



Beyond Ethics? Research Engagement with Scotland's Community Landowners

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Image 1: Walking on community-owned land in northwest Scotland. Source: Matt Rabagliati 2024.

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1. Executive Summary

Accompanying the rise of community landownership in Scotland has been an increase in research requests placed on community landowners. Previous research conducted by the Community Landownership Academic Network (CLAN) suggests that such requests are becoming unmanageable, with respondent communities perceiving little benefit and feeling dissatisfied with research engagement. Respondents reported receiving large numbers of requests from researchers and felt they had little influence over research questions, methodologies, or outputs. Some stated that research findings were rarely returned in

accessible formats and that benefits flowed primarily towards researchers and institutions rather than the communities contributing their time and knowledge. These concerns formed the basis of this project. In collaboration with CLAN, it sought to find ways of aligning the needs of community landowners and researchers to promote a more equitable, beneficial and sustainable approach to research engagement. Specifically, the task was to 'help inform the development of practical guidance which can be used by researchers (and those who supervise them), community organisations and other stakeholders to promote and encourage improved robust research practice'. To do this, the project used a variety of data collection methods, including multi-sectoral workshops, secondary data analysis and a literature review between January and December 2025.

Several key findings emerged to support better research engagement, including early engagement with communities and informed consent throughout a project; clear communication; designing more inclusive and appropriate research; consider shared research agendas and governance structures; critical reflection on sampling and representation; better understanding of community capacity; encouraging more reciprocal exchanges of time and resources; developing trust among those involved, specifically around engagement and transparency around intentions; and that wider power dynamics be more critically considered. It was evident that where problems emerge, it is often not the individual failings of researchers but a wider set of challenging conditions to uphold ethical research. For example, the project found that researchers want to engage ethically but are constrained by time, funding and institutional support.

This report shows how researchers can find themselves at the centre of a complex set of demands and drivers, having to navigate the differing demands of respondent communities and institutional requirements. In this sense, the development of a set of principles into a formal 'protocol' may serve both the interests of researchers and communities in outlining what is possible regarding research engagement. These principles include agreements on research design and communication, as well as how and when data may be collected.

Furthermore, it is recommended that universities and other research institutions examine and challenge their structures and expectations of research to promote more sustainable, mutually beneficial approaches, whether specifically with community landowners or beyond. Communities themselves need to be further engaged in this; it is recommended that CLAN support a programme of work and implement a protocol to support more ethical research.

2. Introduction

Community land ownership is an important means of achieving sustainable development, giving communities the opportunity to control what happens in their area. Support for community ownership in Scotland has developed significantly over the last 25 years (Macaulay et al., 2026) with successive legislation, policy development and funding to assist communities with taking on assets, including whole islands, estates, buildings and small sites for development.

The Community Landownership Academic Network (CLAN) was launched in 2021 to strategically coordinate the future of research around community landownership. Administered by the Centre for Mountain Studies (CMS) at the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), it is an open and accessible network which seeks to connect disparate researchers with the communities and actors who are often the focus of their research. The network has grown to over 200 individuals from academia, policy, practice and community organisations, who meet regularly to present and discuss developments in this area. CLAN's Advisory Group consists of both academic and non-academic actors involved in research, funding, policy and practice.

In late 2024, a Fellowship was launched with the aim of 'the co-production of guidance to inform an ethical research protocol for the Community Landownership Academic Network'. The starting point of this fellowship, externally funded by the Scottish Government's Centre of Expertise for Knowledge Exchange and Innovation ([SEFARI Gateway](#)) for the Scottish Government's Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture Research Portfolio, was the assertion that the current ethical requirements of academic research should be viewed as the absolute minimum standard, and that research activity should seek to go well beyond

these guidelines to not harm, in seeking to benefit, individual and community respondents whilst retaining research integrity.

The fellow was asked to provide guidance on the development of a practical, useful and theoretically informed ‘protocol’, which could be used by a range of audiences, including community organisations, to set expectations of how community research could mutually-beneficially be planned, conducted and communicated. This project report is the main output of that fellowship.

2.1 The Rise of Community Landownership and Associated Research

Scotland has one of the most concentrated patterns of land ownership in the world, with 421 landowners owning 50% of the private rural land (Wightman, 2024). This is, in part, a legacy from the country’s history, its contribution and exposure to processes of colonialism, industrial revolution, globalisation and the Highland Clearances -- a period during the eighteenth and nineteenth century where people were forcibly removed from their lands by landowners who were pursuing perceived economic opportunities; sheep were seen as more lucrative than people, for example, and so people were cleared to other areas of Scotland and land overseas (Hunter, 2018). This has had many implications, one of which is that large estates have been created and their ownership has been increasingly concentrated into few hands.

Since the inception of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, land has been a central point of discussion among politicians, activists and communities in Scotland, with ‘land reform’ an effort to address past injustices and improve Scotland’s system of land ownership and use. Various pieces of legislation, including the removal of the feudal land system in 2000, three Land Reform Acts in [2003](#), [2016](#), and [2025](#), and other funding mechanisms and policy interventions have sought to reform the system of land ownership, use, rights and responsibilities.

Community ownership is but one form of land reform, and on a global scale is not a new concept. It resonates with Indigenous stewardship and postcolonial reforms, and in Scotland there are historic examples of governing for the common good: shielings, municipal burghs, crofting, and the common grazing systems. However, in its current form, community ownership is a relatively new concept, referring to an approach involving ownership (legal

title and a generally exclusive right of possession) of land and/or assets by a community body that is locally led and linked to a defined geographic community (Doyle, 2023).

With the increase in community landownership has come an increase in the requests made of community landowners to not only manage land and support local opportunities in their area but to share their stories. These have been in various forms, including news articles, films, and research projects. A survey and associated report, written in 2023, found a recent surge of research requests placed on community landowners. There were reports of a variety of unethical research practices and a feeling amongst community organisations that they may be unlikely to accept future research requests (Macaulay et al., 2023). The study found that over two hundred research requests had been received by just 10% of members of Community Land Scotland (a membership organisation that supports and represents existing and aspiring community landowners across Scotland) over the preceding five-year period, with over half of those having been accepted and contributed to (ibid). Although limited in size and scope, Macaulay et al., 2023 identified five areas of key concern:

- 1) On no occasion had the community been asked for input on research design or focus;
- 2) Qualitative interview methodologies were criticised for needing many respondents, taking up time from numerous members of the organisation and community, while surveys were often considered long, complicated and difficult to complete;
- 3) Researchers were sometimes perceived as uninformed, with respondents feeling they had to support them in their work;
- 4) Research findings were rarely communicated back to the community and when they were, respondents found they were not in a useful or digestible format; and
- 5) There was a common feeling that research was not of benefit to the community and could be harmful in some circumstances.

This report seeks to inform new guidance that addresses the above. It is structured as follows: Section 3 provides an overview of the methodology. Section 4 reviews academic

and practical literature on the topic of ethics and community-based research. Section 5 presents the findings from primary and secondary data analysis, drawing out key recommendations and guidance. Finally, the report synthesises the findings to provide an overview of the key principles in the development of ethical guidance.

3. Methods

This project's findings are informed by two sequenced phases of data collection, which are outlined below. The study was granted ethical approval from the UHI Research Ethics Committee in May 2024 (phase 1, #ETH2324-1020) and May 2025 (phase 2, #ETH2425-0936).

Phase One: Common Ground

This research phase occurred in June 2024, before the launch of the fellowship. It used a collaborative and deliberative approach to investigate best practice ethical approaches to research, exploring challenges faced by different stakeholder groups and solutions to them. A multi-day and multi-sectoral in-person workshop, funded by SEFARI Gateway, considered what ethical research practice constitutes, the practical barriers in ensuring ethical practice, and how these can be overcome in the context of community landownership. 18 people attended from a range of sectors and roles, including research funders, community organisational bodies and researchers.

On the first day, attendees identified and discussed their perceived challenges in conducting non-extractive research (research that avoids exploiting communities or knowledge holders), whether that be for researchers, community organisations, or research funders. Respondents identified the source of these challenges and further discussed their impact. On the second day, respondents discussed the barriers to overcoming these challenges, identifying and prioritising solutions. Data from the workshop was collected on flipchart paper and post it notes. These were typed up in Microsoft Excel and thematically analysed.

Phase Two: Literature and Workshop

Phase two took place in 2025, pairing relevant academic literature on ethics and community-based research with primary data collected during a workshop in September 2025 at the Community Woodlands Association Conference. 12 people chose to attend this

workshop during the conference, with representation from a range of community organisations, research institutions and policy and practice professionals.

The workshop further built upon data collected during phase one and the findings from the literature review, and asked respondents to provide in-depth comments on ethical practice with community landowners. Specifically, this included what they would recommend take place at different points during any given research process and relationship. Respondents provided overarching comments on the challenges and solutions of supporting more ethical research practice from the viewpoint of various actors (such as researchers, community members, funders) before closing with a wider group discussion about how to prioritise action. Data from the workshop was collected on flipchart paper and post it notes. These were typed up in Microsoft Excel and thematically analysed.

Limitations

The methods used in this project meant a wide range of respondents could input views and exchange ideas, notably through workshops, one of which specific attendees were invited to provide their expertise, another of which attendees could choose to attend during a conference which was already taking place. While these methods allowed for a range of viewpoints and perspectives, their reliance on discussion and workshop-style methods limited the level of detail and nuance that could be captured. Methods such as interviews would have allowed for themes to be discussed in greater detail but did not form part of the methodological approach for this study. Therefore, further research could, for example, consider conducting interviews with key individuals involved in community landownership to provide specificities and experiences which workshops could not directly tease out.

Secondly, the following literature review considered social science research. This was partly to manage the scope of the review but was also deemed appropriate given the majority of community landownership research is situated in the social sciences. A more expansive literature review could take into consideration scholarly work in the natural sciences, for example, and transdisciplinary approaches and considerations of ethics.

Overall, this project has provided a platform for further detailed work on ethical considerations in research with community landowners. This report immediately suggests

the ways in which researchers could more widely and ethically engage with community landowners across Scotland, recommending that research institutions and funders provide more support, that communities be able to better negotiate research through increased transparency and capacity, and that researchers uphold good practice throughout their engagements. A next step would be to develop a 'protocol' that CLAN could promote for organisations, researchers and community landowners to use.

4. Literature Review

This chapter examines academic and practical literature on research ethics. This is important given that there has been a vast amount of work written about this subject and some excellent practical guides in existence which are already being used in many research contexts. The first section defines key terms such as 'ethics', 'communities' and 'community-based research'. The second section interrogates understandings of ethics within the social sciences (which, as noted above, accounts for most research activity in the context of community landownership), with particular attention paid to feminist ethical theory and Indigenous and decolonial approaches, and their application within community-based research. This section builds on an earlier review by McGlade and Oldham-Dorrington, which helped identify relevant debates concerning research ethics, positionality and community-based knowledge production. The analysis and synthesis presented here have subsequently been developed and expanded for the present research. The chapter then concludes by examining selected examples from practical literature, including guidelines and institutional codes of conduct, which illustrate a range of current interpretations of ethical research engagement with communities.

4.1 Definitions

This literature review traces a route through an expansive body of literature on research ethics and community engagement and, as such, provides definitions of key terms.

'Research'

The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) Research Ethics Framework defines research broadly as any gathering of data or facts to facilitate a contribution to the body of knowledge (University of the Highlands and Islands, 2025).

'Community'

The notion of ‘community’ is inherently contested. For this review, the term refers to a group of people sharing certain characteristics—such as geographical location, collective identity, or common practice (Banks et al., 2015). Communities may therefore be defined spatially (e.g., a village or neighbourhood, ‘place’) or relationally (e.g., communities of practice, identity, or ‘interest’ (Banks et al., 2015).

‘Community Engagement’

Wilson et al. define community engagement as “the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting their well-being” (Wilson et al., 2018). Fielding-Miller et al. argues that engagement is best understood as a continuum, ranging from minimal or consultative interaction to fully participatory and community-led research (Fielding-Miller et al., 2022).

‘Community-Based Organisations’

Beste et al. characterise community-based organisations as public or private non-profit entities that provide specific services to a defined population (Beste et al., 2021). In Scotland, such organisations are often geographically bounded, as exemplified by Community Land Scotland (a membership organisation for community landowners in Scotland), who stipulate that membership in community land initiatives be open to all residents within a defined area (Community Land Scotland, n.d.)

‘Community-Based Research’

This refers to research distinguished by its attention to partnerships, collaboration and social change, which considers communities as active in knowledge production and as such are often considered attentive to ethics and ‘good practice’ approaches for positive and impactful research. There are many methodologies, theories, and methods associated with this form of research which have emerged and developed from subject areas including Indigenous studies, education, social justice, and health research (Cargo and Mercer, 2008). Community-based research is an inquiry that involves community members, organisational representatives and researchers. It often seeks to democratise the research process by grounding it in local knowledge and focusing on the issues of relevance to any community,

challenging traditional power dynamics in research, and raising important questions about ownership, representation, consent, and benefit sharing.

Community-based research is often used interchangeably with 'community-based participatory research', 'participatory research' and 'participatory action research'. It is a methodology which tends to embed community members as research partners who co-design and co-produce research.

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is a growing field of research in the social sciences, gaining prominence since the 1970s due to greater public discourse on the importance of stronger engagement between universities and a range of 'publics', including communities (Banks et al., 2015; Kwan and Walsh, 2018). Notably, it has developed following societal concerns on elitism within academic circles, and therefore scholars who advocate and use this approach consider CBPR as a solution to widening access to public education, democratising research processes, ensuring research feeds into policy and practice, and developing local solutions to local problems (Conway et al., 2009; Greenwood and Levin, 2001). It is also frequently used to work with and engage groups perceived as 'hard to reach', including ethnic groups, Indigenous communities and those with disabilities (see Minkler, 2004). Desportes explores how participatory research has been used within the Centre of History at the University of the Highlands and Islands specifically, with varying degrees of perceived success, but she notes that this approach is "rooted in the everyday and inspired by communities" (Desportes, 2025).

'Participatory Research' or **'Participatory Action Research'** is another form of community-based research. Cornwall and Jewkes define it as focusing "on a process of sequential reflection and action, carried out with and by local people rather than on them" (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). Park defines it as "action-oriented research activity in which ordinary people address common needs arising in their daily lives and, in the process, generate knowledge" (Park, 2006). Furthermore, Zhang states "participatory research serves as an umbrella term that covers a variety of interrelated research methods, such as community-academic partnership,

participatory action research, community-engaged research and community-based participatory research” (Zhang et al., 2024).

It is important to note that the boundary between what constitutes a ‘researcher’ and what constitutes a ‘community member’ can be blurred. This is further explored in Section 5.

4.2 Ethics

Ethics is often defined as the principle of ‘doing no harm’ (Banks et al., 2013), but within scholarly discourse it represents a complex system of moral principles that guides researchers to conduct their work responsibly. It is interdisciplinary and expansive, encompassing a broad array of topics, methods, and considerations. Within the social sciences, ethical inquiry draws on disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, anthropology, public health, political science and education, and is a subject area covering the harms and benefits of research, the rights of participants to information, privacy, and anonymity, and the responsibilities for researchers to act with integrity (Banks et al., 2013).

Ethics is typically considered in academic institutions through institutional review boards, helping to mitigate risks such as exploitation, psychological harm, or the misuse of data (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Sieber, 1992). The Economic and Social Research Council, in their ‘Framework for Research Ethics’, states there are six principles of ethical research:

1. Maximising benefits while minimising risks and harms;
 2. Respecting the rights and dignity of individuals and groups;
 3. Ensuring voluntary and informed participation;
 4. Conducting research with integrity and transparency;
 5. Defining lines of responsibility and accountability; and
 6. Maintaining independence and managing conflicts of interest transparently
- (Economic and Social Research Council, 2025).

However, ethical research cannot be reduced to procedural compliance. It requires continuous reflection, particularly in contexts where power imbalances are embedded (Israel and Hay, 2006). For community-based researchers, ethical engagement extends beyond formal approval processes to encompass relations, situated engagement, reflexivity, and respect for local knowledge and power dynamics (Banks et al., 2015). Ethics should

therefore be understood not merely as a regulatory requirement but as a foundation for rigorous, socially just, and reflexive research practice.

Recent scholarship has advanced the notion of ‘everyday ethics’—an approach that understands ethics as embedded in daily practice and interpersonal relationships rather than as an abstract system of principles (Banks et al., 2015). This perspective, aligned with virtue ethics, emphasises qualities among researchers, including sensitivity, integrity, and trustworthiness, viewing them as intrinsic in ensuring ethical research. ‘Everyday ethics’ suggests that ethical practice is as much about cultivating moral character and relational awareness as it is about adherence to prescribed standards.

4.3 Ethics in Community-Based Research

Community-based research presents a particular ethical challenge because relationships with communities are not simply a means of obtaining research data; they form part of the research process itself. This raises questions about how responsibility, power and accountability are negotiated throughout a project, including at points where formal institutional ethics procedures provide limited guidance.

Scholars have observed that ethical concerns in community-based research are undervalued, despite this form of research frequently requiring the negotiation of ethics and moral issues in what can be engaged work (Agisalou and Harris, 2023; Banks et al., 2015, see McGlade and Oldham-Harrington for an overview, n.d). These scholars emphasise the need to be forthright about a researcher’s positionality and to try to better understand community perspectives (Agisalou and Harris, 2023; Beck and Purcell, 2023; Dempsey and Sundberg, 2024; Noh, 2023). For example, the researcher's institutional affiliation, professional status, access to resources and relationship with the community can shape what questions are asked, whose knowledge is prioritised and how research findings are then used. Reflexivity is therefore not simply a statement about researcher identity, but an ongoing consideration of how these relationships affect the research process.

While review procedures can provide essential safeguards to mitigate risks such as exploitation, psychological harm, the misuse of data and lack of consent, they may inadequately constrain the relational, political, and contextual complexities of community-based research (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Sieber, 1992). Consequently, there is a growing

recognition that ethics must be approached as a process that recognises issues of representation, consent, power, and justice (Banks et al., 2015; McGlade and Oldham-Dorrington, n.d).

4.4 Authority, Knowledge and Research Relationships

Questions of research ethics become particularly difficult when researchers assume authority over knowledge that originates within communities. The concern is not simply whether individuals have consented to participate, but whether communities have meaningful influence over what knowledge is produced, how it is interpreted and how it subsequently circulates. This distinction is particularly important in research involving communities with histories of extractive or externally imposed research.

Decolonial and feminist scholars have critically interrogated the assumption that research is always of benefit to those being asked to participate or that researchers have an absolute right to conduct their work. For example, Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (2012) describes research as a significant site of struggle, stating it has been viewed as “‘probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary’” and researchers have been called “‘...mosquitoes [who] suck your blood and leave’” (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012). Whilst significant progress has been made on many fronts to promote meaningful, positive and progressive research relationships, there are still historical and ongoing harms associated with extractive or externally imposed research practices, with some research viewed by certain community members as an instrument of domination which could reinforce structural inequalities (Harding, 1992).

Conventional claims to objectivity are particularly problematic where research involves unequal relationships between institutions and communities. Rather than assuming that the researcher can occupy a neutral position outside these relationships, the literature suggests that researchers should examine how their institutional authority affects the production and interpretation of knowledge (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2004). Dempsey and Sundberg (2024) state that who we are and where we stand has profound implications for the knowledge we produce, challenging the notion that researchers are beacons of objectivity. Their view aligns with broader feminist scholarship that emphasises the role of researcher identity in

the design, conduct, and interpretation of research (Haraway, 1992; Banks et al., 2015; Fielding-Miller et al., 2022).

As reviewed by McGlade and Oldham-Dorrington (n.d.), decolonial and feminist perspectives provide solutions to promoting better research practice, including through encouraging researchers to consider their own positionality and how their acts of studying and representing people may perpetuate domination (de Leeuw and Hunt, 2018). A related implication is that knowledge should be understood as situated rather than produced from a universally neutral standpoint. Researchers therefore need to acknowledge the limits and conditions of their own interpretations (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2004).

Indigenous scholars, as noted by McGlade and Oldham-Dorrington (n.d.), have challenged the extractive nature of traditional research (Al-Hardan, 2014; Hunt, 2014; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2020), emphasising that research can be a positive force if there is critical reflexivity surrounding the researcher's role in knowledge production and relational methodologies, which are grounded in respect, reciprocity and collective well-being. This requires a shift from research on communities, whether they be Indigenous or not, to research with and for them. These perspectives also challenge the conventional distinction between researcher and research subject. Rather than treating community members primarily as sources of information, community-based approaches can recognise them as participants in decisions about research priorities, interpretation and dissemination. This raises a practical question for community organisations: what forms of authority should communities retain over research concerning them?

Decolonial approaches offer a useful basis for reconsidering the relationships through which research is conducted, particularly by questioning assumptions about authority, knowledge and reciprocity. This relationality challenges hierarchical divisions between researchers and communities and promotes a shared ownership of both process and outcome, viewing research as not merely procedural, but deeply relational and grounded in respect for diverse ways of knowing.

A question then follows, such as how should researchers respond when participants' interests conflict with the researcher's assumptions about what would benefit them? Feminist theory has significantly contributed to the development of reflexive and

participatory methodologies that foreground participants' voices, experiences, and agency (Hesse-Biber, 2013). Scholars emphasise that researcher identity, privilege, and power relations profoundly influence and shape data collection and interpretation, and they advocate for collaborative and participatory methods that promote empowerment, inclusivity, and social justice (England, 1994). Many view ethical research as a form of activism aimed at challenging oppression and inequality with an ongoing commitment to social justice, inclusivity and empowerment (Alcoff, 1991; hooks, 1989).

Care ethics is particularly useful because it shifts attention from whether researchers have followed predetermined rules towards how they respond to the needs and vulnerabilities that emerge within relationships. Fisher and Tronto's (1990) distinction between caring about and caring for therefore raises a practical issue for community-based research: how can researchers demonstrate responsibility not only through formal safeguards, but through their responses to communities during and after the research process? Their framework encourages researchers to act ethically not only by following formal guidelines, but by developing empathy, attentiveness, and accountability within their research relationships (Fisher and Tronto, 1990).

Community-based research aligns with decolonial approaches to knowledge production and the broader aims of recognition and justice. However, despite emphasis placed on the ongoing consideration of ethics through the research journey, ethical guidance is mostly addressed through formal mechanisms such as research ethics applications and/or ethical research protocols. Similarly, many community organisations develop standards of ethical behaviour which are used to measure and monitor worker alignment with ethical standards. However, these approaches may perpetuate an imbalance of power between perceived 'knowledge holders' on the one hand, and community members and participants on the other (Beck and Purcell, 2023).

4.5 Research as Co-Productive

Some scholars argue moving beyond procedural approaches to ethical review, suggesting instead that research should be understood as a collaborative, co-productive process between researchers and participants (Beebeejaun et al., 2014; McGlade and Oldham-Dorrington, n.d.; Kindon et al., 2007). Burawoy likewise characterises sociology as

“involving multiple engagement with multiple publics” (Burawoy, 2005). A more substantive approach would involve communities in determining the purpose, priorities and anticipated outcomes of research before methodological decisions are finalised. In this sense, participation concerns not simply how research is conducted, but who has influence over what research is undertaken in the first place.

As noted by McGlade and Oldham-Dorrington (n.d.), promising directions can be found, for instance, in recent efforts to embed feminist care ethics within research methodologies (Brannelly, 2018; Staffa et al., 2022). These contributions put forward models of caring knowledge production (Staffa et al., 2022), and emphasise qualities such as attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, and solidarity (Brannelly and Barnes, 2022).

4.6 Over-Research and Mitigation

A recurrent concern in community-based research is the phenomenon of ‘over-research’, a situation in which particular communities or populations become the repeated focus of academic inquiry to the point of fatigue or resistance (Clark, 2008). It not only risks diminishing willingness for communities to participate in research but also raises important ethical questions about extractive research practices and the equitable distribution of research benefits (Clark, 2008). Despite being widely recognised in discourse, the issue of over-research ironically remains under-theorised and under-studied.

Instances of research fatigue can be found across a range of topics, including mental health education, older people, lesbian and queer communities, the homeless, black and minority ethnic groups, online groups, disabled communities (Clark, 2008), often disproportionately affecting groups that are socially marginalised. Furthermore, over-research tends to be a phenomenon affecting geographically distinct groups too; entire places may become over-researched as an outcome of studying particular populations (Neal et al., 2016; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2013); an aptly titled article ‘You can’t move in Hackney without bumping into an anthropologist’ (Neal et al., 2016) illustrates the extent of this. This phenomenon of over-research is also apparent within Scotland’s community landownership sector, as identified by Macaulay et al., 2023. Anecdotally, the higher the profile of the community land buyout, the more media requests it receives, and then the more academic research requests placed on that community landowner (Community Land Scotland, personal communication).

However, scholars and practitioners have proposed several strategies to mitigate the effects of research fatigue and address declining engagement rates. For example, participatory and community-based methodologies are increasingly presented as antidotes to research fatigue (Castleden et al., 2012, Neal et al., 2016, Minkler, 2004). These approaches frame research as inherently collaborative and relational, focused on the process as opposed to the outcomes (Leeuw et al., 2012), with the research relationship perceived as positive and more ethical because participants have agency over the research agenda and a stake in wider outcomes of the research (Beebeejaun et al., 2014; Crow, 2013).

Additionally, attention should be directed to better communicating research results. Beebeejaun et al. argue there is an over-reliance on text-based outputs within academia, and instead suggest that storytelling, performance, art, and photography can allow for more diverse forms of expression and representation (Beebeejaun et al., 2014). Further, co-published outputs are becoming increasingly common. For example, this can involve researchers at affiliated universities co-publishing with those not associated with an institution but viewed as an equal partner in the research process, including Indigenous elders with Traditional Ecological Knowledge (see Turner & Clifton, 2009). Co-publishing with more-than-human entities, including the land itself upon which the research has taken place, is also becoming more common (see Country et al., 2016).

However, researchers should be wary of the fetishisation of participation and representation, and technical toolkits, recognition and 'beyond-text' outputs alone cannot dismantle underlying power dynamics (Beebeejaun et al., 2014). Indeed, there remain wider questions about whether some approaches may even increase fatigue from the sheer time spent on research engagement and whether participation should always be viewed as positive; Cooke and Kothari's book title 'Participation as Tyranny' articulates this in that the guise of collaboration may mask persistent inequalities and reproduce extractive dynamics (Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

4.7 Ethical Frameworks and Best Practice Guides

In response to the challenges outlined above, a range of ethical frameworks and good practice guides have been developed to support equitable and respectful research engagement. These documents, produced by Indigenous organisations, academic institutions and policy bodies, seek to address the relational and contextual dimensions of research ethics.

Indigenous communities, given experiences of extractive research, have developed a range of instruments to promote better ethical engagement and research. This has been spurred on through legally binding agreements such as the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, where parties agreed to ‘respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of Indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles’ (United Nations, 1992), from the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007), and from within UNESCO and the convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003). Related regional instruments include the Nordic Saami Convention (Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2025), Ethics in First Nations Research (Assembly of First Nations Environmental Stewardship Unit, 2009) and Te Ara Tika: Guidelines for Māori Research Ethics (Hudson et al., 2010).

The Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council created a protocol, affirming their inherent authority to govern research involving their 14 First Nations and setting principles for respectful, reflexive, and community-led research partnerships (Nuu-Chah-Nulth, 2023). The protocol emphasises understanding and adhering to cultural protocols, ensuring respect, autonomy, protection, and beneficence for Nuu-chah-nulth peoples in all research processes. Further, ‘The Native American Centre for Excellence’ situates research ethics within the historical context of exploitation faced by Native communities (Steps for Conducting Research and Evaluation in Native Communities, 2010). This framework includes sections on the importance of establishing relationships, appreciating history and culture, demonstrating respect, proceeding in community time, embracing a strengths perspective, being aware of community readiness, being transparent, being respectful of research protocols, respecting privacy, employing a blended research methods approach and conducting ‘reality’ checks. They specifically mention having Memoranda of Understandings in place when engaging in

research. These guidelines advocate for research that proceeds at the speed of trust and balances academic standards with community priorities.

The Downtown East Side of Vancouver is an area which has struggled with many complex challenges, including drug use, crime, homelessness, housing issues and unemployment. A project recently created ethical guidelines for those wishing to pursue research in the area (Boilevin et al., 2019). It is titled 'Research 101' and outlines a series of steps researchers should consider, importantly noting this area is the unceded ancestral lands of the xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlíl̓wətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations, that communities who live there have the right to say no to research requests, and researchers can “do better” in their work (Boilevin et al., 2019).

4.8 Academic and Institutional Codes

Academic associations have articulated a vast array of comprehensive ethical standards. Some of these are included below but should not be read as an exhaustive list. Notable examples include the Code of Ethics from the American Anthropological Association in 2009, covering the responsibility of researchers to people, scholarship, and science, and the public (American Anthropological Association, 2009). Furthermore, the American Sociological Association updated their 'Code of Ethics' in 2018. (American Sociological Association, 2018). Both codes emphasise that researchers are accountable to participants, the integrity of scholarship, and the broader public interest.

In the UK, the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action at Durham University's National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement have produced 'Community-based participatory research: A guide to ethical principles and practice' (Centre for Social Justice and Community Action and National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, 2022). Their framework extends beyond the traditional definition of ethics concerning harm, consent and integrity to cover values of mutual respect and equity. For example, the report outlines ethics as:

A topic that covers questions relating to what kinds of lives we lead, what counts as a good society, what actions are right and wrong, what qualities of character we should develop and what responsibilities humans have for each other and the ecosystem. In the context of research, ethics as a subject area traditionally cover[ing] topics such as the overall harms and benefits of research; the rights of participants to information, privacy,

anonymity, justice and fair treatment; and the responsibilities of researchers to act with integrity (Centre for Social Justice and Community Action at Durham University's National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, 2022).

Furthermore, it emphasises the importance of mutual respect, equity and inclusion, democratic participation, active learning, collective action, and personal integrity.

Within Scotland, place-specific ethical frameworks have emerged in recognition of the dynamics of areas, including within and across islands. For example, guidelines have been developed for researchers working in island communities. The starting point for this guide was the finding that universities and researchers from urban centres often lead island research projects (Alexander and Henderson, 2024). As a result, research may not be appropriate or suitable for island communities, with potential difficulties arising around ethical practice, power imbalances or extractive processes (Hayfield, 2022). Researchers then developed an appropriate guide for research that takes place on Scotland's islands, and these researchers have also established an overarching research network to strengthen research practices in and for island communities (Alexander et al., 2024).

Of specific relevance is the 'CARE' framework proposed which encourages research to adhere to several principles (Alexander et al., 2024). This begins with 'Connected': research should be grounded in place, and time should be spent learning about the area. Secondly, the research should be 'Aligned', avoiding duplication and instead meeting the needs of communities. Thirdly, the research should be appropriately 'Resourced', including appropriate timing, funding, whilst also containing and appreciating recognition of community resources which are often given in research practices. Finally, research should be 'Effective' and appropriate to local contexts.

A booklet titled 'Research Guidance for those interested in pursuing research with farmers, growers, foresters and other land-based and food systems workers' by the Agroecology Research Collaboration is a response to communicating the difficulties felt by the agroecology and food sovereignty movement when engaging in research (Agroecological Research Collaboration and the Landworkers' Alliance, 2018). The booklet contains a variety of reflection points, asking researchers to consider how they might nurture and continue relationships in a research project and beyond; how to incorporate feedback from

practitioners and organisations into a research process; what outputs are expected from the research; whether there is a clear outline of roles and responsibilities within the project; how to ensure trusting relationships are cultivated within the process.

Initiatives also include the Alliance for Scotland's Rainforests Community Engagement guide, which conceptualises engagement as an evolving relationship which requires time, reciprocity and adaptability (Lawrence and Paterson, 2023). Ritchie's (2023, cited in Desportes, 2023) 'Idiot's Guide to Setting up a Project with a Community Group, or How to Minimise Avoidable Disasters' offers pragmatic recommendations on scope, transparency and compensation when engaging in research projects with community groups (Ritchie 2023, cited in Desportes, 2023). Ritchie recommends that researchers be honest about their expertise and the limitations of their research, that they consider payments and incentives, and that contracts can be helpful to promote partnership.

Reed has also published a variety of work on policy and its impact, with insights into the word 'stakeholder' in research and its potential to marginalise groups (Reed et al., 2024). This article provides examples of best practices for researchers, including the need to recognise the role of language and power imbalances, applying a 'social justice' lens to research that seeks to do no more harm nor perpetuate existing inequalities. Researchers should find ways to engage in respectful, inclusive, and caring ways but, they note, this is challenging with funding structures and institutional performance pressures.

Formalised agreements such as Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) have gained traction as tools for embedding ethical collaboration, many of which have been directed by Indigenous communities (Alcock et al., 2017). These are described as both a "process and a tool for collaborative research... an active, living document used between researcher partners to develop, discuss, and physically outline the ethical, moral, and practical guidelines and protocols that will be used throughout the research project" (Alcock et al., 2017). These engagements are widely recognised within Indigenous research methodologies as mechanisms for ensuring shared governance, transparency and respect. Scholars consider them a way of formally and practically engaging with collaborative research concerns.

4.9 Summary

Based on this literature review, a short thematic analysis identifies the following ethical principles as key principles throughout the academic and grey literature on ethical research, particularly in relation to community-based organisations.

Positionality

The literature in review highlighted the importance of researchers considering their position with the research and with those they wish to speak with. Much of the literature encouraged critical engagement with knowledge production and considered how this is subjective and situated.

Transparency and Trust

Various themes about respect arose throughout the literature review. This included ensuring transparency in research desires, outputs, funding, and communication. The literature collectively highlighted the importance of trust among research collaborators, showing that research relationships are two-way processes and that embedding trust in relationships can lead to impactful and beneficial outputs.

Consent and Confidentiality

Whilst not surprising, consent – which should be free, prior, informed, and withdrawable – was a key theme in the literature reviewed for this project. Ethical research must be based on consent, with people participating in projects knowing how their knowledge will be used, where it will go, what might happen from it, and what the desires of the project are. Furthermore, confidentiality has emerged as a key theme from the literature. Whilst not all research projects need to ensure contributors' confidentiality, it emerged as a key consideration for researchers and communities alike to decide how identifiable respondents should be.

Respect, Reciprocity and Responsibility

Throughout the literature review, concepts including respect, reciprocity and responsibility emerged. Respect was considered a guiding principle for those who were involved in research, either as researchers, community members, research funders, or other

contributors, reflecting the two-way nature and process of research. Much of the literature understands respect as integral to developing and maintaining strong relationships. Respect also featured as a key thematic in considering the places where research was taking place, including geographies such as islands, urban areas or on Indigenous lands. Furthermore, reciprocity was a key theme throughout the literature review. Whilst not all research must be of co-benefit to those involved in its process, it is widely recognised as a gold standard that relationships are based on mutual sharing and understanding. Finally, responsibility was a key theme. This was understood as research, which is conducted ethically, carefully, and honestly, with responsibilities to protect contributors' rights, collect and analyse data appropriately and accurately, and manage information throughout.

Communication

The literature review also identified clear and appropriate communication as a conduit to ethical research, ensuring that all participants, collaborators, and actors fully understand the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of any research project. Clear communication about the research and its expectations, outputs, and potential benefits enables informed consent, where participants can make voluntary and knowledgeable decisions about their involvement. Similarly, research participants must be open and forthcoming regarding their aims and expectations around the research process, requiring open and regular engagement to promote and further encourage mutual benefit. The review evidenced that clear communication and appropriate language can also increase transparency, promote trust, instil accountability and prevent misunderstandings throughout research.

Time

Finally, a key theme from the literature review was that time is a hugely important variable within research projects and must be considered throughout. Notably, this was mentioned in the context of building in time for relationship development, ensuring appropriate timelines to respect contributions, considering when research might take place according to the community's events (for example, research which involves land workers may need to consider the calendar year to consider when they might be most available to contribute their time; some crofters, for example, are very busy in the spring). Researchers should be conscious of not asking too much of respondents and their time.

Ethics: Constantly Negotiated

The literature also suggests the notion that ethics is constantly being negotiated and should be understood as something in flux and constantly needing to be negotiated in sets of relations by multiple people. Thus, while formal protocols are helpful, ethical practice must go beyond them. To do so, ethical research requires continuous reflexivity concerning positionality, representation and power, while requiring mutual respect, communication and understanding of the goals and abilities of each actor. Moreover, ethical practice must move beyond institutional formalities to prioritise reciprocity, care, and co-production. The following quote (Banks et al., 2023) sums this up:

Whilst there are no easy answers or sets of rules that provide definitive prescriptions for action, an awareness of the potential complexities and conflicts and a willingness and ability amongst research collaborators to reflect together on such issues throughout the planning and conduct... are very important.

In conclusion, the literature review examined ethical considerations in social science research with communities and community-based organisations. It has provided definitions, traced key theory, and identified emerging models of ethical engagement that extend beyond standard ethical procedures. Central to the literature is the recognition that research is both socially constructed and relational.

This review has identified specific challenges and responses to promote more ethical research. These initiatives vary across contexts, communities and academic spheres, but are united in their focus on improving relations and practices in becoming more ethical and engaged. Specific focus has been paid to relevant guidance and practicalities for researchers and community-based organisations in Scotland, especially those working in and interested in community landownership.

As evidenced, there are a multitude of resources in promoting better ethical engagement, some of which are presented as guides, checklists, codes of conduct, memoranda of understandings, and more. Many of these have been developed in-situ with specific communities in mind. Whilst many of these approaches are to be welcomed, and the development of an ethical research protocol for CLAN will incorporate them, broader caution and consideration must be given to ethical practice at large. Ethics are all

encompassing; they cannot be granted or secured by institutions or statements.

Institutional ethical reviews, for example, can often hide or cause research to hide behind acceptance or check boxes at a fixed point in time, perceived as a process to 'go through' rather than to continuously consider. Ethical practice is cultivated through dialogue, mutual understanding, and sustained relationships between researchers and the communities with whom they work.

5. Findings

5.1 Multiple Publics in Ethical Research

This project identified several audiences involved in what constitutes research practice which go beyond simply those conducting the research and those 'being researched'. This could be conceptualised as there being different 'publics', as outlined by Burawoy (2005). These publics contribute to and shape ethics and research in a variety of ways, and some have greater influence over processes than others.

Firstly, there are a multitude of researchers, some of whom have different experience, connections, or ability to shape the research process. Similarly, communities are not homogeneous and constitute another complex 'public' in a research dynamic. Community landowners are vastly different from one another, and the individuals who make up that community have different views, experiences and knowledge.

Additionally, research funders were viewed by respondents as being important to discussions around ethical best practices and are themselves vastly different. Some respondents praised certain funders and noted that some were more challenging than others in supporting ethical research, by way of challenging and inflexible deadlines, for example.

Finally, universities and research institutions were considered to play a significant role in shaping ethical practice, a point further expanded upon below.

Viewing ethics as a set of relations among different publics, such as people, institutions and organisations, not only showcases the complexity of ethics and how deeply embedded and entwined into relations it is, but also how instrumental it is for researchers and others to

have soft skills and be able to navigate, communicate and liaise between these publics. It also highlights the difficulty of balancing the often-competing priorities.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into two sections, recognising that research, as noted above, requires an evolving negotiation between different pressures and actors. The first section outlines ethical considerations in the researcher's relationship with those who may be the focal point of research, such as the community or respondents. The second section sets out the considerations and factors present within the broader academic system, including navigating the demands of funders, supervisors and the need to publish. It was necessary to present the findings in this more systematic way, but it is important to note that there are a range of responsibilities and dynamics in a research process. Whilst much of the finding section points to the ways in which researchers and institutions may support better research practice, communities themselves also have a role and responsibility for the development of more research practice. It is this foundation upon which an ethical research protocol can be developed.

5.2 Researcher-Community Dynamic

A major theme was the need for sustained, trusting relationships throughout the research process, with caution expressed over short-term interactions with communities for the sole purpose of collecting data. Whilst respondents heralded research in many ways, with many citing positive experiences, outputs, and relationships, there was a feeling among some that they were unsure about some researchers and there was a lack of trust with researchers with whom they had never worked with before. In some cases, this led to some participants being unwilling to take part in projects due to concerns over anonymity, confidentiality, or a lack of belief that engaging in the research would result in a tangible benefit for the community. A lack of time and funding for relationship-building constrained the extent to which this could be overcome.

A recommendation was made that funders and universities provide time and resources for relationship-building. It was recommended that relationships be developed prior to a funding application to ensure that the community has a say in and could benefit from the research project.

Specific suggestions also centred on providing incentives for researchers to take part in projects, beyond any benefit and impact from the research itself. Suggestions were made regarding how this could be achieved in practice, including building in financial incentives to cover people's time in grant applications. Whilst difficult for some, respondents also recognised there were non-financial ways of 'giving back' to a community beyond the research impact itself. For example, researchers could offer to contribute their skills and knowledge beyond their academic identity to embed themselves locally and make some form of positive contribution. Examples of this included taking minutes at a community council meeting, helping with the planting of trees on community-owned land, or playing in the local football team, with the researcher becoming better known locally and playing their part in community development. It was, however, noted by some respondents that there are times when this is not possible and should not be expected from all research engagements.

Community Understanding of Research Process and Impact

Participants often poorly understand the nature of what research entails and on occasion there are conflicting expectations between researchers and respondents. This includes knowing what research can and cannot do, and how communities may benefit or be impacted. It was reported that in some cases, researchers have overpromised the potential impact of their work, or not shared details of their study prior to engagement, with participants feeling unprepared for the questions or tasks being undertaken.

The proposed solution is through early engagement and open communication to clarify the purpose, benefits, and outputs of the research, as well as the roles of each stakeholder. Further, transparency around ethics, including anonymity, confidentiality, risks, and data ownership is necessary to ensure 'informed consent'. For their part, respondents were requested to engage collaboratively in the research process and recognise the potential benefit of doing so.

Accessible Communication

One of the most significant priorities for positive research relationships was ongoing communication between researchers and communities. The use of technical jargon in

research outputs was sometimes viewed as exclusionary, with formal academic research outputs considered only one format through which to disseminate findings. In addition, it was recommended that plain-language summaries be circulated among respondents and the broader community, which may be considered more accessible to a lay audience. Respondents also noted the positive ways in which some researchers had created outputs including through making films or presenting at public talks. However, in some cases, no feedback was given to communities at all, with communication ceasing after data collection. A barrier to feeding back research was seen to be the lack of time and money available, with universities and funders prioritising formal outputs over accessible ones, and an academic culture which values (and funds) published research outputs over knowledge exchange and sustained relationship-building.

A solution was to engage directly with respondents and the broader community to discuss the preferred format in which they would like the communication to be, and to consider the practicalities of achieving this. As noted, this may include plain-language summaries which prioritise accessibility and usefulness over formality, or creative, engaging and non-text-based approaches to knowledge to return this knowledge to the community in an easily understood way.

Community Engagement in Research Design and Governance

Research is commonly designed by researchers, funders or commissioners of studies. This includes the selection of methods, respondents, timescales and outputs. This approach to predefining the nature of the research can mean research is focused and directed towards a real need, but it can also mean that there is a lack of flexibility to amend this design once contact is made with respondent communities. Communities do not often feature in this design phase, nor are there many mechanisms for them to request specific research to be undertaken where they see a research need. There was a perception that collaborative research design can be seen as less methodologically robust, belying a dated assumption which has since been challenged in modern research practice. There was also a belief among researchers that funding criteria can ignore or exclude the actual realities of working in and with communities. One of the perceived consequences of this was that community voices are not embedded in the ongoing governance or oversight of research projects.

Further, researchers perceived that among some academic circles there is a lack of recognition or value placed on applied, embedded or place-based research, with insufficient funding available for this often more resource-intensive approach. The claimed consequence of this was an ensuing lack of interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and action-oriented research. One way of mitigating this was the promotion of co-design of research from an early stage, including communities specifically designing research themselves. Whilst there is increasingly positive recognition of community-based research, this approach could be further championed, with efforts to lobby funders and universities as to its merit. This may involve including time for ethical discussions and relationship development within funding proposals and encouraging more flexible funding and project timelines alongside ethics processes to allow for more collaborative research design.

When designing research, all involved in the process should seek to ensure practical, value-led, robust and impactful methodologies. This emphasises community need, anonymity and beneficial local impact. It is crucial that early engagement takes place to ensure the study is appropriate, accessible, well-timed and useful. Further suggestions include a community representative joining the project steering group or considering adopting a formal MoU to clearly outline the process and outputs of the project and ensure, where possible, accountability and best practice.

Representation

When developing a 'sample' or participant list within communities, recognition must be taken of the differing views and identities present, and whose voices are being reflected. This is linked to the different 'publics' involved in research: communities are not homogenous. It was felt among some respondents that there is an unconscious (and sometimes conscious) bias towards recruiting community members who may have certain characteristics, such as being older in age, retired or more vocal about community issues in public forums. It was felt among respondents that whilst this was not always the case, researchers should be mindful of those they speak with and consider the implications for the representativeness of data and the representation of the community. This can also work conversely, with individuals uncomfortable being considered 'the voice of the community' in

representing the breadth of local views and, as such, sometimes choose not to take part in research projects.

Community Capacity to Engage with Research

A significant finding was that whilst many community members are supportive of research, and view its benefits, there is a lack of capacity for community members to engage even when they might wish to. It was noted that community landowners, for example, have significant requirements for their community, managing a range of assets, many of which are sustained by volunteers or few staff members. Engaging in research projects can take time, energy, and can also be unpaid.

Recognising community capacity was identified as a first step in promoting better research practice. Additionally, respondents noted that it is easier to engage in research projects even with limited community capacity if it is clear there are positive benefits from the research itself, and furthermore, if respondents are paid for their time, or if the researcher(s) contribute formally or informally through examples such as the exchange of goods or volunteering.

Timing

Respondents identified the importance of actions at various stages of the research process. Respondents spoke about 'pre-research' – the period during which a project is being decided, a community is approached and ethics approval is granted; 'during research' – the period in which the research is taking place, methods are being used; and 'post-research' – the period in which the project has finished, and research results are being communicated back to the community.

Community landowners strongly emphasised the importance of the pre-research stage to establish the real needs of community organisations. They argued that where researchers had no to little relationship with that place or community, where possible, they could spend time understanding work that might already have taken place. They also suggested that effective communication during this stage was vital: one person during a workshop mentioned the frequent use of 'Dear Sir/Madam' in correspondence and that they had an informal policy that any email containing this would not be responded to. This was due to a

perception that there was a lack of attempt to read their website to find out individual first names, or that the email was a catch-all and their desire to speak with a community landowner was greater than their desire to speak with that specific community landowner.

Considerations 'during research' were about the timing of projects, specifically acknowledging clashes in the calendar year and the community's ability or capacity to contribute. For example, it was noted that there are times in rural areas of Scotland where it is much more difficult for community members to engage. For example, if researchers wish to speak to land workers, spring can be a very busy time with lambing or planting.

Viewing ethical research as a dynamic process involving sequential stages can help both researchers and communities understand what may need to happen at times to embed positive relations. Timing was viewed by many respondents as a key consideration in upholding and ensuring ethical research.

5.3 Researcher-University Dynamic

Hierarchy of Knowledge and Unequal Power

When asked about some of the challenges of research, some respondents noted institutionalised hierarchies of knowledge and the assumed role of academia. There was a perception among some participants that local community knowledge was undervalued compared to academic expertise, while this very knowledge was extracted for the purposes of the researcher. Relatedly, it was perceived that this knowledge was then kept within the academy, through the ownership of data and primacy of expensive and inaccessible academic outputs. There was little recognition of the forms of plain-language communication and open-access to publications which have gained traction in recent years.

In this context, power was perceived to be held by researchers, academic institutions and funders, with communities sometimes offered little for the value of their data and its impact on future funding and academic outputs. In this situation, communities may have limited confidence, capacity and resources to engage on an equal footing with researchers.

Whilst there were examples of a multitude of positive experiences, one such solution is to train and build capacity in communities to negotiate with researchers in ensuring their own

needs remained central to the research, or community members themselves be perceived as researchers in their own right.

University Culture

Whilst many respondents acknowledged the positive role of universities and colleges, particularly praising certain institutions with whom they have had longstanding relationships, there were some concerns among a few about a perceived disconnection from place with certain institutions. Some respondents noted that this disconnect can result in a lack of long-term engagement with communities. While these aspects could be addressed individually within institutions, it was also felt that the adoption of the 'Civic University' agenda would facilitate greater engagement with surrounding communities. This approach encourages far greater local activity and interaction, intending to enhance the knowledge and development of the local area beyond simply its students.

The nature and demands of academia can also negatively impact researcher behaviours, with unmanageable workloads, time constraints, precarious contracts and pressure to 'succeed' promoting problematic practices. This includes adopting a short-term approach to research engagement and not seriously reflecting on limitations, failures and learnings from each project.

Sharing Previous Research and Knowledge

The lack of coordination for research and its outputs exacerbates duplication and the fatigue of over-researched communities. Community landownership lacks a journal or research database, leading to fragmented focuses and incorrectly perceived gaps in knowledge. The poor knowledge and coordination of community research needs can, as was highlighted by some respondents, lead to top-down research design, with uncoordinated and fragmented funding considered to exacerbate these issues. Both communities and researchers lack forums and networks for sharing learning, approaches, successes and mistakes.

A multitude of solutions were proposed, including there being better education around the benefits of research from community members, sharing peer-to-peer positive experiences and providing comment on the ways in which they have proactively engaged in research or directed it. Additionally, some respondents noted the importance of having centralised

resources where learning could be shared about past projects, recent papers, a list of community research needs, or researcher contact details.

Institutional Ethical Processes

Respondents recognised the value of having ethics processes at universities, but many noted that these could be more strengthened. For example, some university ethics procedures were criticised for being both too rigid and formal, as well as treated by some researchers as an initial ‘tick-box’ exercise as opposed to an ongoing practice.

It was suggested that the ethics process becomes better aligned with community engagement, defined and led by community values, and adopts protocols based on mutual respect and collaboration with respondents and non-academic community researchers. This could include inviting non-academics, including specialists in certain fields or community members, onto ethics panels to provide a distinct perspective to the research process. Further, it was suggested that ethical procedures were ‘value-driven’, aiming to positively impact respondents as opposed to merely avoiding harm. It was emphasised that ethical processes should be considered empowering, as opposed to restrictive, for researchers and ‘the researched’ alike.

Lack of Researcher Ethical/Methodological Knowledge

Among some respondents was a perception that whilst many researchers were well-meaning and well-trained, some had a lack of experience of ethical and methodological considerations, especially in participatory and community-based research. The focus for criticism in this regard was the university institution itself, which was claimed to be leaving gaps in training, knowledge and ethical practice skills, and introducing these topics too late in the research process. Ethics was sometimes claimed to be seen as ‘procedural rather than relational’, with insufficient time for training and discussion around ethics.

In response, there was a call for more mandatory training in ethics and participatory methods going beyond the standard instruction of ‘doing no harm’ and seeking to encourage and facilitate collaboration and mutually beneficial research relationships. It was suggested that such training begins as early as possible and be constantly available for any researcher regardless of their position or previous experience. Some respondents noted

that research funders had a role to play in ensuring that there was sufficient budget within research grants to allow for training and skills development.

Lack of Researcher Academic/Local Knowledge

Some respondents criticised researchers as being unprepared to engage with community members and with limited knowledge of the subject or context they are working within. This includes overlooking previous research, leading to duplication of studies and asking respondents questions that have been asked by others. There were several criticisms of researchers lacking knowledge of local contexts, exacerbated by the fleeting time spent in the community. Similarly, they were claimed to be unprepared for community engagement or simply unsuitable to be conducting that research in that location.

Solutions to this issue include building in time for researchers to conduct a thorough review of their chosen study site and topic, potentially supported by an online database on community landowners' websites for past research which has taken place, identifying one community member who might be able to share relevant information with such researchers, or having a research base for community landownership research itself. Further, it was recommended that researchers should consider pursuing studies where they already have some knowledge or be prepared (and supported) to spend periods of time in the area to learn more about the context. However, some of those who suggested such solutions noted that this may not always be possible, and it is also important for those who do not have prior knowledge of certain communities or places to make connections.

6. Discussion

This research heard instances of many positive research relationships, collaborations and outputs within the community landownership sphere. However, our research also found several instances of poor research practice in the field of community landownership in Scotland. Much of our findings related to a concerted effort to improve research practice and practical guidance through which to do so.

There was a recognition that good practice could not be maintained through rules or ethical requirements and had to be encouraged through the positive intent of the researchers themselves. Firstly, there was a recognition that university ethics requirements, while well-intentioned, focus on harm-reduction, and may not go far enough in promoting positive

collaborative practices with communities (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Sieber, 1992). Second, ethical research requires personal skills, care, empathy, reflexivity, honesty and selflessness, none of which can be 'mandated' or compelled, but which has to form the 'everyday' nature of researchers (Israel and Hay, 2006; Banks et al., 2015).

While researchers are specialists, trained in identifying and undertaking relevant topics of study, it is important to break down the hierarchy and dichotomy between them and the 'researched'. Methods of coproduction are promoted to blur this boundary (Whitt, 2009), which can help to challenge the unequal relationships within such situations while also enhancing the level of insight and interpretation possible by researchers (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012). However, such methods are often time-consuming and challenging to define in detail prior to their commencement, making funding applications and ethical clearance (both of which require detailed research proposals) considerably more difficult. Overcoming these challenges may require a change in approach from funders and universities, placing more faith in researchers and communities to co-develop methods over the course of a project as opposed to at the outset, as is currently overwhelmingly the case.

With the increase in community landownership has been the increase in research requests, with the risk of over-research or research fatigue for some areas or communities (Clark, 2008). Two reforms were considered to mitigate against this. The first one is to promote research which is of direct use to communities, whether that be in response to communities identifying and setting research questions, encouraging the provision of incentives (financial or otherwise) in addition to potentially impactful and useful research, and ensuring the effective communication of results, some of which may not be text-based. In each case, if research is considered less of a burden and more of an opportunity, such fatigue may lift. Additionally, it is important to note that many respondents had a positive experience and perception of research, and as such it is important to tell the positive stories whilst also encouraging better practice.

Secondly, individual researchers and research projects are not the cause of research fatigue. It is the multitude of individual researchers and research projects which causes this, exacerbated by a lack of awareness of the range of ongoing and recent research activity. Therefore, coordination was proposed as a solution. This could include a central

coordinating body which could connect research needs and abilities, provide details of previous studies, deter over-research in particular communities and direct a research agenda based on the needs of a multitude of stakeholders, including researchers, communities, policy and others, which could help to alleviate such pressures. In other instances, this could be for community landowners themselves to appoint a member of staff to manage research requests or have dedicated sections on their websites where they could highlight their research approach, offering guidelines for those who might wish to work with them. These could build upon some of the guides given as examples in the literature review.

While most of our findings are reflected in literature, albeit in different contexts, one consideration emerged as largely unrepresented previously: the multiple, complex and unmanageable pressures placed on researchers themselves. This is apparent in our structuring of the findings section, with researchers finding themselves at the centre of relationships, navigating the demands of various publics and processes. In each phase of this research, the dominant theme was the need for researchers to change their behaviour, with most such researchers present being willing to do so. However, when placed within a context of academic austerity, short-term contracts, hyper-competition for jobs, 'publish or perish' mentalities, inflexible research teams and institutions, and limited resources for the building of long-term relationships or novel communication of results, such good intentions can soon give way to institutional pressures. This is an unfair and unenviable position for researchers to find themselves, and it makes the design of a practical protocol more complicated, as anything too ambitious could be labelled unrealistic.

Sometimes, to enhance the relationship between researchers and communities for mutual benefit, in the context of institutional pressures and incentives, it can take both a brave researcher to swim against the tide and a collaborative and cooperative community. However, a change in approach from funders and university institutions (the latter often follows the former) with regard to the conditions and incentives for researchers would greatly ease these challenges.

7. Conclusion

Community landownership in Scotland has expanded over the last few decades, and with this there has been an increase in the demands of community landowners to not only

manage the land and support local opportunities in their area, but to share their stories. These have been in various forms, including news articles and films, but this project has specifically focused on the rising numbers of research requests placed on community landowners. The study was conducted in the knowledge that there is a need for change in this field of research, for the benefit of all stakeholders involved.

The research used a variety of methods to gather evidence to guide better ethical research practices. It incorporated workshops (hearing directly from researchers, community organisations, and communities themselves), secondary data analysis and a substantial literature review, looking into academic theory of and practical guides to ethics and community-based research. The literature review highlighted that ethics is often defined as the principle of ‘doing no harm’, but it represents a complex system of moral principles that, in academic work, should guide researchers in attempting to conduct their work responsibly. Ethical research requires continuous reflection, particularly in contexts where power imbalances are embedded. For community-based researchers, ethical engagement should extend beyond formal approval processes to include sustaining relations which are not static but always in flux. Some of the most important ingredients of ethical practice include trust, reflexivity, communication, reciprocity and sustained relationships, with respect for local knowledge and power dynamics. Ethics should therefore be understood not merely as a regulatory requirement but as a foundation for rigorous, socially just, and reflexive research practice.

Pulling together this delicate mix of ingredients can be difficult. Our research found that there are often structural barriers to this, and it can often be highly dependent on individual relations, actions, and behaviours. However, we found that there are certain principles and practices which should be adopted to ensure better ethical practice. This report identifies key pieces of guidance for researchers and communities alike when engaging in research projects, providing suggestions on building relationships, better communication, how to consider research incentives and outputs, and more. Of significant importance are the actions of funders and university institutions, whose policies and practices can constrain or enable more sustainable research behaviours from the individuals they fund, pay or oversee.

Whilst ethical research boards and institutional review processes play a significant role in encouraging researchers to consider and address ethical issues, they are not a guarantee of ethical research. Current ethical requirements of academic research should be viewed as the absolute minimum standard, and research activity should seek to go beyond these to not harm but benefit individual and community respondents whilst retaining research integrity. Community organisations could have the opportunity to be involved in the design and delivery of research, with findings fed back in a timely and accessible way. We hope that this will lead to a mutually beneficial relationship between researchers and the wider community and ultimately lead to significantly more knowledge and understanding of this area of study, for everyone's benefit.

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