

Valuing local communities in research and policymaking



2026

Supported by

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Executive summary

Evidence-based policy-making endures as a gold standard of national policy-making in Scotland. However, what counts as evidence for policymakers and researchers alike continues to evolve, and there is increased recognition of the importance of integrating lived experience and community research in shaping policy. Concurrently, questions around different forms of knowledge, including the significance of deep, place-based systems of knowledge, around who holds or creates knowledge, and the diverse types of impact (at local/regional/national level) continue to be interrogated in Scotland and beyond.

It was in this context that the Royal Society of Edinburgh and CoDeL, with financial support from the Williamson Trust, brought together a diverse group of people with rich experience of research practices (e.g. community groups, universities, independent researchers, public bodies, funders) in August 2025, at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. The Gàidhlig college in Skye provided a physical context immersed in locally rooted knowledge and culture, while a local artist presented her research to kickstart the group's reflection on how knowledge is preserved and shared, and how different voices are represented, remembered, or excluded.

The diverse programme of presentations, discussions and facilitated sessions created a space for the participants to engage with each other on a basis of equality and respect, to reflect on different types of research, especially community-rooted research. They recognised the extent to which many communities are already delivering such research, and shared real-life examples of it. Participants emphasised the need to ground different types of research in deep reciprocity and respect for communities to ensure research is collaborative rather than extractive. Rather than being filtered or interpreted through externally designed frameworks and language alien to communities and their deeply held cultural knowledge, community-rooted research draws on the knowledge and voices of local people, and is already changing narratives and influencing policy, from local to national.

This report presents the main learning outcomes from the two-day event, some case-studies, and the ideation process that led to a shared vision for research with communities. The report sets out key characteristics of such research that is embedded in processes of community action and development. It is pluralistic and relational, not extractive. Collaboration, hope, reflective and relational processes, based on equality, shared resources and shared responsibilities emerged as core principles. In particular, it recognises the rich and diverse repository of knowledge (including embodied and inherited knowledge) and lived experience that communities hold, and is rooted in a deep understanding of place and history, of language and cultural identity. Communities occupy a central role in the research process, not just participating in engagement activities, and are appropriately remunerated, to ensure that researchers remain accountable to them and that solutions identified proceed from shared community values. And it is community research, rooted in local place, experience and knowledge, that can underpin more relevant, tailored and impactful policy across the multiple and diverse contexts found within Scotland.



A diverse set of recommendations emerged around themes such as research methodology and ethics, funding models and new structures for research that empower communities to lead and shape the generation of knowledge and give them agency. Research should amplify community voices rather than extracting knowledge from them or treating them as “living labs.”

Participants therefore sought to identify opportunities to foster new and more equitable and collaborative approaches to research, including addressing the inequalities of structures and power dynamics. They envisioned approaches that are radically open, just, inclusive and transformative, and that can lead to effective and more equitable policymaking.

1. Introduction

Participatory research practices have now become ubiquitous, yet the shortcomings of traditional approaches to such methods have become increasingly apparent. In the RSE's *Rethinking Policy Impact* project, recommendations were made to funders to address the shortcomings of some collaborative approaches and update guidelines for funding.¹ More recently, a report published by the Institute for Community Research and UKRI highlighted that collaborative research projects can be affected by power imbalances² amongst participants, as well as preconceived hierarchies of partners (often benefitting the “established” academic research partner). Acknowledging that a diversity of research methods is needed for a healthy research ecosystem, different approaches should be considered in response to the diverse needs of communities. In this context, the aim of this project was to focus its reflections upon one particular type of research – community-rooted research – as one approach in a complex multidisciplinary research and policy environment that seeks to address multi-scalar impacts.

It thus drew on a concurrent trend which seeks to increasingly recognise the research conducted within rural and island communities by the communities themselves.³ In particular cases, such research rooted in genuine lived experience and understanding (including inherited knowledge) relates directly to local needs and aspirations, and can thus have immediate impact, locally and sometimes nationally. Research funders, such as UKRI and the RSE working in partnership with the Williamson Trust, are providing new structures and opportunities for communities and researchers to foster new collaborative approaches.

At policy level, policy communities across the world, not only Scotland, are increasingly noting the importance of integrating lived experience and community research in shaping national and regional/local policy, recognising that place-based approaches might yield more tailored results. Projects such as What Works have sought to identify better models for co-production of research and policy and encouraged researchers and policymakers to seek “*more inclusive and democratic approaches to developing and sharing knowledge*”⁴ to address the complex inter-

¹ Boswell, C.; Smith, K., & Davies, C. (2022). *Rethinking Policy Impact: Promoting Ethical and Effective Policy Engagement in the Higher Education Sector*. Royal Society of Edinburgh. <https://rse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/RSE-Rethinking-Policy-Impact-report.pdf>

² Institute for Community Studies and UKRI. (2025). *Pushing the boundaries: Exploring “citizen science” and community participation across research*. <https://www.youngfoundation.org/our-work/publications/partnerships-for-citizen-science/>

³ While the value of local knowledge, rooted in distinct cultures, inherited knowledge and lived experience, has long been recognised in some academic disciplines, not least social anthropology, such understanding has often not influenced policymaking. Even if the value of local knowledge may be noted in communities elsewhere, such as indigenous communities, policymakers within Scotland and the UK have rarely developed policy, beyond the cultural sphere, that incorporates the distinct local, inherited and cultural knowledge and practices held within many local communities across Scotland. These are of great importance, not least in responding to the climate and biodiversity emergencies (see, e.g., the conclusions from the IPBES below).

⁴ Henderson, J.; Revell, P., & Escobar, O. (2020). *Summary: Building the community economy in Scotland: supporting learning and action*. <https://policyscotland.gla.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WWSBuildingTheCommunityEconomyInScotlandSummary.pdf>

related social, economic and climate challenges and crises we face. Additionally, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES)⁵ argues that current policies and frameworks will fail to deliver on climate and biodiversity until they incorporate the understanding, perspectives, values, and worldviews of indigenous peoples and local communities.

Foregrounded in this analysis/landscape, a mix of participants hailing from different backgrounds (e.g. community groups, universities and research institutes, independent researchers, public bodies, funders) were brought together by project partners, the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE), and CoDeL, with financial support from the Williamson Trust. The main outcome was a workshop held on 28-29 August 2025 at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig to work together, across communities and different types of institutions, to reflect on different types of research – with a special focus on community-rooted research – and to identify more equitable ways to deliver on research that benefits different sectors of our society, including rural and island communities.

⁵ IPBES. (2022). *The assessment report on the diverse values and valuation of nature: Summary for policymakers*. <https://www.ipbes.net/the-values-assessment>

Community-rooted research

While there has been a lot of recent work on improving “community engagement” with those who hold critical knowledge on the ground, for the communities in question, such research is still often experienced as extractive, with research purposes, agendas, and resources being determined externally. At the same time, there is extensive community-rooted research happening across rural, island, and indeed urban communities, which is often under the radar of academic research. Community-rooted research is often characterised in the following ways:

- it responds directly to community needs, as experienced by the communities themselves (e.g. the need for local education provision in the Glenkens case study); such research is “active” (with purpose to achieve tangible change for communities) rather than “passive” (to examine subject matter which may or may not result in tangible change);
- such research is rooted in place and context, and is embedded in community processes that seek to address particular needs, challenges, and aspirations over time; such research is an integral part of community action and development, rather than a discrete siloed intervention (see the Glenkens and Isle of Bute case studies);
- a significant feature of these processes is enabling communities to reflect and learn themselves (e.g. a community workshop on racism that led to reflection on the experience of past oppression in Gàidhlig communities), enabling communities to tell meaningful stories to themselves, enabling dialogue within communities – including among diverse local interests – rather than just responding to pre-set questions;
- community-rooted research gives voice to diverse individuals, groups, and communities – including voices that are often not heard – voices that are not filtered, interpreted, or translated through externally designed frameworks and narratives, or forced into traditional research outputs (but may instead include stories, poetry, artistic expression, videos and reels, podcasts, etc.);
- remains within the control and ownership of local communities (in contrast to external parties “engaging” communities or setting up “living labs”), and remains accountable to them (e.g. research commissioned by a community itself; see the Glenkens case study); and
- values communities for their knowledge, experience, and insight, valuing that includes significant allocations of financial resources as well as valuing in non-financial ways.

Such an approach tends to be pluralistic, relational, and accountable, and is not extractive (i.e. does not extract knowledge that is then owned and monetised by external agencies). The approach recognises differences and hierarchies of knowledge within and between communities, and seeks to address these by giving voice to less heard voices also. Such research always seeks to be impactful and to have direct positive impacts on communities, on the ground and through better policy. This does not mean that community-rooted research cannot benefit from the contributions of external researchers and research institutions, but that the research remains in community control and that any policy outcomes meet communities' needs and aspirations.⁶ It should thus be considered in the wider Scottish research and policymaking ecosystem.

In places like Canada and Australia, there are protocols to protect indigenous peoples and their knowledge to ensure they remain in control of any research in their territory and that such research remains accountable to them.⁷ Conversely, there are few protocols to protect local communities in Scotland, that respond openly to the question "whose knowledge is it anyway?," and that recognise the deep contributions that so many communities have made to impactful research, and continue to do so, to develop local solutions for themselves that may be relevant to other local communities and contribute to effective policymaking or delivery.

⁶ Like in all contexts with diverging interests, the different hierarchies of knowledge and power that exist within communities may sometimes benefit from external contributions. However, such contributions are not justified by a presumed appeal to objectivity from external researchers. Discussions in the workshop reflected on the influence of researchers' own positionality (e.g. personal and institutional frameworks, differential power relations, and complex institutional dynamics) that might be reflected in their approach to research processes. An ability to be pluralistic, relational and accountable is important for all researchers, whether within or from outside of the communities concerned.

⁷ It is, perhaps, important to recognise that such protections have been hard won, after intense campaigning over long periods of time, and even now remain contested, politically, and economically.

Process and event outline

Pre-event/travelling to Skye

The choice of venue for the event was strategic, as it was important for the event to be hosted within a local community which understands the importance and value of community research and to bridge the gap between communities, academia, and policymakers. Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, a Gàidhlig (Gaelic) college on the Isle of Skye, was our destination and starting point. It provided a physical context immersed in locally rooted knowledge and culture, portraying an inclusive message where under-represented community research voices were platformed. The choice of an island-based location was also linked to discussions around the challenges faced by rural and highland communities,⁸ including those of accessibility and connectivity, further compounded by the cost-of-living crisis.

The room set-up itself further combined the knowledge, expertise, and lived experience of community researchers, academic researchers, policymakers, funders, artists, lawyers, and other key actors present. As a strategic choice, all titles, including Professor, Dr, Dame, etc. were left at the door to create a space for the event where all voices and perspectives mattered and were valued equally. In this manner, we prioritised experience and knowledge rather than status.



⁸ Highlands and Islands Enterprise. (2022). *Rural and regional disadvantage in the Highlands and Islands*. <https://www.hie.co.uk/research-and-reports/our-reports/2022/december/20/rural-and-regional-disadvantage-in-the-highlands-and-islands/>

Art and knowledge

Throughout the day, a local artist and musician from North Skye, Eilidh MacKenzie, shared her work on the eighteenth-century traveller Thomas Pennant⁹ (also published as a book and forming part of the exhibition *ùir-sgeul | earth story*),¹⁰ and about Skye's shieling culture, a migratory way of living which fosters community traditions. She displayed pieces from her art exhibition, reflecting on certain points in the history of the people in Skye through objects. Thomas Pennant was interested in the flora, fauna, and geography of the Hebrides, but his writings primarily reflected the perspectives and interests of his own demographic, often overlooking the lived experiences and culture of the local Gàidhlig-speaking communities. At the time, much of the information being recorded and shared was not representative of Skye's population. Within her art, Eilidh explores themes like poverty, changes in land use, and forced cultural separation, and pursues a central interest in the shieling culture and its remnants. The input of people in Skye was not valued by travellers like Pennant, and little has survived of the shieling culture in Skye, but it continues to exist in memory and oral tradition through its people. Eilidh says in her chapbook:

There feels a powerful connectedness through place, stone, and soil to generations past, and at the same time an overwhelming sense of cultural loss; the loss of indigenous knowledge and culture, of sounds and language of place, a way of seeing and being that was shaped entirely by the land. In terms of physical proximity, you can't get any closer than where I sit to the shieling culture that has otherwise disappeared – but in the time that has passed between the last milking and my curiosity, almost everything else around this place is changed.¹¹

Her research allowed her to reflect on how knowledge about these places is preserved and shared, and how different voices are represented, remembered, or excluded. Her work integrates drawing, painting, sound, and sculpture with collaborative research, linking historic elements to contemporary issues relating to language, learning, and land.



⁹ The research, associated residency at Atlas Arts, and exhibition are part of the AHRC-funded research project Curious Travellers.

¹⁰ Atlas Arts. (2025). *ùir-sgeul | earth story: Exhibition*. <https://atlasarts.org.uk/programme/%C3%A0s-an-%C3%B9ir-from-the-soil-exhibition>

¹¹ MacKenzie, E. (2025). *Ùir-sgeul | earth story* [Chapbook]. ATLAS Arts / Making Publics Press.

Welcome to Skye: radical hope

Various opening remarks were made including by Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart, a Senior Lecturer at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, who emphasised the importance of Gàidhlig, the College, and the island's history. He reflected on how traditional ways of life could be preserved, despite multiple challenges. He proposed the concept of radical hope to make our communities better. The idea of **radical hope** represents a type of hope that sustains a people facing significant cultural challenges, where they can imagine future goodness.¹² The notion of radical hope subsequently inspired event participants, and became a central reference point for the event.



Session 1: Community-rooted research

This session focused on community-rooted research that has made a real difference in local action and policy, showing the value of working closely with communities and ensuring that all voices are heard. Presenters highlighted how research grounded in local experiences can uncover new insights, bring under-represented perspectives to the forefront, and build meaningful collaborations between community members, academics, and policymakers. The session emphasised the importance of understanding local context, recognising multiple forms of knowledge, and addressing structural barriers to participation.

Heather Fulton (Atlas Arts, Isle of Skye) presented a series of projects run by Atlas Arts rooted in the Gàidhealtachd tradition, deeply connected to local culture. Their *School of Plural Futures*¹³ initiative is youth-led, addressing issues such as housing, employment, and climate change. Here, projects are decided collaboratively, emphasising listening and learning from participants. Heather highlighted initiatives like *Tobar an Dualchais*,¹⁴ which includes audio recordings of Scotland's cultural heritage, and the above-

¹² Lear, J. (2006). *Radical hope: Ethics in the face of cultural devastation*. Harvard University Press.

¹³ Atlas Arts. (2025). *School of Plural Futures: Year Three*. <https://atlasarts.org.uk/programme/projects/the-school-of-plural-futures-year-three>

¹⁴ Tobar an Dualchais - Kist o Riches is managed from Sabhal Mòr Ostaig: <https://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/>

mentioned *Ùir-sgeul* project with Eilidh MacKenzie. Both of these projects explore how research can recognise different forms of knowledge. She emphasised that the location of knowledge matters: Lived experience provides context and insight that cannot be captured solely through external analysis.

Reeni Kennedy-Boyle (Fyne Futures, Isle of Bute) highlighted a series of research projects embedded within community development in Bute, for example on training and employability programmes, or active travel (see the Isle of Bute case study). Drawing on a research project related to ferry use, she noted how local expertise was undervalued and so led to the wrong conclusions. She stressed that research should be co-produced with communities rather than extracted from them. She emphasised the importance of asset-based approaches, recognising community assets and strengths, and engaging all age groups to influence policy effectively. With research as a living part of community action, Reeni also discussed the challenges of aligning research and community initiatives with funding structures that often assume deficit models.

Mary Mitchell, an independent researcher (Dumfries and Galloway case study) explored “alternative lifer” communities, focusing on young adults and families who had settled in a region facing depopulation to live “unconventional” lifestyles close to land, nature, and community. Her research demonstrated the ability of local researchers to reach out to groups off the radar, building trust and rapport (including through a self-assessment exercise allowing them to characterise their alternative lifestyles) and to derive relevant policy suggestions. Despite structural barriers, such as limited access to housing or agricultural land, these community members demonstrated resourcefulness, sound ethics, and innovative problem-solving to “buck the trend” of rural depopulation.



Theona Morrison, one of CoDeL's founders, presented some of CoDeL's community-rooted research focused on rural and island education and demographics, highlighting population decline and its consequences for community viability, and the demographic impacts of schools, hospitals, and other services. She emphasised the importance of local knowledge and data to support effective place-based planning and policy, rather than relying only on aggregate data, which can misinterpret local realities on the ground.¹⁵ In particular, she highlighted the need to change the narrative on rural and island, to root research in the understanding and knowledge of local people, rather than interpreting their lives and experience through the lens of external researchers. Theona stressed the importance of recognising local expertise, food security, and cultural knowledge, while countering misconceptions (e.g. that rural islands might be lacking in opportunities). In their work, CoDeL also ensure that young people taking part in research and development initiatives are fairly compensated.

Iain MacKinnon (Kyle and Lochalsh Trust) spoke about research into housing, land ownership, and cultural heritage in Skye from a very personal perspective. He emphasised the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental issues, using the metaphor of a hand to illustrate how individual and collective experiences are linked. Iain highlighted historical injustices, including land dispossession, and structural barriers to collective action and community ownership. Reflecting on personal and community experience, he quoted his own uncle who had remarked: "I love this place, I'm not sure I like it anymore," underscoring the complexity of attachment to land shaped by change and loss. He stressed the importance of understanding local history and culture to conduct research that is meaningful and respectful of the community's lived experiences.



¹⁵ See for instance a blogpost from the James Hutton Institute that notes "the shortcomings of official data sources": "One source of data that is often overlooked by policy analysts is that of the observations of local residents. Members of the local community are usually sensitive to changes in the way migration is affecting the population, and often have a sophisticated understanding of the complex factors at play in population change." Copus, A., Hopkins, J., & Wilson, R. (2019). *Evidencing population change on Scotland's islands*. <https://islandsrevival.org/evidencing-population-change-on-scotlands-islands>

Session 2: How do we achieve good and impactful research?: Research methodologies and good practice

Session 2 explored research methodologies and good practices for conducting ethical and impactful community-rooted research. Based on a panel discussion structure, participants highlighted the importance of relational approaches, plural ways of knowing, and grounding research in reciprocity and respect for communities. The session emphasised that research is not only about generating data, but about fostering meaningful relationships, amplifying local voices, enabling local agency, and understanding the complexity of human experience. Although the focus was primarily on research methodology, policy implications were also foregrounded in these discussions.

The session's layout was also carefully considered to reflect the principles of this event, with participants sitting in a circle and working in small groups, demonstrating at small scale the importance of removing hierarchies and creating spaces where all voices are heard. The richness of information shared during the two days at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, has been further captured in some participant reflections available in this SEFARI Gateway blog.¹⁶

Mairi McFadyen

Local Knowledge: A Relational Approach to Community Research

Independent researcher Mairi discussed the cultural dimensions of policy and the significance of deep, place-based systems of knowledge. Drawing on experience in the Gàidhealtachd and with indigenous communities, she critiqued “epistemic extractivism,” the practice of taking knowledge from communities without their meaningful involvement or benefit, and emphasised the need for deep reciprocity in research, which is enshrined in protocols with indigenous peoples in Canada and New Zealand, for example. Mairi called for mutually respectful and beneficial relationships, and noted that community knowledge is relational, lived, embodied, and plural. For research to be ethical, it must give as much as it takes, be grounded in humility and respect, and recognise multiple ways of knowing and belonging across generations and land-based practices.

Thomas Fisher

Articulating and Amplifying Community Voices

Co-founder of CoDeL, Thomas highlighted the practical elements of conducting research in rural communities. Research should amplify community voices rather than extracting knowledge from them or treating them as “living labs.” Communities should play a central role in research, and be appropriately remunerated, not just participate in engagement activities. He emphasised the importance of place-based knowledge, seeing things through the lens of rural communities, deeply respecting their knowledge and experience. It is the authenticity and rootedness that comes from such approaches that drives impact. Impactful research contributes to community

¹⁶ Dawson, L. (2025). *Valuing Local Communities in Research and Policymaking, Skye, 28 and 29 August 2025*. <https://sefari.scot/blog/2025/09/12/valuing-local-communities-research-and-policymaking-skye-28-and-29-august-2025>



processes, enabling communities to articulate and drive local agendas, and builds better relationships to directly benefit local communities. He concluded with a vision of community and academic institutions partnering on a basis of equality to address society's most pressing issues.

Luis F. Yanes

Human Rights Perspectives on Research Methodologies

Luis, of the Scottish Human Rights Commission, shared insights from human rights research, noting that human rights violations are widespread and often invisible. He stressed the importance of understanding the context and relationships in research. He promoted a constructivist approach, recognising the nuances of human interaction, and highlighted the need for careful mapping, selection of participants, and ethical reflection in all research processes. This emphasis was echoed in the Scottish Human Rights Commission's report *Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands*,¹⁷ which documents how systemic issues such as housing shortages, fuel poverty, and digital exclusion affect the realisation of basic rights, especially the rights to food, housing, health and cultural life, underscoring the need for research methods that make these lived realities visible, and give voice to those who have experienced disadvantage, discrimination, and trauma.

Hyab Yohannes

Research with Refugees Informed by Decolonial Thinking

Hyab, himself a refugee, shared his approach to research with other displaced people, bringing both personal insights and professional expertise. He explained that conventional research methods often fall short and began his presentation with two

¹⁷ Scottish Human Rights Commission. (2024). *Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands*. https://www.scottishhumanrights.com/media/2881/main-report_economic-social-and-cultural-rights-in-the-highlands-and-islands.pdf

poems he had written to give voice to lived experience and emotion. The first, "*For an Oasis*," described scorching heat, hardship, and the yearning for safety – capturing the hopes and struggles of those forced to flee. The second, "*Sitting on the Shore*," reflected on the vast, mysterious sea as a space of loss and memory, quietly asking "where are our friends?" for those refugees lost on perilous journeys. By using poetry, Hyab centred people's emotions/experiences over abstract analysis.

Susan Paxton

Community-led Approaches - Scottish Community Development Centre

Susan reflected on experiences connecting academic institutions with community organisations. She emphasised valuing qualitative data and storytelling alongside quantitative policy data, recognising that interviews are complex and context-dependent. For this to succeed, power must be shared and displaced in research, with approaches that are radically open, inclusive, and allow communities to lead and shape the generation of knowledge. Susan noted that art and music play a crucial role in bringing communities together, keeping memories alive, and encouraging participation, while also emphasising the need to understand how internal norms and local interest groups shape community life.



Review of rural education in the Glenkens



The Glenkens in Dumfries and Galloway

The research, published in November 2024, was on developments in rural education in Scotland and beyond, particularly in areas that are suffering depopulation and have seen a decline in school rolls. It combined interviews in the Glenkens and across Scotland with a desk-based review of current international research. The Glenkens And District Trust

(Windfarm Community Benefit fund administrator, whose funding strategy aligns closely with the Glenkens and District Community Action Plan) wanted to gather evidence and review options for educational provision in the Glenkens, looking for positive, creative solutions which would both support the community's aspirations and support the local authority and other areas facing similar challenges.

It was triggered by the proposed mothballing of the only secondary school in the Glenkens, and inspired by the wish to find realistic alternatives. Parents were feeling powerless, and the local Council was being driven by the need for short-term savings due to national, urban-centric funding models. We were seeking evidence-based assessments and practical examples of alternative approaches, where rural schools were seen as part of a bigger solution to rural depopulation and as a key part of rural Scotland's wellbeing economy.

We have clear governance mechanisms in place to respond to emerging community need, to gather evidence and then to create action in response to that need. A key part of this is the Glenkens and District Trust, a community benefit fund whose trustees are local residents and community council members, and whose decisions are guided by the Glenkens and District Community Action Plan, developed with substantial public participation. Trustees devised the research brief, selected the researchers and steered the research process. Members of the community, including the Parent Council, contributed their views to the research.

We are an organised and coherent community which has delivered community development for ourselves over many years through partnership working and effective engagement. We can access many Glenkens-based volunteers and their associated lived experiences and expertise, including in education and research. These were essential to provide evidence of local need, the detailed local context of what might be feasible and how it would fit into the community's wider aspirations, and input into the report to ensure that it would meet the community's needs in their ongoing discussions with the local authority.

We selected researchers based on a clear brief, and selected CoDeL for their background in academic rigour but also their lived understanding of rural living. We needed researchers who understood the many benefits of rural life as well as the challenges, and who wouldn't patronise us or re-frame our challenges. We viewed them very much as our partners in this project, as we knew that we were all aligned on the larger strategic goals of making rural and island living more sustainable, as well as this short-term research project.

Our well-established community governance models here in the Glenkens mean that we have a direct and credible line from identifying community need to gathering evidence to creating strategic responses to delivering action. Therefore, when we commission projects of this nature, we can access our existing networks and inherent knowledge base to give the researchers an authentic way in to meet, understand and challenge our communities. Through this the researchers were able to engage with a community-organised event on education, organise two sessions of their own with parents and pupils, and carry out interviews with key informants in the area.

The Glenkens Community and Arts Trust Community and Arts Trust (the local development trust) and the Glenkens Community Action Plan Steering Group used the study and other work to create their own report “Education and Learning in the Glenkens” (August 2025). This has been well received nationally, and we are actively pursuing its recommendation for the creation of a 16+ Education and Learning Hub in the Glenkens.

Some of the national feedback:

Professor Roger Crofts FRSE

The first CEO of Scottish Natural Heritage, now NatureScot, and an RSE Fellow

“Perhaps the most significant sentence in the report is the following on page 13: ‘What is required is a significant rebalancing of schooling that does not just focus on learning to leave, but gives rural young people genuine choice and opportunity (a) to pursue their lives, and work, locally within their community, or (b) to migrate elsewhere, whether to urban or other rural places, or (c) to pursue a mix of these options.’”

Professor Ken Muir

University of the West of Scotland and author of the Scottish Government’s report “Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education”

“The report makes for a very interesting read. I’m particularly impressed with the way in which the report and its Appendix captures the advantages of such programmes and incorporates a range of case studies from so many different locations. These case studies are great examples of how local curricular initiatives can offer so much of value to learners in their own context. In fact, the manner in which these rural schools are taking advantage of curricular flexibility for the benefit of young people and their local communities is most heartening. They are very good examples of what I recommend in my report for Scottish Government, “Putting Learners at the Centre.” It is my strong view that ‘ground up’ initiatives, such as those being seen in some rural areas, have much more chance of success, and are much more beneficial for young people and their communities, than the kind of ‘top down’ initiatives we have seen over many years.”

The findings of the report have fed into local negotiations between parents, communities and the local authority around the future of local schools. The report has also generated significant interest from local to national representatives (local councillors, MSPs, and MPs) who have all engaged with the community in response to the report. And it has been used by other organisations, such as the Rural and Small Schools Alliance.

Above all, the report has given the community a stronger voice to seek changes not just locally but nationally across Scotland, for example in the way teachers are trained and the way rural schools are funded, fundamental factors that often push local councils into short-term savings through tactical school closures.

For the best flavour of this bold national vision and strategy from a rural community of less than 5,000 people, see their *Education and Learning in the Glenkens Report* (published in July 2025, only 8 months after the original research report). This latest report strongly argues that ...

"We must move beyond seeing rural education through the narrow lens of cost-efficiency. It is a corner stone of rural renewal and economic resilience."

"We need a better approach - one that sees rural schools as part of a bigger solution to rural depopulation, and a key part of the bigger picture of Scotland's wellbeing economy."

Reflections

For community-commissioned research: Be very clear on the need the research is addressing and how the research findings will move you closer to addressing that need. Be open-minded to it finding different solutions from the ones that you thought it would.

For externally-commissioned research: Be very sure that you have resourced the community that the research is based in sufficiently for it to be able to contribute meaningfully and as a full strategic partner to that research.

Session 3: How can we best incorporate community knowledge and community-rooted research into our own practice to contribute to enlightened action and policy?

The second day comprised sessions three and four, as explained further here. The purpose of the third session was to offer participants an opportunity to reflect on what had most struck them in the previous two sessions and how they wanted to change their own practice as a consequence. This session reflected key principles of the event, enabling participants to build relationships and to engage with each other on a basis of equality and respect within small mixed groups of community members, researchers, and others. Not surprisingly, the dialogue within these small groups was animated. Each group also created flipcharts recording key questions, insights, ideas, and opportunities for research and policy.

The groups reflected on the process of research, recognising that who/where/how research is done will produce different results, and consequently lead to different insight for policymaking. They discussed how to build relationships and reciprocity; how to address power relationships and engage in challenging conversations; how to build shared understanding and common values that also allow diversity; how to create an environment that leads to fair, just, and transformative change, and how to shape funding and research to enable such transformative change. To achieve this also requires challenging risk adversity and accepting failure.



The intention and purpose of research therefore featured prominently: with discussions highlighting for example, that “the point of research is not the interpretation, but what it can bring into being,” or the need for proactive research and a strong focus on (core) solutions and shaping policies that lead to positive changes. Research should incentivise community benefits in funding, and measure the impact on communities as well as within formal research groups.

The small groups shared much on communities, their resilience and sense of place, and not least their knowledge.¹⁸ They wanted research to be rooted in belonging, metaphor, and language, and in connected, place-based, cultural (including of course Gàidhlig), and environmental spaces beyond just the human.

Session 4: Exploring and articulating recommendations: moving towards protocols for collaboration around community-rooted research

The last session of the event was a facilitated process designed to draw out insights and recommendations for best practices in collaborative research that can contribute to positive community action and policy design and intervention. A key focus was creating a shared vision for community research, including its role in policymaking processes, reflecting both practical and aspirational dimensions.

Taking heed of the encouragement to make use of more creative approaches, participants were asked to use a “river” metaphor (see associated images). Ecological metaphors can be useful in explaining complex concepts, and participants were asked to imagine community research as a flowing river: a shared resource that starts at a source and continues to grow, connecting contributors and sustaining collective knowledge. Discussions emphasised both tangible outputs (practical, actionable results) and esoteric or epistemological thinking – considering the broader ecosystem of the research, including relationships, culture, and values. The session highlighted the importance of collective meaning-making, when communities, researchers and other stakeholders contribute together, creating knowledge that is meaningful, inclusive, and enduring.

¹⁸ This included, as we reflect in other segments of the report, the complexities of different types of knowledge, as well as dealing with a diversity of knowledges both inside and outside of the designated communities they were reflecting on.



A community perspective on everyday journeys in Bute



Reeni Kennedy-Boyle

This case study reflects a long-term and evolving community research process around active travel and public transport that has been on-going in Bute since at least 2011 (so, close to 15 years). Some key themes during this process have been:

- Reducing the carbon footprint of the Isle of Bute
- How to allow people to live sustainably
- Enabling transport for households without cars
- Encouraging active travel, to enhance both mobility and wellbeing.

This work was in fact triggered by research conducted by a Scottish university back in 2009 in the context of net zero initiatives, to reduce the carbon footprint of the Isle of Bute. However, after the failure of the initial research phase, in particular when external transport consultants became involved, an alternative community-driven process emerged. While this continued to include reducing the island's carbon footprint, the question at the core of the research process changed to "how to allow people to live sustainably." This included exploring public transport and active travel as key contributors to community sustainability and wellbeing.

For example, while data from the 2000s had suggested that 70% of households in Bute had a car, that has since declined to 44%, leaving more than half of households without their own transport. And transport and mobility are critical for so many different groups within the island, from young people through mothers with young children to diverse groups of elderly people, many of whom did not have good transport options and were thus excluded from participating fully in activities and social life.

One element of the initial research phase demonstrated a badly designed and delivered research process. Commissioned from outside consultants, it consisted of a few drop-in sessions and an online survey using a QR code. The uptake and response was neither comprehensive nor qualitatively of value, including because digital exclusion remains a barrier to participation for many in the area. The initial drop-in session was at 7pm in February. At one drop-in session, only one person who held a particularly strong point of view attended, and this happened to coincide with the perspective of the external consultants whose focus was on cycle paths (because their background was in road engineering). When the results were written up in line with that one person's views, it led to a local outcry because it did not represent the views of the community. As a result, many community participants turned up to the session to review the results, because they were so unhappy, and that meeting ended acrimoniously. And it certainly did not reach more than half of the people without access to their own car. These people were walking and wheeling prams and wheelchairs because they had no choice, and a new road layout with cycle lanes meant nothing to them.

A new process, led by key community organisations, began in 2011. With funding available to look at the potential of e-bikes in the area, a local graduate apprentice looked at the practical implications of this idea. The local apprentice reviewed the context in Bute and compared initiatives in Skye, Lochabar and Cumbrae to introduce e-bikes, but concluded that such initiatives would not be commercially viable beyond the period of being funded. So, once again, a predetermined research focus (in this case on the positive value of e-bikes driven by government priorities and funding streams) turned out not to be appropriate to the specific local conditions within the Isle of Bute, when the experiences and views of the local community, and communities elsewhere, were taken into consideration.

The community process therefore evolved further, with work involving meeting up with primary and secondary pupils at the schools, followed by consulting with employers and ultimately creating a group of diverse stakeholders within the community. This latter group has continued to meet during the different phases of the community research process, guiding the modulating focus of the research and evaluating what had been achieved in 2011, 2014, 2018 and again now.

A key principle of the research methodology was going to where people are, to regular places where they feel comfortable, rather than expecting them to turn up to consultation sessions. In these safe spaces it is important to create opportunities for dialogue, rather than seek answers to a fixed set of questions.

On the face of it, a decline in households with access to their own transport could be interpreted as a reduction in car use, but beneath the surface there could be multiple reasons for this change, such as population decline and an ageing population, economically active people leaving the area, a drop in school rolls, etc. So on the surface the publicly available data suggested progress on this agenda, but only a community-rooted process could reflect on the real reasons for this change. Likewise, the lack of access to private transport also means that many engage in active travel by walking, but not out of a positive choice for their health and wellbeing, but out of necessity, because there are no alternatives.

A community-rooted process is critical in enabling the voices of groups often not engaged to be heard. This was reflected, for example, in exploring the availability and suitability of existing public transport.

One focus group led by the community was with teenage girls. They said they were quite fearful of travelling by bus. The bus shelters were not lit, they felt vulnerable when the pubs close and drunken men used the same service or were around the bus stop. They sometimes felt uneasy on the bus, and they also worried about when they disembarked from the bus, due to lack of pavements and lighting which in the dark left them feeling vulnerable. Additional key insight: In strong contrast to the perspective that these teenage groups are not exercising enough, the focus group revealed that the girls did a lot of walking, to and from school, for their social activities, etc. but that would be in daylight hours and perhaps in a group.

Another session was with a men's group, mostly elderly: The men felt very at ease using the buses but said they didn't run at suitable times to allow them to access leisure activities which led to a sense of social isolation by being excluded from leisure

places because they didn't have a car, and taxis were too expensive. There was no bus stop close to the leisure activity. Additional key insight: The men felt that transport needed a whole system approach which did not treat leisure as a separate activity, and therefore less important than getting to school or work.

Another group used the Day Centre, which runs a memory club, sing along, photo reminiscences, a ukulele club, has a good kitchen and a place for bereavement care. In this case, the Day Centre was clear that no researchers could tag along at regular activities for their users. But because the request came from a trusted community partner, they proposed that their staff would do the consultation with users, and requested a research brief and postcards for this purpose. Many of the users had mobility problems which meant there were access issues: only one of the local buses could lower the entrance to allow easy access.

An impromptu focus group also emerged in a café with young mothers, who happened to be meeting in the café when one of the community leads for this research happened to be there also.

During the different phases of this community process, conversations with a wide variety of local groups have been conducted. I have already mentioned school pupils (primary and secondary) and employers, and when focusing on bus travel, other groups with teenage girls, an (elderly) men's group and users of the Day Centre. Ready access to these groups was possible because the process was led by trusted community partners (external researchers would not have been able to gain this access), and was not driven by tight timeframes dependent on the availability of external researchers/consultants.

This long process of research has not yet influenced national decisions, although key insights that should influence such policy have emerged. For example, a key insight from this work has been around leisure activities. For so many groups leisure activities are a vital part of their lives, not just some add-on, not just the icing on the cake. Accessing leisure activities is therefore critical, but transport policy often distinguishes between different uses, prioritising, for example, getting to school and work, and not emphasising access to leisure activities. This is seen, for example, in the lack of transport options in the evenings, on Sundays, etc.

The community research process has influenced local policy, for example the local authority has installed new bus shelters. And policy-makers are starting to recognise the needs of people not usually listened to.

There is a need for more community and place-based conversations and dialogue, and stories of lived experience. To deliver positive change, any research and data needs to be linked to experience, knowledge and insight on the ground from individuals and groups within the local community, and it is trusted community groups rooted in the local community that enable access to such groups and their insights. Local people bought into the process because it became part of the community's journey.

A final insight. Purpose and outcome: that is what distinguishes community-rooted research. Community-rooted research is "active" (with purpose to achieve tangible change for communities) rather than "passive" (to examine a subject matter which may or may not result in tangible change).

A shared vision for community research: key learnings

While participants' approaches and interpretations of community research varied, some common broad themes emerged. These were drawn from key learnings from the first day of the event and reinforced through the facilitated discussions on the second day. Themes included a shared vision for community research, the importance of process and collaboration, valuing and giving voice to plural forms of knowledge, and ensuring research outputs are both respectful of communities and practically useful for policymakers and other actors to enable positive change. Collaboration, radical hope, and reflective and relational processes emerged as core principles, with hopefulness seen as part of the research process itself. Creative practices such as stories, art, and music were recognised for their role in connecting communities, preserving memory, and fostering engagement.

Concept

"Sustainable, efficacious, plural, messy, contradictory, risk-taking, open to failure and ambitious"

Filling in the metaphorical river with ideas and in discussion during the second day, participants articulated a distinctive vision for the future that seemed to gain general consensus in the group for what the future of research could look like. Building on the Scottish ethnologist Hamish Henderson's metaphor of the "carrying stream,"¹⁹ the group envisioned a future whereby meaningful change is enacted, one in which research benefits, empowers, and creates meaningful change in policy but also in action. As Hamish himself noted in his reflections on the concept of tradition, this was described by some as a flow of movement towards bringing this particular approach to research – which is proactive, based on reciprocity, and that makes room for different types of knowledge (including embodied knowledge) – towards the centre. Similar to Hamish's interpretation, the participants reflected that the "river of community research" is dynamic and gradual change can be integrated in its course, focusing on the long term as much as on immediate impacts. Several participants emphasised the importance of creating space for difficult conversations and to tease out any existing tensions. Ultimately, participants felt the role of a supportive research culture would be to create "an environment that leads to fair, just, and transformative change."

¹⁹ See amongst others Kockel, U., & McFadyen, M. (2019). On the carrying stream into the European mountain: Roots and routes of creative (Scottish) ethnology. *Anuac*, 8(2), 189-211.

Place

“Community research is deeply aware of sense of place and enshrines aspects of local knowledge (e.g. Gaelic)”

A strong sense of place prevailed through the various presentations held in the first day, as well as in discussions during the second day. This echoes the increasing interest at national level in designing place-based policies in different fields. Participants noted the importance of different interactions with history, which has shaped various landscapes and left lasting traces. This was especially visible in the discussions around Gàidhlig and the Gàidhealtachd in this event, although it can be extrapolated to other places and spaces. The community research presented (some of which is reflected in case studies throughout this report) emphasised the deep repository of diverse forms of knowledge held by communities in different parts of Scotland, showing how they can form the basis for actionable policies that benefit local communities. This includes, but is not limited to, ancestral and modern knowledge, memories such as those shared in the event of the shieling culture, or the deep link of tradition that roots crofters in the Isle of Skye and elsewhere in land and place.

Research embedded in reciprocal relations embraces such local knowledge(s), experience, and understanding of community culture, recognising and valuing that communities are “brimming with insights, skills, experiences, ambitions.” Research must thus be grounded in a deep understanding of language and culture in close-knit communities, as well as of community needs and aspirations.

Process

“Shared responsibilities and stewardship rather than individual ownership and gain”

As noted at the beginning of this report, a pervasive model of participative research still sees partnerships and collaboration mired by the inequalities of structures and power dynamics. Understanding and navigating power dynamics is central to co-creation, ensuring research is collaborative rather than extractive. As the example of the research into Thomas Pennant’s work presented during the event suggests, it is often too easy for certain privileged groups to foreground their views, which remains as true today as it was during Pennant’s time, and policymaking processes in different communities across Scotland can fall into this trap. The vision of community research articulated in discussions throughout the event emphasised the need for deep listening, to capture and represent community voices rather than the interpretation of these by powerful institutions. The participants at the event also recognised the complexities of community voices, recognising that communities themselves are not monolithic but hold multiple views on one issue. Any researcher, whether from within or outwith communities, should ensure that the solutions identified are derived from shared community values, not just those of the most influential, most vocal, and articulate.

These sessions highlighted that impactful research must be ethical, relational, and grounded in reciprocity, recognising the humanity and expertise of all participants. Community voices must not only be heard but actively shape the research agenda, with every single voice valued. This was captured through the markings on the river as being “seen, heard, understood from the inside out.”

“At its core it is about humans getting along, showing humility and acting for the greater good”

Relationship building was deemed an essential component of a research process that follows this research ethos, participants emphasising the need to “value the person for their own sake.” This, in turn, can lead to better policymaking, which reflects the granularity of experience, rather than apply boilerplate solutions in different contexts.

Proceeding from a place of respect for the deep knowledge held by communities through their heritage and traditions, their rootedness and embodied knowledge, enables researchers to facilitate communities to explore the right questions to ask and how to meet the challenges they face. The reflexivity of researchers – whether from within the community, from an external institution, or in collaboration – is essential to ensure extractivist methods are not used, that relational accountability informs their practice, and that through their delivery of research, relationships are strengthened.

Embedding the principles of human rights methodologies could also enable better research, and the researchers, again whether from within or beyond the community, should carefully consider not only the big picture of the project design but also the most minute details such as who is selected to take part, the location of an interview, even the manner the researcher is dressed for that interview (as reflected in the “alternative lifers” case study). The role of empathy and emotions in research relationships needs to be considered to create favourable conditions for relationship building and, in the end, a better outcome of research (also foregrounded in the Isle of Bute case study).

A challenge that researchers might face in this process is identifying how to translate qualitative, relational data into policy-relevant formats (which often value quantitative data predominantly) without losing the richness and nuance of community experiences. At the same time, the Glenkens case study on rural education demonstrates just how much community organisations themselves can shape their relational understanding of their communities to drive policy processes, at local, regional, national, and even international levels.

Some pitfalls of unconstructive co-produced models of research were also identified, including that of “story fatigue:” the same people being approached in the name of “research” and being asked all the same questions, time and again, by different researchers. Equally damaging, participants felt, were research projects that ultimately reinforced results based on the researchers’ preconceived ideas for and of the topic (with the Isle of Bute case study emphasising the negative outcomes of such projects).

Structures

Participants felt that, at present, community-based research can sometimes lack the support it needs to enact meaningful change, and different causes were identified including funding, as well as capacity issues, or accessibility of resources. Providing spaces for sharing best practices, guides, and protocols was deemed important to ensure better participation and ownership of research processes.

Participants noted that funding models, through their design, can either present a challenge in some cases as well as offer opportunities to strengthen the existing infrastructure. Funders can have an impact in making the envisioned future a reality by mainstreaming research models that give community better agency and challenging extractivist practices, as well as by carefully (re)considering their metrics of value. Funding should enable people to have time and space to be creative, to ask questions and to devise visions for the future. Participants felt that, although some funding bodies and funding streams value such approaches, more could be done to support and facilitate community-rooted research. In this context, participants noted the importance of funding models that empower communities to define research agendas, deliver research, and control the narratives about their own contexts.

To explore these complexities, some participants put forward the concept of “confluence,” conceived as a series of events bringing together different actors (e.g. community groups, researchers, policymakers, etc) who are willing to contribute in an equal manner, to share resources and work together in support of the vision of community research outlined in the group.

From a policy perspective, investing in community research, which can often be delivered with more moderate funds than a large-scale research project, could address some of the deficits and negative outcomes of mechanisms commonly-used, such as those of “consultation,” “town halls,” “living labs” and other forms of policymaking co-production which place communities on an unequal footing.

Alternative lifers in rural Dumfries and Galloway



Mary Mitchell

My research project - titled "Alternative Lifers: Bucking the Trend in a Decreasing Rural Population" – was undertaken as part of a larger study looking at depopulation in rural Dumfries and Galloway (D&G). The population trend in D&G shows not only a decrease in numbers but an increase in the age of the remaining population as generally, it is the younger people who are moving away.

I have lived in Dumfries and Galloway for around 20 years, and I know this trend is not the whole picture.

There are also some younger people moving into the area, younger people who are not always officially counted. Many arrive, aged in their late 20s, seeking a particular lifestyle or occupation which they could not pursue in the more urban areas they originated from.

I wondered what common characteristics this group of people held and why they were attracted specifically to D&G.

My research project was based on interviews with 14 people I knew had moved to D&G as younger adults and who I thought may fit with the stereotype of an "alternative lifer." The purpose behind the interviews and subsequent report was to bring into the open a better understanding for a group of people who are often unacknowledged, under-valued and to a degree subject to prejudice.

The interviews consisted of two parts. Part 1 was a conversation based on questions about their background, reasons for coming to D&G, and their occupation and aspirations. Part 2 was to help find a definition for this group of people. I asked each interviewee to complete a characteristics matrix. This was done as a self-assessment exercise where each characteristic attracted a score, and the result was a placement on the "Alternative Lifer's Spectrum."

I assured everyone I talked with they would be kept anonymous, which supported a more relaxed and open conversation to take place. I tried to make the interview as easy and as unintrusive as possible for my interviewees. They always chose the time and the place for meeting, often mutual ground like a coffee shop was chosen, and I would pay the tab as a way to thank them for their time. I explained what would happen with the information they had shared with me. I reassured them that if they did not want to answer a question or wanted to avoid a certain subject, it was not an issue, and we would move straight on to the next question.

My research raised various findings, but the most interesting and surprising find was the level of community interaction and work being done by this group of "alternative" people; more often than not their time and efforts were unpaid. As a group, their contribution to place and community was enormous.

My background is in urban and regional planning, and my root interest is in sustainable communities; sustainable in all three meanings of the term – environmentally, socially, and economically. The alternative communities I saw and the aspirations of the people I talked with were hugely encouraging. My interviewees talked of a crofting culture and of eco-villages, of strong communities in local villages, they talked of local control and effecting positive change from the bottom up. That's why they are in D&G. I see this group of people as filling a niche which is waiting to be occupied, a niche which needs to be filled to create a stable, sustainable population in D&G.

The sustainable, positive aspects of these alternative communities and the potential that this group of people bring with them is however not officially recognised. I think there is little trust between D&G's alternative lifers and the national or regional policymakers.

I can confirm it is ad-hoc developments of temporary-type accommodation which planning policy does not like and does not support. I can also confirm that the over-arching aim of the planning system is to promote and encourage sustainable development. Therein lies the rub and it highlights a missing discussion at policy level.

Could local policy find a solution to help combat the decreasing and aging population trend in rural D&G? I propose that alternative lifers have started the job under-cover and are waiting to do the job openly once there is better support.

Recommendations

A range of recommendations emerged from the workshop in Skye, relating both to research design and to policy. First, however, we outline two overarching recommendations:

- The first step for both effective design and policy is to **recognise and value** the extent of community-rooted research already being delivered by many communities themselves and their impact in driving positive and meaningful change.
- While there is no one best approach that would suit all research projects, community-rooted research should proceed from a **recognition of the deep knowledge repositories that are held in communities** and their central role in designing adequate policy.

Methodology and ethics for communities in research

Many of the recommendations that emerged relate to methodology, proposing a thoughtful approach that builds on respect and reciprocity, shared responsibility and ethics.

- Research processes, irrespective if conducted by community researchers, academics, or in collaboration, should proceed from a base of respect and shared responsibilities to each other and the environment, and these principles should be integrated into the approach to conducting research.
- Carefully consider the relationships around who holds the research taking place within communities. Research must proceed from an ethos of equality, including in sharing resources, so that trust is built and sustained throughout the process.
- Respect, shared responsibility and trust facilitate “cultural mending.”²⁰ Research relating to communities must acknowledge the connection to place, history, and cultural identity.
- Design thoughtful research methodologies which carefully consider normative research practices, rooted in respect and reciprocity, equality and collaboration, rather than perpetuating extractive processes (taking knowledge from communities without their meaningful involvement or benefit).
- This can be helped by making room for more creative approaches, such as art, music, stories, poetry, and performance to connect communities, preserve memory, and communicate insights beyond conventional research outputs.

²⁰ McFadyen, M., & Sandilands, R. (2021). On ‘Cultural Darning and Mending’: Creative responses to Ceist an Fhearainn/the land question in the Gàidhealtachd. *Scottish Affairs*, 30(2), 157-177. “... the metaphor of ‘cultural darning and mending’ ... invites people to take agency in their own place, entering into an ethical and reciprocal relationship with the land, its past, people and their stories.” (p. 157)

- It can also be helped by appropriate use of language. Research should not seek to frame deeply held cultural knowledge within a generic linguistic framework used in research institutions, that is often alien to those from communities participating in the research.
- Ensure all voices are heard, not just the privileged and most vocal members of the groups.
- Carefully consider the complexity of different forms of knowledge and avoid prioritising certain types of knowledge over others (e.g. “expert” knowledge over knowledge embodied in community practices).
- Ensure that the *research process* itself is recorded and valued, not just the outcomes, in order to highlight community contributions and enable dialogue and learning.

Recommendations for policy

- Given the prominence of evidence-based policymaking, recognising the breath of “data” advocated by community-rooted research can lead to richer repositories of knowledge to inform policy design. Although data could be perceived as a central element of research in communities, it is a wider understanding of “data” than is commonly used in policymaking, including aspects such as the lived experience of communities and diverse forms of knowledge. Approaches that embrace co-production of research and policy rooted in “*more inclusive and democratic approaches to developing and sharing knowledge*” (footnote 4) are needed to address the complex challenges and crises we face such as the climate and biodiversity emergencies (as the IPBES argues; see footnote 5).
- Policymaking derived from such practices can foster meaningful relationships, amplify local voices, mobilise local agency, and enable better understanding of the complexity of human experience. As a community-rooted process is critical in enabling the voices of groups often not engaged to be heard, it can ultimately lead to better policymaking, informed by a variety of viewpoints rather than a dominant few.
- As the case studies included in the report show, and the participants reflected in the workshop, policymaking driven by research rooted in communities can lead to more nuanced and tailored policy solutions, that meet the needs of different communities (which might differ significantly from what is assessed externally as suitable). Moreover, in some cases, it can enable communities to drive changes not just locally, but nationally across Scotland, by enabling bottom-up mobilisation.
- In an age of eroding trust in policymakers at national and international levels, community-rooted research, which holds trust as a central tenet of its approach, can support countering misconceptions, and potentially lead to better relationships of policymakers and other agencies with different communities, and better buy-in for the solutions and actions proposed.

- Participants' reflections throughout the workshop emphasised that policymaking in parts of Scotland has not led to a transformative change in the realities of rural and island life. Policies that draw on community-rooted research need to identify novel solutions that lead to fair, just, and transformative change that is inclusive and enduring.
- Most importantly, however, as emphasised throughout the report, is that communities are enabled to occupy a central role in the evidence-building processes and a more prominent role in policy design. This might enable finding positive and innovative solutions to the complex problems Scotland faces, such as to address the decreasing and ageing population trend in different parts of the country, or to support the delivery of national priorities and build a wellbeing economy for the country.
- An immediate consequence of recognising and valuing community-rooted research, with the benefits outlined above, is to invest more resources directly into such research through funding models that empower communities to define research agendas, commission and deliver research, weigh in on the suitability of different policy options, and control the narratives about their own contexts. This includes addressing the structural barriers that prevent more equitable forms of collaboration.
- An effective strategy to enhance community capacity and skills is to build on the significant good practice already existent within communities across Scotland.²¹ This requires support for cross-community learning and collaboration, sharing best practices, methods and resources to inspire and inform other community groups and expand the policymakers' toolkits.
- Finally, it is important to note that while this report has focused significantly on community-rooted research, participants at the workshop felt strongly that many of the principles and recommendations that emerged are equally relevant to most forms of research and policymaking processes that involve communities. Mainstream research models should foster genuine partnerships of equality, giving communities better agency and challenging extractive practices. Following such a model would ensure communities play a central role in all relevant research, and are appropriately remunerated for their involvement, not just participate in engagement activities, to promote/enable greater impact and outcomes.

²¹ Presenters at the event shared examples from Dumfries and Galloway, the Highlands, islands like Bute, Skye and Uist, as well as internationally, by organisations like Atlas Arts, CoDeL, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Scottish Community Development Centre, the Scottish Human Rights Commission, and the Williamson Trust.



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