

BECOMING HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS: COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS TAKING ACTION ON RURAL POVERTY IN SCOTLAND



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Background: Rights in Action

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

The project has three workstreams:

- 1.** 'Know Your Rights' workshops to raise awareness of how human rights can be used as a tool in the fight against poverty.
- 2.** Action Learning Sets to bring together community organisations and community members to identify actions to support rights realisation and combat poverty.
- 3.** Participatory research projects enabling community researchers to generate learning on the overlaps between human rights and intersections of inequality and to undertake action

This report was written by Laura Robertson and Lydia Murphy.

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

www.povertyalliance.org

Disclaimer The views in this report are those of the researchers and the action learning participants and opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Poverty Alliance or our members. Acknowledgements The Rights in Action team would like to thank the community organisations who took part in the Rights in Action action learning sets. Funders Rights in Action is funded by the Scottish Government's Equality and Human Rights Fund, managed and supported by Inspiring Scotland.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Rights in Action (RIA) project brought together six organisations from rural Scotland to tackle poverty using human rights-based approaches.

After a residential in Aberdeen where we came together to undertake human rights training to establish a strong foundation in human rights principles, the set met monthly online to explore issues they were facing in their work. They also received ongoing support through targeted learning sessions and policy updates. These activities created a collaborative environment where participants could share experiences, reflect, and develop strategies to address the causes and consequences of poverty in their local contexts.

As a result of the project:

- Organisations embedded human rights into their work

‘It has really highlighted ...the importance of human rights and the recognition that they are available... The realization and awareness and empowerment and then the ability to take action, to defend and, and to stand up for your human rights.’

- Participants gained confidence in advocating for their communities and using human rights language to influence decision-making.

‘I feel much better able to advocate for people and prevent discrimination and the right to equal access.’

- Organisations introduced participatory structures, improved policies, and reframed communications to better align with their equality and inclusion goals.

‘The work we did as a group helped us all to pull out the importance of participation.’

‘There is a much greater awareness now of the importance of equality and how we can elevate that.’

‘Since that action learning set we’ve been putting a tooth comb through our policies.’

- The supportive peer network developed through the ALS process strengthened individual and collective efforts, enhancing resilience and collaboration across rural communities

‘When you are rural like ourselves, it can be, it can feel quite isolating and so I’ve really appreciated having the support.’

‘The process has really supported me being able to take action, of being able to think critically and creatively and outside the box.’

Evaluation of the project emphasised the value of in-person engagement to build trust and the importance of targeted human rights training. The learning and evaluation from the project also highlight the potential of structured, participatory methodologies to drive meaningful and sustainable change.

WHAT WE DID

In June 2023, a group of six organisations delivering anti-poverty work in rural areas across Scotland came together through the Poverty Alliance's Rights in Action project. Over 12 months that followed, using the action learning methodology, these organisations identified issues related to their work and/or community and were supported through a process to identify and take action to make change through adopting human-rights based approaches.

The group first met in a residential over 2.5 days in June 2023 where they were introduced to methodology of action learning sets and how this process would support them to take action within their organisation and local community on tackling poverty through adopting human rights-based approaches. The residential provided a space for the individual participants to learn about each other's roles and organisations, and to reflect and discuss what work they were already doing with groups living in poverty and who are furthest from realising their economic, social and cultural rights in Scotland. The first sessions also included training on economic, social and cultural rights providing the participants with an overview of the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the UK's obligations as a signatory to the Covenant and an introduction on how human rights can be used as a tool to tackle poverty utilising the PANEL principles outlined below and case studies of how organisations have successfully used human rights based approach to tackle housing rights infringements.¹

¹ [housin-project-report-vfinal-may-2020.pdf](https://www.scottishhumanrights.com/housin-project-report-vfinal-may-2020.pdf)
([scottishhumanrights.com](https://www.scottishhumanrights.com))

The residential gave time to really delve into what the PANEL principles mean in practice for community organisations. Whilst community third sector organisations are not always duty bearers, they are often a key, or only, organisation in a rural area, providing support for people living in poverty. In the action learning sets, the group were given examples of open questions to aid a maintained focus on thinking underpinned by human rights-based approaches.

- **Participation:** people should be involved in decisions that affect their rights
- **Accountability:** there should be monitoring of how people's rights are being affected, as well as remedies when things go wrong.
- **Non-discrimination and Equality:** all forms of discrimination must be prohibited, prevented and eliminated. People who face the biggest barriers to realising their rights should be prioritised.
- **Empowerment:** everyone should understand their rights and be fully supported to take part in developing policy and practices which affect their lives.
- **Legality:** approaches should be grounded in the legal rights that are set out in domestic and international laws.

Over 12 months, the action learning group met online every month. Each meeting typically involved two of the participants each presenting on an issue through an action learning set. Based on feedback gathered from the group, from January onwards the participants were also provided with monthly updates on key human rights publications, events and legal changes, such as the UNCRC (Scotland) Act coming into force, prior to the session as well as additional awareness raising presentations focused on areas the group wanted more knowledge around.

WHAT IS ACTION LEARNING?

The action learning sets were facilitated by two members of the Poverty Alliance team who had received training in delivering action learning through Action Learning Associates.

Action Learning is a process that involves a group of peers working on real problems they are facing in their work, taking actions and learning as individuals and collectively. It helps organisations develop strategies to address pressing problems.

Each session follows a fixed structure. It starts with the group checking in on the progress they have made the month prior, then each member proposes a problem they would like to discuss for that day. The group chooses who they would like to hear and the person presenting the issue can talk for as long as

they require. They are then supported to think through the issue by being asked challenging and probing questions, and then to identify key actions. Each group member then has an opportunity to reflect on what the process was like for them.

The Poverty Alliance has extensive experience in using an Action Learning Set (ALS) methodology to both analyse and take action on complex problems. As a participatory approach that centres meaningful action, we felt it was a natural fit for a project focused on embedding change to practice.

Anonymity is a key principle that underpins ALS. Consequently, not all the content of the sets or actions taken as a result of taking part in this process are shared in this report.

A note on the organisations involved

Organisation	Type of area	Groups supporting
1	Remote rural	Disabled people and carers
2	Remote rural	Whole community
3	Remote rural	Whole community
4	Remote rural	Whole community
5	Accessible small town	Whole community, particularly young people
6	Mix of rural and urban	Whole community

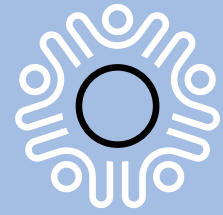
Rights in Action: Using the PANEL principles to tackle poverty

Over the 12 months, the individuals participating in the programme brought challenges they were facing in their respective roles, organisations and communities. Commonalities in the issues they were facing were evident; for example, challenges around gaps in provision of services for people living in poverty in rural areas (e.g.

welfare rights advice, transport); poverty-related stigma; and working collaboratively with duty bearers were highlighted. The participants also explored a range of economic, social and cultural rights issues including: the right to cultural life, the right to adequate housing and the right to health.

CASE STUDY ONE

PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT



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How can I use the youth council to the best effect to get young voices in the community to be more prominent and to get them involved in strategic planning? How can I get them to see that this is your future? How do we get the youngsters to be involved?

This community organisation focused on how a youth council could give young people a say in decisions that affect them locally.

‘They’re looking forward to going to Scottish Parliament and they’ll not be shy about talking about the challenges in their community and to do human rights and things like poverty and housing that they they believe in passionately.’

‘They’ve now got the structure and the organization of the youth Council, influencing the club, going to meetings with the council, attending events like the Climate Action Times.’

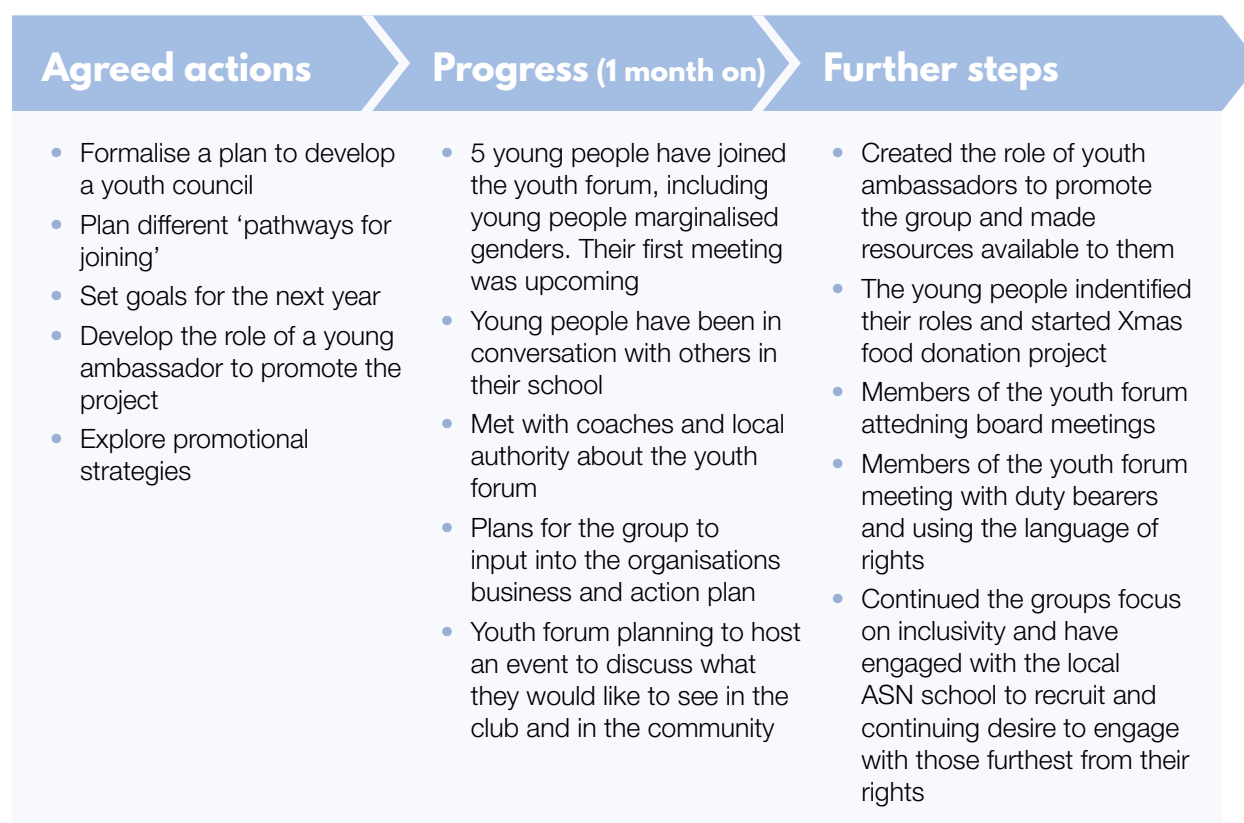
The Issue

In this set, the opportunity for increasing participation of young people in the work of the organisation through a ‘youth council’ was explored. The set member emphasized that they wanted young people involved to understand what they could influence.

Through clarifying and open questions from the other set members, such as ‘what are the benefits for young people?’ and ‘how would you sell the youth council to young people?’,

challenges around barriers to involving young people furthest away from their economic, social and cultural rights were explored. The set member identified a range of actions he could take within the organisation to build participation of young people and asked for practical thoughts from the rest of the group. Actions identified included developing the role of a ‘young ambassador’ ‘to go out and spread the word in an exciting way’. Reflections from members of the group included.

What happened?



Wider Outcomes

The ALS participant shared what the outcomes of taking part in the action learning process had been at two timepoints: six months into the process and a few months after the final action learning set. The set member reported:

- The benefits peer support and of having relationships with organisations across the country.

‘For me as an individual, it was really valuable having a group of peers to run things by and to share some of the challenges, get the fresh perspective on things from their point of view, drawing on their experience, their context.’

- That the project had supported the set member to introduce human rights to the whole of their organisation.

‘The first thing really is that is has really highlighted or elevated and then highlighted the importance of human rights and the recognition that they are available...The realization and awareness and empowerment and then the ability to take action, to defend and, and to stand up for your human rights... this process has been really helpful in that regard.’

- The project had also deepened the organisation’s participatory practices.

‘The work we did as a group helped us all to pull out the importance of participation. I’ve now got it on the agenda for board meetings as well.’

- Rights in Action supported them to set up a structure to pursue accountability from duty bearers, and challenge how the organisation works, particularly post UNCRC incorporation.

‘So having this structure and this framework and to know that there is a legislative platform behind it...that they can take forward in the youth council and get more young people involved as well as communicating their views and challenging the board of trustees, challenging politicians and speaking up.’

- Setting up the youth council supported them to deepen their practice around equality diversity and inclusion.

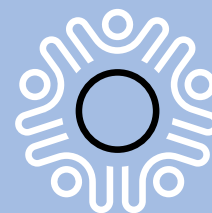
‘We were well down the road in terms of EDI, having ... but engaging with the youth council... there is a much greater awareness now of the importance of equality and how we can elevate that.’

- The set has supported them to bring a human rights perspective into outward facing work, particularly when engaging with MPs, MSPs, and the local authority.

‘We get asked to contribute and to attend and make presentations as I...I always try and build in, as you would imagine, the human rights perspective to that... We’re developing leadership and young people, the leaders of tomorrow and citizenship within our community, which has been sorely lacking and, and, and battered and bruised over decades... and we’re reminding the politicians and policy makers about that and holding them to account, hopefully to some extent, as far as you can, to what their obligations are.’

CASE STUDY TWO

PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT



How can I identify and dismantle the barrier of stigma and shame that are preventing community members, particularly the most vulnerable, from engaging with poverty alleviation projects, framed by a human-rights based approach?

This community organisation worker focused on the challenges of stigma and how the community identifies with the word poverty. Through their action learning set, they explored how they were using human rights-based approaches currently and how they could go about 'lighting the fire' to change perceptions and raise awareness of poverty as a human rights issue.

iStoc
Credit:

The issue

Based in a small community, the set member faced challenges around tackling poverty due to the shame/stigma it evokes. Poverty is not a word that is used by the community. There were issues around accessing adequate standards of housing as well as digital connectivity in the local area. The local area also lacks access to a welfare rights advice, and many other vital services. They knew that

the continued cost-of-living crisis meant more people were being affected by poverty, but the organisation faced struggles with offering help that might be seen as condescending or as charity.

Their actions focused on how they could use human rights language to remove blame and stigma relating to poverty.

What happened?



Wider Outcomes

The ALS participant shared what the outcomes of taking part in the action learning process had been at two timepoints: six months into the process and a few months after the final action learning set. Outcomes included:

- Having language to express that something is not acceptable and increased confidence to challenge and influence local authority decision making. This has included inspiring and supporting others to challenge decisions that would cause human rights regression. The participant noted that using human rights language was particularly ‘empowering’ for them as an advocate.
- Benefits of the network and being part of a supportive community of practice on wellbeing and motivation were also shared.

‘It was a group of people who helped me keep fighting the fight when at times it was really tiring... it was nice to be able to kind of lift the lid a little and talk about it a bit more explicitly.’

‘Someone in that meeting saw me doing it and then spread it further to other communities. I feel much better able to advocate for people & prevent discrimination & right to equal access.’

- The set member was able to advocate for their local library to stay open.

‘I managed to get them to ensure the library opened and stayed opened. I had a discussion with them to impress upon them the importance of it. It was particularly actually from the point of view of people who are experiencing domestic abuse.’

• The participant getting a promotion and funding for their post. In the final interview the participant reflected that they did not think they would have made as much impact, had the confidence to take on more responsibility, or been able to secure this funding if they did not implement a human rights based approach.

‘I’m able to justify a lot of the work that I’m doing and the impact of it because I’m taking a human rights-based approach.’

‘it’s been a key part of me being able to feel more confident about presenting my work to other staff members and to my board.’

The participant also reported that they felt the community saw the organisation more sympathetically as a result of them taking a human rights-based approach to their anti-poverty work.

CASE STUDY THREE

EMPOWERMENT



How can we, as an organisation, use effective language to empower the community to use human rights as a tool, firstly as a team, then through our comms?

This community worker focused on how human rights-based approaches and issues could become more integrated in her organisation. Through questions from other set members, she considered how her organisation currently communicates with the groups it supports, including older people and disabled people and took actions to change language use in communications with the community.

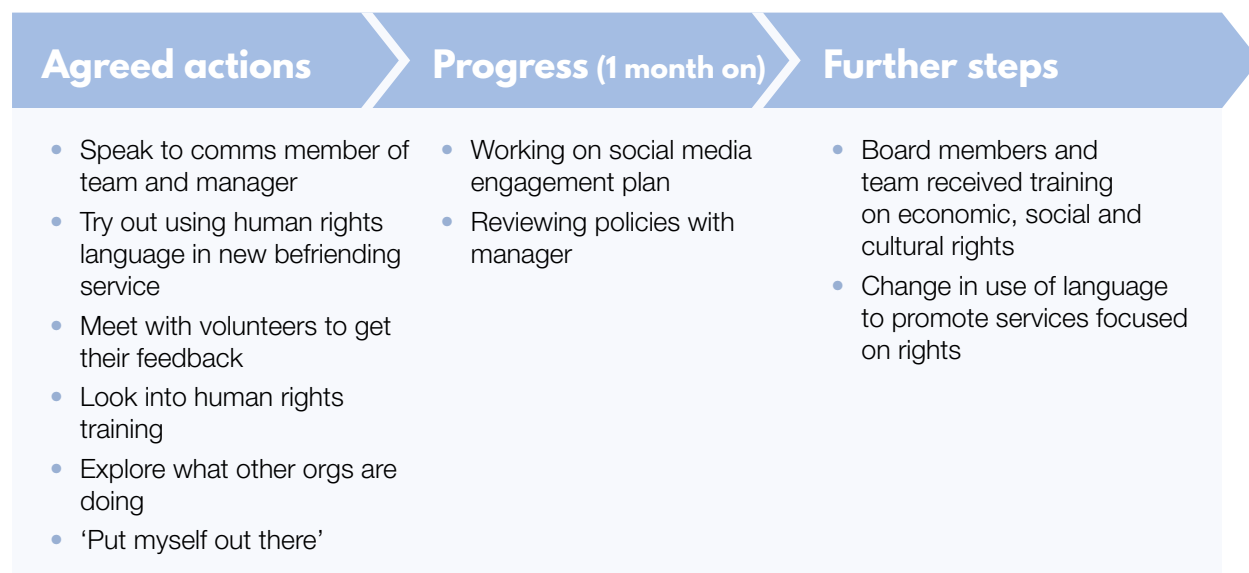
The issue

The organisation provides support in a remote, rural area. They communicate news and information about services, events and activities through differing communication channels including newsletters, leaflets and via social media. A challenge they face as an organisation is engaging with people who have lived in the local area ‘for decades’ with pride identified as an issue as people do not talk about poverty. Her vision was for her

organisation to ‘organically and subtly’ use human rights language in the community and in a year’s time, to see the organisation reaching everyone in the community, particularly older people.

The action learning set members offered reflections including the importance of groundwork and framing new approaches as pilots within a small community where there could be resistance to change.

What happened?



Wider Outcomes

The ALS participant shared what the outcomes of taking part in the action learning process had been at two timepoints: six months into the process and a few months after the final action learning set. Outcomes included:

- The benefit of bringing the team together to learn and to integrate a new perspective into their work.

‘It’s really just it’s kind of created a new perspective.. it’s actually brought our team together. I think it’s, you know, going out into the wider community. I’m not sure how well it will be received immediately. But like anything in a rural community it just takes time but the effect on my ability and capacity has been very positive internally.’

- Supporting the organisation to reframe their work, particularly in external communications and raising awareness of new services, and conversations with the wider community.

‘I think the key outcome has really been on our language, our marketing throughout the whole organisation, so we offer, for example, befriending services and counselling services and that’s quite a new thing to the generations that we have here and it’s like it’s very out there and I think using the language that I’ve discussed in the action learning sets sessions. It changes that perspective... that’s been the key outcome, the language that we use. ... I’m having more open conversations with the community surrounding it and it’s really helped.’

- Embedding human rights into the policies and procedures that underpin the organisation and ensure that new staff are also taking a human rights-based approach to their work.

‘Since that action learning set we’ve been putting a tooth comb through our policies... we’ve even been looking at our mission statement and things like that.’

- Benefiting from being part of a supportive community of practice. This was seen as particularly important as the set member works in a remote rural community,

‘I think it’s been one of the most supportive, collaborative working that I’ve experienced in my role, especially within the third sector... when you are rural like ourselves, it can be, it can feel quite isolating and so I’ve really appreciated having the support.’

CASE STUDY FOUR

ACCOUNTABILITY



Case study of a remote rural organisation: How can I realise my ambition for my organisation to be a human rights decision-making organisation but also a human rights defender?

This participant focused on how they, and their organisation, could further embed human rights decision-making and challenge duty bearers.

The issue

In this action learning set, the ALS participant presented on the idea of her organisation becoming a 'human rights defender'. In their role, they knew they were in a position where they could influence policy and strategy locally and challenge duty bearers. Through questions from the set members, they shared how they would love to move forwards with

the use of human rights language in the public arena and stated, "assuming you are a rights-based organisation is not the same as being one". Challenges to taking this forward included hesitancy about how to campaign effectively and not having a comms person within the organisation.

What happened?



Wider Outcomes

The ALS participant shared what the outcomes of taking part in the action learning process had been at two timepoints: six months into the process and a few months after the final action learning set. Outcomes of the process included:

- Making progress on their ambition to become a human rights social leader in their remote island community.

‘I think I have made some progress, but there’s a lot more to make. I’m a lot more comfortable, you know, calling ourselves defenders of rights. I use a lot further from their rights. I use that a lot.’

- The set member reported that they have found human rights to be a particularly helpful way to address discrimination and disabled people not being afforded equal access and opportunities.

‘You know discrimination is quite emotive. I think what what I’ve probably done which is helped the organisation is say OK... let’s look at it from a human human rights point of view and I think that’s been useful... I mean it’s the same when you come out the other side but yeah, it’s less emotive going in through that lens.’

- In their final evaluation interview the set member spoke about how they had become more ‘comfortable’ to remind duty bearers of human rights obligations and that their existing strategic relationships locally had enabled this.

The set member also spoke about the benefits of receiving practical support from other set members, particularly in areas that are not in their organisational focus, like digital access.

At the end of the process that set member reflected that the project had supported them to feel more confident engaging with marginalised groups, and that they had learnt from the practice of other set members, particularly around considering the needs of young people.

The process of getting to watch other organisations think through and explore issues was seen as beneficial.

‘Hearing from all these organisations was brilliant...It was right down at the stresses and it was right down at the ohh this isn’t working or this is working or you know so... Well, it’s a privilege.’

LEARNING AND EVALUATION

Through interviews with five of the ALS members mid-way through the action learning set programme and with three of the ALS members a few months after the final set, we have been able to explore their experiences of participating in RIA as well as individual and organizational outcomes.

All set members reported that they were better able to integrate human rights and intersectional approaches into their work as a result of taking part in the set.

Throughout the project, set members took action to support them to advance human rights in their communities.

Outcomes not highlighted previously in this report have included:

- **Developing and piloting a taxi service to support people with dementia to access their social and cultural rights in a remote island community.**
- **Building rural connections to support the development of a national digital helpline.**
- **Set members coming to understand themselves as human rights defenders.**
- **Supporting healthy organisational development by improving board recruitment.**
- **Developing a pilot of a skillshare project.**
- **Set members feeling confident to discuss human rights and challenge decision making in strategic meetings.**
- **Using human rights-based approaches to develop funding applications, and seeing a benefit from doing so.**
- **Set member leading renewables projects, using a human rights-based approach.**
- **Centering the right to health in a 2023 summer programme and putting messages out to schools and teachers about human rights.**
- **A set member updating business strategy, introducing human rights as a crosscutting theme.**
- **A set member advocating against the local area using punitive measures after antisocial behaviour by taking a human rights-based approach.**
- **A set member setting up structure for the people who use their services to feedback and shape the service.**
- **Two set members introducing aspects of the ALS process to their work environment.**
- **Deepening involvement with the wider anti-poverty movement.**

BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Networking improving practice and wellbeing

All set members reported that the ALS felt like a supportive community of practice.

The peer support and being able to call on help and advice from others in the set was noted as an important outcome of the process by all set members. It was noted that having a mix of rural and island communities and organisations with rural reach but located in more urban areas was helpful. As was the diversity of experience in the set.

'We have all become quite close and supportive of each other, offering ideas and offering help and encouragement it has been an important and powerful aspect.'

Improved Confidence

Set members report increased confidence and feeling able to take bolder and more innovative action than they would have done without the support of set members.

'it's emboldened me to do things I might have been too tentative to do if I didn't have you guys to bounce things off.'

Set members reported increased confidence in using human rights language, and that this in turn improved their confidence in advocating for others and justifying why their work was important.

'A huge part of my job is justifying what I'm doing, whether that be to general manager, to a board or a subsidiary board, to funders. I have to be able to have more than just a like to stand on, you know, I have to have a really very strong justification for the work that I'm doing and how it benefits the community. I think the action learning sets have definitely strengthened my ability to do that.'

'It's been that kind of like you're immersed in the conversation. So you're kind of learning when you're not realising you're learning it. It's just that immersion in in the language of human rights and practical examples of it working and I think that's really been the biggest output of me joining you.'

EXPERIENCES OF THE ACTION LEARNING METHODOLOGY

Benefits of Action Learning

Set members found the Action Learning methodology extremely useful. Set members reported that the space the methodology provides to think and talk without interruption was particularly helpful.

'I've been listened to – it's very special that you are given that opportunity to speak and talk about something without interruption. That I think is a very important aspect – you are not hogging the floor but you are able to speak and that the group respect this.'

Set members reported that the methodology had changed the way they think. One set member reported that the most important outcome for them was the way in which taking part in the action learning set had changed the way they thought, and that this in turn improved their management style and organisational practice.

'It changes the way that you manage and the way that you strategically think.'

'The process has really supported me being able to take action, of being able to think critically and creatively and outside the box.'

'having that thinking space and having those questions were really valuable, because you continue, you continue along that vein afterwards even when the conversation is finished.'

Two set members have taken aspects of the methodology into their own workplace.

'I have taken the ALS slides and theory of action learning to use them as a leadership team. We are going to pilot it and see how it goes. It would be good if we can bring an issue to the table and use the methodology.'

LEARNING

Supporting organisations to understand human rights and use human rights frameworks has tangible benefits

Set members reported that increased human rights knowledge has improved their confidence to advocate for their communities, to be more mindful of participation, to justify why their work is important to funders, to improve their engagement with marginalised communities and to address difficult and emotive issues, like discrimination.

The residential was vitally important

The residential was seen as vitally important by set members in order to learn together about human rights, to build relationships, and to ensure that the online action learning sets were able to function as a trusting environment. Some set members suggested that the process would have been improved by having a residential at the beginning, again in the middle and at the end of the process.

‘I think having the residential first made the whole experience for me, and just having that connection and you know I can’t imagine having just gone straight into zoom. I just can’t imagine it would have been the same experience so having that face to fact contact, and it was quite an intense couple of days, but it really helped me and encouraged me into the project.’

‘It’s the reality of who you are speaking with online, because you have had food with them, you have had a laugh with them.’

Targeted human rights learning was welcomed

Building on our evaluation from our previous action learning set, we incorporated more human rights learning sessions as part of the process, set members reported that this was helpful. Set members let us know they were keen for more learning to be incorporated into the action learning process. After this discussion we incorporated more learning components into the process, and ensured that after every set we discussed the human rights implications of the issues at hand, and made sure that we were drawing out the PANEL principles fully. Some set members highlighted how helpful this was in their evaluation interview.

‘Knowledge is, is power, and the continuous revisiting of concepts I think was very helpful.’

More in person work would have been welcomed

Towards the end of the set, we experienced some drop off. In final evaluation interviews some set members suggested this may have been mitigated by more in person work. Set members were aware that doing all the work offline would not have been possible but suggested that you should have points where they meet again during the process that are clearly outlined.

‘the human contact is still important’

An additional piece of feedback from one set members was that they would have benefited more from the process if there were other set members with a job role which had a focus on campaigning.

CONCLUSION



This project has emphasised the impact of integrating human rights-based approaches into anti-poverty work and the importance of human rights education.

Key outcomes included heightened confidence among participants to challenge decisions that would cause rights regression, improved organisational practices, and solutions to address barriers like poverty stigma, service gaps, and community engagement.

The collaborative nature of the ALS fostered a supportive community of practice that proved invaluable for participants, particularly those working in isolated rural areas. The opportunity to engage in reflective, uninterrupted discussions helped

participants adopt creative, human rights-focused strategies in their work. This resulted in tangible outcomes such as advocacy successes, the establishment of participatory structures like youth councils, and the reframing of communications to empower communities.

The process highlighted the importance of in-person sessions to build trust and understanding, as well as the need for ongoing targeted learning on human rights.

The majority of participants emerged as stronger advocates and leaders. This experience underscores the potential of combining structured methodologies like Action Learning with human rights frameworks to inspire impactful, sustainable action.





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INSPIRING SCOTLAND