

Public Services and Government Research Findings

The Evidence Base for Third Sector Policy in Scotland: A Review of Selected Recent Literature

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This review provides an overview and evaluation of the literature and research evidence dealing with the third sector in Scotland, drawing on a wide range of evidence. It focuses on material relating to the contribution of the third sector's work to the Scottish Government's five Strategic Objectives: Wealthier and Fairer, Smarter, Healthier, Safer and Stronger, and Greener.

Main Findings

- The third sector makes a significant contribution to social and economic life in Scotland.
- Beyond its contribution to each Strategic Objective, the third sector's impact is often cross cutting.
- A wide variety of research exists, emerging from a range of sources including the public and third sectors, research consultancies and academia.
- Existing research varies greatly in approach and quality.
- The scholarly literature is underdeveloped and there is little conceptual discussion. Studies tend to marginalise Scotland in favour of broader discussion of the UK.
- There is abundant research on specific geographical locations or themes of work, but fewer national-scale studies.
- There are strands of work on the rural third sector, and on social enterprise, but both these areas could be developed.

Introduction

The review provides an overview and evaluation of the literature and research evidence dealing with the third sector in Scotland. It includes a brief outline of the size, scope and organisation of the Scottish third sector. It also contains discrete chapters which address the evidence in relation to the contribution of the third sector to the Scottish Government's five Strategic Objectives: Wealthier and Fairer, Healthier, Safer and Stronger, Smarter, and Greener. The study was commissioned by the Scottish Government's Local Government and Public Service Reform Research Team on behalf of the Third Sector Division.

The aim of the study was 'to review the research evidence and assess the current contribution of the third sector to the Scottish Government's purpose and priorities'.

The review's objectives were to:

- Review the recent research evidence on the third sector in Scotland and identify how it contributes to the Scottish Government's five Strategic Objectives
- Identify areas where evidence suggests that the third sector is having an impact, but where it is not aligned to government objectives
- Identify key gaps in the research evidence
- Make recommendations as to how the gaps in the research evidence might be addressed

The study drew on a wide range of resources in its analysis, including scholarly work, research undertaken and commissioned by the third sector and the public sector, as well as evaluations and government policy documents. The review focuses on literature produced post-devolution, although it uses older material where appropriate. The review took a range of approaches to examining the material, noting gaps in the literature and evidence base, highlighting any caveats, including missing and conflicting evidence. It also identifies new issues raised by the most recent literature.

Overview and contribution

The literature indicates that there can be little doubt that the third sector makes a significant contribution to economic and social life in Scotland. The work of third sector organisations also has an important role in contributing to the Scottish Government's five Strategic Objectives. It is important to note, however, that the evidence relating to the impact of the third sector often cuts across a number of these objectives. Indeed, the cross-cutting nature of its work can be taken as a great strength of the third sector in Scotland.

The evidence we have identified points to a diversity of impact in the third sector's work. Our study outlines examples including the sector's economic contribution, its role in service provision, and the work of third sector organisations in identifying and responding to emerging social problems.

The existing research is varied. We identified a great deal of material emanating from the public sector, and the third sector itself, that provided evidence to support the third sector's impact. However, we identified little scholarly literature, and noticed a tendency to marginalise Scotland in favour of a broader discussion of the UK in the work that we did encounter. Running throughout the different themes of third sector work, we identified strands of literature relating to the rural third sector, and to social enterprise, with a range of different sources of material highlighting the contribution of the third sector in these areas.

Additionally, a number of gaps in the evidence base were identified. In most cases, these gaps are due to a lack of rigorous research evidence on a particular theme. In some cases we found no extensive body of research available in specific areas and generally there was little cross referencing between studies on similar themes.

Overarching gaps:

- Lack of scholarly literature
- Most studies do not consider conceptual issues
- UK (or English) focus in much of the relevant research evidence
- Variable research quality
- Low number of large-scale datasets
- Little literature on international impact
- Little cross referencing between studies

Wealthier and Fairer: *Enable businesses and people to increase their wealth and more people to share fairly in that wealth*

Of all the Strategic Objectives, Wealthier and Fairer was subject to the most attention in the literature. A significant amount of material was relevant to this objective, including several large-scale datasets, such as the Voluntary Sector Statistics collected by the SCVO, and the Scottish Household Survey. However, variations in definition and scope meant that there was a variation in research findings across different studies.

We identified particularly strong themes of literature relating to the third sector workforce, and its economic contribution, although there are few qualitative studies of employees' experiences. The contribution of credit unions to financial sustainability and tackling financial exclusion was also evident. There is literature distinguishing between urban and rural Scotland, although rural Scotland is often marginalised, and an emerging theme of work relating to the impact of the third sector and the recession. There is also a growing body of work on social enterprise, although this could be further developed.

Smarter: *Expand opportunities for Scots to succeed from nurture through to lifelong learning ensuring higher and more widely shared achievements*

A wide range of material was thematically relevant to this Strategic Objective, in part due to the cross-cutting nature of much of the work available. However, despite the wide range of literature available the body of research is not extensive, covering a wide range of issues without always providing the depth of analysis needed to illustrate the sector's impact. There is little scholarly literature and a UK focus to much of the existing material.

We identified strong themes of literature relating to the third sector's role in education provision, and its contribution to early years childcare, lifelong learning, facilitating access to learning, and promoting access to employment. However, the literature on adult numeracy is underdeveloped. Overall, there is a need for more methodologically sound research in this field

Healthier: *Help people to sustain and improve their health, especially in disadvantaged communities, ensuring better, local and faster access to health care*

This Strategic Objective has been subject to a great deal of policy attention, and this is reflected in the wide range of material available. The strongest themes of material we identified related to the significant role played by third sector organisations in health policy, healthcare provision, health promotion (although the evidence here would benefit from further development), children and parental wellbeing, substance misuse, and sport, health and wellbeing. There is little work on multi-agency partnerships, particularly Community Health Partnerships. A greater discrete focus on the third sector is needed as third sector organisations were often not the direct focus of the studies we identified.

Safer and Stronger: *Help local communities to flourish, becoming stronger, safer places to live, offering improved opportunities and a better quality of life*

In all, the evidence base relating to this Strategic Objective is comparatively strong. We identified, however a wide variation in research quality, and a lack of scholarly literature.

There was a wide range of material available but it should be noted that the scope of the objective contributed to the broad range of literature that related to this objective.

We identified clear themes of evidence relating to housing and homelessness, equalities groups, the third sector and the arts, and advocacy work. Research in this area tends to focus on specific themes, such as the arts, rather than collecting data on a range of relevant areas, suggesting that cross-cutting work would be helpful in understanding the contribution of the third sector to this objective.

Greener: *Improve Scotland's natural and built environment and the sustainable use and enjoyment of it*

Of all the Strategic Objectives this was subject to the least attention in the literature, and overall this area of the third sector's work would benefit from greater research attention. Although there were a number of clear areas where the material indicated a significant contribution from the third sector, we felt that the depth of evidence in this area could be developed, with more studies exploring the themes we have identified here. This area did include, however, a relatively large scholarly literature.

Despite this, it was clear that the third sector carried out significant work in this area. We identified clear themes of evidence relating to environmental volunteering, community recycling, and land management and heritage. Important gaps are the lack of broad, national studies, and statistics on environmental volunteering.

Conclusions

From the material we have identified, there can be no doubting the importance of the third sector to social life in Scotland. The size, scope and diversity of the sector discussed in the material included in this study can only begin to attest to the sector's contribution in Scotland. However, there is particularly strong evidence relating to Wealthier and Fairer and Safer and Stronger.

The majority of the research that we have included in this review cuts across the Government's five Strategic Objectives. This is a necessary function of much of the research that we have encountered, with the work largely being focused on a specific initiative or theme without reference to the objectives themselves. It seems clear that the cross-cutting nature of the third sector's work is a strength that is emerging from the literature, and one that can support the Government's aim for more joined up working across portfolio areas

One striking feature of the literature was the role played by the public sector in commissioning, or directly carrying out, research either directly on the third sector, or on related fields. The majority of the material we collected had its origins with the public sector, indicating a commitment on the part of the government to understanding the impact of the third sector. A comprehensive database of all commissioned work would be beneficial.

Our review has identified some gaps in the existing research. It is clear that relatively little scholarly literature exists that focuses specifically on the third sector in Scotland, in spite of the broad references made in the context of the situation in the UK. Similarly, there is little literature that attempts to establish a conceptual basis underpinning the third sector's role in Scotland.

From our work, there is a clear mandate to further develop current research on the third sector in Scotland. Currently, although large amounts of material exist, with some exceptions there is no coherent body of research which identifies clear areas of relevance for the sector as a whole. Instead, many studies focus on specific geographical locations, areas of work, or individual organisations. Given the clear contribution made by the third sector to social and economic life in Scotland, the need to develop the body of nationally-focused studies of its impact is clear.

This document, along with the full research report of the project, "The Evidence Base for Third Sector Policy in Scotland: A Review of Selected Recent Literature", and further information about social and policy research commissioned and published on behalf of the Scottish Government, can be viewed on the Internet at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch>. If you have any further queries about social research, please contact us at socialresearch@scotland.gsi.gov.uk or on 0131-244 7560.