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**COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE MATTERS'
RESPONSE TO THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT'S
'DEMOCRACY MATTERS - PHASE 2'
CONSULTATION**
March 2024

Democracy Matters
Your Community. Your Ideas. Your Future.

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About the Democracy Matters consultation

The first phase of the Democracy Matters consultation highlighted people's desire for greater control over what happens in the places they know best. The second phase of the consultation asked people to discuss and reflect on options for governance arrangements that could meet the needs and aspirations of communities.

About Community Knowledge Matters

Community Knowledge Matters (www.communityknowledgematters.com) is a network bringing together people interested in community-led research shaping practice & policy change in the Highlands & Islands and beyond. The network builds collective voice and capacity through a programme of activities – including network events, collation of resources and funded training opportunities – working together to support more community knowledge represented at a systemic level. The network is facilitated by Science Ceilidh, and funded by The Ideas Fund through the British Science Association and Wellcome.

About this consultation response

This consultation response was guided by a number of different community conversations, including as part of our regular Community of Practice sessions as well as themes from our Steering Group discussions, a standalone session about the consultation, and through asking groups and individuals to respond to the consultation. Throughout these conversations we used a variety of tools, such as digital online tools and adopting creative storytelling techniques as a means of eliciting thoughts about the prompt questions. Additional themes were also drawn from parallel work happening in the Highlands and Islands Climate Change Community-Researcher Network also facilitated by Science Ceilidh and British Science Association, funded by UK Research and Innovation.

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1: HOW COULD COMMUNITIES USE THESE TYPES OF POWERS TO ACHIEVE ITS AMBITIONS, NOW AND INTO THE FUTURE?

Our network **Community Knowledge Matters** and work focuses on the role that fully community-led research and participatory approaches can play to support local communities to recognise and value their own expertise and lived experiences, and develop this robustly to be able to have more power to advocate for evidence-based local changes and action - particularly, but not exclusively, around climate change and mental wellbeing.

Therefore the power to allow communities to act would be valuable to enable the development and commissioning of community-led research approaches to local challenges, consultations and/or knowledge gaps. Though there are many different approaches our network members use, some embedded in participatory action research, some using more creative participatory approaches, the key principles are that community members with lived experiences are enabled to be involved in the research and knowledge making process as peer researchers for example (working in partnership and support with, but not led by academic researchers and facilitators), set the appropriate questions and methodologies, analyse the data, and have full ownership of the findings and resultant action.

These approaches do take time and resources, including support and training, to do meaningfully and non-tokenistically. The power to raise and direct budgets would be key to do this well and might be seen as a valuable way to approach understanding the wider communities needs and priorities on a given topic and/or policy area.

For example, some of the community organisations we support have mapped out wellbeing priorities for a local area, or developed climate action plans where the process and survey was developed by the community rather than by external consultants.

. There is certainly appetite for this type of community researcher role, and a growing network of people who are working at this interface. The power to employ specific staff members with expertise in this type of approach who can then embed and share good practice around community-led research could be a real asset.

Finally, the power to enter collaborative arrangements with neighbouring communities could be important to scale. One group we support for example have developed a piece of research around the wellbeing support of veterans in a community, and are keen to share their learning and practice with wider veteran groups in similar geographic areas.

Also, we believe that this approach, especially in partnership with wider practitioners and academic researchers, enables better quality research, and there is certainly interest from research funders to also have more community-led involvement (e.g. the UK Research and Innovation Strategy highlight this as a priority). This raises the possibility this could lead to collaborative arrangements, and tap into the resources and support, from research organisations and universities as well as funders.

2: WHAT OTHER POWERS SHOULD BE ADDED, AND ARE THERE SOME WHICH SHOULD BE RETAINED BY EXISTING DECISION-MAKERS?

One of the early conversations with our network's Health and Social Care Working Group really highlighted how there is a balance to be made around responsibility between communities, organisations and decision-makers. There is a current feeling among members that communities do feel like there is an abdication of responsibility from decision makers and statutory providers who are putting more and more pressure on communities - especially those in third and voluntary sectors - to pick up the pressure on essential services in the name of being more "community-led" without key resources and recognition to do this sustainably.

One of the network members explained in a conversation with us that their organisation - a third sector, grassroots organisation responding to local health and social care needs - is undervalued by decision-makers, while paradoxically often fulfilling essential services to support health and wellbeing locally. They feel like they should be recognised for their value and impact of support, and be funded accordingly, to be able to continue this work. When redistributing powers between decision-makers and communities and local organisations, it is important that communities are appropriately resourced and valued for the activities and responsibilities they take up. This does not only mean acquiring powers, but also receiving active acknowledgement of their value through being included and heard at local boards.

3: WHEN THINKING ABOUT WHO MIGHT BE PART OF NEW DECISION-MAKING BODIES, WHAT ARE THE BEST WAYS TO ENSURE THEY TRULY REFLECT THEIR COMMUNITIES AND ENHANCE EQUALITY?

Possibly the most important theme that has come out of our work and conversations with our network is the importance of trust and relationship-building. To truly reflect communities and engage marginalised voices, and ensure they are not tokenised, it is key that any decision making processed are open and accessible.

Community-led research, when done well, can be a key tool in gaining meaningful and rich data, while enabling people with lived experience to be involved throughout the process, develop skills and self-advocate.

One of the projects we support funding with highlighted that peer-led research actually enabled better quality engagement with the wider community as they could relate to the people who were leading and conducting the survey itself. Wider members of the community reached out to get involved voluntarily as they knew it involved people with lived experience, and it encouraged others with similar lived experience to reach out. This demonstrates how community-led research can be one tool used and supported by decision-making bodies in establishing trust and encouraging community members to get involved.

Another key theme within our network conversations is the importance of inclusive language. Language is a continuous topic of conversation within our network. Several of our projects have voiced feeling excluded by decision makers through the use of jargon.

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In the network there has been wider discussion that a proactive approach to inclusion and support needs is also fundamental. This goes beyond covering travel for example, but also being active in offering payment (explored further), childcare or other care-giving relief, translation or training needs. It has also been identified that often administrative processes to be paid or reimbursed for expenses can also be a barrier - for example, requiring extensive (and inaccessible) paperwork, and presuming that people are able to pay upfront for costs like accommodation and then having to wait long times for reimbursement.

We as a network are interested in how we can develop more accessible infrastructure which is still accountable and transparent, but is proportional and new decision-making bodies should also have this approach to ensure there are as few barriers.

Photo credit: Nicky Murray -
2023 Highlands and Islands Climate Change Community Network

4: THINKING ABOUT YOUR OWN COMMUNITY, WHAT GROUPS WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE REPRESENTED THROUGH OTHER SELECTION METHODS, AND WHAT SHOULD THESE METHODS BE?

One of the main motivations of our Community Knowledge Matters network and funding we help delegate in partnership with the British Science Association including the Ideas Fund is to specifically focus on groups who are underrepresented in research and wider decision making, particularly in the Highlands and Islands.

This includes very grassroots groups, who are not necessarily constituted, people who have never received funding before. We recognised that groups that are often louder, and better at writing funding applications, are not necessarily representative.

For the Highlands and Islands Climate Change Community Grants, we had a specific focus on ethnic minority groups, those disadvantaged socioeconomically and speakers of marginalised languages. To reach these groups required a dedicated approach that was not just "being open to" but a dedicated research and development and referral approach where we actively built trust with groups who never would have applied. We also needed to provide very tailored support for this - including in some cases writing proposals with the groups verbally rather than depending on literacy, and guiding people on the phone to navigate the technology.

Finally in terms of decision making, we had a community panel with whom we spent a lot of time developing shared values which included the importance of focusing on equity of opportunity and ensuring diversity was valued, going just beyond the sheen of a well written application for example.

Any mechanism for selection should take this very active approach to both inclusion to help prioritise underrepresented voices, and being very transparent from the beginning about why this is important.

Photo credit: Nicky Murray -
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5: WHAT WOULD THE ROLE OF LOCAL ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES BE, AND WHAT WOULD INCENTIVISE OTHER PEOPLE TO TAKE ON/BE PART OF DECISION-MAKING?

One of the key dynamics and values that was co-produced with both communities and different stakeholders early in the network formation is that it is important that our focus should not take a deficit approach "moulding" communities who want to make an impact locally to the tune/requirements of local elected representatives, but rather we should change the processes and the roles of representatives - who have more power in this situation - to listen, understand and value the evidence communities want to share in. This includes appreciating diverse models of knowledge and qualitative evidence rather than often a perceived very narrow focus on just "numbers" and the bottom line.

In terms of the incentives around being involved decision-making, our network's Ethic's Working Group has been exploring this question along with a focused conversations working with three youth groups with different intersections of identities to explore what a more inclusive, community-led ethics process could look like and how this should frame research and consultations for example.

This included questions exploring financial incentives. Many agreed it was appropriate to ensure people at least had the opportunity to be paid as an incentive and to value people's time and expertise. This was especially the case for marginalised and underrepresented groups where financial pressures can be especially key. This also acknowledges for example there can be complications with how payments interact with benefits.

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Perhaps this a very structural change that could be proposed to ensure that people who are on benefits could still be paid for being involved in local decision making as they will be bringing key perspectives on many topics where their lived experience is key.

However, there was also a strand of thought from some in the discussion where often the value did not need to always be financial. Indeed, in the context of research, there was even the view that payment "instrumentalised" and put a value on lived experience in a very transactional way.

Ultimately, for both views there has been a key element that the most important incentive for involvement is that community input has been meaningfully used and has shaped decisions, and there has been the most frustration - whether paid or otherwise - when it felt like it wasn't listened to and nothing has changed.

"I think trust can often be broken when people feel as though they haven't been listened to about things that those bodies actually have no control over. Being clear about the actual possible impact of their involvement feels important from the start"

6: WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE BEST WAYS TO ENSURE NEW DECISION-MAKING BODIES ARE ACCOUNTABLE TO THEIR COMMUNITY?

One thing that has developed through the network is the role of ethics processes which can help guide accountability and a way of working to ensure transparency. This can set principles and values of working, rather than necessarily being too top-down which ignores context.

This should be developed and reviewed with their communities consistently though there may also be value in an external organisation also managing this so if there are key concerns, this can be raised.

7: ARE COMMUNITY EVENTS A GOOD WAY TO INVOLVE LOCAL PEOPLE IN SCRUTINISING PROGRESS AND SETTING FUTURE DIRECTION?

community events can be a good way to set future direction and hold discussions when done well. However, when done in an ad-hoc way, there is a feeling that these can be tokenistic, with organisations being "parachuted in" - a sentiment particularly felt in the Highlands and Islands.

However, if they are part of a longer programme of activity and conducted with Openness and honesty about what's happening so community members feel included and a sense of ownership from the start, and also can manage expectations.

One thing that was raised through the conversations is that third sector organsiations are often holding these community events already - often informal coffee mornings, lunches, ceilidhs - and these are vital connective spaces where trust and relationships are nurtured and needs are understood in places. This is especially the case in more rural communities.

When these are genuinely led by community members, the staff can be key allies in enabling meaningful discussions about local decision making.

This is a critical infrastructure which both has an intrinsic value, but is also undervalued by decision making processes. In our context, it has enabled high quality community-led research which built on.

One thing to highlight is that reduced funding and increased operational costs mean these are under increased pressure and even closing down. Losing this infrastructure means losing a key asset to enable meaningful involvement in democratic processes, and therefore, we need to take a holistic understanding that more sustainable funding and support for community infrastructure in general cannot be separated to decision making.

8: WHAT OTHER MECHANISMS WOULD HELP ACHIEVE HIGH LEVELS OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES?

One thing that has come strongly through the network is the role and value of creative approaches to enable participation. Many of the projects associated with the network have involved local artists, creative approaches and art-based research tools in their engagement approach to enable better community participation.

Another key value is the importance of interrogating and building shared language. In one conversation, participants shared that even when they were invited to a local Health and Social Care board as a third sector organisation, the language and jargon used was highly exclusionary and they neither felt welcomes nor included despite being 'at the table".

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11: HOW DO YOU THINK COMMUNITY DECISION-MAKING BODIES SHOULD BE RESOURCED?

Multiple projects we interviewed for this consultation emphasise the feeling that currently financial systems are limiting decision-making, as the power lies with the funder, rather than with the community. Power to direct budgets and employ staff would place more of this power within communities themselves.

One of the biggest challenges identified consistently in the network is short term funding which has to be heavily prescribed (in order to get the funding) which does not allow genuine co-production and relationship building to happen, nor more emergent outcomes which weren't predicted at the very beginning.

We have been working with the Ideas Fund to develop more participatory funding models which fund communities directly to lead research (flipping the traditional model) which can be more longer-term, focused on capacity building and is highly relational.

There is a balance to be made about this resource for decision-making bodies - it should allow for longer term funding to enable continuity but still have accountability to the wider communities and not become complacent. There is a balance of risk to be made to understand this tension and each community should have the opportunity to shape how they want to react and respond to this balance.

One of our participants set themselves a creative writing task envisioning what properly resourced and supported community-led research in the context of Democracy Matters would look like in the future. They highlight the existence of community research hubs within local social enterprises, funding and training for community researchers, and equipment to increase the accessibility of the hub:

It's 2035, groups have been properly resourced and supported to conduct community-led research. This looks like...

"Groups have been properly resourced and supported to conduct community-led research. This looks like a community research hub within a local social enterprise or charity. There is a core team who have funded salaries as community researchers and who have undertaken and gained qualifications in research in various specialties. These include environmental studies, mental health and digital health interventions. They have involved the geographically spread out local populations by enabling people to join in with research sessions via a hybrid meeting system. People can then either come to the hub to participate or join in via the internet from home. Once a project is identified via surveys and consultations then the community researchers involve others who want to either be interview participants or to help with literature searches, quantitative surveys or writing reports or with data analysis. The research hub have produced a number of outputs that have led to significant changes to communities."

14: WHAT TYPES OF SUPPORT MIGHT COMMUNITIES NEED TO BUILD CAPACITY, AND HOW COULD THIS CHANGE THE ROLE OF COUNCILS AND PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANISATIONS?

Where we have interviewed network community members as part of the Highlands and Islands Climate Change Community-Researcher Network (including our New Voices grants with marginalised groups particularly) to understand their needs in-depth for a dedicated "building capacity" grant and support network, the needs included a focus on:

1. Navigating Challenging Conversation in Wider communities
2. Fundraising and being more sustainable
3. Policy Change and Impact - including understanding the landscape
4. Measuring Environmental Impact
5. Facilitation and Volunteer Management
6. Dealing with Burn-Out

Though these have a specific climate change focus given this side of the network, we do feel these are a microcosm of the needs of grassroots organisations at the moment in general to enable communities to be more involved in both local decision making. In particular, the recognition of needing to do this work in a way which supports people's wellbeing is worth highlighting.

Overall, we as a network also believe that the value of community-led research approaches as a capacity building for communities can also enable much more equitable relationships and advocacy with councils and public sector organisations.

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