Community Power

Co-Creating Approaches to Participatory Democracy

Written by Suzanne Wilson, Research Fellow in Social Inclusion and Community Engagement, UCLan Westlakes Campus

Reviewed and approved by residents in Ewanrigg, Millom, Moorclose and South Whitehaven

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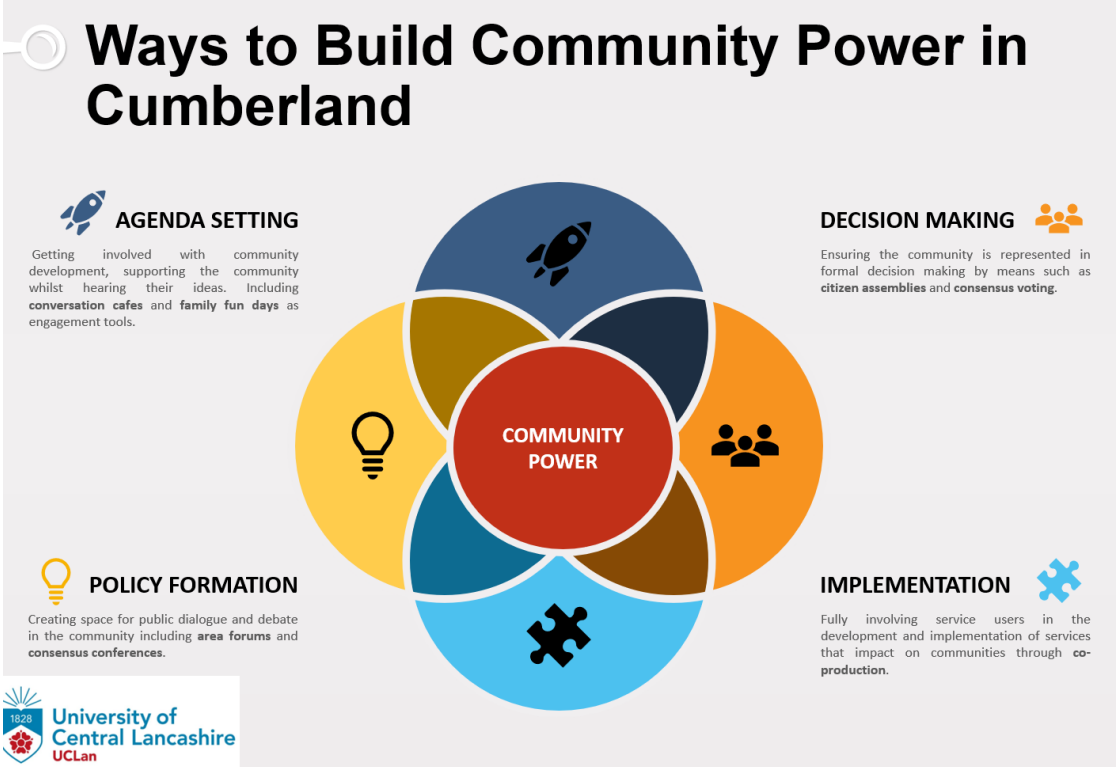
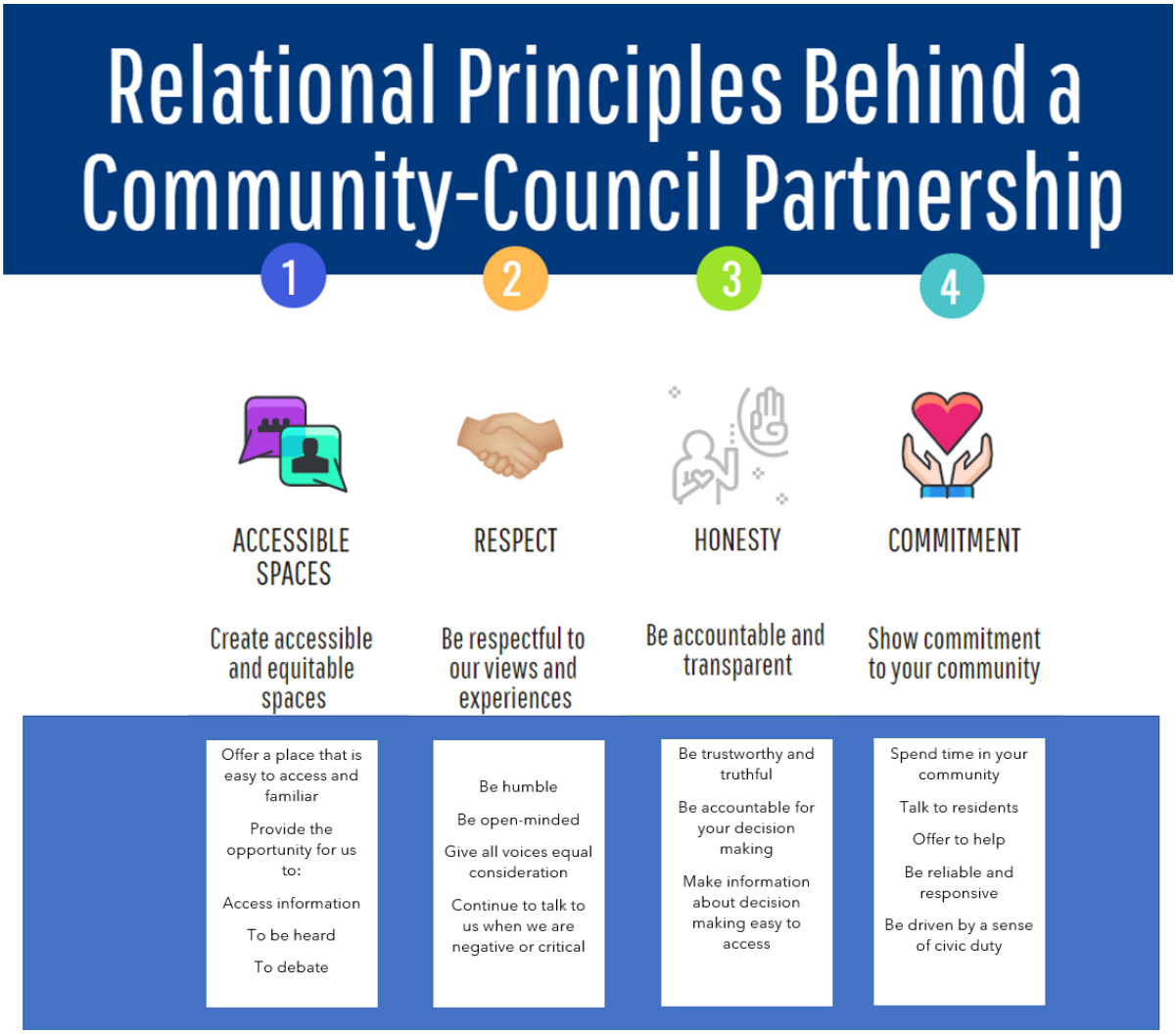
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research, conducted by the UCLan Westlakes campus sought to bring communities together with the new Cumberland Council to co-create new ways to work together. This was done over 18 months through community workshops, where residents explored different strategies for democratic participation and later discussed these with the Council in co-creation sessions. The strategies developed by residents are summarised below:



The most important issue for communities was that any approach must be based in their community with opportunities for open and honest discussions with the Council. A voice and an opportunity for discussion were more critical to the community than having formal decision-making responsibilities, although some residents were interested in this.

It was widely felt that building strong, trusting relationships between communities and the Council was the foundation of any collaborative strategy. With this in mind, communities developed a relational framework which was endorsed by officers involved in the project. This framework is presented below:



The research has produced numerous outputs and outcomes, including providing an inclusive space for discussion and support for developing engagement strategies to promote the new Community Network. Residents reported increased confidence and awareness of local democratic processes as a result of being involved in the research, and community organisations benefited through developing their networks. The research is providing evidence for the promotion of a developing culture of participation within Cumberland Council, something which is explicitly referred to in the Council Plan (Cumberland Council, 2023). It is also anticipated that the frameworks presented in this report will inform a number of Cumberland Council policies.

Four key recommendations are presented:

1. Provide accessible and inclusive place-based opportunities for participation.
2. Develop a hybrid community communication strategy.
3. Involve marginalised young people in decision-making through collaborating with gatekeeping organisations.
4. Invest time to build trusting relationships with communities, adopting the relational principles behind a community-council partnership.

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

The Westlakes campus of UCLan hosts a cluster of social science research who conduct local, independent research, funded by Westlakes Research Limited. Within this cluster there is a growing portfolio of community action research, working with low-income coastal communities to understand their experience of a number of key policy areas. These include education, health and community engagement. A key research project, spanning five years was the Connected Communities Cumbria research, which worked with children and young people from Mirehouse and Woodhouse in Whitehaven, Moorclose in Workington and Ormsgill in Barrow, to understand the social networks and perceptions of their communities (Wilson & Morris, 2023a; Wilson & Morris, 2023b, Wilson & Morris, 2020, Wilson, Morris & Williamson, 2020).

The Connected Communities Cumbria research found that of 646 residents, only nine people reported they would approach 'the Council' or a 'councillor'[1] if they wanted to make a positive change in their community. In response to these findings and the merging of the local borough and county councils into a unitary authority, Westlakes UCLan undertook some focused research in this area with the central purpose:

To work with residents from low-income coastal communities to co-create a new approach to participatory democracy with Cumberland Council.

This was done through a series of workshops with residents and the Council, but before describing the methods undertaken, a brief overview of participatory democracy and policy co-production is provided.

Participatory Democracy

The importance of including communities in decision-making that impacts on them has received refreshed attention in the public policy arena following the community responses to community need during the Covid-19 pandemic. Grassroots mutual aid groups responded and mobilised to meet the needs of vulnerable people within their communities (Chevée, 2021). For example, the 'Levelling Up Our Communities' report argued that "a wholly new paradigm is possible in which community power replaces the dominance of remote public and private sector bureaucracies" (Kruger, 2020, p.7). Within this argument is the recommendation for a Community Power Act to ensure that public agencies take deliberate steps to involve and empower communities. Similarly, Nesta, a national charity which supports social innovation, recommends revolutionising public services to be embedded in collective power, appreciating social connections and neighbourhood relationships, and investing in the capabilities of those communities (Nesta, 2020).

Participatory democracy is defined as "a polity in which each citizen participates in self-government through the offering and receiving of public reasons for collective laws and policies" (Warren, 2020). Participatory democracy affects governance, empowerment, and democratic outcomes (Avritzer, 2002; Baiocchi, 2005; Barber, 2003; Fung & Wright, 2003; Goldfrank, 2007; Labonne & Chase, 2009; Wampler, 2007), along with individual wellbeing and sense of belonging (Boulding & Wampler, 2010). Community Power sought to identify ways to include socially excluded communities in local democratic

[1] Councils were referred to collectively in these responses.

processes through co-production, working with Cumberland Council to reach a consensus on strategies that would suit both parties. Policy co-production is defined as:

> *the actions taken by both the service agent and the citizen [that] are based on their joint consideration of the problem and both share responsibility for deciding what action to take and each accord legitimacy to the responsibility to the other (Durose & Richardson, 2015, p.35).*

From this definition, Community Power sought to co-create a new approach to participatory democracy.

Purpose of this Project Report

This report describes the methods used to work with communities to help them identify what approaches they felt would be effective within their own communities. It then describes the four main approaches developed, describing what they are and why residents have chosen these methods. The potential benefit of the application of these to Cumberland Council will be described, along with a critical reflection on these choices in light of key issues emerging throughout the research. Four themes generated around relationships will be presented, which are used then to inform four relational principles behind community-council partnerships.

Community action research in policy presents a sensitive context where the researcher must balance criticality with relationality, offering a critical and honest presentation of the data whilst maintaining relationships with policy actors. The Community Power research endeavoured to achieve both goals, following a recognised guiding framework (Bartles and Wittmayer, 2020). Through developing trusting relationships with all stakeholders, over time, with clear expectations of roles, the author is confident these aims were met. This is evidenced through the further collaborations with both the Council and the communities resulting from this research project.

The results presented are intended to portray the accounts provided by residents in a clear and objective way. The research seeks to understand how communities interpret and perceive their interactions and relationships with the local authorities, rather than state their accounts as 'facts'. Simply, this research is concerned with understanding 'their truths'. Within these accounts, it is important to understand the challenges residents perceive in order to develop ways to work collaboratively in the future. The author acknowledges the dedication of elected members and officers across Cumberland to work with communities to make the area a great place to live.

Methods

Participants

The project sought to work with communities experiencing social exclusion, and a proxy of multi-deprivation was used to operationalise the concept. According to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), South Whitehaven, Ewanrigg and Moorclose were in 10% most deprived areas in the county (IMD, 2019) and thus were considered to be socially excluded. Millom is considered to be within the 30% of most deprived areas in the county (IMD, 2019) but was included due to its significant geographic isolation, which also impacts on social inclusion (Atkinson, 2009).

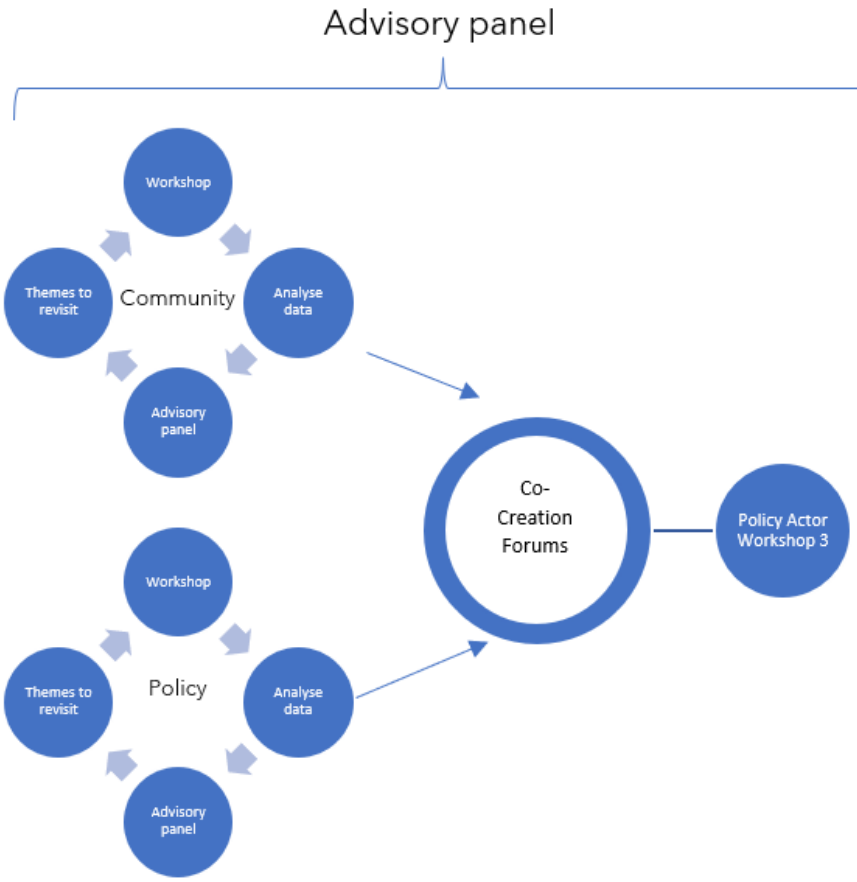
Building on specific community-based recruitment strategies used previously by the author (Wilson, 2020), purposeful sampling was used, targeting specific communities. A total of 48 community participants took part in the workshops, with 15 young people (aged between 11-17 years old) and 25 adults attending all sessions (n=40) (see Appendix A for demographic information).

Community Power also sought to collaborate with policy actors from various policy areas and on every level. The selection criterion for policy actors was that they should be any individual working for the local authorities or a public body whose work involves or impacts on South Whitehaven, Moorclose, Millom or Ewanrigg. This includes elected members, officers, and street-level bureaucrats (such as social workers, police and teachers). A total of 19 policy actors participated in at least one session (policy actor workshops or co-creation sessions). Specifically, 11 elected members were involved, two Directors of services, four senior officers and four community development officers (see Appendix B for demographic information).

Throughout this report direct quotes are used to bring the data to life and enhance meaning, where all participants' accounts are anonymised using pseudonyms.

Research Process

The research process was one that worked collaboratively with community and policy participants in a variety of settings over a period of approximately 18 months. The dynamic research process is summarised in the figure below:



Community Workshops

A total of six workshops took place in each community, each lasting for approximately two hours. All sessions took place in a community centre located in the target community, used by the gatekeeping organisation involved in the research. Workshops aimed to:

1. Build and maintain relationships within each group.
2. Provide a space for participants to reflect on their community, particularly in light of participation with local and national democracy.
3. Introduce key elements of the local democratic process.
4. Produce an original approach to engage communities in the local democratic process.
5. Identify key policy actors to recruit as policy actor participants.
6. Prepare participants for working alongside the policy actors to finalise an original approach to engaging communities in the local democratic process.

Sessions also provided opportunities for participants to be updated on the progress of the project. Although a structured programme was developed, this was applied loosely during the workshops, allowing the community participants to take the lead on the direction of conversations and topics covered. In one community the residents agreed that they would prefer to talk, rather than complete structured activities. By allowing conversations to flow naturally a number of unexpected themes arose in all groups.

Policy Actor Workshops

Two policy actor workshops took place, both using Microsoft Teams consisting of two different workshops with two different groups of people, as directed by the Council. The first workshop was held with senior elected members and officers, which aimed to:

1. Provide an introduction and background to the Community Power project.
2. Reflect on opportunities and challenges of working with low-income coastal communities.
3. Share the Council's existing ideas to engage communities in the democratic process.
4. Identify further policy actors recruited to be policy participants.

The second workshop, held with elected members and community development officers, aimed to:

1. Provide an introduction and background to the Community Power project.
2. Reflect on opportunities and challenges of working with low-income coastal communities.
3. Critically discuss the Council's existing ideas to engage communities in the democratic process.
4. Prepare for working alongside the community members to finalise an original approach to engaging communities in the democratic process.

Co-Creation Forum

In the initial project design, it was anticipated that a large, high-profile event would be held, bringing all participants together to co-create an overarching approach to engage communities in the democratic process with Cumberland Council. However, both communities and policy actors strongly felt that communities are heterogeneous and generalised approaches would not meet the nuanced needs of each community. In response, smaller co-creation forums were held within each respective community in the same venue, day of the week and time as that on which the community workshops were held.

The community participants designed the structure of all the co-creation forums during a dedicated preparation workshop. A leaflet summarising all key topics discussed in the community workshops was produced and given to all community participants before the co-creation forum to ensure they felt prepared and informed. An online or face-to-face briefing session was held with policy actors ahead of the co-creation forums to discuss the structure of the session, identify any specific objectives the policy actors would like to achieve through the process and emphasise the importance of an inclusive and equitable space.

Although community participants designed each session, the agreed structure for all groups revolved around six activities, summarised below:

1. Icebreaker activity.
2. General questions to policy actors.
3. Community participants share their ideas for engaging communities in the local democratic process, followed by feedback from policy actor participants.
4. Policy actor participants share their ideas for engaging communities in the local democratic process, followed by feedback from community participants.
5. All participants pool ideas and come to an agreement on a strategy to engage communities in the local democratic process.
6. Next steps identified moving forward.

In practice, activities 3, 4 and 5 occurred concurrently, with all sessions taking the form of a dialogical forum based on discussion rather than a structured workshop. Throughout all the co-creation forums there was an awareness that developing new approaches takes time and that consensus on a strategy to engage communities could not be achieved within one session. Rather, the final activity took the form of all participants agreeing on their role in the process and with policy actors agreeing to a number of actions, including returning to the communities to develop the strategy further.

Following the completion of the co-creation forum a specific debrief session was held, bringing all community development officers together with senior officers at Cumberland Council to develop a strategy to ensure sustained and authentic community engagement. Unlike the first two policy actor sessions, this workshop was face-to-face, at the UCLan Westlakes campus.

Including Young Adults with Learning Difficulties

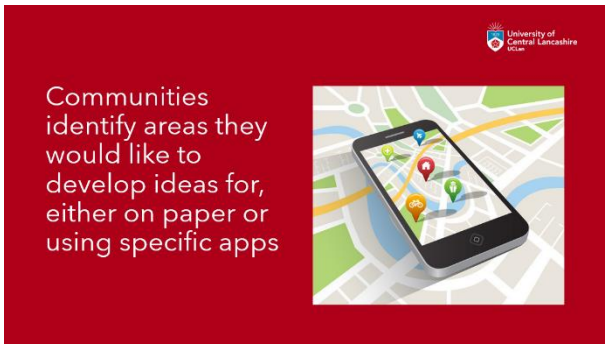
The Moorclose sample included a group of young adults who use the day services provided by the community centre. After consulting the community centre manager, it was agreed that sessions should be structured to be inclusive, with all participants working together in one group. However, during the first workshop, it was clear that this structure did not allow young adults to participate meaningfully. A revised structure was agreed upon after wider consultation with experts in research and practice concerning including people with learning difficulties. The centre manager facilitated a separate workshop after both groups had eaten lunch together. Additional material was produced for the workshops with young adults, with fewer and more simple activities, using images to help support understanding. The skills and experience of the centre manager ensured effective communication relating to the workshop activities and in interpreting young people's responses accordingly.

PART TWO: DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

A core aspect of the Community Power project involved introducing participatory democracy approaches, inviting residents to critically reflect on which, if any, could be realistically developed within their community. This included conveying a wealth of information to residents within a relatively short time, with considerable thought invested in ensuring the exercise was accessible, being mindful of educational background, reading and writing fluency and prior understanding of participatory approaches.

Methods

In order to present information about a range of different participatory methods, an interactive card activity was developed, where different forms of participatory democracy were summarised on A5 pieces of card. It was hoped that having something tangible that participants could physically touch would also make the content easier to engage with. The front side of the card provided a succinct summary of key factors to consider (for example, cost, number of participants and method of delivery) and was designed in such a way as to introduce the name of the approach without being too daunting in providing too much text. The reverse side of the card was designed to provide an overview of the method and the accompanying photo was presented in order to support participants in understanding the approach.



National and local stakeholders were consulted throughout the development of the cards, including the civil servants in central government's 'policy lab', the advisory panel for the project and with academic peers. Prototypes of the cards were shared with the project advisory panel and academic peers to gain critical feedback on the face validity and accessibility of the cards. There were no recommendations for revision.

The card activity was delivered over two workshops, with two discrete stages, both of which involved facilitated discussion, carried out by either myself or a partner involved in the research. In the adult groups, these were CVS Cumbria and Moorclose Community Centre, and in the group working with young people, this was South Whitehaven Youth Project and Shackles Off Youth Projects, with the additional support of Rosehill Theatre.

Stage One

The first stage introduced residents to the policy cycle, presented as comprising four areas; agenda setting, policy formation, decision making and implementation. Residents allocated themselves into small groups and were asked to choose two different stages of the policy process. They were then presented with participatory democracy cards for the respective process stages they selected. Facilitated discussions took place, critically reflecting on how suitable each approach would be if applied within their community. Cards presenting approaches that were felt to be suitable were placed on a sheet of

paper with the respective policy process stage and a photo was taken of these to capture the outcome of the exercise. The groups then reconvened and shared the outcome of their activity.

Stage two

In the following session, residents were presented with the cards they selected as having potential for being developed in their community, reminding them that this would be what they could share with Cumberland Council when they met. In pairs, residents were asked to select one or two cards to explore in more detail. Residents were given two large sheets of paper inviting them to consider whether these approaches could be implemented in their community. The pairs were then invited to share their ideas with the wider group.

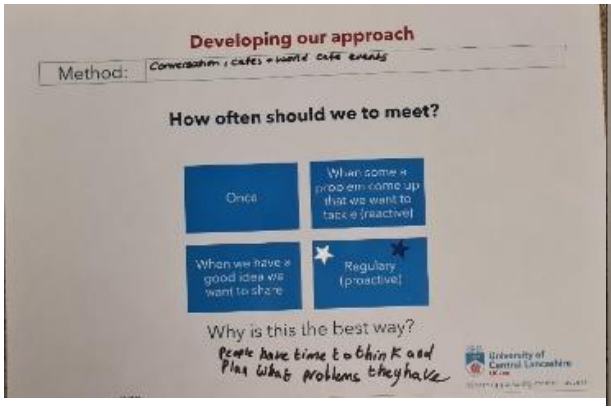
The participatory democracy approaches chosen by each community were then transposed into an infographic and presented to the community in the next workshop. Residents were asked for their critical feedback, confirming whether or not this was an accurate representation of what they wanted. In all cases residents agreed that it was.

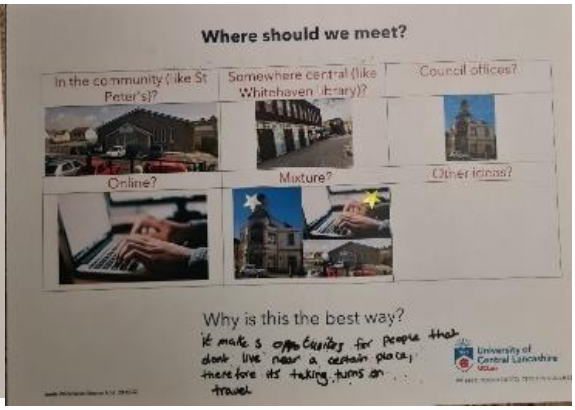
Results

All four groups completed both stages of the exercise, resulting in 37 cards being selected in stage one and 16 cards being selected for detailed follow-up. The approaches developed by the four communities can be categorised into four broad thematic areas: a community development approach, organised community representation, public dialogue and co-production.

Community Development Approach (Agenda Setting)

Residents sought an approach embedded in the community, based in community venues, open to the public, with a family focus. An informal space, providing all community members with an equitable forum to share their views, was unanimously favoured, with this form of 'conversation café' style approach being selected by all groups at stages one and two of the research.





An approach embedded in the community can potentially yield secondary benefits, beyond policy development, for example, through fundraising, providing free food or offering fun activities for children. It was felt that a family-orientated event may attract people who may not have previously participated in any local democratic engagement activity, like public consultation events or surveys. Thus, this approach was seen as a way of engaging with seldom-heard groups, whom may be more vulnerable to social exclusion.

A key feature of this community development approach is a spirit of collaboration and equal power distribution between the Council and community organisations, entrusting in these essential organisations' connections, assets and local knowledge. Though working side by side with grassroots organisations, the Council can work to create a shared identity with the community, all working together for the benefit of the community. It values and shows appreciation of the capacity and strengths existing within the community, recognising and celebrating the great work already taking place.

Residents felt such events could be held two to four times a year, within the community itself. Residents who were actively involved in existing groups felt this approach could be complemented with regular visits to such groups and explicitly stated they would welcome regular visits from their elected representatives and other members of the Council. The passage below describes a discussion between adult residents, describing the rationale behind this approach:

Stacey	I think the one that we liked the best was the coffee and chat one, we already do that here.
Jane	You tend to find if it's too formal nobody will… maybe if it's just going with the flow.
Q	So if they had someone friendly turn up and say, oh do you mind if I ask people's views?
May	Oh yes because we've had Age Concern in here, Citizen's Advice.
Jane	And I think the best thing about it is honesty and you are trusted and you're genuine I think that's what a lot of people, that's why you're always packed when it's coffee and crack and stuff like that because they know.
May	Put anything on in here, free food and they will come.

Here, informality, connections with existing services, trust and the provision of free food were highlighted as being effective in engaging community members in agenda-setting.

Through these events, elected members have the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to the community by volunteering, alongside seeking views and input from residents. Relations between the Council could be effectively developed by dedicating time to organising and delivering these events.

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Reflecting on this choice of approach in a wider context, the strong place attachment and sense of community shine through in residents' accounts. It illustrates the strength of capacity already existing within communities, that have created a space for residents to meet where they feel comfortable, with a drive to maximise engagement to benefit the community.

Organised Community Representation (Policy Development and Decision Making)

Residents (mostly adult residents) would value some form of organised community representation whereby traditional power structures are removed, and a selected member of the community is represented alongside the Council. Although these differ slightly across communities (citizens' assembly, citizens' jury and citizen panel), the focus of this approach was to have an event distribution of power.

Residents said they wanted someone, chosen by the community, who would have an equal position of power in formal Council meetings where policy decisions are made, as summarised below:

> *I think that a delegation being allowed into that meeting but being allowed to say what you want to and not being told to shut up (May, retired grandmother)*

The quote also illustrates how May feels that the Council traditionally treats communities when they try to have a say. This relates to a narrative that was present throughout the research, in which residents often described how they felt unheard and looked down

upon by elected members and council officers.[2] Residents were keen to develop an approach where they felt they would be treated with respect and looked upon as having equal value.

On a practical level, the groups differ on how often they think meetings should take place, with some feeling such a group should function to respond to specific needs (react), whereas others felt there should be set meeting times (act). It was felt that these meetings should occur in various locations, including the community, and within council facilities so that relevant officers could be easily accessed for information.

Although residents said they wanted some formal representation they had concerns about selecting such a representative. One group expressed concerns about a random sampling approach, worrying about the trustworthiness of someone being selected using this method.

> *That would depend on who it was and could they be trustworthy for you to go and tell them. It's like me saying to you, now I'm going to tell you something, this is this, and I know that she's not going to tell anybody else (Claire, retired mother)*

The above quote provides some insight into the complex dynamics within communities, where not all residents are seen as having shared values and being trustworthy. Residents wanted some control over who would be selected to represent in this more formalised approach but had little faith in traditional democratic processes, such as voting. This attitude is reflected in the low voting turnout in local and national elections in these areas, which appears to imply a lack of faith in the wider political system.

Time was given to explore alternative recruitment strategies for community representation in decision-making, but groups could not see how the 'right' resident could be selected for the position. A thorough vetting and safeguarding system was felt to be important whatever final recruitment process was chosen.

The degree of responsibility within this position was also a concern of some residents, who worried that community representatives may be vulnerable to abuse from other residents regarding unresolved issues.

> *To me you've got to be interested in like volunteering. I wouldn't like to be, I wouldn't do that, because you'd have people coming up to you in the street and going, hey you, you were on that thing, why didn't you, no (May, retired grandmother)*

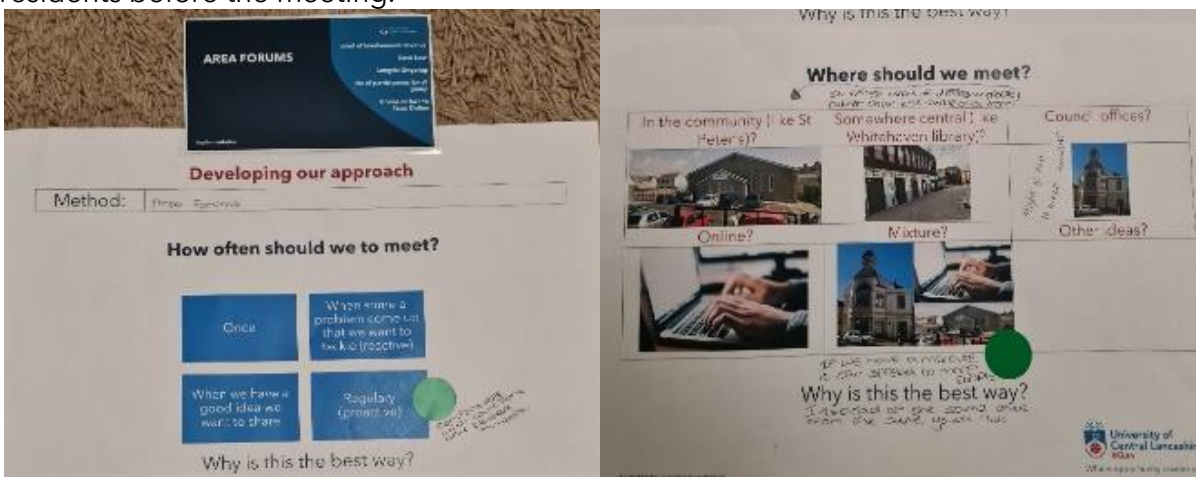
The discussions concerning the responsibility of the role revealed a hesitancy in relation to volunteering for such positions of power themselves. The reasons given for this were fear of retribution from community members but could also be related to the level of knowledge, time and skill required within formal democratic processes, something which feels very distant from their own skill set and experience.

[2] Some residents expressed that this was just "they way things were", suggesting this narrative is sometimes based on an accepted norm rather than being entirely accurate. However, some residents provided very clear examples of when they felt unheard in decision-making. These include discussions around the closure of wards at a local cottage hospital, the use of a council-owned bowling green, and being blocked by elected members on social media when they have challenged a decision on this platform.

The adoption of such an approach would provide Cumberland Council with the opportunity to show a commitment to authentic collaboration with the community, where residents are viewed as experts in the affairs of their community.

Public Dialogue (Policy Development)

Residents desire a space for all members of the community to have a voice around a given issue that concerns them and to explore ways to create solutions collectively. This approach, particularly favoured by young people, was felt to be more likely to be effective if held within the community periodically, focusing on a specific issue identified by residents before the meeting.



The rationale for this choice of approach was simply a desire for everyone to have a say, in public, on equal ground. Communities favoured approaches including consensus conferences, local issues forums and area forums, with issues surrounding accessibility and group size being discussed at length in all groups. One of the central concerns around accessibility focused on generational issues, and communities debated the pros and cons of face-to-face versus online approaches.

> *I think it's got to be inclusive for all because we don't want to leave certain generations behind by everything being accessible online (Jane, full time carer)*

All groups felt that face-to-face approaches would offer a more inclusive space, especially for the older generation, but some young adults said that they would feel more comfortable and would better engage in an online space.

> *Some like to go online though because they don't like speaking up (Georgina, young working mother)*

It was agreed that a hybrid approach to a public dialogue would be the most inclusive strategy to adopt, as summarised by one young person:

> *I think like a mix of the online and the sit around the table and just ask what they want (Davy, young person, male)*

The desire for an inclusive dialogical space, open to all, conflicted with a desire for a small group size. The sentiments of most adult participants are summarised in the following discussion:

Deborah I think smaller would be better.

Joseph	They're more likely to hold them to account.
Deborah	If there was a load it would be a free for all, wouldn't it?

It was felt that smaller groups would facilitate focused discussion and ensure that all present could have a say. In contrast, it was felt that large groups would compromise purposeful discussions.

There was, however, another generational difference when discussing group size, with one group of young people having a strong preference for an approach open to all residents, as is summarised below:

Spencer	An open group, as it would allow for fewer biases.
Laura	Open group.
Sophie	Yes, open group.
Q	So tell me more about biases, what do you mean by that?
Spencer	If you select a group of similar people they'll usually have similar opinions.
Sophie	Sometimes you can end up with a group, like people who basically want their own opinions, if you just pick certain people. So an open group would be better.

Here the young people critically reflect on perceived unfair practices that could occur if an exclusive sample of people were involved in a public discussion, revealing attitudes and suspicions over current democratic processes.

The conflicts and contradictions described above highlight the complexity of participatory approaches and the differing preferences that different members of communities are likely to hold. They do, however, also highlight that communities that do not necessarily engage well in traditional democratic processes, such as voting, understand the pros and cons of different approaches and their implications.

Enabling a public space for residents to engage in discussions with the Council (be it with elected members and/or officers) would help to overcome barriers regarding access to accurate information. The workshops revealed most residents access their news from social media and often miss official Council press releases. An open forum style approach would help residents to feel heard and provide a means to share information in a way that is easy for residents to understand, providing the opportunity to question and ensure clarity.

Co-Production (Implementation)

Co-production proposes that "citizens can play an active role in producing public goods and services of consequence to them…[where] inputs from individuals who are not in the same organisation are transformed into good or services (Ostrom, 1996, p. 1073). Residents across all groups felt that co-production should be at the heart of the development and delivery of services used by community members. The rationale for favouring a co-productive approach rested in the belief that people are experts in their own lives, as summarised below:

> *Yes, I agree with that because they'll know what they're going through (May, retired grandmother)*

It was felt that this could most effectively be done by the Council attending existing groups and working with those with lived experiences to design services. One participant

suggested the Council introduce a 'co-production bus', that could 'tour' different services across Cumberland using a roadshow-style approach. Here, the Council would conduct an analysis of all services existing in Cumberland around a specific issue (such as young people with autism), and the bus could visit every group in the area, inviting service users to be involved in developing relevant supportive services.

A significant proportion of the residents involved in this research were themselves users of a service, particularly around health and wellbeing. This included people with physical disabilities, learning disabilities and people accessing some form of psychological or emotional support. Residents also spoke of their contact with social and welfare services. The importance of investing time in building these relationships and using different methods and materials to engage people with different needs was stressed.

Throughout the workshops, a narrative suggested that communities feel 'done to' by the local and central government and wish to be part of the journey to making the community a better place, especially for those in most need of support. The quote below is with reference to a newly introduced traffic scheme, illustrating how communities resent services and initiatives being designed by people with little or no knowledge of the issue in question:

> *It's always done by somebody who doesn't live here, who doesn't know how we work as a community. They can do as many traffic surveys as they want, but we've got all those log wagons… I just think it's not going to work (Janet, community centre volunteer)*

Introducing a culture of co-production within the Council has the potential to challenge this viewpoint, fostering a new narrative around inclusivity and cooperation. Framed this way, co-production could be viewed as a tool for informing policy and practice and also providing secondary benefits in developing skills and capacities in individuals and organisations, thereby promoting social inclusion. Another secondary benefit of feeling heard and valued is the potential positive impact on confidence, sense of belonging and self-esteem. Furthermore, developing interventions including those with lived experience brings an acute awareness of the needs and concerns of service users.

These four areas for participation are presented in a theory of change logic model. Here, the inputs required are set out, followed by an outline of the potential outputs and outcomes of such participatory activities. It is hoped that the model provides an accessible framework to understand and implement the ways communities would like to work with the Council.

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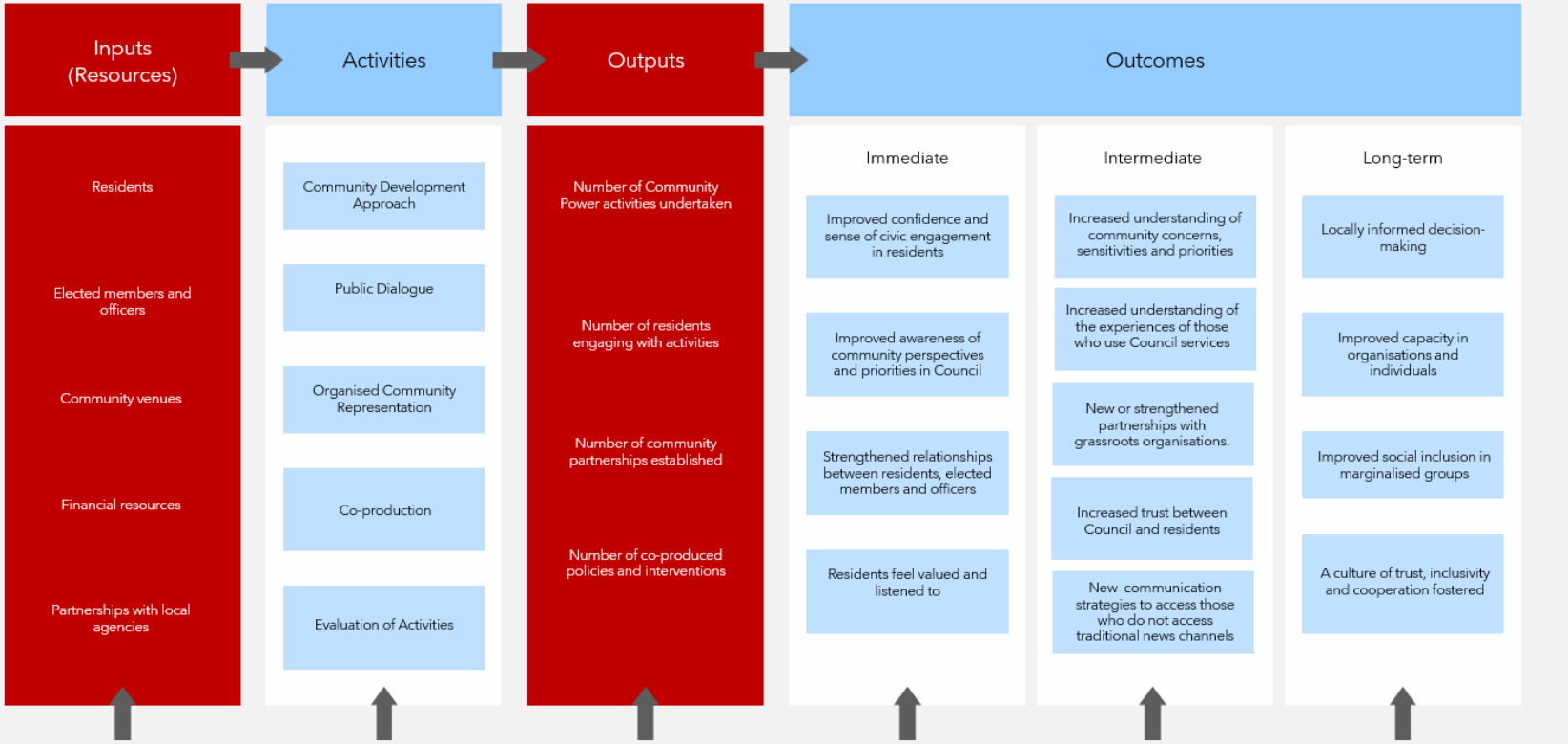
Community Power: Theory of Change Logic Model



Factors that influence participation

General principles concerning barriers and enablers to participation were discussed by communities, along with some strategies explicitly being noted to avoid.

Barriers to participation

As alluded to throughout this report, there is a narrative within communities around a lack of trust in the Council or faith in their voices being heard. This can, and has, resulted in an apparent disengagement in local democracy:

> *They'll sit at home and just think, 'I'll just leave it to them, they'll do It'. So it just kind of almost becomes, they'll do it. When in fact it's everybody's role, isn't it? (Jane)*

Many residents expressed concerns about the centralisation of the democratic process with the emergence of the new Council, with residents worrying that the focus of the Council would be on Carlisle and the surrounding area. This concern was not only related to issues around local funding but to those concerning public transport and ensuring residents would be able to access opportunities to engage in the democratic process.

There was a lack of awareness relate to the different functions of councils and confusion over the roles of the new unitary authority and town councils. There was also a lack of awareness concerning decision-making processes within the councils, which impacted on the residents' perceptions of the accountability and transparency of the Council. This unfamiliarity with the functions and processes may contribute to the hesitancy to engage in more formal means of participatory democracy.

Enablers to participation

A community-based, informal, friendly approach is essential in engaging communities in the democratic process. It was felt that such an approach would help to overcome the barriers discussed above, acting as a hook to attract people, as is summarised below initially:

May	Free food.
Janet	Once they're coming-
Meline	They know what it's about.
May	And if they know the people in here are friendly.

The friendliness of those present requires significant consideration and relates to how residents perceive their relationship with the Council, elected members in particular. One resident who volunteered locally reflected on how effective a previous community engagement approach was in reaching seldom-heard groups:

Andrea:	I think it's, because we weren't with a big councillor badge and everything, rosettes on our chest, we were just normal people.
Stuart:	And that's what they want. We don't want suits, that's what we don't want.

In addition to creating a friendly space, a positive, proactive approach was felt to encourage participation:

> *A lot of positivity needs to be created around it to get people to think, 'oh well actually, this is something I could possibly do'.*

A positive, proactive approach could potentially challenge the disengagement seen in communities and provide opportunities for residents to take part in democratic processes that they have never previously engaged with, which, in turn, would build their own capacity. Young people were mindful of the importance of a bespoke and inclusive promotional strategy to ensure that all members of the community were informed about any approach to engage in the democratic process. Suggestions included traditional postal and social media methods and more innovative ideas such as touring cars with megaphones.

Participatory Approaches to Avoid

Approaches that communities felt least comfortable using were surveys, voting and the use of participatory videos. Surveys are a popular tool for collecting information from large populations and can be administered online or on paper. However, surveys were unanimously rejected by young people, being seen as something formal and closely related to school and schoolwork. Although young people in one group supported the idea of consensus voting, believing that every person in their community should have a right to vote on decisions that impact on them, this idea was strongly rejected by both adult groups.

Summary

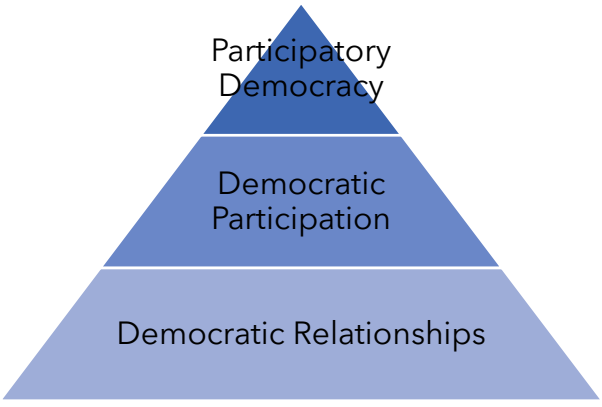
Residents were keen to explore a community development approach with the Council, consisting of informal, family-focused community events organised between community organisations, residents and the Council. Residents expressed interest in community representation in formal Council meetings but could not reach an agreed recruitment method for this representation. Opportunities for public dialogue would be welcomed by residents, providing a space for the public and the Council to engage in public discussions around a given issue. Finally, co-production was a popular method for involving residents in services that impact on their lives, particularly relating to health and wellbeing. Before any form of democratic participation is introduced within Cumberland Council, it is essential for officers and elected to take the time to foster trusting relationships.

PART THREE: UNDERSTANDING PARTICIPATION FROM A RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The research initially hoped to co-create innovative methods of participatory democracy with communities. However, the community workshops revealed that communities sought a relational form of participation, where they were part of the journey with the council rather than having authoritative or decision-making power. Bringing the residents and policy actors together for the co-creation workshops showed that, in some cases, relationships between the residents and some elected members are not in a position to explore such forms of relational working.

Given these challenges, it is useful to reflect on different levels of democratic participation. Numerous models of participation are available. For example, Kanji and Greenwood (2001) can be seen below as presenting a ladder with numerous stages of participation, each including larger degrees of participation. Whilst these models acknowledge the differing forms of relationships with each stage, These models tend to focus on the processes that take place. The findings from the Community Power research suggests that relationships should be central to any forms of political engagement between communities and policy actors, resonating with a growing body research (Agranoff, 2008; Bartles 2018; Bartels, 2016; Bartles and Turnbull, 2020; Dodson, 2005; IPPR, 2012; Medina-Guce, 2020; Selg & Ventsel 2020; Stears, 2012, Stears & King, 2011).

The learning from the Community Power research lends itself to understanding participation from the perspective of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Here, democratic relationships are the fundamental basis upon which any other forms of participation can take place. Here, the emotional connections between people with diverse experiences must be acknowledged, along with their background and interests, (IPPR, 2012, p. 40). This is followed by democratic participation, where communities feel willing to work with existing structures, such as voting, and deliberate with the Council on issues that impact on their lives. Finally, is participatory democracy, where communities seek power and control through formal mechanism such as citizens assemblies, juries or mini publics (Pateman, 2012). This model shows that trusting relationships are the bedrock of any participatory approach, and in order to develop participation in Cumberland, fundamental work needs to take place to build strong relational foundations. In order to do this effectively, it is critical to understand relationships from the perceptions of the community, which will be the focus of the next section.



Relational Theory, Political Participation and Policy

Limited literature covers community engagement, relational theory and political participation. However, Bartles and Turnbull, present a heuristic classification of relational approaches to public policy administration (Bartles and Turnbull, 2020), with four different categories outlining different ways in which relationships can operate:

	Instrumental-strategic	Critical Reflexive
Individualist	Connected Actors • Administrative actors are always connected street level • Street level bureaucracy • Co-production • A relationship to achieve a goal	Interactive Performance • Focused on including and empowering public participation • Create new relationships of mutual understanding, trust and collaboration • Participatory democracy: co-creation of value-based policy
Holist	Co-Creation Networks • The relationship is more than the sum of its parts • The efficiency that can achieved through working together	Dynamic Systems • Aims at uncovering forces of power • Interpretive policy analysis- the relational construction of meaning to demonstrate how policy processes and outcomes take shape through interactions

Similar research conducted in the Netherlands stressed the importance of relational, collaborative networks that generate "connective human capital" (Agranoff, 2008, p. 320), which can lead to developing a joint practice and shared understanding of the challenges communities face (Bartles, 2018). This research also encountered challenges similar to those faced in Community Power concerning resistance to changing working practices from political actors in local government, and this inhibited sustainable change from being made on an institutional level. Bartles calls for collaborative networks to be grounded in the development and implementation of policy and argues that "future research should examine collaborative dynamics in street-level work in other contexts and different approaches to improving their processes and outcomes" (Bartles, 2018, p. 1332).

The four ways of working that residents developed tell us as number of things about the ways in which they seek to engage with local democracy. Residents seek to work dialogically, with those with shared values around reciprocity. There is a desire to build trusting and equitable relationships where residents can become informed actors. Residents do not necessarily want to be involved in structural or formal decision-making processes, nor do they wish to overturn traditional power structures. Rather, they seek a physical and symbolic space in which power is distributed equally and residents' views, concerns and preferences are considered as legitimate as those of the Council.

Reflecting on these findings in relation to Bartles and Turnbull's heuristic classification of relational approaches to public policy administration (Bartles and Turnbull, 2020), we can see that an instrumental-strategic epistemology is best situated when working with the communities involved in this research, where the focus is on processes and fulfilling specific tasks, rather than challenging traditional power structures. Furthermore, it would appear that an individualist approach, rather than a holist approach, is most valued by residents and focused on the specific roles and actions of individuals. Street-level practices are of central importance to residents, who seek to see policy being implemented in practice in order to understand how it improves their lives and those

around them. Considering the application of these findings, it could be argued that the type of relational approach to public administration communities' desire falls within the 'connected actors' category, with approaches of significance being co-production and street-level bureaucracy.

A caveat must be made when making these arguments, however. It could be argued that residents in LBP do not seek to challenge traditional democratic structures and gain participatory democratic power due to a taken-for-granted assumption of their social and political position, that is, one without power. A separate analysis of the Community Power research suggests that although residents are consciously aware of differing power structures, they accept their position as one that does not encompass any authority for official decision-making (Wilson, 2024).

Fostering Democratic Relationships in Community-Council Partnerships

Another key aspect of the research was to understand the opportunities and barriers to building positive relationships between the Council and communities. Four categories have been generated around relationships, all of which are equally important and interdependent. This analysis draws on data from a number of focused exercises and discussions around relationships with local authorities in Cumbria (including town councils, Allerdale and Copeland Borough Council's and Cumbria County Council). For simplicity, these will be referred to collectively as the Council throughout the report.

Accessible and Equal Spaces

A space to be heard

Overwhelmingly all community groups cited that one of their main desires was to have a relationship with the Council where they felt heard. There was a consistent narrative of feeling unheard under the current system, and this impacts on residents' motivations to become involved in consultations or any other participatory opportunities, *"We've already decided that we're not being listened to. So, they don't get the uptake because people are like, well what's the point?" (Deborah).* This experience of learned helplessness was understood to be the reason behind poor voting turnout at elections and a general distrust and disengagement in local and national politics.

Adult residents provided accounts of where they had participated in public consultation events but did not feel their views were adequately accounted for, "*They sort of listened to what people had to say but you knew it wasn't going to make any difference" (May).* May's account suggests that some residents who do actually participate in local consultations do so with the pre-existing assumption that they will not be listened to, which may influence how residents interact with those conducting the consultations.

Young residents were not able to provide examples of trying to communicate with the local authorities but there was a strong narrative centred around not being heard:

Laura:	*I think people don't listen because they just can't.*
Q:	*Because they just can't?*
Laura:	*Do you think they want to listen?*
Sophie:	*Not really, no.*

When asked, most young residents said their understanding of the Council was influenced primarily by their parents, providing an example of how the intergenerational transmission of disengagement and distrust in politics can occur, mainly through discussion about current affairs. Young people were more able to draw on encounters with other authority figures such as the police and teachers, where they too spoke of feeling unheard.

When exploring opportunities for participatory democracy (such as participatory strategic planning), adult residents were unsure how this would be embraced and followed through by the Council:

Arthur: *Would it work after you've told them?*
Elaine: *You could always speak, yes.*
Andrea: *It's worth a try, yes.*
Elaine: *Whether they'd listen.*

This was a concurrent theme throughout the research, with the above passage providing an example of both the residents' interest and willingness to work with the Council, but scepticism about how willing the Council would be to listen and adopt new ways of working.

Both young and adult residents alike wanted to speak to *"actual people" (Laura)* face to face, in their community where they are comfortable. It was felt that in order to be heard, the person to whom they would be speaking to is crucial, that it needs to be someone familiar with the community and *"someone who knows what's going on" (Joseph).* This view is informed by past experiences whereby residents have felt that representatives from the Council have made policy decisions with little understanding of the areas it would impact on.

Accessible language and communication channels
Residents felt that language can be a barrier to communication, with the use of jargon impacting on people's confidence to speak to local councillors:

> *I think sometimes that's a barrier because you can have all the feelings and wanting change in your community, but if you've got, let's say an arrogant man in front of you that's reading all these policies and spouting all this, you're just going to think, well what's the point. I'm not going to get my point across, I can't compete with that (Jane)*

Here, Jane suggests that there is a motivation to make a change in the community but feels that institutional tools, such as policies and jargon are used to prevent residents from engaging in dialogue and debate, adding to the perception of being unheard. Jane's example of an "arrogant man" indicates assumptions surrounding the gender and personality of people who are associated with the local authorities, which relate to traditional patriarchal power structures. Feeling unable to "compete", Jane suggests that she perceives the Council as an opposing body, indicating a fundamental conflict in relation to the needs of the community.

Residents said they wished to interact with someone who would be on their "*level… It's got to take all that jargon out, remove all that waffle" (Janet).* Seeking to be on an equal level demonstrates a desire for equality and describing jargon as "waffle" shows that such language is of little value to residents. Indeed, another resident suggested that the

Council should "*Talk normal. Don't sit there and think that you're better than me because you're not" (Jane).* Here Jane shows that much of the language used in policy is not within the frame of reference of many residents and does not relate to everyone's daily lives. The passage also reveals a perception of assumed superiority by the Council, again providing an example of how residents perceive the local authorities as exerting power over communities.

Concerns with access to accurate information were also highlighted by Jane, who had an awareness of how to access information and a drive to do so:

> *Some of Council's agendas and minutes do get put online. I think the last time I checked, the minutes of all the meetings were about three years out of date. So there's no transparency and they don't keep up with things I know the Council have got a Facebook page but it's very select what they share on there.*

Here Jane shows concerns about a lack of transparency and accountability by the local authorities in not publishing up-to-date information and being selective about the information they share on social media. This may suggest the Council as being seen as gatekeepers of information and wielding their power by not sharing information they are obliged to, such as meeting minutes.

Accessibility was further explored when discussing the use of online spaces. There was a generational split on the types of forums where people would like a say or interact with the local authorities, with younger residents favouring of online methods, such as WhatsApp. However, younger adult residents and young residents often discussed the need for hybrid approaches that would include everyone. Suggestions around social media platforms such as WhatsApp present a shift from the impersonal traditional online engagement strategies, such as online consultations on websites, towards a more dialogical interaction. The benefits of such online spaces were noted to be important as previous consultations were reported to have been held "*through the day, when the majority of people are at work, so they couldn't access it…there was nothing online". (Jane).* These accounts suggest the importance of multiple strategies, with physical and virtual spaces being available at different times.

Opportunities to challenge

Both groups of adult residents provided examples of challenging an elected representative (MP or Councillor) on social media and had been blocked from their accounts. The below conversation with two women in their twenties sharing their experiences:

Brooke:	*He's that much of a good councillor he's blocked the people that speak, me.*
Q:	*So is that on Facebook?*
Chloe:	*And me, I'm blocked off.*
Q:	*Because you've spoken up against him?*
Chloe:	*Yes.*
Brooke:	*They don't like our opinions.*
Q:	*How did that make you feel?*
Brooke:	*I also noticed, when I was looking through his, not just me, with a few of them.*

Here, Brooke shows dissatisfaction that the elected member is not fulfilling his role because he is not being accountable and that on further investigation this is standard

practice. Another resident felt this to compromise any potential relationships through not facilitating interaction, "*He's blocked me on Facebook, so I haven't got a good relationship with him" (Jane).* In all cases, residents described their contributions to the online dialogue as challenging a decision they disagreed with. The nature of the challenge is unknown (in language, tone etc), so it is difficult to know the true reason why the residents were blocked. However, the fact that residents from both adult groups commented on this warrants some consideration.

Equitable space for dialogue

Some adult residents could provide examples of when they had approached the Council to voice concerns or participate in decision-making. The example below relates to an incident when a group of older gentlemen challenged the Council on an issue relating to the use of a local council owned allotment:

> *I had an allotment and the council said we'd have a meeting. There was quite a few of us went to the meeting and there was more councillors and they all said, you've got ten minutes to talk. And one of the lads done all the talking for us, then they started talking and they talked for nearly an hour. And what we got off them was no answers of anything. All they wanted to do is just to show that they were in charge (Arthur)*

Within this passage, there is a common use of 'they' when referring to the Council. This implies distinct social identities and a perception of 'us vs them', emphasising a conflicting relationship where the Council are asserting their dominance over residents. There was an unequal allocation of power within the meeting, which left residents feeling dissatisfied and unheard.

A consistent message in the accounts above revolves around unequal power distribution relating to dialogical spaces. This has clear implications for social inclusion, in that it is felt that accessible and equal spaces to participate are not available.

Respect and Equality

All community groups spoke of how they sought to be treated with respect, based on notions of equality, humility and an open-mindedness that gives views of all residents equal legitimacy.

Humility

The most dominant narrative regarding respect and equality relates to humility, or the perceived lack of it, shown by members of the local authorities. When one group of young residents completed an exercise to 'build their own MP' attributes around humility were most frequently cited as being the traits they sought in an elected leader. A narrative around assumed superiority *("I'm a councillor, who are you type of thing", Stuart)* was present within both adult resident groups, using encounters to describe a perceived lack of humility. For example, here Joseph described how the behaviour of a newly elected member changed once they were voted into office.

> *As soon as they become a councillor, 'do you know who I am?' Yes, you're still young, you're just a councillor and you're supposed to be the voice of the local people, but clearly not because all of a sudden you think you're special (Joseph)*

Here, Joseph is reflecting on a perceived power inequality, whereby being in office is associated with an assumed superiority on behalf of the elected member, which was attributed to a change in character in the newly elected member. The shift in the status of newly elected members is met with resentment, particularly since the role of the elected is to be the *"voice of the people" (Joseph),* which is not felt to be honoured *("You work for us", Andrea*). This sentiment was echoed by some young residents:

Laura: But these are actually chosen to be part of a council, how ridiculous, and just overall snobs.
Q: Snobs? And why would you say snobs? That's an interesting word.
Laura: The council just looks down at everyone, the entire council are snobs.

This passage reveals much about how Laura understands the local political system. Firstly, is shows a lack of faith in the current voting system in expressing how "ridiculous" it is to be "chosen" to sit in office. It also reveals a determinative perspective, applying 'snobbish' attributes to the "entire council". Laura has had little contact with members of her local authority, and these views, she tells us, are influenced by conversations with her parents, who are dissatisfied with the local authorities. It illustrates how the intergenerational transmission of attitudes and beliefs can occur, resulting in an unquestioning attitude.

Open-minded

Residents sought a relationship with the Council whereby they could work collaboratively, with an equal status. This sentiment is captured in the passage below:

Simon: We could liaise with them, work with the councillors as an equal member.
Joseph: Yes, if it was an equal member.
Simon If you were treated equal it's a good idea but I don't think they would.

Here, Joseph and Simon agree that they would like to 'liaise' with the Council, implying a relationship defined by congeniality and equality. However, Simon concludes by sharing his disbelief that this would happen, which is consistent with the narrative around distrust towards local politicians.

Residents felt that being open-minded included *"not taking offence when they get a little bit of criticism" (Brooke),* (evidenced by blocking residents on social media), and providing a space where open and frank discussions could take place. Both young and adult groups sought to have their views accepted as being equally legitimate as those of the Council. This was not felt to be currently the case, as was summarised by one resident:

> *You don't know if they're just humouring you, to say what you want to keep you quiet. Nine times out of ten they won't do anything with what you've said, they've just let you in to humour you, so you feel like they're doing something. (Trish)*

Accountability and Transparency

All community groups presented a narrative of distrust towards the Council. This accepted stereotype of politicians was generalised and deterministic in outlook *("They're never going to tell you the truth", May*). More than anything, residents seek honesty, particularly when things do not work out as planned *("don't sugar coat it, be honest and tell you", May).* There was little trust in the ways in which the Council made decisions, with residents presenting three dominant narratives; "nothing gets done", "they'd already made their minds up" and "they don't care about us at all". The source of these narratives, and their impact, is considered in turn.

"Nothing gets done"

When discussing the new Cumberland Council Plan, one group of adult residents were reluctant even to open the document:

May: *Well to be honest even to read that, nobody's going to believe it because they never do what they say they're going to do.*

Jane: *They promise you the world and say that they're going to, they'll feed that back and they'll feed this back and they'll do this and they'll do that, but it never happens.*

The discussion above outlines a historical feeling of being let down, of being promised actions which were felt never to transpire. This collective memory then impacts on how future interactions are anticipated, with a reluctance to be receptive of new policies or initiatives. The motivations for these 'false promises' was attributed to elected members seeking to gain votes from the community *("oh I'm going to show this and I'm going to show that, and that's just to get your votes", May).* This narrative relates to another dominant theme within the research of feeling used by elected members, further adding to the perception of being powerless.

"They'd already made their minds up"

There was a significant narrative amongst both adult resident groups that council decisions are predetermined, with any consultation being tokenistic (to appease the community) and for promotional purposes ("*they just ask us for publicity", Elaine)*. In exploring the roots of this narrative (the phrase was used five times throughout the sessions), residents described a lack of awareness of how decisions are made and added that they felt this was a deliberate tactic to exclude residents in decision-making, as Janet alludes to, "*They're not very inclusive and there's no transparency. It's all, like you say, cloak and dagger, isn't it? And you'll find out what's happening after it's happened" (Janet).* When asked what evidence residents base this assumption on, the dominant response was *"you always think it anyway" (May),* suggesting this is a socially constructed narrative. There are examples of when communities attempted to exert some community power and influence policy decisions, many of which were unsuccessful, for example, when Ewanrigg campaigned to keep the local cottage hospital open.

"They don't care about us at all"

These experiences inform the attitude that the Council do not care about communities. A number of adult residents said that the Council don't *"give a shit" (Celia, Joseph)* about their community, and it was widely felt that "t*hey don't care about us at all" (Elaine).* These accounts all relate to a feeling of powerlessness, where decisions are made, that impact on their lives without any consideration of the consequences for the community. Trish summarised this sentiment when proposing that the Council's attitude toward investment and the social infrastructure of her community was *"we'll just take it away, it doesn't matter" (Trish).*

Commitment to the Community

Residents sought to build relationships with people who shared their values, embedded in a deep commitment to the wellbeing of the Council. This commitment was seen through enacting a sense of civic duty by providing practical support to residents and responding to the community's needs.

Civic Duty and Reciprocity

Adult residents provided numerous accounts of elected members who they felt acted in the interests of the community, which included offering practical support at public community events and also responding to individual requests for support. Examples of community support include helping with community dinners, where members worked without wanting anything in return:

Melanie: *And he'll stand and work.*
Janet: *All day, won't have dinner. He's in the kitchen all day washing dishes.*

Here Melanie and Janet suggest that selflessness, reciprocity and civic duty are highly valued. These sentiments are echoed in the example below:

Joseph: *The only one who does actually take any time with [the young people with learning difficulties] is [elected member]*
Chloe: *Yes.*
Joseph: *When he comes in he'll sit here for ages cracking away with them.*
Chloe: *He'll bring the dog and everything for us.*
Joseph: *The rest of them, they like to put their name to the community centre and say, we've helped to do this, oh look what we've achieved.*
Chloe: *[Elected member] gets us donations and that though as well, doesn't he?*
Joseph: *Yes, he's the only one.*
Chloe: *But he doesn't shout it from the rooftops.*

This elected member is seen to offer an informal and personal approach by bringing his dog to spend time with young people with learning difficulties, which is perceived as being selfless as it is not used as a tool for self-promotion on social media.

Reliable and responsive

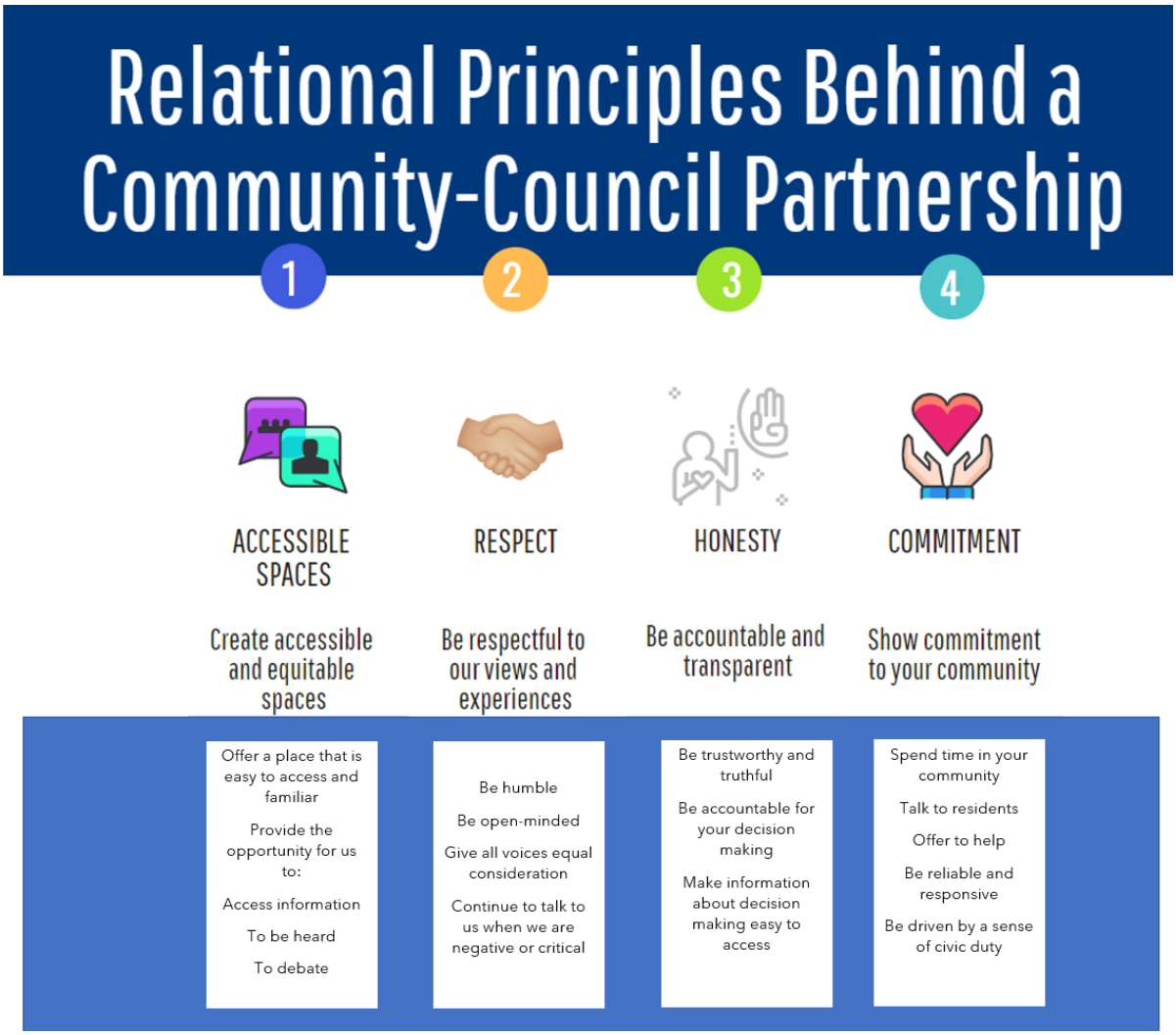
Residents provided examples seeking help from a trusted elected member and cited reliability and responsiveness of traits that were of great value:

May: *I phoned [elected member] because I was struggling getting a passport. You ask him to do something, done, done.*
Janet: *That's the kind of person you want though, don't you? You want somebody that's going to help you, not hinder you.*

Being approachable and accessible (through attending meetings or being available on the phone) was felt to help facilitate this supportive process, along with listening and being reliable *("If you had a problem and you tell him, he would listen and he would help you sort that problem out", Claire).*

Relational Principles Behind a Community-Council Partnership

The accounts provided by residents show that relationships are critical in working with communities. Relationships revolve around interactions and "have a history of past and an expectation of future interaction and this shapes their current interaction" (Crossley, 2011, p.28). Interactions impact on relationships, "transform[ing] the way in which [actors] act, feel and think" towards other people (Crossley, 2011, p.30). Drawing on the accounts provided by residents, four relational principles have been developed to inform interactions between communities and the local authorities moving forward.



The principles presented above have been shared and critically discussed with a number of policy actors. Consensus was reached that these principles were valid, but several policy actors wanted to ensure that these were reciprocal principles, where elected members and council officers were also treated with respect. This highlights the importance of reciprocity in building relationships.

The author appreciates that the recommendations may reflect the Council's current practice and that they resonate closely with the values described in the Cumberland Plan (Cumberland Council, 2023). This relational framework, emerging from in-depth, impartial research can be used to both validate and challenge current practice.

PART FOUR: TURNING RESEARCH INTO ACTION

Outcomes

The publication of this report swiftly follows the completion of the research and therefore the outcomes are still emerging. However, a number of immediate outcomes have already been observed on individual, community and policy levels. On an individual level, residents felt empowered and educated to speak out, with one resident simply saying:

"you've given me firepower"

Accounts from young residents show how the research experience made them feel heard and validated, and many spoke with pride about the work they had done in the project. One young person commented that:

"being able to like speak up instead of like, because you don't really get to speak up in the school and like anywhere else."

Another young person reflected on this involvement in the project has developed his skills and awareness of politics:

"I feel like it's almost preparing us for the real world because in the real world you're always going to have to have a say in something. Obviously, we're going to have to start voting and stuff like that eventually, so it's just preparing us for that".

These outcomes show the immediate impact of being involved in a process where residents feel heard, developing confidence and knowledge, which can be understood as individual capacity.

Bringing communities and policy actors together in an inclusive space created opportunities for dialogue. Residents could ask policy actors questions about issues affecting them, such as bin strikes, which increased their understanding of the processes within the Council and the challenges they face. These conversations identified the communication strategies used by the Council that could be improved upon in reaching residents and new methods of communicating with residents are being developed. In one community this is through a local newsletter, another through word of mouth and being more visible at the local community centre.

On a community level, new networks were established between community organisations and the Council, which have already resulted in increased community capacity in the form of additional funding and further networking opportunities. These new connections have also provided young people with different mediums to express their concerns. For example, Bobby Forbes (Member of Youth Parliament for Cumberland), with some of the young people attending Shackles Off in Millom. They expressed a wish to have their voices heard on projects in town, such as future funding and spending planning, and development of facilities for young people. Bobby filmed and publicly posted a request to the Town Council,[3] which has received a response asking for Bobby and the young

[3] Bobby's video can be found here: https://youtu.be/ZMQGfiF0L7E?si=0lyvloJxdzmYQFdo

people from Shackles Off to meet with councillors to find a way forward in communicating effectively and working together.

On a policy level, the research is contributing to the developing culture of participation within Cumberland Council, with the involvement of the elected members in this research serving as role models of best practices in community engagement. The findings provided supportive evidence for adopting Community Network and have been used to inform engagement strategies in the communities involved in this research. Furthermore, results have been used in developing Cumberland Council's new Customer Empowerment Strategy

Anticipated outcomes

There are also a number of anticipated outputs associated with the Community Power research. Through being involved in local decision-making, residents will feel listened to and valued. Being involved in the process, in whatever form it may take, will build capacity in individuals and promote social inclusion in marginalised groups. Closer working relationships with grassroots organisations can also help to build their capacity.

As set out in the theory of change logic model, embracing the participatory activities co-designed by communities could bring numerous beneficial outcomes for the Council. These include gaining a breadth of information about community concerns and priorities along with detailed insight into the sensitivities within a given community. These approaches would provide the Council with the opportunity to share accurate information with groups who do not access traditional news channels and also to gain insight into the experiences of those who use Council services.

It is also anticipated that the findings will be used to inform a number of local policy developments, including:

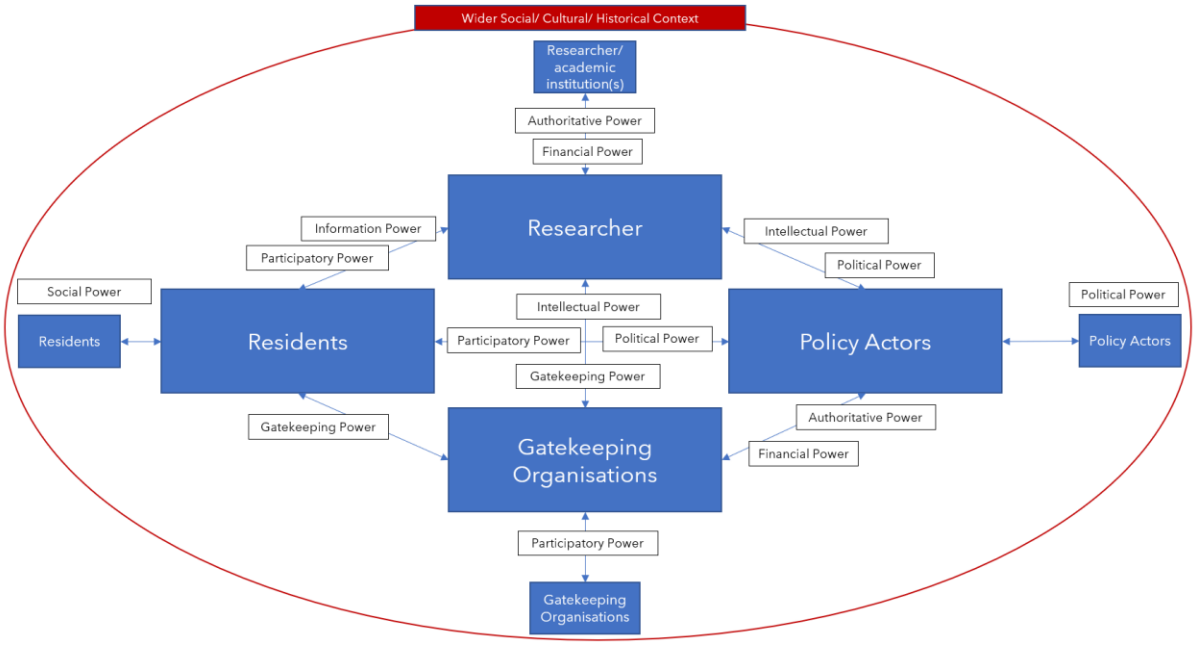
1. The overall relational framework will be considered as providing the foundation for developing collaborative and respectful practices between communities and the Council. This will be applied to the forthcoming community engagement research between the Council, the University of Cumbria and UCLan, focusing on evidence-based policy development.
2. Specific work with a small group of young adults with learning difficulties resulted in the co-creation of a framework for engagement and participation with young adults with learning difficulties. This framework will be presented to the Council for consideration within SEND and adult social services policy (see Appendix D for the Framework for Community Engagement and Participation).

The overarching vision of this work is for a culture of authentic community participation to thrive in the Council, characterised by positive relationships, locally informed decision-making and improved social inclusion in low-income coastal communities.

Responding to Resistance by Understanding Power Dynamics

Physical communities are complex, as are councils, which could also be considered a community. Both have strong cultural histories and can stir strong emotions in those who belong to such communities. The formation of Cumberland Council and subsequent reforms that have since accompanied it have resulted in significant changes in the culture and practices of this council. As in many walks of life, change can be met with resistance; new ways of working may feel unfamiliar and threatening to officers and elected members, and the community may be fearful of change due to previous negative experiences.

An understanding of the reasons behind resistance is key in developing strategies to overcome them, and often, power dynamics can be the central cause of resistance. The Community Power saw a vast array of different power dynamics, which may provide a useful framework for understanding and responding to challenges in the future. The figure below provides a reflective framework of the power dynamics operating in the Community Power research, all acting within a wider social, cultural and historical context.



PAR seeks to challenge existing inequalities by working with marginalised populations to overcome some form of power inequality. As researchers, we must be cognisant of our implicit privilege in terms of social positioning and subsequent power positioning. This is the foundation of being a reflexive researcher, where we strive to "maintain transparency about our own positionality and be reflexive over the research process" (Bartles & Wittmater, 2020, p. 22). The role of the academic institution and the research is presented to acknowledge the implicit status and power that is often associated with HE. These potential assumptions were consciously recognised and reflected on throughout the research, and it is hoped that UCLan and the researcher were perceived as equal partners throughout. In order to ensure intellectual power was evenly distributed, copies of the

report were shared with all stakeholders involved in the research. This invited feedback and provided opportunities for questions, comments and challenges.

Some forms of power present in the research were unique to the research context, others more ubiquitous. Examples from each form of power are provided below:

Authoritative	• Policy actors have the power to enforce policies and practices onto the ways in which gatekeeping organisations work. • Academic institutions have set policies and procedures which the researcher must adhere to.
Policy	• Policy actors have power over policies that impact on the lives of residents. • Different policy actors may have different policy preferences, which may cause conflict. • Different policy actors have different positions of power, which may cause conflict. • Policy actors have control over how they use the results of the research to inform policy.
Financial	• Academic institute provide funding for research. • Policy actors provide funding for gatekeeping organisations.
Gatekeeping	• Gatekeeping organisations provide research access to residents • Gatekeeping organisations can control who is invited to participate in the research and who may be excluded.
Participatory	• Residents had a control over their choice to participate with the research. • Residents have control in their choice to participate with local democracy. • Management in gatekeeping organisations have control over who else in the organisation participates in research.
Intellectual	• Academic institutions possess a taken-for-grant expertise, where their opinions may be given more weightage than others. This includes being in a position to challenge policy actors, which others may not be able to. • The researcher, belonging to an academic institution with a taken-for-grant expertise, may be assumed to be in a superior position to gatekeeping organisations.
Information	• Residents could choose what information they provided the research and in what way they shared it. • The researcher had control over how the information shared by residents was interpreted and presented to the policy actors.
Social	• Residents have different levels of social power and influence in their communities, manifest in many forms.

The complexities of power in community research and community engagement in general can make it different to devise ways to promote an equal distribution of power. However, in the interests of this research, policy actors can be understood as having tradition, authoritative power, and communities (residents and gatekeeping organisations) possessing participatory power.

By applying the relational framework presented in this report, it is hoped that communities and the council will find a way to distribute powers differently. Equally important is ensuring that internal power dynamics are recognised and addressed, which can be done using similar methods used with communities. A relational approach to participation in local governance has been advocated elsewhere, again recommending shifting power dynamics to build trust. Such an approach must include an inclusive engagement process, a responsive government administration, and the removal of political constraints and threatened civic spaces, among other relational outcomes. (Medina-Guce, 2020)

Recommendations

The recommendations presented have been deduced from the findings of the research. It is recognised that some may reflect existing values and practices in the Council, and where that is the case, it is hoped that these recommendations can support and enhance current approaches.

1. Place-based: The local social infrastructure plays a significant role in bringing people together in communities. It is recommended that the Council provide opportunities for residents to become involved in the democratic process in their physical community. Two effective strategies are engaging with existing community services and holding public engagement events. Both strategies would involve the Council developing strong collaborative relationships with the third sector, which could help to build trust. Both the development of Community Networks and the implementation of recruiting co-opted members into Community Panels will add to the local social infrastructure.
2. Coproduction not consultation: Be mindful to avoid approaches that are short, term, and focused on taking information from communities. Rather, embrace long-term, participatory processes whereby communities are positioned as active partners and contributors in the democratic process. For example, the development of the Community Networks must embed a long-term dialogue with residents rather than one-off conversations.
3. Involve young people: The young residents in this research provided inspiring and innovative ideas concerning community engagement and democratic participation. Most of the young people included in this study were marginalised in multiple ways, for example, experiencing poverty and having additional learning needs. Consequently, these young people are more likely to experience additional barriers in accessing participatory opportunities. Recommendations include developing a community of practice whereby opportunities to participate are included within existing services. An example of how to do this would be by Cumberland Council adopting the previous Cumbria County Council Participation Framework to embed across all departments and for anyone intending to work with young people.
4. Communication: Sessions revealed that residents have limited access to traditional communication strategies and information do not always reach them. Community Development Officers and elected members can work with community organisations, with embedded and effective communication strategies for each community, ensuring that key messages and opportunities for participation are reaching different groups of the community (including young people, older people and migrant residents). As advocated by residents involved in this research, this must include a combination of digital, written and verbal tools.
5. Build relationships: All recommendations allude to building positive relationships. This takes time and may involve adopting new practices, which may be uncomfortable or feel challenging. The findings suggest that residents are open and willing to start this process. Investing time in building positive relationships with grassroots organisations operating in communities and the residents who use them is essential. Developing approaches to participation that are ongoing can help to build these relationships. A regular presence will help to embed the Council within the community where explicit shared values can form the foundations of reciprocal power and relationships.

Concluding Comments

The approaches developed by residents tell us what is important to communities and where they see themselves in relation to the Council. The social infrastructure within communities is greatly valued; community centres and services are seen as inclusive and accessible places for residents and places where they feel they can enact a degree of power.

The workshops did, however, reveal the complex social fabric of communities, with relationships being the epicentre. As much as, collectively, there appears to be a strong sense of belonging and pride in the community, issues around trust can be seen through residents' concern over who would act as a formal representative for the community. Historical and embedded narratives impact on the perceived relationships with the Council, which affect how much trust and faith are placed in democratic processes. The ways in which the Council interact with communities, particularly responding to the challenge, also have a significant impact on community-council relationships.

Critically reflecting on the approaches chosen, it could be argued that residents seek reform in opportunities for *democratic participation*, rather than *participatory democracy*. Conversation cafés, dialogue forums and co-production provide means for communities to have some input into the policy process but suggest that they do not necessarily want to hold the power and responsibility of decision-making. The issues around representation and responsibility that arose around formal representation support this argument. That said, the residents involved in this research were passionate about the well-being of their community and welcome the opportunity to be part of the journey of the new Cumberland Council.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Community Participant Demographics

	Ewanrigg %		Moorclose %				
	Sample	Ward*	Sample	Ward*	Allerdale*	NW*	UK*
Age							
- 18-25	0		11.8		7.6	9.8	9.6
- 26-35	12.5		23.5		10.9	13.4	13.5
- 36-45	12.5		11.8		10.7	11.9	12.5
- 46-55	12.5		11.8		14.6	13.4	13.5
- 56-65	12.5		0		15.9	13.7	13.5
- 66-75	50		29.4		13	10	9.8
- 76+	0		11.8		10	7.8	7.8
Gender							
- Male	0	48	47	47.6		49.1	49
- Female	100	52	53	52.4		50.9	51
Sexuality							
- Straight	100	98	94	97.2	91.8	90.1	89.4
- LGBTQ+	0	2	6	2.8	2.1	9.9	10.6
Ethnicity							
- White	100	99.7	100	99.3	98.6	85.6	81.7
- Other	0	0.3	0	0.7	1.4	14.4	18.3
Employment Status							
- Student	0	2.7	0	3	2.9	4.6	5.6
- Employed	12.5	53.2	17.7	52.2	55	55.5	57.1
- Unemployed	12.5	5	47.1	6.7	4	5.8	5.7
- Maternity	12.5	6.1	0	6	3.8	4.7	4.8
- Retired	62.5	22.9	35.3	21.2	28.2	22.2	21.6
Disability							
- Yes	0	24	52.9	26	20	19	18
- No	100	76	47.1	74	80	81	82

Table 1: Community Participant Demographics (*Census 2021)

Appendix B: Policy Actor Participant Demographics

Age	Gender	Role
56-65	Male	Leader of the Council
36-45	Female	Deputy Leader of the Council (statutory)
36-45	Female	Deputy Leader of the Council (non-statutory)
56-65	Female	Exec Board member
56-65	Male	Exec Board member
46-55	Female	Exec Board member
46-55	Male	Director of Health
46-55	Male	Director of Place
46-55	Male	Senior Policy Officer
46-55	Male	Senior Officer: Governance and Thriving Communities
46-55	Male	Project Manager Place Theme – LGR
46-55	Female	Senior Manager, Community Services
36-45	Female	Community Development Officer
46-55	Female	Community Development Officer
46-55	Female	Community Development Officer
36-45	Female	Community Development Officer
56-65	Female	Elected member
56-65	Male	Elected member
66-75	Female	Elected member
46-55	Male	Elected member
66-75	Male	Elected Member

Table 2: Policy Actor Participant Demographics

Appendix C: Community Approaches to Participatory Democracy

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South Whitehaven

Community Cafe

Proactive, regular, face to face sessions in the local community centre. Family and community themed, including fundraising for local chairites and activities such as bingo.

Area Forums

Proactive, regular, meetings, both face to face and online. Physical locations include the local community centre, public space and Council offices.

Crowd Sourcing

Proactive, providing an online space where residents an share concerns and potential soultions to policy polciy areas.

Citizen's Panels and E-Panels

Reactive, when issues arise as identified by the community and the Council. At various locations around the community and online.

Agenda Setting

Implementation

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Ewanrigg

Community Cafe

Proactive, regular, face to face sessions in the community centre and various locations around Maryport. Intergenerational theme.

Co-Production

Proactive, regular, face to face sessions in the community centre.

Work in conjection with existing services.

Consensus Conference

Proactive, regular, face to face meeting in the community centre. It is important to have meetings in the same place to avoid confusion.

Citizen's Assembly

Proactive, regular, face to face sessions to pre-empt and tackle issues as they arise.

Involve schools and children

Agenda Setting

Policy Development

Decision Making

Implementation

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Millom

Community Cafe

Proactive, regular, face to face sessions in Millom town centre. Needs to provide free food and free wifi to attract young people.

Co-Production

Proactive, regular, face to face sessions with existing services, using a number of different ways to work with service users (surveys, focus groups, workshops).

Consensus Conference

Meeting in Millom town centre in response to specific policy issues. It is important to make sure it is widely publicised to make sure that the opportunoty is open to everyone in the community.

Consensus Voting

Paper and online voting open to the entire community on specific policies. To include participatiry budgetting, where all members of the community can approach the Council with a pitch.

Agenda Setting

Policy Development

Decision Making

Implementation

How we want to be treated

Be kind to us

Don't shout at us

Make eye contact with us and talk to us on our level (rather than looking down on us)

Listen to us

Smile at us

Reply when we speak to you

We want to be treated with respect.

How we want to be involved

Face to face

Small groups

One to one

We find it easier to understand things through pictures rather than words, so please present information using images when possible.

Things we would like a say about

Leisure and recreation: Safe, clean, accessible, affordable and fun places to spend our free time.

Access to transport: Safe, affordable, accessible, and reliable public transport and taxis.

Volunteering: What accessible volunteering opportunities we can have.

Services: What day services and evening groups we can access

We want to feel safe above everything else.

The people we want with us

The most important people we want with us are support staff, parents, and close family friends. These are the people we trust and feel safe with.

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