Understanding the role of communities in water governance in Scotland

Kirsty Holstead
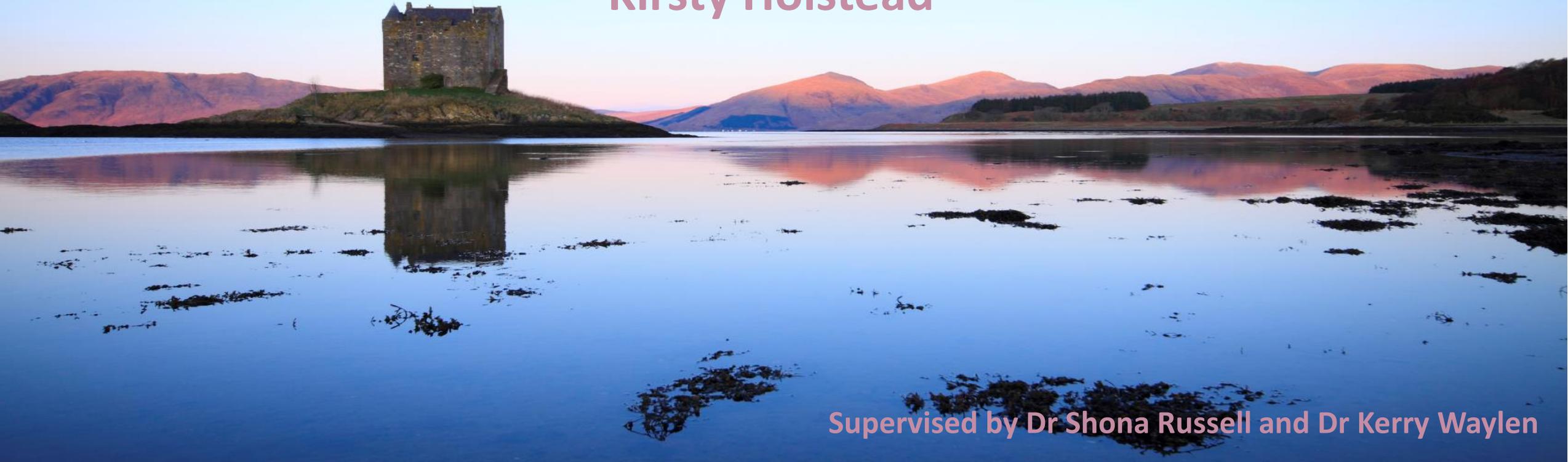
Supervised by Dr Shona Russell and Dr Kerry Waylen

Introduction

"No strategic intervention should happen without a customer view having played a broadly equal role to the vital technical engineering input" (WICS Strategic Review of Charges 2021-2027. Final Decision Paper.)

"Public awareness, participation and community engagement are essential components of sustainable flood risk management" (Scottish Government, 2019)

BUT!

Highly technical field, dispersed responsibilities across regulatory and governmental bodies, and historically people are removed from the management and governance of water (Bakker, 2003; Bakker, 2010; Strang, 2004)

Aims & objectives

This project has the overall aim of understanding how communities are involved in water governance and the factors that influence it. It will:

- Map and categorise the potential roles of communities in water governance;

- Explain how communities and their role in the water environment is understood by practitioners;

- Interrogate how communities understand water governance and what shapes their involvement; and

- Explore the implications for community involvement in governance in Scotland.

Approach

- Mixed methods methodology.

- Data collection Phase 1: 10 x 'water walks' with practitioners.

- Data collection Phase 2: interviews and observations with practitioners.

- Data collection Phase 3: to get a community perspective, was on-hold due to COVID.

- Analysis: coding transcripts and fieldnotes using MAXQDA.

Scottish Government
gov.scot

Hydro Nation Scholars Programme

These findings relate to one of my studies looking at the challenges of involving communities in water governance. Below I describe challenges experienced by those who regularly work with the public.

1. **Resources**

- Limited reach
- Focus on places where there is community infrastructure such as Community Councils.
- Developing relationships with communities leads to further, often unacknowledged work.
- Can make working with communities uncomfortable.

2. Conflicting goals and expectations (with communities and colleagues)

2.A Diffuse ideas from communities about their role

- Different views on responsibilities for water.
- Front-line "a fiery place" = some try to avoid to limit personal and organisational exposure.

Scottish Government gov.scot
Hydro Nation Scholars Programme

2.B Maintaining organisational legitimacy

- Fear and concern about challenging the legitimacy of organisation through community involvement = softer approach and do not assign responsibility.

2. C Pressure not to complicate delivery of services

- Difficult to show results of community work = some choose not to "put head above parapet" and rather, carry out job 'to the letter'.

3. 'Seeing like a community' vs 'seeing like a water problem'

- Tension between doing what a community wants and that which is technically excellent/regulatory requirement = "Seeing like a community" vs "seeing like a water problem".
- Some practitioners doing tough work to make others see like a community. This can lead to "feeling jaded".

Implications

Community involvement is broadly supported at a strategic level but it is in interactions with colleagues and communities where tensions arise in how it should take place.

- Who's role and responsibility is water governance? – still a contested issue.

- Involving communities in water governance has far reaching implications for practitioners, including how they see themselves, their role, as well as how they work.

- Involving communities in water governance can mean putting one's head 'above the parapet'.

Research impact & dissemination

Key evidence of impact:

- Expert contributor to Scottish Government's water governance process review (2019)

- Expert contributor and reviewer of POST review document on natural flood retention (2020)

Academic presentations:

International and domestic conferences i.e. Earth Systems Governance and Twenty65.

Recent academic publications:

- Hoolohan et al (2021) Re-socialising digital water transformations: Outlining social science perspectives on the digital water journey. In review in *WiresWater.*

- Holstead et al (2018) Putting community to use in environmental policy making: emerging trends in Scotland and the UK. In *Geoforum*.

Thank you

For further information & updates, please contact (kh38@st-andrews.ac.uk)

www.hydronationscholars.scot/scholars/Kirsty-holstead

@KirstyHolstead

linkedin.com/in/hydro-nation-scholars-b75b92142