



# Next steps for the Third Sector Research Forum

## A summary of key findings from the external review July 2022

The Scottish Third Sector Research Forum (TSRF) exists to:

- Promote and share research about and from the third sector
- Encourage the use of third sector research to improve policy and practice
- Produce resources and deliver events to support third sector researchers and encourage collaboration with academic partners.

After nearly 10 years facilitating the TSRF, Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS) commissioned a review to identify the support and networking needs of people involved in third sector research and to propose the best ways to meet those needs in future.

The review was carried out April – June 2022 by external consultant Philippa Bonella. It involved desk research, 12 interviews with TSRF members, a survey of TSRF contacts (20 responses) and a shorter survey seeking to reach beyond existing contacts (1 response).

### Key findings

- 1. The TSRF is highly valued.** Members generally said they wanted the TSRF to continue in a similar way in future, although most were keen for it to grow and develop. Any future changes must balance safeguarding the current value of the TSRF with engaging a wider audience.
- 2. The TSRF is well-run.** Members and survey respondents valued the TSRF's quality resources (for example the [ethics guide](#)) and its events and communications. Members felt meetings were well-chaired and organised. Some felt that as facilitator, ESS could cede more control to members.
- 3. The roles of the TSRF have not been achieved equally** (see bullet points above). The TSRF has focused most on producing resources, events and collaboration opportunities. It has focused least on encouraging the use of third sector research to improve policy and practice. This role may be difficult for a networking forum to achieve; expectations should be reviewed.
- 4. The TSRF should reach a wider audience.** The TSRF could extend its benefits to more people through a 'community of practice' or peer network. Some said it would be good to engage more academic and public sector researchers. There would need to be different ways for people engage.
- 5. The TSRF could do more to build research capacity in the third sector.** Suggestions from members included helping non-research experts in the sector to realise they are producing valid research and organising joint training and skills sharing at different levels of expertise.

## Proposals for the future

### 1. Develop a community of practice or peer network for researchers

- Build a core group of TSRF members to develop a wider peer network/community of practice; invite mailing list contacts to join the community of practice and to attend regular themed events
- Continue to offer core group members time-bound and focused opportunities to lead activities, agree themes for the year
- Increase academic input, perhaps through inviting a wider academic audience beyond those already senior in their field
- Offer an email distribution list or online forum so researchers can communicate with each other directly
- Create an online register of members' research interests that they can update themselves.

### 2. Develop the TSRF role in building research capacity in the third sector

- Drop the focus on use of third sector research and deepen the focus on building the capacity of third sector researchers
- Undertake research to understand why the research profession is growing in the third sector and what the profession now looks like
- Offer pairing or mentoring of experienced and new researchers
- Support joint funding applications or run funder matchmaking sessions
- Broker peer-peer training or group training sessions for new methods
- Set up sub-groups for different sub-sectors.

### 3. Develop the TSRF role connecting (and promoting) research expertise within the third sector

- Set up an ethics sounding board or similar process for those who wish it
- Develop a list of people willing to give time to advisory boards
- Create opportunities to build collective advocacy on what third sector research is telling us about social challenges.

## Next steps

These proposals are summarised from the full review report and a workshop run for TSRF members to discuss the review findings and brainstorm ideas for the future.

The next stage is to develop these proposals (as far as possible within available resources) into a clear plan for ESS to deliver. This plan will be shared with the wider TSRF mailing list and further input is welcome.

The TSRF is funded by the Scottish Government and convened by Evaluation Support Scotland: Scottish Charity No. SC036529 Registered Company SC284842  
[www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk](http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk) [info@evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk](mailto:info@evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk)