More than findings and funding

A coproduced guide for community organisations and universities working together to create the right environment for community research

More than Findings and Funding: A co-produced guide for community organisations and universities working together to create the right environment for community research

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Introduction

Keep Talking is a collaborative project between Expert Citizens CIC and Staffordshire University, both based in Stoke-on-Trent in the West Midlands, UK. The project is funded by UKRI Enhancing Partnerships for Placed Based Research fund. Community researchers from Staffordshire University and Expert Citizens CIC, along with representatives from Stoke-on-Trent based community organisations and Staffordshire University staff have contributed to this guide.

The aim of Keep Talking is to understand how universities and community organisations can work together to effectively support sustainable community research. The project works with an existing team of community researchers and Expert Citizens with experience of delivering community based research projects, including Get Talking Hardship in 2019. The team bring their lived experience to support research participants to talk openly and offer a range of lenses through which we can understand the issues at the heart of the research.

While working with community researchers as partners in research benefits can be brought to the research, organisations and people involved. It is important to create the right environment for community researchers to thrive. This guide offers an introduction to community based participatory action research, some principles for building a supportive environment for community researchers and some practical actions universities and community organisations can take to support local people to take an active role in the research process.

What is community based participatory action research?

Community based participatory action research (CBPAR) is:

Community-based: it focuses on social issues relevant to a geographical community, interest or identity. It is driven by the needs and interests of people within that community and is visible to members of the community.

Participatory: it supports people to take a full and **active** role in the research process as community (or peer) researchers, to find solutions that work for them. Often, community researchers do not have academic experience, but may have lived experience of, or unique insight into, the issues being researched.

Action driven: CBPAR is an active approach that aims to make positive change. The approach enables communities to identify changes needed to address social issues and act based on their research findings.

Research: Exploration of one or more research questions and follows a clear research process of investigation. The research project and findings are coproduced allowing a robust analysis of the findings by taking a few different perspectives into account.

Get Talking is an approach to CBPAR developed by Staffordshire University. Get Talking is a **principled** approach which values full and active participation of community researchers, inclusion of people often excluded from the research process,

"Very often we measure things with KPI's […] but we don't often measure the success of the relationships that have been formed. […] Relationships are massively important to the community. As we build more positive relationships with universities and communities, that can benefit all parties"

Darren Murinas,

Expert Citizens

honesty, and flexibility. The process is driven by the desire to create positive change. Get Talking uses **creative consultation techniques to** involve a broad range of people as participants. The approach encourages strong **relationships** between partners, including community members, community researchers, universities, and community organisations, to ensure social issues can be explored from a range of perspectives. Get Talking research is co-produced and the findings are shared between these partners.

What do community researchers do?

In Get Talking, community researchers are usually members of the public or representatives from a specific community with a personal interest in the research subject area. As **coproducers** and co-

owners of the research they are equal partners in the project and are involved at all stages of the research process. There is no expectation that community researchers will have any academic experience or qualifications. Although projects will differ, in Get Talking projects, community researchers usually:

- Help to **decide** the focus of the research and write the research questions.
- **Identify** the people to be approached as participants in the research.
- **Design** the creative consultation techniques to be used to collect data.
- **Reach** out to their own networks to engage them in the research.
- **Interview** or facilitate focus groups with participants
- **Contribute** to the research findings by sharing their own stories and experiences
- **Analyse** findings with the team.
- **Disseminate** findings with the team by contributing to reports or sharing findings at events.

Community researchers are fully **trained** in Get Talking: Creative Community Consultation, a Staffordshire University short course, with optional accreditation, and are **supported** throughout the whole research process by experienced participatory researchers who act as facilitators.

"It's not necessarily about what's the biggest issue. It's sometimes about where could the biggest impact be?"

Andy Meakin,

VOICES

Benefits of community based participatory action research (CBPAR)

Engaging with CBPAR can benefit communities, community organisations and universities. It creates change and promotes growth. It builds on the knowledge, strengths and assets of **expert citizens**, people with lived experience of the area of research, making it relevant and meaningful to the people involved. Community researchers take an active role in all aspects of the research process, informing the research questions, data collection, analysis, and reporting. It builds **skills** and capacity and participants report feeling connected to the research[i] and more likely to provide honest responses[ii]. For community organisations it provides vital insights into communities and builds authentic arguments for change. For

universities, CBPAR can build connections with the places and people they serve and open up spaces for conversations about issues relevant to their local areas.

Ethical CBPAR is built on a firm foundation of strong **relationships** between community researchers, community organisations and university partners. This guide is designed for community, voluntary, statutory, and higher education organisations who want to create the right **environment** for community based participatory action research. It provides some guiding principles and practical actions that can help build and sustain long term relationships between all partners.

community organisations to work with them in ethical ways, that recognise and challenge power **inequalities** and openly value their contribution.

This guide was **co-produced** by Keep talking community researchers, community organisations with experience of working together on Get Talking research projects, and members of the Keep Talking project team at Staffordshire University. The guide pulls together the experiences of all the co-authors, outlining the principles that need to underpin ethical CBPAR and some practical actions that can help make CBPAR an **accessible** and **meaningful** process for all partners to be involved in.

The need to create the right environment for community research

Community and participatory research can bring many **benefits** to those involved and provide a rich insight into social issues. However, unless carefully planned it can create challenges for lead researchers and community researchers alike. Support for community research is time and resource intensive. Creating the right **environment**, in which community researchers feel supported and valued, and where community organisations and universities work together to make a difference to communities with community researchers, is vital.

Community researchers often **invest** a significant amount of time, skill and emotional energy into CBPAR projects. For this investment to be rewarded, community researchers need universities and

"It's very important that researchers use the frame that best reflects the lived experiences they want to research. Same with analysis of data. That's why including community researchers at every step of the research is important"

Lotika Singha, Community Researcher

Guiding principles for creating the right environment for community research

Valuing the experience of others: starting from strengths

Community based participatory action research helps us understand a problem from a range of perspectives. Universities, community organisations and community researchers bring different **expertise** and experience to the collaborative relationship. The **experience** of each partner is understood, embraced and valued equally. Power imbalances between partners will exist. These are acknowledged and addressed together early in the project.

Community research draws on a broad range of collective strengths and assets. Recognising, **valuing**, and utilising each partners' assets, is key to effective CBPAR.

Keep Talking has identified some of the assets offered by each of the three partners involved in Get Talking projects.

Community researchers were perceived as bringing their lived experience of the research topic and knowledge of the local area. They are well networked and have good communication skills. In interview situations they can often be more approachable than university staff or other 'professionals'.

Community Organisations have detailed insights into the community context and have existing relationships with members of the public. They are often trusted by the community and can respond quickly to changing needs. They have experience of accessing funding and are often led by people who want to make a difference.

Community Researchers
- Approachable to the public
- Lived Experience
- Trained to research in the community

Community Organisations
- Provide a community context
- Local area Knowledge
- Trusted in the community

Universities
- Power Within The Research World
- Research Knowledge
- Academic Staff Support

Community Based Participatory Action Research Partnership

Universities are often relatively well-resourced institutions. They have experience and knowledge of research and have 'gravitas' amongst decision makers. They have access to ethical frameworks and "can act as a 'magnet' to bring likeminded people together". They can provide training and offer different techniques of engaging people with research. Working with universities through community research projects can provide community members with access to other opportunities in higher education.

"The work Universities do can become remote and [out of context] to the population locally [...] [when] not rooted in community practice [...] it really is a reciprocal arrangement because what the university brings to the arrangement is validity, authenticity [and rigor] to the work of the community organisations"

Patsy Corcoran, Asist

Inclusion

" [It] is very important [to be inclusive] because it ensures that a wider point of view about the issues people face is considered. Also, it makes people feel valued in society and like they are worth something, which is very important when you are trying to engage with communities and individuals who are often marginalised and excluded"

Chloe Harris, Community Researcher

Inclusion is a central principle of CBPAR and Get Talking. It is important to consider inclusivity throughout the whole research process. Inclusive practice builds relationships and results in more accessible research.

Keep Talking identified potential exclusion of community researchers through:

- **Physical access**
- **Language**
- **Technological access**
- **Emotional access**

Ethical CBPAR ensures projects have capacity to actively identify practices that exclude and deal with these issues as they arise, recognising that each community researcher's needs are different. Inclusive practice therefore is flexible practice which adapts to suit the diverse needs of all communities.

Active participation: Collective decision making, co-ownership and mutual benefit

Community researchers and community organisations are actively involved in all stages of the research process. This includes:

Mutual Benefit: Exchanges are reciprocal, in which people contribute to the research process and gain something in return. If this is abused (someone brings nothing but takes away) then relationships could become exploitative.

Collective decision making: Where possible, decisions about all aspects of the research are shared between universities, community organisations and community researchers.

Co-ownership: Universities, community organisations and community researchers work together to conduct research and co-produce findings and documents. Research findings and outputs are therefore be co-owned.

"Every exchange is reciprocal, and people bring and get something from […] if that balance is off, and if [organisations aren't] bringing in, but taking, then that means that the [other] organisation isn't getting, they just bring in.[…] that reciprocal nature of that exchange is quite key"

Patsy Corcoran, ASIST

Transparency, authenticity, and passion

In CBPAR projects, motivations and actions must be **transparent** to ensure each partner is fully aware of what is happening at each stage and why. To do this universities, communities and community researchers need to build a culture of **honesty and trust**.

Clear lines of regular **communication** and time spent to build relationships between partners allow for an honest exchange of ideas, **authentic** engagement, and commitment to the research process.

Flexibility

CBPAR relies on **collaboration**, which can help to shine light on things which were not visible before and provide a different perspective. Collaboration, inclusion, and active participation require flexibility. Flexibility within the research process allows community researchers to have a say in the **direction** of the research, in the data collection techniques used and how the findings are presented. Flexibility within the research design:

- Increases **accessibility** for a wider range of community researchers and participants,
- Strengthens **confidence**,
- Improves **understanding** of others,
- Expands **empathy**
- Increases **capacity** of team members.

Practical Actions to create the right environment for community research

Listed below are some of the practical actions, identified through the Keep Talking project, that contribute to a positive environment for CBPAR and provides support for sustainable work with community researcher teams.

Invest in relationships

CBPAR relies on strong relationships between:

- Community Researchers and Community Organisations

- Community Organisations and Universities

- Universities and Community Researchers
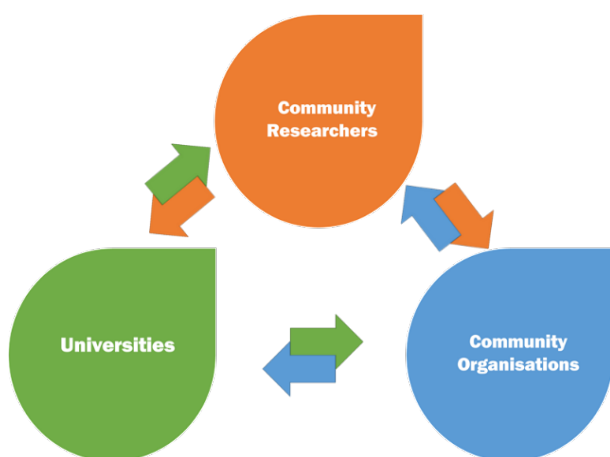
Strong relationships reduce the likelihood of tokenistic engagement of communities in research or exploitation of community researchers' goodwill.

"It is vital that [all members] are open and honest about all activities being undertaken, and do not try and hide anything from the other. Such a project can only be successful if each individual is aware of what is happening in the collective effort"

Ben Finney, Community Researcher

Relationships between partners are strengthened by:

- Creating a culture of **long-term** relationships, which span beyond short-term funding.
- Taking **time** at various stages of the project to get to know each other, their skills and assets and plan how these can be used to enhance the project.
- Producing clear **outlines** of duties, roles, and expectations.
- Plan regular times to **meet** and to review the project.
- Be honest about the amount of **control** each partner can have over the project and the reasons for this.
- Ensure **flexibility** to allow people to opt out of the process for a while, knowing they can return later.
- Don't **promise** anything you cannot deliver.
- **Value** the commitment of the community research team by providing food and refreshments at events, paying them for their time, reimbursing expenses, recognising their contributions to documents and findings by naming them as contributors.

Acknowledge and address impact and power

Collaborative relationship between community researchers, community organisations and universities should be:

- Fair
- Inclusive
- Accessible
- Transparent

Organisations or groups hold a different type of **power**. For example, universities are perceived as having power in the academic or 'research world', but community organisations can have greater influence within communities. Community researchers on the other hand can provide community organisations and universities with **access** to communities that they would otherwise be unable to reach and bring authenticity to the research.

Power between partners is not always **equal**. To avoid one partner dominating the relationship, regular, honest discussions about each partners assets, power and potential impacts take place at the start and throughout projects. Shared ownership of research helps to re-address assumptions about where power lies within the relationship.

Access and Inclusion

Flexibility makes research accessible; everyone has different **needs** and the project must be **flexible** to consider and address them where possible.

Access and Inclusion considerations include:

Payment and expenses – community researchers are paid for their time where possible and travel and other expenses are be reimbursed quickly.

Food and refreshments – providing food and refreshments demonstrates how valued community researchers are by partners, as well as providing a welcomed meal for some members of the team.

Use of Accessible Language – Language is suited to the group that you are working with. Academic language, either spoken or written, can exclude many members of the community and acts as a barrier to

"Language can be very exclusive as everyone has different levels of understanding and perceptions of language that is acceptable to use. Therefore, if language is not accessible to all it can exclude people from accessing important information"

Chloe Harris, Community Researcher

inclusion. Use language which is straightforward and easy to understand in publicity, information sheets and reports.

Technology - Get Talking uses creative consultation techniques wherever possible. In some cases, the use of technology to engage community researchers is useful. However, access to technological hardware, software, bandwidth, and digital confidence varies amongst community research teams. For some members of the Keep Talking team, the use of technology to communicate helped to overcome physical barriers. However, for others the use of technologies led to increase stress and anxiety. Therefore, technology is used at a level which is accessible to all involved. If this isn't possible, it is not used as a main feature of the research process, without the appropriate technology or equipment, guidance and support being provided.

Emotional safety - Emotional safety is when people feel safe to communicate and contribute to a collective effort. Creating this 'safety' is key to access and inclusion for new and existing group members as it reassures and builds trust.

Recruitment and a lived experience perspective - Recruitment to research environments must be inclusive and accessible. This is especially the case when recruiting members with lived experience of the issues being researched. Investing time for the group get to know each other can allow a lived experience perspective to be gained and shared, which values each person's experience and develops a shared understanding of the unique insight each person brings to the relationship.

"The best research relationships are those that have a solid foundation of trust in each other. And trust building takes time"

Lotika Singha, Community Researcher

Time

CBPAR requires lots of time to thrive. Understanding and utilising the assets of each member, to learn from each other's lived experience, and to ensure full **participation** in each stage of the research process. **CBPAR cannot be rushed.**

Each partner must:

- Take time to allow for each person's contribution in the research process, understanding that each person must be involved at each stage.

- Take time to allow relationships to flourish naturally and authentically.

- At all stages of the project process, take time to build common ground on roles, objectives, aims and outcomes.

- Include more time than expected to; set up and conduct research, involve partners in all stages, evaluate the impact of the work.

Navigating procedures

Community researchers and community organisations can find some university procedures **challenging** to navigate, making collaboration difficult. Some of these challenges hinge on a lack of shared understanding between community organisations, community researchers and universities, or misalignment of priorities or timeframes. Keep Talking community researchers and community organisations identified a few areas where these difficulties can arise and make some suggestions for actions that can be taken to ease the negative impact of these.

- **Ethics Procedures** - Following university ethics procedures can be a barrier for community involvement. The detailed forms and consent process can be inaccessible for some research participants. Equally, community organisations have lots of expertise in ethical research with communities, but many felt this was not considered as valuable as the university expertise. These challenges can be addressed by:

  o Recognising the experience of community organisations in ethical research practice with communities and learn from good practice.

  o University Ethics committees should connect with community researchers and community organisations to understand how university ethics procedures can impact on communities involved.

  o Collaborate with Community organisations and researchers

to create more flexible and creative ways of conducting CBPAR, including coproduced videos and audio recordings in place of information sheets and consent forms.

"It's a collaboration and therefore, you've both got equal responsibility for looking after your research [ethics] […] I'd love to sit with the [University] ethics committee, and it be a blank piece of paper […] [and say] this is how Expert Citizens conduct research"

Rachele Hine, Expert Citizens

- **Emotional support and counselling-** Engagement with CBPAR can be emotionally challenging, especially where the subject of the research is sensitive. To address this CBPAR teams should:

  o Provide consistent and reliable access to free and accessible support for all community researchers.

  o Keep Talking provided its community research team with free access to Staffordshire Universities Employee Assistance Scheme, allowing them all free access to a counselling service should they require it.

- **Working Times**- Community Organisations are often open throughout the year, during the week and at weekends. Universities on the other hand are perceived as only being accessible for a short period of time during term time. While this may be the case in some circumstances, not all universities are limited to term time. This misconception can be resolved by:

  o Taking time to understand what each organisation wants from the partnership and when.

  o Having conversations about the capacity of frontline staff to work during times which they 'traditionally' wouldn't.

- **Payment, reward and expenses**- Paying community researchers and reimbursing out of pocket expenses quickly and easily is vital to ensure longer term engagement with CBPAR. Keep Talking researchers identified that this has at times been a barrier to their engagement. To address this universities and community organisations can:

  o Ensure all funding bids include payment for community researchers' time.

  o Do not expect community researchers to give their time voluntarily but recognise some may prefer not to be paid.

  o Make the payment process accessible and easy to engage with.

  o Recognise that although some people will only be able to participate if payment is received, other may prefer to do the work voluntarily.

  o Always consider alternative ways of rewarding the team if necessary, including certificates, free access to training opportunities or naming community researchers as co-authors on reports and academic articles.

"The academic year is a problem. So, you know, sometimes if you want to get something done in the summer it's really hard […] even in the in the spring in people [respond] "can you come back in October?" […] in terms of our engagement [with a university] we run 365 days a year operation, their academic operation times are not helpful"

Andrew Meakin, VOICES

The 'Connector'

As we have seen, CBPAR requires excellent communication, ongoing support for community research teams, navigation of university processes and investment in relationship building.

In addition to a research assistant, Keep Talking has identified the role of a '**Connector**', a member of the research team that acts as a flexible, yet constant, link between organisations, community researchers and universities. The 'Connector' plays a significant role in sustaining relationships, through:

Emotional safety and recruitment- The 'Connector' is an additional means of creating and maintaining a welcoming, engaging, and **accessible** research environment, for existing and new community researchers. This is done by reaching out to members, facilitating discussions, sympathising and understanding their needs to comfortably contribute to the research process.

Shared Understanding of Structures- The 'Connector' builds a collective understanding of all partners', including, structures, key contacts, procedures, ways of working and staff skills and capacity. The 'Connector' then acts as a **link** between the university research environment, the community research team and the community organisation partners, nurturing new and existing connections. This removes potential barriers to engagement by ensuring all community researchers' involvement with all partners does not cause undue stress.

Asset and resource management- The 'Connector' plays an important role in understanding community resources, including what universities, organisations and community spaces can offer to the research environment. They also navigate university and community organisation structures, such as payment for researchers access to counselling and support for the team, booking meeting spaces and arranging food. Having the 'connector' undertake these vital tasks increases research **capacity** by allowing more time to focus on the research questions and methodology.

Positive Wellbeing- The 'Connector' plays an integral role when difficulty arises in projects. The role has maintained the **cohesion** of the group by setting group tasks, encouraging creative problem solving, prompting discussions and maintaining contact with all members. The role has proven vital to identify people who are being negatively affected by the research or other events and has allowed for early intervention and support.

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[i] See for example Gratton, N. and Beddows, R. (2018) 'Get Talking: Managing to achieve more through creative consultation', in M. Stout (ed) *From Austerity to Abundance? (Critical Perspectives on International Public Sector Management)*, Volume *6,* Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, pp 141-160.

[ii] See for example Gratton, N. (2019). 'People with learning disabilities and access to mainstream arts and culture: A participatory action research approach', *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 48 (2): 106-114.

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