

Community-rooted research to be placed at the heart of policymaking

A new report urges policymakers, funders, and research institutions to better recognise, resource and support the knowledge already held within communities.

What counts as evidence?

Evidence-based policymaking remains the gold standard in Scotland and beyond. But what we count as evidence is still evolving.

Communities have experienced research and policy collecting data about them rather than knowledge created with them.

It was in this context that the RSE and CoDeL, with support from the Williamson Trust, gathered a group to reflect on how knowledge is created, preserved and shared, and how different voices are represented, remembered, or excluded.

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Coming together in Skye

In autumn 2025, the RSE and CoDeL brought together community groups, researchers, policymakers, funders, artists and public bodies for a two-day gathering at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gàidhlig college in the Isle of Skye.

The location mattered. Being immersed in a place rooted in language, culture, and local knowledge shaped how people listened, spoke, and thought - reinforcing the idea that where research happens shapes what research becomes.

And the gathering deliberately removed professional titles and hierarchies, so that all voices were valued equally.

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A new starting point

Community-rooted research starts from recognising communities as knowledge holders.

It responds directly to needs identified by communities themselves. It is embedded in local action, culture, history and place. It values lived, inherited, and embodied knowledge, including stories, language, memory, art, and creative practice, alongside more conventional research methods.

Crucially, it is owned, shaped and accountable to communities.

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Community-rooted research in practice

On the Isle of Bute, community-led research into transport and everyday journeys has been evolving for more than a decade.

Externally commissioned research with a predetermined focus failed to assess the island's approach to reducing its carbon footprint, due to a poor uptake that was neither comprehensive nor qualitative.

An alternative community-driven process emerged, on how to allow people to live sustainably. Rather than asking people to come to consultations, researchers from within the community went to where people already were - schools, cafes, day centres, and community groups.

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Community-rooted research in practice

This approach uncovered the following insights:

- Young women felt unsafe using buses at night due to poor lighting and a lack of pavements.
- Older residents experienced isolation because transport prioritised a timetable suitable for work and school over leisure.
- Only one of the local buses could lower the vehicle to ease boarding and exiting for passengers with mobility issues.

While this research has not yet influenced national decisions, it has led to tangible local change, including the local authority installing new bus shelters.

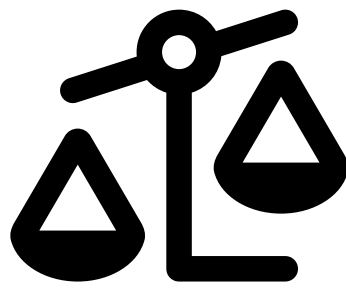
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A radical hope

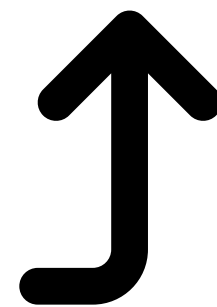
Participants repeatedly returned to a proposed idea of “radical hope”, questioning power:



**Who sets research
agendas?**



**Who controls
resources?**



**Who benefits from
the knowledge
produced?**

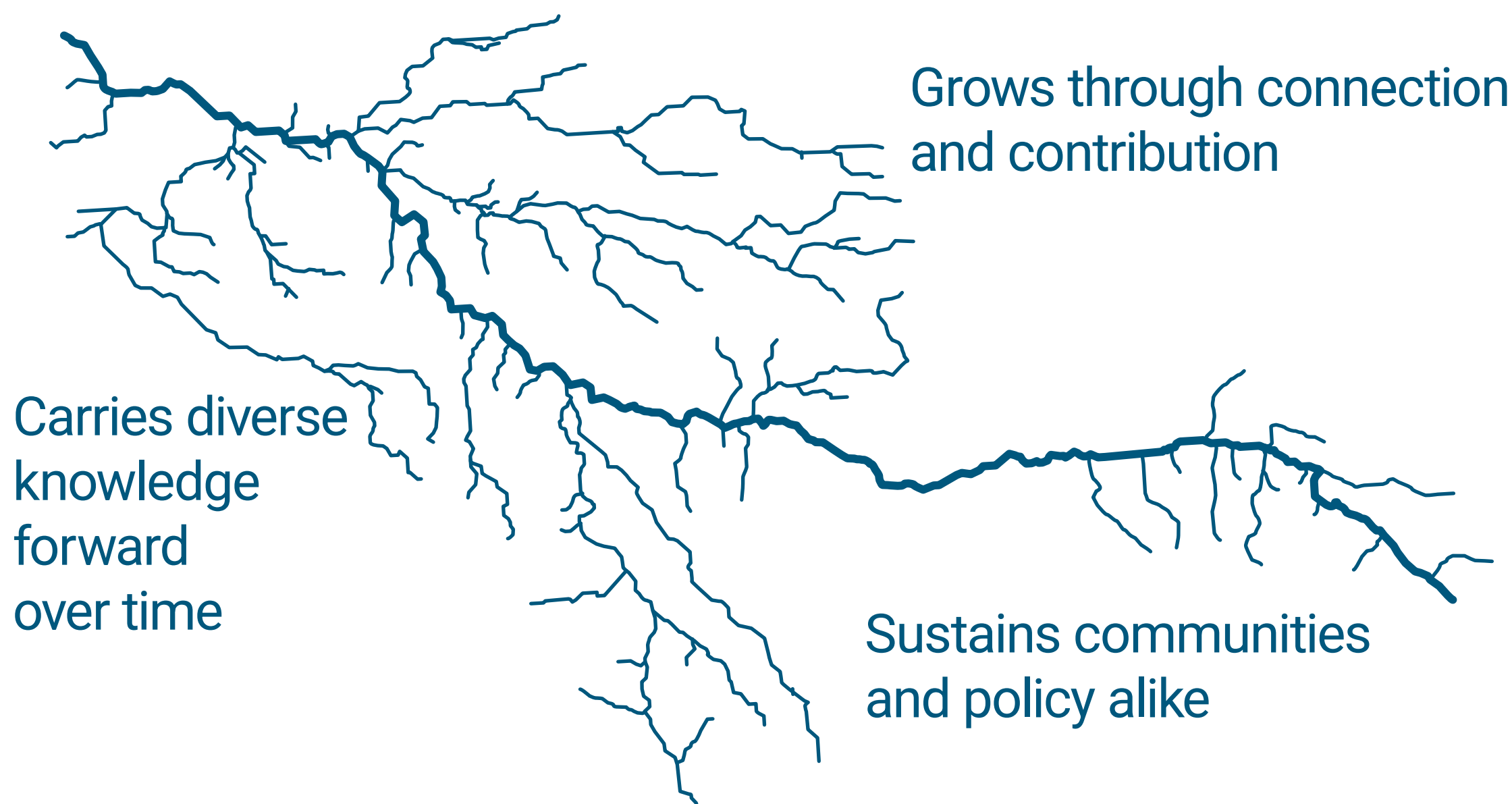
The idea of radical hope represents a type of hope that sustains a people facing significant cultural challenges, where they can imagine future goodness.

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A shared vision: the river metaphor

To articulate a shared vision, participants used a river as a metaphor for community research. Like a river, this kind of research:

Begins in local places



Relationships, trust, reciprocity and long-term stewardship were emphasised as much as outcomes.

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Community-rooted research framework

Concept

Plural, relational and purposeful

Community-rooted research is proactive rather than passive. It is ambitious, open to difficult conversations and teases out existing tensions. It creates an environment that leads to fair, just, and transformative change.

Process

Shared stewardship

Community-rooted research is relational and ethical. It prioritises deep listening to capture and represent diverse community voices, rather than mining or filtering them. Communities should actively shape agendas and methods.

Place

Deeply grounded in local context

This research is rooted in history, language, culture and environment. It recognises communities as repositories of ancestral and modern knowledge shaped by lived experience and inherited understanding.

Structures

Enable community leadership

To thrive, this kind of research needs supportive structures. Funding models should empower communities to define research agendas, deliver research, and control the narratives about their own contexts.

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Valuing and investing in community knowledge is foundational

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