Institute for Community Studies
Powered by The Young Foundation

Understanding communities

Final insight report

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Jessica Redmond

Institute for Community Studies
Powered by The Young Foundation

We believe that involving communities leads to better decision-making.

About the Institute for Community Studies

The Institute for Community Studies is a new kind of research institute with people at its heart. Powered by the not-for-profit organisation, The Young Foundation, the Institute works to influence change, bridging the gap between communities, evidence, and policymaking.

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Executive summary

The *Understanding Communities* research programme was a collaboration between the British Academy and the Nuffield Foundation, exploring how local communities function and can improve people's lives. It represented a new foray into community- and action-oriented research, seeking to support new approaches, and strengthen the relationships between researchers, policymakers and practitioners. Several projects using participatory or co-design methods to give communities a more active role in shaping the research direction.

To capture the learnings from the programme, this report focuses not on the research findings but *learning from the experiences of researchers and stakeholders of this type of research approach.* We explore what makes community-oriented research in place more or less effective, and what that can teach us about how communities operate in theory and how best to work with communities.

What makes research 'community-oriented'?

'Community-oriented' means both involving the community in the research process and choosing 'the community' as a unit or site for analysis. All research projects went beyond *identifying* the community as something to analyse into *including* the community in the research process in a wide range of ways. For example, including community members in the research team or advisory board, building on previous community research outputs, co-producing final outputs, sharing research findings in community engagement events.

The structure of the Understanding Communities programme was designed to support this type of approach. Research innovation workshops at the outset of the project brought community and policymaker stakeholders in touch with researchers to shape their research agenda and design. Although programme guidance encouraged but did not require co-production (The British Academy, 2021), most projects involved some element of co-production whether that was directly with community participants or with third sector community-engaged organisations.

Community-oriented research comes with its own challenges and opportunities:

- **Representation:** Community-oriented approaches may support greater participation in the research but gaps in participation may be more critical when seeking to reflect community voice.

- **Conflict:** On sensitive topics with opposing perspectives, conflict can emerge between stakeholders that research teams may have ceded the power to control.
- **Trust and resource pressure:** Trust allows for greater engagement and richer insights, but meeting communities 'where they are at' requires a lot of additional time and effort that can be hard to anticipate.
- **Community value:** Research can focus on the value generated for the community but must be careful of overstating benefits particularly regarding policy changes.

A community-oriented approach to 'place'

Within research projects, 'place' functioned as a way of translating the experiences of communities into the language of policy or collective demands. This ran a risk of misrepresenting the experiences and activities of communities to policymakers – 'flattening' internal differences, conflicts and understandings. When representing 'place', community, and the multiple voices these contain, research teams sought to achieve 'loyalty' to the intentions of community members through a range of strategies. These included incorporating multiple perspectives through multi-disciplinary approaches, long-term community engagement, arts-based approaches that could address difficult or contested topics and allowed space for different participant interpretations.

Another challenge was how to make the research useful to policymakers whilst remaining loyal to the voices of the community in place. Evidence produced by researchers benefited from perceptions that the research team, as 'outsiders' to the community, were more 'neutral' and therefore less biased when receiving and transmitting information. However, it could generate recommendations which community members did not feel fully reflected their views, because recommendations must accommodate policymaker constraints, present a consensus view which may not reflect consensus in places, and emerge from the application of technical analysis skills without community input.

Research teams were careful to position findings as emerging from the research, and several projects were able to return to community stakeholders with project findings to receive further input and reflection. The process of translation itself was therefore able to foster dialogue and collaboration whilst enhancing the potential of impact.

Social infrastructure and community strength

To conduct their research and navigate across stakeholders, teams often created spaces of social connection (both in-person or online) which performed a convening, facilitation and information sharing role *within* and *between* the places they were researching. These spaces were effective because they facilitated curiosity by focusing on shared experiences and personal narratives and stories. Researchers were able to leverage their role as 'in between' outsider and insider status to build trust and reveal inconsistent beliefs and knowledge taken for granted. Teams were also able to provide capacity to local community organisations or build capacity by granting ownership of research spaces to communities.

Policy and community stakeholders in research

Community and policy stakeholders interviewed about their experiences felt that rather than introducing new ideas or learning, knowledge generated through the research was primarily useful in strengthening the case for their policy area or programme. Due to the perceived neutrality or 'objectivity' of research, research outputs could be used as unbiased evidence which stakeholders could cite to demonstrate practices were likely to be effective or providing support for particular interventions or community services.

Another strong source of value for policy and practice stakeholders was access to new networks and connections. Policy participants emphasised the importance of research spaces as reflexive spaces useful to 'stop and think' about their work from a more distant perspective. Feeling valued and respected as partners, with a common purpose, allowing participants to feel comfortable sharing and thinking in the open.

Engagement of policy and community stakeholders also required successful buy-in from senior management. This was sometimes undermined by lack of staff continuity at the senior management level within many government organisations.

Recommendations

The experiences of research teams demonstrate that community-oriented research highlights the vital role of trust and social connection built through continuous, consistent demonstrations of curiosity, care and shared values. A community-

oriented research team can therefore create value for communities through the very process of conducting the research, as workshops and community research engagement events are potential spaces for social connection that can build bridging and bonding social capital in places.

Emerging from these findings are the following recommendations for research funders and research teams:

1. Funders and research teams can invest in the time to align research and community priorities, eg, by scoping community need in a particular place or providing seed funding for researchers to identify priorities.
2. Consider how research projects can support community and social infrastructure that lasts beyond the research projects, eg, including dedicated budget lines to build connections and earmark follow-up funding for participating community organisations.
    - Consider how research outputs can be developed in subsequent research projects within the same place, allowing for iterative community engagement.
    - Create spaces for peer support and engagement within community-oriented researcher spaces.
    - Focus on interactive workshops to allow early career researchers to build experience.
    - Provide funding for influencing time after project completion to maximise policy impact.
3. Researchers should seek to engage senior management buy-in within government and community organisations throughout the project.

1. Introduction

The *Understanding communities* programme

The *Understanding communities* programme is a collaboration between the British Academy and the Nuffield Foundation that aims to explore how local communities function and can improve people's lives. It builds on the following objectives for each organisation:

1. **Nuffield Foundation:** to address the limitations in understanding of the role of community in social and individual well-being in the UK, and its effect on how well interventions address disadvantage.

2. **British Academy**: to contribute to their 'Social and Cultural Infrastructure' ongoing programme of activity, which engages with a growing body of evidence on the critical role of spaces, services and structures that support thriving communities, address deepening spatial inequalities and contribute to recovery from COVID-19.

An innovative feature of the programme was the series of virtual research and policy innovation workshops at the start. These brought together early- and mid-career researchers from different disciplines, national and local policymakers, and people working in local community organisations. For policymakers and practitioners, the workshops offered the opportunity to shape research which could inform existing challenges. For researchers, these workshops sought to promote collaboration and innovation, including through the creation of multidisciplinary cross-institution teams.

Selected participants attended six morning sessions between 13 September and 13 October 2021. Research proposals were submitted six weeks afterwards at the end of November 2021 (The British Academy, 2021). Following the workshops, Nuffield Foundation awarded £1.1m to six research teams for projects to inform policy and practice on how communities can improve wellbeing across the UK.

Project summaries

The six research projects aimed to find tangible, evidence-based policy solutions that could have an important and positive impact on society:

Principle Investigator(s)	Title of project	Case study locations
Azedah Fatehrad Kingston University and **Davide Natalini** Anglia Ruskin University	**Nature-based integration**: connecting communities with/in nature	Blackburn with Darwen; London Borough of Haringey; Isle of Lewis
Lasana Harris University College London	Using **administrative data** to understand community wellbeing	London Borough of Camden
Tirion Havard London South Bank University	**Transformative justice**: Women with convictions and uniting communities	Stoke-on-Trent
Danielle Hutcheon Glasgow Caledonian University	**Rural assets**: Policy and practice insights from the devolved nations	Trawden, Lancashire; Rosal, Strathnaver; Welshpool, Powys; Cushendall, Antrim
Sarah Nason Bangor University	The role of communities and connections in **social welfare legal advice**	Deeplish, Rochdale; Bryngwran, Anglesey; Hackney (London); Dartmouth, Devon
Mona Sakr Middlesex University	**Beyond school gates**: children's contribution to community integration	Bolton; Blackburn with Darwen; Preston

In addition to research findings, the programme aimed to support new approaches, and to strengthen the relationships between researchers, policymakers and practitioners within the policy ecosystem.

Overleaf, the methods used by each project are summarised. All projects relied on working closely with communities for research dissemination, research and engagement, with several projects using participatory or co-design methods to give communities a more active role in shaping the research direction.

Fatehrad & Natalini Nature-Based Integration	Harris Administrative Data	Havard Transformative Justice
WP1: Conceptual framework for nature-based integration Scoping, survey of integration practices, and artistic production review.	**WP1: Landscape review of community wellbeing measurement** Mapping of domains in community wellbeing frameworks and potential behavioural data.	**WP1: Focus groups with women with convictions and survivors of domestic abuse who had sought justice** Focus groups
WP2: Deep mapping in case studies of three different areas Participatory mapping, aesthetic workshops and ethnography.	**WP2: Ethical approaches to using behavioural data** Ethics subgroup workshops, draft best practices and guidelines, policy and legal analysis.	**WP2: Understanding Transformative Justice** Literature review of Transformative Justice, Interviews with TJ professionals.
WP3: Policy & practice Engagement with Policy & Practice Team, Advisory Board, Local Advisors and Community Researchers. 'Long table' events at Case Study locations.	**WP3: Simulated behavioural data insight into community wellbeing** Co-design case study of behavioural data with VSCEs, local government, residents.	**WP3: Community workshops** Community workshops, Community event with participant work presented as an audio-visual installation.
	WP4: Impact assessment of demonstrators Qualitative interviews, econometric analysis.	**WP4: Evaluation** Focus groups, Survey impact measurement and economic cost evaluation

Hutcheon Rural Assets	Nason Social Welfare Legal Advice	Sakr Beyond School Gates
WP1: Desk based work Scoping review of asset acquisition and community empowerment, comparative analysis of devolved nation policy and legal frameworks.	**WP1: Literature, secondary data and organisations review** Literature review on SWL advice, community impact of access to justice.	**WP1: Local histories of immigration** Archival research.
WP2: Primary data collection with rural community case studies Data collection across 4 case studies, interviews with policy stakeholders in each nation.	**WP2: Stakeholder workshops and survey** Workshops across case study areas, survey of SWL providers.	**WP2: Children's intuitions on integration and diversity** Psychological survey of children and quantitative survey analysis.
WP3: Knowledge exchange events Five Knowledge exchange events (1 UK-wide, 4 nation-specific).	**WP3: Focus groups and interviews** Case study semi-structured interviews, continuous community engagement.	**WP3: Networks and experiences of integration** Survey on children's peer networks, qualitative interviewing of children, parent survey. Survey network analysis.
	WP4: Social network analysis, triangulation, and main output writeup Social network analysis.	**WP4: Policy analysis** Iterative stakeholder dialogue to develop early findings.

Reports

Nuffield Foundation commissioned the Institute for Community Studies at The Young Foundation to aggregate grant insights at key milestones. Two interim 'insight reports' were produced for internal use to inform the development of the programme. This final public insight report draws on key themes from these reports, as well as additional data from the final year of the programme.

As well as this public insight report about the research approach itself, the British Academy and Nuffield Foundation have produced a final report focused on the research findings about how communities function and can improve people's lives, and the policy and practice recommendations that emerge. However, as well as research findings the community-oriented nature of the research creates *learning from the research approach itself*:

1. The research *affects communities themselves* who react to the presence and actions of researchers and other (eg, policy) stakeholders.

- The *community-oriented nature of the research* affects both the experiences of the research and the types of findings emerging.

This Institute for Community Studies report will therefore critically examine how the experiences of researchers, stakeholders and communities during the research projects inform our answer to the following questions:

1. What understanding do the *Understanding community* portfolio projects have about the relationship between communities and wellbeing?
2. What challenges and opportunities exist to understand the relationship between community and wellbeing in the UK using community-focused research approaches?
3. How can the wider research ecosystem (funders, national academies, charities) best support research teams in community-focused research?

We seek to situate these findings in existing community research literature. The remainder of the report is therefore laid out as follows:

1. **What makes research 'community-oriented'?** This section explores how the research projects have incorporated community voice and participation, the challenges and opportunities this created.
2. **A community-oriented approach to place:** How 'community-oriented' approaches intersect with 'place-based' research and policy approaches.
3. **Social infrastructure and community strength:** How places responded to the researcher's presence, and what that tells us about social infrastructure and community strength.
4. **Policy and community stakeholders in community-oriented research:** Reflections from policy and community stakeholders involved in the research projects.
   - **Conclusions:** Recommendations for future programme funding and researchers undertaking community-oriented research.

To draft this report, the Institute for Community Studies have collected the following data on the six funded projects over the course of the *Understanding communities* programme:

1. **Project proposals:** Initial proposals made following the programme research and innovation workshops.
   - **Progress reports:** Progress reports submitted by project teams over the course of the projects.
2. **Team communication plans:** Proposed research communication plans drafted by research teams.
3. **Insight interviews:** one-to-one interviews between Institute for Community Studies and project team Principal Investigators (PIs).

- **End of Project Assessments (EPAs):** A two-part self-assessment submitted by project teams at project completion (EPA Part A) and six months after completion (EPA Part B).

2. What makes research 'community-oriented'?

Within the *Understanding communities* portfolio, 'community-oriented' means both involving the community in the research process and choosing 'the community' as a unit or site for analysis. These approaches sit across overlapping research traditions of participatory methods and place-based approaches, catalysed into a research agenda by the range of community responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and austerity (Abrams *et al.*, 2021; Amin, 2022).

Since the 1960s, a *participatory turn* has opened the way for greater involvement of individuals and communities in research and policymaking. Motivations for this widened involvement differ: a desire to share power, to build confidence in research and democratic processes, or better outcomes for research and policy through knowledge transfer (Dean, 2016). All however reflect a shift in 'knowledge politics', who can be seen as owning and generating valuable knowledge in society.

This section explores the different ways in which the research projects approached 'community-orientation' and engagement in their research, as well as the challenges and opportunities this created.

Community engagement in research

All research projects went beyond *identifying* community as a unit or site of inquiry to *including* the community in the research process. A wide range of methods were used across the portfolio to achieve this. To understand this range, we can map aspects of the projects to the 'research engagement' framework developed by Fransman (2018). Tracing traditions which explore the engagement of non-academics with research, Fransmen proposes three dimensions to scope the field of research engagement: *Locus, Analytical Lens*, and *Configuration.*

Across the projects, we can identify a range of *Loci* for the 'community-oriented' components of each project:

Locus	Key enquiry	Examples of contribution
Engagement in research governance	How are different groups involved in agenda-setting and evaluation practices?	Holding stakeholder panels to discuss research ethics (Harris). Advisory Board membership consisting of community and policy stakeholders (all projects) Using previous community research output to inform academic study (Harris) Including community and policy stakeholders in initial research innovation workshops (all projects)
Engagement in knowledge production	Who participates and how in the design and implementation of research?	Community organisations and policymakers in research and/or delivery team (Havard, Hutcheon, Nason, Sakr). Community researchers hired to collect data and implement research design in places (Fatehrad and Natalini, Havard). 'Embedded' research through continuous community engagement via delivery of workshop series (Fatehrad and Natalini, Havard, Sakr)
Engagement in research communication	How is research represented and disseminated to the public?	Formation of separate outputs for different audiences such as: place briefs, policy briefs, guidance for practitioners, academic reports (all projects). Art installations on findings co-produced with participants (Fatehrad and Natalini, Havard) Community engagement events to reflect on project findings (Nason, Sakr)
Engagement in Research Use	How is knowledge used and who is using it?	Co-production of final outputs with community stakeholders (Hutcheon, Havard). Creation of open-access resource hub (Fatehrad and Natalini) Training offer developed as follow up (Havard, Nason)
Engagement in impact and learning	How is impact and learning generated and for whom?	Knowledge exchange events across stakeholders following research conclusion (Hutcheon, Nason) Community engagement events to reflect on project findings (Nason, Sakr)

(Adapted from Fransman, 2018)

Some elements of community engagement emerged from the Understanding Communities programme structure. The research innovation workshops allowed for community and policymaker contribution at the outset of projects, also connecting researchers to prospective non-academic team and advisory board members. Although programme guidance encouraged but did not require co-production (the

British Academy, 2021), most projects involved some element of co-production, whether that was directly with community participants (Fatehrad and Natalini, Havard) or with third sector community-engaged organisations (Hutcheon, Nason, Sakr).

The programme structure may have curtailed some elements of community engagement. Co-production in research design beyond research and innovation workshop participants was limited as participants had six weeks to develop research proposals for funding, with most projects focusing on involving community partners in the implementation of research methods and co-producing potential outputs. One exception was the Hutcheon (Rural Assets) project which co-designed data collection methods in each case study with local community organisations. The two-year timeline for research projects also limited the potential for follow-up engagement beyond a one-way communication of research findings to generate new learning. Although the programme did give an option for seed funding to co-develop research questions over a longer timeframe, no team took up the offer.[1]

Harris (Administrative Data) had a different approach to co-production. Whilst one key work package, on the ethics of using administrative data, heavily involved policy and community stakeholders, other work packages (literature mapping and econometric analysis) were led by academics. However, the academic-led work was focused on validating and extending a previous community co-produced framework of community wellbeing. In this way, it enabled previous community research to have further reach and impact.

> "This project was a wonderful example of how you can take community engagement beyond the life of an initial project, where the engagement happens, to be fruitful for other types of scientific advancement." (Administrative data)

Challenges and opportunities of community orientation

Community-oriented research brings with it novel challenges and opportunities. In progress reports to Nuffield Foundation, research teams were encouraged to reflect

[1] The guidance notes stated: *"…we would be willing to consider initial seed funding to enable the broad research questions developed at the workshop to be refined through the co-production process as a first step."*

on how the community-oriented nature of their research was shaping the outcome of their projects.

At the outset of the projects, researchers' reflections focused on challenges of *representation* within the community, whether community-oriented research could meet *evidential standards* for e.g. policymakers, and *ethics* risks when trying to authentically reflect potentially vulnerable or conflicting community member experiences. However, researchers also identified opportunities relating to knowledge generation by leveraging *lived experience*, *intra-community relationships* and *deeper engagement* to uncover unique insights. The benefits of participation with non-academics were also felt to open new avenues for generating *community and policy value*.[2]

At the end of the projects, the following themes arose from the interviews regarding the challenges and opportunities of community-oriented research:

Representation: Representation was described as both an opportunity and challenge for projects. All projects faced challenges in achieving representation of the community, particularly those facing additional barriers such as cultural stigma and resource constraints. Whilst low rates of participation are a common issue in studies with human participants (Dutz *et al.*, 2023), this posed a greater challenge to projects seeking to form recommendations about community in place (see Mosley and Grogan, 2013; Cohen and Wiek, 2017).

Projects were often able to overcome these challenges through project changes or connections through existing relationships in the community. For example, Sakr (Beyond School Gates) increased the value of participation incentives to encourage more schools to take part in the research. However, these were not always successful; Havard (Transformative Justice) attempted multiple strategies to involve Women with Convictions more deeply in the project, with ultimately limited participation.

> "…having the community actively involved fostered a sense of ownership and support for the research, leading to higher participation rates and greater cooperation from community members." [Nature-based integration, EPA Part A]

At the same time, for other projects a community-oriented approach was credited with higher rates of participation. Reasons given included participants feeling ownership of the research, the ability to influence policy on issues that

[2] These outset reflections are summarised in more detail in Annex A.

affected them, and that the research created a rare opportunity for community members to feel heard.

Achieving 'perfect' community representation can only be an aspiration, not a reality. Multitudes of identity, experience, and viewpoint contained both within places and people cannot be captured in a single research project. For example, Havard (Transformative Justice) discusses in detail in their final report the challenges faced by the team in recruiting Women with Convictions and the implications for the strength of their findings.

Conflict: Sharing power within the research process also introduces challenges as community members may have opposing perspectives on what policy or research goals are for and how they can be achieved. On sensitive and contentious topics, such as integration policy and the rehabilitation of people with convictions, conflict over goals can create a risk of harm to research participants (e.g. by retriggering trauma responses). Research teams also highlighted the difficulty of conflict when community and government stakeholders mixed, leading to the restrained engagement of stakeholders.

Teams adopted different strategies to mitigate this risk. The Havard project (Transformative Justice) worked with a partner organisation who specialized in trauma-informed approaches. Fatehrad and Natalini (Nature-based integration) employed a framing of 'cultural sensitivity' to ensure outreach openly included the entire community (for example translating outreach materials into Arabic and Gaelic). Several projects employed a strategy of holding both mixed events and events exclusively for policy or community stakeholders.

For the Havard (Transformative Justice) project, conflict between attendees did result in participants withdrawing from the research. However, this also opened opportunities for learning. Acknowledging that diverse groups are likely to generate conflict, the team conceptualized the importance of 'brave spaces' where conflict may occur in a supported space that acknowledges the bravery of participation (Arao and Clemens, 2013).

> "…we can never be wholly certain as to the views and attitudes of every member of a community. This can create friction and challenges … which is difficult to manage or mitigate for."
> [Transformative Justice, EPA Part A]

Trust: Participants reflected that they were able to achieve rich insights into the lives of research participants and the community by adopting a community-oriented approach. Relationships of trust were built either through deep

continuous community engagement, or research teams re-engaging partners they had worked with before to deepen their relationship.

This trust allowed researchers to know their participants more intimately and build the psychological safety to share complex or difficult experiences. It also expanded rates of participation and recruitment through referrals from community members to the research team based on trust.

> "We have invested in getting to know [various stakeholders] in a more personal way which helped to build trust and allowed us to learn more... This has supported our research practically in terms of recruiting participants and institutions, but it has also enriched the analysis of the data we have gathered." [Beyond School Gates, EPA Part A]

Resource pressure: Some project teams reported unanticipated resource pressure from community-oriented methods. Building trust with community members and organisations often took additional time and effort, mitigated by some research teams by relying on existing connections (e.g. Social Welfare Legal Advice). Anticipating this additional time commitment at the proposal stage was complicated by challenges with accommodating research for time- and resource-poor community and public organisations. To meet community availability and capacity, research timelines were required to shift for several projects and in several cases researchers had to work flexibly around weekends and evenings.

> "We had to be flexible in finding times to speak with people, which can be difficult when we have our own family and caring commitments etc, a lot of our engagement was at evenings and weekends." [Social Welfare Legal Advice, EPA Part A]

Community value: All projects identified the creation of community value as an important benefit of community-oriented methods. Examples of community value generated were: greater community social capital, through new or stronger community relationships and new connections with external stakeholders such as policymakers; co-produced outputs such as art exhibitions or initiatives designed with the research team; creation of social infrastructure through workshop series and groups formed during the research process; skills development and capacity building for individuals and community organisations; policy change in favour of involved communities; and greater access to information and evidence about the availability and effectiveness of local services.

> "Part of the success of this project related to its ability to both give rural communities a voice, and to create opportunities for rural communities to be in the same room (in-person or virtually) as decision makers, connecting the disconnects." [Rural Assets, EPA Part A]

One issue with policy change was that for many of the research projects, a continued environment of austerity and a tight funding environment was identified as a key challenge. Policy stakeholders fed back that these conditions would not change. This created tension in managing the expectations of participants, who often felt acute resource pressures and may have hoped research participation would result in greater funding of critical public services. Realising community value through policy influence often required researchers to navigate through policyholder and community concerns to identify alignment. For example, Fatehrad and Natalini (Nature-based integration) emphasised low-cost interventions local governments could make to enhance nature accessibility.

3. A community-oriented approach to 'place'

The last decade has also seen the re-emergence in *place-based* approaches to policy in the UK (McCann, 2019). Place-based approaches to address area inequality have a long history, from the Community Development Projects of the 1970s to the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal in 2001(Goulden, 2021). The relevance of place dynamics to economic inequality (Moretti, 2024), democratic accountability (Lankelly Chase, 2017), and social issues (Majevadia, 2017) is well documented in the literature. Recent research around social capital and networks also links community wellbeing and the social environment to individual wellbeing (Bagnall *et al.*, 2017; Jopling *et al.*, 2022).

This section explores how 'Place' interacted with the community-oriented nature of the research projects, with a focus on the challenge of 'translating' community experiences into insights and recommendations about places.

The role of 'place'

The concept of 'place' played several distinct roles in the research projects:

- **Place-based community:** Place can define or boundary 'the community' (e.g. the Stoke-on-Trent community).
- **Place-based policy:** Place can describe the spatial territory of institutional stakeholders such as local government or schools (e.g. 'the Blackburn with Darwen constituency'), reflecting that resources are allocated between or available to groups that occupy the same place.
- **Place-based resources:** Place can be used to identify the physical, natural and heritage resources and spaces available to local people.
- **Place-based marginalization:** Place as a lens can draw attention to the effects of spatial inequalities (e.g. regional economic decline, political exclusion) and symbolic *territorial stigmatization* of places (see Meade, 2021).

These roles often intersected, with Place functioning as a tool which translated the experiences of communities into the language of policy or collective demands. Researchers observed that more funding was available for 'communities of geography' given recent government policy focuses on devolution, regional inequality

and "left behind" places. For example, whereas funding remained available for 'communities of interest' (groups of people united by a shared interest or hobby, such as a sporting community) or 'communities of identity' (groups of people united by a shared identity such as ethnic, cultural or religious groups), Hutcheon (Rural Assets) described how community ownership policies required these groups to appeal to communities of geography to access funding.

> "If you're going to take on a piece of land or building, you need to demonstrate that it serves the 'whole community'. If you are a community of interest, you've actually got less chance of getting a community asset from a public authority, and you're also less likely to get funding for it as well." [Rural Assets, First Insight Interview]

Taking a community-oriented approach focused on place therefore enhanced the potential impact of the research, both because research questions were more compelling to community and policy stakeholders, and because policy recommendations emerging from the research were felt to be more actionable.

> "If you think about where money exists to make changes within communities, if the money is focused on a particular place-based region, then it makes sense to focus on that as a community because then you can have actual effects." [Administrative Data, 1st Insight Interview]

Whilst some of the communities involved in projects were felt to have a clear sense of place-based identity, others did not. For example, although the Borough of Camden defines the remit of the local government authority, its conceptualisation as a single 'community' does not necessarily align with actual feelings of place-based community identity. This is further complicated by Camden being a dense urban area with many 'transient' members such as students or temporary renters, with wide disparities in living conditions even at the postcode level. Fatehrad and Natalini (Nature-based integration) noticed similar complexities in rural areas.

Despite these complexities, place was identified as playing an instrumental role in unifying the concerns of different communities, most seen in the projects which focused on integration, such as the use of 'neighbourhood' by Fatehrad and Natalini (Nature-based integration) and the geographic focus of Sakr (Beyond School Gates).

> "Neighbourhood was the most inclusive way to include all the communities of identity [in place]... Neighbourhood was the vocabulary that was the most accommodative as a

conversation opener to enable integration better." [Nature-based Integration, 2nd Insight Interview]

A focus on place therefore introduced an opportunity to translate the shared concerns of different communities into a united voice of 'place', but also a risk of misrepresenting the experiences and activities of communities to policymakers – 'flattening' internal differences, conflicts and understandings. This is not an unknown problem. A wide body of literature exists on research evidence transmission to policymakers in the context of community-oriented research (see Freudenberg and Tsui, 2014; Bussu, Golan and Hargreaves, 2022; Perry, 2022).

The framework of Conelly et al. (2021) also shows how the *content* of academic research faces a dilemma of translation to policymakers. Translation generates challenges in balancing *equivalence,* what remains from the original when a text is translated, and *function,* what is required for the end-user to find the output useful. To mediate these two objectives, Conelly proposes a focus on *loyalty* where a translator must produce a text "compatible with the original author's intentions" (Connelly *et al.*, 2021). Community-oriented research faces a unique translation challenge in 'Place', as the researcher is tasked with translating many perspectives including their own as part of the final research output.

Representing 'place'

To what extent were these challenges of translation and 'flattening' overcome by the research teams? When representing 'Place', community, and the multiple voices these contain, research teams sought to achieve 'loyalty' to the intentions of community members through a range of strategies.

- **Incorporation of multiple perspectives:** Researchers sought to incorporate multiple perspectives in their research. One approach to achieving this was by using multi-disciplinary approaches to invite input from the widest possible range of stakeholders. For example, Sakr (Beyond School Gates) relied on creative methods for input from young people, archival research and iterative dialogue with school staff, and Nason (Social Welfare Legal Advice) used Social Network analysis and interviews to understand social welfare advice behaviours paired with workshops held with community organisations. Fatehrad and Natalini (Nature-based Integration) also sought to incorporate diverse perspectives in their aesthetic review by bringing in multiple reviewers with differing levels of experience with integration.

"A singular point of view wouldn't be helpful in giving all aspects of the integration process. So we recruited different groups of reviewers... to voice different ways of looking at these material, how they respond to integration processes, what is being perceived by viewers." [Nature-based Integration, 2nd Insight Interview]

Long-term community engagement: Research teams highlighted that long term community engagement in place, often enabled by links with 'superconnecters' (individuals with a wide range of trusted social links) or 'gatekeepers' (individuals with the authority or social capital to refer the research team to certain groups or individuals), was key to capture community voices. Long term engagement, sometimes facilitated via community researchers, built trust with community members that the research would fairly represent them, and allowed researchers to encounter a wider range of perspectives in places.

Hutcheon (Rural Assets) made at least two visits to each case study area, with continuous engagement with local community organisations throughout the project. A patient and co-production approach flexible to the community organisations allowed a strong level of participation despite fatigue from groups of 'over-research'. In contrast, Havard (Transformative Justice) noted that a gap in the timing of the project's research phases affected participation.

"It was a case of 'Listen, we're here for the next two years. We'd really like to give something back.'" [Rural Assets, 2nd insight interview]

Fatehrad and Natalini (Nature-based Integration) noted that community engagement required showing an inclusive interest in the whole community, even if the primary focus of the research was a minority group. For example, ensuring that outreach materials were translated into Gaelic as well as other languages.

Arts-based approaches in places: Several projects (Havard, Fatehrad, Sakr) used arts-based approaches to handle difficult or contested topics within places. Arts-based approaches typically rely on the participant producing a creative output in response to a provocation, then followed up with a discussion about the meaning of the piece and motivation for artistic choices.

Research teams noted that arts-based approaches were effective at opening conversations on topics that felt daunting or difficult to communicate, such as ethnicity, integration, and the criminal justice system. They also equalized access for participants with different languages or other barriers to research participation. Finally, Havard noted that as art pieces were open to interpretation by other workshop participants many different interpretations were able to emerge.

"Through art of they can express themselves in different ways, but then their art is open to interpretation. We did a quite a lot of group work, and I'm watching the group work out how to represent what they were thinking in an artistic format… this showed a lot about dynamics, thought processes, and difference - compromise and frustrations." [Transformative Justice, 2nd Insight Interview]

Research teams were in general confident they had reflected community voice in their research as best possible within the two-year timeframe. Reflections focused on *representation* of different groups within the research *sample*. Some projects reflected that as the research focus was on community organisations or social networks, less connected community members in Place were underrepresented. Others highlighted that minoritised groups faced barriers in participating in the research that were only partially overcome in the timeframe.

Place and policy

Fitting research findings into a policy framework opened a difficult set of reflections around the translation dilemma of Conelly et al (2021): how to make the research useful to policymakers whilst remaining loyal to the voices of community in place? Transmission of community voice to policymakers was primarily led by the research teams. This benefited from policymaker and community member perceptions that the research team, as 'outsiders' to the community, were more 'neutral' and therefore less biased when receiving and transmitting information. To increase the probability of the research influencing policy, research teams produced policy-oriented outputs. These required condensing material into shorter 'briefings' or presentations, often lists of evidence-based recommendations.

Reflecting community voice in these recommendations raised some dilemmas of translation. Recommendations with community support may be considered infeasible by policymakers: for example, for several projects community members raised low public spending and a tough funding environment as a core challenge for their activities, whereas policy stakeholders reported that due to fiscal constraints, recommendations of higher public spending would not be adopted. In addition, recommendations typically emerged through analysis combining different strands of data, a process which often did not involve community representation due to its technical nature. Finally, recommendations presented a consensus view from the research team that may not reflect consensus amongst communities in place.

These dilemmas are inescapable. A core intention of the programme was to go beyond simply theorising community experience, and towards promoting policy changes that could support communities across the UK. Research teams were

careful to position findings as emerging from the research, and several projects were able to return to community stakeholders with project findings to receive further input and reflection. Community stakeholders (see Chapter 5) interviewed by the Institute for Community Studies at the end of projects spoke positively about how research findings supported their aims and opened up the potential for collaboration. The process of translation itself was therefore able to foster dialogue and collaboration whilst enhancing the potential of impact.

4. Social infrastructure and community strength

This section explores how practice-based insights can deepen our theoretical understanding of how communities function and impact the lives of their members, by showing the dynamics of communities' responses to the research teams and projects. By examining how these responses are shaped by the local context of place, this section also seeks to develop cross-project insights into how different place characteristics might shape communities.

Research as Intervention in Place

> "We found the aesthetic workshops to be an effective research integration tool. They provided a creative platform for participants to engage in nature, in which connections were fostered and participants' understanding of integration dynamics was deepened. Overall this enriched data collection, and facilitated intercultural exchange. **The aesthetic workshops were nature-based integration in action.**" [Nature-based Integration, EPA Part A, emphasis added]

To conduct their research and navigate across stakeholders, teams often created spaces of social connection (in-person or online) which performed a convening, facilitation and information sharing role *within* and *between* the places they were researching. Mirroring the research findings around the importance of connections within and between communities, government or local institutions, researchers themselves facilitated connection-generating spaces. PIs reflected that they had seen new collaborations, friendships and connections emerge from these which had directly generated value for communities. The act of conducting research itself therefore impacted and shaped the communities and places research teams work within.

The spaces of social connection created through the research projects performed the following roles beyond their initial purpose of data collection, with some spaces performing multiple functions:

- **Piloting spaces:** Some spaces acted as a piloting ground for the specific intervention of interest, such as the nature-based aesthetic workshops for

Fatehrad & Natalini, and the formation of The Hopeful Collective as part of Havard's Transformative Justice workshops.

- **Connecting spaces:** Projects held workshop series which allowed stakeholders previously siloed across community, government, and practice to encounter each other and discuss challenges and opportunities, such as Learning conversations set up by Sakr (Beyond School Gates), ethics workshops held by Harris (Administrative Data), and community focus groups held by Nason (Social Welfare Legal Advice).
- **Bonding spaces:** Many of Hutcheon's (Rural Assets) co-produced outputs/outcomes sought to support the community in exploring an issue or engaging with a local activity. For example, the community forum held with their Welsh case study and the storytelling and walking events held with their Scotland case study. Havard (Transformative Justice) also supported The Hopeful Justice collective in exhibiting their work through a community art installation.

Social infrastructure and community strength

To supplement the theoretical findings of the research on prospective interventions, examining the successes and failures of these spaces of social connection may shed further insights on how to create social infrastructure (the people, physical or virtual spaces and organisations that enable communities to create connections) which builds community strength. Some key characteristics emerging from the projects were:

Curiosity: Several PIs (Fatehrad and Natalini, Havard, Sakr, Nason) highlighted in research outputs and insight interviews the importance of creating spaces that allow for curiosity between individuals. Fatehrad and Natalini (Nature-based Integration) suggested rather than focusing on difference, they had noticed that "[curiosity] is much more about shared elements… people would connect on things that they have in common rather than difference." [Nature-based Integration, 2nd Insight Interview].

Similarly, Havard discussed how members of the Transformative Justice workshops connected over "people's shared experience of their locality." [Transformative Justice, 2nd insight interview]. Later, during a workshop on trauma-based practice, workshop participants similarly realized "everybody in the group had a trauma" which affected their behaviour, and through sharing allowed the group to break prejudices down such that "everybody saw everybody for the human being they are."

Spaces that focused on sharing personal narratives and stories appeared particularly effective allowing people to identify points of commonality and

thus spark curiosity. In addition, Fatehrad and Natalini (Nature-based Integration) noted that 'super connectors' (individuals who held and facilitated a large range of community connections) seemed particularly adept at sparking curiosity between people. However, PIs also noted the importance of 'safety' for curiosity to occur. This encompassed psychological safety, for example to facilitate Havard's (Transformative Justice) 'brave spaces' or for confidence in connections across difference (Beyond School Gates). It also included feelings of safety from harm identified by Nature-based Integration as a barrier to nature access.

Embeddedness: The creation of these bridging spaces in the research projects was facilitated by the 'in betweenness' and 'embeddedness' of research teams with community members and other stakeholders. 'In betweenness' refers to how researchers fluctuate between being seen as "insiders" and "outsiders" to the community, academic and policy stakeholders they work with (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). When asked how they related to the communities in their research projects, PIs reflected on a complex array of closeness and distance between their and community members' experiences (Kerstetter, 2012). Over time, however, research teams discussed a process of becoming 'part of' or 'more embedded within' the communities they were working with.

The routes to this 'embeddedness' often reflected the building of trust between the research teams and community, recognised as an important process in community-based research (Edwards *et al.*, 2008). One key route to embeddedness was working with community researchers [Fatehrad & Natalini, Harris, Nason], local community organisations, or community 'super connectors'. Community partners not only shared local knowledge and 'translated' information (sometimes literally into another language, or to reflect local context), but also hold existing relationships of trust that can connect the research teams to community members. For example, Sakr (Beyond School Gates) was able to leverage the close connections project advisory board members held in relevant communities to increase participation.

Research PIs reported using both embeddedness and in-betweenness to support their research objectives. 'In-betweenness' helped researchers present themselves as relatively neutral on the topic compared to other stakeholders, allowing for freer sharing of information. Approaching an issue with the naivety of an 'outsider' also helped to reveal knowledge taken for granted, or inconsistencies of beliefs and attitudes (Fatehrad & Natalini, Sakr).

Capacity: Research teams were able to provide capacity to run spaces of social connection through their research projects which complemented local provision. Many community and other stakeholders involved in projects

experienced severe financial and capacity constraints. In some cases, constraints were physical – a lack of safe and accessible communal places to meet. Research teams were able to provide time and people power to help community organisations and local stakeholders achieve their aims, where these aligned with the research. For example, Nason (Social Welfare Legal Advice) was able to facilitate community feedback for informal advice providers as part of their research on advice-seeking behaviours.

Research teams also provided capacity support to community organisations and 'bridging' spaces through team member (academic and non-academic) skills and experience. For example, Hutcheon (Rural Assets) supported one of their case studies in developing a Men's Shed. Facilitation skills and knowledge of practice within the research team – such as in aesthetic or trauma-informed practice – were also useful to generate psychological safety and reflexiveness amongst participants in bridging spaces, creating a better environment for curiosity.

Compared to other sources of support, research teams may have also had a greater capacity for risk tolerance. Connecting across difference, particularly on contested issues, can also give rise to conflict as evidenced in the Havard (Transformative Justice) project. However, the research team were able to respond to this conflict productively to repair and generate further learning.

Overall, provision of capacity was best facilitated by alignment in aims across the research team and local community partners. Alignment facilitated trust between the research team and local stakeholders and made it easier to pool resources and work together. This also applied to other stakeholders - Sakr (Beyond School Gates) noted community and local government were better able to pool resources and intuitively work together where "[local stakeholders] have a vision of what we're trying to achieve for our diverse community, and everybody knows how their work feeds into that." [Beyond School Gates, 2nd Insight Interview]

Ownership: Finally, research teams noted the effectiveness of bridging spaces which ceded control or ownership to communities. Co-production elements in the research design and in workshops, such as with Hutcheon (Rural Assets), were an effective strategy for aligning aims and therefore enhancing capacity by co-ordinating resources. Rather than "just highlighting their story in their voice… it was also about helping them move forward slightly or understand what they've been through or engage with the wider community." [Rural Assets, 2nd insight interview].

At the same time, allowing for community ownership also required sufficient capacity from community organisations and members. For example, Havard (Transformative Justice) described challenges in handing over leadership of

> the Hopeful Justice Collective to participants from what appeared to be "a lack of confidence in leadership skills combined with feeling overburdened with other life/work commitments" [Transformative Justice, Final Report]. Whilst research teams were able to provide capacity support, projects were limited to two years, which was not always sufficient to build leadership capacity.

These insights suggest a role for community-oriented research to support community strength in places by leveraging their role in creating spaces for social connection (particularly 'bridging' and 'bonding' spaces) to support local social infrastructure. Research focused on learning about lived experience and community challenges lends itself to curiosity and reflectiveness which opens new potential for connection. By making use of their 'in-betweenness', researchers can connect people and share information across silos. In doing so, the process of conducting research itself can create value for communities and leave a positive legacy.

The experiences of the project teams suggest that granting greater ownership to the community of research workshops or research engagement events helps to maximise this dimension of community-oriented research. For example, several projects involved local community organisations or hiring community researchers who can input into the design, delivery and follow-up of workshops or events. Time and resources had to be built into the research project to identify and involve community members equitably. For the Understanding Communities programme, a key issue was follow-up support from the research team or funder to enable communities to continue operating spaces of connection introduced by the research project or integrate them into existing community services.

5. Policy and community stakeholders in research

To understand the perspectives of community and policymaker participants in the *Understanding communities* programme, the Institute for Community Studies undertook four reflexive interviews at the end of the research projects with policy and community stakeholders involved in each research project. Interviewees were a mixture of research participants, members of the research team and policymakers the researchers formed connections with during their projects. Interviews focused on what the stakeholders had gained from participation in research, how any learnings applied to their policy or practice area, and exploring what made their involvement in the programme effective.

This section summarises the findings from these interviews, covering the research value and effective engagement of policy and community stakeholders.

Research value for policy and community stakeholders

Knowledge Outputs

> "We were reasonably well informed as an organisation about the issues. As a solid piece of academic work, [the research project] strengthens our hand when calling for [policy change]." [Community partner interview]

Stakeholders felt in general that rather than introducing new ideas or learning, knowledge generated through the research was primarily useful in strengthening the case for their policy area or programme. Where policy partners cited applying learnings from the project, these often emerged from conversations enabled by the research rather than adopting the recommendations of the research directly. This does not mean that policy recommendations were ineffective. Policy recommendations formed by research teams policy partners were directed at a range of decision makers, often in central or national governments. Policy stakeholders included in the research were therefore not always the decision makers able to adopt all the recommendations of the research.

"I was at a round table yesterday… I had a new sense of authority in what I was saying, because it's supported by very recent research." [Community partner interview]

Due to the perceived neutrality or 'objectivity' of research, research outputs could behave as unbiased evidence which stakeholders could cite to demonstrate practices were likely to be effective or providing support for hypotheses about important causal mechanisms (eg, the relationship between interventions involving young children and integration outcomes). In addition, case study approaches taken by research teams also gave organisations a chance to showcase their work as a demonstration of "what is possible" with wider political and policy support.

"It just expands what's possible. We're always wanting to keep this programme fresh… As a practitioner you need new energy, don't you?" [Community partner interview]

Networks and Professional Connections

Another strong source of value for policy and practice stakeholders was access to new networks and connections. These connections opened the possibility of new avenues of impact for the stakeholder through collaboration or contextualising their work across a wider policy landscape. Cross-nation connections were cited as particularly valuable, as participants were able to learn about different policy environments (eg, in asset transfer) and allow for cross-nation collaboration that had previously felt unattainable. Interviewees cited having expanded their programmes and accessed new funding due to the relationships and connections built during the research project. "It just expands what's possible."

"I don't have time to philosophise, but I really should be doing that. If I'm in a room where I have to do that, there is value in that - to reset your brain, and challenge your thinking." [Policy partner interview]

Research activity

Policy participants emphasized the importance of research spaces as reflexive spaces useful to 'stop and think' about their work from a more distant perspective. Many of the research projects allowed participants to hold conversations internally and externally on questions of strategy or priority which were usually given less importance than the pressures of day-to-day work. In some cases, research was a means to elevate the experiences of a marginalised group who were also

marginalised in policy discussion, such as rural communities. Research spaces also helped with stakeholders' wider missions – such as supporting local government in engaging with their community.

Finally, one participant highlighted the skills development they experienced as part of their participation in research. They felt they had learned about how a research project worked, and how research can be used to inform policy.

Engagement of policy and community stakeholders

Navigating Hierarchy

> "When engaging [government], start at the very top – the most influential person in the organisation." [Policy stakeholder]

Two policy stakeholders were interviewed, and described difficulties arising from their relatively junior positions in their organisation, limiting their ability to allocate time towards participating in or advocating for the research internally. Without research team buy-in from a senior manager, this created a burden on participants who felt they had to spend time and effort navigating the internal hierarchy of their organisation to participate. Whilst research teams generally sought to engage senior decision makers, junior staff were more available and responsive to researchers. This created an adverse effect where more engaged staff felt they did not necessarily have the power to function as an effective 'point of contact' or represent their organisation to researchers.

This issue was exacerbated by 'churn' at the senior management level within many government organisations. The loss of senior management willing to commit staff time towards a research project left junior staff previously involved in the project uncertain of their participation. Renewing senior 'buy-in' after periods of change was cited as important for making policy engagement easier for junior staff.

Feeling valued as partners

> "How are we brought into play – as a means to support the delivery of their research, or collegiately, to address common questions and issues?" [Community partner participant]

All stakeholders expressed the importance of feeling valued and respected as partners, with a common purpose. One way in which teams created this environment was by being available for stakeholders to provide rapid and informal feedback –

one interviewee described they felt "able to pick up the phone" at any point and suggest eg, changes to outreach materials to make them more suitable. This helped participants feel they were actively contributing to the research process as valued partners, although it may have introduced new resource pressures on research teams.

Two interviewees described the importance of creating an equal playing field amongst participants regardless of institution and seniority, allowing participants to feel comfortable sharing and thinking in the open. This equal playing field was created through strong facilitation, holding meetings in person, and clearly briefing participants. One of the interviewees described feeling "out of their depth" at one in-person event and suggested connecting participants prior to meeting, to help understand the purpose of the event and liaise with known attendees.

Some stakeholders received funding for aspects of their participation, such as travelling to in-person meetings or events. This created additional feelings of being valued as an integral part of the research process. In contrast, those who had not received funding for such activities highlighted the challenge of allocating sufficient resources to projects to allow people to participate fully, and having to weigh the strategic benefit of the project against internal constraints.

Research influence

Most policy and community stakeholders had continued using the research outputs to influence policy after the two-year project timeline had completed. Where possible, this was supported by the academics on the project. Advocacy and influencing work were often spurred by the possibility of using the research to access further funding, presence in government decision-making mechanisms, or expand existing projects. Participants also described the impact generated during the research itself by creating spaces for reflection or community engagement, with one commenting that an opportunity to continue offering workshop events beyond the data collection would have generated further policy impact.

6. Conclusion

Understanding communities as a research programme represented a bold step towards supporting early and mid-career researchers in community-oriented research. The diversity of the portfolio topics, locations of interest and methods speaks to the enormous potential of funding interdisciplinary projects which seek to translate community voices into theoretical and policy findings.

By exploring insights emerging from the *experience of the research itself*, many parallels with the synthesis of research findings of the programme can be observed. The importance of trust and connection between research teams and community members, the factors which make effective social infrastructure such as encouragement of curiosity and safety, and the potential unifying role of 'place' speak to findings in both *Understanding communities* reports. In addition, this report has identified how community-oriented research can create value for communities through the very process of conducting the research, as workshops and community research engagement events are potential spaces for social connection that can build bridging and bonding social capital in places.

These insights also explain negative experiences many communities have with research. 'Extractive' practices, which do not involve community in research processes but seek to collect data and analyse it independently of community input, may undermine trust or participant curiosity. By emphasising the importance of lived experience, community involvement in research, and community value, the *Understanding communities* programme attracted value-aligned researchers who were given the flexibility to develop community-oriented research projects.

In this concluding section, a series of recommendations are put forward for funders developing similar programmes, as well as research teams seeking to undertake community-oriented research.

Research development

- **Alignment of research and community priorities:** Alignment between research and community priorities opens more opportunities for collaborations with local community stakeholders, enhancing the potential impact of the research. To achieve this alignment, a place focus may be effective. Funders could

provide seed funding to research teams to identify priorities in places, for example using the Priority Setting Partnership (PSP) model (James Lind Alliance, 2021). Funders could also conduct this initial scoping work themselves, potentially choosing a 'Place' in which subsequent research funding will focus in collaboration with local communities.

Infrastructure: Community-oriented research has value in the process itself, by creating new connections between people. Research teams and funders should consider how a research project might generate spaces of connection within and across communities to support local social infrastructure and build social capital. Applications could allow research teams to articulate the value in the research emerging not just from connecting the research team to community members, but also in connecting research participants to each other.

Requiring projects to include budget lines which cover aspects of building connections in places, such as outreach, partnership building and follow-up would allow research teams and funders to ensure projects have the time required to build trust and effective spaces of social connection. In addition, funders could earmark funding for local community or policy organisations to take over and continue to run spaces which proved to be effective after the end of the projects lifespan.

Iteration: Many of the research teams highlighted the challenges of building trust and deep understanding in the two-year timeline of the Understanding Communities projects. However, research funding may not be available for longer term projects. An alternative way to embed greater longevity in projects could be for research teams and funders to consider at the research development stage ways in which research outputs can be picked up and developed in consequent research projects within the same place. This would allow the formation of longer-term relationships and greater alignment between research and community priorities over time.

Programme events

Facilitate connection: Research PIs felt that programme events for *Understanding communities* (such as portfolio-wide workshops and seminars) brought the most value when allowing the research teams to connect with each other. Funders should consider how workshops can facilitate connections between and beyond research stakeholders.

Understanding communities projects were required to budget for travel and accommodation for non-academic stakeholders to attend programme events. However, in practice these were not taken up by many stakeholders. Providing

a travel and accommodation bursary directly from the funder may ensure events remain accessible and opportunities for access well known. One policy stakeholder commented that they felt unprepared for an event they did attend, making engagement difficult. Producing briefings well in advance of events to be shared with non-academic stakeholders, as well as sharing attendee lists, may support their engagement.

- **Interactive workshops:** PIs felt that *Understanding communities* seminars relied too heavily on talks and presentations from external stakeholders, which were useful but rarely went into sufficient depth for teams. Policy workshops in particular could benefit from centering around interactions between participants and policymakers. For example, allowing research teams to rotate across policymaker attendees for feedback on research 'pitches', early draft briefings, or engagement strategies.
- **Support:** Whilst a programme of support and training was initially intended as part of the *Understanding communities* programme, in practice delivering the training was challenged by teams moving at very different paces in the projects, the diversity of techniques deployed, and constrained time available to researchers. Rather than a training delivery programme, support may have been better provided by peer support amongst research teams through regular meetings to share progress and challenges. Some meetings could be focused on a shared challenge, such as strategies for mixed-methods data analysis.
- **Funding connection time:** Participants often found it difficult to meaningfully engage in *Understanding communities* programme events due to a perception of limited resources and time to deliver research. Although the *Understanding communities* funding documentation suggested teams budget for this time, it may be more effective to set a strict amount that must be budgeted for (eg, five FTE days per engaged research team member) to build in the funding specifically for meaningful engagement with programme events.

Research output and influencing

- **Senior buy-in:** To empower frontline staff within local government and community organisations with the capacity to be most engaged with research, it is important that research teams secure and maintain senior buy-in to the research. Strategies that can facilitate this include scheduling evaluative reflection with senior stakeholders at the outset of the research, going outside the organisation eg, to local politicians to reach senior management within local authorities, and asking frontline staff to alert research teams about changes at senior level that may require new engagement.

- **Funded influencing time:** Policy and community influence often continues long after research projects are ‘complete’. This has meant several teams have engaged in unfunded influencing work in order to maximise the impact of their research. Funders should consider having pockets of funding specifically for influencing and further impact work after the final research outputs are produced. This could be made available both to research teams and the communities where the research took place.

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Annex A: Challenges and opportunities in community-oriented research (outset)