

Knowledge is Power

Supporting community-led action research

Programme Learning Report


August 2023



www.knowledgeispower.scot

Contents

Section 1 Introduction and background	4
Section 2 What is community-led action research?	5
Section 3 Knowledge is Power programme implementation	7
Section 4 Programme learning	12
Appendix	28





Section 1 Introduction & background

"Community-led action research is not research for the sake of it, to prove a theory or to satisfy the curious. It is about people asking their own questions about the issues they experience, getting the information, and evidence they need, and testing actions for change."

Knowledge is Power was developed as a result of an increased interest in and commitment to community-led action research in Scotland. From June 2016 to October 2017, SCDC and the Poverty Alliance worked alongside ten community organisations from across Scotland to identify what a support resource, designed for communities to undertake their own community-led action research processes, would look like. Together we identified what impacts community-led action research can lead to, what more might be needed to embed action research processes and help them work well, and where challenges might lie. In short, we began to design a community-led action research support project, from the ground up - **Knowledge is Power**.

Following on from this work we engaged in a series of discussions amongst a range of national stakeholders including Scottish Government, national funding bodies, national intermediary organisations and national networks. The outcome of these discussions was the development of the Knowledge is Power programme as a means to promote community-led action research and to support the development of this approach as a key component of community empowerment and community capacity building. There was also a clear intention from the start to develop learning about community-led action research and the impact that it can have on local communities, services and policies.

The core programme was funded by National Lottery Community Fund and the Scottish Government, and additional funding for specific community-led action research projects was committed by Corra, Inspiring Scotland, Scottish Government (Community Safety) and Scottish Families affected by Alcohol and Drugs (SFAD). The programme was delivered over the course of 3 years from 2019 -2022 by Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) and the Poverty Alliance working with a range of local community groups and projects.

Section 2 What is community-led action research?

The Knowledge is Power programme was developed based on the following key principles and elements of community-led action research.

Guiding principles

Self-determined: Communities, and their representative organisations, must set the agenda: the field must be open for communities to choose to investigate the topics, issues and matters which they define as important and worthy of action.

People and communities as assets: Every community has its own set of skilled, knowledgeable individuals who are experts in their own lives, experiences, and communities. These assets are the foundations of community-led action research practice and the bedrock of community empowerment.

Properly resourced: Community organisations can often demonstrate an impressive array of research knowledge, expertise and engagement – as well as a deep appreciation of their communities. However, training and support to design and deliver a robust action research process is essential.

Collaborative: The experience of collaborative and creative learning between and across communities is fundamentally important. This method goes beyond simply sharing learning. It aims to deepen learning and ask different – and often bigger – questions.

Embedded: Community-led action research approaches can be at their most powerful when undertaken within existing community-led work to support deepened learning and inform next steps in taking action on community priorities.

Of the highest quality: Community-led action research can prove the legitimacy and community-led credentials of the organisation carrying out the research activity, and provide satisfaction that any research presented is reliable.

Accepted as valid: Research carried out by community organisations is recognised for its value and its integrity, and accepted as a fundamental and credible source of evidence.



Section 3 The Knowledge is Power programme

Project Outcomes

The project had the following planned outcomes:

1. People in communities have improved capacity to deliver community-led action research.
2. Community-led action research is more widely used to influence practice and achieve positive change at a local, regional and national level
3. Public bodies have a better understanding of the value of community-led action research

The programme was developed by the Project Team (SCDC and Poverty Alliance) with input from a cross-sector alliance group comprising a wide range of interested stakeholders. It had 3 main phases of development covering: programme planning and set-up, programme implementation, and programme learning.

Set-up and planning

This took place between April and December 2019 and focused on programme planning, recruiting participating groups and designing/delivering training for the participants. In addition, a cross-sector alliance group was established which helped to shape the early development of the programme.

Programme Planning: In the programme planning phase it was agreed that the focus should be on supporting the delivery of local community-led action research projects, developing training and tools to support this, and developing learning about what works in supporting these approaches. There was an emphasis on peer-led learning and development throughout the programme which was aimed at ensuring the programme activities and outputs were shaped by participants and other key stakeholders.

Recruitment of groups: The recruitment of groups took place between June and September 2019 and was influenced by a number of factors: the level of need for the particular research to be undertaken; the capacity of the

group to participate in undertaking the research; the level of local support that might be available to help the groups through the research process. There was a good level of interest in the programme and from this interest we were able to recruit 6 groups to the core funded programme along with 4 other groups whose participation was funded by Scottish Government Community Safety, Corra Foundation and Inspiring Scotland.

Training: It was important at an early stage to bring all the participants together for some foundation training in community-led action research. This was developed and delivered in November 2019 and allowed us to take the participants through the stages of the action research cycle, explore research methods and begin to develop their research plans.

Toolkit development

One of the first significant tasks in the programme was the development of a toolkit which would help groups progress through a community-led action research process through providing them with a range of advice notes, templates and practical resources. The toolkit was developed during 2020 and is structured in 4 main sections with a series of key features.

1. What is community-led action research?

- The action research cycle
- A model c-l action research process
- FAQs

2. Planning your research

- Developing your research question
- Stakeholder analysis
- Thinking through c-l action research
- How to plan your research
- Ethics

3. Methods

- Quantitative methods (including desk research and surveys)
- Qualitative methods (including interviews, focus groups and creative methods)
- Digital methods

4. Taking Action

- Using Evidence
- Evaluating your Research

Each section of the toolkit contains an introduction to the content as well as a selection of resources, most of which can be accessed as both web-resources and downloadable Word documents. The resources follow accessibility best-practice and are written in plain English using clearly formatted headings which can be identified by screen readers. In addition to providing straightforward guidance, the resources include exercises, templates and examples as well as links to further information.

Most of the resources were developed using pre-existing SCDC and Poverty Alliance materials. These were reworked to ensure there was cohesion and consistency across the toolkit. Some new content had to be developed – e.g. a digital research methods resource was created consisting of up-to-date guidance and links to the latest useful tools for conducting online research. The COVID-19 pandemic made this even more of a necessity, and the resource reflects many of the equality, ethical and security considerations which were of increased significance at this time.

As an output, the toolkit is already proving to have a long-term legacy, and it has been a useful resource for other community-led action research support provided by SCDC and the Poverty Alliance. It will continue to be maintained as far as possible, by SCDC, although future funding will be required to ensure the toolkit remains up-to-date and for hosting costs.

Implementation of the research projects

Of the ten groups recruited to the programme, nine were able to put together and deliver at least some of their planned research activities. This was despite the impact of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdown periods which happened just as the research projects were becoming established. Unfortunately, one of the projects (Auchinleck Community Development Initiative) was unable to continue due to other demands on their time caused by the pandemic and two other projects (Aberdeen in Recovery and Fernhill Community Kitty) were unable to fully complete their research due to a variety of factors including the impact of COVID-19.

The nine research projects developed over the period from March 2020 through to June 2022. The delivery of the projects was quite severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic but all the groups responded creatively and with a great deal of resilience to the adverse circumstances they found themselves in. There was a great deal of flexibility from the programme funders in agreeing to extend the programme delivery time by a year as well as a wide range of vital local support provided by workers from local authorities, the third sector and community organisations.

A summary of the research projects is provided at Appendix 1 and there are snapshots and case studies of some of the projects in the [Learning Section](#) of the Knowledge is Power website.

Shared learning/training

Throughout the programme we provided opportunities for participants to learn together and share their own reflections and experiences with each other and external partners. This developed through the initial training which was delivered in-person in November 2019, 2 online shared learning sessions in 2020/2021, and the end of programme event which was held in June 2022.

The initial training focused on introducing participants to the key principles and elements of community-led action research. There was also a very practical focus on research planning and methods which the participants took forward into the development of their own research projects.

Shared Learning Event 1 – 2020: This session took place online during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and unsurprisingly focused on digital research methods and other creative methods. All the groups were able to share ideas and learning about how they had adapted their research projects in light of the circumstances they found themselves in.

Shared Learning Event 2 – 2021: This session took place online towards the final stages of most of the research projects and provided an opportunity for participants to hear from a couple of the projects who had completed or were near completion. The learning from this session helped several of the projects to focus in on how they would complete their research and take forward actions from it.



Section 4 Programme learning

Programme learning for Knowledge is Power comes from the following sources:

1. Case studies and other written updates from the Knowledge is Power projects, available on the [learning](#) section of the Knowledge is Power website.
2. The [end of programme event](#), held in June 2022, bringing together community researchers from the different projects with others with a role or interest in community-led action research.
3. Observations and reflections from the Knowledge is Power team gathered throughout the programme.
4. The Knowledge is Power monitoring and learning records.

The learning points have been organised below into the following three broad themes:

- 'Strengths of community-led action research'.
- 'Challenges of community-led action research'.
- 'Taking community-led action research forward'

Most of the learning can be seen to apply to community-led action research more generally. However, we have clearly identified where learning applies more specifically to the Knowledge is Power programme.

Strengths of community-led action research

A number of different features and strengths of community-led action research were highlighted:

Community-led and active involvement: As the name suggests, community-led action research is led by communities from start to finish. This has been identified as a key strength to the approach to research used by Knowledge is Power. As a result of 'owning' and 'leading' research, people are actively involved in the process rather than being 'done to'. In this sense, community-led action research is an empowering process.

“It means something that's not done to you. But something you are actively involved in. Which I think is important for people to feel a part of something”

(Participant at end of programme learning event)

“Community-led means community owned and different results and solutions.” (Participant at end of programme learning event)

Another sense in which Knowledge is Power participants found community-led action research empowering was that this approach enabled them to conduct their own learning into what was important to them. In many cases, the issues people were investigating were things that had a significant impact on their lives, such as experiences of poverty and inequality, the quality of mental health provision, and the availability of accessible services. Research topics were often at the core of people’s identity, since many participants had lived experience of the issues they were researching, including mental health/neurodiversity, poverty and disability.

Knowledge is Power projects reported how empowering it was to be able to conduct their own research into these issues, with the potential of influencing positive change as a result. For instance, the [Knowledge is Power case study of Moray Wellbeing Hub](#) illustrates how empowering the group found conducting their own research into neurodiversity.

Building community capacity: Another, potentially empowering, benefit of community-led action research which emerged clearly from Knowledge is Power is that it builds the skills and connections within a community. On the one hand, community groups and individuals who take part in a programme like Knowledge is Power will gain research skills which they can use to conduct further research in their community, and also transfer to other areas of life, including employment.

“Local people supported to have tools, and skills to take on the research”
(Participant at end of programme learning event)

“Provides new skills and ways forward for communities.” (Participant at end of programme learning event)

On the other hand, community-led action research can help to build community, potentially leading to more people being involved in local community groups and activity. Some of the groups supported by

Knowledge is Power have highlighted that community-led action research has helped different communities to get to know each other and, as a result, build community connections.

“Two new groups have been created in Dundee – more men as a result”
(Participant at end of programme learning event)

“It can help embrace different perceptions and create connections with others in the community and with agencies.” (Participant at end of programme learning event)

Unique and rich insights through lived experience: If research is community-led, it has the additional advantage of benefiting from people sharing similar experiences, creating a level of trust and understanding that would be difficult to achieve in traditional forms of research. As a result, community-led action research is able to generate unique insights that other forms of research may miss.

This unique character of community-led action research was evident in Knowledge is Power.

“It is good for finding out about people’s needs. Also a safe way of involving people to discuss issues.” (Participant at end of programme learning event)

“It is an effective way of linking need with demand.” (Participant at end of programme learning event)

“If done in an open minded, flexible way it can surface issues not thought about before, e.g. trust in agencies.” (Participant at end of programme learning event)

The Knowledge is Power case studies clearly illustrate the strength of having research based on the voices of people with lived experience. Shetland Community Connections said their project was the first research from disabled people into accessibility, providing evidence that wasn’t available before. Ability Shetland, the leading disability organisation in Shetland, gave the following feedback.

“Many of those business people have commented to me that they thought they knew what they had to do to be inclusive but this report has been a real eye opener for them as they can now identify the work still required to do to be completely inclusive to those who experience discrimination.
(continues overleaf...)

(Cont) ***"Having this document is really helpful as we continue to challenge attitudes and practice that is discriminatory, quoting disabled people with actual lived experience of the barriers they face in trying to have a social life in Shetland - something that many of us take for granted on a daily basis. This is a powerful piece of research that we see as a great tool for Ability Shetland."*** (Ability Shetland)

Action, influence and improving services: As with all community-led action research, Knowledge is Power has focused on 'action', and this was another strength which emerged during the course of the programme. There are two distinct ways that community-led action research leads to positive change. Firstly, there is the impact of the research findings themselves, and how these can be used to improve services.

"It is also about change, influencing decision makers and ultimately making an impact e.g. on funders. It can create lasting change." (Participant at end of programme learning event)

This connects well with the point above about community-led action research offering unique insights based on lived experience. The second way in which community-led action research leads to positive change is in terms of the 'process' of doing the research (i.e. empowering communities and making connections).

"Local people being connected to service planners, making experiential learning count and advise government for better progress and services" (Participant at end of programme learning event).

The following examples highlight how Knowledge is Power projects resulted in both types of positive change simultaneously.

- Moray Wellbeing Hub were able to evaluate the outcomes of their research to show increased levels of optimism, peer-to-peer support, and positive perceptions in the wider community around neurodiversity. They also reported that their campaign to raise awareness resulted in partners being connected with and influenced.
- Falkirk Youth Initiative reported a marked increase in the confidence and skills of young people who participated as community researchers, including in relation to online learning tools and methods. In addition, the young people have received recognition for their efforts through a Participatory Democracy certificate from Youthlink Scotland and have progressed to work towards achieving a Dynamic Youth Award.



- The research conducted by Taking up Sophie's Fight has helped give local people a voice in mental health services. Some of the group have been involved in helping to shape a 24-hour mental health crisis centre, which is currently being established in Dundee, and the group is also helping to shape the development of a Mental Wealth Academy in Dundee. Furthermore, the group is now developing their own 'train the trainer' package for employers, focused on mental health in the workplace.
- Shetland Community Connections have reported how their research has led to encouraging commitments from services and venues to improve accessibility. A key disability organisation in Shetland, Ability Shetland, has let SCC know how useful the research report has been in working to make community resources in Shetland more inclusive and accessible.

"I learnt so much from practical research tools to ethics to scale of work to pull it all together. Having the guidance and tools available to us and the power to research what we wanted to rather than join a project was really powerful. I will definitely look at research differently and see it more as a thing we can all do." (Community researcher, Shetland Community Connections.)

The benefits of Knowledge is Power went beyond these two categories of impact. In keeping with other organic and bottom-up approaches, community-led action research can bring unexpected benefits. Groups taking part in Knowledge is Power viewed this as a strength.

"It can lead to unexpected 'wins' e.g. additional resources/funding being provided on the back of the evidence gathered." (Participant at end of programme learning event)

"It can lead to positive unintended outcomes – but it raises the question if we shouldn't try to build these in and make them 'intended.'" (Participant at end of programme learning event)

Creative and digital methods to engage people: Knowledge is Power has highlighted the creative and engaging ways in which groups can carry out community-led action research.

At the end of programme event it was observed that community-led action research is a great way to work with young people, as well as with other groups where engagement will benefit from highly participative methods.

Digital tools became essential during the COVID-19 pandemic, both in terms of digital research methods and meeting up and working together as a group.

Knowledge is Power examples of creative and digital methods include:

- Moray Wellbeing Hub's use of social media and digital methods to generate genuine, respectful and thoughtful discussion.
- Falkirk Youth Initiative's research led by local school pupils which included creative arts projects and video as well as more conventional surveys.
- Dunterlie Foodshare's use of graphic facilitation to capture the experience and value of volunteering at the Foodshare.
- Taking Up Sophie's Fight, who developed a digital survey to accompany their printed version and used social media platforms such as WhatsApp in order to stay in contact with one another and offer each other moral support

Challenges of community-led action research

COVID-19: The pandemic was perhaps the main challenge faced by the groups taking part in Knowledge is Power. The research projects were still at planning stage when the first nationwide UK lockdown began in March 2020. This made it more difficult for groups to meet, to conduct research in their communities and also to prioritise research at a time when groups were struggling to meet demand for support in their communities.

Marginalised and disadvantaged communities tend to be disproportionately impacted on by external circumstances. This was none more evident than during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the Scottish Government stating: "Those with certain underlying health conditions, men, those in the most deprived areas, some minority ethnic groups and disabled people are also at higher risk of dying from COVID-19." ([National Performance website](#)).

A related issue is that community groups working in and with disadvantaged communities have a lot of competing priorities and often find themselves working at the front-line to support people through difficult circumstances - the expression 'fire-fighting' is used for good reason.

It was no surprise then that the groups who struggled the most with their Knowledge is Power research were the groups working in and with disadvantaged communities. For instance, Fernhill Community Kitty were unable to meet due to the local authority-owned building they were based in being shut over the course of the programme. Like many disadvantaged communities, Fernhill also has poor digital connectivity, ruling out online meetings and research methods.

Community Action Blackburn were similarly affected, and it proved all but impossible to recruit community researchers, never mind plan and carry out any research. This situation was also made more difficult by the fact that the newly-recruited project manager was for many weeks unable to get out in the community and speak to people due to strict lockdown measures.

COVID-19 also had a direct effect on many of the community researchers taking part in Knowledge is Power. For instance, Aberdeen in Recovery, working with people with lived-experience of addiction, found that the pandemic impacted further on many people's health and wellbeing (as well as preventing face-to-face meetings and activities).

Most Knowledge is Power groups nevertheless managed to complete their research projects, and they were helped by the extension to the programme agreed by funders. It is notable that some of the groups who overcame the challenges around COVID-19 and lockdown were able to function during the pandemic (such as Dunterlie Foodshare who provided emergency support locally) or were already well-versed in using digital methods (such as Moray Wellbeing Hub).

COVID-19 has also presented new opportunities and challenges in terms of conducting research online. It was pointed out that, going forward, a challenge will be to balance the different needs and preferences of participants through hybrid (combining online and face-to-face) methods.

Local support: From our previous work supporting community-led action research, we are aware of the importance of having local support in place for community researchers. This support can be provided by a paid worker within the community organisation, community development or community learning and development (CLD) workers based in other organisations (such as the local authority) or another similar role.



The Knowledge is Power application process asked applicants the following question:

Do you have access to a dedicated staff member (or other support) to support your involvement in this programme over the life of the project? Please give details.

Most Knowledge is Power groups therefore had this support in place before joining the programme. In two groups support was provided by local authority CLD workers and in another two groups support was provided by locally-based Corra Foundation community co-ordinators. Other groups had paid workers within the organisation take on the role of local support.

In most cases, this model of support worked effectively, with the local support role helping to bring community researchers together regularly, plan and co-ordinate activities and link community researchers and Knowledge is Power support staff where needed.

Where there was a disruption to local support, this had a clear impact on progress. For instance, some groups had changes in staff personnel at a relatively early stage of the research. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, little progress had been made, meaning that the new person in the role had to effectively start from scratch. It is notable that most of the groups who struggled to complete their research projects were impacted in this way.

Furthermore, turnover was more common among paid workers within groups (as opposed to external workers) and it is worth considering whether this is indicative of the fragility and stretched-capacity of community organisations.

Ready volunteers: In most cases, community-led action research requires having a core group of community researchers who can commit on a voluntary basis to a research project lasting many months. It doesn't need to be stated that this is a considerable ask of anyone. Knowledge is Power was working primarily with groups in disadvantaged communities, often with lived experience of a range of issues.

People who would ordinarily face greater challenges in terms of committing time, energy and resources to a research project also now had to deal with pressures relating to the impact of COVID-19. It is therefore all the more

impressive that so many Knowledge is Power projects were carried through to completion so successfully. And it is also entirely understandable that some groups were unable to achieve as much as they set out to.

Nevertheless, there are some learning points which could help mitigate against this issue. For instance, despite it being a criterion for groups applying for Knowledge is Power support, it was clear at the start of the support that a small number of groups did not have in place a ready group of willing community researchers. Importantly, this seems to be largely due to applicants being overly optimistic about group members being able and willing to commit their time.

In future community-led research programmes, it will be helpful to speak to applicants beforehand to assess how likely it is that community researchers will be able to commit to the project. This will be an opportunity to stress the nature of the time commitment that is expected. It will also afford the chance to highlight the role of local support in the process, which is clearly related to the capacity of community volunteers to commit to the process.

It is worth noting that the issue of paying for the time of researchers came up in the course of the programme. In a couple of areas, local support staff took the position that some kind of payment would help to address the power inequalities inherent when paid workers work alongside community volunteers to carry out a piece of work in the community. In another Knowledge is Power site, recompensating researchers was seen as a pragmatic way of recruiting volunteers at a difficult time (lockdown was in full swing).

Our position was flexible in that it was left up to Knowledge is Power groups to decide how to appropriately spend the support costs provided to them. We advised groups that any payments should be ethical and support the programme's objectives and also that they should remain within the budget whilst making sure the programme is deliverable. Groups were also reminded that payments can in some instances make it difficult for people to claim social security payments.

Engaging with everyone: One issue which was discussed at the end of programme event was that of engaging with different groups within a community. It was agreed that we need to bear in mind that we do not share backgrounds and experiences with everyone, even in our own community. It is important, going forward, that this is taken account of so

that everyone can take part, and be heard, in community-led action research. Taking Up Sophie's Fight provided a particularly honest account of the challenges they faced engaging with some groups in Dundee.

For instance, they reported that reaching older people and some ethnic minority groups during the COVID-19 pandemic was difficult due to the fact that these groups tend not to be so well connected digitally. They also described the barriers faced by a deaf person when trying to participate in the research.

“There was someone from the deaf community, and there was nothing there for them. Community groups have to be aware of missed opportunities to reach out to groups they don't normally engage with.” (Community Researcher at Taking Up Sophie's Fight)

The status of community-led action research: Community-led action research needs to be recognised as being as equally valid a form of research as more traditional forms of research. This issue emerged during Knowledge is Power, and has been a continuous concern in other community-led action research programmes we have been involved in. As the above 'strengths of community-led action research' have shown, research produced by communities has different but important qualities to other forms of research, which lead to unique insights and learning.

“It does have status – but it needs to ‘hold its own’ in relation to research carried out by professional agencies. It needs the tools and resources to help people feel confident in undertaking it.” (Participant at end of programme learning event)

Some Knowledge is Power participants felt that the programme of support helped to address the imbalance that exists between different types of research. For instance, Shetland Community Connections highlighted how the Knowledge is Power support costs had enabled their research to have a reach and status that they wouldn't otherwise have been able to achieve (see more in the 'support costs' section below).

Ethics: The topic of ethics and safeguarding came up a few times over the course of the programme. Knowledge is Power was no different to most community-led action research in that much of the research was focused on sensitive issues like mental health or with people in disadvantaged communities who can already be at a power-disadvantage and may be more vulnerable to being

adversely affected by poorly-conducted research. Furthermore, community researchers are also likely to be experiencing many of the issues they are researching, and the research process may as a result be emotional or even traumatic.

It is therefore important that community-led action research take ethics into account, and that community researchers are supported to do this. This should be proportionate, however. Community researchers tend to be part of the community they are researching, and there is less of a power-differential between researcher and research participant than in traditional research.

“We had to look at the ethics as we were placed in a position of trust and confidentiality” (Community researcher, Taking Up Sophie’s Fight)

Taking community-led action research forward

Building on the strengths and challenges of community-led action research, we have co-developed learning on how to take community-led action research forward in future. Some of these suggestions were discussed in the Knowledge is Power end of programme event, which added to learning built up over the course of the programme.

Suggestions cover how best to set up and run a piece of community-led action research, as well as how to grow and support the approach more generally.

Laying the foundations: Some conditions need to be in place for community-led action research projects to work well in future. These include having local support and community researchers in place, which has been covered above. Good leadership is also required, for instance, from team leaders or managers of organisations. Dundee group, Taking Up Sophie’s fight benefited from a commitment to community-led approaches and a willingness to trust community learning and development staff to use these approaches flexibly.

Another requirement which was identified as important is that of having a community space from which to work from. Most of the successful Knowledge is Power projects had a building to use, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Knowledge is Power groups without such an asset have understandably struggled to develop and carry out their research.

Training and support: The Knowledge is Power programme grew out of the recognition that, while community-led action research is a powerful way of putting community empowerment into action, approaches such as this need resourced and supported. SCDC and the Poverty Alliance were able to bring our range of experience from supporting community-led action research, and from our wider community development and anti-poverty work, to develop a full package of training and support to ensure groups were able to plan, carry out and make use of their own research.

Some of the Knowledge is Power projects explicitly recognised the value of the support provided to them by the programme. For instance, Shetland Community Connections made it clear how much they valued the expertise and advice which their Knowledge is Power team-member provided to them around research methods, ethics, and data management.

“Laura from the Poverty Alliance was with us every step of the way. Unfortunately she never got to visit but she certainly visited us regularly online, and she really upped our skills and kept the faith and kept us going. There’s a lot of thanks from us to Laura.”

Taking up Sophie’s Fight found the [Knowledge is Power toolkit](#) helpful in terms of expanding their knowledge and ideas for forward planning. Given the sensitivity around issues such as suicide and self-harm, the group made particular use of the [ethics](#) guidance, and they also reported finding the [planning template](#) and [model action research process](#) useful.

Support costs: Financial support for research is crucial. The support costs provided through Knowledge is Power helped groups to pay for a range of things, including:

- Advertising surveys in the local press
- Graphic facilitation
- Report design
- Production of promotional resources such as t-shirts, videos and flyers
- Event space hire

Some groups highlighted the value of having this resource. Falkirk Youth Initiative particularly valued the flexible nature of the funding, describing how this enabled them to switch from a specific focus in one town to a wider geographic area and cover wider themes in the research.

Shetland Community Connections used their support costs to pay for their survey to be advertised in the online version of the local newspaper, and also to pay for their report to be designed. They made the point that the money enabled them to do place their research on a higher footing than they would have otherwise been able to.

“We learned that the finance was absolutely vital, because to engage at the same level as other research you need to have the ability to be on the platforms that other research is on.” (Shetland Community Connections).

Preparing for action: A key aim of any community-led action research is to make change happen as a result of research. As described above in the strengths of community-led action research, some Knowledge is Power projects have seen their research make a difference to local services and communities.

Some recommendations for ensuring future community-led action research is as influential as possible are as follows:

- Support programmes should be designed to give appropriate time and resources to the stage immediately after research reports and other ways of presenting findings have been published or produced. For instance, projects should be supported to disseminate and present their findings, contact decision-makers and other stakeholders they want to influence and take their research forward in the way they want.
- There should be an emphasis on planning for action from the start of the support. Knowledge is Power planning sessions incorporated planning for action and research questions and methods were designed with action in mind. However, the day-to-day focus of support tended to be on designing and carrying out the research rather than on taking action and some groups may find it challenging to find the time and capacity to take their research forward once support is completed.
- The projects who reported having the most influence either had pre-established relationships with planners of local public services or were able to build these up during the research. A key recommendation is to start building these relationships from the start and support needs to be in place to help groups make connections and have influence.



Appendix

Research project summaries

Aberdeen in Recovery: Aberdeen in Recovery (AiR) is a Lived Experience Recovery Organisation (LERO) which provides support for people recovering from addiction and their families. They were supported by Knowledge is Power to plan to carry out research to address issues in service provision, both in terms of how people engage with AiR's own support and in terms of how people are supported more widely. AiR also wanted to use the programme as an opportunity to gain a better understanding of how well their role was understood by agencies and others they worked with. This would help them to develop a stronger identity as well as strengthen links between AiR and service providers.

After attending the initial training in November 2019, AiR decided to carry out a face-to-face survey, followed by a series of focus groups, to identify what actions AiR could take or encourage others to take to help achieve the research aims and objectives. They planned to engage with individuals with lived experience of drug and alcohol addiction (including members of AiR) and their family members. AiR also intended to interview drug and alcohol related professionals. A range of difficult circumstances meant that the research couldn't be completed. However, important learning has been generated as a result, including AiR's advice on what to consider when embarking on community-led action research. [Read more on AiR's participation in Knowledge is Power here.](#)

Community Action Blackburn: Community Action Blackburn (CAB) is a community organisation working in partnership with statutory and voluntary organisations to engage, assist and support the community of Blackburn in addressing concerns regarding community issues to make positive change that leads to improved quality of community life. A pressing issue for the local community of Blackburn is the misuse of fireworks within the local area around bonfire night and CAB applied to Knowledge is Power in order to research this area specifically, including why young people get involved and what works to discourage them from misusing fireworks. After attending the Knowledge is Power initial training in November 2019, the project worker for Community Action Blackburn who had applied to

participate in the programme left the organisation and was replaced by a new worker a few months later. Unfortunately for the new worker, she was appointed at the onset of COVID-19 and was unable to recruit members of the community to participate as community researchers. After a series of attempts to get things off the ground, the worker was able to host a stall at a local engagement event in autumn 2021, where community members were asked to provide comments on bonfire night and firework use in Blackburn. These comments were then categorised and compiled, and CAB is currently using its support costs to work with a designer to develop a video highlighting community priorities, partly based on this prior engagement.

Crossroads Youth and Community Association and Bridging the Gap: This partnership of community organisations working in the Gorbals area of Glasgow changed its initial focus to explore the impacts of the pandemic on the community and what might be needed by the community to go beyond recovery towards renewal.

In late 2021, once lockdown restrictions had eased enough to do so, Crossroads and Bridging the Gap established a research group, consisting of one staff member and two community researchers from each organisation. From October until April, the research team designed and carried out two questionnaires and a focus group to find out how the pandemic affected individuals, families and the community and to ask what supports would be needed to enable the community to flourish.

Progressing the research during COVID-19 has been challenge, particularly developing and maintaining involvement of the community, many of whom found it difficult to break out of the 'bubbles' developed to keep themselves and their loved ones safe, during the pandemic. Crossroads and Bridging the Gap have produced a report highlighting their research findings, mainly around the need to 'dig deeper' and build on the community involvement and findings so far in order to identify actions for bringing about positive change and improving the quality of community life.

Dunterlie Foodshare: Dunterlie Foodshare is run by a group of volunteers from Dunterlie supported by Corra Foundation and East Renfrewshire Council's communities team. They were supported by Knowledge is Power to develop and carry out research to learn more about how they could support the community and also to highlight the value of the Foodshare. The COVID-19 pandemic hampered initial progress, with the group having no base to operate from and then, when this situation changed, finding themselves busy supporting the community-led effort to support people during COVID-19.

This challenge was turned into an opportunity and Dunterlie Foodshare incorporated learning from their COVID-19 experience into their research. Using mixed methods including a survey and a graphic facilitation exercise, the group produced a report highlighting how volunteering at the Foodshare had positively impacted on their lives. The report also provided information on priorities and gaps in food provision which Dunterlie Foodshare can use going forward.

Fernhill Community Kitty: Originally set up as a steering group to deliver a local participatory budgeting exercise, this group was supported by Corra Foundation and South Lanarkshire Council to identify community priorities and plan actions around these. The group was initially supported by Knowledge is Power to identify community priorities and actions for working together to achieve these.

COVID-19 created significant challenges for the group, who were unable to meet during the entire pandemic due to the closure of the local community centre. Digital or online research methods were not a feasible option due to low digital connectivity in Fernhill. Due to these circumstances and other demands on the volunteer researchers time it was decided to wind up the research project before it was fully complete.



Falkirk Youth Involvement: In this Knowledge is Power project, a group of young people were supported by local youth work staff to carry out action research based on topics that are important to the lives of young people and the services that Falkirk Council deliver. The project began with a specific focus on young people's needs in relation to open space in Grangemouth. However, after some of the young people dropped out, the staff involved decided to re-direct their thinking and look more broadly at youth issues across the Falkirk area. They identified an opportunity in conjunction with a steering committee which was looking at children's rights to widen out the project to explore youth needs across the area.

A range of different projects were undertaken using a range of methods. This included a children's rights project consisting of surveys and video, surveys on young people's needs and coping strategies during lockdown and a creative art project featuring a large digital exhibition. An important element of the overall support was that rather than rely on the same group of young people, different young people became involved who were interested in the different themes that emerged.

Moray Wellbeing Hub CIC: This Moray-wide group applied to Knowledge is Power in order to start a conversation and collect the voice of lived experience around neurodiversity to further their aim of increasing 'Mental Wealth' across Moray. The group was already well-versed in digital methods, and utilised these skills to overcome the challenges of conducting research during COVID-19 and the resulting lockdown. For instance, they combined digital methods and outdoor events to collect the voice of lived experience around neurodiversity, using an appreciative enquiry approach to focus on strengths. The resulting conversations were used to develop a video and information leaflet on neurodiversity as well as a neurodiversity themed pathway for support.

The community-led action research project has led to a range of successful outcomes, with the project continuing to make positive change in Moray beyond its funding. The campaign to raise awareness resulted in partners being connected with and influenced, and the visual resources have helped reach and support new empowered community members.

Shetland Community Connections: Shetland Community Connections – a community group in Shetland who address issues around disability were supported by Knowledge is Power to conduct a community survey in order to better understand the reality of attending social and cultural events or spaces for disabled people, their families and carers in Shetland and how their experiences can be improved. The majority of the research was conducted in 2021 and concluded in January 2022. The group developed an online survey for community members to complete, which was advertised in the local newspaper with a direct link from the online version of the newspaper. Findings range from physical barriers such as lack of transport and not having accessible changing places toilets to more subtle, yet just as important, issues such as lack of awareness among staff and volunteers. Importantly, it was established that disabled people, their families and carers think that disabled people should be part of planning inclusive events and spaces.

Shetland Community Connections is now using the report and recommendations to help them evidence the need for improved services to local organisations.

Taking Up Sophie’s Fight: Having formed in 2017 as a result of taking part in the Health Issues in the Community (HIIC) course, this Dundee-based group was supported by Knowledge is Power to come up with important findings about people struggling to find much-needed mental health support during the pandemic, as well as people’s priorities for what services they would like to see.

Working with local partners to develop appropriate methods during COVID-19, the group conducted a digital and printed survey to gather evidence on the impact of the pandemic on mental health as well as people’s experiences of services during this time. In addition to increasing the group’s skills and confidence, the research and its findings has helped give local people a voice in mental health services. With the support of the local Community Health Worker from Dundee City Council who supports the group, Taking Up Sophie’s Fight have been able to strengthen their involvement in the following services and developments. The programme has strengthened the group’s wider work around mental health, including delivering training and helping to improve services.

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