

## Housing, Regeneration and Planning

# Community Empowerment Case Study Research

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In November 2008, the Scottish Government commissioned Social Regeneration Consultants to explore in detail examples of community empowerment practice in Scotland. The research was intended to allow case studies to fully describe their experiences and tell their story of how their community empowerment activity worked, the challenges they faced and their successes. Twelve case studies were visited between December 2008 and March 2009.

It is anticipated that dissemination of these experiences more widely across the country will help inspire other communities to embark on a community empowerment journey, in line with the Scottish Government Community Empowerment Action Plan, published in March 2009.

## Main Findings

The main findings from the research can be summarised as follows:

- There is already a **wealth of community empowerment experience** in Scotland; the Community Empowerment Action Plan is not starting from a low base.
- Every community is different and there are many ways in which they can become empowered. They work within a **community empowerment spectrum**, from participation to control. A one-size fits all approach is inappropriate.
- There is little evidence from the case studies to suggest that movement up and down this spectrum is either straightforward or necessarily an aspiration. **Communities can be 'locked in', or lock themselves in, to particular forms of empowerment.**
- A positive relationship between communities and key stakeholders usually lies at the heart of a successful community empowerment initiative. Local authorities and other external agencies need to be **supportive and enabling partners.**
- The most successful empowerment initiatives are likely to be those that **grow from a strong community base.** Government, local authorities and other external agencies can create the right climate for community empowerment, but they cannot make it happen.
- Community control of decisions about some local authority or external agency **budgets** can be empowering, but only if agencies are prepared to devolve some responsibility to neighbourhood level and avoid micro-management.
- Successful community empowerment depends on investment in **on-going support, training and individual capacity building.** The commitment and quality of external advisors can be crucial.
- Community empowerment initiatives benefit from regular opportunities for **networking and peer group learning.**
- **Community asset ownership** can boost community confidence and status, underpin community sustainability and give a boost to local economies.

## Background

In April 2008 the Scottish Government and COSLA issued a joint statement of commitment to community empowerment. In that statement community empowerment was defined as:

*“a process where people work together to make change happen in their communities by having more power and influence over what matters to them.”*

The Scottish Government published its Community Empowerment Action Plan in March 2009. It explained why community empowerment is important, how communities can become empowered, and a range of new and existing practical actions which underpin it. The Action Plan includes a summary of case studies which formed the core of this research.

The research took an in-depth look at 12 diverse case studies of community empowerment across Scotland, selected by Scottish Government and COSLA.

The 12 case studies were:

- Gigha
- Cordale Housing Association
- Coalfields Community Federation
- Dundee Regeneration Forums
- North Ayrshire Estates Based Projects
- Buchan Development Partnership
- Orkney Community Councils
- East Lothian Community Councils
- Community Links
- The Alness Initiative
- Dumfries and Galloway Housing Partnership
- South Ayrshire Placemaking.

## Aims of the research

The main aim of the research was to explore in detail 12 case studies of existing community empowerment practice across Scotland, including how they have been planned, implemented and evaluated.

The research was not intended as a formal evaluation of the case studies or their activities. Rather, it was intended to allow the case studies to fully describe their experiences and tell their ‘story’ of how they work, the challenges they have faced and their successes, any barriers to success, and to draw out at every stage key learning points.

For many communities, becoming empowered may seem to be a daunting task and one which may be beyond their capacity. Seeing and hearing how others in a similar situation have overcome these hurdles can open people’s eyes and broaden their horizons.

The twelve case studies included in the research represent a small cross section of many hundreds of community empowerment initiatives currently underway across Scotland. They showed a range of models that can be empowering. They involved communities owning assets and people playing a key role in influencing decisions about how public money is spent. They included several types of community organisation, including community councils, registered tenants organisations, community based housing associations and community businesses.

All the examples focused on telling people’s stories from their own perspective. Together they offer a powerful insight into how people can get together to do things for themselves and change their communities for the better.

## Our approach to the research

The research involved visits to all 12 case studies between December 2008 and March 2009. 138 individuals were involved in our discussions; they included tenants and residents, community representatives, other volunteers, case study staff and board members, local authority staff and councillors and external agencies.

Our approach to the research involved:

- An initial overview of what each case study was set up to achieve, how it has organised itself and a timeline of its progress.
- A description of how each case study has been funded and how this has changed over time.
- Highlighting each case study’s main achievements, identifying what has contributed to them.
- Exploring the challenges and barriers that each case study has faced and how these have been overcome.
- Drawing out lessons from their experience and any evaluation of it which might usefully be passed on to others.
- Discussing where each case study intends to go next and how they feel they might get there.

The research involved the production of two reports. A summary of each case study was included in the Government’s Community Empowerment Action Plan. A more detailed document about each case study is due to be published during Summer 2009.

## Findings

There are many ways in which communities can be empowered. The 12 case studies illustrate a broad spectrum. For some, community empowerment has meant gaining control of local assets and securing financial and organisational independence; for others it has involved taking a lead, in partnership with public and sometimes private sector agencies to achieve specific objectives; a third group are content to work for community benefit within an empowerment framework set by others – usually local authorities and community planning partnerships.

There is little evidence from the case studies to suggest that movement up and down this spectrum is either straightforward or necessarily an aspiration. Communities can be 'locked in' to particular forms of empowerment.

The research findings have been grouped into five themes, covering the main learning points from the case studies.

## Leaders and partners

- Building **genuine and practical partnerships**, based on trust, between communities and local authorities and other external agencies is one of the keys to successful empowerment.
- Community led initiatives, particularly when they involve **partnerships with the business community**, can make a huge difference to local economies by combating economic decline and supporting employment and training initiatives.
- Significant change in communities does not normally take place without committed and determined community leaders. **Community leadership** needs to be embedded in the local culture.
- **Volunteering** lies at the heart of community empowerment, but some volunteers can be over-stretched and are not easily replaced.
- **Dedicated staff** are of paramount importance, but the ability of small and often remote communities to attract and retain skilled staff is often problematic.
- The on-going **commitment and support of external advisors** was seen as particularly important by several case studies.

## Changing cultures

- Some of the case studies have spent much time tackling **apathy, suspicion and a culture of negativity** in their communities, encouraging them to see the bigger picture and keeping people together through an often long process of change.
- Local communities feel they know their own communities better than anyone else; partners and other external agencies need to **see things from a community perspective**.
- The most successful empowerment initiatives amongst the case studies are those that have **grown from a strong community base**. Government, local authorities and other external agencies can create the right climate for community empowerment, but they cannot make it happen.
- Some of the case studies have had difficulty establishing **credibility with external agencies** and persuading them to focus their efforts at locality, not just strategic level.
- Those agencies, including local authorities, that have focused on locality working have sometimes been reluctant to let go of **micro management**, limiting the potential for community empowerment.
- Many communities experience difficulties with **interpreting professional jargon**, particularly amongst those involved in major planning and regeneration initiatives.

## Learning and capacity building

- Most of the case studies have experienced a **steep learning curve** for new members and volunteers, particularly those involved in large and complex initiatives.
- Successful community empowerment depends on having in place **on-going support, training and individual capacity building**. All the case studies have a 'You must never stop learning' culture.
- **Networking** with other community empowerment initiatives, particularly those with similar roots or aspirations, can be inspiring and lead to new and unexpected partnerships.
- Progress on initiatives always takes longer than communities expect; **managing expectations** is important.

## Equalities and diversity

- It is always important to **engage with everyone in a community**, not just those with status or the loudest voices.
- Finding ways to make sure that **young people's** voices are heard within communities has proved particularly difficult.

## Practical actions

- All the case studies have had to deal with complicated and time consuming **funding applications** which they feel could and should be simplified.
- Achieving financial stability has been vital for some of the case studies, but it is not easy to find the right balance between reliance on **grants** and creating opportunities for **earned income**.
- Many of the case studies have found innovative ways round intractable problems and moved on quickly from ideas that did not work out.

- Community empowerment that is early and continuous must be at the heart of each project; **'quick wins'** help sustain community interest and involvement. Getting the little things right is often more important for communities than prestige projects.
- **Community asset ownership**, for example through development trusts, can be important delivery vehicles for community priorities.
- Community-led initiatives should regularly **celebrate and publicise their success**.
- **Community engagement techniques** should always be tailored to specific communities; no two communities are the same and proper targeting is more important than innovation.
- Some of the case studies have recognised the value of looking at themselves with a fresh pair of eyes on a regular basis, for example through a **social audit or external evaluation**.

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