CITIES IN ACTION:
DEMOCRATISING
LOCAL GOVERNANCE

CONTENTS

OVERVIEW AND SUMMARY

This report summarises the process and findings of an action research project entitled 'Democratising Local Governance,' which focused on the relationships between local campaigns and democracy and governance in two cities – Glasgow and Sheffield. We explored to what extent local campaigners and community groups (working on a diverse range of issues) share common experiences of local democracy and governance and articulate demands for change. We also asked about the strategies and tactics used by campaigners to further these demands, and the potential for more collectivised action among these networks of changemakers.

Brought together to speak about their experiences, campaigners offered rich insights and widely-shared concerns about local democracy and governance in both cities. These included wide-ranging issues of access to local democracy and governance, the multiplier effect of cuts, challenges for meaningful voice and influence, and the de-prioritisation of the public interest in the face of private and corporate capture. Local campaigner insights and concerns do not necessarily correspond with the democratic and governance agendas prioritised in councils. This mismatch creates real dilemmas for organising and building voice and power.

This research has wider implications for our local democracies and how they work, and about how democracy might be rethought. These discussions are especially relevant in the current context of the UK, where there is widespread democratic disengagement and polarisation and a loss of public trust. This is true at all levels, but we chose to look at local governance as that is closest to people's everyday lives and often overlooked. Discussions about local democracy and governance usually focus on the actions of local governments themselves. These sit alongside central government policy frameworks, which set the agendas in one of the most centralised democracies in the world. Much less attention is paid to the action of local residents to secure greater power, agency and democratic control.

Nevertheless, there is an active landscape of community groups and local campaigners in the UK. They come up against many obstacles, undemocratic practices and poor governance. They face a local state that is not set up to address the lived experiences of residents, or communities coming together to tackle issues of concern. But there is another side to the story: campaigners contest the dominant interests and existing top-down governance arrangements in their councils, and build power through their activities. Through this, they are creating new forms of democracy in action – although they generally lack the infrastructure and resources to develop their collective voice and analyses for change together, which would make them even stronger. Some campaigners also draw inspiration and support from city-based movements and new democratic models in Europe and around the world, including those which are often discussed under the term 'municipalism.' This represents a way of building political power from the ground up by challenging both established power and the way political institutions are managed, and experimenting with radical democracy within local politics.

We hope this report resonates with local campaigners, grassroots activists and community groups – including the participants in Glasgow and Sheffield – and is useful for their strategic thinking and ongoing campaigning activities. We also believe there are important lessons here for elected members and officers in councils, as well as policy-makers, advisory bodies and national campaigners concerned with local democracy and governance.

What we did

The project was initiated by Research for Action, who invited project partners in Glasgow and Sheffield to join. These were, respectively, Solidarity Against Neoliberal Extremism (SANE) and Ruth Hubbard, founder of It's Our City! The project was funded by the Lankelly Chase Foundation.

Our starting point was that local campaigners, activists and community groups occupy a different position from other stakeholder groups (such as big service providers, or local business interests) in the local state. They are therefore likely to bring different and particular perspectives, experiences, and insights. However, in challenging the status quo, their voices are often marginalised or minimised in the dominant, formal, and institutionalised narratives of local authorities and other powerful players. Given the widespread, serious, and deepening concerns about the state of local democracy and governance, we wanted to bring local campaigner voices to the fore.

Together, we set up a series of 'co-learning conversations' in Glasgow and Sheffield with a diverse range of local campaigners, grassroots, and community activists. Participants were invited by the project partners in each city, and were often linked to more than one campaign or cause. The total of 26 participants from four co-learning conversations (two in each city between November 2022 and January 2023) worked on local issues including parks and green spaces, heritage and culture, housing, transport, public education, health, migrant justice, anti-racism, poverty, planning, privatisation, air pollution and the climate emergency.

The types of groups ranged from grassroots and community groups operating at neighbourhood or community level to established city-wide movements. Some were linked to organisational structures or networks beyond the city, nationally and internationally. Given their common claims and action on local democracy, and for the purposes of clarity, within this report we will refer to all participants as 'campaigners'. Most participants were from groups with very little funding and resources and run by volunteers.

We did not start out with fixed or detailed definitions of something called 'local democracy' or 'governance' (and nor did we seek to tie down these definitions in the co-learning conversations). Nor did we set out to document the detailed local governance arrangements in each city. Instead, we concentrated on campaigners' experiences and practices. We wanted to provide scope for them to draw on their own frames of reference and shape the group conversations. This was about trying to map and better understand the 'landscape of resistance'[1] as expressed and understood by campaigners in Glasgow and Sheffield themselves.

We also wanted to explore how local democracy is expressed in local governance arrangements, cultures, and practices in local councils, and to gather insights about the ways in which local governance might become more democratic.

The co-learning conversations were loosely structured around three areas, with a series of prompts to guide each conversation. Firstly, conversations covered campaigner activities and strategies, including campaign aims and how groups had engaged with the council to further those. Secondly the groups explored shared understandings and experiences of how local democracy is working and how it is expressed in local governance arrangements, cultures, and practices. Thirdly, we asked about possibilities for improving collective action, including how groups might better work together. A list of questions can be found in the appendix "How to host your own co-learning conversation."
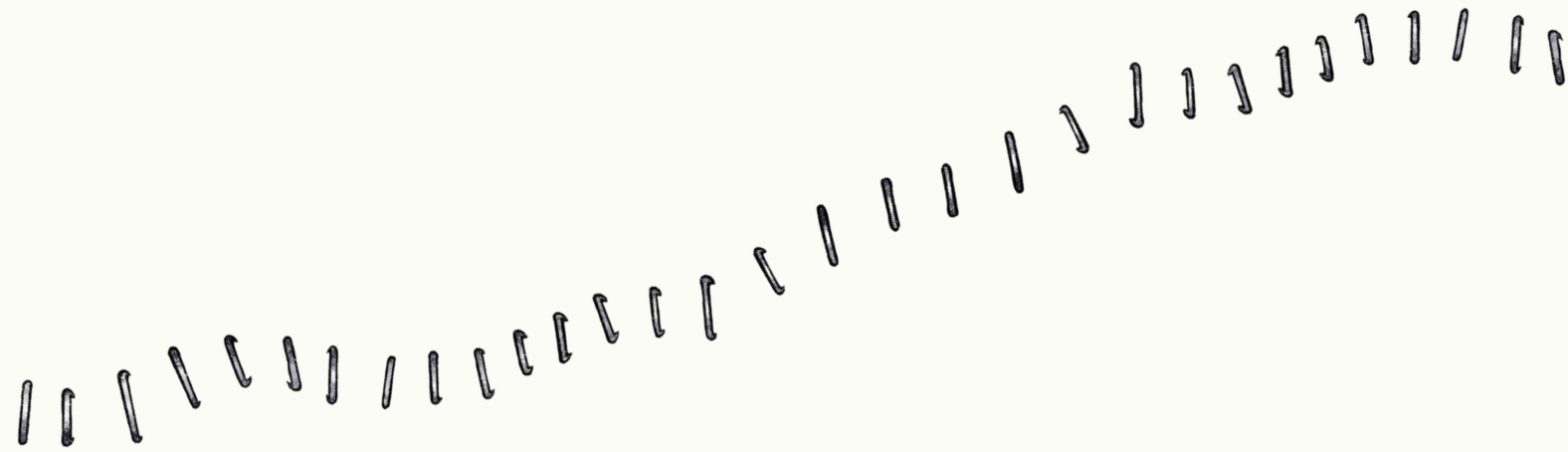
PROJECT FINDINGS

LOCAL GOVERNANCE CONCERNS

The co-learning conversations showed that local governance arrangements and the quality of local democracy were relevant for campaigners' goals and activities. Campaigners were usually very knowledgeable about legal and policy frameworks and procedures, as well as decision-making histories and arrangements relating to the issues they were working on. They also often challenged these, rather than taking them as given. They often saw the underlying dynamics that shape existing governance arrangements as problematic. This highlights the importance of asking deeper questions about how local governance (and democracy) operate, and how they could be improved. It also shows that campaigners and community groups have a lot to bring to these conversations and that they share wide-ranging democratic and governance concerns.

a) Access to local democracy: rhetoric and reality

A closed system

Local campaigners talked extensively about council structures and processes as complex, closed, and inaccessible: even describing the system as *"a monster."* Campaigners might have understood *"where the powers lie, what doors to knock, who to question"* – and had developed this understanding over lengthy time periods. Yet they recognised that for most people, the structures and processes often *"don't make any sense."* Even for experienced local campaigners, deciphering how things work (or how they are meant to) is time-consuming, unreliable, and saps energy.

No level playing field

Campaigners also demonstrated how access to local democracy is intertwined with inequalities. Access to information often relies upon existing knowledge or considerable cultural and social capital: it involves digging into conceptual, legal, and wider policy frameworks, as well as sifting and distilling information. This knowledge is not available to many. Some groups (like asylum seekers) are also directly excluded from citizenship rights, and therefore also excluded from access to many services.

For those who do not have this social capital or knowledge *"it's like we are going into battle and we don't know anything – this is not our place, not our country."* Some likened the experience to playing a game: *"If we don't know the rules, we can't identify the weak spots."* In this context, any successes were chalked up to *"sheer luck"* or reliant on particular approaches such as shows of public strength (demonstrations, letter-writing campaigns). Some campaigners cited their own collated data as evidence that patterns of people accessing information themselves mapped directly to socio-economic inequalities.

Local campaigners spend huge amounts of time and effort trying to untangle what is going on, not least to share that information more broadly, especially with those who do not have equal access. This means that they have a public education function alongside designing their own approaches and campaigning strategies.

A systemic problem

Local campaigners understood this situation was about more than simple deficits in information that councils could easily rectify by communicating more and better. The problems and barriers here were understood as built into council structures and cultures, as well as emanating from exclusive and technocratic knowledge and approaches to governance; *"the legalistic and technocratic dominance and culture that seems designed to shut people out."* Campaigners questioned councils' commitment to essential (democratic) openness and transparency: *"We are not actually in a democracy at all…the system is constructed in such a way so as not to let us call people to account, and those in charge seem to have engineered things in this way."* Furthermore, *"[w]e're not talking about a level playing field [in planning]: it's all tipped in favour of…development, developers, and growth – the 'public interest' is apparently the same as private interests!"*

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Councils extracting but not providing information

Campaigners also reported councils extracting information from residents and organisations, rather than being oriented to routinely and actively sharing information. Information needs were largely seen as concerned with supporting the council's own functioning and insularity (and preserving power) rather than oriented towards the public, and councils failed to see the importance of providing information. This general approach was reported as being exacerbated by various mechanisms of obfuscation (including refusals) of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests in often glacially slow and unresponsive systems overall. *"It's not just the complexity of the system, it's the language, and the gatekeepers of information who extract information from us but never share anything."*

'Commercial confidentiality' excluding the public

Local campaigners cited many examples of councils withholding information linked to claims of 'commercial confidentiality' even when these seemed spurious in their own terms. This seems to be increasing. In Glasgow in particular:

> *I've had a lot of experiences where councillors are telling me 'We can't get the information' – and this is from the people who work for the council, so there's a really weird power dynamic going on there, where chief executives, bureaucrats and things like that are not giving information to their elected members, and yet there doesn't seem to be a recourse to challenge or question anything, so these issues are left a mystery.*

It was a major concern to local campaigners that whole swathes of basic information about local services were routinely lost under blanket applications of 'commercial confidentiality,' in direct tension with democratic control and accountability and opportunities to extend these.

The "rhetoric-to-reality gap"

All this happens in an environment where *"we can't move for social justice terminology in council documents and policies"* and there is *"quite a lot of reasonable political rhetoric,"* meaning reasonably good from the campaigners' perspective. The gap between these sorts of council claims and the reality of operationalisation in council structures and in actual practices was stark. Councils were seen as constantly *"over-claiming but under-delivering."* Bureaucratic and political interests seemed to dominate, rather than seeing through stated public service or social justice commitments. This applied to particular policy and service areas that local campaigners were interested in (e.g. housing), but also to underpinning democratic rights, values, and good governance. Notions of public rights were understood as weak, limited, and often merely procedural – or customer-based rather than shaped and operationalised by democratic, social justice or citizen-based frameworks. A lingering *"paternalism and we know best [attitude]"* was also identified in Sheffield. The significant gap between rhetoric and reality for local democratic and governance quality undermined basic trust, confidence and legitimacy. For some the chasm was also seen as something simply ridiculous, a joke.

Narrow electoral local 'democracy' and a lack of legitimacy

Despite social justice rhetoric in councils, there is a notable absence of

THE SIGNIFICANT GAP BETWEEN RHETORIC AND REALITY FOR LOCAL DEMOCRATIC AND GOVERNANCE QUALITY UNDERMINED BASIC TRUST, CONFIDENCE AND LEGITIMACY.
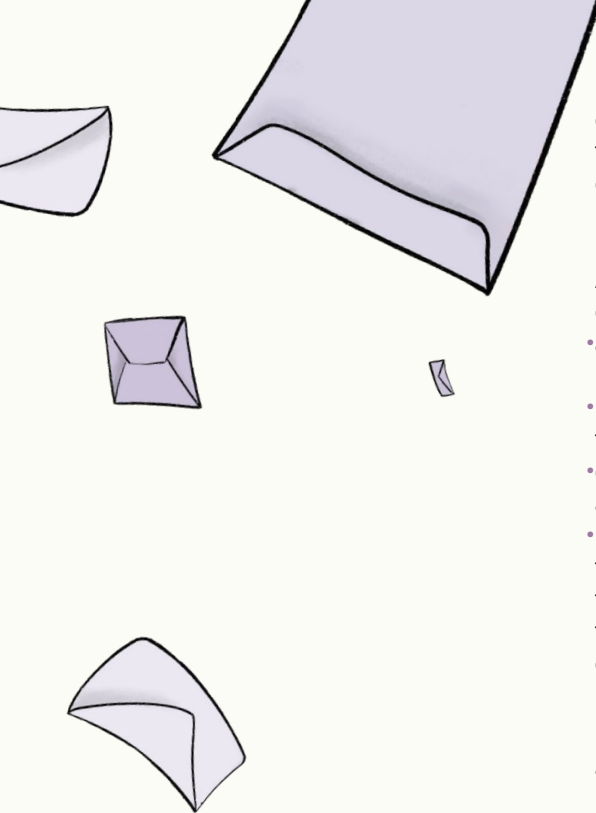
discussion about the quality of local democracy. Implicitly and explicitly this often seems to be reduced to the vote (from which some are excluded). But *"democracy is not a period of dictatorship bookended by elections"* as one Sheffield campaigner pointed out.

At the same time, voter turnouts in local elections are low, linked to socio-economic and other inequalities. Political disengagement and lack of trust are evident and widespread: *"People have lost faith in democracy. People aren't stupid, they sense and see that the council is useless."* In Glasgow, more than half the electorate do not vote in local elections, and voter turnout can be mapped in an almost direct ratio to the demographics of economic inequalities – with turnouts of as low as 16% in more deprived areas of the city. This further widens the gap between the most vulnerable residents and mechanisms for exercising democratic agency. In Sheffield the picture is no different: 7 in 10 do not vote locally and, again, voter turnout patterns are aligned with patterns of economic inequality across the city. Yet councils do not seem to be alarmed about the potential lack of legitimacy this indicates – let alone consider how governance arrangements might respond. In Glasgow, *"the SNP came in on a promise of more transparent and accountable local government – different people are in power but they still cling on to power just the same."*

b) The multiplier effect of cuts

The backdrop of funding cuts

Council budgets have been systematically decimated over more than a decade. Local campaigners were aware of the situation and felt it in their work: *"The scale of the cuts – we are working with an incredibly irrational situation."*

Despite being the largest local authority in Scotland, Glasgow City Council received a drop of £270 per head in real terms revenue funding from the Scottish Government from 2013/14 to 2019/20.This was the highest reduction in funding to any local authority in Scotland[2]. Sheffield City Council's real terms spending power was reduced by 29% (or £856 per resident) over a decade, compared to an average of 20% across all English councils.[3] This reflects a pattern where central government funding cuts in the UK have been disproportionately targeted towards high-need authorities.

Some campaigners talked generally about a lack of council competence: *"I just assume they are not very good at what they do."* However, many associated this, at least in part, with the impact of devastating year-on-year cuts where *"the answer to everything is 'there's no money'"*. This, in turn, was associated with the ebbing of basic confidence, trust and legitimacy in overall council management, stewardship and governance. *"It feels like our Council, whatever party is in charge, accept decline, accept cuts."*

Campaigners also highlighted some of the wider political priorities and choices involved in the shrinking of the public sector. Some questioned the growth of charity and the charitable sector (including when it involved their own organisations providing services) and the imbalances this brings as public services are cut back. They pointed out that all this happens in the context of tax-cutting political agendas, not a commitment to funding for public services.

"DEMOCRACY IS NOT A PERIOD OF DICTATORSHIP BOOKENDED BY ELECTIONS "

2   https://digitalpublications.parliament.scot/ResearchBriefings/Report/2019/7/2/Local-government-finance--facts-and-figures-2013-14-to-2019-20

3   https://democracy.sheffield.gov.uk/documents/s62804/10%20-%20Medium%20Term%20Financial%20Analysis%20Committee%20Budget%20Targets%2023-24%20Q1%20Budget%20Monitoring.pdf

The inevitability of incompetence

Campaigners cited many examples of losses of basic competence and functioning that they believed cuts had caused or contributed to:

> "We see all kinds of legal violations in housing but there's not the staff power and no enforcement"
> "I'm asking to speak to the planning officer and suddenly there's no planning officer, or they've changed from last week"
> "We cannot signpost to homelessness accommodation that doesn't exist"
> "It's all just constant restructuring"

This leads to a situation where local councils simply *"don't do what they say they do."* This is not only a question of services or staff being hard to reach: *"Even if you know how it's meant to work, it doesn't work."*

Weakening democratic accountability

Councils are losing or giving up in-house expertise due to outsourcing arrangements, campaigners highlighted. This leads to a hollowing-out of council competence to effectively oversee those arrangements.

In Glasgow, key sectors of public interest, including social housing and public transport, are delegated to 'arms-length' organisations which are formally separate from local authorities but subject to their control and influence: the theory being that this will provide additional financial opportunities. In reality, it means that services can be operated outside of the democratic realm, and are not held to the same standards for communication, transparency or accountability as sectors operating from 'in-house.'

Sheffield campaigners cited the *"farcical notion of a 'self-monitoring' contract"* that might appear to free the council from work associated with competent oversight but that signalled the weakening of democratic accountability and public ownership. This was in context of a PFI (Private Finance Initiative, a form of a public-private partnership) contract. The effect of this was very damaging in the case of the contract discussed.

In one example, poor historical decisions had saddled the city with significant debt that would be being paid off for many years but *"these are barely in the public eye"* and no one had been held accountable.

The loss of important relationships and experience
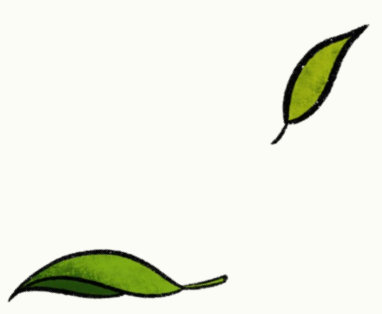
Another effect of cuts was changes to points of contact. Campaigners often had long-standing relationships with individual officers, which had been carefully nurtured and built up over many years. Staff losses meant these were lost – sometimes altogether, sometimes their functions turned over to unpaid volunteers or simply added to others' job descriptions: *"We've got lots of longer job titles than ever before!"*

Campaigners also described *"a reduction of staff and experience to help navigate the systems… [which are] vital given the huge amount of knowledge and perseverance needed to engage with it."* Constant restructuring and redeployment led to bizarre situations: *"She was a librarian who was now – overnight – a housing manager. No wonder there was no 'capacity'."*

Impacts of increasing need and inequalities alongside cuts

The extent to which basic services have been stripped back also meant that many groups we spoke to were dealing with immediate need: they were providing a safety net for those who could not access it elsewhere. This increasing need was created by a combination of the cost-of-living crisis, the Covid pandemic, the exclusion of some groups (such as asylum seekers) from state provision and cuts in council funding, which was resulting in increasingly inefficient or ineffective services. However, *"the capacity of communities is also limited,"* as campaign groups pointed out. Much time was now being spent by campaigners, especially groups who

also provide services, being *"simply reactive and responding to crises rather than being strategic, preventive, and concentrating on system change."* Some described this as being *"dragged away"* from their core purposes, although for some this solidarity-based provision was seen as a key part of their work. These effects were also seen in councils, including in terms of reduced competence for joined-up working. In these ways, multiplier effects of cuts create a downward spiral.

c) Voice and influence (hard-to-reach councils)

Limited participatory mechanisms

In neither city was there much sense from local campaigners that they (as citizens, service providers or as campaigners) exercised any significant influence in local decision-making, nor that this was embedded in governance arrangements.

Some participatory mechanisms were in place but they were seen as very limited. In Glasgow the (statutory) community planning framework was characterised as *"top-down and doesn't work."* Local Area Committees (LACS) in Sheffield were described as *"imposed," "council- not community-owned"* where *"you don't even get a say unless you are pre-approved."* Access to meetings was an issue: *"buses not running;" "people don't have the means;" "it's another pointless meeting."* Some groups were described or described themselves as *"effectively permanently outside"* any existing mechanisms for participation due to various factors that excluded them structurally. In the discussions, it became clear that campaigners felt their voice and influence were inhibited rather than enabled. This was due to structures and cultures in councils, and the ways in which these mechanisms were designed.

Underlying dynamics in barring voice and influence: city complexities

The insights of local campaigners in Glasgow and Sheffield about voice and influence were, on one level, very similar. There were few or no opportunities perceived for meaningful or demonstrable voice and influence. However, discussions in the two cities arguably revealed slightly different factors and dynamics in play that shape this picture.

MANY GROUPS WERE DEALING WITH IMMEDIATE NEED: THEY WERE PROVIDING A SAFETY NET FOR THOSE WHO COULD NOT ACCESS IT ELSEWHERE.

Glasgow

Glasgow campaigners experienced disconnection to a remote council machinery: *"one of biggest barriers is council itself, it doesn't understand the work, the sheer scale of need, and takes a very managerial, disconnected approach."* There were seemingly scant expectations of council change.

Reports by local campaigners included a straightforward *"lack of willingness of the council to engage in joint problem-solving,"* even where there appeared to be clear, shared interests between councils, communities and campaigners. But the ability to engage was also questioned: *"The council are not community development people, they are not facilitators, it's not about empowerment, they don't have the skills, desire or knowledge."* Likewise, in terms of managing and organising council engagement initiatives: *"I don't think they have ever had an effective way of engaging with communities, it's all piecemeal...disjointed."*

Those outside the council were positioned as subject to council projects and priorities, not equal or active players. *"It's all 'we want your input on this,' their consultations, so it's all about them, not about being responsive and open."* This was also happening where campaigners tried to help people become active: *"giving people the basic information to do that, you know. But we don't see interest from the council in that, in responding to that."*

Overall, active debate with the council came across as limited. There was little room to discuss basic structures to support residents' voice and influence in decision-making. Even councillors were sometimes said to be kept out of council machinery loops: *"They said 'e agree with you but we can't get the information either'."*
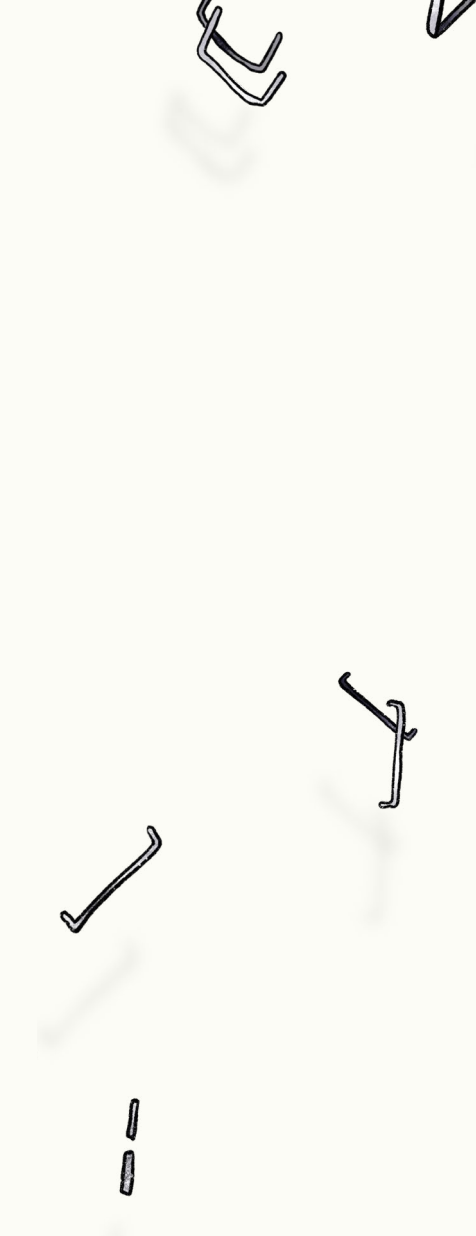
When significant pieces of work had been undertaken by civil society and/or campaign groups, a simple lack of responsiveness and engagement was reported: *"We launched and sent the report to all of them but there was absolutely no response."* This signalled disconnection and detachment, as well as a lack of care. Expectations of the council being oriented toward meaningful civil society contributions and influence appeared to be low (although arguably this was a driver to campaigners beginning to organise together themselves, see below). At the same time campaigners saw *"some scope for mechanisms like citizen's panels or assemblies."* Participants were clear that such initiatives *"must be citizen-led."*

Sheffield

At first sight, the comments and reflections of Sheffield local campaigners echoed many of the concerns as Glasgow campaigners. In relation to council consultations, *"it's all about getting the answers they want on things that are already decided."* Also *"they've demonstrated they don't know how to listen, and then they claim they are 'engaging people.' I don't understand the point of it, it's certainly not to allow anyone else any power or say at all...if only they saw themselves as enablers, rather than blockers."*

There was also discussion about people *"not fitting council boxes or expectations."* This arose from longstanding experiences of the *"othering"* or *"stereotyping"* of racialised groups in particular: *"They can't cope when we don't fit what they imagine, or allow ourselves to be simply pigeon-holed and compliant and 'ticked off' their list."*

In Sheffield, however, demands by local campaigners for meaningful

voice and influence appeared more active and very much the subject of live debate with the council. This is arguably connected to two significant recent city campaigns which participants referred to several times as being influential: *"The tree campaign was a turning point, and it gave people hope and encouragement in standing up to them. And then that kind of prepared the ground for the campaign for the governance change referendum."*[4] Gross failures to listen had led to widespread critique and demands for change, including at system and constitutional levels, to integrate stakeholders directly in decision-making arrangements, rather than *"always in their gift, under their control."*

However, these demands did not appear to have yet led to significant or visible shifts in practices or outcomes. Nor was a new council constitution seen to have enshrined improved mechanisms to secure greater influence in decision-making for Sheffield residents.

The primary barriers to greater influence were mainly seen as political rather than institutional (although both were clearly at play). In particular, the council's Labour Group was seen as a major block, hostile to anyone who stood outside their tent.

Labour has been the overwhelmingly dominant political party in the city for a century, so it is unsurprising that this party feels that they have ownership of decision-making. In refusing to cede any control, Labour in Sheffield was seen to have *"a culture of entitlement."* For campaigners in the room, this was real and divisive: *"They have their favourites who get what they want, everybody else is knocking at the door and getting nowhere; it stinks."* The Labour Group's attitude was typified as *"hostile,"* *"insular"* and *"tribal"* to outsiders, including local campaigners: *"They make everyone outside their control their political enemies."* They were seen as *"wanting to control all the levers of power in the city"* and *"practising divide and rule"* between different communities in the city.

> They said 'come with us and we'll get you this and that' but we said we wanted to be non-party political...then they turned on us...if you follow their line it's all good, but if you don't... It's about holding your own, not being afraid, not being bullied. They bully you; they intimidate.

In both cities, the impacts on local campaigners, and as part of wider civil society, were significant, including affecting the ability of people and groups to work together. Significant divisions and a lack of trust took place across the campaigning and voluntary sector, because access to the corridors of power, as well as information and resources, were claimed to be based on one's closeness to the dominant political party. Groups self-censored and were scared to speak out, and anyone 'on the inside' certainly did not speak out for fear of losing favour.

d) Private and corporate capture

The impact of private and corporate sector interests in the local state, and on public services, was felt strongly by local campaigners across a wide range of areas. This included land and asset disposals, the privatisation of public services, the commercialisation of parks and buildings and a variety of public-private delivery mechanisms. There was a general prioritising of private interests, or even subservience to them, across both cities.

On one hand, this was described as a factual state of affairs where public assets had been lost, or where different ownership and delivery mecha-

4   The major and extended dispute over the felling of up to half of Sheffield's street trees under a PFI Highways Contract exposed significant dysfunctionality in local governance. This contributed to the momentum behind the largest ever citizen campaign in England for a change of council governance. Using community rights enshrined in the Localism Act 2011, it triggered a referendum on moving from a strong leadership model (Leader and Cabinet) to a more decentralised Committee model. The referendum was won by a large majority in May 2021. The formal changeover in governance took place in May 2022 and continues at the time of writing.

nisms were in place. On the other, councils were seen to have been *"captured by a model of thinking."* As one person put it: *"The rules of engagement have changed – it's a business now. When we do engage with the council, forget social justice, forget democracy, we just have to go with a business case."* This suggests a decline in the importance and prominence of public service or democratic values for those in charge.

One campaigner typified the ascendancy of market thinking in councils by describing the institutional response to a situation where six out of eight local housing managers had been lost through cuts. *"Their response to the decimation? Buzzwords! A slogan! What was it?…'Stronger Voices,' something like that. I mean, you couldn't make it up!"*

Others described how corporate interests had, at least in part, gained some control of the narrative in councils. One example given related to a large private developer who called local campaigners *"a load of NIMBYS,"* presenting their own interests, by contrast, as neutral or benign. *"There is a corporate interest in play, but everything assumes both the public and private interest are the same. The 'public interest' is a sop, a nod to the fact that we are dealing with issues of governance, democracy, citizenry. But no, we don't talk about the money."*

Another example given of an apparent deference to private interests was seemingly routinely exorbitant costings presented with *"no challenge, no questions asked. It's a bit of a recurring joke really – this tiny little thing needs doing, oh that's going to cost you another ten thousand."*

"THE 'PUBLIC INTEREST' IS A SOP, A NOD TO THE FACT THAT WE ARE DEALING WITH ISSUES OF GOVERNANCE, DEMOCRACY, CITIZENRY."

"THE WHOLE SYSTEM'S BEEN GERRYMANDERED TO REMOVE RESPONSIBLE CONTROL."

The corporatisation of cities, in hand with austerity politics and cuts to public services, was seen as a challenge to the fundamental principles of local democracy: *"It's hollowing out cities and it's hollowing out human beings. Our city council's debt is huge – to what extent are they responsible for the city's residents over the needs of their creditors?"*

In Glasgow, the corporatisation and privatisation of public services has reached a boiling point for some. *"The whole system's been gerrymandered to remove responsible control."* Campaigners had little faith in the local authority, for whom they deemed it convenient to delegate responsibility and accountability to private bodies without a democratic mandate or obligation. Some campaigns prioritise challenging corporate bodies over trying to affect change through their local authorities. *"We can attack the local governance structures that don't work, but we need to get beyond attacking the politicians, because they're working within a neoliberal system, and it's the corporates that have power!"*

Overall, local governance arrangements, cultures and practices were seen to have done little or nothing to uphold or protect the interests of residents and local democracy in the face of private and corporate power.

CAMPAIGN APPROACHES
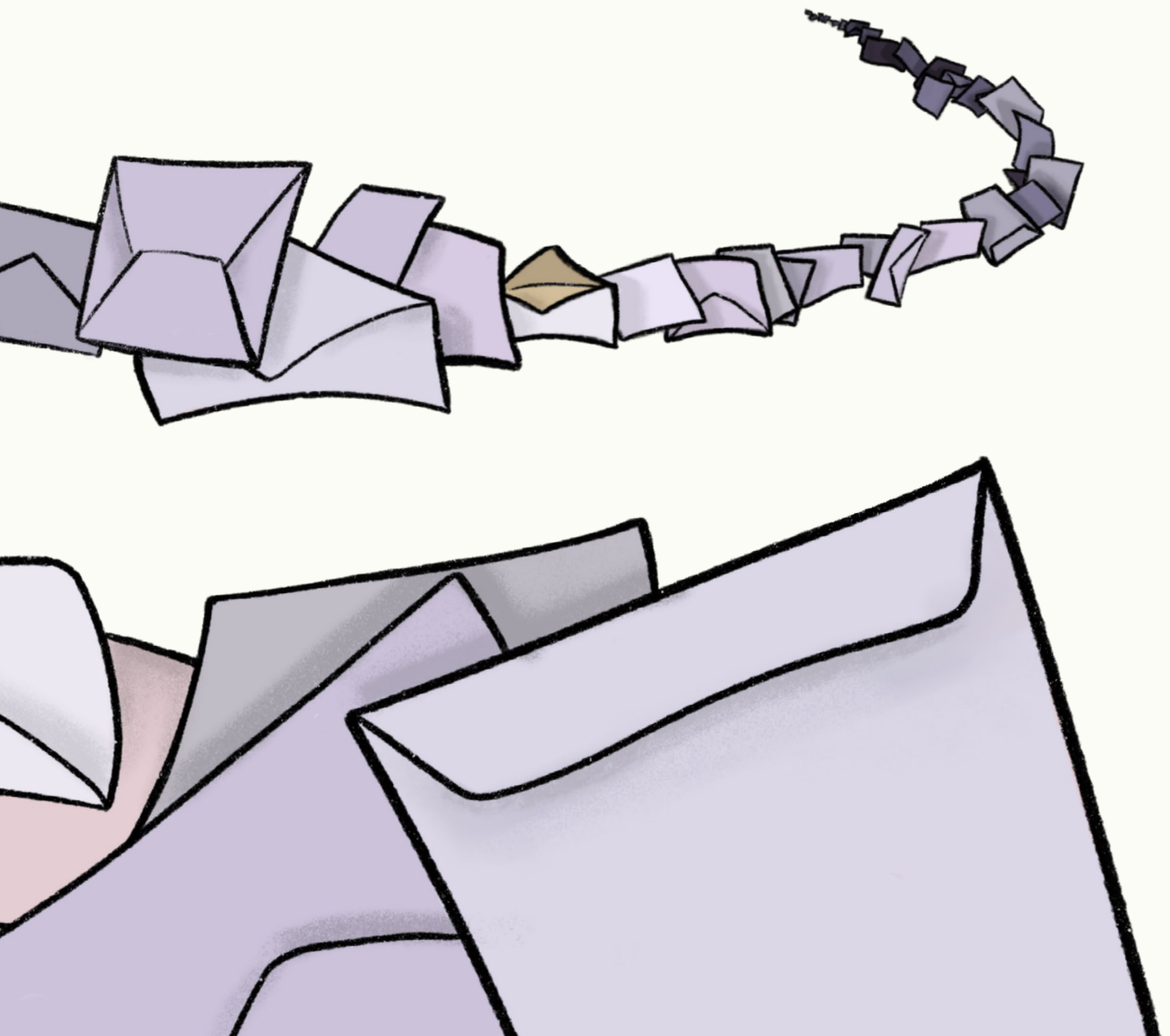
a) Dilemmas of engagement and strategy

Positioning in relation to the council

For the local campaigners in our co-learning conversations *"the relationships we all have with the local state, how we engage it, how and when we talk to them or not...involve different tactical considerations".* Whilst almost all expressed the strategic and tactical importance of organising outside, and in tension with, local power structures, in practice these were complex decisions. Campaigners' positions changed. They moved towards and away from councils depending on a whole range of factors and considerations, whilst at the same time, maintaining and protecting their 'outsider' positioning in different ways. Working with local government was strategic, tactical, contingent, opportunistic, and flexible. It also depended on a range of conditions and factors affecting campaign groups themselves, not least their strength in numbers, capacity and resources.

One participant highlighted the importance of simply being opportunistic:

> In the end we bypassed the council...set up outside...developed the strategy. They don't have any staffing, don't have any money. Now is the time to form your network and give them a strategy...because they don't have the people to do it. There's an advantage you can take by doing that.

At a basic level a widely-expressed problem was: *"We don't want to be co-opted into their narrative."* One campaigner was more explicit: *"They are always trying to neutralise the grassroots energy and co-opt people with established knowledge...get endorsement...for their own interests."* In this context, it was not a question of campaigners simply turning up or responding as stakeholders and collaborating with council bodies to reach a consensus on issues of concern – even if local governance arrangements were designed and operationalised to enable this collaboration. They were not. For local campaigners this would likely be to be part of maintaining or reinforcing both the status quo and modus operandi, to be acting simply as compliant subjects rather than more disruptive forces.

One participant new to campaigning said she was *"astonished, I couldn't believe it, I had no idea"* when she first encountered councillors and officers at meetings and saw the opaque, complex, slow systems and the lack of responsiveness, openness and collaborative approach. Others felt from the outset that putting significant energy and time into the council was unlikely to deliver meaningful or significant shifts in the council's actions that would have reflected campaigner priorities, except at the margins. In some cases, they were proved right.

Councils not meeting campaigners half-way

This is not to say that nothing positive could be done in collaborative spaces with the local council. However, even successes were hard-won, and campaigners reflected that there might be more opportunities if there were more favourable governance conditions and cultures. Even those campaigns with faith and willingness for deep engagement with local authorities found themselves kept at arm's length or further:

> We've tried in so many ways to do 'the engagement thing' – it's how you get deep enough and embraced to get the knife in to make it possible for you to release what needs to be released; It's not enough

to just vote a councillor in and then expect them to perform, I think we need to be with them more, all the way. We've tried to do that, and they've slapped us down.

For some campaigners, while their assessment of the local authority's mechanisms for changemaking was one of intentional obscurity, this was treated as an assumed given circumstance, one that could be far worse, and one that should not deter changemaking efforts: *"I would never despair about them setting the system up to make it harder for us, because people have changed things in much worse systems. What we can do is we can make ourselves heard."*

Dilemmas posed by funding or direct collaboration

Council and other funding clearly created contingencies for how campaign strategies and tactics were crafted. Formal funding frequently meant significant compromises. In Glasgow, *"Funds from the council and Scottish Government tie us into systems that are the systems we are actually fighting against, capital comes with constraints, co-option."* For some this meant that *"we don't seek government funding, deliberately,"* and *"we are never asking the council for help, that's not our positioning. We can be 'spikier'".* Structures with multiple funding streams could also give some freedom: *"We get 60% from [different funders] but 40% from [the membership]. That's our 'free money' to do what we want with."*

One campaigner described being involved in direct partnership work with the council (that had been extremely hard won over a long period). There were:

> nteresting and ongoing tensions; it isn't easy, relating to openness, transparency, accountability, all those things we know about…And a constant tendency to backslide, to fall back into the old ways of communicating and exercising control…excluding people…to forget things we've agreed. You have to pay attention, it's somewhat wearying… don't think we've got it right for the long term.

Another talked about potential risks to the campaign when disproportionate energy is spent on collaborative work with the council (and especially if the outcomes were not going to be particularly significant):

> What we've found, the more you get into the nitty gritty on policy, the more your people are in talking to their people. It enervates the movement; it drains the energy out of people and it makes it feel as though they are not participating… There is no substitute for being in the room with people [other campaigners], to build solidarity…you can't afford to weaken or lose that, especially for marginal gain.

Maintaining radical agendas
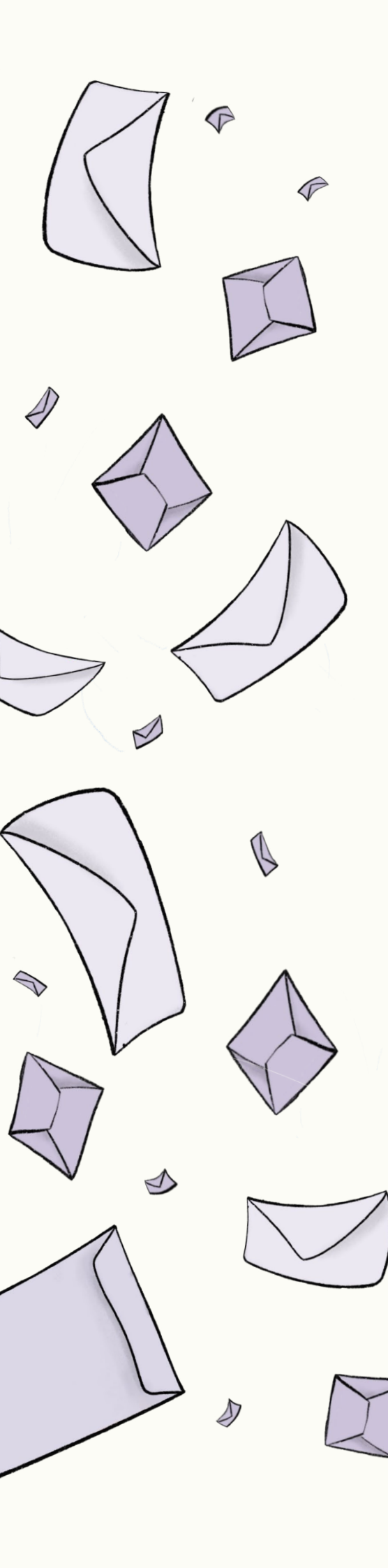
For some, however, these questions were also existential:

> We need our autonomy to articulate demands without watering it down…there's such an integrationist logic, a white supremacist agenda that underpins it, we have to be really careful around that. So one of the things we've learnt is to be really careful about how we articulate the needs, through the lens of our own experiences, to not get caught up in that dominant framing and language.

Others described how they had *"started off naively…we reached out to*

"**THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR BEING IN THE ROOM WITH PEOPLE TO BUILD SOLIDARITY**"

our local councillors, we didn't know how to do anything, but we very soon realised this had a big cost. 'Yes we'll help you' they said, but we very quickly realised that we cannot trust any councillors...we withdrew."

For others it was different:

> *We never had a moment when the scales fell off our eyes... If any-thing, we're a bit uncomfortable if we ever have councillors on board, we see that as a bit of a conflict, we have to manage that situation be-cause it's all about building an independent base of power... We don't want to be co-opted into the local political structures.*

b) Building power outside the council

Some participants were quite expansive in describing different frameworks and understandings that provided strength and shaped campaign activity. In both cities, for example, campaigners talked about radical histories of collective action and the importance of these. Others drew on internation-al links as a challenge to reframe dominant, limited and conventional ways of thinking about the local state and local governance in more inclusive and diverse ways. Others drew on the urgency of the existential challenge of the climate emergency to (re)focus and energise, or recognised *"a grassroots material interest in change."*

These understandings had practical meanings and expression in a vari-ety of different ways for campaigns. Campaigners pointed to *"the very large numbers of volunteers"* and *"lots and lots of groups and activists"*, *"working out how to use national and international information to raise awareness"* or rethinking or democratising local economies. Several also described specific public educational functions and activities drawing on their wider understandings, such as enabling young people to understand the political power of their vote, or for young people and communities to act on the things that matter to them, and in understanding very diverse experiences across different communities: *"We are trying to set up groups in different areas, we have to go in listening. We are coming from a place where we have problems to solve and their problems are not necessarily the same as ours."*

This is all suggestive of a terrain beyond simply state-centred forms of local democracy, where it is understood that councils are not (or cannot be) the institutional deliverers of something called 'democracy' (and local governance that might go with this). As one participant put it: *"Are we living in a democracy here? I haven't really experienced it. What do we need to do to make ourselves be noticed and what do we have to give up of ourselves to be part of this power structure?"*

Some contributions directly pointed to forms of democracy and govern-ance beyond the local state:

> *Campaigns show a different type of democracy, one that's more inclusive, one that is more connected to the lives of ordinary people than the current democracy, and it's that gap between the kind of democracy we do in our communities and in our campaigns, to what is actually out there and seen as the only solution.*

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c) Campaigner collectivising, infrastructure and resources

Working across campaigns: Glasgow
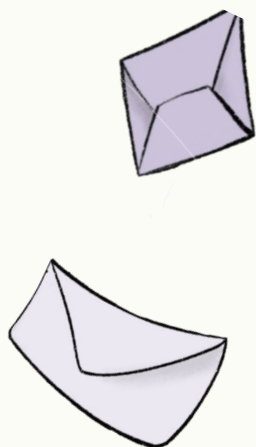
Campaigners in both cities understood the importance of building power within their own local campaigns in different ways, and as a counter to local state 'democracy' and governance that was seen as failing for their particular issue. Yet this was arguably under-developed beyond their individual groups. This is important because if campaigners face similar underlying issues in the ways their councils work, then collectivising and organising together can amplify voices for change (as well as other benefits like mutual support). *"After 25 years of campaigning, I have never really been in forums where you can discuss things with other campaigns – why are we not doing more of that?"*

This collective work was seen as a more of a priority in Glasgow than in Sheffield. There was already some attempt to collectivise, build infrastructure and generate resources between campaigners, such as the People's Plan for Glasgow[5]. Many participants in our co-learning conversations knew each other through this cross-campaign work in the city.

At the same time, many wanted more of this: *"Yes, we do work together... but I think there is scope for opening up to have [more] conversations."* Lack of capacity and resource was evident for joint and cross-campaign work here: *"We have some close contact day-to-day, especially as there is so much crisis working now, but there isn't the capacity to sit down and think what's wrong with this, what's wrong with that, how this can be done differently."* And: *"There's a lack of joint problem-solving between campaigns, we don't spend enough time thinking together, developing joined up tactics etcetera."*

Some pointed to particular ideas directly in relation to council approaches that might support more joint and collective working. For example, it was suggested that

> [W]ith a relatively small budget – room booking, childcare, transport – [councils] could identify a couple of organisations in each board, and pay you to have conversations, for your knowledge, about how this can be done differently. [It] wouldn't be in the big scheme of things a lot of money to do that.

This of course would be a long way from the current situation. Another participant noted:

> We've been talking about public interest planning and citizens' panels and changing the narrative by having a panel based in the city council that's citizen-led. Not necessarily to expect major change but firstly to get inside, develop relationships with officers but also to discuss what is in the public interest rather than just growth.

Overall, in Glasgow the potential and need for (more) collectivising cross-campaign was recognised, but available resources to support this were limited.

5   The People's Plan for Glasgow is a common platform and process for drawing together Glasgow's groundswell of campaign and community groups and organisations for mutual support and solidarity, co-learning, and re-imagining Glasgow's democratic future.

Drawing on radical histories: Glasgow

Some campaigners drew on different kinds of inspirations and frameworks to locate their work. For example, Glasgow was seen as being *"a global city for centuries…involved in things like slavery and colonisation"* but that also draws on *"this sense of connectedness, the diasporic, and global freedom struggles"* that *"bring innovations, global and internationalist concerns to the table."* Place-based approaches were seen as sometimes *"insular and homogenising."* At the same time, there was a sense of nostalgia and mourning for the Glasgow of the past: *"Glasgow's municipal socialism was second to none, and we threw it away"* to the extent that:

> Sometimes Glasgow feels like a defeated city. There was a time when our councils were very powerful, very strong, and did come from the trade union movement and our own movements, the co-op movement and others. I don't know where that started to go wrong.

Recognising the need for better collaboration: Sheffield

Sheffield, too, claims its radical history from the Suffragettes to the city council administration's attempts to resist the dominance of Thatcherism in the 1980s. In recent years the street-tree campaign in the city contributed to a proliferation of local campaign groups directly and encouraged others: *"the tree campaign was a turning point."* However, local campaigners in the co-learning conversations were working in a less connected way than in Glasgow, with no city-wide infrastructure for working together on common or overarching concerns. These connections were sporadic, or via one-off initiatives or events.

The campaigners and groups we spoke to in Sheffield largely knew or were aware of each other. Some individuals had connected on city-wide initiatives such as via coordination of *It's Our City!*, the successful city-wide petition for a change of governance system. However, there was no city-wide network that brought local campaigners together for joint working in the same way as Glasgow. This possibly reflected the nature of the local campaign groups in Sheffield who were involved in the co-learning conversations – overall they were smaller and more grassroots, with less money, than in Glasgow.

This difference possibly reflects different national contexts: arguably, England has seen a greater harnessing of VCS (voluntary and community sector) groups to council projects, with the effect of subduing a critical presence in third-sector organisations. One of our co-learning conversation participants commented that in Sheffield, this manifested as the *"stripping out of critique and challenge and strong independent voices across the VCS in Sheffield as a check and balance on formal power."* The wider sector was also seen as often being in competition with one another and *"divided."* The local campaigners we spoke to in Sheffield did not really see themselves as linked into these wider VCS networks and the established organisations were not seen as providing support to local campaigners.

At the same time, it was clear that whilst sustaining their own campaigns' already-stretched capacity, Sheffield local campaigners wanted and would welcome better networks and local campaigner infrastructure. They knew they were working in isolation: *"Sometimes you feel you are on your own – there should be a forum."*

The *"diversity across our campaigns"* was recognised as an important benefit of more joint working. This included inter-generational connections:

younger people tend to understand *"the possibilities that technology offers as a 'force multiplier' but older people tend to understand collective organising more."* This meant that *"connecting social media to collective organising"* was a key task – especially as the importance of social media was recognised for the inclusion of many disabled people.

Possibilities for a better campaigning infrastructure

Overall, in Sheffield local campaigners were working under pressure and with greatly stretched capacity. They were often dependent on only a very few individuals as volunteers to sustain their own local campaigner work. But they recognised that *"Sheffield has lots and lots of campaigners, loads more than other places."* There was an affinity and sympathy between local campaigns, and participants were pleased to meet other local campaigners across the city where they had not previously met before (or not in person). The recognition of common issues faced in terms of local democracy and governance was clear, although not yet fully analysed.

In Glasgow, because of the People's Plan initiative, campaigners had managed to start leveraging some spaces to explore and develop more collectivised agendas and organising. This does suggest possibilities and potential for the development of infrastructure, spaces and resources for more joint thinking and working together, for supporting each other and for collectivising around joint agendas. Councils, bigger or umbrella third sector organisations and funders might also play a useful role in enabling and supporting local campaigner development as a contribution to a vibrant local democracy.

ENGLAND HAS SEEN A GREATER HARNESSING OF VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR GROUPS TO COUNCIL PROJECTS, WITH THE EFFECT OF SUBDUING A CRITICAL PRESENCE.
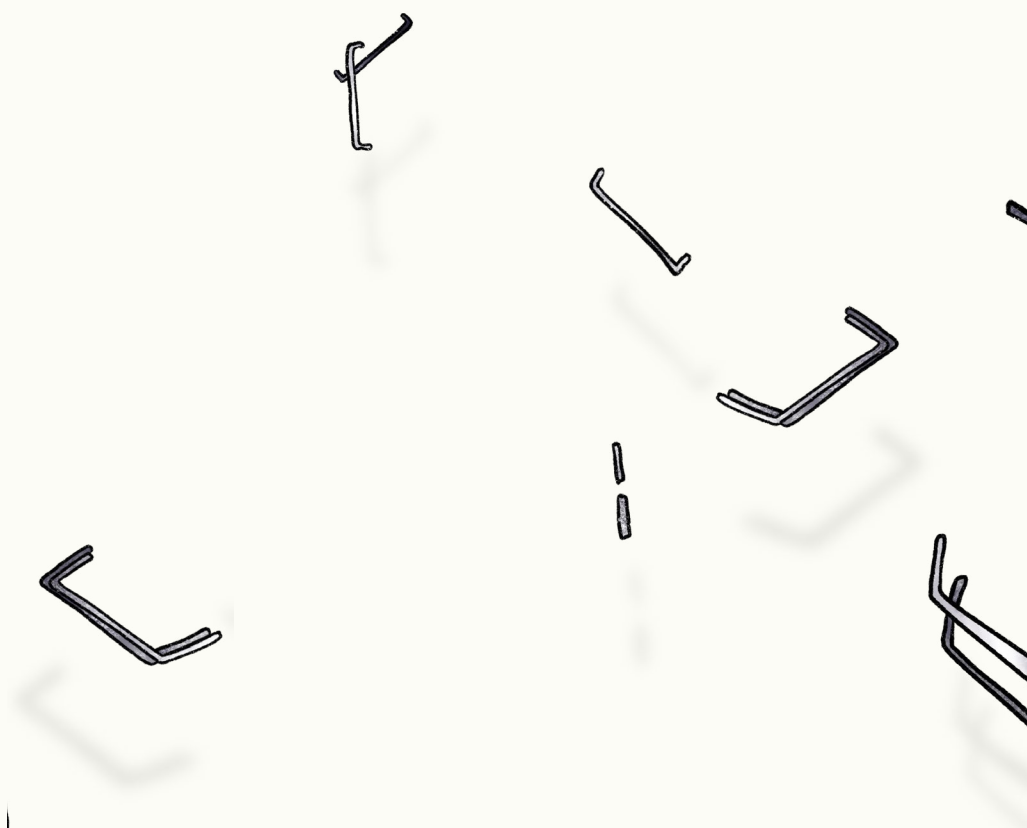
IMPLICATIONS

Campaigners and community groups at the local level are operating in a significant democratic deficit. Our findings show it is near impossible for residents to engage with local decision-making structures, to the extent that they question whether these structures are democratic at all. We have seen that it requires significant knowledge and social capital to access democracy; the legitimacy of democratic structures is eroded by low voter turnouts; and the public sector itself is shrinking with more and more services, buildings and land being sold off to private companies.

This democratic deficit is made worse by cuts that are eroding capacity in councils – but these do not explain the whole picture of poor governance and entitlement to power we have witnessed. The democratic structures that campaigners try to use are technocratic and favour those with already-existing levels of voice and privilege. From our findings, we see no quick fixes to reforming these structures for the common good.

In the co-learning conversations, campaigners reflected on their own strategies and tactics. A complex picture emerged: whilst there was a shared criticism of existing governance arrangements, campaigners had different views on why this was the case and what would be the solutions to this problem of democracy. This meant that the campaigners and community groups had different priorities. They also had different orientations to existing power structures, and different understandings of to what extent they could and should seek to reform or transform these.

Our research makes clear that campaigners have few opportunities to come together and share common concerns about the nature and impact of local democracy, and what it means for the outcome of their work. The groups we spoke to found the conversations very useful for learning about each other's work and thinking. Throughout the course of the conversations, participants frequently mentioned how little time was spent with other campaign groups on joint analysis, or identifying complementary tactics and strategy. We imagine that in many ways, the experiences of lack of mutual understanding and communication between campaign groups in Sheffield and Glasgow are echoed in other cities. For these two cities, ideas about better collaboration and campaigning infrastructure began to emerge and it was clear that there was a desire to move this forward.

This research project only scratched the surface of the variety of local campaigners' experiences. However, there are several broad implications that can be drawn about:

1. Campaigners' relationships to power structures and contributions to local democracy
2. Creating alternative and extended forms of democracy
3. Cities' potential for new democratic futures

Despite the dire state of local governance, our findings show that a vibrant, pluralistic democracy is already present within the campaigning landscape. We identified at least four ways in which the groups we spoke to contributed directly to ideas and practices about local democracy and the distribution of power.

Firstly, local campaigners embody democracy in action. Operating outside and chafing up against the local state, they assert power. Their existence and activities show that democracy is active and diverse; it is not simply delivered via an occasional vote. However, local councils do not meaningfully embrace the democratic possibilities campaigners offer for their practices or governance arrangements, and groups seeking to influence, reform or transform local government were very aware of the limits of their ability to do so, especially through collaboration and dialogue. There are few opportunities for meaningful democratic participation where impact and influence are evident: where participation mechanisms exist, they are limited and appear to be designed to prop up councils' existing agendas rather than allow for them to be challenged or changed.

Secondly, local campaigns can become important sites for creating structural or governance changes to local authorities. Many of the campaigners we spoke to had started from an immediate local concern. When trying to enact change, they had found themselves in conflict or tension with the local state and institutional power. This led to different balancing acts – making demands to the local state does not exclude positive engagement and collaborative work with local councils. Our findings show that some groups were successfully involved in joint collaborative or partnership initiatives attempting to enact different ways of doing things. Others, whilst recognising their limits, were successfully using current structures and to achieve some change: including Sheffield activists' successful referendum to decentralise their council governance model, or successful campaigning in Scotland to lever additions to statute for local planning frameworks.

Thirdly, local campaigns help to mitigate some of the negative impact of the lack of democracy within local authorities and governance structures. At a time when many third sector organisations—especially charities—have become invested in the delivery of projects and services traditionally delivered by councils, those exercising a campaigning voice act differently. They perform an active check on the power of the local state; highlight and challenge inequalities; actively pursue accountability; seek improvements in governance; and create new forms of solidarity and collective action. In this sense, though they may not recognise or admit this, local councils need local campaigners.

Lastly, local campaigns are invested in understanding and challenging unequal distributions of power in their areas. Neither Glasgow nor Sheffield Councils were experienced as benign dispensers of social justice. Quite the contrary: powerful interests often hold sway, as evidenced in the way that resources, control and power are distributed. The local governance landscape is marked by profound inequalities and injustices, which contrasts sharply to the stories councils tell themselves and others. Outside of this, local campaigners work towards a different set of values and outcomes, and pay close attention to equality and the distribution of power within their own structures and practices.

Local democracy would benefit greatly from councils showing less hostility and a more collaborative attitude toward campaigners and community

A VIBRANT, PLURALISTIC DEMOCRACY IS PRESENT WITHIN THE CAMPAIGNING LANDSCAPE. COUNCILS DO NOT MEANINGFULLY EMBRACE THE DEMOCRATIC POSSIBILITIES CAMPAIGNERS OFFER.

groups, learning from the ways that people organise themselves outside of state structures and embedding mechanisms that invite participation via challenge and on residents' own terms. Dynamic democracies cannot exist in any meaningful sense, let alone improve, without the challenge and dissent active campaigns provide.

Creating alternative and extended forms of democracy

Our findings show a democracy in action, where local campaigners and community groups collectively build power and even a shared infrastructure. This is happening outside councils' governance structures and official institutions, and in some cases highlights the shortcomings of those.

Many of the groups we spoke to were dealing with the immediate impacts of the cost-of-living crisis as well as long-standing inequalities. In some cases, they were providing a safety net that had been ripped apart by decades of increasingly neoliberal and racist policies, by which we mean the erosion in local government capacity and funding, and the exclusion of some migrant groups from state provision. Importantly, when groups provided services that were otherwise absent, this was understood by the campaign groups themselves as an act of solidarity and resistance, rather than charitable provision. It involved giving power to those they work with, creating a directly democratic relationship that is perhaps deeper or differently conceptualised than that of service provision. It builds in a dynamic of care with a basis in solidarity, mutuality and interdependence.

Campaigners' focus on working together also showed a real democracy in the making. Groups were either already connected or recognised the importance of working together: this shows that they considered themselves more than a sum of their parts. However, there are major barriers to this democracy in action. Our findings show that groups were constantly battling a lack of resources, hostility from councils, risk of co-option and weak democratic accountability as a result of privatisation.

We have seen that these grassroots groups are best placed to respond to residents' needs and understand them better than charities, NGOs, large funders and councils. They need to be better resourced. Equally, there needs to be more discussion among these groups about the current limitations of local democracy and the potential for collective action on governance. These co-learning conversations have provided one such model for this discourse.

Cities potential for democratic futures

Sheffield and Glasgow are both prime examples of places where an undemocratic push of market forces has resulted in a conflict with residents. Despite the different contexts in England and Scotland, there are important similarities in the shortcomings of city governance. Both councils largely operate in a closed and technocratic manner, failing to engage people. Consultations operate on council terms; meaningful power is not ceded.

The two cities we focused on are not unique in this respect. Cities are at the heart of the neoliberal vision of economic development and engines of innovation, yet also primarily places where people live our lives. This means that residents' needs are often directly in conflict with the economic forces that seek to maximise profit from land and housing, pushing away and displacing those who are excluded from or choose not to be part of this vision.

CAMPAIGNERS' FOCUS ON WORKING TOGETHER SHOWED A REAL DEMOCRACY IN THE MAKING.

Indeed, as our findings from Sheffield and Glasgow show, cities are also often centres of political resistance and diverse social movements. They often seek to influence those in power as well as build more directly democratic alternatives. This is sometimes referred to under the umbrella term of 'dual power,' and is closely linked to ideas of building 'counter-power' in relation to existing power structures). A dual power approach has been an important building block in many recent movements globally, where activists and campaigners have started electoral platforms and successfully governed cities, or shaped urban governance and legislation to become more democratic. Examples of the first range from Cooperation Jackson in Mississippi, USA, to Barcelona and many other cities in the Spanish state; and of the second from the 'urban commons' of Naples to the housing campaigns in Berlin. 'Municipalism' is a useful umbrella term for this kind of local politics that puts direct democracy, care and democratising the economy at its heart. Even though most of the groups we spoke to would not call themselves municipalist, we would argue that their experiences have a lot in common with other groups building local power across the world – and that in the same way as it is important to collectivise the experiences in Sheffield or Glasgow, seeing these trans-local connections will bring the democratic horizons of those cities a little closer.
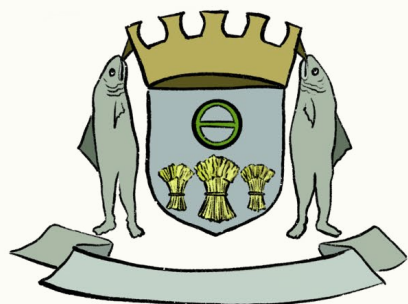
Cities in Action Appendix

How to host a co-learning conversation

PURPOSE

We have included this appendix to help other local campaigners to host similar Co-Learning Conversations in their area. We found these conversations to be a healthy and positive means of encouraging campaigners, community groups and local activists to think about the commonalities between their experiences, and their implications for local activism, democracy, and the organisation of power in their councils (governance). Of our questions, which are listed below, discussions 1 and 2 are more designed to map the landscape and culture of resistance within a city or area. The third discussion has the potential to spark movements that fulfil important democratic functions, counter barriers to exercising power, and strengthen voices that re-vision and reshape local governance and democratic participation.

We are curious to see whether campaigners elsewhere have similar insights and experiences to those in Glasgow and Sheffield. Our research is exploratory and ongoing, and insights from other cities or regions can make a valuable contribution to our overall picture. If you plan to use this guide to host a Co-Learning Conversation, we would love to hear from you!

PRACTICALITIES

Timing your conversation

You should consider how to time your Co-Learning Conversation around the availability of your participants. Groups and organisations working for change are commonly under-resourced and overstretched, and many people's ability to participate in the Co-Learning conversation may rely on its timing. We hosted each of our conversations on weekends to avoid participants' weekday commitments, but of course the timing of participants' other commitments will depend on their group. It also makes sense to be mindful of other activities in the city that may draw participants away from your conversation – for example it is wise to avoid the days of mass demonstrations, elections, or popular public meetings. The duration of your Co-Learning Conversation will determine the depth with which you are able to explore the questions, but you should also be mindful of meeting fatigue and accessibility, so we recommend having breaks. Each of our conversations lasted 3.5 hours, including a break.

Choosing a venue

Ideally you want to use a space that feels neutral and welcoming for your participants. If you are not hosting a Co-Learning Conversation on behalf of a group or organisation who has their own space, you may need to book a space. We do not recommend hosting the conversations in a public space, as this can interfere with people's sense of ease, or with any recordings you choose to make.

We recognise that there may be budgetary limitations to hosting conversations – rooms in libraries and community centres are often more neutral and affordable than conference centres, corporate spaces, or educational establishments. We hosted our pilot event online, and while this is certainly a low-cost option, we recommend trying to meet in person if possible, to help participants better connect with one another. It may be wise to have an idea of your participants in advance so that you can give special consideration to any necessary accessibility requirements for your venue. In Glasgow and Sheffield, the conversations were held at community centres in or near the city centre.

Selecting participants

The number of participants determines how many perspectives are included in the conversation, and how in depth the conversations may go. Each of our conversations hosted between 6 and 8 people.

Participants should be people with an active stake in local campaigning or community activism. Most people will likely be working or volunteering within campaign or community groups, though you may also find participants who operate individually. We wanted to include a range of participants working on different issues. If you want to include multiple participants working on the same cause or issue, you may want to select people from groups that use different tactics and strategies, to ensure a diversity of opinions and experiences. If you have multiple participants from the same group or organisation, hosting them in separate conversations is an option.

As these conversations are designed to investigate relationships with a particular local authority, the campaigners you invite should all be active within the same city or region. Some of our participants were representatives of groups and organisations operating nationally, but we asked that their contributions focussed on creating change at the local level. We decided it would interfere with other participants' comfort and ease of honesty if we included representatives from the local authorities themselves or other state institutions (for example, people working closely with local authorities in 'arms-length' or 'partner' organisations), and we advise that you also approach this issue with consideration of overall group dynamics.

Inviting participants

As the host, you should already be familiar with some of your area's network of campaigns, community groups and other changemaking organisations – a direct connection is a good way to get people round the table. In Glasgow and Sheffield, most participants were already known to the hosts, and the others were reached through contacts within these networks. Campaigners were approached via email in the first instance, or in person where possible. If you wish to attract participants from a group or organisation you do not have an existing connection to, you can investigate whether the group has public meetings or opportunities to engage. Putting energy into the group's work may encourage their members to put energy into yours.

Supporting participants

Think about how you can support people to take part. As a funded project, we were able to offer a financial incentive. Participants were each given £100 to keep or donate to their group or organisation. On top of this, we provided travel expenses for people to attend, offered a financial contribution toward childcare costs and provided snacks and refreshments throughout the Co-Learning Conversation. If you are thinking about hosting a conversation but you do not have funds to offer a financial incentive, think about other ways you can support participants: for instance, by you or your group or organisation providing strategic or practical support to the participants' groups or organisations. You can also design your output / outcomes to provide a benefit to campaigners to incentivise participation.

Safe participation

It is important that people understand what they are signing up to do, and why. Think about why you are hosting a Co-Learning Conversation, what you wish to get out of it, and how you plan to use the insights you uncover. Use this information to build an information sheet and consent form for participants to read in advance. Consider how you will be documenting the insights – whether recordings, or note-taking, and be sure to include information about how this will be stored, who will have access to it, and for how long. Depending on how you plan to use the insights, you should also consider options for participants to remain anonymous (either across
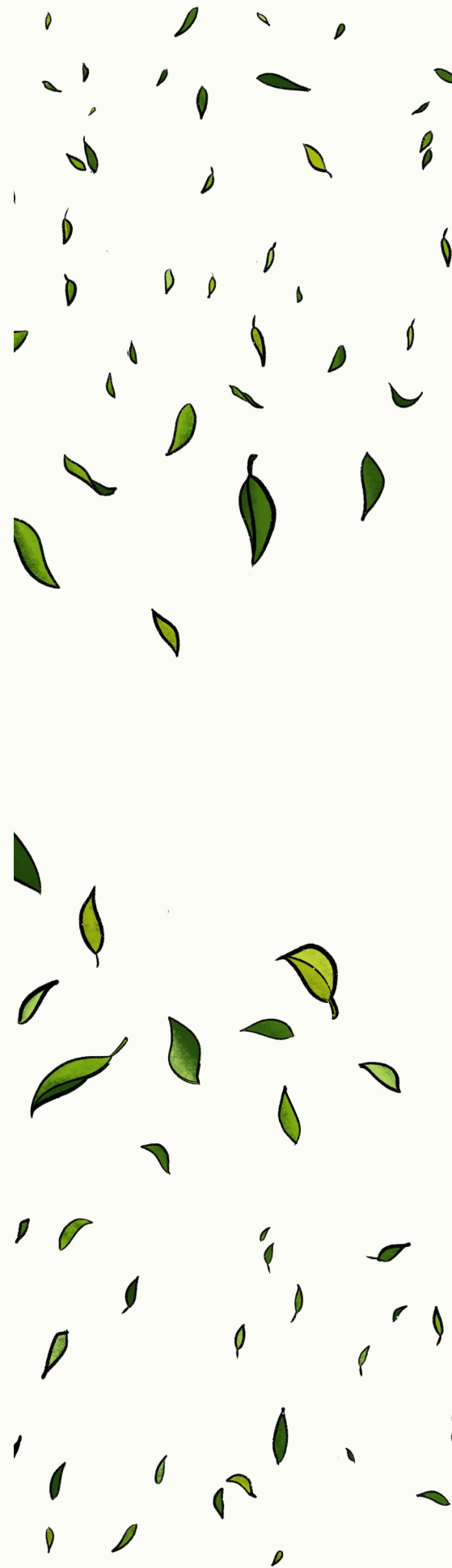
the board or by individual choice). In our Co-Learning Conversations, we opted for complete anonymity for all participants and their groups or organisations, to encourage people to share freely without risk of repercussions.

Before beginning the conversation, consider sharing some guidelines for safe and inclusive participation, which we framed as 'Group Intentions.' The guidelines we used for our conversations are as follows:

There are no right or wrong answers.

Avoid making assumptions. Refrain from making assumptions about other people's identities, activities, or contexts. Practise speaking about your own experiences and context.

This is a space where we do not tolerate racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, transphobic, classist or oppressive behaviour or language of any kind. We strive to all feel able to call out such behaviour, also recognising that it is easier for those of us who are not directly affected.

Understand the difference between intent & impact: try to understand and acknowledge impact. Denying the impact of something said by focusing on intent is often more destructive than the initial interaction.

Move Up / Move Back: Encourage participation by all present. Notice who is speaking and who is not. If you tend to speak often, consider "moving back" and vice versa. Remember there are different ways of participating.

Practise mindful listening: Try to avoid planning what you will say as you listen to others. Practice listening with your whole self.

Confidentiality: Please be responsible for the confidentiality of the people you work with. Take home learnings, but do not identify anyone other than yourself. No names or pronouns or places and no distinguishing details. If you want to follow up with anyone regarding something they said during a session, ask first and respect their wishes.
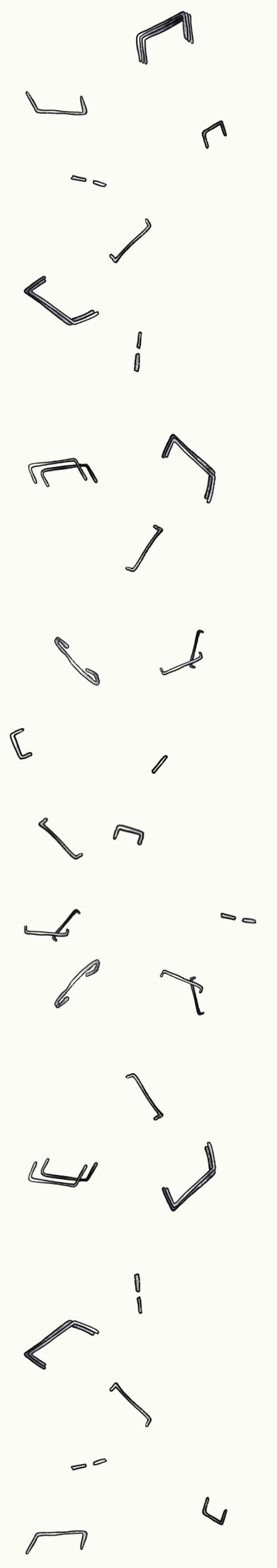
PROCESS

Documenting the conversation

You will need to decide how you document the insights that will come out of the Co-Learning Conversation. As our conversations were designed as part of a research project, we needed in-depth documentation that we could return to in the later stages of the project. For this reason, we decided to use a voice recorder, as well as appointing a dedicated note-taker. You may choose to do the same, depending on the planned outcome – just remember to ask for consent. We also decided that we wanted to publish a creative output, so we included an artist within our team who was present at all conversations to observe and take reference photographs. This is not a necessary part of the process, but can be helpful in making your output more engaging, if you have the resources for it.

Notes for hosting

As a host, it is helpful if you yourself are engaged in some way with changemaking in your area. This may be observation of, or familiarity with local authority strategies, activities or processes, or experience of trying to enact change through them, an awareness of localised activities related to democracy or governance, or awareness of the activities of your participants. This will help you to come up with your own prompt questions to tease out topics and themes, or direct questions more towards your

participants areas of experience.

Participants can be energised by one another's contributions and drift off-topic. This can lead to insights you might not gain otherwise, but can also take up valuable time. You must find a balance between letting the discussion flow organically, and keeping everyone on track. For this, you will need a facilitator who is used to steering people to an intended direction and jumping in when participants get ahead to the next discussion ahead of time. We chose to not facilitate too rigidly, giving space for the flow of the conversation as our research agenda was not very fixed – this meant for instance that the length of the different rounds varied quite a bit between the different conversations. However, our facilitation technique was active in the sense that we made sure to pick up on relevant themes that came up and not leave too many open loops. Our prompt questions are below and can be helpful if you need to redirect the conversation back towards the intended discussion.

Opening the meeting

Some or all of your participants may already be familiar with one another, or they may be meeting for the first time. You may choose to include an 'icebreaker' exercise to get people comfortable speaking and interacting. We recommend that you begin with an explanation of the Co-Learning Conversation, why you are hosting it and what it will be used for in your context. Recap the main points of the information and consent form that participants will have read in advance, and offer to answer any questions your participants may have. You should also give participants an idea of the Co-Learning Conversation structure, the themes that will be explored and in what order. Once these have been covered you should introduce any guidelines for participation you plan to use (our guidelines are listed above).

Introducing participants

Now you are ready to begin the Co-Learning Conversation. Start with a go-round, asking people to briefly introduce themselves and describe the broad aims of the group, campaign, or organisation they work with (or, if participating as an individual, describe the change you are working towards). This will provide a baseline description in the participants' own words that you can use to characterise their activities in your output. We offered participants 3 minutes each. We recommend that a timekeeper is appointed to keep track.

The question we posed was "Can you introduce us to your campaign or group, and tell us what your purpose and aims are, what are the changes or improvements you want to see locally?"

Round 1: Strategies and Tactics

Our research question for this round was *"What strategies are campaigners using to challenge the way things (local governance) works and/or to create new or alternative spaces for democratic engagement?"*

Round 1 gets participants thinking about the different pathways they use to create change, in particular how different strategies and tactics inspire different results. This round should give an idea of each participants' experiences, which will inform the next two, more discursive rounds. Introduce the question and then give time for people to answer individually. In our Co-Learning Conversations, we dedicated 1 hour to this round, or sometimes even longer.

Question:

Can you tell us a bit more about the activities and strategies of your group in meeting your demands / creating the change you want to see?

If you feel that participants may need an extra nudge, we have identified some 'prompt questions' that might inspire more in-depth responses. Please also feel free to add your own prompt questions as you go along in response to the development of the conversation.

Prompt questions:

- *How do you work in practice? How do you reach people or mobilise people?*
- *In what ways have you engaged with the council? (For example, consultations, public enquiries, reaching out to them, finding information about their plans)*
- *What was the outcome of any such engagement? What did you achieve?*
- *Why do you think that was the case?*
- *Who holds power in [your local authority area] in your experience?*
- *What did you learn about the way the council works?*
- *What could the council have done differently to make this engagement easier / more fruitful?*

Round 2: Relationship with local governance

Our research question for this round was "To what extent, and in what ways, do local campaigning/community activist groups share common understandings and demands for more democratic local governance?"

Round 2 teases out how these strategies and tactics have played out in your local context. It may be that what has worked well for one participant has failed another, or it may be that there are common experiences among all groups. This round in particular will be rooted in your local context: the culture of creating change, mechanisms for engagement and participation with your local authority, and other localised factors. For this round we encourage all participants to contribute their insights, but also to interact with one another's contributions, ask one another questions and explore this territory together. In our Co-Learning Conversations, we dedicated between 45 minutes to an hour to this round.

Question:

Based on the conversation this far, what common understandings do we have about local democracy? What shared experiences are there in this room? What struggles and efforts do you have in common?

Prompt questions:

- *Have you heard anything today that you have strongly identified with, or had a different experience with?*
- *How would you describe the general culture of campaigning in [your local authority area]?*
- *Why is your work necessary or important in [your local authority area]? What is the local context that makes your work important?*
- *What would need to change about the way power lies in Glasgow, in order for your campaign not to be necessary?*
- *What are the structural issues that create your cause?*
- *What does that tell you about who holds power?*

Round 3: Opportunities for connection

Our research question for this round is *"What are the possibilities or prospects for working better together/acting collectively/building solidarity and links for local democratic gains and spaces?"*

Round 3 is designed to build on the first two discussions, and explore possibilities for groups working together for common democratic claims. This discussion should be explorative and involve everyone. What this might look like may be particular to your city or region, or to the participant groups you involve. For example, in Glasgow, discussions centred around establishing a common platform for the network of grassroots and community activity in the city to connect and support one another, share information and resources, and explore alternative democratic mechanisms.

Question:

If we are part of something bigger/bigger than the sum of our parts, is there a shared territory we could/might/should be occupying more/collectivising etc?

Prompt questions:

- *What have you learned today? What have you learned or thought of doing more, or differently?*
- *How do groups support each other? Who and what helps or might help? What is the role of networks? Are they important here?*
- *What networks are you part of in your city or beyond it? Who do you work with? Who inspires you or who have you learned from?*

OUTPUT AND OUTCOMES

Output

The Co-Learning Conversations have intrinsic value and if you choose, you can leave it there! If you have the capacity, you may wish to produce some form of output based on your findings. Our initial output was a series of four posters created by our artist and inspired by the stories that came out of the conversations. We then turned to analysing the wealth of insights we had gathered to produce a report and a shorter summary of implications for use by activist or campaigner groups.

Outcomes

How you use the insights you have gained is your choice. Possible outcomes may be:

- Sharing these insights with your council to inform them about the impact of their operations
- Sharing these insights with other local campaigners to show solidarity with their experiences and encourage them to think about their struggles more systemically.
- Encouraging the creation of a common platform for local campaigners in your area to learn, share and work together
- Sharing insights with the Democratising Local Governance research team to add additional colour to our ongoing investigations

Research for Action is a worker co-operative producing research to support social, economic, and environmental justice. Our work aims to bring about change by identifying points of intervention, countering dominant narratives, making struggles and inequalities visible and disseminating alternatives.

Website: http://researchforaction.uk
Email: info@researchforaction.uk
Mastodon: https://mastodon.social/@researchforaction
Twitter/X: https://twitter.com/Research_Act

SANE is a collective working in different ways to challenge the dominant neoliberal direction of policy in Glasgow. Our central pursuit is to draw together the city's rich landscape of campaign and community activity into a *People's Plan for Glasgow*, a social movement that collectivises to resist the neoliberal distortion of the public sphere and explore alternative models.

Website: https://www.sanecollectiveglasgow.org/
Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/sanecollective/
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/SANEcollectiveGlasgow
Twitter/X: https://twitter.com/SANEGlasgow

It's Our City! mobilised communities and citizens across Sheffield to make common cause across our differences and for meaningful improvements in local democracy. We organised for impact, and coordinated the largest ever citizen-led campaign for a change of council governance, forcing a city-wide referendum in May 2021 that was won for change.

Website: https://itsoursheffield.co.uk
Email: contact@sos-sheffield.org.uk
Twitter/X: https://twitter.com/ItsOurCity1