

An equitable future for research and innovation

Building sustained community
involvement in knowledge production



A scoping report from
The Young Foundation's Institute for Community Studies
commissioned by UK Research and Innovation

July 2022


Introduction

This summary report shares the results of discussions with community representatives about how we can improve the ways in which knowledge is produced, used and communicated across the UK. These discussions focused on how formal institutions such as government, research funders and universities – which is typically called ‘the research and innovation (R&I) system’ – can more equitably involve those community groups and organisations with less power or representation through the way they fund, create and value knowledge.

The key question for the scoping review was: how can involvement between communities and R&I be more equitable and sustainable?

The Institute for Community Studies at The Young Foundation was commissioned by UKRI to conduct a scoping review exploring how to change this imbalance. UKRI wants to address this issue in order to deliver their new strategy which is committed to ensuring ‘everyone in the UK has a stake in research and innovation’. The strategy has

identified four principles to drive the necessary change: engagement, diversity, connectivity and resilience. As the review found, UKRI are one of many funders who are currently committed to trying to change who and how they fund to be more inclusive. Alongside the drive from policy and funders, this is at heart, an issue of moral importance.



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What we know

Behind this work is a long term reality that partnerships between those with power to make decisions over funding, and those working 'on the ground' to support communities, have consistently been unequal.

Research organisations such as research funders, universities and think tanks have been seen as the leading lights or 'gatekeepers' of knowledge activities. In almost every situation, they take the 'lead' in partnerships with non-research organisations.

Whether local government, charities, community organisations or informal community networks and groups, non-research actors have been invited to participate, but are rarely given power over what and why knowledge is needed, how knowledge that affects them is created, or what knowledge is valued. The imbalance of power has ranged from inequality over decisions, even in well-intended partnerships aimed to produce knowledge about an issue, to grave issues of injustice where communities' experiences are used or 'exploited' in research.

A common limitation of these approaches is the short-term nature of funding, the focus on distributing 'projects' not 'power'. The limited forms of both funding and delivery approaches have consistently confined the involvement of communities to limited forms of 'taking part' – rather than owning the agenda or setting the terms for engagement.



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However the tide has started to turn. The pandemic recognised what communities had long known: that community-led solutions were essential to solve the deep crises in social, economic, health and wellbeing situations, as well as to ensuring some peoples' basic survival. Even greater importance was put on working locally between government, community organisations and grassroots groups within places. Yet we know that places do not have equal access to funding, equal resources or equal experiences: some were 'thriving' while others only 'surviving' or 'getting by'. The last five years have also seen increased experiences of inequality and injustice, including over who has a stake in knowledge about different issues. It is now a time where many people, not just a small committed core of hard working people, want to talk about not just community involvement, but greater community power.

Knowledge is alive and well in communities, with local groups and partnerships showing how different engagement approaches, infrastructure and activities are vital and can respond more closely to local and community need. But

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they are not given equal recognition or value, and don't receive funding, power, legitimacy or support the way universities, research organisations and formal committees and policymakers do.



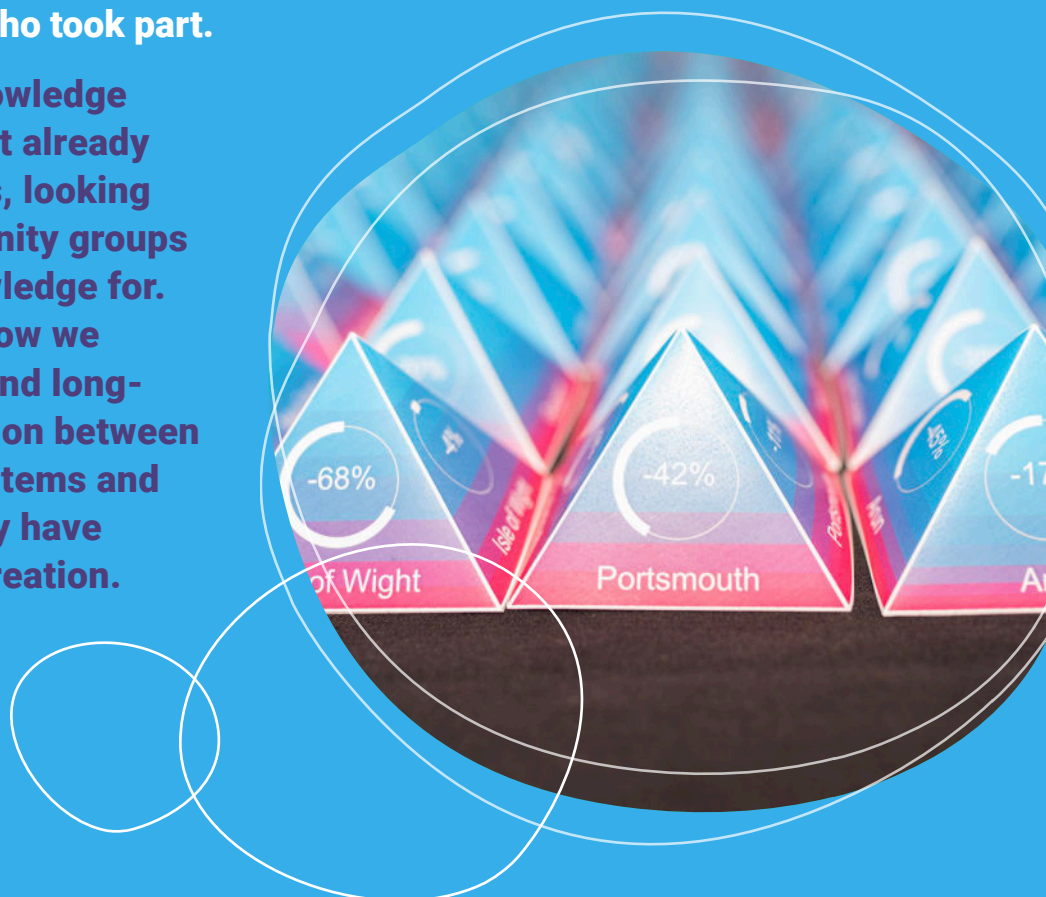
What we did

A Steering Group of 12 individuals, all involved in different types of community organising and organisations, co-designed and supported the review.

They proposed the questions they felt were important to ask about what 'research' and 'engagement' mean to different communities, and highlighted what barriers and issues they frequently experience when working in partnerships with formal research organisations or engaging with funders. 'Knowledge' was preferred to 'research' as a more inclusive term for information, data and insight that comes from local engagement and community experience. Similarly, the language of who had more or less 'power' over knowledge was preferred to 'marginalised' by those who took part.

We also explored the knowledge needs and the assets that already exist within communities, looking at what different community groups want, need and use knowledge for. From this, we explored how we might build more equal and long-term forms of collaboration between communities and the systems and institutions that currently have power over knowledge creation.

Over 50 representatives from different community organisations, mutual aid networks, campaign groups, community interest companies, local branch organisations of social movements and rights-based groups, and members of community businesses and social enterprises, took part in the discussions. This diversity reflects the steering group's wish to emphasise that communities are not 'the same'. Thus by gathering perspectives from different organisations that work at 'different layers of the local', from the grassroots to representatives of local government, we aimed to understand how different layers want to engage and why.



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All these organisations, in different ways, discussed how they produce and use knowledge and how they seek to create change. Many had different experiences of 'engagement' in research, and varied experiences of struggling to gain equal roles and recognition regarding commissioning, producing or using knowledge with research institutions and funders.

People described their experiences of feeling under-recognised, under-valued, co-opted and, in certain cases, actively or passively discriminated against.

In all cases, workshop participants described not being directly able to access and control funding from institutions that hold power over R&I, which was a key barrier to building their own power and ownership of knowledge. In the context of creating knowledge about an issue, community or local area – or of valuing knowledge that informs decision-making around policy, services, a challenge affecting people, or a place – this was described as “knowledge injustice”.

The workshops brought forward a wealth of ideas about how engagement could be more

equitable – and proposals of what those with decision-making power over the system could do to create a more just and fair system – with case studies sharing experiences of more equal partnerships.

The review also gathered perspectives from public sector bodies who work locally with communities, such as local authorities and the NHS, as well as from community federations and funders working to build more equal forms of involvement. Led by the guidance of the Steering Group, we asked what other funders and organisations are doing to make involvement and leadership of knowledge more equal.

A final workshop brought proposals, ideas and pilots together, to consider which recommendations could practically be put forward to start changing the R&I system.

We recognise the limitations of this process are that there are countless more voices we could have heard from. However, we are grateful to everyone who contributed their time and perspectives through the interviews and workshops that were part of this process.

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What we found

This short-form review highlights the key findings:

- » **It is vital that R&I systems prioritise issues of social justice regarding who has a stake in knowledge creation. To build more equitable involvement, there is growing demand for the R&I system to recognise and respond to forms of knowledge that are produced by – and seen as valuable to – communities.**
- » **'Community' is not homogenous, and neither are forms of 'involvement' for different community groups. What will address power imbalances in one context will not necessarily work in another. However, there are common needs and priorities that can be addressed in funding design – including ways to address structures for learning, capacity-building, pilot models, resources for partnership-building and testing, and accessibility and consolidation of knowledge for communities, not just for researchers.**

- » **Community representatives must have a greater role in decision-making about research and funding agendas. Creating equitable involvement necessitates shifting power to communities in R&I priority-setting, commissioning and funding design. Currently, community participation is frequently limited to what has been called 'problem solving' participation, based on agendas and research questions.**
- » **It is crucial to invest in (hard and social) infrastructure to produce, share and scale these forms of knowledge. This goes beyond project-based involvement, to instead investing in and building a vision of an expanded system of knowledge creation that includes community-led and community-decided knowledge assets and greater local research capacity.**



- » **The pandemic – alongside experiences and agendas of injustice, disempowerment and devolution – have resulted in communities across different groups calling for forms of direct involvement in all aspects of the R&I system. This means:**
 - **direct involvement in all parts of the R&I cycle;**
 - **greater control of funding as ‘lead’ partner;**
 - **greater ownership of the resulting research, data and knowledge outputs.**

There is an additional need for structures and approaches to engagement that support direct involvement of communities in hyperlocal and informal ways. This poses challenges in how large-scale funders can work collaboratively with less constituted or smaller-scale groups.

- » **There is also a need for structures that can work across ‘layers of the local’, to involve models of community organising on different scales. This is particularly important to balance and address who holds the power of representation over the R&I agenda – for example, in relation to the place agenda where diverse groups have a ‘stake’.**
- » **Intermediary organisations have a role to play in overcoming financial and process barriers that hinder the involvement of smaller groups. They can offer support to those**

that lack a ‘formal’ governance structure, constituted entity, or bank account. Larger charities - and branch organisations of national charities - may also support partnerships, capacity-building and relationships between communities and R&I. However, funders should be mindful of these intermediaries’ positionality and power.

- » **We are at a potentially pivotal moment where national and local government policy, R&I policy and practice, the Higher Education sector (via the Civic University Movement), and the civil society and public service sector are all united in the need for greater involvement of communities and greater social impact from R&I. Achieving more equitable and sustained involvement of communities is a challenge shared by multiple decision-makers and funders within and outside of R&I.**
- » **Because of this, there is a substantial opportunity for decision-makers and funders across different sectors to work together, in order to do more, and go further to drive culture change towards consistent and empowered community involvement in different parts of the R&I system, and to promote best practice to create a more inclusive system of knowledge production and innovation.**

What we recommend

- **A fundamental shift in what knowledge is valued and how it is funded:** this means seeing value to community involvement in all parts of the system, and respecting that community groups and organisations can be recognised as knowledge producers, guardians and lead partners in knowledge creation processes.
- **Changing funding processes:** so community organisations can be lead recipients and controllers of funding in funded partnerships. Where there are financial or due diligence barriers, for example for funders investing in hyperlocal or informal community groups, working with intermediary organisations may help to ensure community partners can still control and lead the process where they are the most relevant group to do so.
- **Greater community involvement in deciding what knowledge and innovation is needed:** this means including community representation in decision-making roles over funding, not just in knowledge production processes. This includes working collaboratively with different community groups in all parts of the funding process, from setting priorities to deciding funding criteria. These could be community commissioners, roles on committees designing funding, or collaborative setting of research agendas and research priorities. It also means working together with other funders, rather than taking a competitive approach.
- **Diversifying types of funding:** making different types of funding available to suit the needs of a greater variety of applicants, including funding to support partnership building and idea development, funding for pilots and 'try and learn' models, and funding for infrastructure, training and learning – not just for 'research projects'. By having a diversity of funding models on offer (for example both long-term and short-term funding opportunities), a broader range of groups can benefit from, and see benefit in, engaging.



- **Engaging in ‘relational funding’ with communities:** this means building longer term funder-community relationships, with funders being supportive at all stages of the funding process. It can involve making applications more accessible; offering individual help to applicants so they can put across the best possible application, agreeing different ways ‘impact’ can be demonstrated and ‘success’ can be measured, and being open to changing timescales and providing flexibility in what activities funding is for, in order to respond to communities’ needs. It also means letting communities steer how and when engagement happens, and actively seeking to adapt to the needs of those who may have greater engagement barriers.
- **Taking a long view:** thinking about building long-term resilience as a central aim in funding strategy, so that everyone involved can benefit sustainably. To achieve this, ‘success’ and ‘quality’ should be understood differently, not just as one-off outcomes, but as ongoing results from the collaborations and relationships built during the work that was funded.
- **Building ownership in communities:** this means seeding power to communities to own, share, and use the knowledge and information they create and need – as equal organisations within an expanded R&I system. This means going beyond the usual approach where knowledge typically remains in the control and typically most benefits a university, research partner or research funder. Additionally, it means providing the support and breaking down barriers so communities can freely and openly access and use different kinds of data. Ultimately, it means understanding knowledge as a common resource we all have a stake in.



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