

Leeds Community Researchers: An Ongoing Journey

Based on discussions and workshop outputs from the *Leeds Community Researchers Meet-Up* held on Tuesday 15th July 2025.

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Aims

The aim of this meet-up was to:

- **Reflect** on experiences as community researchers, with a lens of how a network can help in future. How do **we** do Community Research? Where have you been looking for support? What common challenges are you coming across?
- **Explore** the current landscape and opportunities. Funding, where is it? How can we coordinate and be better prepared? What are the current trends? Where are we headed?
- **Plan** our next steps. What does this network look like? How does it fit within the current landscape? Who else do we bring in? When do we meet again? How frequent would we want to meet? How can we fund this network going forward? What is the next bigger event?

Context for the Day

In 2024, a group of community researchers focussing on community-led and community-engaged research across Leeds, together with university staff, came together to write a bid for UK Research & Innovation's (UKRI) Community Research Network funding scheme¹. The group had been funded for Phase 1 of the bid to run 2 pilots and to develop a city-wide network of networks with which they shaped the bid. Several bid writing workshops took place with partners and a symposium in May 2024 was fully booked with 80 participants. This event built up a solid foundation for collaboration. Sadly, the bid was unsuccessful; however, there was an intent to keep the momentum going.

Throughout 2025 the Public Engagement team at the University of Leeds has been maintaining conversations with a core group of community researchers and define the next steps, a meet-up to reflect and discuss what next. Through these conversations the aims were decided, balancing out the need to reflect together as community researchers, and to develop an ongoing journey as some form of possible network².

Outputs can be found on this Miro Board:

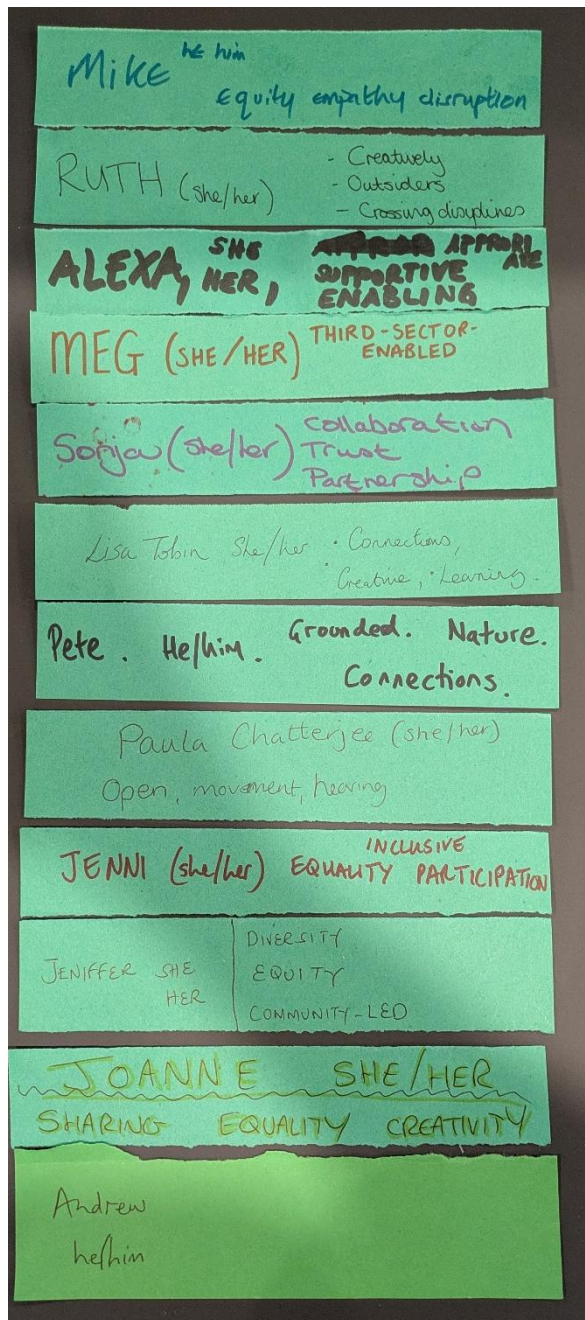
https://miro.com/app/board/uXjVJeMynTQ=?share_link_id=472080035278

¹ <https://www.ukri.org/what-we-do/public-engagement/research-and-innovation-for-everyone/>

² Network will be used in its most informal term throughout the document, as in a grouping of people. When more formal set-ups will be discussed, they will be called formal networks.

Who was there?

Participants were asked to introduce themselves with their name, pronouns and write words about their community research practice:



Mike (he/him) – Equity, Empathy, Disruption

Ruth (she/her) – Creatively, Outsiders, Crossing Disciplines

Alexa (she/her) – Appropriate, Supportive, Enabling

Meg (she/her) – Third – Sector – Enabled

Sonja (she/her) – Collaboration, Trust, Partnership

Lisa (she/her) – Connections, Creative, Learning

Peter (he/him) – Grounded, Nature, Connections

Paula (she/her) – Open, Movement, Hearing

Jenni (she/her) – Equity, Inclusive, Participation

Jeniffer (she/her) – Diversity, Equity, Community-Led

Joanne (she/her) – Sharing, Equality, Creativity

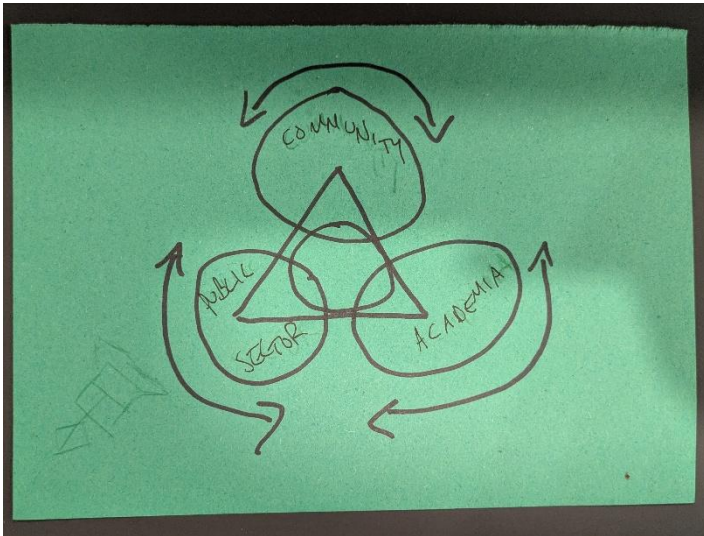
Alice (she/her)³

Andrew (he/him)⁴

³ The card was lost.

⁴ Andrew missed this initial exercise.

What is Community Research to you?

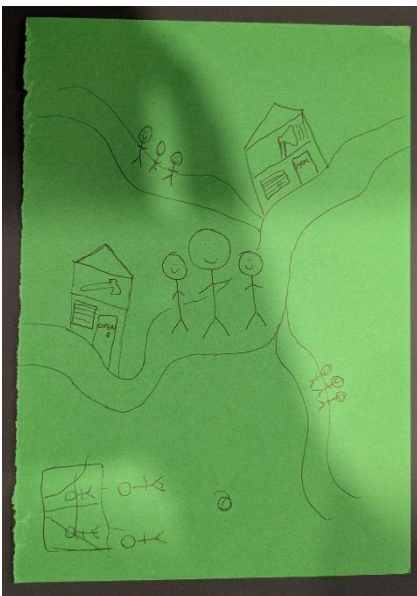


Participants were asked to explore what community research was to them through drawing. It was emphasised that any type of drawing was allowed, so diagrams, or more representative sketches.

Many themes were repeated across the outputs. More diagrammatic examples had circles overlapped with connections and directional arrows.

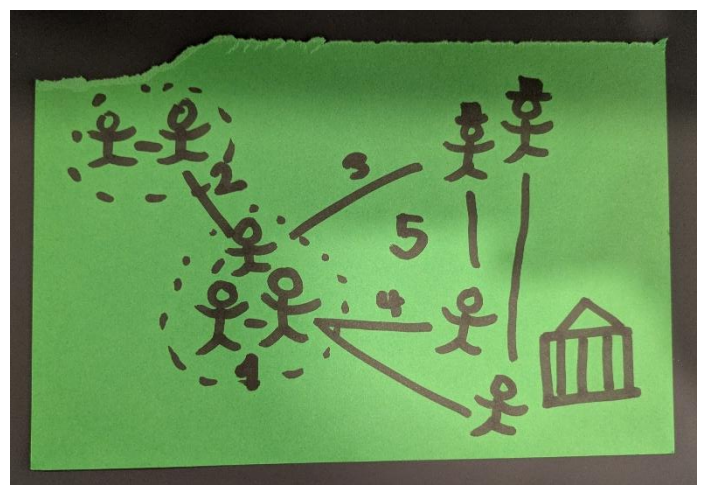
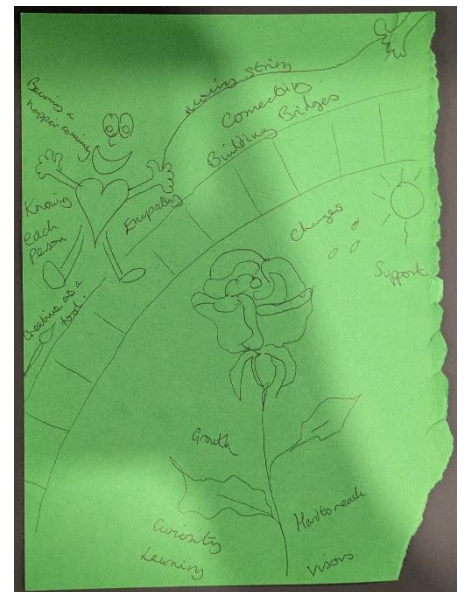
These generally indicated community research as a

connected system. Some examples focussed on the connections within community research; others linked these to academia and the public sector / policy.



The other type of drawing produced was pictorial, and these included homes and other buildings, groups of people and often pathways or journeys connecting these. The idea resonated with initial conversations when co-planning the day, where the community researchers themselves are on an ongoing journey, with this event as the next step.

Other examples combined pictorial representations of circular groups people with each other and buildings.



When discussed in groups these common elements emerged for **Community Research**.

On **what** it does:

- Identifies power dynamics.
- Disrupts at and across different levels.

On **how it practically works**:

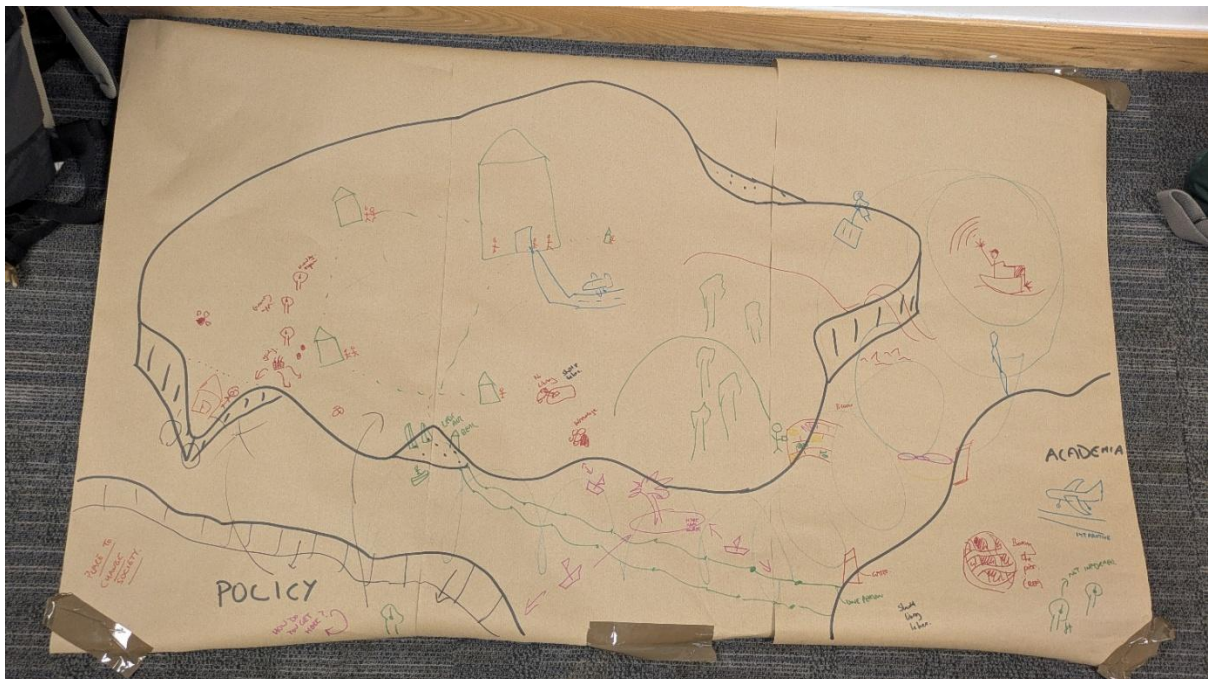
- Dynamic / Flexible
- Flowing Movement
- Qualitative.
- It's a journey.
- There's circular communication.
- Creative.
- Natural rather than mechanical.
- Values lived experience.

On **how it emotionally works**:

- You **know** how it *feels* to do it.
- Respectful.
- There's trust.

This exercise laid out a common understanding for **what Community Research is**.

What is the Current Context for Community Research?



The next exercise looked at the wider context for Community Research. It postulates what does Community Research look like as an island, and how does it connect to other islands? This

creative methodology helps to map a system or organisation which has links to other systems. The methodology allows for participants to map what the current situation is through using metaphors but also dive into the actual situations when needed.⁵

The map can be found on the Miro Board, where it is easier to Zoom:

https://miro.com/app/board/uXjVJeMynTQ=?share_link_id=472080035278

The **system** was represented as an archipelago consisting of three islands, one representing community researchers, one representing academia, and a final one representing policy. The community research island was drawn with some cliffs and some beaches, but everything else was added through discussion.

The **community researchers** are a collective of organisations of many different sizes, represented by different sized buildings. What's important to note is the people themselves within these buildings. Bigger organisations have more people. However, there isn't a proportionate relationship between house size and people, so some bigger organisations may still be under resourced. There is a network of paths that connect the buildings, representing how these different groups are well networked.

There are **scars** on the island which represents damage from previous partnerships with other islands that have been extractive. There is continued extraction from the island, through a digger which remains isolated from other parts of the island.

One of the houses is on a cliff edge, which represents the danger posed by lack of stability. There are also other **dangers**, there are sharks in sea and big storms approaching. These represent the unsettled times we are all operating in due to additional cuts to funding available to communities, the growth of late-stage capitalism and rapid climate change.

Connections and communication with academia. There are airports that connect the islands of academia to community research, but the road which connects to the airport on community research only goes to the bigger building (so more established organisations within the community). The airports also represent one-off partnerships, so flights are chartered by academia island, so these partnerships are led by academics. Engagement professionals from academia are navigating the straits between the islands on a small boat, powered by a tiny engine and trying to communicate with as many people as possible on both islands. Some community organisations (Hyde Park Source) have set-up camp on a small island off the coast of community research and are sending sail boats to all islands from there. Another organisation (LeedsACTS!) has set-up a beach where they invited other organisations to join, chat, and work together.

Bridges are being developed across the straits. From academia, these are seen as metal chain bridges, so structured but still not fully stable. The development of these is uncoordinated and not always landing in the best places on the island. Each bridge starting or landing in academia has an airport style security gate at the start. From community research, some organisations are building their unique bridges which represent their way of working (such as a multi-coloured brick bridge). A less stable rope bridge connects the accessible beach on community research (LeedsACTS!) to academia.

⁵ Method originally created by creative facilitator Mary Robson.

There is a distinct lack of connection to **policy island**, yet this was seen as *the* place to change society. Some community researchers feel academia is a route to Policy. (The mapping between Academia and Policy was beyond the scope of this exercise).

One support structure that was seen as missing on community research island was a **library**; this was represented as a blank space. Participants felt there should be one. This library represents a place where learning from community researchers can be codified, stored, and shared by community researchers for community researchers. Instead, a library is located on academia island. This library is not accessible, and represents the formal publications of research, which was not the best knowledge storage system for the type of knowledge been generated on the island.

These ideas were also represented in how **resources** are shared across the archipelago. This was represented by apples. Community island produces apples. This represents the research being carried out by community research, which includes ideas, learning, lived experience, wisdom, knowledge of the island, the homes within it and its people. These apples are coveted across the archipelago and can't be found on other islands.

Academia island needs those apples to bake an apple pie following a very specific recipe, one that leads to a pie that looks perfect and is appealing on their island. This represents how academia uses the lived experience that community research has, and turns it into a specific **output**, like a research paper, or a REF⁶ Impact Case Study. These pies are then sold, however that money doesn't make it back to the island of community researchers, even though the original apples were from there. This represents how outputs designed by academics for academics, lead to greater income for research institutions (e.g. through QR funding⁷), even though the research comes from the community.

Meanwhile, other pies made by the community researchers with those same apples, but using a different recipe, are often seen as imperfect, or may not be the right taste. These are left on the island and not of interest to the other islands. So, other outputs that emerge from community research, that aren't packaged through an academic output, are often ignored and not of interest to policy or academia.

What Do We Need?

Through the mapping, participants identified what was needed; a **marketplace** on community researchers island that would sell their apples and pies on **their** terms to the other islands. This marketplace would be on their island but understand the markets and needs of other islands. This represents a group of community researchers that comes together and advocate for community research and its outputs, on their terms. A group which is ready to respond to a policy or academic funding call, on their terms.

⁶ Research Excellent Framework

⁷ QR funding is the formula used by UKRI to award UK Higher Education Institutions many different types of funding, including Participatory Research, and is based on performance in the REF. For more on QR and its link to the RED see: <https://www.ukri.org/publications/explainer-qr-research-funding-and-the-ref/explainer-quality-related-research-funding-and-the-ref/>

What Next?

Participants wanted to continue their journey together as community researchers. How exactly this journey looks will evolve depending on circumstances, opportunity and the energy and availability of participants. It was decided that a formal network was not the best route for this journey just yet, as this would require funding and development of formal structure, instead it was decided to continue as a collective, or a **web of community researchers**: Connected and ready to take opportunities as they arise.

Through an exercise exploring the minimum requirements, participants determined this web should be:

- A route to influence.
- Have flexible intentions / intentionality.
- Listen & communicate.
- Maintain this dialogue regularly.
- Be open and inclusive.
- Be relational.

Practically speaking the web should have staff and those within the web should be feel they have the adequate resources to be part of the web.

The best place to house this web now would be LeedsACTS! with support from Together for Peace. They have existing structures that would help to develop this web over the coming months. However, funding is needed to cover expenses to plan the next meeting, including people's time to attend.

In terms of who is part of the web, there are different sets of people to consider:

- Community Researchers who helped co-design this meet-up.
- Community Researchers who attend this meet-up.
- Community Researchers who were invited, wanted to attend and sent their apologies.
- Community Researchers who were invited and didn't attend.
- Other Community Researchers who were involved in preparing the bid.

Which groups get invited to the next meet-up will depend on the purpose, focus and scale of the meet-up. The next meet-up should take place within three months, with the date and agenda decided through consensus. No firm decisions were taken on who facilitates the next meet-up, but this would be a corollary of the consensus-based agenda.