

Briefing Note: Improving Ethical Research Engagement with Community Landowners in Scotland

The growth of community landownership in Scotland has been accompanied by a significant increase in research involving community organisations. While research has the potential to support evidence-based policy and strengthen community development, some approaches often place substantial demands on community landowners. Evidence suggests that many community organisations experience research fatigue with limited influence over research design and little practical benefit from participation.

Key Findings

The research found that **ethical research requires collaboration**. The strongest finding was that ethical research extends beyond institutional ethics approval and should be understood as an ongoing process rather than a one-off procedural requirement. Communities expect researchers to develop relationships, communicate openly and clearly, involve communities in decision-making and ensure that research creates tangible value.

Communities need greater influence over research, contributing to setting research priorities, designing methodologies and having more active roles in projects and their governance.

Communities reported that **communication from researchers remains a major weakness**. There was a preference for plain-language summaries, community presentations, visual outputs, and practical recommendations that could directly support local decision-making.

Institutional structures can constrain good practice. Researchers consistently identified structural barriers that limit their ability to undertake ethical engagement. These include short funding timescales, insufficient resources for relationship building, and ethics processes focused on risk reduction rather than collaborative community engaged research.

Recommendations

The findings have implications beyond community landownership, with Scotland increasingly promoting participatory policymaking, community empowerment and place-based approaches to development and climate adaptation. If research continues to place disproportionate burdens on community organisations including community landowners, there is a risk that community knowledge becomes less accessible to policymakers and researchers. Additionally, improving ethical research practice offers opportunities to strengthen evidence-based policymaking and benefitting communities.

1) Develop an ethical research protocol

The Community Landownership Academic Network (CLAN) should create a practical protocol outlining the expectations for researchers and community organisations. This should build upon the research and include best practices on early engagement, informed consent,

communication preferences, data ownership, use and governance, dissemination of findings, and reciprocal benefits for participating communities.

2) Support from universities and funders

Universities and research funders should recognise and support community engagement as a core element of ethical research practice. This should be through providing sufficient time and resources to develop relationships, ensure collaborative research, appropriate knowledge exchange activities, and community remuneration.

3) Strengthen community participation in the research process

Communities require support to engage with research. Community organisations could be supported to engage with research on their own terms by providing guidance on negotiating research engagements, understanding data rights, and identifying research priorities. Shared governance models and Memoranda of Understanding should be used where appropriate.

4) Better coordination of community-based research

The coordination of community landownership research can be further supported and strengthened through the work of CLAN. CLAN could provide practical resources to organisations to help assess research requests, negotiate expectations, understand data rights, develop Memoranda of Understanding or shared governance models, identify research priorities, suggest remuneration and communicate findings in an accessible format. This requires core funding for the expansion of CLAN's role and activities.

Conclusion

Great knowledge of the impacts of community landownership provides an important opportunity to understand how local ownership can contribute to sustainable development and resilience. Improving ethical research requires coordinated action by research institutions, funders, policymakers, and community organisations to assist researchers, community organisations, and policymakers to provide more relevant, trusted, and impactful research whilst reducing burdens on participating communities. The above summary, and accompanying report, outline the requirements in order to achieve this objective.