Designing your research project

Community Research Resources Bank

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DEVELOPING YOUR RESEARCH QUESTIONS

When initiating community research, there should be a broad topic which you are looking to find out more information about. This topic could have been identified in multiple ways:

- Through a review of the work your organisation does.
- Through feedback you have received.
- A desire to improve services.

When you have identified a topic which you would like to research, it is important to consider the purpose of your research:

- Is there a specific issue you are looking to address?
- Is there a change you are looking to implement?
- What outcomes are you hoping to achieve?

Having a topic and purpose to your research will help you to develop a clear research structure and plan, ensuring that your research remains on track and relevant to your organisation's work and aims.

Once you have selected your research topic and identified your purpose, you can start developing your research questions. Your research questions should be clear questions which, when answered, will help you to achieve the purpose of your research. The data you gather will be analysed with the purpose of answering these questions, therefore they need to be simple and related to your research topic.

Compared to your overall research topic, your questions should also be more specific, helping to narrow down your topic to the areas that greatly impact your work and align with the purpose of your research. To do this, you might want to restrict your questions demographically or geographically e.g., people aged 25-60, within the borough of Great Yarmouth.

Here is an example of developing research questions for an organisation working with young people aged 16-25 in Great Yarmouth:

Research topic:

- Young people's mental health.

Purpose of the research:

- To find out what activities young people think benefit their mental health and adapt our activities provision in response.

Research questions:

- What do young people understand by mental health?
- What is the current provision for young people's mental health like in Great Yarmouth?
- What do young people do to support their mental health?
- What activities would young people like to have access to which they believe would benefit their mental health?

WHO YOU WANT TO BE INVOLVED AND HOW

Once you have identified your research topic and questions, you should consider who will be involved in your research, this could include research participants, research partners, and the community.

Research participants

Research participants are the individuals who will be taking part in your research. How you select your research participants will be dependent on your research topic, and the community that your research is focussing on. It is important to have an idea of who you would like to participate in your research before you begin your study, to ensure that it is possible to involve your desired research population.

Research partners

Community research can be collaborative with other community, statutory and academic organisations. Community organisations are well placed to conduct research, as they can be gatekeepers within their community. This can help to give statutory services and academic organisations access to populations for research they would otherwise struggle to engage.

For community organisations, working with partners in this way can help to bring the funding and training needed to conduct research, and the skills necessary to carry out community research in the future.

The community

Participatory Action Research (PAR) brings together the community and the researchers as equal partners in community research. This approach to research helps to empower members of the community to be agents of change. The community is involved in all stages of the research, helping to design, deliver and analyse the research.

Tip:

PAR is a good approach to research when the researcher wishes to use the insight they are gathering to directly benefit the community affected by the research topic. PAR can use a variety of methods to conduct research, such as interviews.

RESEARCH METHODS

As outlined in the 'What is Community Research' report, there are multiple methods of research which can be utilised in both qualitative and quantitative approaches to research. The research methods you choose will depend on your research questions and your resources. Some common community research methods include:

Questionnaires

Questionnaires can be a qualitative or quantitative method of research, depending on the types of questions asked. Questionnaires normally involve developing a set list of questions for participants to answer. The questions can be asked to participants in multiple ways, including digitally, over the phone, or in person. Questionnaires can ask questions in a range of formats, including:

- Closed questions: questions with limited responses.
- Open questions: more general questions with no predetermined answers.
- Multiple choice questions.
- Ranking questions: participants are asked to rank options, for example from 1-5.
- Grid questions: participants can use a drop box to choose a pre-selected list of answers.

The flexibility of the format of questionnaires means that it is easy to distribute among participants and simple to adapt to suit the needs of different people. They are also useful if you are looking to obtain information from a large population, as they are easy to distribute. Online questionnaires can be quick and cheaper to produce, making them a time efficient research method.

However, questionnaires are limited in the amount of in-depth information they provide, as the question format means that answers can often lack details and the researcher is restricted in being able to understand the reasoning behind participants' answers and they cannot probe or follow up with participants.

Interviews

Interviews are conversations that are centred around your research topic. They are a way for a researcher to obtain more detailed information from their participants. Interviews can take place in different formats and with a range of number of participants. Some examples of interview structures include:

- Structured interviews: the researcher has a list of prepared questions to ask their participant.
- Semi-structured interviews: the researcher has guiding questions to help to structure the conversation.
- Unstructured: the researcher has no pre-prepared guide or questions for the conversation.

Interviews can be carried out in a one-to-one setting, or in a group setting. It is important that the location of the interview is a setting that is comfortable for the participants.

Interview data can be recorded through notetaking, tape recording and video recording. Having notes and a recording of the interview available will help the researcher to have an accurate reflection of the interview. If recording the interview is not possible, it is important to try to take detailed notes.

Focus groups

Focus groups are a useful research method when you are trying to identify norms within your research population. During a focus group, a researcher, acting as the facilitator of the focus group, leads a discussion by presenting the group with open-ended questions to answer. The facilitator helps to guide a discussion in the group around the questions and keeps the focus group on track. A note taker will also be present during the focus group to record the data. Focus groups are often tape recorded or video recorded so the researcher has access to transcripts.

Typically, focus groups should consist of around 5-8 people to ensure that it is manageable for the facilitator and that all participants can share their views. Ideally, the focus group should not exceed 10 people unless the researcher is highly experienced in leading these types of discussions.

ETHICS AND DATA MANAGEMENT

Ethics

Research participants are the individuals who will be taking part in your research. How you select your research participants will be dependent on your research topic, and the community that your research is focussing on. It is important to have an idea of who you would like to participate in your research before you begin your study, to ensure that it is possible to involve your desired research population.

All community research should be conducted on the grounds of respect and trust between the researchers and participants. To ensure this, researchers must consider the ethics of their research. Reviewing ethics helps to ensure that any research you are conducting will not have a negative impact on the wellbeing of your participants.

Unlike academic research, there is no current ethical framework or ethical approval system for community research. As such, community organisations should use the following six core ethical principles established by UK Research and Innovation to identify any potential risks and mitigate them where possible.

1. Research should aim to maximise benefit for individuals and society and minimise risk and harm.
2. The rights and dignity of individuals and groups should be respected.
3. Wherever possible, participation should be voluntary and appropriately informed.
4. Research should be conducted with integrity and transparency.
5. Lines of responsibility and accountability should be clearly defined.
6. Independence of research should be maintained and where conflicts of interest cannot be avoided, they should be made explicit.

These principles should be reviewed for each stage of your research project:
1. Planning and designing of your research.
2. Conducting the research.
3. Analysing the research.
4. Presenting the research.
5. Storing the research.

Consent

Obtaining consent from your participants is an important factor in ethical community research. Everyone who is participating in your research should have given informed consent. Informed consent can be given by participants when they have received transparent information about the research project, what their participation involves, and how their contributions to the project will be stored. Once they have received and understood this information, they can provide their consent to take part.

Each participant's consent needs to be formally recorded. This is normally done through the signing of a consent from, however, verbal consent can also be obtained and recorded if appropriate. When obtaining consent, it is important to tell participants that their participation is voluntary and they are able to withdraw their consent to participate at any time.

An example consent form for a focus group can be viewed in the 'Further Resources- Templates and Guides section'

Depending on your research population, an individual might not have the capacity themselves to provide informed consent. Being able to gather informed consent is dependent on the participant being able to:
- Understand what the research project is about.
- Retain the information about the research project.
- Consider what the benefit is and what the risks are in taking part.
- Communicate their decision effectively.

Whether your participant is able to give informed consent will need to be explored on a case-by-case basis. As a researcher, you should always ensure that you use methods of communication that suit the individual wherever possible to help give them the information they need to give informed consent e.g., putting an information sheet about the project into Easy Read.

For more information on consent, please see https://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/bps_guidelines_for_conducting_research_with_people_not_having_capacity_to_consent.pdf

For information on conducting research with children, please see 'Further Resources- Participants'.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

The information participants give during research can be sensitive and contain personal identifiable information. This needs to be considered when doing research and, where possible, confidentiality must be applied. Confidentiality should always be maintained if it is requested by the participant. Confidentiality is particularly relevant when conducting research in a small community setting, where individuals' stories and experiences could easily be identified and traced back to them.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, you should:
- Remove any personal identifiable information from data.
- Ensure participants who wish to remain anonymous participate in the research in a private setting.
- Ensure robust data management is in place to stop access to the collected data.

Data management

Before starting to collect your data, you need to consider how they will store the data collected within your research. When conducting research, you should be compliant with the General Data Protection Regulation of 2018, which outlines how to hold personal data.

All of the data collected should be stored in a secure and private manner, with a limited number of relevant individuals being able to access it. If there are physical copies of the data, these should be kept in locked cabinets. If there are digital copies of data, these should be password protected.

Data should only be kept for as long as necessary, as long as its original purposes still apply. When storing personal data, you need to be able to justify why the data is still being stored. If there is not a legitimate reason for holding the data, it should be safely destroyed.

BUDGET

Community research can vary in cost depending on your research topic and how you are planning to carry out your research. Before you begin your research, you should consider the costing to ensure that the research is feasible.

In your budget, you should consider:
- Staff and volunteer time
- Participant expenses
- Overhead costs
- Electronic resources
- Transport
- Meeting rooms

When considering your budget, you should factor how much time you think the research will take. This will be dependent on who will be involved, and your research methods. You should also consider possible delays that could occur e.g. difficulties in recruiting participants.

Incentives

It is common for incentives to be used during research to help attract participants. Incentives can take multiple forms, such as cash payments or vouchers. Incentives can be a useful way to speed up the research process and engage participants. It is also a way of showing a participant that their time and knowledge is valued within your research.

When deciding whether to use incentives, it is important to consider the ethics surrounding the topic within the context of your research. While incentives can be helpful, they also have the potential to make participants feel obliged to take part in the research. To avoid this, the incentives given should be proportionate to their contribution to the research study, such as their time and any burden that the research has placed on them.

FEEDBACK LOOPS

Before you begin your research, you should consider how you will present your findings. To do this, you need to have an understanding of who the research is for, and who you hope will read it. This will differ depending on your research purpose. For example, if your research is focussed on change within your community organisation, then your main audience might be staff, volunteers and service users at your organisation. Alternatively, if your research is focussing on a wider issue in your community, your audience could be the local council or statutory services.

It is also important to consider how you will close feedback loops with your research participants, as they would have played an important role in the research and are a key stakeholder. Sharing your findings with them will allow them to see the difference their research could make, and how important their role was in contributing to this.
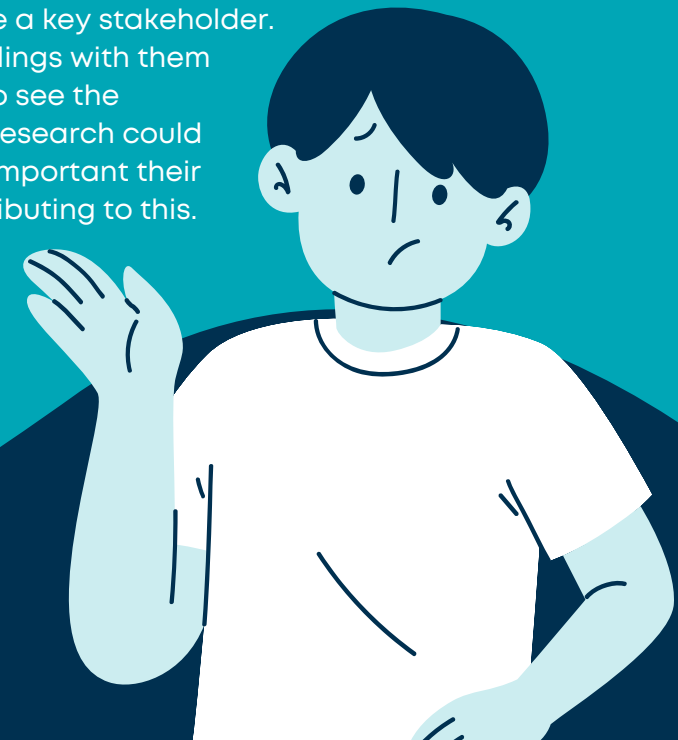
Want to find out more?

Read our other guides on community research

1

What is community research and why should you do it?

Discover the ins and outs of community research, the approaches you can take, and why it matters.

2

Designing your research project

Find out what you need to think about when developing a research project, including deciding your research questions, involving people, ethics, data management and more.

3

Carrying out research

Learn how to recruit research participants, gather and analyse your insights, and write up your findings.

4

Further resources

Explore helpful links and resources to learn more about community research.

NIHR | Clinical Research Network East of England

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Find out more or get in touch

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