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# Investigating the contribution of community empowerment policies to successful co-production-evidence from Scotland

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## ABSTRACT


Although frequently perceived as a 'woolly' policy concept and a means to reduce public service delivery costs, co-production can lead to increased quality and efficiency of services. In this paper, we explore the contribution of a community empowerment policy to co-production processes. Analysing empirical findings from a mixed-method, longitudinal study through the lens of Myers et al.'s (2017) Theory of Change, the paper develops a model of a successful co-production process. We show that changes in working practices and shifts in power can create friction between co-producing actors. By critiquing specific policies, we inform future co-production research, policy, and practice.

**KEYWORDS** Community empowerment; co-production; participation request; public policies

## Introduction

In recent decades, social policies around the globe have been undergoing a transition from paternalistic, passive approaches towards greater citizen participation (Markantoni et al. 2018). Such transitions in social policy-making advocate moving away from top-down, centralized, and bureaucratic welfare states towards more democratic models that promote greater involvement of end-users in designing solutions to seemingly intractable social problems (Bennett et al. 2021; Lindenmeier et al. 2021). These changes are frequently associated with co-production and community empowerment policies (Munoz, Steiner, and Farmer 2015). Indeed, the value of co-production – described as the involvement of multiple public, private, and community actors in shaping service production (Alford 2014; Ostrom 1996) – and community empowerment – which refers to transferring elements of power from the state to communities in order to inform local development (Bailey and Pill 2015) – has been acknowledged at the international level, with an increasing number of academics indicating their interest in investigating this growing field of enquiry (Dudau, Russ, and Bram 2019; McGann, Wells, and Blomkamp 2021; Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia 2017; Osborne 2018).

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Indeed, some evidence highlights the potential benefits of community empowerment as well as co-production of services more generally (Henderson et al. 2020; Kelly et al. 2019). For example, empowered communities are seen to be able to engage and participate in local projects that matter to people, have strong social ties and a sense of belonging, and continuously develop community skills that build capacity to act and contribute to local democracy (Farmer, 2017). Co-production, on the other hand, assists in developing multi-stakeholder collaborations and a better understanding of processes associated with developing public services (Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016) and, therefore, helps to create responsive services tailored to meet the specific needs of communities and individuals (Steiner, Calo, and Shucksmith 2021). Clearly, these characteristics have made the concepts of community empowerment and service co-production attractive to policymakers who, challenged by the failure of existing political systems in addressing persistent socio-economic inequalities as well as other, less expected, emergencies such as the 2008 global economic crisis and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic, are forced to look for more efficient forms of public governance.

However, while policies position co-production and empowerment as means through which to strengthen democracy and include citizens in service planning and delivery (Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016), greater clarity is needed, especially in relation to the impact of policies and processes that can lead to successful co-production, defined as an ability of community members to *effectively* engage in shaping or co-delivering public services. Critiques of co-production indicate that the concept is multi-faceted, 'lacks conceptual and definitional clarity' (Sorrentino, Sicilia, and Howlett 2018, 277) and represents a public policy 'woolly-word' (Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016, 693) that, although popular, remains vague. In practice, in some cases, co-production of services by communities fails despite support from public sector stakeholders. For instance, Skerratt and Steiner (2013) indicate that even with public investment and guidance, co-production can be jeopardized due to differences between individual and community-level aspirations, and the fluidity of in-community interests and powers. Moreover, while acknowledging that co-production can be 'relatively efficient in complementing and filling in gaps in existing service provision', Vanderhoven et al., (2020:5) raise concerns associated with the long-term sustainability of co-produced services and, therefore, 'value for money' of co-production. Similarly, community empowerment is often viewed as an attempt to reduce public spending and a movement that shifts responsibilities from the state to communities (Markantoni et al. 2018). Farmer (2017, 132) shows that there are limits to which community members are capable of embracing current community empowerment policies and suggests that 'policies alone are not sufficient for empowerment to happen'. Community empowerment is also criticized for being complex, as it challenges existing, and often well-established, power relations between the state and citizens.

With elements of power being given away, governments are keen to re-establish an understanding of '*who's doing what?*'. As such, we are dealing here with a double-edged sword; community empowerment and co-production being simultaneously viewed as a solution to social problems as well as a complex and problematic social policy area. Indeed, within academic discourse, our understanding of successful co-production of

public services is still limited and little is known about specific policies that work to support community empowerment and co-production, and their impact on the changing relationship between citizens and the state.

The highlighted knowledge gap is surprising considering the growing focus on both community empowerment and co-production policy and practice. Indeed, to be efficient and identify *'what works and what doesn't'*, we need to know more about the impact of relevant policies. The latter can assist in further development of social policies as well as in creating community interventions that are supported by both local citizens and local public authorities.

Considering our remarks, we investigate *whether and how, community empowerment policies can contribute to successful co-production*. To address this aim, we focus our attention on *'Participation Requests'* – a social policy within the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, introduced by the Scottish Government in 2017 to stimulate community co-production and, through collaborative efforts between citizens and the state, reduce socio-economic inequalities. In this context, successful co-production would lead to greater participation in local democracy, increased confidence and skills, increased volunteering, and greater satisfaction with quality of life (Scottish Government 2017). Whilst these are complex outcomes to measure quantitatively, through qualitative data it is possible to explore the steps towards these outcomes through the proposed theoretical framework.

The originality of this paper derives both from our adoption of a longitudinal approach to assessing a specific policy as well as the use of Theory of Change – a method frequently used when evaluating specific policy interventions (Mason and Barnes, 2007) – to assist in developing our understanding of the impacts of community empowerment policies on co-production. Given the neoteric nature of the Participation Request legislation, evidence relating to its implementation is limited: our study is the first to identify the impacts of Participation Requests. We develop the theoretical framework proposed by Myers, Geyer, and Craig (2017) and, based on our empirical findings and academic debate in the field, develop a model of successful co-production processes. By critiquing *'what works and what doesn't'*, our study findings have direct implications for policy, research, and practice.

The paper begins with a brief explanation of co-production in relation to community empowerment, and a review of the Scottish context in which the research took place. The paper continues with a description of the Theory of Change, followed by the research methods, findings, and study implications.

## **Co-production and community empowerment – theoretical background**

The concepts of co-production and community empowerment are not new; rooted in the theory of citizen participation, user involvement in the planning and delivery of services has a long history within the public and private sectors (Parks et al. 1981). Over the past four decades, co-production and community empowerment have gained recognition among policymakers due to the perception that stakeholder involvement in decision-making and service co-design can limit *'the number of errors of diagnosis that are all too common when planning is carried out from the outside'* (EUCom 1988, 62). Proponents of both co-production and community empowerment highlight that the ability to affect change and influence decision-making is a vital component of *'healthy'* communities (Markantoni et al. 2018).

Co-production is a broad concept with different meanings across a range of competing narratives (Osbourne et al., 2016). Establishing a definition is problematic, as the term has grown organically from a range of sectors and individual expertise (Sorrentino, Sicilia, and Howlett 2018). One perspective defines co-production as ‘the process through which inputs used to provide a good or service are contributed by individuals who are not in the same organization’ (Ostrom et al., 1996, 1073), encompassing all forms of partnership working, feedback mechanisms, or public involvement. On the other hand, co-production can relate to ‘the provision of services through regular, long-term relationships between professionalized service providers (in any sector) and service users or other members of the community, where all parties make substantial resource contributions’ (Bovaird 2007, 847). Consequently, roles for the ‘co-producer’ can combine different rationales and expectations concerning rights and responsibilities within partnerships.

Considering presented arguments, in this paper, we define co-production as the involvement of public service users in any activities associated with the design, management, delivery, and/or evaluation of public services (Osborne and Strokosch, 2013). We recognize that ‘co-production is intrinsic to the process of public service delivery and is linked directly to the co-creation of value both for service users and for society’ (Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016, 644). In other words, ‘co-production leads to the co-creation of value for the service user’ and, therefore, can relate to co-designing and informing the shape of public services (Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016, 643) or, in other cases, to more active roles in taking responsibility for public service delivery by non-state community actors (Lindenmeier et al. 2021).

The ultimate aim of co-production is to drive change within services and traditional state-citizen relationships through ‘an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours’ (Boyle and Harris 2009, 11). This implies that co-production is possible only if communities are sufficiently empowered to participate and engage in decision-making and the co-production process. As co-production aims to reconfigure power relations and give voice to the disempowered, we argue that community empowerment and co-production policies should not be debated in silos; instead, they overlap and inform one another.

Empowerment relates to capacity to make choices and to transform these choices into desired outcomes (Mohan and Stokke, 2000). As such, it is more than participation – it is an ability to participate in decision-making *and* have the power to provoke change. Community empowerment is a systematic effort to enable communities to gain and exercise (more) control in a collaborative process of defining problems, identifying and applying assets, and designing solutions (Reininger et al. 2006). According to Steiner and Farmer (2017), the process of community empowerment starts with community engagement, which enables participation and, thereafter, empowerment. However, while empowerment has the potential to deliver improved outcomes, empowerment policies may not be fully inclusive (Parker and Street 2015), leading to an uneven distribution of services (Skerratt, 2013).

True co-production is enabled when shared decision-making is in place, with no single group able to dominate proceedings or direct outcomes. However, even within communities, there are sub-groups with ‘different perceptions, interests, resources and amounts of influence’, and unequal capacities to act (Crona and Bodin 2006, 1–2). As such, co-production can fail if power is not effectively and equitably shared between

collaborating partners, and if insufficient attention is given to the range of interests involved (Levelt and Janssen-Jansen 2013). This has implications for the effectiveness of community empowerment and co-production practice.

Changes in working practices and shifts of decision-making control can be a source of friction and professional resistance, with co-production partners having to redefine existing relationships (Bovaird 2007). Concerns arise over the lack of clarity surrounding shared decision-making practices and the level of confidence required to be involved in the process. In some cases, scepticism about the efficacy of a 'shared' approach and fears over loss of authority lead to professionals retaining their power in decision-making (Muñoz et al., 2015).

Therefore, it could be assumed that policies alone may be insufficient to support processes of co-production and empowerment, particularly given the range of factors that influence the extent to which the state can enable such processes. Consequently, it is essential to evaluate policies to verify 'what works and what doesn't' in practice, and to make clear how communities may be empowered to enable successful co-production of services.

### **Co-production and community empowerment in Scotland**

In Scotland, the context in which this study took place, the move towards co-production of services originated from the Christie Commission report (2011), which found public services to be top-down and often unresponsive to local needs, proposing co-production as a new model for future public service delivery. Specific recommendations stated that 'effective services must be designed with and for people and communities', and there should be a commitment to 'embed community participation in the design and delivery of services' (Christie 2011:ix). This 'Scottish approach' to policy making creates opportunities for strengthening local democracy, incorporates cooperative principles, and shifts the focus to place-based community action (Cairney, Russell, and St Denny 2016).

Given this context, and to enable co-production, a new Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 (henceforth, The Act) was enacted to deliver responsive services, increase democratic participation, increase confidence and skills, and promote volunteering and quality of life (Scottish Government 2018). The Act consists of policies to support co-production, including a provision to strengthen community voices in local planning and decision-making: Part 3 of the Act – Participation Requests (henceforth, PR). Whilst there are some similar provisions in the UK government Localism Act (2011), the Scottish approach offers opportunities for more collaboration with communities, rather than simply reverting to marketized solutions (Rolfe 2016). EU Cohesion Policy has also utilized co-production in attempts to better address local needs (Potluka and Medeiros 2021). The aim of this paper is not to conduct a full comparison of approaches to co-production, rather to position PR as one such form of co-production policy. PR enables 'community participation bodies'<sup>1</sup> (henceforth, Community) to participate in service co-production to address local needs and take part in the decisions that matter to people through 'outcome improvement processes' in collaboration with 'public service authorities' (henceforth, Authorities).' Requests can relate to four key areas: starting a dialogue, contribution to a decision-making process, service change, and seeking support for alternatives (see Bennett et al. 2021, for further details, including a broader overview of the democratic and governance

context within which PR is situated). The definitions of Communities and Authorities<sup>2</sup> within the Act create a process that is open to a wide range of community groups and the potential to be involved in the co-production of diverse services.

Given the growing importance of co-production, we evaluate outcomes of PRs to understand *whether and how community empowerment policies can contribute to successful co-production*. Our study is informed by a Theory of Change framework.

## Theory of Change

Theory of Change outlines pathways from inputs and activities of an intervention to the anticipated outputs and outcomes. Theory of Change approaches are frequently used to identify sets of assumptions about an intervention or in the evaluation of interventions which seek to affect complex societal change, and when policymakers require evidence that change can be linked to a specific intervention (Mason and Barnes, 2007). The theory has been used in a variety of contexts including public health (Breuer et al., 2016), responses to climate change (Forsyth, 2018), international development (Vogel, 2012) and place-based community interventions (Bruner et al., 2019). While criticisms have been made surrounding the practicality, development, and application of Theory of Change (Prinsen and Nijhof, 2015), given that this approach can support complex chains of causality based on a variety of evidential sources (Rolfe 2019), we find Theory of Change apposite in evaluating the PR empowerment policy.

Here, we use a theoretical framework (Figure 1) developed by Myers, Geyer, and Craig (2017) and published prior to the implementation of the Act; consequently, it presents assumptions or anticipated impacts specific to the legislation.

The pathways presented in Figure 1 were adopted as an initial framework to inform our data collection and analysis. Evidencing the outputs and outcomes of PR enabled us to comment on causality and the impact of a community empowerment policy on co-production.

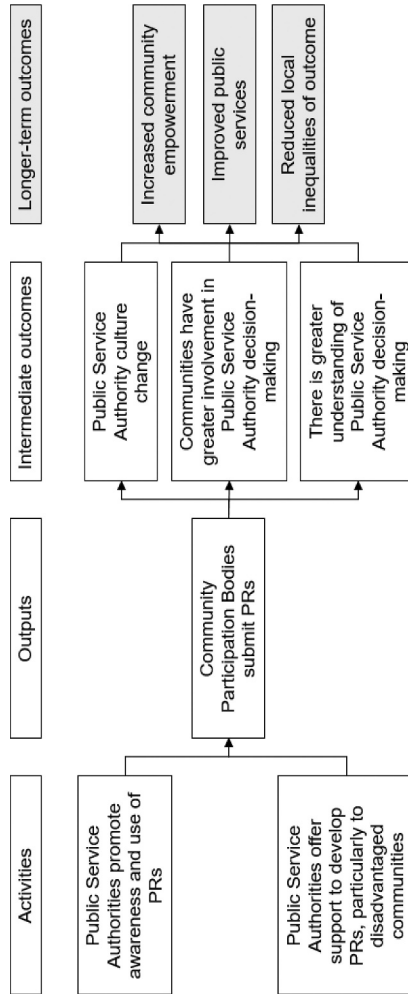
## Methodology

Before conducting our study, we obtained ethical approval from [University + detailed information /Anonymized for the review process].

### Data collection

To understand *whether and how community empowerment policies can contribute to successful co-production* we explore the intermediate and longer-term impacts of PR and use a mixed-method approach combining primary and secondary data collection and analysis. Our data collection was conducted between 2018 and 2020, soon after the implementation of PR under the Act.

*Secondary data* were collated from formal Authority annual reports (n = 67) as well as informal data (n = 15) submitted to the research team by Authorities which provided quantitative data on PR numbers and, where available, qualitative information regarding the types of groups using PRs, the nature of submitted requests, actions taken to promote PR, and the support offered to Communities. Despite a statutory requirement to report on PR activity, not all Authorities published annual reports at



**Figure 1.** Participation Request Theory of Change (Myers, Geyer, and Craig 2017).



the time of the research.<sup>3</sup> Further, the format and content of annual reports was inconsistent across Authorities: annual reports ranged from a single table of submitted, accepted, and refused PRs to full, detailed reports.

*Primary data* derived from interviews and a focus group. We undertook 15 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Authority representatives with a working knowledge of, or responsibility for supporting, the PR process. Specific job titles and roles differed, depending on the nature and structure of participating Authorities. The interviews offered insight into how PR has been understood, interpreted, and implemented by Authority representatives; how PR compares with other mechanisms of participation; and provided insight into outcomes of PR. Authority interviews allowed for follow-up questions, to better understand interviewees' answers (Mason 2017) on their perceptions of PR. Authority interview participants were identified through the analysis of annual reports (2017–18). Purposeful sampling was adopted to ensure that the sample reflected PR activity: the majority of Authority interviewees ( $n = 9$ ) were stakeholders from five local authorities to reflect that most PRs are submitted to local authorities (94.7% and 100% in 2017–18 and 2018–19, respectively); six interviewees were recruited from other Authorities (including health boards and transport bodies) given their inclusion in the Act. At the time of our study, two Authorities had not yet received any PRs; one Authority had not yet received a PR but had been named as a secondary organization<sup>4</sup>; and one Authority was minimizing PRs, explicitly favouring alternative forms of engagement and participation.

To supplement data from Authorities, and to understand the perspectives of those directly involved in submitting PRs, we interviewed individuals ( $n = 14$ ) from six Communities that had knowledge or experience of the PR process – either as members of formed community participation bodies or community groups exploring PR as a viable route to achieve objectives. Purposeful sampling was adopted to ensure inclusion of Communities that had a variety of experiences (accepted or rejected PRs, whether submitted PRs had resulted in a change in service) and operated across diverse contexts: we included a spectrum of communities, affluent and less affluent, vulnerable and less vulnerable (as defined by SIMD, 2018) and with various geographical profiles given that disparate groups may experience community empowerment policies differently. The interviews were conducted in person or by telephone. The topic guide for Community participants aimed to generate data related to the experience of the PR application process: Communities' motivations for submitting PRs; the support offered by Authorities; actual and anticipated outcomes from the PRs; and perspectives on the meaning and possible measurement of community empowerment.

Finally, a focus group was held with four stakeholders from an Authority that indicated a preference to pursue alternative and pre-existing participatory processes over PRs. Topic guides for the focus group were developed to generate data related to how PR *and alternative processes* have been understood, interpreted, and implemented and understand how PRs are perceived, in comparison to other processes. The focus group was conducted in person. Where we present text from focus group participants, we differentiate between participants numerically (Authority-2.1/ Authority-2.3, for example). Using a combination of methods enabled data triangulation (Denzin 1989) and data saturation (Fusch and Ness 2015), and led to generating a rich, comprehensive understanding of the PR process and impacts.

## Analysis

Quantitative data were extracted from the reports. SPSS was employed to generate descriptive statistics of the numbers of PRs that were received, agreed, and refused across Authorities, and any changes to services identified by the Authorities during the reporting period. All interviews and the focus group were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All interview participants and their respective Authorities/Communities were anonymized. Framework analysis – a method commonly used to assess the impact of a policy and understand the ways in which a policy is implemented, which is particularly apposite for large volumes of data (Hackett and Strickland 2019) – was used to analyse the transcripts and field notes in NVivo. Analysis followed a five-stage process (familiarization; identifying a thematic framework (coding); indexing; charting (final coding); mapping and interpretation) and involved sifting, charting, and sorting the data in accordance with key themes (Srivastava and Thomson 2009). The resulting themes and subthemes that emerged through framework analysis are presented in Supplementary, alongside samples of coded text.

In our findings, data from reports were used to present ‘a broader picture’ on PR activities: information on types of Communities applying for PRs and their success rates; types of Authorities being approached; as well as descriptive statistics (PRs received, agreed, and refused). As such, annual reports helped to reveal aspects of ‘*If, who and how many?*’ (e.g. *Do communities use PR legislation to co-produce? Who is using PRs? How many PR applications were (un)successful in their pursuit to co-produce?*). In addition, some annual reports provided descriptive statements about implementing PRs. The latter was analysed together with qualitative interviews and focus groups to provide a comprehensive understanding and multi-stakeholder view on PRs exploring the *how and what* questions (e.g. *How PR can contribute to co-production? What are the experiences of using the legislation to co-produce?*). We present our findings using the structure of Myers et al.’s (2017) Theory of Change and, building on it, develop a discussion to answer our research question.

## Findings

Through the analytical process outlined above, we revised and further developed Myers et al.’s (2017) Theory of Change. The data showed a series of cause-effect pathways that were theorized by Myers, Geyer, and Craig (2017) and, in addition, we identified new elements indicated by dashed lines in Figure 2. In the sections that follow: firstly, we show activities associated with the implementation of PRs and, secondly, we present outputs, intermediate and longer-term outcomes of the policy. Our findings are used to discuss and critique co-production and community empowerment policies and develop a model of a successful co-production process.

## Activities

### **Authorities promote awareness and use of PRs**

Authorities have a duty to promote PRs using of a range of communication channels targeted at a variety of communities. Whilst there was evidence of such promotion in the annual reports, some Authorities were not actively promoting PRs due to resource pressures and conflicting priorities, viewing PRs as a burden in the context of staff

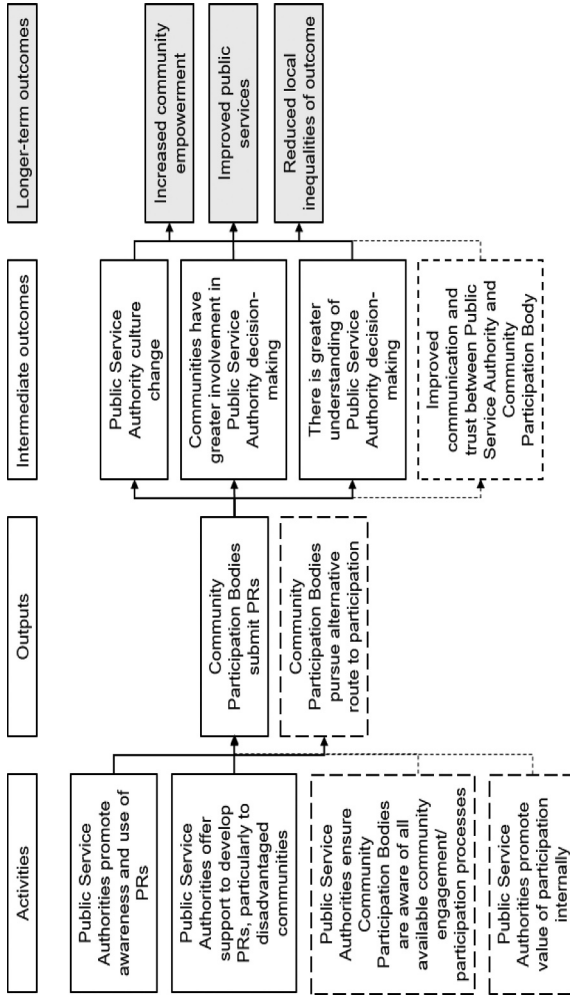


Figure 2. Revised Theory of Change.

reductions and increasing responsibilities. Some interviewees directly attributed low PR submissions to poor promotion: ‘You think to yourself, “how come we’re getting so little of these requests? Is it because we’re not promoting it correctly? Is it because people are simply unaware?”’ (Authority-4).

Other Authorities actively minimized the use of PRs, stating that PR should be the ‘exception rather than the rule’ (Authority-4) as other mechanisms for co-production are available. Another stated that PRs represent a ‘failure of our support to communities and our Local Community Planning Structures’ (Annual report-17). Some Authorities introduced a ‘pre-application’ stage in the PR process, reflecting a desire to pursue alternative and, crucially, less formal routes to participation, co-production, and dialogue, through which communities may attain desired outcomes: ‘The initial invitation is to a conversation, and what the elected members at committee had said was, “If we can resolve things and we can talk to people and get our directorates working in their direction without having to go down a more formal route, that’s what we would do”’ (Authority-3). These examples indicate that promotional activities may be undermined if Authorities do not support PRs. Indeed, it is likely that attempts to minimize PRs through the application of other processes has impacted upon the use of the legislation. For instance, within the Authorities that have made statements surrounding reducing the number of PRs, no PRs had been submitted between 2017–2019.

### ***Authorities offer support to develop PRs, particularly to disadvantaged communities***

In 2017–2018, no Authority annual reports made reference to disadvantaged groups. In 2018–2019, reference was made in only two annual reports: one noted that the Authority would continue to ‘review how to better tailor support for more marginalised groups’ (Annual report-25). A second Authority claimed to monitor PR submissions from an equalities perspective to be ‘fully aware of any underrepresentation from protected characteristics groups and ... work with partners to ensure ... increased focus on opening up channels to maximise opportunities for participation’ (Annual report-26). Although both Authorities suggested that the PR process should be simple and accessible, neither identified strategies to achieve this. This is a risk for achieving the desired longer term outcome of reducing local inequalities, discussed further in subsequent sections.

#### *Authorities ensure Communities are aware of all available community engagement/participation processes*

This activity is an addition to Myers et al.’s (2017) Theory of Change. Given that PRs are complementary to, rather than a replacement of, existing participation or co-production processes (for example, community-led action plans; participation in the development of healthcare strategies and services; and participatory budgeting), an awareness of all available processes enables Communities to utilize the approach most appropriate to achieve community aspirations. As previously discussed, some Authorities aim to minimize PRs, viewing them as ‘prescriptive legislation’ (Authority-3) and placing more value on pre-existing mechanisms.

### ***Authorities promote value of participation internally***

This activity is a further addition to Myers et al.’s (2017) Theory of Change and a key starting point for the outputs and outcomes that follow. PRs were perceived as part of a wider agenda to encourage collaboration, embed co-production in service delivery and

design, and as a key mechanism through which a change in practice may be fostered. Nevertheless, this was not a consistent view across the sample, with some respondents stressing potential power struggles: ‘Those that are in power have to be willing to share that power . . . initially the councillors weren’t too keen on sharing that power’ (Authority-2). Further to this, some interviewees highlighted hesitance towards PR legislation: ‘A lot of staff . . . see it as community groups finding another vehicle to complain about how services are being delivered . . . I had to remind colleagues that we’re supposed to be proactively promoting this Act’ (Authority-5). These examples highlight the importance of the need for cultural change as an intermediate outcome and indicate that Authorities that do not view participation positively may undermine the potential for PRs to generate successful co-production. At the same time, where Authority leadership acknowledges the value of participation, this may act as a key mechanism in the promotion of a supportive culture.

## **Outputs**

### ***Communities submit participation requests***

19 PRs were received by Authorities in 2017–2018, and 27 in 2018–2019. Of the total 46 requests, 27 were accepted and 14 were refused. Overwhelmingly, Communities made requests to participate in local authority decision-making (94.7% and 100% in 2017–2018 and 2018–2019, respectively). Despite the Act noting that Communities need not be incorporated, nor have a written constitution (opening up PR to a broad range of informal groups), the majority of PRs were submitted by well-established, formal Communities such as community councils (submitted 68.4% and 52.2% of PRs in 2017–2018 and 2018–2019, respectively), charities (10.5% and 17.4%), and development trusts (5.3% and 8.7%).

Given that the demographics of community councils do not always represent the socio-economic, gender, or ethnic diversity of Scotland (Paterson, Nelis, and Escobar 2019), there is potential for this to affect the extent to which PRs reduce local inequalities of outcome.

Both Authorities and Communities recognized that PRs offer additional power to communities due to the formality of the process and the fact that Authorities are obligated to engage with Communities once PRs are submitted. This was the rationale for some Communities to submit PRs: ‘It’s good from a community group perspective. They’ve got that formal piece of legislation to say, “Well, you can’t ignore me, Mr. Council”’ (Authority-5); ‘We have now got a legitimate entry to discussions, and in that sense it is hugely important for us’ (Community-5).

However, there is a limit to the power that PRs afford communities as criteria for refusal are loosely and locally defined, i.e. if there are ‘reasonable grounds’ to do so. Further, the absence of an appeal mechanism to challenge a refusal has the potential to undermine the rationale behind the legislation, as Authorities essentially retain power over the process: ‘[PRs are] an essential bit of policy because it gives us a way for them to pay attention and have rules that they need to abide by . . . but obviously none of that matters if they can get away with just not validating it’ (Community-7).

### ***Community participation bodies pursue alternative route to participation***

This output is an addition to Myers et al.’s (2017) Theory of Change and a consequence of Communities gaining an awareness of the range of existing co-production and community participation processes through, for example,

engagement in pre-application stages. While being better informed and able to choose the most suitable route to participation may represent a positive output, there is also evidence indicating that Communities may be actively discouraged from submitting PRs and encouraged to use other routes (see subsequent sections for more detail).

Pursuing alternative routes to participation represents an exit pathway from the Theory of Change and, therefore, this output is not linked to subsequent outcomes. However, it is possible that through engaging with Authorities to explore available participation processes, communities gain greater understanding of Authorities' decision-making. Subsequently, this alternative pathway may also enable collaboration and processes of co-production leading to intermediate and longer-term outcomes.

## **Intermediate Outcomes**

### **Authority culture change**

Myers et al.'s (2017) Theory of Change assumes that PRs help to cultivate more equitable relationships between communities and public bodies. Most Communities indicated that their relationship with Authorities had been challenging both historically and during the PR process; with some describing their relationship as 'very difficult' (Community-4) and 'pretty negative' (Community-3). Community 5 provided examples in which communities have been excluded from decision-making, with unequitable partnerships undermining co-production: 'the local authorities have, up until now, enjoyed plenty of income and money and they've decided things for the community as opposed to involving the community in certain things. It's this detachment . . . the interconnection between local government and the community, because we don't consider ourselves to be anything other than just volunteers representing the community. As a consequence, things happen over which we have no authority or knowledge of' (Community-5). On the other hand, some Authority interviewees highlighted challenges associated with community engagement: 'Whenever I speak with the community council, they still bang on that they haven't been consulted and it really winds me up because they have been consulted. We've took them along very much with us during the [outcome improvement] process . . . They still feel like they've been let down on the consultation and you think, "Oh my God, how much do you want?"' (Authority-1). Although frequently justified, these hostile viewpoints illustrate the need for culture change and the risk that opportunities for co-production may be jeopardized.

Despite negative relationships, there are some indications that PR may be a catalyst for culture change. Whilst acknowledging some of the challenges, Authorities recognized this potential: 'The work is to try to bring change through the entire [Authority]. [There is] pretty good support from our Chief Executive who is definitely up for change but trying to get that transformation message to filter down through all of the [Authority], through middle management to right down on the ground, it can be challenging because cultures build up over years and decades, don't they? And people evolve ways of doing things . . . there's a critical mass thing in this that once it gets beyond a certain point, it becomes the norm and its drip fed over time' (Authority-3). Here, it may be that leadership demonstrating commitment to PR may act as a key mechanism to enable wider culture change.

### ***Communities have greater involvement in Authority decision-making***

The interviewees presented examples of effective community involvement in Authority decision-making as a result of PR: ‘The local groups ... they influence the final decisions ... as a result of the participation request process ... people who live and work in that area ... influence the outcome of what the [Authority] does’ (Authority-4). Indeed, prior to the introduction of PRs, some community groups attempted, unsuccessfully, to engage in Authority decision-making processes. One Community ‘presented reports, done surveys, made recommendations ... cajoled, embarrassed, gone to the press, been angry people in the local newspaper’ (Community-2), and approached local councillors without being able to establish a meaningful dialogue with the Authority. The PR process facilitated direct access to decision-makers, enabled dialogue with the Authority and resulted in the development of mutually acceptable solutions: ‘what we’re now getting is direct decisions, why decisions are getting made. We’re now getting the opportunity to put in other concerns and raise questions and get answers’ (Community-2).

In other cases, the extent to which community participation would influence the final decisions made by Authorities was questioned: ‘They basically asked: “do you want this to be commercial or let or residential?” ... It got me really annoyed because they didn’t say, “What do you want with the site? Is this okay?”, ... It wasn’t asking people about what they want’ (Community-1); ‘I suspect that even before the participation request was granted, [Authority] had made its mind up on what it was wanting to do ... you felt they were trying to shove us sideways. They were adhering to the letter of the legislation rather than the spirit of it’ (Community-5). This had the impact of diminishing opportunities for meaningful co-production.

From the Authority perspective, there was a concern about raising community expectations of their involvement in decision-making processes. This was particularly the case when requests related to commercial interest and/or legislative requirements: ‘When we make a decision about whether to provide a socially necessary [transport] service, we have to do it on the basis of what the likely demand will be, we have to make sure that the [transport] service will provide access to certain local services, etc. but we also have to make sure that the [transport] service doesn’t in any way compete ... with the commercial service ... So, you could have a discussion with a community group about that service or about how those decisions were made, but there might be relatively limited scope to make significant change’ (Authority-6).

In certain circumstances, cost and efficiency implications were a key consideration and it was suggested that different participation processes may be needed, depending on the context: ‘We said, “look, we understand what you’re asking for and you want to be involved in this ... but I have to deliver it efficiently, which means I don’t design it by committee”. Ultimately, somebody has to make decisions ... [and] you don’t always have that flexibility to take on people’s wishes’ (Authority-1). This suggests that whilst Authorities may be supportive of co-production, there are perceived limits to the contexts in which it is appropriate.

### ***Greater understanding of Authority decision-making***

Enabling communities to better understand Authority decision-making was vital: ‘Some people don’t know the rationale behind some of the decisions that are being made so ... be transparent with them as to what’s going on’ (Authority-2.1). The value of clarifying the rationale behind decision-making was also stated by



Communities: ‘We’ve sat there and we’ve watched what’s being discussed, especially with regards to our own stuff because we want to know what’s actually being said and who’s supported us at the end of the day’ (Community-3). Although gaining an understanding of Authority decision-making was frequently a key rationale behind submitting a request, some Communities recognized that full involvement in the process may not be possible given the confidential nature of some aspects of the process: ‘Some of it might be sensitive financially . . . but that’s fine, you can tell us: “We can’t tell you this”. That’s fine, we get that’ (Community-2). This indicates that there is an understanding of some of the limits of co-production in practice.

### ***Improved communication and trust between Authority and Community***

Limited trust in motivations and decisions of Authorities was raised in the interviews: ‘If you don’t trust [people] – which is a problem for a lot of [Authorities] – you don’t talk to them . . . If you see them as authority figures who do things to you, you’re not going to have a conversation really’ (Authority-3). However, PRs were viewed by both Communities and Authorities as an effective vehicle to build communication and trust: ‘I see [PR] as a vehicle to enhance the relationship we have and the trust with the citizens of this area. It’s about the people and the citizens that we serve because ultimately, in the past, there’s been too much of, “Why is the [Authority] doing that? It doesn’t care what we think”’ (Authority-4). It was suggested that PRs enabled greater understanding of community perspectives: ‘It’s improved the communication and it’s about being able to see somebody else’s point of view, and it works both ways. He sees our point of view and we can see his point of view, so there’s a mutual understanding developed’ (Community-5). While mutual understanding of priorities and processes is an important outcome of PRs, to build trust and communication, much relies on both Communities and Authorities placing value on transparency and participation.

### ***Longer-term outcomes***

Given the relatively recent enactment of PRs and the length of PR processes, our evidence relating to long-term outcomes of the legislation is limited. Consequently, within this domain we did not revise Myers et al.’s (2017) Theory of Change and acknowledge that as PR is increasingly embedded across Scotland, additional outcomes may emerge. Instead, using emerging empirical data, we comment on the proposed longer-term outcomes.

### ***Potential for increased community empowerment***

When describing community empowerment, interviewees referred to community spirit, civic pride, greater satisfaction, increased confidence and skills, equity, taking ownership, transfer of power, local democracy, and having their voices valued and heard. On this basis, members of Communities reported that PRs can enable empowerment, particularly in relation to communities exercising greater participation in local democracy, and increased community engagement, two of the key indicators of community empowerment according to the Scottish Government (2018).

This outcome is contingent on achieving culture change in authorities: ‘It has the potential to be fantastic and very empowering but, again, it’s whether the will is there and whether we get it right in terms of who is going to culturally change and get in that bandwagon of thinking’ (Authority-4). Cultural shifts can be a source of friction and



resistance from those who hold the balance of power, thus limiting the potential for increased community empowerment in the longer term. A further consideration under this outcome relates to the tendency for PR use by Communities that could be considered ‘more empowered’; this, and the implications therein, are further discussed under the following ‘*reduced inequalities of outcome*’ section.

### **Improved public services**

An overarching aim of the Act is to ‘increase the pace and scale of public sector reform, leading to improvements in services resulting in better outcomes for communities’ (Myers, Geyer, and Craig 2017, 21). It is assumed that through co-production, PRs can support service improvement. Authority interviewees saw the potential of PRs to improve services as communities propose alternative approaches to service delivery: ‘PRs provide the opportunity to say, “we can run your service better, here’s the reason why we can run it better” . . . and I need to then formally review that and say, “You’re right . . . you could deliver a [Authority] service better . . . ” That’s the sort of things I would expect that would be good for community participation’ (Authority-5). As such, PRs may have an important role in the co-design and co-production of services in order for them ‘to be more inclusive or more responsive to community need’ (Authority-9).

The data shows that PRs are being submitted to improve a range of services including traffic management, road and pavement infrastructure, access to local amenities, land use, and environmental sustainability. Thus, there is potential for PRs to have an impact on the quality of local services.

### **Reduced inequalities of outcome**

At this stage, there is limited evidence to demonstrate how PRs may contribute to a reduction of inequalities of outcome, although one interviewee noted a shift within the Authority: a growing focus on addressing inequalities: ‘There’s been a real marked shift within this [Authority] . . . in terms of that real focus on disadvantaged communities which is great’ (Authority-3). Our study highlighted that PRs are less likely to be submitted by informal and less established Communities. Rather, submissions came from ‘higher capacity’ Communities characterized by having relevant resources, professional experience, and time to undertake the PR process: ‘[The community] had people who had some professional insight into this type of work already, so when things came along there were people who were ready to jump up and run with [PR submission]’ (Community-1). However, within the scope of this research it was not possible to fully assess the extent to which this has an impact on inequalities.

## **Discussion: towards a model for successful co-production**

We set out to explore whether and how community empowerment policies can contribute to successful co-production. To address this aim, we focused our attention on PR – a co-production policy introduced by the Scottish Government in 2017.

Considering the ‘whether’ part of our aim, we see that PR has the potential to support co-production, particularly in terms of increasing service inclusivity and responsiveness to community needs. Interestingly, however, co-production *per se* is not always the desired outcome for communities involved in PR processes; for some, the primary rationale behind using PRs is to better understand decision-making

processes. Secondly, considering ‘how’ community empowerment policies can contribute to successful co-production, our evidence suggests that co-production is contingent on different, yet interconnected factors.

By evidencing cause and effect pathways of PRs and their impact on co-production, we further developed Myers et al.’s (2017) Theory of Change, adding additional activities, outputs, and intermediate outcomes (Figure 2). Given that the model proposed by Myers, Geyer, and Craig (2017) was published prior to the implementation of the Act and, therefore, is based on assumptions and anticipated impacts specific to the legislation, our additions have resulted in the development of an empirically proven Theory of Change. Such an approach addresses key criticisms surrounding the practicality, development, and application of Theory of Change (Prinsen and Nijhof, 2015).

Supplementing the new Theory with factors and mechanisms that emerged from the findings and previous research, we propose a model of successful co-production (Figure 3). In this section, we unpack this model, linking elements with wider academic and policy debates to better understand how community empowerment policies can contribute to successful co-production.

While certainly relevant to PR, the application of the successful co-production process model is not limited to PR. The model highlights the different, yet interconnected, factors that underpin the relationship between successful co-production and policies that enable power sharing (empowerment policies). The data indicate that co-production is enabled when engaged actors (community organizations and public organizations) exhibit certain behaviours: community organizations understand the legislative routes available to them; possess sufficient capacity and resources; and act to support their communities, while authorities support and promote co-production; embrace culture change; and implement legislation as it was intended. Together, these behaviours (re-)establish relationships which enable improved communication and engagement.

Over time, and to achieve positive outcomes and more equal power relations, value must continually be placed on gaining mutual understanding, ensuring transparency, and building trust by both communities and authorities. This process is particularly important in contexts where relationships are strained or challenging, limiting opportunities for co-production.

In our research, it is clear that this process can be constrained when engaged actors did not exhibit certain behaviours. Firstly, while a desire to move towards more equal power relations among some Communities and Authorities was evident, specific Scottish Government recommendations suggesting that ‘effective services must be designed with and for people and communities’ (Christie 2011:ix) were often forgotten, especially among Authorities that chose to support other participatory mechanisms. Further, at the local level, we observed that some public authorities do not want to relinquish control and that sharing power over decision-making can be a source of friction and professional resistance, as evidenced in other studies (Bovaird 2007). In these circumstances, national policies are regarded as tokenistic, while the essential aspects of co-production (i.e. services designed ‘with’ people; Christie 2011:ix) are sometimes neglected. Nonetheless, in our research, one Community reported that the PR process had been ‘overwhelmingly positive’ (Community-1) in terms of building mutual understanding between actors engaged in the process.

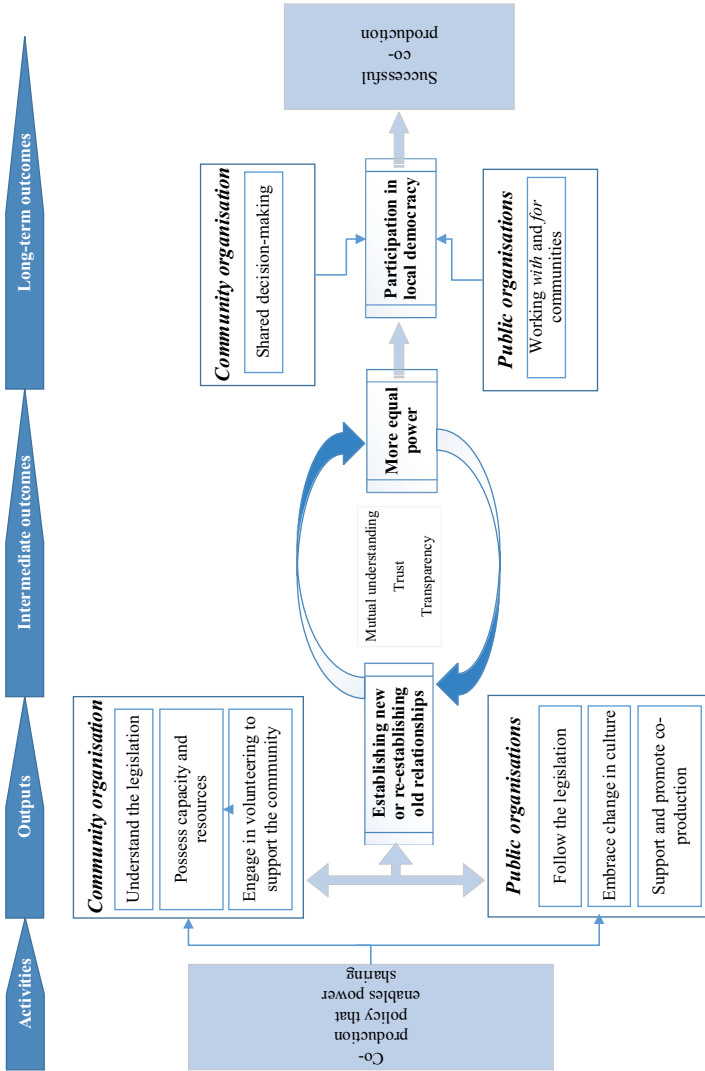


Figure 3. Successful co-production process.

The model indicates that as more equal power is achieved (indicating that communities have gained greater power through the process), this enables greater participation in democracy. In other words, participation in democracy *relies on* communities being empowered to participate. In this study, we see that higher capacity groups, including those with a level of professional experience and resources, are more likely to co-produce. This mirrors findings of previous research indicating that participation can often be used by communities with significant resources to garner further resources, or certain subgroups within communities that hold power (Markantoni et al. 2018), yet do not reflect the diversity of Scotland (Paterson, Nelis, and Escobar 2019).

This tendency for high-capacity groups or more advantaged communities to engage is described as a potential ‘risk’ (Myers, Geyer, and Craig 2017, 21) that may contribute to widening inequalities (Skerratt and Steiner 2013). Importantly, and in parallel with other studies (Bovaird 2007), we found evidence that successful partnerships between communities and public servants introduce new responsibilities that community members must meet as ‘co-producers’. This commitment, in the long-term, may be challenging, especially within communities that lack resources, skills, and engagement. As such, policymakers should ensure that new co-produced community services are appropriately supported by the state to guarantee sustainability, quality, and equality. Otherwise, successful co-production might not be possible.

Finally, in the latter stages of our model, co-production policies can yet be undermined if public sector servants are unwilling to share their power in decision-making, thus constraining participation in democracy. Indeed, in addition to favourable national policies, successful co-production also relies on public organizations being willing to work with and for communities as well as communities being able to contribute to shared decision-making.

## Conclusions and Implications

This paper contributes to a better understanding of the impact of specific policies on enabling a successful co-production process. Considering the growing importance of co-production in social policy, its perceived role in strengthening local democracy and improving the quality and sustainability of public services, we evidenced processes and characteristics of successful co-production, and draw recommendations informing policy, practice, and research.

First, we note that although specific policies can work to enhance co-production, success is contingent on institutional congruence between co-production in policy and co-production in practice. While policy provides the formal rules and regulations for equitable and reciprocal relationships, co-production relies on public organizations valuing meaningful engagement and participation. Without true commitment to a shared decision-making and more equitable share of power between actors involved in co-production, the potential impact of policies is limited. Indeed, when parties are able to retain power over critical stages and direct outcomes of the co-production process, this undermines the ‘doing with’ ethos of co-production (Christie 2011:ix). A lack of flexibility and resistance to change in working practices that shift power can create friction between actors (Communities and Authorities), leading to adversarial relationships. Building institutional environments that are receptive to the process of co-production and culture change can be a lengthy process, but examples of successful co-production and its mutual benefits can enable this process.

Another challenge relates to national policies being interpreted on an *ad hoc* basis or not being adhered to by regional authorities. In our study, public bodies that viewed PR as a failure of other co-production mechanisms created environments in which community co-production proposals are more likely to be refused, or not submitted. Although mutual understanding developed through PR is one step towards developing a reciprocal relationship, the absence of an appeal process means that the ‘equal relationships’ rule (Hanley 2013, 14) does not apply, as the ‘power’ is ultimately retained by the dominant public bodies.

Although this evidence derives from a specific policy in Scotland, what is clear is that the practical implementation of policies can vary by stakeholder. This creates a challenge for policymakers who must develop specific policies that can be perceived as being rigid and ‘too prescribed’. Yet, a high level of flexibility in interpreting legislation might lead to tokenistic policies implemented on an *ad hoc* basis across regions of the same country. This issue applies to a wider international context and varied legislative systems.

Finally, to avoid a scenario in which co-production is a way for ‘governments [to] retreat from the direct provision of public goods, services and welfare’ (Steiner and Farmer, 2018:119), the process of co-production needs to be facilitated on an ongoing basis through, for example, community capacity building, training for community groups and public servants, as well as adequate investment. This means that co-production might not bring, possibly anticipated, significant financial savings for the public sector. Instead, it can lead to better quality and more efficient services.

### Limitations and avenues for future research

We note that monitoring the impact of specific policies is highly challenging. This challenge emerges not only because of the complexity of policies that refer to areas with broad or varied understandings, such as co-production, but also because policies do not work in silos. From a research perspective, we show that the assessment of complex policy interventions can be supported through the application of Theory of Change and the use of a mixed-method approach. This approach can aid the identification of the multifaceted, often non-linear, pathways between specific policies and their anticipated and unexpected outcomes.

We note that the findings reported here are based on a limited sample and only one specific legislation supporting co-production. These limitations highlight opportunities for future research to apply the successful co-production process model, beyond PR, and further develop knowledge surrounding the factors that underpin the relationship between successful co-production and policies that enable power sharing. Indeed, study findings exploring different policy contexts would help to distil the ‘best’ settings for successful co-production, helping to meet ambitious expectations placed on the co-production movement in recent social policies. Finally, with the growing popularity of the legislation, future research could specifically focus on exploring the impact of PR use within Communities that are the target of the legislation – less-affluent, more-vulnerable, and less empowered.

### Notes

1. ‘Community participation body’ is the term given to a group of people who may submit PRs. To qualify as a community participation body, groups must meet certain requirements: the majority of group members must come from the same geographic community/community

- with shared interests or backgrounds and the group must be open to other community members. Further, generated profits must be used for community benefit and a statement of the group's aims and purposes must also be provided.
2. Public service authorities/Authority categories listed under Schedule 2 of the Act include: Local authorities (i.e. 32 administrative bodies in local government which provide public services including education, social care, waste management, libraries, and planning); Health Boards; Boards of management of colleges of further education; Regional transport partnerships; and 'Other' (including National Park Authorities, Police Scotland/Fire and Rescue, and Highlands and Islands/Scottish Enterprise).
  3. In total, 67 annual reports were analysed, this included 38 reports for the reporting period April 2017-March 2018 and 29 reports for the reporting period April 2018-March 2019. In addition to the annual reports, 12 informal submissions (for 2017-2018) and three informal submissions (for 2018-2019) were received by the research team. Given that 76 Authorities are required to report, this represents an Authority response rate of 66% and 42% in 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 respectively – the first two years that immediately followed the introduction of PR.
  4. The Scottish Government guidance allows Communities to elect to include secondary Authorities (in addition to the Authority to which a PR is made) if the Community believes their inclusion is warranted.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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