Mapping the community sector in the Aberdeen region

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1   Introduction and Key Findings

In 2014, 65 community groups across the City of Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire (the Aberdeen region) in Scotland were surveyed as part of the EU funded TESS project[1]. This report provides a synthesis of that unique dataset. Insights will be relevant for those who are designing or administering funding and support programmes for community-based initiatives, particularly those with an environmental focus.

Key points:

1. The Aberdeen region is host to a diverse population of community-based initiatives active in the energy, transport, food, and waste domains.
2. A policy focus on "communities of place" appears to match expectations on the ground. The initiatives studied identify strongly with their place and tend to have a small-scale, "local" focus of activities.
3. Despite growing interest in social enterprise and other hybrid business models, the community sector relies largely on public funds and relatively few groups have any self-generated income.
4. Although community-based initiatives are built on volunteerism, the community sector is a small but not insignificant employer in the Aberdeen region.
5. Community-based initiatives are not "new" or "emerging"; the majority of the groups in our sample have more than a decade's experience carrying out their work.

2   Dataset

This report draws on a survey of 65 community-based initiatives engaged in environmentally relevant activities in the Aberdeen region (city and shire) in Scotland. The initiatives were selected using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling methods (see Appendix 1). This sampling approach is both a strength and a limitation of our work.

2.1   Strengths

This study differs from previous research on the Scottish community sector by taking a bottom-up approach, rather than starting from Scottish Government policy and following it "down" to the initiatives involved, e.g. two reviews of the Climate Challenge Fund (Brook Lyndhurst & Ecometrica, 2011; Hilliam et al., 2015) or Markantoni and Woolvin's (2015) review of multiple policies. Other research has focused on particular types of community-based initiatives, e.g. CXC work on community renewable energy (Haggett et al., 2013; Harnmeijer et al., 2015). There is also a great deal of work on individual case studies and their relationship with government policy, e.g. Aiken (2014) or Creamer (2015).

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[1] Towards European Societal Sustainability (TESS); FP7 grant agreement no. 603705; November 2013-2017. See www.tess-transition.eu or www.hutton.ac.uk/research/projects/tess.

The TESS dataset presented an opportunity to develop a bottom-up view of community activity. Rather than focusing on a single policy, single activity or single case study, we provide a snapshot of the community sector as it was in the Aberdeen region in summer 2014.

2.2 Limitations

The dataset has three main weaknesses. Firstly, the sampling approach taken (i.e. non-probability) does not yield a sample that is statistically representative of a wider population. Our results should not be extrapolated uncritically to the community sector as a whole in Scotland or beyond. Secondly, many groups did not respond to the TESS researchers' attempts to contact them. The sample is therefore probably biased towards more formal initiatives with paid staff or regular volunteers. Lastly, because the questionnaire had to be applicable across Europe (a TESS project requirement), many questions could not be adapted to the Scottish context. Additionally, it was not designed for detailed analysis. In the absence of a more comprehensive, purpose-designed questionnaire, this dataset represents the current state of knowledge.

3 Findings

This section presents our description of the 65 community-based initiatives in the TESS sample (see Figure 1 and Appendix 2) according to the characteristics that were covered by the TESS questionnaire which included:

- activities carried out
- place and scale of operations
- funding sources
- human resources: volunteers and staff
- organisational structure
- age and experience of initiative

Figure 1: Distribution across the Aberdeen region (city and shire) in Scotland of the 65 community-based initiatives in the dataset (Heslop, 2014)**. See Appendix 2 for the full list of surveyed initiatives.**
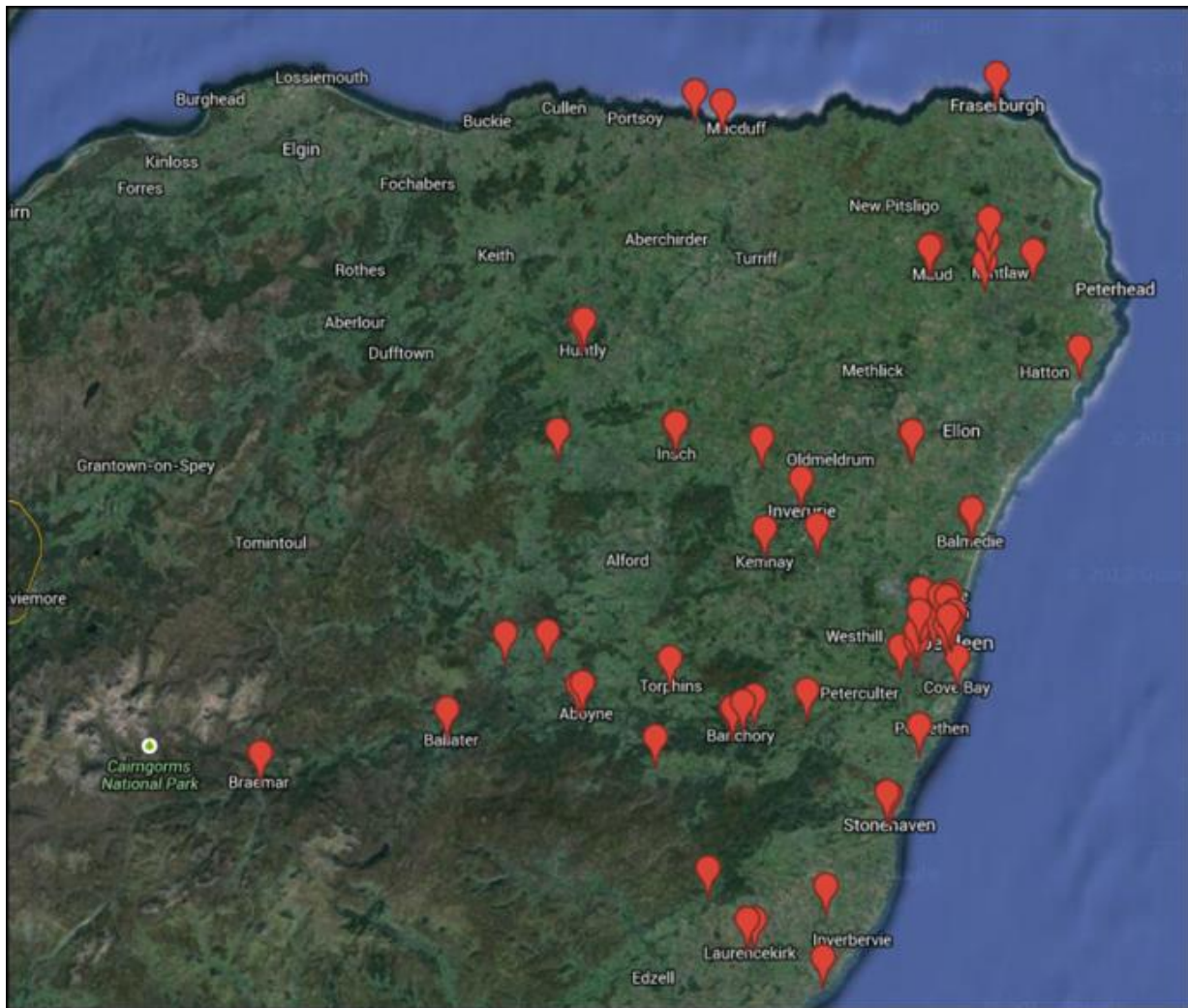
3.1   Activities

The activities carried out by the initiatives in our sample appear to reflect the interaction between policy support, societal demand and individual members' altruistic motivations. Figure 2 illustrates the broad range of project types identified in our sample.

Figure 2: Full range of 112 activities carried out by the 65 community-based initiatives in our sample, categorised by domain: energy, transport, food, waste or other. The number of initiatives carrying out each activity is in brackets with those activities carried out by 7 or more initiatives highlighted in bold.
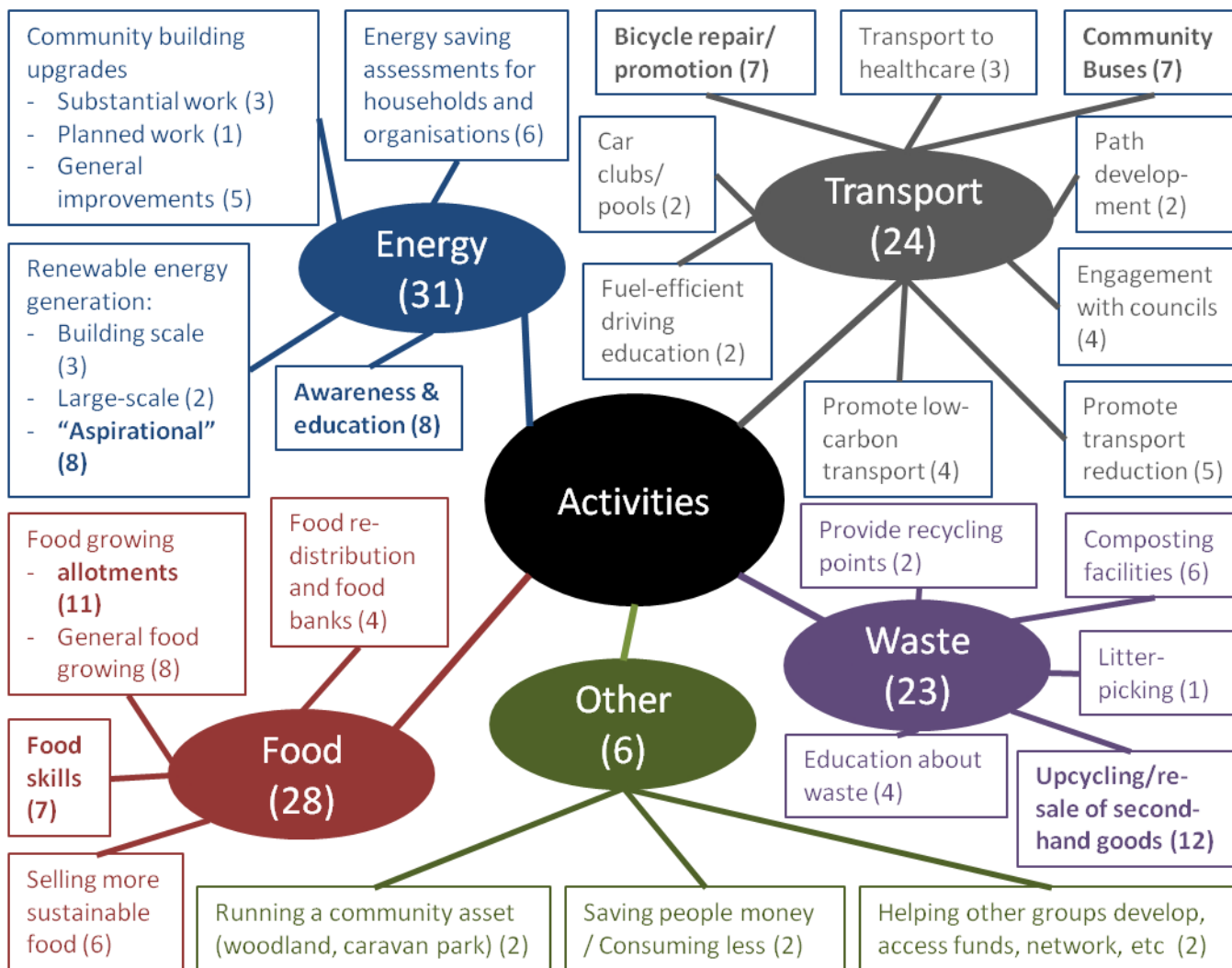
Many of the activities in the Figure 2 appear to reflect policy support. This is particularly prevalent in the energy sector where there are many supporting organisations and programmes, e.g. the Energy Saving Trust (2014) or the Climate Challenge Fund (Scottish Government, 2014a). For example, one initiative received Climate Challenge funding to fit double glazed windows in their village hall as well as to train energy champions to help households reduce their energy consumption. It is likely that the policy support was key to their decision to pursue these activities. Also noteworthy is the number of community initiatives aspiring to develop renewable energy capacity. Again, this may reflect the availability of funding and support for this work via the CARES programme (Scottish Government, 2014b).

Other activities more directly reflect demand that is not currently met by the public or private sectors. This is notable in the food domain, which is mainly demand-led in its provision of food aid, cooking education and growing spaces. In the waste sector, many initiatives have developed business models around providing second-hand goods. Rather than being linked to specific government policies, these activities appear to directly address the communities' demand for them.

The last factor that shapes the activities run by the initiatives in our sample is pro-social and pro-environmental concern. Many initiatives carried out education and awareness-raising activities designed to change people's attitudes and behaviours.

These three factors – policy support, societal demand and altruistic concern – are dominant drivers of the activities carried out by the initiatives in our sample. Gaining a better understanding of these inter-relationships could make support programmes more effective.

3.2   Place and Scale

Our dataset provided clear evidence on the importance of place to community-based initiatives. 78% of the initiatives were named after the place in which they operated. Our data also confirm the idea that community-based initiatives tend to operate mainly at a "local" scale. Figure 3 shows that 51 of the 65 groups in the sample had a catchment covering a small area of Aberdeenshire or a small part of the city. Initiatives defined this "local" scale in many ways – listed in Figure 4 – but they all correspond roughly to an area encompassing at the most 20,000 people.

Figure 3: The number of initiatives operating at different scales: 4 cover all of Aberdeen city, 10 operate over large areas of city and shire and the rest operate at a more local scale in parts of Aberdeen (12) or parts of Aberdeenshire (39).
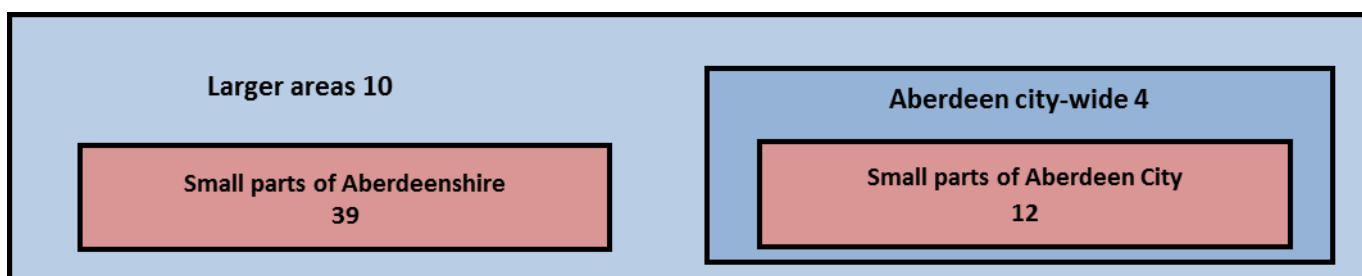

Figure 4: The various ways in which initiatives defined their catchment. Examples are given in brackets.

Reported scales of operation:
... **parishes** (eco-congregations)
... **postcodes** (AB54, AB43)
... **small towns** and their hinterland (Stonehaven, Banff, Laurencekirk)
... **a topographical area** (Moss of Cruden, Mearns, Deeside, Garthdee, Cults)
... **community council areas** (Cove and Altens)
... **health centre catchments** (Rhynie, Insch).

Thus, the scale at which most community groups in our sample operate is much smaller than other scales of governance in Scotland. Whether this "scale gap" is problematic or not remains to be determined. For example, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 encourages community organisations to participate in community planning partnerships (CPPs) to provide services in their areas (Campbell et al., 2014). These CPPs are co-ordinated at the local authority scale and thus encompass 164,000 inhabitants on average (Wightman, 2014). The measures that CPPs put in place to bridge this gap will likely determine the success of these new provisions.

3.3   Funding Sources

Our data indicate that despite the growth in social enterprises – represented in Scotland by SENScot (2015) – the community sector is still largely dependent on public money. The majority (60%) of our sample drew on central or local government funds or other types of grant funding. Our dataset did not identify specific funding streams. This meant that we could not examine in more detail how initiatives interacted with the different existing sources of funding. Further research could examine the full breadth of the funding landscape from the community sector's perspective to understand how the various funding streams interact with one another.

The community sector's engagement in the market economy is another area for future research. Only 37% of our sample engaged in any market activity and two-thirds of these also received public funds. This raises new questions: Which economic goods or services do community organisations provide? To whom? Can they cover their costs or even generate surplus for re-investment? How do community groups resolve the conflict between business activities and public funding under EU state aid regulations?

Remembering the importance and potential of unfunded activities is also important. Just over a quarter of the initiatives in our sample (28%) operated without significant funding aside from donations or membership fees. Even within some of the funded groups it is likely that some activities were carried out without funding. Understanding more about how these activities work and how they interact with funded activities would be critical to designing better support policies.

3.4   Staff and Volunteers

Our data show that the community sector is a small but significant employer in the Aberdeen region. Together, the initiatives for which we have data employ 168.75 full-time equivalents (FTEs) across the Aberdeen region. Staff generally work in small teams: of the 23 groups with paid staff in our sample, the majority (57%) employed 4 FTEs or less and only three initiatives (13%) employed more than 15 FTEs. However, our data also showed that staff are always supported by volunteers. Furthermore, half of the initiatives for which we had data[2] were entirely volunteer-run.

Overall, the community sector harnesses a significant amount of human effort in the Aberdeen region. Our dataset does not look into how effective or meaningful this effort is – it would be interesting to study this further.

3.5   Organisational Structure

Initiatives' organisational structures reflect the balance between the necessity of having a formal legal identity for regulatory compliance and the administrative costs of maintaining it. Charitable Limited Companies are the most common structure (21 initiatives) and another 13 groups are registered under a different form with Companies House and/or the Scottish Charities Regulator. In addition, about a quarter (16) of the initiatives in our sample are sub-groups of registered bodies, e.g. student societies part of the students' association or eco-congregations part of their respective church. All of the organisations with employees are either formally registered or are affiliated to a registered organisation.

Finally, just under a quarter (15) of the initiatives operate simply as constituted bodies without submitting accounts to any regulator. It is quite likely that groups do not formalise their legal structure unless there is a strong reason to do so, e.g. applying for grants, taking on employees, or owning assets.

Table 1 lists the various organisational structures mentioned in our questionnaire responses. The numbers in brackets refer to the initiatives of that type. Note that the listed examples are not mutually exclusive.

Type	Examples
Formally registered with OSCR (29) and/or Companies House (26) (34 total)	Development Trusts; Social Enterprises; Community Benefit Societies; (Charitable) Limited Companies; some Area Partnerships; Community Transport Associations
Sub-groups (16)	Student societies; Eco-congregations
Non-registered Bodies (15)	Allotment associations; Transition Towns; other Area Partnerships

3.6   Age and Experience

Our data shows that the community sector is well established in the Aberdeen region. The median age of the initiatives in our sample is 14 and a significant majority of initiatives (58%, n=39) have over a decade's experience in running their projects. Eight initiatives (12%) have been going for 25 years or more. Figure 5 shows the age distribution in full detail from the oldest initiatives founded in 1980 to the youngest from 2012.

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[2] The dataset only had staff and volunteer data for 43 of our 65 initiatives.
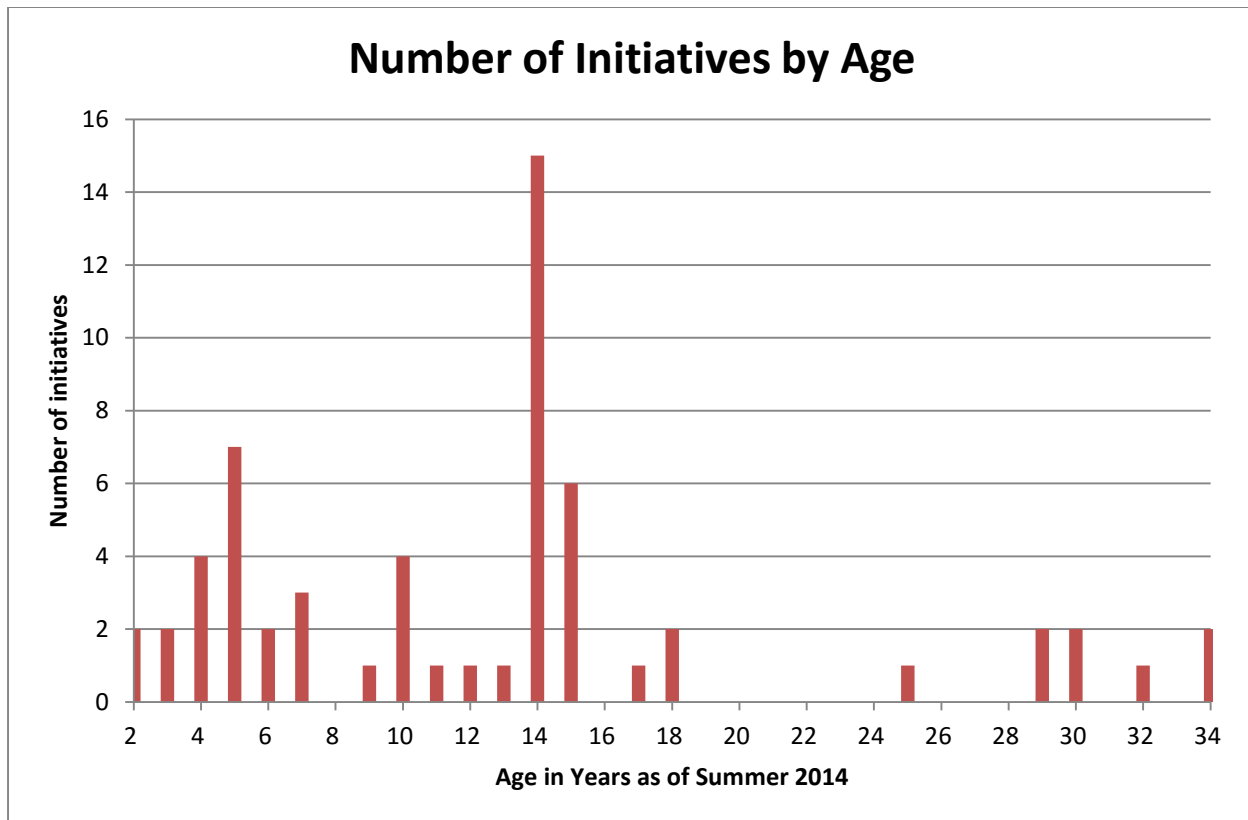
The broad age range in our sample highlights the potential for knowledge exchange between more experienced initiatives and newer ones. The results also show the importance of taking age into account when designing community support programmes. Is the support targeted at new initiatives? Or is it targeted at initiatives that have already been active for a few years to help them develop? Or is it targeted at the smaller population of older, proven initiatives that will likely be able to efficiently transform extra support into impact on the ground?

4   Acknowledgements

5   References

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6   Appendix 1: Method

This study is based on a dataset that was compiled in summer 2014 by a team of social science researchers[3] at the James Hutton Institute as part of the EU funded TESS project[4]. TESS examines the potential of community-based initiatives to contribute to the societal transition to a sustainable future, including but not limited to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. The primary aim of the data collection was to identify a pool of community-based initiatives from which to choose specific cases for further study. To be included, an initiative had to:

- be active in at least one of the energy, transport, food and waste domains
- be started and managed by a community group
- have been in existence for 1 year or more.

The pool was constituted by drawing on existing networks of collaborators, conducting internet searches using keywords (e.g. "sustainable", "community", "Aberdeenshire", "Aberdeen") and consulting a list of Climate Challenge Funded Projects (Scottish Government, 2014a). Snowball sampling was then used to extend the pool, whereby all contacted initiatives were asked for names of similar projects for inclusion (Tikkanen & Haara, 2014). Although no exact records were kept, we estimate that snowballing increased the sample by around 50%.

The researchers conducted a structured telephone interview (using a script with primarily pre-determined response options) with each initiative covering the range of topics described in this report. Where a telephone conversation was not feasible, researchers gleaned information from the initiative's internet presence. The final pool comprised 65 community-based initiatives; 49 of these had been interviewed.

Based on the collated data, the TESS project then went on to select four case studies from the pool of 65 initiatives for comparison with other European regions. There were no plans for further analysis of this data set. Noting the lack of bottom-up type studies of the Scottish community sector as a whole, we developed this synthesis of the collected data (that would otherwise not have been publicly available) in the hope that it might inform policy and further research in the field of community-led sustainability action.

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[3] Kirsty Holstead, Petra Lackova, Annie McKee PhD, Simon Heslop PhD and Liz Dinnie PhD.

[4] Towards European Societal Sustainability (TESS); FP7 grant agreement no. 603705; November 2013-2017. See www.tess-transition.eu or www.hutton.ac.uk/research/projects/tess..

7   Appendix 2: List of Initiatives

Aberdeen Cycle Forum

Ballater RD Ltd

Banchory District Initiative

Banchory Ternan West Church eco-congregation

Banffshire Partnerships Ltd

Banff Castle Community Association

BeCyCle

Better Balmedie

Birse and Feughside Parish Church eco-congregation

Books Abroad

Braemar Community Ltd.

Buchan Development Partnership

Buchan Dial-A-Community Bus

Car Aid Rhynie

Community Food Initiative North East

Co-operation green

Cults Parish Church

Drumoak-Durris Church eco-congregation

Earthkeepers

Ferryhill Parish Church of Scotland

Fetterangus power limited (PUFF power - Planning for the

Undertaking of the Future of Fetterangus)

Fraserburgh development trust

Friends of Insch Hospital & Community

Friends of Sunnybank Park

Garthdee Field Allotments Association

Gordon Rural Action

Greener Kemnay

Healthy Roots Aberdeen

Heathryfold Allotment Holders' Group

Huntly and District Development Trust

Huntly Community Growers

Insch Renewable Energy Consortium

Instant Neighbour

Inverurie West Parish Church eco-congregation

Kemnay Parish Church eco-congregation

Kintore Parish Church eco-congregation

Laurencekirk Development Trust

Logie Coldstone Trust

Longside Parish Church eco-congregation

Magpie

Making the most of Aden Country Park

Mearns Community Transport Scheme

Mid Deeside Ltd

Milltown Community Ltd

Moss of Cruden Community Association (MOCCA)

Neither Loirston Growers' Association

Pitcaple Environmental Project Ltd.

Portlethen and District Voluntary Community

Ambulance Association

PUT Community Co-op

Queen cross eco-congregation

SCARF

Shared Planet Society

SHARK

SHIFT – umbrella

Slopefield Allotment Association

Slow Food Aberdeen and Shire

Somebody Cares

St Thomas' Aboyne eco-congregation

Stonehaven Allotment Association

Sustainable Energy Association Stonehaven

Tarland Development Group

The Corner

Transition Mearns

Udny community wind turbine company ltd

Woodend barn