



Purpose, Process, People

Community researchers'
motivations for sustained
engagement in
place-based research

Purpose, Process, People: Community researchers' motivations for sustained engagement in place-based research

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Staffordshire University and Expert Citizens CIC

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With thanks to the Get Talking Hardship Community Researchers,
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Introduction

Keep Talking is a collaborative project between Expect 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 Engagement fund.

The aim of Keep Talking is to understand how universities and community organisations can work together to effectively support long-term and sustainable approaches to community research. The project works with an existing team of community researchers and Expert Citizens CIC, who have experience of delivering community-based research projects. 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.

Using information collected from community researchers involved in Get Talking Hardship in 2019 and Keep Talking in 2020, and staff from both projects, this report outlines our learning about the motivations of community researchers to join and remain involved in community research projects.

Background to this report

Participatory action research challenges the power inequalities between researchers and subjects of research by placing people most affected by an issue at the heart of research. Teams of community researchers are trained and supported to take a full and active role in all stages of the research process, including refining research questions, designing consultation tools, data collection and analysis, and planning action based on the findings.

Get Talking is an approach to participatory action research developed by Staffordshire University. In 2019 Get Talking was used to understand the experiences of people living in hardship and poverty in Stoke-on-Trent in a project called [Get Talking Hardship](#). Get Talking Hardship worked with over 40 community researchers during its life span. While the project had a positive impact on the community researchers and organisations involved, some people were not able to sustain their involvement with the project to the end. Others, however, continued to the end of the project and went on to work with Staffordshire University and Expert Citizens CIC as community researchers for the Keep Talking project.

Both Staffordshire University and Expert Citizens understand the value of community-based participatory action research and are keen to establish a partnership that helps to sustain community research teams beyond short-term funded projects. In order to do this we recognise the need to understand:

1. the motivations of community researchers for joining projects,
2. why people remain engaged in community research projects, and
3. the reasons for them leaving community research projects.

We worked with community researchers who were involved in Get Talking Hardship to understand their motivations for joining, remaining or leaving a community research project.

This report starts with a description of the methodology and demographic background of the sample. It then outlines the core findings from this research under three headings, each identifying a critical stage or element of community research that motivated or limited engagement. There are: Joining, staying or leaving; Organisation and communication, and; Data collection and analysis.

Under each heading, three broad themes were found to influence community researchers' decision to engage with, remain involved with or leave community research projects:

1. Purpose and place of the research
2. Process of community research
3. People involved in community research

Each of these are discussed in relation to each of the core elements. Following this we discuss the impact of the research on the researchers and their relationship with it and the interviewees' tips for potential community researchers.

Methodology


This research formed part of the overarching Keep Talking project and involved semi-structured phone interviews with community researchers (CR), associate researchers (AR) and university researchers (UR) involved in Get Talking Hardship. This was followed by a thematic analysis of the data.

The interview schedule was co-constructed by the Keep Talking university team in consultation with the ARs. The questions focused on people's motivation for joining and continuing or dropping out of the Get Talking Hardship research process and their experience of engaging with the research along its timeline from the first World Café to the feedback event and beyond to their participation in the ongoing Keep Talking project. People were asked about good and bad experiences, what helped them to remain involved (where relevant) and the challenges in remaining involved, the impact of the support provided by the university and the community research team on staying involved, their perceptions of the ideal scenario for community research and advice for potential CRs.

All CRs who had signed up to the GT Hardship research project, as well as those newly joining the process through the Keep Talking project (n=44), were approached via email by the two ARs. We asked them if they would be willing to participate in a telephone interview about their experiences of having taken part in the project. The original plan was to do face-to-face interviews or telephone interviews depending on the interviewee's preference. But due to the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown announcement just before the data collection period, the former option was not possible.

We had also planned extend our request for an interview to our colleagues at Expert Citizens but due to the same reason, this part of the plan was not carried out. Hence, eventually a total of nine CRs were interviewed. Of these, five were part of the Keep Talking project at the time of the interview, three had left the process during the Get Talking Hardship research and one had joined the Keep Talking research as a new CR. In addition, both University Researchers (URs) and two of the three ARs were interviewed (total 13 interviews).

All interviews were recorded after taking consent and demographic details (one CR declined to give these details) and lasted between 30 minutes to 1 hour. The interviews were transcribed, and a thematic analysis was undertaken.



"It was great seeing how the group formed, different relationships, how the group got stronger. [...] it was nice to watch the group grow and develop, and [...] how everybody worked with each other and kind of got on with each other cos there were lots of strong personalities, which worked well. Just everyone finding their place within the group. It was really good, I really enjoyed it"

Only three of the 13 interviewees were male¹. Ten interviewees identified as White British and two as British Indian. One did not provide demographic details. Their ages ranged from 30 to 65 years and one had a disability that required use of a wheelchair. They came from different parts of Stoke-on-Trent, as well as the neighbouring town of Newcastle-under-Lyme. Except for one UR, the interviewees were either not employed or worked part-time at the time of the research².

Joining, Staying, or Leaving

Most people heard of the research by reading leaflets about it or seeing the call-out on Facebook, hearing about it by word of mouth or because they were on the mailing list of the university research team or organisations that work with people in poverty and hardship. Three who remained engaged until the end of the research project and of whom at least one continued to be actively engaged in the follow up were all introduced to the project by a person who themselves first signed up but was unable to continue because of too many commitments. The equitable, non-judgemental safe space that was created by the URs and ARs in the sessions was key to this CR's enthusiasm to recruit more CRs:

“the key thing is that the project involved the very people that were undergoing hardship. Because I think initially I was concerned that it might be people who were, you know, were able to, who weren't in that position, that were able to do interviewing and were able to carry out the project, but had never really understood hardship themselves. So, I think the beauty of the project was that I invited a couple of people who understood totally what hardship was about and how it affected, not just financially but mentally their whole life. Umm, and that for me was a really important part of the project ... So, for me, I felt it was a really good thing and certainly [the URs] was there and [the ARs], they made them feel very, very welcome and enabled them, I think just to share their experiences and to be recognised professionally but also respectfully. So I think that's, that core to all of it, because if they didn't feel welcome or they felt foolish, they wouldn't have come back and they wouldn't have had a real insight into what the project's all about really”

¹ We had originally planned to do 6-8 interviews and interview some colleagues from Expert Citizens, in which case the sample might have been more gender balanced. In the whole sample, we think there was more gender balance among the 40+ aged CRs, although it was not 50:50.

² Note: In retrospect, it would have been useful to ask a question around the interviewee's perception of their own position on the Joseph Rowntree Foundation poverty and hardship [house diagram](#) that was used in the project to demonstrate the various levels of hardship, before, during and after the research. This would have helped in understanding whether sustained involvement has a relationship to this aspect of people's lives. We do know from the conversations that happened as part of the co-produced research that we had some CRs who were experiencing poverty and hardship at the time of the research; others also empathised with the various levels shown in the house diagram and had certainly had experience of moving up and down the levels at various points in their lives.

Purpose and place of the research as motivators

Many people were motivated to join the research by the purpose of the research, its timeliness in the local context, the possibility of being able to help with the situation and raising the profile of the poverty and hardship currently being experienced in Stoke-on-Trent. Some CRs were already working with marginalised people in different ways, such as in an advocacy context, or had done so in prior research. As one CR observed:

“Ah but even my own research I think is based on social action research, and I think [I have] that same interest within those sorts of issues. And I think that the issues are quite important. Also, [it’s] important to have the community, especially in I think [...] Stoke [...] where hardship is quite a bit of an issue. And so, I think that anyway to help the community near to me, well that was my meaning and motivation to try and help the project as a CR”

Similarly, the topic of the research was a motivator for the URs and ARs, all of whom had a background of working in social research.

Later, the findings of the project and its high-level impact (for example presentation of the Get Talking Hardship report in Parliament) motivated some people to remain involved and take the recommendations of the report a step further to implementation. As one CR who was keen to remain involved at the strategic level noted:

“the report needs to become a core document that we are all referencing and working on. The ARs also saw continuing to remain involved as a way to possibly participate in influencing policy in the city, while the URs felt a ‘sense of responsibility for trickling down of the impact”

The relevance of the purpose of the research to potential CRs own lives may also, however, have excluded some from even thinking about participating. For example, some people may not be able to access the place of the research (too far to walk, lack of own transport or poor public transport connections). Among some CRs who signed up, a lack of understanding or a feeling of not having own first-hand experience of hardship was a reason to leave the project. As one CR who dipped in and out of the process explained:

“mental health issues, financial considerations at times, can be a problem with turning up, locations that weren’t easy to get to, which prevented me from being more involved than I would’ve liked to. But there is a major thing that we also found out in the research, local public transport causes problems a lot as it’s so unreliable”

Process of research as a motivator

For the URs, continuing the project was an opportunity to develop the Get Talking model further and gain more experience in it, and for embedding community research in the university’s community strategy. The CRs appreciated being involved as significant contributors in the whole process of the research, from developing conceptual understandings of hardship and poverty to data collection, analysis, and dissemination of the findings.

The use of creative methods ensured inclusive involvement of CRs through each stage of the process and aided in CRs gaining self-confidence in doing tasks that could have been assumed to be out of one's depth³.

The same reasons also motivated people to continue with the research. Another motivation for some CRs was the free training and a qualification at the end of the process that was an opportunity to improve career prospects. For example, one CR was able to use their experience to go on to a paid job in the follow-on Keep Talking research project, and develop the confidence to put themselves forward for a leadership position in future Get Talking community research projects. However, Get Talking Hardship was commissioned as a six-month project, with CRs contacted and recruited within that period. This left four months of face to face contact with the community researcher team. Therefore, given the short time in which several Get Talking Hardship sessions were timetabled, it was 'hard work' sometimes to fit it around other commitments, in particular for those who needed to attend the group sessions that were primarily for the qualification. Some CRs were left feeling they could have done better if they had had more notice of sessions or if the time between sessions had been greater.

The payment mentioned in the call-out was also an attraction for some CRs, both for joining and continuing in the project and beyond it. However, a few CRs felt the information was not clear. They had thought that this included being paid for attending all training sessions as well as data collection sessions. This misunderstanding might have resulted in some CRs dropping out down the process. Conversely, people on welfare might not have considered participating as being paid (for all sessions) could affect their benefits, and the leaflet did not explain that the university team would ensure that such a situation would not arise. At the same time, an expectation of payment in a project focusing on hardship and poverty also induced a feeling of 'guilt', of questioning oneself: 'Am I being greedy?'

Another aspect of the project that might have affected continued involvement was a lack of understanding of how the project would work and affect the CRs themselves. People needed to commit a considerable amount of time to attend the various group sessions and for data collection opportunities (it was not just about 'filling a survey'). It would also demand considerable emotional investment for those who were facing poverty or hardship themselves⁴.

Process-related reasons for dropping out that were suggested by the interviewees included a clearer understanding of how much or how little CRs would be paid after joining up as mentioned above; over-stretching themselves in terms of time commitments to voluntary work; holding sessions in venues with poor parking facilities or not easily accessible via public transport (from the point of view of person's residence rather than the venue itself); and sessions and events being held on days people had paid work or other previous commitments.

³ See 'People Involved in the Research: The Human Face of Community Research' for examples.

⁴ See the section 'People Involved in the Research: The Human Face of Community Research' for a more detailed analyses of these last two points.

Organisation and communication

Impact of purpose and place of the research

Some CRs said the brief information provided in the call-out was sufficient to stimulate people to attend. But a few felt that it might not have been enough to raise interest among some people, in part because the word 'hardship' can be interpreted in various ways by people. As one CR explained:

"I felt like we weren't really briefed very well. Like my idea of hardship, until I'd done the research, was completely different to what the definition of hardship actually was. So, for me it was quite eye-opening, and I can see why some people would've been put off because maybe they weren't thinking that what they were doing was what they were actually doing. When I was told hardship, I thought they meant all the disabled people, but they didn't just mean that, they meant all sorts of people. And I thought I was part of the hardship group, and it turned out by the end of the research that I'm not in hardship at all, nor some of the people we thought. So, I think that definition could've been explained better"

The call-out had not mentioned help with transport, which also might have prevented people from signing up.

At least two of the interviewees said talking to people during the data collection opened their eyes to the economic and related hardships that were particularly faced by people in Stoke-on-Trent.

Impact of the process of the research

From the university's point of view, first, funders of co-created research need to be aware that the Get Talking approach requires much flexibility rather than 'tight rules' in the operational aspects of the research process. Second, the ARs form a key 'connector' between the university and community and this role needs further attention to understand its full potential in sharing the responsibilities during the carrying out of a community research project, including that of community organisations.

The CRs had different perceptions of the research call-out leaflet. One CR noted it was 'people centred' rather than 'topic centred', that is, 'come and meet like-minded people, no strings attached and don't have to go again if you don't like it!' But others said a leaflet could feel 'impersonal', it had not given enough information, or it had given an over-optimistic picture of payment for the work. One CR felt that face-to-face recruitment could have also been done as people living in poverty or hardship might not have access to electronic communication forms. A few CRs felt that it 'didn't seem as if the whole process had been thought through at the start', and for one of them the first GT Hardship session had lacked clarity of purpose although they felt better informed at the end of it. Perhaps it might be useful for URs to say at the start of a Get Talking project that it might appear as if the facilitators are not prepared, that is, this is part of the co-creation process.

All CRs said payment of travel expenses was vital to their engagement with the project and many appreciated the inclusion of refreshments and a free, hot good-quality lunch. The inclusion of lunchtime in the session also gave people the opportunity to socialise with each other. The CRs said that it was important to know each other as people with real lives and not just as researchers. A sense of connection among team members could also make it easier to deal with the sensitive topics during data collection.

Co-production was generally valued, in which the co-creation of the feedback event was particularly mentioned. However, co-creation requires commitment from both university and CR sides. Some caution is also advisable in the process, in that the enthusiasm created by the democratic co-creation process might result in CRs sometimes ignoring or overlooking the ground rules of engagement with the public, such as doing spontaneous one-to-one interviews that were not agreed with the team. As the quote below reveals, other challenges that emerged during the process included a race against time that was intensified towards the end of the project:

“that’s kind of a really short period time then to get a group together, get that group bonding together, getting them to do some work together, training them all, you know, making them feel supported so everybody knows what they are doing, bringing them back together to do... interviews, and then the analysis and it was just like ... It was intense wasn’t it!”

One key aspect of the process that was both a challenge and a high point was communication between the URs, ARs and CRs. Most CRs said that they were satisfied with the mode (email), level (to the point) and frequency of communications sent out by the URs about subsequent sessions and steps in the research. One CR however, received information through their organisational contact. This meant they often had short notice about dates and times of sessions or events and was thus not able to attend. Another CR missed seeing an email about a late cancellation of a data collection meeting, before reaching the venue. Here, as the quote below shows, the Keep Talking WhatsApp group, which was set-up as a response to the lockdown, has proved to be a vital way for CRs to stay connected and receive information in a more immediate way:

“It’s the WhatsApp and the Facebook group stuff. Even though people currently, because of the situation, people aren’t really thinking about CR for each other they obviously still feel a strong bond with each other and so have contact to help each other with their mental health, with their wellbeing, references for jobs, encouraging people with their writing, sharing what they’ve written or published, asking questions about courses that they’re on and I think that that [...] as soon as we can do some CR together again, it’ll be really quick to pick it back up again”

Given that the project included GT training, many sessions of the project were delivered in a relatively short period of time. As the lead URs also had other commitments, aspects of the latter part of the project were not fully discussed with the ARs early in the process. This meant that the latter did not always have sufficient information about next steps. Setting up accounts with the university’s employment portal Unitemps confounded several CRs initially - the university did not take into account that the alternative work/employment conditions that are the hallmark of the Get Talking process do not neatly slot into the university’s processes, which are rigidly followed due to constraints imposed by the GDPR.

In sum, the aspects of the process that were considered critical by the CRs for ongoing commitment were:

1. Aligning of project meeting times with their own availability around other commitments in their lives
2. Ease of parking near the meeting spaces
3. Flexibility in attendance (being able to dip in and out of the process)
4. Being kept up to date via regular communications as well as payment of expenses and for at least part of the work
5. Clarity around sharing of roles of leadership/management and support from within the university and from with the community researcher group is also needed (bearing in mind that some CRs would like to contribute towards these roles as well)
6. ARs as connectors could also help in sharing the constant responsibility of the URs to maintain long-term relationships by interacting in other spaces

Considering the last point, researchers in this project had much experience in this area, which as the quote below shows, helped in the recruitment of 43 CRs in a relatively short period of a few weeks:

“Not losing their experience and expertise when projects just end and we go thanks very much, off you go, bye. But you know trying to maintain relationships and the best way to do that is to have a range of things that we’re connected to either quite directly or more loosely that we can signpost people to and help engage them in [...] It’s almost like there’s a, there’s that invisible hidden timeline behind it all which makes it possible, which makes a project possible in existing in the first place. So that’s really the project timeline but the context timeline, which makes the project possible, is much bigger isn’t it?”

And later:

“[...] you mustn’t just, you must try and keep those relationships between the projects even when you haven’t got any money and even when it’s not officially part of your core job you need to find a way of maintaining those relationships with people even if you never know if there’s ever going to be another project just because that’s the right thing to do as a human being. But it just shows the value of doing that, because it just shows that when there is an opportunity everybody is primed and kind of ready and willing, because it’s not just being able, it’s willingness to do it, and you know you’ve not really got to, well as I’ve already said, you’ve not really got to relationship building which is the bit that takes the time. It’s the bit that takes the time and then once you’ve lost them it’s really hard to get them back, so I think that’s another reason why I’ve been trying to keep involved, even though I don’t work at the university any more, is that for everyone, for me, for the rest of the work that I do and for all the people that I’ve worked with, the value of those relationships and that shared experience is much greater than it being about an organisation because the organisation hasn’t got the memory of the project, it’s the people, isn’t it?”

The continuing CRs appreciated that the operational aspects of the process had greatly improved, thanks to the learnings from the Get Talking Hardship project. There was greater clarity of the roles of the university team members and communication between the URs and CRs had improved significantly. This included prompt responses from the university team members to feedback and queries and the provision of session summaries both on the WhatsApp group and via email - the last point was vital for CRs to feel that they remained connected with the project at times when it was not possible to attend.

However, this also raises a series of ethical questions: What is the extent of the 'duty of care' of the university team members? Do they need to engage with the WhatsApp group 24/7, or should there be periods of 'down time'? What happens if there is a crisis during the URs down time that is shared on the WhatsApp group, leading to an unmoderated discussion among the CRs, which could have implications for the university and the community research team? One way of maintaining a long-term CR network without the need for 24/7 presence of URs might be through a 'self-supporting' model. As one CR suggested, this could involve fostering links with community-focused organisations, who could be championed by the university or having a community interest group of CRs, or also through ARs as connectors.

The project also raised questions around the appropriateness of the term 'community researcher' for a member of the public who while doing research also might act as a community gatekeeper or informant. Instead of empathy, the 'researcher' label might create an invisible barrier between the person and community members who feel alienated from higher education. As one CR explained:

"the word "research" just puts people off or they think you're "trying to be a scientist" so difficult to explain the experience really quickly in plain English to peers ... it's so frustrating because there isn't a few lines you can say about what it is, your project and what you're actually doing, it's difficult to understand really - really that's the hardest part about community research because as soon as you mention research, in the community people get two different ideas about what that means. Or probably five ideas about what that means, and depending on where you've been brought up, in what sort of environment - the other thing is that you think you're trying to do good but people think you're just trying to be a scientist or something, that's what somebody said to me!"

Data collection and analysis

Purpose and place of the research and data collection

Some CRs felt that talking to people and learning about their experiences of hardship and poverty helped them better understand the city they lived in as well as their own location on its socio-economic spectrum. One CR noted that community group focus groups should prioritise those groups that do not usually have a voice. For example, one focus group was held with a disability community group that had a significant presence in the city and consisted of people who did not appear to be facing significant economic hardship.

Process of research and co-production of knowledge

Most people interviewed had participated in data collection, mostly in the form of focus groups in organisational settings or in public spaces, such as market stands. Some found the experience underwhelming compared with the 'buzz' that they sensed after attending a group session. In part this was because although many people signed up to do this work, availability was not guaranteed, and the AR spent considerable time trying to make sure everyone involved had an opportunity to do this work. A few interviewees found it challenging to approach people off-the-cuff in public spaces such as market halls and the bus station. One CR noted that in-depth interviews might be better carried out in a 'supportive environment', over a cup of tea in a living room or a smoke together in a garden space.

While some activities yielded sufficient data, the root cause analysis (RCA) activity at the feedback event became a missed opportunity for the analysis. The feedback event was held three weeks before the final date of the project and provided an opportunity for the CRs to present the research findings to an audience of over 80 local decision makers, community organisations and research participants. Several of the groups during the event did not carry out the RCA as had been explained, and their discussion was therefore not fully incorporated into the findings. This likely happened because of time and human-resource⁵ constraints towards the end of the project, which meant that the exercise was not clearly mapped out as a team activity during the planning of the feedback event. This could have affected the quality of facilitation of the exercise in some of the groups on the day, alongside possible lack of prior RCA experience among group members. However, the event otherwise was unanimously agreed to be a success in terms of the co-creation of the event, delivery on the day and an opportunity for several CRs to demonstrate their growth during the research process.

The amount of work required towards the end of the project was greater than the pre-project projection so that the ARs completed some of the work on a voluntary basis. The ARs would have also liked to have more time to understand what the findings were revealing although the URs expressed satisfaction in this regard.

⁵ One of the URs, who had been leading the communication activities among other things, left the project four weeks before the feedback event.

The Human Face of Community Research: People Involved in the research

Although people did not talk about the emotions involved in being a CR, the individual accounts gave us a glimpse of the impact of a co-produced social research project on people as individuals, with lives beyond the research community. This may be

because several months had passed since the end of the research, people were in the middle of the Covid-19 lockdown, the impact of which might have overshadowed their remembrances of a project that was now done and dusted, and because we did the interviews over the phone instead of face to face. However, these effects might be often suppressed as a cohesive group identity becomes established and is enthusiastically embraced by group. Hence it is always useful for URs to be mindful of CRs as individuals and create a safe space for articulation of impact on personal lives at various points in the research process.

Several people said personal development was a reason for signing up to the community research project, this included:

“We’ve all got family issues and jobs and wellbeing concerns and acknowledging that, whilst not focusing on that, but acknowledging that what makes, is fundamental to the ethical principles of this work isn’t it? Treating people as, you know, as whole human beings”

1. Greater awareness of one’s own community
2. Expanding one’s networks beyond the familiar comfort zone
3. Using the opportunity to develop skills or avoid showing a gap on a CV
4. Filling time between graduation and finding a job
5. Using the project as a way of maintaining links with community and the university
6. Encouraging marginalised people in own organisation to use it as an opportunity to interact with the wider community

An important reason for continuing to engage with the research was the university team's approach to creating and fostering cohesion in the group, that is, welcoming everyone as a person in their own right into an environment that did not feel judgemental and wherein everyone's voice counted. One CR described this as follows:

"You could tell that the people were all a bit unsure of what was going on, but at the same time everyone was comfortable about it. And everyone was just talking to anyone"

The interviewees talked about how they made new friends and liked working with people from different backgrounds. The front-of-house contribution of several CRs at the feedback event was noted to be the result of growth of self-confidence through participation in the research process. CRs who came from less-disadvantaged backgrounds noted a growing respect for the value offered by involving people who on the surface may appear unskilled, that is of discovering how lived experiences themselves become a 'skill set'.

However, despite these efforts a few times the inclusive nature of the process fell short. Thus, URs need to constantly reflect on their intersectional thinking for operational processes and remain mindful that 'everyone has different needs, and that there isn't a one system fits all', as one CR said⁶.

For those with personal experience of hardship, being part of the group discussions could, on the one hand, 'bring your own issues to the fore of your mind' which meant that 'you have to be balanced to be able to deal with this' noted one CR. The same group discussions, on the other hand, could be spaces that motivated continued involvement because people could help other people in the same situation by talking about how they coped, as the same CR went to say:

"The learning process - having to deal with that was a bit of a first for me. Because I was used to dealing with my own trauma and other people close to me but not other people. So, there's like a secondary barrier you have to deal with. Not to get too sucked in/give too much of yourself but to be able to listen and empathise and from your own experience you can quite often just make them feel better. Telling them how you got out of that. And you know try and steer them just try and give them that there's a direction or there is an agency out there that specialises in that that they didn't know about. And you found [out] about and you can put them in touch you know that sort of thing"

Some CRs clearly showed a growth in self-confidence through the process. Their keen involvement in the feedback event was a major reason for the success of that event in terms of keeping the audience engaged with the findings of the research. Others discovered hidden strengths such as analytical skills and clear and comprehensive notetaking. As one CR described how they developed confidence in the analysis of the findings:

"It was pretty good actually. Because it wasn't like - if somebody said you're going to do some analysing now and things like that I'd have thought oh! can't do that! But because of the way we did it, and it was quite a creative way of doing it [...] it's like a whole new world, it's not boring as you thought, well I thought sorry! You know by grouping the different words together, you know the sort of trends in people's thinking and it was like really interesting as opposed to what I thought it was - that it was like a very theoretical type of thing, theoretical"

⁶ See also the introductory paragraph of the section 'Joining in the Research and Staying or Leaving' for observations on exclusion of possible participants in the recruitment stage.

and you know, a person, a man in a suit with a computer and doing all the boring analytics and data and stuff like that. That's how I saw it [...] But then actually doing it, it didn't even feel like you were doing it. It was just more of an [...] activity"

One CR noted that while they would have appreciated the money that was offered for the work, participating in a project on hardship also entailed not expecting payment. Also, despite other commitments, they wanted to continue 'as long as I feel like I am helping in some way'. They felt bad when they were not able to make it to a session, and there was also a fear of missing out. But they noted that if they were always made to feel a valued member of the team, they were able to deal with these conflicting emotions. Another CR felt that by introducing other people to the project, they were able to leave in between themselves without worrying about it:

"Yeah! I think I was pleased that I could bring along people ... and, and almost you feel like you, you hand over to those people and allow them to share their experiences. So, they were very well supported - so that, I thought was brilliant, and that helped me quite a lot"

From the URs' point of view, the emotional impact on the CRs was a key challenge, and they keenly felt the huge responsibility of managing this impact as the project progressed and a commitment to ensuring the project report received due attention by policy makers. As one of them said:

"I felt such a huge sense of responsibility that you know we're doing all this work; we've got to make sure that people listen to this. Now, once this is over, we need to make sure people listen to it and take it seriously and it actually makes some real changes. So yeah it was challenging in, in lots of ways yeah"

Hence, a key factor for ongoing engagement is support, in the form of individualised support for those with special needs, as well as organisational support, for example, being kept updated through regular sharing of meeting notes. URs also need to support the ARs. Hence, there is also a need for appropriate support for the URs from the university itself as they are the people through whom the university funnels support for the community research team.

Some CRs might have dropped out because 'people's lives living in hardship changes from day to day' as one of them noted. As we know also from the findings of the research, many people living in poverty or hardship experience mental health issues, which then can impact on their ability to participate consistently as a CR or complete the training course. While university counselling services were made available to all CRs, an important learning is clarity around availability of university counselling support services for CRs for whom the issues raised might trigger an emotional response related to their own experiences of hardship and poverty, and clear and ongoing communication of this service. Similarly, extending community involvement to other groups of vulnerable people such as Expert Citizens also needs to consider that discussions of causes and consequences of hardship and poverty might act as a trigger and appropriate debriefing must follow sessions. CRs might become more 'self-supporting' through use of 'buddy' systems or enmeshing organisations interested in community research into the partnerships, so that they could support their own CRs when required. As of now, the visibility of CRs in the university remains low, and that can hinder the URs' efforts to create an equitable working

environment for CRs. URs can also experience vulnerability in the process (for example, reduction in staff numbers) and need clear lines of support for themselves.

Reasons for leaving among the other CRs included having to prioritise more regular and long-term paid and unpaid work over an intense and short-term project, despite being interested in it. One CR who ran their own community building initiative withdrew once they had made several useful connections with other project attendees and with the project itself for mutual benefit. It may be useful to have a system in place to take timely feedback from those whose pattern of dipping in and out starts to indicate they might be dropping out, and those who do drop out, to better understand problems with retention. Finally, it might be worth thinking whether people who are continuing to engage - is their socioeconomic profile or their demographic or health profile different in any way from those who leave.

Helpful suggestions for potential CRs

Some CRs said that social research around poverty and hardship is a 'tough' task and people 'need a level of self-awareness' to help them deal with any emotional experiences which arise.

Potential CRs should talk to already engaged CRs to understand how '**your own demons come up and you have to separate them and make sure you deal with them before you continue**'. Another CR suggested reading the GT Hardship research report as that would give a good background and help understand what kind of commitment was required. Some CRs felt people should try it out to understand the process and whether they could commit to it. In this way, people might discover they have skills of which they were not aware. Other advice for community researchers included:

- 1. There is plenty of support and people should not worry about technical aspects or feel shy to ask questions.**
- 2. See it as a networking opportunity - as one CR said, it is 'an excellent way to meet very supportive people'.**
- 3. It is very rewarding to work as part of a cohesive group.**
- 4. Make the most of it, as there will be plenty of opportunities to brush up or learn new skills for improving prospects.**

Conclusion

Overall, community researchers felt it was worth getting involved in the community research project and it was a satisfying experience. The experience of taking part in Get Talking Hardship was overwhelmingly one of positivity, despite the challenges faced by some of the participants and the emotional impact the project had on some of them.

A large part of this positive experience was due to the shared passion for making a difference for the **people** affected by hardship and poverty, and the university team's efforts to ensure that everyone had a voice and that everyone's contribution was respected. As one community researcher said:

"[it provided the] opportunity of shaping what you're doing so that it becomes co-created rather than just one person having an idea that they're imposing on everybody else. I think it becomes an opportunity to really unlock the stored value of people's imaginations"

The shared passion also translated into a genuine feeling of camaraderie and connection between the members of the research group. The timely contextual **purpose** of the research proved to be a key motivator in the participation within these research projects, as they have allowed lived experience, advocacy, and prior research to be applied within the research process.

The **process** allowed inclusive involvement through creative consultation methods, which in turn enabled CRs to gain and build self-confidence. Additionally, participation in the process of the research gave CRs an opportunity to refine the Get Talking model with the URs. One outcome of this has been the use of the Get Talking approach to participatory action research to inform Staffordshire University's civic engagement strategy.

This focused piece of research has provided useful insight into the motivations of community researchers for joining community research teams, and their reasons for remaining involved or leaving a project. The overall learning from the research has been collated into a series of recommendations, designed for universities and research institutions, to support ethical and effective work with community research teams to support participatory action research projects.

"Overall, it was entirely positive. I networked, met some fab people, learnt new things, found out I was very driven in that area myself, very interested in people, in having a voice for the people and trying to get more choice for the people and just like wow! It arrived at the right time in my life and instantly sort of gelled with the people [...] All of them were pretty impassioned about it which was quite wow as well."

Recommendations for working with Community Researchers

Recruitment

- Use mixed methods, including posters, leaflets, online content and face-to-face meetings to advertise community researcher opportunities and recruit CRs.
- Clear define the research topic in all publicity materials.
- Clarify payment arrangements in recruitment materials, including what is eligible for payment and other benefits CRs will receive, such as free training.
- Ensure people are clear about the role of a community researcher, the benefits of being involved and the expectations during the recruitment process.
- Involve experienced CRs in the recruitment and induction of new CRs, to share their experiences, the benefits of being involved on CR projects and the challenges they may experience.
- Give time for recruitment and recognise new CR may introduce other people from their network after they have been involved for some time.

Support and growth

- Align project times with the CR availability wherever possible.
- UR should recognise CRs and ARs have individual needs and therefore individualised support needs to be provided.
- Provide flexibility to allow CRs or 'dip in and out' of the project, and welcome people back if they have been absent for some time.
- Develop a system for checking on CRs who have not been able to attend sessions.
- Provide CRs with access to counselling and support services and give clear and consistent messaging about how to access these.
- A 'connector' role provides an excellent link between universities and communities and offers vital pastoral role to CRs.
- Use opportunities for shared leadership within the whole team to support individual growth and alleviate capacity issues.
- Provide regular progress updates, using a range of communication methods.

Giving back

- Wherever possible pay CRs for their time and seek alternative forms of payment or reward where needed.
- Provide transport to venues or meetings, or if this is not possible cover the costs of public transport. Use venues that are accessible by public transport and have onsite parking.
- Provide hot and cold drinks and lunch (or other food) at all CR meetings.

"I would say it was a worthwhile and wonderful experience. You will [hear] some absolutely awful stories but you'll also see the best of people at the same time. You'll see how people are coming together to try and make a better community, a better place. At the same time, you'll recognise, you'll see how our city, our community can be impacted by a range of very simple things the Government could do to improve the area."

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