

# CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS WITH COMMUNITY RESEARCHERS

**Making Co-Production Happen?**

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Other reports from the Catalyst Fund can be found at the link below.

### **Critical Conversations with Community Researchers – Making Co-Production Happen?**

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# Introduction

This report documents the proceedings and findings from a national event held in September 2017 funded through a Connected Communities Catalyst Fund grant. The event brought together community researchers from three different Connected Communities research programmes for a day-long ‘critical conversation’ which aimed to foreground and critically explore the experiences and knowledge that emerge from being a community researcher within co-produced research projects. The event was a response to an identified need across the three programmes for space where the voices and experiences of community researchers could speak into wider methodological discussions.

The event was designed to enable community researchers to draw on their experiences within the research field to explore the following questions:

- How can involvement in research be most useful to individuals and communities?
- What does it mean to be a researcher within a community - for the researcher and for the community?

The event aimed to facilitate conversations which would develop understanding about the embodied experience of being a community researcher and consider how this might inform future co-produced research methodology and support the design and development of training initiatives for community researchers. The event was the first in a series of events focused on community researchers which were designed between the Productive Margins programme and the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement.

Typically, community researchers are individuals who participate in the research activities of a given project without any prior recognised research training and with minimal knowledge of, or experience with, the research process.<sup>1</sup> The roles and responsibilities of community researchers vary enormously across contexts and research designs but they are usually individuals who are ‘peers’ to a project’s research participants with at least one shared ‘lived experience’.<sup>2</sup> Community researchers can be volunteers drawn from a geographical, cultural, religious or other form of self-identifying ‘community’ or, they can be an employee representing an organisation within a research partnership. In some cases, community researchers are involved in all facets of a research project and are members of the core research team. In others, they are instrumental in one or more specific aspects of fieldwork or recruitment and/or are invited to review a project’s design, data and findings in a more advisory capacity.<sup>3</sup> For this event ‘community researchers’ were defined as individuals who had taken part in training and conducted fieldwork as active on-the-ground researchers within one of the three research programmes.

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<sup>1</sup> Mosavel et al., 2011; Mosavel & Sanders, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Logie et al., 2012; Flicker, Roche & Guta, 2010, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Guta, Flicker & Roche, 2013.

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# Overview of Participating Research Programmes

## **Productive Margins Regulating for Engagement (PM)**

Productive Margins is a five-year programme of research which finishes in June 2018. The programme draws multi-disciplinary academics together with seven diverse neighbourhood-based, identity-based and faith-based community-organisations to co-produce a programme of research which explores how regulatory systems shape everyday lives. The programme was founded on the understanding that people and communities have expertise, experience and creativity that can be politically productive. It sought to use research as a vehicle to redesign and harness regulation as a tool for engagement, finding ways for communities at the margins are engaged in regulatory processes and practices.

**Find out more about the programme: [www.productivemargins.ac.uk/](http://www.productivemargins.ac.uk/)**

## **The Imagine Project**

Imagine was a five-year programme of research which finished in December 2017. The programme brought together universities and their local communities to uncover knowledge and imagine better futures. It involved university researchers from a range of disciplines working together with a variety of community organisations across the United Kingdom to explore why and how people across diverse communities participate in civic and public life. The research has foregrounded the importance of community development, community activism, and arts and humanities approaches to civic engagement.

**Find out more about the programme: [www.imaginecommunity.org.uk/](http://www.imaginecommunity.org.uk/)**

## **The Trust Map**

The Trust Map was a multi-partner, multi-disciplinary, national research project which finished in July 2017. The project analysed the relation between trust in structures of power exploring social and digital exclusion. It sought to place the people who live with the reality of trust and power at the centre of its endeavours through engaging in local and sustained community-centred activities. Through this, the project investigated the links between exclusion, empowerment and trust within minority communities.

**Find out more about the project via twitter: [@TheTrustMap](https://twitter.com/TheTrustMap)**

## Event Design and Participants

Community researchers from each programme were contacted through existing contacts within each programme's research team. The event was framed as *'a chance to connect with other projects and people who are engaged in similar work across the country. It is a space to ask interesting questions and open new debates and is an opportunity for professional development and national networking.'* (Marketing materials). Community researchers' attendance was supported through funding travel, overnight accommodation (where necessary) and, the provision of a small bursary for individuals who were not able to attend the event as part of their paid working hours. In total seventeen community researchers attended the event.

The event was designed and facilitated by Helen Thomas-Hughes (Productive Margins) with Sophie Duncan and Paul Manners from the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) and was organised as a series of activity-based facilitated discussions and drew on the NCCPE's extensive experience designing and delivering public engagement events and activities. Key activities included:

- Round table discussions visualising challenges and opportunities that attendees had experienced through their work as community researchers. Themes were then identified and debated using a 'world café' model whereby ideas are developed through small-group conversations held in rounds, with each round building on the content of the previous<sup>4</sup>
- Resources from across the Connected Communities project<sup>5</sup> were used as discussion tools for community researchers to re-imagine systems of training and support for community researchers in co-produced research projects.

Data from the event was captured through comprehensive observational field-notes, alongside the writing, doodling and drawing which groups used to capture and develop their ideas and debates.

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<sup>4</sup> Find out more about World Cafes here: <http://www.theworldcafe.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Cafe-To-Go-Revised.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Facer, Keri and Enright, Bryony, (2016), Creating Living Knowledge, 'creating new roles'. pg. 73-77 **Available from:** [https://connected-communities.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Creating-Living-Knowledge.Final\\_.pdf](https://connected-communities.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Creating-Living-Knowledge.Final_.pdf)

Centre for Social Justice and Community Action (CSJCA) and National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), (2012), Community-based participatory research: A guide to ethical principles and practice. **Available from:** <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/CBPR%20Ethics%20Guide%20web%20November%202012.pdf>

NCCPE's UK Community Partner Network Principles of Partnership **Find out more at:** <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/work-with-us/uk-community-partner-network>

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## Emerging Themes

This event was designed in response to the concern that, while community researchers have become a relatively typical feature of co-produced research projects in the U.K. and are often seen as a practical embodiment of co-production's attempt to radically re-distribute power within the research process, there have been few opportunities to hear the critical experientially-rooted voices of the community researchers themselves.<sup>6</sup> The event aimed to facilitate conversations which would enable the experiences of community researchers to develop methodological theory and practise around the use of community researchers in co-produced, participatory and collaborative research.

The community researchers who partook in this event were all active on-the-ground researchers working in localised participatory, collaborative or co-produced projects. Most community researchers were individuals who had an existing connection with a community organisation or service delivery agency and had been invited to join a project as a community researcher in a voluntary capacity. A smaller proportion had either been directly recruited to join projects as volunteers through local advertising or, recruited to a paid community-researcher role within a local community-based organisation.

### The Benefits of Being a Community Researcher

The personal benefits of becoming a community researcher were grouped around three key areas: opportunities for professional and personal relationships, developing social relationships and opportunities for new learning experiences.

For a large proportion of community researchers, their experiences within research projects were seen as a valuable professional-development opportunity through which they acquired new skills and developed networks with influential local institutions, voluntary organisations and universities. Many community researchers were managing portfolios of voluntary and/or paid community-based work and the role of community researcher, particularly if this included university affiliated or accredited training, was perceived to be a valuable career-development opportunity. For some older community-researchers the experience was part of exploring what volunteering they might be interested in committing their skills to post-retirement. For community researchers already involved in local activism and community work, the experience of being a community researcher was useful to *'improve understanding [of community-needs and research process]'*, *'develop networks/relationships outside of what we do every day'* and *'lead to opportunities to develop further projects'*, validating and extending the work they were already involved in. For other community researchers the principal value of the role came from its purposefulness in identifying and addressing a social problem which made them feel they were *'being useful and needed'*, in

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<sup>6</sup> Salway et al., 2015; Thomas-Hughes & Barke, 2018.

this way the experience of being a community researcher was described as both *'empower[ing] people'* and *'building confidence'*.

High significance was placed on the personal nature of the relationships that developed through being part of a team of community researchers, in particular being part of a mutual *'willingness to be involved...to listen'* and the *'common values'* of *'sharing ideas'*, *'creating knowledge together'* and *'an honest belief in what you are doing'* that was felt to underpin individuals' motivations to be involved in projects. Being able to *'bring the personal in'* to relationships that were *'strong and chatty'*, *'friendly and fun'*, were important relational aspects to being members of a community research team. The role of *'academic'* or *'professional'* researchers as facilitator was identified as highly important in whether teams were successful building these relationships particularly when there were diverse opinions within the group: *'[researcher] opens eyes to prejudices within your own group - if you can see people's contributions within a frame of different roles it can help you be more open'*.

## **Training and Support for Community Researchers**

Community researchers' perspectives on the role of training and support was a particular focus of the event. Most community researchers had received some form of training as part of their community researcher role. Training was discussed by community researchers as a valuable asset in the process of community capacity building, *'Up-skilling'* through training was felt to be *'empowering'* to individuals and to meet a wider *'need [for] more skills to get through to people'* particularly those *'in poverty'* in order to build *'collectively stronger voices'*.

Community researchers felt that *'people are often 'scared' of research'* but that training was a good place to begin demystifying research as a process. To develop understandings of the *'socio-political context within which projects happen'*, *'how funding and ideas can be used in practice'* alongside the practical elements of *'learning how to research e.g. how to collect data'*. Training was a place to make sense of some of the academic jargon surrounding co-production, for example *'democratisation'* was described a frequently used term which *'means different things and some people don't like it...too abstract'* but within training *'people [could] decide how to put it into practice'*. As a result, training could be a catalysing space where better understandings could lead to community researchers having greater input into research design through which *'more valuable research ideas might arise - things which really matter to communities'*.

The lived-experience of individual community researchers significantly influenced the way that training was valued. Generally, for community researchers who felt settled and secure (in terms of career-path/retirement and/or personal finances), training was valued primarily for the extent to which it had equipped them to build research teams and develop the skills to conduct research within their projects. However, for community researchers who felt themselves in more precarious circumstances, training's value was framed in terms of its

potential to open up future opportunities (for work, education, training and involvement in community development).

Research training across all projects had been delivered by someone with a formal academic background and most trainers were also the *'university researcher'* working on a project. These university researchers were described as fundamental in developing community researchers into research teams through: a *'willingness to listen'* and *'opening minds to prejudices in the group'* while *'finding mutual ground'* and *'valu[ing] people equally'*. The fact that research trainers were often also employed as the academic researchers within research teams meant that they were a constant source of guidance when community researchers were putting training into practice on-the-ground. This *'encouragement to keep-going'*, *'patience'* and bringing *'creative flexibility'* through acting as a sounding board, particularly when community researchers encountered areas of uncertainty, was highly valued by the community researchers attending the event.

Community researchers argued strongly for the development of both: accredited nationally-available training for community researchers and, mechanisms to recognise and value the informal, reciprocal learning opportunities that being involved in the research process facilitated. For some, particularly older, retired community researchers, accreditation held little currency. For this group, motivations for participating in research projects was not to do with a desire to become a *'community researcher'* or to receive training but rather, to be part of producing research which would make a difference to an issue they felt passionate about *'people come to [community research] because they care about a topic, not because they want to be community researchers'*. However, there was an urgent urge from all community researchers attending the event for clarity with regards to the status of training currently being offered to community researchers. It was felt that research teams were not having *'honest conversations about...training/accreditation'* and, as a consequence, community researchers were not always given *'realistic expectations regarding what you get out of it'*.

## **Valuing Different Sorts of Knowledge**

Community researchers reported managing intersecting and contradictory opinions on the value of the data collected and knowledge produced through their work. Many community researchers reported the dismissal of community-based and experiential knowledge by universities and other institutions they had encountered. Simultaneously, many community researchers had experienced scepticism from community-members and community-based organisations as to the value and usefulness of academic research, *'dismissing the value of the research by the community...what is the value of it to community campaigns'*. Some community researchers had encountered community-organisations who were unconvinced by co-productive or participatory methodologies and were primarily concerned with producing evidence robust enough to support their needs in commissioning environments.



## Roles and Responsibilities

*'Recognising that different needs, community researcher responsibilities and academic researcher responsibilities can be different and that is OK'*

Community researchers spoke very clearly about wanting to be able to hold themselves to account for their training, development and practice within projects. However, they were often not entirely sure as to the roles and responsibilities that they and others held within projects and experienced a lack of transparency around project structures and processes which made it difficult to understand what expectations they could have for themselves and others. When things went wrong, this lack of clarity made accounting for what had happened (including identifying where things might have been improved), extremely difficult. The complex language of co-production compounded this, one community researcher identified a need for research team to *'be clear and simple so that people can hold themselves to account'*.

Community researchers felt that they held a unique position in co-produced research, a third-perspective which was neither from the 'the university' nor from a community organisation. It was felt that projects need to find ways to acknowledge that co-producing with a community organisation does not necessarily equate to co-producing with community researchers or community members.

## Volunteering and Remuneration

How community researchers were remunerated for their time and questions of whether or not the role should be formalised and salaried akin to that of *'academic'* or *'professional'* researchers was a question of frequent focus. There were calls for: *'jobs (paid jobs) for community researchers and professional recognition nationally'*, and for specifically dedicated funding streams from research councils and universities which would make *'funding available for community researchers to continue their work and achievements'* and enable post-project *'follow on support for community researchers'*.

However, a number of community researchers felt that there was a strong benefit to being a voluntary community researcher. They felt that the role of volunteer gave them more freedom to contribute honestly to co-producing their research projects: *'volunteers can say what they like'*. This was echoed by others who questioned how to *'balance what you can and can't say when you're sometimes a community researcher and sometimes a community development worker - risk to employment etc'*. One retired community researcher made an impassioned argument against getting too *'hung up'* on the ethics of remuneration arguing that, for a proportion of older people there was a strong appeal in *'work[ing] for free and feel[ing] useful and needed'* and urged university-community partnerships to *'ask more of them'*. This was echoed by others who argued that, if community researchers were a paid role within a project then this would exclude individuals who, for a variety of reasons, were

unable or un-willing to compete in an open job-market. Many community researchers did not feel that they would have been in the position to take on short-term precarious paid work and that the voluntary nature of the role had enabled their participation. This was emphasised by event attendees who had been part of salaried community researcher teams. One community researcher observed that, within their geographically defined community project, every recruited 'community' researcher was qualified to at least degree-level (at odds with the typical education-level within the locality) and very few actually lived within the 'community' they were researching.

## **Relationships between the 'Community' and Community Researchers**

*'What is a community? There are diverse groups and needs'*

Community researchers came to projects with a wide range of personal, professional and academic experiences, skills and knowledges which shaped and framed their motivations for participation. As such, there were widely differentiated relationships between community researchers and the 'community' their research focused on. Some community researchers were established community members who actively self-identified as part of the 'community' the research focused on (geographical, cultural, religious, health-based service-users etc), having long-standing relationships, networks and connections which reflected this. For these individuals the role of community researcher was a temporary iteration of their long-term position within their community and being a community-researcher on a given project was framed as part of their ongoing commitment to the development of their community.

For others, the relationship with the 'community' that their research project focused on was more transient and spontaneous. These community researchers were not necessarily interested in identifying as a 'community member' or being involved in longer-term community development agendas. Though these community researchers often had similar relationships, networks and connections to the community researchers who identified themselves as established community members, they tended to frame these individually; as personal relationships and singular experiences rather than as part of a 'bigger' community affiliation. In these cases, the focus of the research (for example, improving mental health support services or examining isolation and loneliness in older people) was often the primary motivating factor for participation in a project. For these individuals too, the networking, training and experience that the role of community researcher represented could be a strong driver for participation.

The different relationships that community researchers have to the 'community' of their research project had significant influence on the extent to which skills and knowledges developed through the research process were felt to be embedded within the community going forwards. For a lot of community researchers their role within a project was a small part of a portfolio of community-based roles and experiences. Though they as individuals

might feel that they had benefited considerably from the training, support, and research process, any implied ongoing benefit to a community or community-based organisation depended largely on how the community researcher perceived their relationship to the community. A number of community researchers expressed concern as to the sustainability of the small voluntary sector organisations they had worked within during these projects. They were mindful that much of the tangible benefits of participating in a research project (such as skills and knowledge transfer) were embodied in the community researchers who would inevitably 'move on' from the organisation.



*Figure 1: Event participants' name tags*

## Researching Outside Your Own Community

Community researchers were highly interested in reaching beyond the boundaries of their own 'community'. Many expressed concerns that their research's focus on a single 'community' would make it too limited to draw any meaningful conclusions and there was an interest in comparing and contextualising findings from their own research activities with other sites and groups. However, there was a strong feeling that there would be specific skills and knowledges that would be required to enable community researchers to take research 'outside' of their community and questions were raised about where (if anywhere at all) the boundary would lie between 'community' researchers and 'academic' researchers. Queries were also raised about the appropriateness of researching a community to which you do not belong, particularly as the reasons for 'community' rather than 'academic' researchers are around the benefits of sharing 'lived experience'.

# Key Recommendations

## Developing Training for Community Researchers

Training is more than just a skills acquisition process, it is an integral part of building people's confidence and self-belief to do research and can catalyse new ideas for research. Training needs to be practically orientated, with the option for accreditation, flexible enough to adapt to the specific needs of the community and community researchers involved and with in-built methods for acknowledging that people can make different contributions. It is essential that research teams are *'honest with themselves'* and with community researchers about what training is needed and why. Training needs to facilitate pathways beyond research training for those who want it. This might mean easier access to university facilities and other taught-courses for community researchers and/or accreditation processes which mean research training can be counted towards higher education qualifications.

Currently training for community researchers is without *'accreditation'* and *'recognition'* and so is not as useful as it could be for future career-paths and can't be used to *'access other courses in the university'*. Many community researchers felt that training didn't seem to relate to general teaching within the university and found it frustrating to have experienced what higher education could offer but without ongoing *'access to university support and infrastructure'* or *'opening opportunities to take part in what comes next'* either through training or continued research-involvement. Some community researchers felt that the idea of *'research skills'* are *'monopolised by professionals'*, one community researcher suggested that the specific skills required to do *'good research'* could be embedded in a new role of *'hybrid researcher'* who is a research-skilled community development worker.

Community researching is an emotive undertaking and community researchers need to be supported to understand the potential *'emotional impact'* and *'emotional labour'* involved in the role. Equally, managing the emotions of participants when *'your role is as community researcher'* was an area requiring ongoing support and guidance throughout the research process. Community researchers reported *'guilty feelings, want to do more, stuck between community support and research'* and it was felt that a *'mentoring programme'* between experienced community researchers and new community researchers and linked to the afore-mentioned national network might be a way to embed *'support for difficult situations'*.

Community researchers identified a number of key areas which research training should focus on in addition of the practical skills required for work on a specific project:

- Training should start from focusing on the motivations that have driven community researchers to participate.
- Information on other things like local council demographics so you know the context that you are working within.

- Skills in how to *‘address cultural barriers’* and *‘identify common ground across diverse groups.’*
- Training in *‘reflexive thinking’* to identify and address labels/presumptions you might bring to the research with consideration for the complex position of community researchers as *‘inside’* and *‘outside’* of their research communities.
- Building in processes for recognising when research targets might be unreachable.
- Training needs to include *‘skills to get through to people and protect yourselves from difficult stories and situations you might hear about’*
- Managing *‘power-dynamics’* within research teams and (if appropriate) community meeting-spaces and focus groups including *‘speaking up’* and assertiveness.

## Preparing to Work with Community Researchers

Research teams need to be fully prepared for the practical and emotional implications of working with community researchers. They need to be ready and willing to be honest and transparent with community researchers about funding processes and limitations, the scope within a research project of where community researchers can be involved and equipped to give community researchers realistic expectations as to the reach and impact of a research project. Community researchers are aware that there are different approaches research can take and felt that universities should support research teams to figure out *‘when community researchers are the right method or not’* and *‘How to figure out when it’s appropriate’*: *‘it is sometimes more appropriate for a community member to do the research but sometimes it isn’t’*.

When community researchers are brought into a project they need the *‘wider picture’* – support and guidance to understand what knowledge already exists in the area they are researching and how to bring their experiential experience into conversation with this. This should not simply mean *‘academics mak[ing] a fuss out of it so you think you should read it’*

## Establishing a National Network of Community Researchers

One of the key recommendations from the event was for the establishment of a national network for community researchers. This would be a *‘neutral spaces for volunteer researchers to meet’* which could provide *‘regular network events’* for existing community researchers alongside *‘info on how to get involved’* and a *‘mentoring programme’* for new community researchers which could include *‘peer to peer trainers’* in particular community-research techniques. Mentors and peer to peer trainers were felt to be a means to bring *‘more diverse communities to community research’* and, a way for community researchers to expand on their existing research activities with new communities.

The network might serve to identify ways to *‘protect the interest of community researchers’* within co-produced research projects, this was felt to be important due to the widely differentiated roles, expectations and accountabilities that community researchers

experienced across different projects. It could be a body through which *'nationally recognised training for community researchers'* could be delivered with training *'linked to network of support for community researchers'*. If such a network could be established, then community researchers felt it was important that its functionality and effectiveness be researched *'If there is a community researcher meeting scheme then this should be researched'*.

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*Figure 2: Round-table discussions*

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