



the
**POVERTY
ALLIANCE**

WORKING TOGETHER TO COMBAT POVERTY

LEARNING REPORT

Taking Action on Rural Poverty

Key project learning



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Taking Action on Rural Poverty is a 3-year project working with local people and partners to find new ways to reduce the rural poverty premium: the higher costs in money, time and opportunity for those living rurally.

Across Aberdeenshire and Argyll and Bute, we have developed Citizens' Panels, hosted events around key local issues, trialled two anti-poverty interventions, taken photos and written stories depicting the day-to-day reality of rural poverty and campaigned with a rural lens. So, what have we learnt?

1. Participation strengthens our response to rural poverty

People experiencing the unjust costs of rural living should lead change in their communities. Panel members strengthened the decision-making on our tests of change, crafted external messaging and contributed to developing policy and resources. Key learning includes:

- Sustained lived experience engagement brings depth and understanding that one-off consultations alone can't capture, leading to change that lasts.
- Stigma can be overcome to work together successfully on poverty. Prioritising respect, trust, and flexibility builds confidence, and a sense of agency.
- The panels are more than a group of individuals – with good facilitation and planning we have built communities sustained by shared experiences and goals. Human connection can, and has, flourished online.
- People who are engaged in a sustained way develop technical and policy expertise, enhanced by their lived experience. The panel have gained skills as advocates and changemakers which they carry forwards.

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The opportunity to take part in this panel has given us dignity, voice, and solidarity.

Citizens' Panel Member

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2. The rural poverty premium impacts on everything

The rural poverty premium isn't just about needing more money to access a good standard of living. It is about additional time to travel, or to navigate services not designed for rural communities; or where the opportunities – for jobs, education and leisure, are more limited. We have learned that the rural poverty premium is gendered, and that rural issues intertwine, for example, limited transport blocks routes to work, healthcare, and education.

- National data doesn't take into account the cost of living in rural areas and we saw this play out repeatedly. Adding an anti-poverty lens to rural policy making, and a rural lens to anti-poverty policy making can help.

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We need to focus with a rural lens and an anti-poverty lens to be able to see the full picture.

Citizens' Panel Member

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- For everyone in rural Scotland, including those living off grid, **the cost of fuel is an ongoing challenge**. In Aberdeenshire, people told us of the spiralling costs of heating rural homes, exacerbated by the need to buy home heating oil in bulk. For many, it is a choice between being warm or fed. With Grampian Credit Union we tested the potential for no-interest loans for home heating oil.
- Our test of change in Argyll and Bute showed that incorrectly installed or inadequately explained retrofitted heat systems can bring substantial costs for social tenants. Without support and advice, many end up cold, with negative impacts on health and wellbeing. With ALLenergy we produced guides and resources to help.
- Childcare provision can be a make-or-break issue for preventing or reducing poverty in rural areas. Widening participation in childcare planning alongside taking a rural and gendered lens to childcare infrastructure and funding in Scotland could tip the scales.

3. Collaboration brings lasting change

Poverty is a cross-cutting issue, and allies can be found across multiple policy areas, and community organisations with a range of priorities. Our local learning events and national gatherings connected people across sectors, creating a stronger network for rural action on poverty and lasting collaborative energy.

- Change comes from a broad coalition of actors. Ongoing relationships and shared evidence mean we can mobilise quickly.
- Local and national events spark collective action. At our national conference we collaborated on rural policy asks for the upcoming election and learnt from our colleagues in Wales and Ireland.
- Stronger networks improve local capacity, giving small organisations a louder voice in decision making spaces, as we learnt through supporting a campaign against the mothballing of rural nurseries in Aberdeenshire.

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It has been very positive: everyone helping each other to help our clients.

Learning Event Attendee

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- Change is happening – our feedback reveals a network of connections: including organisations, funders and elected members who have grown their understanding of the rural poverty premium at our events.

4. Framing matters

How we talk about rural poverty matters: we developed language that connects with people, reduces stigma and invites more people in. Poverty can look different in rural areas, and this language can be an uncomfortable fit for people's experience. The panel related more to the unjust costs of living, and spiralling costs.

- Rural poverty is complex, but framing doesn't need to be – it is injustice. Making unjust costs the headline reduces stigma and shame. Unjust costs always stem from the systems, not the individual.
- The Poverty Alliance, **values first approach** works rurally. We have been framing our work around what we want to achieve, and the shared benefits to us all.
- Organisations benefit from recognising where people they connect with may be disadvantaged by higher costs of rural living. This has included around community transport, social care, and other cross-cutting challenges. Taking a rural and anti-poverty lens strengthens decision-making processes, and our training helps organisations ensure their approach reduces stigma.
- We have **shared learning** about the needs of rural organisations with funders to help inform their decisions, and support work on reducing the rural poverty premium.

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It's easier now to speak up when something isn't working.

Citizens' Panel Member

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Key learning summary

Taking Action on Rural Poverty shows what works when rural voices lead the way – real participation, strong partnerships, and continuous learning that helps rural-proof policy decisions across Scotland.

Summary

People's experiences make policy stronger: the Citizens' Panels in Aberdeenshire and Argyll and Bute prove that listening to people who actually live with rural poverty leads to policy ideas that are practical and rooted in reality.

- Removing digital barriers helps everyone take part: small acts like providing devices, data, a range of options for participation vouchers, and flexible meeting times. This allows more people to participate, ensuring important voices are not lost from discussions.
- We achieve more together than we can when working alone. Local learning sessions and national events bring community groups, third sector, councils, and public bodies into the same room (or Zoom), sparking collaboration and shared solutions to rural challenges.
- Seeing the whole picture matters. The rural premium isn't just about money, it is about access, transport, childcare, energy, time and agency. Policies work best when they join up community knowledge and anti-poverty thinking.
- Learning is in the process as well as the outcomes: we have been intentional in taking action, trying ideas and learning as we go. Continuous reflection, open evaluation, and flexibility mean the project doesn't just test interventions, but captures insights that can shape wider policy and practice, and that we can continue to build on.
- The takeaway: meaningful participation delivers anti-poverty insights policymakers can act on, helping design fairer systems that work for the whole of Scotland, not just our towns and cities.

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