

Evaluation of Community Participatory Action Research Training & Mentoring: Cohort 3





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Introduction

Community Participatory Action Research (CPAR) training and mentoring programme.

CPAR is an approach in which community members undertake research related to their communities. They are supported to do this as equal partners with system stakeholders, with the aim to put their research into action in addressing health inequalities.

The third cohort trained and mentored 24 Community Researchers from 10 voluntary sector organisations across the South East. The findings of their research will be used to support key decision makers and commissioners at local and system levels in informing priorities and supporting service development that act on health inequalities for marginalised communities in the South East.

The training and mentoring were delivered by the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC), the University of Reading, and the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR).

This report will describe the structure, governance and outline of the programme including feedback from the training and the showcase event

A full evaluation of the outcomes of the cohort 3 research has been delivered by IVAR which is available on the [IVAR website](#).

“Yesterday we were the ones advocating, today we are the ones bringing change.” Noorullah Sidiqi, Community Researcher (Health Inequalities Among Afghan Women in Hampshire)

Governance

- An Oversight Group was established with members from System and Place (Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), NHS England and local authority representatives) which met quarterly to oversee progress and direction. The Oversight Group had a clear remit:

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- Provide **assurance of the programme:** ensure quality assurance of the programme, sustainability, evaluation and alignment to policies and strategies to CPAR.
 - **Oversight of the programme:** provide governance, support and challenge, risk management, stakeholder engagement and programme impact.
 - **Oversight of the delivery:** monitor progress, stakeholder communication, help unblock and facilitate implementation, utilise group leadership and influence in place and systems.



Training and mentoring survey results

Feedback on skills and confidence

SCDC developed an electronic survey which was sent to all researchers at entry point, midpoint and endpoint of the training. Feedback was gathered from a combination of multiple choice and free text answers. SCDC analysed the feedback.

Information was sought on:

- how beneficial the programme was to researchers
- what went well and what can be improved
- confidence and skills before and after training
- their perceived influence of their research

The feedback is shown using a weighted average formula, where the averages of the variables are measured according to the relative importance of each variable.

1 is lowest value and 5 is the highest value: see table on next page.



Question	Entry	Midpoint	Endpoint
I have a good understanding about community participatory action research	4.18	4.57	4.92
I am knowledgeable about research methods	3.75	4.35	4.75
I am confident about using research methods	3.61	4.35	4.75
I am knowledgeable about analysing data	3.46	4.04	4.5
I am confident about analysing data	3.52	3.87	4.5
I am knowledgeable about research ethics	3.86	4.52	4.58
I am confident about applying research ethics	3.71	4.52	4.58
I am knowledgeable about presenting research findings	3.82	3.91	4.58
I am confident about presenting research findings	3.82	3.91	4.67
I am knowledgeable about using research to influence decision makers and improve public services	3.64	3.7	4.5
I am confident about using research to influence decision makers and improve public services	3.58	3.91	4.5
Response	100%	100%	50%



Midpoint survey:

- 28 responses were received while there were only 24 researchers on the programme. This could be due to duplicates or could have been completed by the host organisation research leads.

Endpoint survey:

- 50% (12 researchers) completed the endpoint survey after many reminders.
- 3 additional questions were asked related to the final stage of the training
- All said that CPAR helped them connect and communicate with local stakeholders to influence local decisions and services in relation to health inequalities
- All said that they believed that their research is already having an impact or is likely to impact positively

Some feedback from community researchers:

“ICB, University and other researchers are already keen to help us progress our research further. We know our research would have an impact in developing our work, but this is beyond what we expected. CPAR research has given us a platform to say why restorative practise is needed in our community and for it to be recognised as a public health service.”


“The IVAR stakeholder online meeting was great and given us some contacts”.

Other observations included:

- a steady improvement in knowledge, skills and confidence from entry to endpoint in all areas was declared.
- All learning sessions had a high attendance rate, with most community researchers achieving 100% attendance. Only 1 researcher left the cohort due to personal circumstances.

Other feedback from community researchers:

“The flexible approach of the programme worked really well. Community researchers were trusted to shape the direction of their own research, which allowed the work to



stay relevant to local needs. Our local knowledge and lived experiences were respected and valued throughout the process. We also appreciated the strong support from multiple mentors, which provided guidance and encouragement while still giving us space to lead.”

“Online and face to face training mix worked well. Mentor good support. Like having mixture of people delivering the training. A year is a good amount of time too. Everyone so genuinely supportive and approachable. The language used was accessible to all, not too academic!!”

What worked well

Recommendations from cohort 2 were woven into cohort 3. A ‘Who is Who’ document was suggested to streamline communication. This developed into a comprehensive handbook which was updated regularly with the details of the training and mentoring programmes.

What we could do better

Comments from community researchers suggested that in-person learning is beneficial for peer learning and that they would like more. They also suggested clearer signposting for more opportunities for ongoing community research to build on current learning. Some requested learning instruction on using Excel spreadsheets or general IT use. As in previous years, more access to local authority and ICB stakeholder engagement for funding opportunities was requested.

Examples of good partnerships

The 3 host organisations in Portsmouth, Portsmouth Mediation Services, Work Better Innovations and Spark Community Space (6 researchers) collaborated in learning together and continue to share their research work after the training completed.

Hampshire County Council took on the role of recruitment and management of community researchers and worked in collaboration with Community First.



Showcase September 2025

The Showcase was held at The Foundry, Vauxhall, London which gave an opportunity for community researchers to promote the insights from their research projects and to put into practice their presentation skills learned from the training programme. The event was attended by 75 delegates from NHS systems, local authorities, the voluntary sector and academia. The community researchers presented their work via oral presentations, elevator pitches, poster presentations and networking.

Key highlights of the day

Alexis Keir, Public Participation Manager, in the People and Communities Division at NHS England delivered the keynote. He shared his personal experience as a writer and being part of the St. Vincent diaspora highlighting the power of storytelling and how it can empower communities.


The writer and poet Ros Barber chatted with the researchers and quietly observed the events of the day. Ros surprised everyone during the close of the event with a poem she wrote about the community researchers: 'Hello Human'. (see page 28 of the [Showcase Booklet](#))

The community researchers were presented with certificates by Tim Elwell-Sutton, Deputy Regional Director of Public Health, South East, Department of Health and Social Care to much applause.

Feedback

33 attendees completed the electronic survey of the showcase event.

- 81% said they strongly agreed the flow of the day was well organised and 19% agreed.
- 90% said they strongly favoured the venue as a productive and suitable space for the Showcase. 10% partially in agreement as they felt there was not enough space to present their posters in the lobby. However all strongly agreed the location was accessible by public transport.

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- Overall, 81% rated the event as excellent and the remaining 19% as good.
 - The feedback included thanks and gratitude to the organisers of the Showcase and training delivery partners and hopes to be invited to the next Showcase.

“It was a positive boost to my soul to hear about all the positive community work and the strength within the communities themselves.”

“It was an inspirational day and the poem at the end was a lovely touch.”

“Supportive, warm and celebratory environment.”

There were questions and comments around ‘where does this research go now’ from researchers from previous cohorts:

“There must be implementation of the CPAR research findings by the NHS England as highlighted in the showcase presentation to ensure the success of other future community participatory research work.”

The feedback suggested for future showcases to have more space to network and present posters.



Sharing the CPAR programme and work of community researchers

Following the completion of the programme, between December 2025 and March 2026, NHS England has presented the outcome of the programme, shared the research project reports and contact details of community researchers and their organisations with the following networks run by NHS England. Networks were either national or regional:

- **People and Communities ICB Engagement Leads (national) Network:**
The South East engagement leads were asked how they can support this newly trained workforce and how they can embed the research insights into their commissioning processes.
- **NHS England's Engagement Communities of practice Network (National Programme - cancer, women's health, neonatal, lifestyles)** Members of this group were asked to share the outputs of the CPAR research projects in their areas of practice with system leaders to inform service development and commissioning.
- **Health Inequalities (national)** South East leads in this group were specifically asked how they can help advocate for the research findings and mobilise this trained workforce. The group was asked if there were opportunities to replicate the CPAR training programme in their area.
- **Neighbourhood Health Communities of Practice (South East)** network was asked to build relationships with community researchers and their organisations, share the insights of the research, and consider their role in supporting a future programme. The Caribbean Community Lunch Club presented their research on hypertension at this meeting which gave the opportunity to link with communities of practice close to the subject.

Resources

[Health Inequalities through community eyes](#) is the report produced by IVAR which aims to celebrate and amplify the work of the community researchers in cohort 3.



NHS England was keen to understand the career opportunities and pathway of the community researchers following their training. NHS England commissioned the University of Reading to deliver an impact report which identifies the career and education routes they have taken, how they are using their research skills, and the wider personal and community impact from their community research work. [The Impact Report](#) is available on our website.



Next steps

Future CPAR Programme

Due to the current organisational change in NHS England, the CPAR training and mentoring programme will be paused for the foreseeable future.

In the event of this programme running Cohort 4, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Collaborate with ICBs and Neighbourhood Health Networks at a strategic level with joint responsibility in the development of a community researcher workforce according to the local needs.
2. Financial reimbursement of researcher training time to be funded by ICB systems, and the training & mentoring to be funded by the South East School of Public Health.
3. Work with ICBs in the south east to develop an ICB-based alumni network, learning from the success of the Thames Valley CPAR Alumni.
4. Commission a specialised delivery programme to include the elements of this CPAR programme: training on evidenced based participatory research models; mentoring to guide researchers on the realities and practicalities of the research; and tools to enable researchers to engage with stakeholders and decision makers.

CPAR Toolkit

NHS England has worked with SCDC to develop a toolkit to support other places and systems in the NHS that are considering a CPAR programme. This will be accessible on this website from 31 July 2026. The toolkit will be a useful addition to the resources currently available.



Summary

This CPAR programme has delivered training and mentoring to three cohorts of community researchers between 2021 to 2025. The model of delivery has been refined following a continuous improvement process through co-production, participant feedback and ongoing evaluation. This iterative approach not only strengthen the programme itself but it also supported local systems to rethink and enhance their approaches to community engagement and community participation.

Although the programme is currently paused, its legacy remains significant. A network of 87 community researchers across 41 voluntary sector organisations are now equipped to generate community insight, amplify lived experience, and contribute meaningfully to place-based and system-level decision making. This represents a valuable and enduring asset for communities and partners seeking to embed community voices in the design, delivery and improvement of services.