

Research and Engagement across Communities for Health County Durham



Framework Summary

Introduction

We want to involve communities in the design and delivery of high quality research in ways that are fair, respectful, proportionate and effective. By this we mean the voice of our communities shaping research priorities and activities that are meaningful and able to influence policy.

REACH (Research and Engagement across Communities for Health) County Durham is a partnership between Durham County Council, Durham University and Durham Community Action.

Collective Vision

“ Together, we harness the power of research and innovation to tackle the causes of unfair differences in health outcomes across County Durham. ”

Community involvement in a collaborative research process is vital to fulfilling this vision. We want to encourage communities to fully, equitably and effectively engage with research development and delivery across County Durham.

Our approach



Our Community Involvement Framework provides:

- A common reference point for those involved in collaborative public health research (including community members).
- A benchmark for public health practitioners, academics and VCSE organisations.
- A tool to facilitate exploratory discussions throughout the research journey.
- A living resource, under the ownership of the Community Involvement Steering Group (CISG), that adapts and evolves as we journey together.



Health is influenced by the 'wider determinants of health'. These factors include how much money we have, the quality of house we live in, our natural environment and our access to transport, education and work.

For us, communities are those communities of interest and place in County Durham who we serve in partnership, and help to thrive.

For us, research is a way to identify and explore questions that matter. It can help to bring together a range of voices and experiences and combine these with wider knowledge and data to help target and address inequity.

For us, engagement is about keeping each other and our communities informed, connected and supported. As partners we are engaging with each other with our different experiences, knowledge and perspectives, building bridges between research, policy, practice and communities.



Understanding the research landscape

“ An expanded understanding [of research] makes space for research to also be seen as a process of exploration, learning and knowledge creation, of which research findings are just one element with which people might engage. This expansion creates more space for collaborative action and allows a much wider spectrum of actors to be involved in and more activities to be classed as research.

[Collaborate CIC](#) (2025, p.9)

”

We understand ‘research’ as a process of shared exploration and learning, in which many people and roles participate and multiple forms of knowledge are needed.



Our approach is guided principally by the following

Durham County Council

[County Durham Approach to Wellbeing](#)

National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR)

[NIHR Principles for public and community involvement in public health research in local authorities](#)

Durham University

[Health@Durham Strategy](#)

Voluntary Organisations' Network North East (VONNE), NIHR and Community Partners

[Community Engagement Toolkit](#)

Collaborate CIC (2025) Reimagining research collaboration: How can universities and local places work better together? London: Collaborate CIC. Available at: <https://collaboratecic.com/insights-and-resources/reimagining-research-collaboration-how-can-universities-and-local-places-work-better-together/> (Accessed: 5 May 2026).



Before embarking on any research, we recognise the need to take time to understand:



Understanding local contexts is essential to any public health research. This includes exploring inequalities through listening to people who live, work and volunteer in their communities, as well as reviewing existing evidence and insights.

The research journey

Our Framework outlines four Practical Steps to implementing a community involvement approach to collaborative public health research.

These include Recognition (Giving back), Communications (Sharing a common language), Evaluation (Ensuring we are making a difference) and Impact (Demonstrating real-life benefits).

Guides for these Practical Steps will be available and routinely updated on our REACH County Durham website.



Recognition (Giving back)

We recognise the need for involvement in the research process to be appealing, relevant and impactful. We are committed to removing barriers, honouring the time and contribution that people give to research while also providing a positive experience.



Giving back strengthens trust and makes research more meaningful.



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Communications (Sharing a common language)

Inclusive research may also require creative, visual and 'beyond words' materials to engage with communities, and codesigned messages to help ensure that everyone involved understands the purpose, process and value of research. A shared language promotes equity and avoids alienating anyone.



We value the use of clear, everyday language that is jargon-free.



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Evaluation (Ensuring we are making a difference)

Evaluating community involvement in research is important. Examples of knowing whether an approach is successfully involving communities could include evidence of community voices influencing research priorities, and increased participation from under-represented groups.



Evaluate how community involvement shapes inclusive research.



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Impact (Demonstrating real-life benefits)

By involving residents in identifying priorities, co-designing approaches, and interpreting outcomes, we understand the value of ensuring that research leads to practical improvements that people can see and feel - such as better access to services. This approach not only validates community expertise but also builds trust and creates lasting, meaningful impact.



It is vital to assess how your research has affected local communities.



REACH County Durham Delivery Team

Ready to REACH out?

Want to get involved? We'd love to hear from you.

Whether you're a resident, local group, VCSE organisation, academic or practitioner, REACH County Durham can support you to develop a meaningful and inclusive approach to community involvement in public health research - one that works for you and the people you aim to involve.

Let's make County Durham a place where everyone can shape a healthier future.

Please email our REACH County Durham Delivery Team at publichealth@durham.gov.uk to begin your journey.

A more detailed version of this Community Involvement Framework along with more detailed Practical Steps to Recognition, Communications, Evaluation and Impact can be found on the Community Involvement pages within our [REACH County Durham webpage](#).



Check out our webpage
www.durhaminsight.info/county-durham-reach