

Priority Areas: General Assembly 2017 Report

1. WEvolution: Building an SRG Movement

The SRG movement is a living celebration of the potential and talents of the people of Scotland, especially those who live in what most people refer to as disadvantaged or poorer communities, but what we think of as our least understood communities. Within Priority Areas, WEvolution works creatively and boldly to:

- take our work to the margins;
- tackle the causes of poverty; and
- develop more effective leadership within Scotland's least understood communities.

By working in often-overlooked places, SRGs offer an avenue of hope through a collective environment where people are able to self-lead, self-generate and drive forward their personal aspirations for tackling poverty. More specifically, these SRGs are enabling people, especially women, to take control of their lives and work towards their goals with dignity and mutual respect. This, in turn, is leading to a real and positive impact on their family lives, social bonds and friendships in communities. Part of the dignity and pride we see in SRGs is due to the fact that, once they are up and running, SRGs sustain themselves entirely on their own efforts and are totally self-financing.

The SRG approach nurtures an environment wherein people, especially women, are enabled to come together to help each other, save small amounts of money, share skills and create products or services, bringing hope and value to their own lives, and in the long term, to their families and local communities. Flourishing in Glasgow, Paisley, Dundee and Inverclyde, SRGs are based on the principles of self-help, trust and collective endeavour towards their social and economic well-being. Group members collectively strive towards improving their confidence, reduce their sense of isolation and grow their aspirations to take more control of their lives.

2. Progression of WEvolution's work

Since starting in 2011, WEvolution has supported the start-up of over 60 SRGs. Currently, WEvolution supports over 40 emerging and existing SRGs based largely in areas considered as marginal. WEvolution has spread its work from Glasgow to reach other areas of Scotland, including Inverclyde, Stirling, Edinburgh, Renfrewshire, Perth and Dundee. In addition to supporting SRGs in these areas, WEvolution runs four hubs in local communities that provide meeting and working spaces for SRGs to grow their ideas into realities. As a result of the hubs and collective working environment of SRGs, over £25,000 of income has been generated by SRGs since 2014. WEvolution, through contributions from the Church of Scotland's Women's Guild, has approved 7 loans, totalling over £8,000, since 2014. These loans have ensured the start-up of local retail shops and event businesses run by SRG members, as well as, the ongoing running of other small ventures started by SRGs. Internally, SRGs have loaned over £2,000 to one another demonstrating their own resolve to tackle financial needs as they arise with the group.

To ensure local people, traditionally excluded from mainstream financial services, have access to financial services out with the loans, WEvolution has partnered with formal bank institutions to enable over 10 SRGs have group bank accounts. Additionally, 10 SRGs have received public liability

insurance through WEvolution which enables them to more swiftly enter into income generating activities without having to worry about the plethora of regulations standing in their way. Internal loans and income generating activities of SRGs contribute to people in local communities having increased financial resilience and capital which in turn will enable them to more swiftly address issues facing their families and wider communities.

WEvolution has also worked to ensure the SRG way of working permeates other parts of the community development sector. Since 2014, WEvolution has seen the start-up of 15 SRGs through partner organisations across the UK. Additionally, we have equipped over 30 organisations with knowledge and tools required to walk alongside SRGs in their local contexts. Over the coming months, we will host over 100 leaders at our National Gathering, where attendees will learn more about the model and consider the next steps forward. It is our hope that organisations find their own “SRG Way of Working” that allows for a multiplication of SRGs scattered throughout the UK.

3. *The Real Impact: Gaynor's Story*

A year ago Gaynor was a shy mum of two, working alone to make cakes and hair bows that she would gift to family members. Working alone she appreciated the compliments she received but never considered it could become an income generating opportunity. In May, Gaynor and two others formed their Self Reliant Group – ‘W.E. Makers & Bakers’. The group make artisan chocolates, crochet items and children’s clothes for sale at local craft fairs and online through their Facebook page. Recently the group also fulfilled an order for the local branch of *Footasylum*, a large sports shop chain, creating rosettes for a staff award event.

In September, Gaynor’s confidence was bolstered when she agreed to share her passion for cross stitch as a skill share for other SRGs in Dundee and she supported and coached several women with some Christmas cross stitch patterns. Being able to share her experience of discovering the value of her skills and talents came naturally and now Gaynor shares the SRG way of working and her positive experience with people she meets outside of the hub environment, a huge change from the quiet, shy mum who wouldn’t speak to strangers.

As Gaynor and the SRG continue to grow and provide a supportive, productive environment for its’ members, she has started to dream of new ways of growing the sales. The group have been in talks with a local shop who will stock some of Gaynor’s children’s clothes and have agreed to take orders on her behalf. Gaynor was always proud of her products, but would never have imagined them go off enough to sell, but through her SRG experience of the last year is learning to believe in her ability to produce items people want to buy.

As a mum of two, Gaynor sees the value in her children watching her be creative and productive, but more so, her skills and talents are financially valuable; the additional income from the sales of her children’s clothes have meant more disposable income for family days out. The shared experiences and support she receives from the other mums and women in her group, and the wider SRG movement, mean she feels valued, but more than this, she has also become a contributor, offering support to SRG members in return.

4. *Future Direction: WEvolution 2.0*

Over the next year WEvolution will focus largely on:

- A) Directly growing and supporting SRGs in Scotland;
- B) Embedding its way of working into other organisations; and
- C) Creating stronger market linkages for products made by SRG members.

It is through these avenues that we lay the groundwork for the swelling of a larger and wider-reaching SRG movement across the UK.