

Levelled Up or Left Behind? Fostering Community Power and Social Inclusion in Low-Income Coastal Communities

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Regional inequalities in the UK have received increased policy recognition in recent years. Certain regions, such as those that have undergone significant industrial decline and have poor physical infrastructure, have been highlighted as being vulnerable to regional inequalities and subsequent exclusion (MacKinnon, et al., 2022), constructed from a policy perspective as being “left behind” (Local Trust, 2019). Coastal communities are amongst regions highlighted as particularly vulnerable to such inequalities (Whitty, 2021), many of whom feel removed from local and national places of power, something I will present as political peripherality. This peripherality hinders opportunities for political participation, a central dimension of social inclusion (Levitas et al., 2007), and thus deprives communities of opportunities to thrive. ‘Community power’ is a concept proposed to reduce spatial inequalities, although no accepted definition exists. The new Labour government speaks of “powering up Britain,” which includes a new English Devolution Bill and new powers for metro mayors and combined authorities (Labour, 2024). However, the role of community power in this agenda is unclear. Despite stating a commitment to empowering communities, the role of citizens and the third sector in this agenda is yet to be determined.

Policy Idea: Hyper-local Community Power

This essay presents evidence advocating for hyper-local participatory approaches to build relationships and promote community power in low-income coastal communities. Creating the conditions for communities to meaningfully share power and participate in decision-making that impacts their lives can foster social inclusion and promote further political engagement. After presenting an overview of the academic literature making a case for hyper-local relational governance to support communities to thrive, a case study example will be presented from a participatory action research (PAR) project which brought four “left behind” coastal communities together with a local authority to co-produce strategies promoting participatory democracy (Wilson, 2024a). The results highlight the potential of co-produced research to address the challenges of ‘left behind’ communities by placing the lived experience of feeling left behind and excluded at the forefront of policy development.

Evidence

There is an increasing recognition that a hyper-local approach is needed to promote civic participation (Hickson, 2024). Approaches to democratic participation with socially and economically deprived communities acknowledge issues surrounding power, governance and participation (Selg et al., 2024), respecting feelings (Stears & King, 2011), inclusive dialogical spaces (Medina-Guce, 2020), honesty and trust (Medina-Guce, 2020), a culture of co-production (Agranoff, 2008; Bartels & Turnbull, 2020) and ensuring accountability and transparency (Selg & Ventsel, 2020).

Case Study: Community Power in Cumberland Council

Previous research with low-income coastal communities along the Cumbrian coast area found that, of 646 residents surveyed, only nine would approach 'the Council' or a 'councillor' if they wanted to make a positive change in their community (Wilson & Morris, 2023a; Wilson and Morris, 2023b; Wilson and Morris, 2020, Wilson et al, 2020). In response, four low-income coastal communities in Cumbria were selected for this participatory action research project. These were Moorclose (in the town of Workington), Ewanrigg (in Maryport), Millom (a town on the Cumbrian south coast), and South Whitehaven. We worked with 40 residents: 25 adult residents aged over 18 years; and 15 young residents aged between 11 and 17 years old.

The research was conducted over 18 months through community workshops, where residents explored different strategies for democratic participation and deliberated on which strategies would be most effective within their communities. During the community workshops, we discussed how people felt about local and national politics and whether they felt represented in these arenas. We also discussed what obstructed their participation in local and national politics and what might enable it.

Policy actor workshops were held with councillors and council officers from Cumberland Council, reflecting on opportunities and challenges of working with low-income coastal communities and critically discussing the Council's existing ideas to engage communities in the democratic process. The participatory action research element of the project was enacted through co-creation sessions in each community, bringing residents and policy actors together for honest and critical discussions about working together for the benefit of their communities.

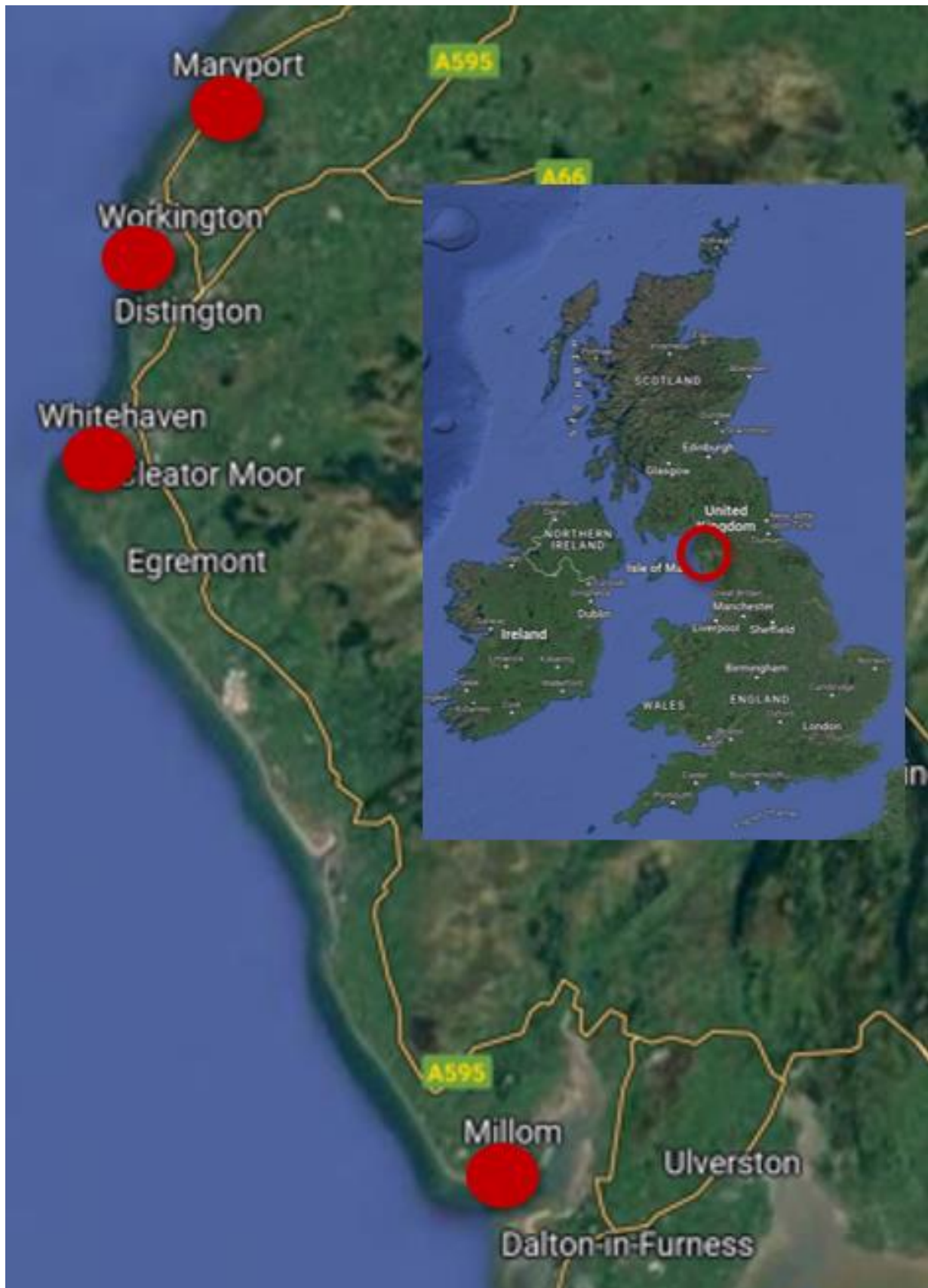


Figure 1: Location of case study communities in West Cumbria

Identifying the Challenges

Before developing a co-creative approach to policy development, it was important to understand how residents viewed the local council. Despite their physical proximity, the dominant narratives about local policy actors revealed a symbolic distance between residents and the local political system. Three distinct narratives emerged from a thematic analysis of the issues discussed:

1. **Local government cannot be trusted to act for the benefit of the community:** A historical feeling of being let down was a common theme, exemplified in the comment. *"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"*. This collective memory then impacts how future interactions are anticipated, with a reluctance to be receptive to new policies or initiatives.
2. **Local council decisions are predetermined:** There was a significant narrative that council decisions are predetermined, with any consultation being tokenistic and for promotional purposes. In exploring the roots of this narrative, residents described a lack of awareness of how decisions are made. They added that they felt this was a deliberate tactic to exclude residents in decision-making, for example: *"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"*.
3. **Local elected members have an assumed superiority:** A narrative around councillor assumed superiority (*"I'm a councillor, who are you type of thing"*) was present. For example, one resident 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 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"*. Here, a perceived power inequality is implied, whereby being in office is associated with an assumed superiority on behalf of the elected member, which was attributed to a change in character.

These accounts exemplify the symbolic distance communities feel towards their local democratic system. This subsequently results in disengagement with local politics, which

is expressed in low voter turnout and lack of engagement in council consultation exercises. The local elections for the new Cumberland Council in May 2022 saw all communities returning fewer votes than the 36.1% county average: Ewanrigg 26.9%, Millom 30.1% Moorclose 27.7%, South Whitehaven 31.4% (UK Parliament, 2023). These findings resonate with voter behaviour in similar communities that could be considered peripheral or ‘left-behind’ (Abreu & Jones, 2021; Telford, 2021, 2023; Telford & Lloyd, 2020).

Working Towards a Solution

In response to these concerns, the research brought communities and policy actors together to co-create bespoke means to promote participatory democracy in each community. Through discussions with residents and local policymakers, it became clear that communities wished to be “part of the journey” with the Council, having the opportunity to build ongoing, respectful relationships with key policy actors. Through the workshops, communities developed a framework of relational principles that residents wanted to underpin all practices throughout the Council, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Relational Principles Behind a Community-Council Partnership (Wilson, 2024b)

Residents sought a relationship with the Council whereby they could work collaboratively and with equal status. It was agreed that strong, trusting relationships between communities and local authorities are the foundation of any collaborative strategy. Co-production was universally chosen as the preferred vehicle to create conditions to enact their community power, appreciating the value of citizens' subjective, lived experience and the expertise this can bring. In response, Cumberland Council have developed a Community Power workstream within their Transformation Programme. This workstream seeks to co-create a council-wide, well-supported and resourced approach to co-production with a centralised engagement and research hub. Although only at the start of a long process, this workstream works towards a radical approach to citizen engagement in decision-making.

Policy Implementation Recommendation: Co-Production over Consultation to Develop an Inclusive Policy Process

The four relational principles developed by residents and illustrated in Figure 2 demonstrate several findings about how residents wish 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 legitimate as those of the local authority. This research demonstrates the multiple positive impacts that can occur through meaningful engagement between communities and policymakers. On an individual level, lived citizenship was fostered through residents participating in meaningful activities within their community. Furthermore, new relationships were formed by offering low-income coastal communities opportunities to engage with local institutions, sometimes resulting in new community partnerships.

To achieve authentic, sustainable community power, local authorities must commit to long-term, participatory processes whereby communities are positioned as active partners and contributors in the democratic process. This includes, but is not limited to:

- adopting culture and arts-based engagement strategies to begin conversations with communities.

- providing opportunities to co-create ways for communities to participate in local democracy and allocate resources to ensure co-produced strategies are implemented.
- establishing lived experience advisory groups, with the support of key third-sector organisations, to ensure that the voices of those experiencing inequalities are at the centre of policy development.
- forming local governance structures to ensure that community representatives play an active role decision-making and holding the authorities to account.

Co-production is not linear, with a beginning and end. It is a cultural change in thinking and practice, which requires a critical reflection on power dynamics within co-productive policy (Durose & Richardson, 2016; Beebeejaun et al., 2014). Barriers to successful implementation may include resistance and even hostility towards changing practices, from both elected members and officers. This hostility, as my research found, may be rooted in a feeling of powerlessness within the Council itself, so it is essential that all actors, community and policy alike, are included in the journey towards co-production and community power. Competing priorities can also impede inclusive and co-produced practice; it is expensive and time-consuming; a luxury many local authorities may feel they cannot afford. Promoting a culture that appreciates long-term public cost savings can be a tool to gain institutional support (Improta & Mannoni, 2024). Moreover, implementing cultural change within an institution may be hindered by short-term policy cycles, which often provide only short-term strategies which seek quickly observable outcomes. This can be countered by challenging hegemonic structures and promoting sustainable, long-term systems beyond traditional policy cycles (Bartels & Wittmayer, 2019).

Conclusion

Poor relationships, embedded in a historical distrust towards local government, can shape how coastal communities view their position within democratic systems. Investing time and resources in developing trusting relationships with significant grassroots third-sector organisations can be a step towards developing the conditions to enable all citizens to participate in local democracy. However, this requires a significant cultural shift and potentially difficult decisions in reforming traditional power structures. Challenging these hegemonic structures, where the conditions are created to develop co-productive practices that share power and decision-making over issues that impact their lives, has the

potential to turn the most socially and economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England into thriving communities.

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