” (NS1)

Another interviewee working with development trusts highlighted the value of a session with the Development Officers that focussed on the learnings from the test of change pilots and how development trusts could use those learnings “to do things in their own communities” (LPG3). Clear here is the TARP and Poverty Alliance commitment to not only capture learning, but to share this to inform wider practice.

4.3.3 Oversight Groups

Oversight Groups in each location were established as a way of “institutionalising support for the project” (SM3) from the outset, including with a view to sharing learning and enabling the project to have a strong legacy in each location. Comprised of three representatives (one local authority, one TSI and one test of change partner) the oversight groups have generally been a great source of support for the project overall and for individual team members.

“(OSG member) input was completely invaluable” (SM4)

“...(they) have been extremely supportive and cheer-led for us in many ways” (SM1)

“They’ve helped us manage relationships where otherwise it might have been challenging around the campaigning pieces” (SM3)

Learning from this approach includes the need to consider the relative seniority of organisational representatives involved and how a specific project, like TARP, can navigate wider challenges in how organisations operate and are perceived.

“There’s always a balance of whether you have the person you’ve got contact with who is enthusiastic about the project, or whether you’re pushing to have someone higher up the tree who you might never get.” (SM1)

“I wish I’d found a better way to crack the TSI nut... there’s been kind of a disconnect between the TSI and the wider ... third sector community” (SM4)

The issue outlined in the second quote was explored further in the facilitated reflective workshop with the team where they noted the importance of strong existing relationships between a TSI and other organisations, to maximise the value their involvement brings. The team reflected on the extent to which this was a) something that both impacted the TARP project and b) was outside its sphere of influence or control. There is learning here about balancing involvement of a representative almost on principle, because of the organisation they represent, with the practical value their involvement brings.

Interviews with Oversight Group members were an opportunity for them to reflect on their experiences and these identified additional learning about the use of groups like this and some wider project approaches. Key was the need to have begun actively planning for the end of the project earlier in its lifecycle.

“... perhaps we could have been better, and we could probably have given some more thought to end of life and legacy.” (OSG2)

“We could have had maybe some clarity as we went, rather than having a rush at the end to see what we can do to keep some of the project going.” (OS4)

This sense of being “close to the wire” (OS4) regarding project end, and consideration of options for continuing aspects of this, was considered particularly critical given the current financial climate.

“... financially the situation has changed for funder and for local authorities so if you’ve got more lead in time to think... and I think that’s a missed opportunity because we could have planned.” (OSG4)

These concerns from Oversight Group members were explored in the facilitated discussion with team members and were met with openness and thoughtful consideration. The team reflected that they had indeed been planning for project end and elements of continuation for some time, but that perhaps they had not sufficiently involved all Oversight Group members in this work on a consistent basis, and/or had perhaps not informed them of the

work that they had been doing as a team and an organisation to secure a next stage of work.

The interim evaluation report, completed in September 2025 did identify the interest from Oversight Group members at that time in starting to plan for project end and included a more general recommendation about the need to focus on sustainability. This appears to have been partially taken on board.

The above relative lack of engagement of the Oversight Groups as an entity in this planning for the end of the project overall may link in part to a remaining lack of clarity on the purpose of the groups.

“We don’t make decisions, we don’t maybe scrutinise the project. We share information... it is very useful, but an oversight group... I’m not quite sure if that was what the vision was of an oversight group...” (OSG4)

“I’m fairly sure we set up a terms of reference, but I can’t remember and I think that’s possibly a weakness, that kind of loose democratic approach. You know, it has possibly been a bit too loose.” (OSG2)

See section 5.5 for further consideration of effectiveness in planning for the project end.

4.3.4 Wider learning – project and organisational

There is clear evidence of the TARP team responding to specific recommendations from the interim evaluation and applying the learning from this. Examples include:

- increasing the size of the Oversight Groups
- altering the format of the Learning Partner Group meetings
- connecting Learning Partner Group meetings more directly with experiences from the work in Argyll and Bute and Aberdeenshire

These were noted and appreciated.

“...on the back of your last, your interim report, there were changes made to the format of the meetings... so it wasn’t just them presenting endlessly... you know, that kind of much more direct connection to what was happening on the ground.... There was a definite shift.” (LPG3)

More fundamentally the experiences of the TARP project have also influenced overall practice within Poverty Alliance, embedding consideration of rural issues into core organisational work.

“... rural experiences and issues are far more mainstream within the Poverty Alliance... it’s not an afterthought anymore.” (SM2)

While not all team members were confident this focus would be maintained after the project ended, there was clear evidence of a rural focus being embedded in existing and wider Poverty Alliance activities.

“I don’t think it’s as influential as it could be... It’s only a priority because there’s funding behind it... it’ll be interesting to see, after the end of the funding, do we ever talk about the rural poverty premium again.” (SM4)

Clear examples of the way in which a rural focus has been embedded in the organisation include opting to focus one day of the annual Challenge Poverty Week campaign on rural issues, something agreed and in place before the end of the TARP project.

The TARP project has also influenced how the Poverty Alliance works in several other ways including:

- with “an increased confidence in working locally” (SM3)
- “demonstrating and publishing learning on how we can support local campaigns” (SM3)
- how the organisation shares information and data
- greater commitment to and confidence in working with lived experience
- greater confidence and skill work having staff embedded and working locally.

4.3.5 Connecting and sharing the learning

During interviews conducted for the final external evaluation there was some evidence that the progress with various elements of the project (e.g. tests of change, influencing work, anti-poverty networks) were not fully connected in terms of stakeholder knowledge and understanding, including in relation to activities within the location in which the stakeholder was based.

“I can’t really speak much about that, I don’t honestly know much about that.” (APN1 on test of change pilots)

“I’ve not been overly involved with that... I’m not close to it.” (APN5 on test of change pilots)

“I’m not familiar with it at all” (APN3 on test of change pilots)

“I certainly haven’t heard anything about how it’s progressed or what they’ve learned from it.” (CP1 referring to understanding the outcomes of the test of change pilot)

“When you say test of change pilot, what do you mean by that?... I’ve not really been involved in that side of things at all.” (OSG2 on test of change pilot)

“I don’t know the answer to that, really.” (APN1 on success of influencing work)

“Honestly, I don’t know. I’m not aware” (OSG5 on success of national influencing work).

It was also the case regarding the experience of connections across the two locations.

“I don’t feel there’s been a lot of connection.” (OSG3 referring to work in the two locations)

“I couldn’t tell you the ins and outs of that.” (APN2 on understanding work in the second location)

“I’m not aware of entirely how successful it’s been.” (APN6 on understanding work in the second location)

These disconnects appear to have remained despite consistent team efforts to share learning at local and national events, and through presentations and discussions.

There was also some evidence of lack of full connection between team members and the project elements they lead.

“I genuinely don’t know what impact it’s had, because I haven’t been at any of the sessions.” (SM4 on Learning Partner Group)

“To be honest I’ve had very little involvement with the learning group.” (SM1)

This team disconnect often appeared to be driven by capacity challenges. All members of the TARP team technically work on the project on a part time basis, although it should be noted that team members working in Argyll and Bute and Aberdeenshire routinely work more than contracted hours and with a very high degree of flexibility to respond to local circumstances and opportunities. At the start of the project some team members also worked for the Poverty Alliance as an organisation on a part time basis, rather than being in the organisation full time with part of their time dedicated to TARP, which impacted overall availability and flexibility. In this final evaluation there was some evidence that not being closely connected to all aspects of the project was because of being “spared having much to

do with that” (SM1) i.e. in recognition of the high demands on time. However, there was also some evidence that the disconnect may not have been welcome, but relationships were not well developed enough to explore this.

“I worried that it wasn’t my place to say, hey, why are we not at these sessions? Because it felt like may that was research (team’s) space to find out.” (SM4)

While the project team have developed broad and deep learning across all elements of the project, there is perhaps a missed opportunity to share and embed that learning more widely, through greater connection of the various project elements and their stakeholders. Even within locations there was at times only partial knowledge of project activities and outcomes (e.g. deep knowledge of the work of the network within an areas, but limited knowledge of the test of change within the same area), and certainly there is scope to increase the sharing of learning that emerges from working in two locations. While this is clear to team members, it could be clearer for wider stakeholders and therefore support goals around sustained impact.

The question of potential disconnects was explored with the project team during the facilitated discussion to explore emerging final evaluation findings and was acknowledged as a “missed opportunity to maximise impact” (SM3). The team described the barrier to this as purely one of time and resource (“just the constant busy-ness” (SM4)), rather than inclination. The situation was described as having arisen in part because of being focused on delivery of each element of the project but also because of the part time nature of all team members working on these various project elements. This is discussed further in section 5.3

4.4 Objective 4

Poverty Alliance influence local, national and UK actors to implement solutions to the rural poverty premium

Outcome 4.1 The Poverty Alliance drives or supports local and national campaigning activity on key rural poverty issues

Outcome 4.2 Decision makers come to the Poverty Alliance for expertise on rural poverty

Outcome 4.3 Decision makers are better informed on the solutions to the rural poverty premium (and rural poverty more broadly)

Outcome 4.4 The rural poverty premium is a more prominent consideration of anti poverty campaigners

As part of this external evaluation a facilitated workshop was undertaken with TARP team members specifically to explore the nature and impact of influencing work undertaken within this project. A vast amount of activity was identified and having been undertaken locally and nationally to influence positive action on rural poverty. It was however, also acknowledged that it is incredibly difficult to map clear impact: causation is very difficult to identify or evidence. In addition, culturally, the organisation is particularly sensitive to a) not overclaiming impact generally, and b) not claiming “too much” credit for work that is by design participatory and collective. In the workshop the team were very clear that, in relation to campaigns, for example, their aim was to encourage and enable others to lead, rather than needing to lead themselves.

In the facilitated workshop key points to emerge were:

- influencing activities have been undertaken in all three years of the project, with perhaps an expected increase as the project progressed and the team had generated more evidence to support this work
- influencing work will continue after the project end
- great care was taken by the team to ensure influencing work was directly informed by lived experience and optimised opportunities for those with lived experience to be personally involved in influencing activities
- influencing work was informed by all the key elements of the project i.e. Citizen Panels, Test of Change pilots, Anti-Poverty Networks and the National Learning Group meetings⁹,

⁹ The team did highlight however that influencing was not intended to be a core part of the activities of the national learning group and therefore comparatively less time was spent on this in this setting

- team members have worked together to focus on building the capacity and confidence of local and national stakeholders to do more influencing work themselves
- team members worked together to develop and deliver approaches to influencing, drawing on individual skills and experience to be a strong collective force
- influencing is also underway internally to ensure learning from this project shapes the overall Poverty Alliance strategic direction, particularly in relation to fuel poverty

Below is a snapshot of examples of influencing work undertaken over the three years of the project. This is not an exhaustive list and aims to be illustrative. Notably in collating these examples team members themselves reflected on the sheer volume, and the risk of “forgetting” some things, indicating perhaps a need for greater tracking of activity and outcome within the project.

Some of the examples listed here are explained in more detail in other sections of this report.

Year One

- Rural poverty priorities featured in Poverty Alliance Cost of Living engagement with Scottish Government Cabinet Secretaries on social justice, transport, employment and economy
- Scottish Government Fair Fares review of public benefit benefits from Citizen Panel input, with messages shared with Scottish Government, Cabinet Secretaries and wider Poverty Alliance members
- Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament holds anti-poverty session for the first time
- MSP engagement on transport and rural poverty
- Citizen Panel members supported to engage (individually and collectively) in the local authority Budget Engagement Surveys in Aberdeenshire and Argyll and Bute
- Correspondence with local authority to recommend changes to their process for budget consultation and to advocate for inclusion of lived experience within this
- Contributed to Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund process and priorities
- Citizen Panel engagement in the refresh of the Argyll and Bute Discretionary Housing Policy
- Writing of the Cross Party Group report on poverty in rural Scotland

Year Two

- Training delivered to anti-poverty network members, to increase their skill and confidence in influencing
- Citizen Panels workshop to respond to Scottish Government Just Transition consultation on transport

- Submitted a response to consultation on the Delivery Plan, shaped by direct engagement with Citizen Panel members
- Participation in the Our Voices Matter campaign in Argyll and Bute – see section 4.4.1
- Discussions with Department of Work and Pensions regarding the challenges of access to transport in rural communities and the links to missed benefits review meetings
- Discussions with a large private bus services regarding the above (see section 4.1.5)
- Deepening relationship with Allenergy, providing capacity, knowledge and skill to support their influencing work on energy costs (see section 4.3.2)
- Two Citizen Panel members supported to share with Trussell Trust their experiences of use of foodbanks, leading to audio recordings being used as a training resource by Trussell across its member organisations
- First Minister briefing during Challenge Poverty Week included a focus on rural issues
- Project learnings shared at European Regional Parliament
- Sharing of learning from TARP leading to focus on rural poverty in Argyll and Bute Community Planning Partnership's regional climate strategy and action plan

Year Three

- Supporting a campaign against the mothballing of some childcare services in Aberdeenshire - see section 4.4.1
- Invited to attend Scottish Government ministerial event to explore credit for heating oil in national islands plan, drawing on test of change experiences
- Attended Scotland Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel and Consumer Scotland Roundtable event exploring research into Scottish fuel poverty
- Multiple meetings with Scottish Government civil servants on energy costs
- Attendance at two UK ministerial events advising on the role of advice services and issues of credit for energy costs
- Development of the Poverty Alliance Rural Manifesto, shaped in collaboration with Citizen Panels
- Working with the Health and Social Care Partnership Health Improvement Officer to embed low-income intelligence into the Good Food Action Plan being developed at local authority level
- Scottish Government Social Security Scotland Stigma Campaign launched featuring a Citizen Panel member and with specific exploration of issues of stigma in rural communities
- Citizen Panel member interviewed for membership of Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks local assessment panel
- Submitted a letter as part of Equalities and Human Rights Committee parliamentary enquiry into rights realisation in Highlands and Islands and received feedback that the Poverty Alliance framing around rural premium directly influenced the final

report. The TARP project was subsequently referenced in the recommendations made to the Scottish government

4.4.1 Driving, supporting and inspiring campaigns

There are strong examples of the project supporting campaigning on rural poverty in both Argyll and Bute and Aberdeenshire. In Argyll and Bute, the TARP team were described as playing a key role in a campaign to challenge proposed cuts to health and social care budgets through their “amplification” (APN5) of the campaign. The campaign, Our Voices Matter, was described by one network member as emerging from networks established by the TARP project and as “... one of the more significant policy and rights movements in this area” (APN5). This network member described in detail how the campaign emerged from her initial discussions with the TARP Development Officer, which led to engagement with the local TSI and “initially a tripartite coming together” (APN5) to make “formal representation”(APN5) to the chair of the Joint Integration Board. This in turn led to the development of the campaign that brought together over 40 organisations across the third sector. The Poverty Alliance “lent their expertise, particularly on the campaigning side, and the clarity around what our message was” (OS2).

The impact of this was summarised by a member of the project Oversight Group as having both short term “we stopped some cuts” (OSG2) and more long term:

“We’ve succeeded in bringing the NHS to the table, along with the Council. So, we’re looking at a strategic alliance model... I’m very, very cautious about saying it’s going to be successful, it’s great, but we’ve influenced the words inside the joint strategic plan, which has just been published and approved... The words are about prevention, the words are about early intervention, the words are around co-production with those with lived experience. It’s deep in that document. It’s embedded.” (OSG2)

In Aberdeenshire, as reported in the interim evaluation, the TARP team supported local action to challenge proposed cuts in nursery provision, ultimately achieving a reduction in planned cuts. This directly involved members of the Citizen Panel, who had initially brought the topic to one of their meetings.

“We joined... to address the mothballing of various nurseries.. and we found people who were affected by it, we spoke out as a group and the decision was reversed.” (CP2).

For some Citizen Panel members involvement in campaigning has been a particular highlight of their panel membership: the opportunity to have their voice heard, in some cases in national settings with senior politicians and their advisers, has increased confidence and sense of self worth. For some Panel members an outcome of their involvement with the project is an increased awareness of opportunities to campaign and a desire to do so.

“Before this I didn’t really, like, speak up a lot, or get fully involved in things, but having my eyes opened to a lot of issues... I think I’d feel more, want to be more involved in stuff if I heard anything else was going on, or other issues that people face... I would be more inclined to say I’ll get involved and I’ll help.” (CP4)

One Panel member has already established their own community organisation for parents with children with additional support needs.

The format of the hustings event organised by the TARP team during the election period was highlighted as a particularly creative and impactful example of national campaigning.

“They turned it on its head. They had presentations from people with lived experience first and then the candidates ask them questions. It literally flipped. It was brilliant!” (OSG2)

“... organised a hustings in April which was pretty amazing. And really quite a unique methodology, really successful.” (LPG2)

Notable again is the centring of lived experience in this work and the provision of opportunities for people with lived experience to influence decision makers (see objective one). In the facilitated discussion to explore emerging final evaluation findings team members shared that one outcome of the hustings was that as a result of attending one MSP has now written a report on the rural poverty premium for use within their constituency.

For public sector stakeholders active within the project the role the project played in campaigning was particularly helpful, given the restrictions they have on doing this themselves.

“There was maybe a bit of a political challenge and I kind of has to step aside from that in a way, because of my role, but even that was good to hear, in terms of, you know, just talking about how this works and what they should be thinking about” (OSG1)

“They supported people to challenge decisions as well, which we can’t really do. Well, we can but we’re not supposed to. But they were able to come in and support and make sure that the issues and challenges... were being elevated up to a Scottish Government level. So, I do think campaigning and influencing change and decision-making is a great strength of the project” (OSG4).

4.4.2 Style and tone of campaigning

The style and tone of the TARP team approach in campaigns of this type is highlighted as particularly important by several interviewees.

“(The Development Officer) has been part of that conversation, the Our Voice Matter campaign, she’s taken part in it without steering it in an overbearing way, you know, it’s got our flavour on it.” (OSG2)

Facilitated discussions at team meetings have shown clearly that this enabling approach is conscious practice within Poverty Alliance where great care is taken to avoid appearing to move into local communities and take over, and to work in a way that a) empowers others and b) make best use of project resources. This approach is aimed at being more respectful and at intended to lead to more sustainable outcomes. It can at times be challenging for team members who describe themselves as having an “action bias” and having to work hard to “sit on the edge” (SM1).

This style and tone was apparent to and welcomed by stakeholders not just in relation to campaigning however, and was something considered central to the organisational way of being.

“One of the things I like most is that you felt like you were dealing with real people who see you, not the badge of the third sector and dismissed you... it was good to be treated as an equal.” (APN3).

For one Citizen Panel member the spirit of partnership and respect they experienced in their work with the Poverty Alliance was highlighted when they attended a meeting of senior organisational staff, with a member of the project team:

“I was at a panel with some of the high, the people who run the Poverty Alliance, and he referred to me within the panel as his colleague. And it sounds very small, but it’s not very small, because he was in a managerial position... but he referred to me as his colleague.” (CP2)

One interviewee felt there was an opportunity or need for the project team to adjust their campaigning approach and show “sharper teeth” (APN5) however for another, working at a national level and more closely with the Scottish Government there was a reflection that as the project appeared to move into more “direct action” (NS3) this may have had a negative impact on engagement.

“I link quite closely to the Scottish Government so you get a feeling, because you have conversations, water cooler moments around what’s going on in the landscape, and there was, you could see the enthusiasm and interest in what was going on in the project early on. Maybe that was because it posed no threat? But as the project progressed and the tone of the project became, I don’t want to use the word

aggressive, it's not aggressive, it's assertive, it's, yeah, as the volume raised slightly you could see the enthusiasm and the willingness to listen changed slightly." (NS3)

The "fine balance" needed between "being confrontational and direct and assertive" was acknowledged as not always easy to find (NS3) but there remained for some, a need to "shout a bit louder" about what has been achieved (OSG3).

4.4.3 Informed, engaged and motivated advocates and decision makers

Local stakeholders regularly referenced feeling better informed about rural poverty as a result of the project, with related increases in confidence to influence for change.

"Definitely growth in knowledge, 100% growth and confidence. I now know that when I was pushing, or when I was thinking about pushing for this, I've got so much confidence. (OSG1)

A more prominent consideration of the rural poverty premium among public sector representatives was also noted by those in the voluntary sector.

"There's definitely a recognition and greater support and understanding and regular reference to poverty used by officers and services that wouldn't necessarily have been before." (APN5)

Learning partner group members working at a national and UK level were also able to cite examples of the work of the TARP project directly influencing the activities of political leaders.

"I work at the UK level a lot too, so I've seen the Poverty Alliance's name associated with parliamentary committees at Westminster level, which is pretty impressive and, in fact, I had a meeting with an MP recently... the particular MP is going to take forward a paper on rural poverty in Westminster and a lot of that is based on the Poverty Alliance's work, which is amazing." (LPG2)

In additional national stakeholders working alongside elected officers described themselves as "able to give more well-rounded and robust advice" (NS1) because of the TARP project. They went on to describe an outcome of their involvement in the learning partner group as "improving our own knowledge as ministerial advisers" (NS1).

The work the project was doing also made it easier for some stakeholders working at a national level to engage others in their work.

"Around rural and island living I have had a much better dialogue with the actors within that environment because of the project raising those issues... so when I went

to speak to people or engage with people, I didn't have to explain why I was there, or what the issues were. They knew and that was as a result of this project. So, I was very, very grateful for the work that was being done and I benefitted enormously from that. (NS3)

For some network members involvement in TARP had not only increased knowledge and confidence in campaigning and influencing, it had also increased their motivation to do. This crucially meant shifting from largely reactive and supportive work with local people, into more proactive influencing work aimed at making at a preventative intervention.

"...our day to day is firefighting, reacting to crisis, to people's problems and challenges but what we're doing... it's given us a new way of thinking of what we can be doing... We will be looking more at the policy side... and yeah, definitely just taking what we're learning on the ground and feeding that back to the appropriate people further up the chain, whether than is government or DWP or whoever." (OSG3).

4.4.4 Shared language

Local and national stakeholders identified the introduction of a shared and simple vocabulary around rural poverty as key to enabling more effective influencing on solutions to the rural poverty premium.

"One of the biggest achievements is using language that people find quite easy to pick up, like rural premium or poverty premium... They've been very successful in increasing the frequency of use of that phrase." (LPG2)

"It helped us change our language and view what poverty is like... and that helped us to really sort of see our role within that." (APN1)

This included specifically in relation to language used in policy related work.

"The new Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan... I think there's a direct link between what's in the plan and information that we've heard through the learners' partners meetings and whilst we don't have any specific actions in the new delivery plan, the language throughout the document has a much stronger recognition of rural and island issues." (NS1)

4.4.5 External context

In considering the impact of the project overall, and particularly in relation to objective four, it is important to acknowledge the changing external context that unfolded through the three years of the project. While any multi-year project will need to adapt to external factors several interviewees highlighted the impact of elections on progress with influencing work, and to a lesser extent the uncertain political context which directly impacted the cost of fuel and energy bills.

“I would say (the external context) has had a higher impact than perhaps we would ever have thought at the beginning of the project... we weren’t imagining the straits of Hormuz would be strangled... I would say the context has worsened and within that the ability to influence is constrained”(LPG1)

“... during the pre-election period our engagement with external stakeholders is incredibly limited... It’s a really tricky time of year... there’s so many conversations that would be so helpful to have, but we just can’t have them... it doesn’t surprise me at all that the pre-election person has just sort of hampered the momentum of the project. I’d be surprised if it hasn’t to be honest.” (NS1)

“... you’ve also got to recognise... where we were and where we are in the political cycle. All this plays a part in, obviously, decisions that can be made, money that can be spent, things that can be said and should be said and aren’t said... nothing is done in isolation, and I think this project was maybe a hostage to some of that.” (NS3)

The dual impact of both UK and Scottish elections were described as creating “interesting times” (LPG1) and the flexibility and adaptability of the team noted.

5. ADDITIONAL REFLECTIONS

5.1 Working in two locations

Overall stakeholders felt the choice to have two focus locations for the project was positive, bringing particular benefits for Citizen Panel members including by facilitating the online way of working.

“Particularly with the panels... people have really enjoyed that. Learning from others, but also getting to hear about things that are very different from their own situations and I think that’s helped to, in an odd way, I think it’s helped to make the kind of online way of working with the panels even stronger, because there’s a bit more of a community and there’s always been that feeling that you don’t need to be in the same place... because there’s no way you could have been.” (SM1)

The value of this opportunity to “compare and contrast” (SM2) was shared by anti-poverty network members.

“Even if you’re working in one geographic location that geographic location can feel like a silo so it’s really interesting to see that there are potentially similar member organisations coming from another part of the country who are potentially looking at the things that you’re looking at, but in a different way, so you can both learn from each other and you can both adapt and absorb work that others are doing.” (APN3)

Clear here is the value of the “comparator piece” (SM3) that comes from two locations and the learning for individuals and organisations, beyond the core TARP team.

National stakeholders highlighted the value of working in Argyll and Bute and Aberdeenshire as “quite often those areas get overlooked” (NS2) and because of the range of communities within them.

“... both are pretty vast local authority areas compared to the rest of Scotland... so I feel like they were good choices because within the boundaries of those local authority areas you’ve got quite a mix of all those different typologies.” (NS1)

Attendance at monthly team meetings and facilitated team sessions also gave insight in the value of working in two locations for team members. The work undertaken by the

Development Officers in each location has been demanding (it was described by one team member as “time intensive and emotionally draining” (SM2) and having access to a peer undertaking the same type of work has been a clear source of practical and emotional support. For the wider team having two locations has also created a helpful leveller when faced with challenges (for example in progressing test of change pilots), offering a helpful broader perspective on project progress.

It is important to note however, that there was also a view that working more intensely in one location may have been more impactful.

“Evidence and learning from place based work and system change work is... so much of it is about having those relationships and being able to build those networks in a place... but you’re just limited in what you can do in two and a half days a week...that was always going to be a challenge because (staff members) are also having to engage in other parts of the project or with the rest of the organisation... if you had to choose between two places at two and a half days a week or one place full time, I would have plumped for one place full time.” (SM2)

Clear here is the desire to do even more detailed work in one location rather than a sense that having two locations was unhelpful – the issue raised is about overall level of resource for the place-based work, rather than the principle of working in two locations.

5.2 Project length

In evaluating the success of the project in achieving stated objectives consideration was given to the length of time it ran. Many stakeholders, involved in various elements of the project, considered three years too short a period in which to deliver the significant change the project was seeking.

“I don’t think three years is going to address everything that we need to address.” (CP3)

“Three years is very short... such a short time before you kickstart the project, before you get all of the people that need to be involved, all the charities, the private and everybody and then it takes, it would have taken maybe a year to get things ready and then you’re running and they you have to conclude and disband every work that you have done.” (OSG6)

“I think it’s far too short to effect change.” (APN4)

This was in part because of the complexity and length of time needed for any systems change work.

The extent of time needed to “build positive relationships when you’re coming in cold.” (OSG4) was also particularly noted, and we have seen (in section 4.1) that the care taken to do this has paid dividends across the project.

Several interviewees commented that a 3yr + 2 yr funding model would be more effective in allowing time to capitalise on work to date, with one stakeholder describing extended funding as giving “room to breathe” (APN3) and build on the crucial foundational work.

“If they could have had 3 plus 2, because it takes you 3 years, especially if you are not in the local authority area, and you don’t know the communities and you’ve not worked with them...it’s quite a large local authority area... the first year is just about exploring what the possibilities are, how are you going to pull partners together, what is it that you’re going to be doing and ... setting up structures and ways of working with partners...and the second year us about setting up your lived experience panel, looking and exploring the issues which are huge for rural areas and identifying... what is the priorities that local people really want you to take on . And the third year is about taking those priorities on... I think they’re just getting to the stage of knowing what they’re doing, they’ve got a reputation as a trusted partner... they’re just getting somewhere and then it’s closed off...” (OSG4)

“I think five years is a good time and you a better result.” (OSG6)

In considering longer term funding it was acknowledged that “five years funding is really difficult to get” (OSG4) and that in fact three years was unusual. Three-year funding was in fact a source of envy for some.

“We’re in a yearly funding cycle so it’s quite nice to see a project that’s been able to be funded and have a commitment three-year funding. I’m quite jealous of that.” (NS2)

Some stakeholders did however feel that three years was “actually perfect” (APN2), “just right” (OSG5) or “about right for identifying the issues and looking at what we can do to mitigate them” (OSG1). One national stakeholder commented on the way in which the length of the project may have negatively impacted their ability to influence in policy settings.

“I wonder if it was a bit too long... because it enabled it, unfortunately, to go from flavour of the day to something else.” (NS3)

Overall, though, those working at a national level, including those in policy related roles, felt continued funding of the project was crucial.

“It certainly needs a lot longer funding... the culture change... it’s going to take a lot longer to be implemented.” (LPG2)

“It needs more funding, it needs more secure funding... it should last, it should continue... to continue to build on that momentum.” (NS1)

For some project staff there was a clear desire to have the opportunity to extend impact by working over a longer period

“I feel like it would be great to be able to do a phase 2 that builds on some of it...” (SM1)

“It feels like if we’d had five years, we could have done several different tests of change that kind of grew from each other” (SM4)

Others reflected that while “three years is never going to be enough” for “big change that lasts, systems change” (SM2) perhaps a more helpful approach would have been “three years or maybe even less, but with more resource packed into one place” (SM2). There was also a view that funding for several years can “sometimes be an issue of pace” (SM3).

In the facilitated discussion to explore emerging final evaluation findings the team were invited to reflect on the varying views on project length. As part of this, consideration was given to the potential tension between applying for the level and length of funding an organisation feels is genuinely required for the task at hand, versus applying for the level and length of funding they believe it is reasonable to ask for or they are likely to be successful in securing. The context for exploring this was some stakeholders having highlighted what they saw as “the trade off between ability to get it funded and the impact you can have” (LPG3) and some team member interviews which noted how unusual it was to have received the scale and length of funding they had for this project.

“We were significantly well funded for a significant period of time.” (SM3)

“It’s the longest contract I’ve ever had... I haven’t had to apply for another job in two years which has been an incredible luxury compared with the entire rest of my career and that’s been the same for some others involved in the project.” (SM1)

In previous team meetings team members had noted that this grant was “Robertson Trust’s biggest commitment to a project in their history at that point” (SM3) and the single largest grant received by the Poverty Alliance. In the workshop team members were encouraged to reflect on the extent to which the knowledge of this may have negatively impacted the initial and any subsequent funding asks. In addition, in interviews the extent to which “funding bids are massively competitive, hugely oversubscribed” and the way in “which (this) sets up a dynamic... of over promise” (SM3) was also noted. These factors may perhaps have come together to influence a funding ask and project length that was influenced by likely funding success, as well as project success.

5.3 Team structure

The interim evaluation report noted the challenges of delivering the project with a team working on TARP on a part time basis. For some staff this was initially also part time within Poverty Alliance, while for others they worked part time on the project, but full time for the organisation. Some of these challenges have continued although the impact has been reduced because of increased hours for some team members, and/or through taking on additional roles within the organisation.

Staff member interviews did however identify some potential learnings around team structure and ways of working. For some the matrix management approach for the project was challenging to navigate i.e. the combination of a manager for this project and a line manager located in a different part of the organisation. Across the team of five members of staff there were four different line managers, and this was seen by some as sub optimal.

“If you’re recruiting someone just to work on a project¹⁰, in some ways it would have made sense if we were all just managed by the same person.” (SM2)

For another team member the reflection is wider: less about line management but more about the construction of roles i.e. learning that there may be value in having generic rather than specialist roles to allow greater flexibility in use of resource and working on project outputs. This includes reflecting on the value of “one full time officer who does policy and research” (SM3), instead of the part time policy and part time research post both created for the project. Another reflection was on the potential advantage of recruiting “project officers” rather than posts focussed on specific activities, which in some cases led to some initial reluctance to work more flexibly across general project needs, albeit potentially driven by lack of confidence to step into areas perceived as more specialist.

Some team members also highlighted the potential value of phasing project resource differently, reflecting that in the early stages of the project the bulk of the work was in the

¹⁰ Which was the case initially for some of the team roles

two locations, with more limited demands on policy and research. For this staff member the learning was the opportunity to have “front loaded” (SM4) resource into the two locations, bringing wider team resource on board later. Certainly, there was an early recognition that resource in each of the two locations was “understaffed” (SM3).

5.4 Project planning

The success of the project is clearly built from the work of skilled and committed team members, and particularly the willingness from those working in the two locations to work extended hours and with a great deal of flexibility. The way in which these staff members flexed how much they were working and when was noted by all team members and the impact of this is clear in the following example where one team members describes the development journey a particular Citizen Panel member has experienced.

“... the person who was a participant and is now a peer as a professional was there speaking to this, and kind of putting that view in its place, and I was just thinking, oh, this is amazing... and that... would not have happened had (staff member) not spent a Saturday traveling a fair distance to this community event to go and speak to a face painter who was doing stuff for kids and recruited those in...” (SM3)

While this commitment and flexibility is widely recognised and appreciated (alongside the way in which the Poverty Alliance as an organisation facilitated and enabled this) there is also some evidence to suggest that a more “clear and consistent project management structure” (SM2) may have been helpful, with some team members commenting that not enough time was spent on this up front, which added to pressure in the later stages of the project. Certainly, midway through the project, there was a recognised need for increased focus on producing outputs from the project.

“I'm looking at our output schedule, for example, and I'm like, you know, it's massively bunched, this is suboptimal, this is very much what I was seeking to avoid by trying to push pace a year ago and 6 months ago, and trying to get stuff out then...” (SM3)

There is a particular opportunity to think in more detail not only about project planning, but particularly about resource and capacity planning.

“I think one thing we haven't had is... so it isn't necessarily specific to this project, is a sense of resource planning... we often might have very useful conversations about

priorities. And they sometimes will then feed into useful-ish conversations about, sort of, timelines and things like that, although not enough, but what we never talk about is, how long will that thing take? How much of someone's time? (SM2)

In the facilitated workshop with team members in June this was briefly explored and the Poverty Alliance approach to project management was described as based around objectives and key results (OKRs). This approach will not create the space for integrated resource planning, as described above and this may be an area the organisation wishes to consider for future projects.

5.5 An uncertain end?

Section 4.3.4 noted the concerns of some Oversight Group members about the lateness with which they felt planning for the project end was taking place, and the lack of clarity on what would happen at the end of the project. This lack of clarity was a consistent theme in interviews with stakeholders involved in all elements of the project.

“I’m not sure about the network, what will happen.” (APN2)

“I have no idea what’s going to happen, sorry.” (APN6)

“I don’t know what’s going to happen.” (APN4)

“... in terms of awareness of next steps, I’d have to put my hands up and say I have absolutely no idea. I’m not sure what the plans are.” (NS1)

Given the care taken in establishing and maintaining relationships with Citizen Panel members, and the strength of connections established between Panel members, the lack of clarity on plans at the end of the project for this community is perhaps concerning.

“Unfortunately, I am not sure what’s going to happen.” (CP6)

“We have no idea, you know, I don’t know. We’ve not really talked about that.” (CP5)

“I’m also unsure about what would happen.” (CP4)

“Nothing’s been mentioned, so it’s kind of been skirted around.” (CP3)

This lack of clarity was a concern not just for panel members themselves, but also for some wider stakeholders.

“I’m talking about people with lived experience, (they have) a place to go and then that’s gone. So where do they go after that?” (APN3)

As noted in section 4.3.4 Oversight Group members there is a particular concern that planning for the end of the project did not begin early enough and a missed opportunity to more actively engage them in helping secure resources needed to ensure some elements of work continue.

“I have met to talk about what we’re going to do in the end. But I would have maybe wanted those conversations earlier, because I was worried there was going to be a cliff edge... it’s still unclear, and it’s June and the project finishes in September...” (OSG4)

“We haven’t discussed end of life as it were, or continuation... It’s even possible that those discussions are being had outside of the group, which I’m not part of... and that’s fine, but, you know, it does need to come back to the oversight group at some point.” (OSG2)

Exploring this in the facilitated workshop with the project team in June it was clear that they do have a greater sense of clarity on plans (albeit not fully so, as some actions are reliant on securing additional funding and confirmation of this has still not been received) and a shared recognition that they need to do more to ensure stakeholders have up to date information. Team members noted that local authority partners had in fact been approached approximately one year prior to the end of the funded period, and while there is a positive desire to continue supporting the work of the project, including with funding, these arrangements take considerable time to confirm. The team also noted that this was the first time a local authority would be taking on funding elements of a previous Poverty Alliance project.

6. CONCLUSION

This evaluation shows clearly the success the team have had in delivering against the objectives and outcomes established for the project. The risk in presenting these as separate sections is losing the overall essence of the feedback gathered in interviews, from surveys and through facilitated and observed discussions and workshops. Stepping back to consider that two key things shine through:

- the *care* taken by the team to deliver this project respectfully and with humility, including through an authentic and skilled commitment to centring lived experience.
- the extent to which the project has *enabled others to do their own work better*. This is the case for individuals and organisations, and locally and nationally: the additional capacity, clarity of focus, informed and evidence-based approach taken by the project team has led to increased confidence, knowledge and skill in others, and critically, it has also inspired others to want to do more to tackle the rural poverty premium.

The evaluation does highlight opportunities for learning for the management of future projects and key amongst these is the opportunity to take greater time at the start of the project to ensure all team members have a shared understanding of the purpose of each aspect of the project. Taking that time at the start, to generate deep and shared understanding of what was intended in the project proposal and plan submitted for funding and exploring and agreeing together how this is expected to come to life, would have been helpful. Alongside this more detailed project and resource planning may have enabled a more integrated and efficient way of working, and earlier and more transparent work on preparing for the end of the project would give greater clarity and confidence for a range of stakeholders.

Overall, though, the project has been very successful and there is clear evidence that it will have a strong legacy.

Appendix One – Original project objectives and outcomes

- Objective 1: To support people with direct experiences of poverty and trauma, community and voluntary organisations, the private sector, and public bodies to collaborate to address the poverty premium.
- Objective 2: Connections and collaboration between local rural organisations are increased and strengthened as local community and voluntary organisations are supported to network and undertake anti-poverty advocacy work.
- Objective 3: We learn about change in taking a participatory approach to tackling the rural poverty premium.
- Outcome i) Citizens Panel members experience Citizen Panel involvement as positive, meaningful and impactful personally and for the local area
- Outcome ii) Citizens Panel member ongoing involvement in related participatory processes and local decision making after the project ends
- Outcome iii) Increased connection and collaboration between local people, community and voluntary organisations, the private sector and public bodies to address the poverty premium during the project
- Outcome iv) A legacy of increased connection and collaboration to between local people, community and voluntary organisations, the private sector and public bodies to address the poverty premium after the project ends
- Outcome v) Increased understanding of the enablers and barriers of taking a participatory approach to tackling the rural poverty premium
- Outcome vi) Increased and sustained involvement of those with lived experience in poverty policies
- Outcome vii) Increased and sustained consideration of rurality and poverty in wider policy development
- Outcome viii) Increased understanding of the enablers and barriers of taking a participatory approach to tackling the rural poverty premium

