

# STARTER GUIDE FOR A COMMUNITY-RESEARCHER PARTNERSHIP

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## THE FIRST STEP IS BEING OPEN TO IT

This means being ready to shift power to a community in terms of how they engage with you and the research, enabling them to develop a project and the partnership more equitably, and by starting with **what matters to them**.

Community-led research, co-production, community collaboration, co-research, and community-expert partnerships are different terms with complex meanings that often overlap. Use the one you think applies to you the most or the one you feel is right for you. For this guide, we will refer to community-researcher partnerships, which look for more **equitable relationships** between researchers and community groups and centre on the latter through an ethics of care.

## BEAR IN MIND

- During the process, there will be an emphasis on sharing power and expertise, with co-production as a starting point wherever possible.
- Importantly, the following suggestions and questions are not a to-do list or a prescriptive formula. Rather, these are areas of consideration and practices that have worked in specific contexts.

## GET STARTED!

In equitable community-researcher partnerships **everybody benefits from working together**.

### THINK ABOUT YOURSELF AND YOUR EXPERIENCE:

1. **What does it mean to you to build a community-researcher partnership?**  
What is the purpose of co-creation for you and your institution? What does co-producing research entail and what do you think are the challenges?

More than any other type of partnership, **community-researcher ones can challenge institutional perceptions of ownership and control of content**. These projects require the utmost trust in community groups' abilities to perform complex tasks and collaborate among their members. To foster this kind of partnership, institutions must not only trust the competencies and motivations of community members as research participants but also deeply desire their input and leadership.

### ACKNOWLEDGE SOME POWER DYNAMICS:

1. *What kind of commitment does your university or organisation have for a potential community partnership?* (e.g., it is committed to: 'helping communities feel like research participants along with the institution', 'forging long-term partnerships with some specific communities', 'supporting the needs of target communities if their goals align with the institutional mission', 'inviting community members to use institutional resources for their own purposes').
2. *How do you see the institution's relationship with a community during the research?* (e.g., 'it requests content, and the community members supply it subject to institutional rules'; 'it sets the research concept and plan, and then you work closely with the community to make it happen'; 'it gives community participants the tools to lead the research and then supports their activities and helps them move forward successfully'; 'it gives the community rules and resources and then lets the participants do their own thing').

3. *How much control do you and your organisation want over the collaboration process and outcomes?* (e.g., 'a lot, we want participants to follow our rules of engagement and give us what we request'; 'institutional staff will control the process, but the community members' actions will steer the direction and content of the final product'; 'some, community goals and preferred working styles are just as important as those of the organisation'; 'not much, as long as participants follow our rules, they can produce what they want').
4. *Addressing power differences and developing relationships requires the development of open, honest, trusting and reciprocal relationships. Could your organisation provide induction training to their research staff and public members on co-producing research? Or are there any other forms of skill-sharing or reciprocal support you or your organisation could offer a community group?*

## CONNECT WITH A COMMUNITY



There are many universities and institutions, so communities need to choose the right researcher for them.

Consider **how a community could benefit from a partnership and by working with you**. What are your strengths, weaknesses, expertise, and experience? How may your skills apply to a community setting?

## FIND A COMMUNITY PARTNER:

Scope communities with **projects related to yours** and identify the ones with whom you can discuss links to your work.

Are there communities and groups **historically excluded from or overlooked by these kinds of partnerships** on your research subject? Consider rural and minoritised ethnic communities, young people and more grassroots organisations and groups.

**Community partners may already be known to you** as you may have an existing research relationship or know an individual or organisation with whom you would like to work collaboratively. Consider building on existing relationships. Not only do people know each other but they have probably worked together before because of a mutual interest in an issue and may share common values and principles.

### Connect.

Consider **non-academic means** to reach them or use social media to communicate.

Consider **who in your organisation and networks could help you** link to a community. Which stakeholders can you approach for advice?

## BUILD THE RELATIONSHIP

Do not rush into project ideas and plans. Let the relationship and trust be built and give everyone time to get to know each other.

- *Language can quickly get in the way and reproduce hierarchies in groups.* Use jargon-free language to communicate with the community from early on. Do not make assumptions about the understanding of concepts and words.
- *Build a relationship with the community on their own terms.* Get to know and understand the features and priorities of the community. Start with what matters to them. Do they have any access needs or preferences?

## RESPECT EXPERTISE

- Do not assume the role of the sole 'expert', that could lead to thinking that others are not also experts on their own right. Start by acknowledging different types of expertise, including first-hand experience. Consider what expert means and who the term applies to.
- Value each contribution and knowledge equally and respect different viewpoints, even if you disagree with them.
- Consider how you are going to share power and leadership roles fairly. Recognise that each partner might adopt different roles at different times.

# PROJECT PLANNING (GET RID OF RIGID PLANS)

## Time and uncertainty

There are unknowns when building new partnerships. Get ready for flexible timescales and adaptable research projects and be clear from the start on what you can offer in terms of time and what can be realistically achieved in that time frame.



## Warming up

- Facilitate *free-flowing communication* both ways.
- *Establishing ground rules* at the beginning of the project can help create an environment where all voices can be heard and treated with respect. These rules, developed by the group working on the research, would set out expectations in terms of the roles, responsibilities and behaviours of all.
- Participants can feel more confident about joining if the *community group is enabled to lead* the process.
- Communities may want a variety of inputs from researchers. Take an equitable approach and *be ready to undertake a breadth of roles* in supporting the community's aspirations.
- *Explore roles, responsibilities, and a shared agenda* for the work before jumping into a project too quickly. Make sure the research team includes all those who can contribute.
- How can your organisation improve its *processes and infrastructure* to support the partnership?

# WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

## OBJECTIVES

- *Be patient*, it takes time to explore what the community wants from the partnership. The type of collaboration will depend on the problem they want to solve with you.
- *Partnerships don't begin with predefined outcomes but with the relationship*. These projects start by creating a space where people can gather and ask questions. There may be a complex problem, or set of problems, that the community wants to address.
- *Identify together the barriers the community faces*. What opportunities can you find as a researcher to explore alternatives?
- *Identify an area or issue of common interest* that you want to research together. This could be a particular issue or a range of issues around a common theme.
- Consider a project that *doesn't originate from a single author's vision*, but from relationships.
- *Objectives setting and decision making are done together*.



## EXPECTATIONS

- *Assess your expectations*. Keep in mind that not everyone can commit equally to projects.
- Be clear from the beginning about *what you want and what you can offer* in return. If you cannot offer much because of personal or institutional constraints be open and honest about it. Which resources and expertise could you share? (e.g., technologies, tools, budget, funding, resources, staff).
- Talk through your and the community's expectations about *the impact of the partnership* (e.g., sometimes communities might want a systematic change, and sometimes that is not possible; what would you expect to happen with the process, the data and the results?).
- The research will be jointly owned and people will work together to achieve a joint understanding. *Recognise collective authorship*, before starting. Co-research offers alternatives to a single-authored vision and contributes to preventing the community's participation from turning into someone else's property.



## WHAT NOW?

This is only the start. Next, comes doing the research, sustaining the partnership, evaluating and disseminating the research. For information and guidance on what is next, **check the following resources:**

## INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE ON CO-PRODUCING A RESEARCH PROJECT

- [Stronger Together](#), from the University of York. A short guide for co-researchers with the key principles and practices of co-production in research.
- [Community Toolkit](#), from Beacon North East for Public Engagement. A guide to working with communities on research projects. And the [Co-Enquiry methodology and toolkit](#), for community-university research partnerships.
- A [working reflection tool](#), from the mental health charity See Me. A tool for practitioners to review their practice concerning key elements of co-production.
- [Participation Toolkit](#), from Healthcare Improvement Scotland. A resource with methods for planning participatory research.
- [Evidencing Genuine Co-Production in the Third Sector](#), from Evaluation Support Scotland and Inclusion Scotland. An evidence paper identifying key building blocks, common barriers and challenges, examples of good practice and practical lessons.
- A [guide](#) for researchers, from the public participation charity 'Involve'. A resource on how to co-produce a research project with communities.
- [Doing and evaluating community research](#), from AHRC Connected Communities. A process and outcomes approach for communities and researchers.

## OTHER KEY RESOURCES

- [Community Knowledge Matters](#), A Highlands and Islands network for community-led research.
- [The Ideas Fund](#), a case study of community-led research.
- [Knowledge is Power](#), a programme of support for community-led action research in Scotland.
- [Communities Channel Scotland](#), a website where community groups can find information, ideas and inspiration to help them achieve their aims.
- [Research ethics developed](#), from YouthLink Scotland, a resource to explore community-led research ethically.
- Guide from the Co-Production Collective for university researchers and staff [exploring the ethical considerations of working in partnership with people outside the university system](#).

