

Research and Engagement across Communities for Health County Durham



Framework

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1.0 Introduction

This section introduces REACH (Research and Engagement Across Communities for Health) County Durham.

1.1 The Context

Communities across County Durham have proud histories, strong identities, and a deep sense of facing challenges together. However, we recognise that people in County Durham experience long standing and unfair differences in health outcomes. These inequalities can also be reflected in inconsistent community involvement in research activity. Put simply, not every community has had the same chance to engage with research or shape decisions about health and wellbeing.

By becoming more research active, local government and the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector can, in partnership with higher education institutions, create new opportunities to improve the health and wellbeing of our communities.

Aligned particularly to the principles of the [County Durham Approach to Wellbeing](#), our framework outlines the value of collaborative public health research to researchers, community partners, practitioners, and residents.

“ 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.

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1.2 The REACH County Durham Vision

REACH County Durham is a partnership between Durham County Council, Durham University and Durham Community Action.

Our 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.

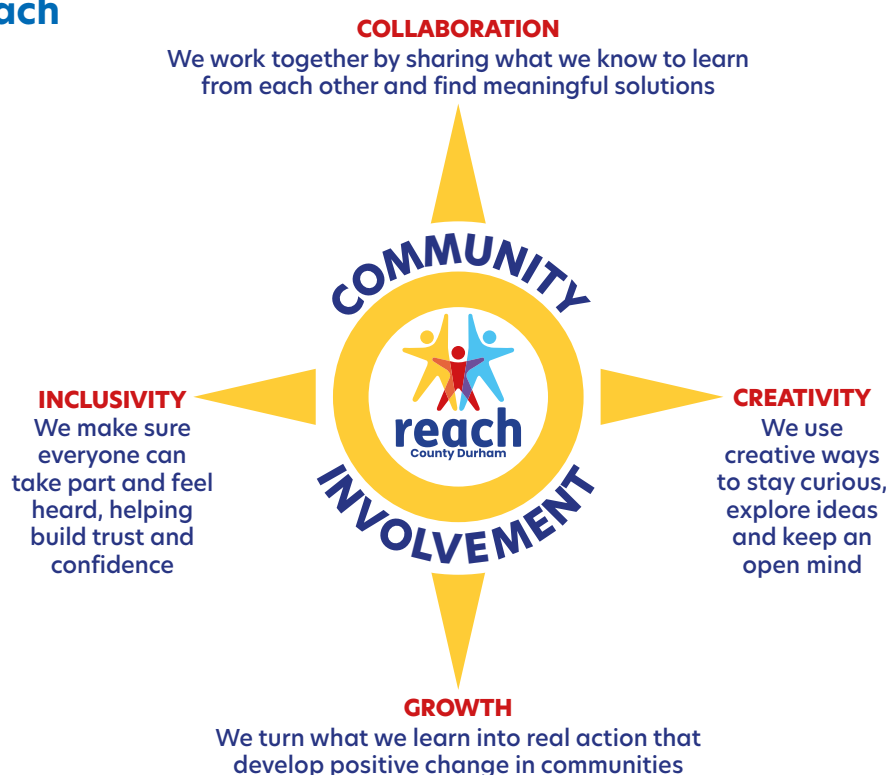


1.3 Our REACH Community Involvement Approach

We have co-designed an approach to community involvement in research that has been led and co-produced through our Community Involvement Steering Group (CISG). They have collaborated directly with colleagues from Public Health, Durham University and the wider VCSE through a series of monthly in-person [CISG workshops](#), online surveys, and real-time co-editing.

Our approach is offered as a guide or conversation starter for collaborative research teams to consider how they will work in partnership throughout the research journey, build relationships with communities involved in the design and delivery of their research, and benefit communities through strengthened local research capacity and policy making.

Our Approach



1.4 What do we mean by research?

Is research only for academics?

The term 'research' can mean many different things to many different people, particularly as there are many ways to approach or 'do' research. As a research collaboration focused on addressing health inequalities through exploring the wider determinants of health, we value the following definition of **Basic research** by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR):

“ Basic research aims to improve knowledge and understanding, rather than finding a solution to a specific practical problem...This kind of research can sometimes provide clues as to which avenues to explore... [NIHR](#) ”

“ 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.

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While research must be scientifically rigorous to be credible, to attract funding and to inform policy, it should be meaningful for our communities. We therefore recognise the value and power of involvement, creativity and innovation throughout the research process.

1.5 What do we mean by engagement?

What is engagement all about?

Engagement in research is considered a two-way process that encourages listening and interacting between researchers and communities in order to achieve the joint aim of mutual benefit ([NIHR](#) and [National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement](#)).

“ 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.

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2.0 Community Involvement

This section explains the REACH (Research and Engagement Across Communities for Health) County Durham collaborative approach to community involvement in public health research.

2.1 What is our approach, and who can get involved?

NIHR defines public involvement in research as

“ research being carried out ‘with’ or ‘by’ members of the public rather than ‘to’, ‘about’ or ‘for’ them. It is an active partnership between patients, carers and members of the public with researchers that influences and shapes research.

[NIHR](#)

”

We see community involvement in collaborative research as both the foundation and goal for building meaningful relationships across communities, ensuring that research is shaped by and responsive to those it aims to benefit. This will ensure that our research aligns with our Public Health strategic objectives and the needs and ambitions of communities across County Durham.

Our aim is to develop collaborative public health research activities that:

- Involve communities in ways that are respectful and rooted in trust.
- Recognise the diversity and strengths of communities across County Durham.
- Respond to real community needs.
- Are joined up to avoid duplication and ‘research fatigue’ for communities.

2.2 How does community involvement impact our work?

Meaningful community involvement in collaborative research helps ensure research activity has real impact and relevance, and is of practical use to communities. Crucial to our research outputs that improve quality of life and narrow inequalities are insights that draw on lived experience, local knowledge and place-based evidence.

2.3 What does our framework provide?

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.

3.0 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.

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

**Local
priorities**

**Community
assets and
challenges**

**What has
already
been tried**

**What support
or resources
already exist**

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.

3.1 The social gradient in health

In order to understand and shape inequalities in health through our research, we seek to address the social gradient that exists in health.

The Institute of Health Equity explains that the social gradient in health is

“ a term used to describe the phenomenon whereby people who are less advantaged in terms of socioeconomic position have worse health (and shorter lives) than those who are more advantage. ”

[Institute of Health Equity](#)

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).



The following questions are examples of how we might consider the role played by research in this context:

- Does the research focus on unfair differences in health outcomes for County Durham residents?
- How are we focusing on unfair differences in health outcomes?
- Is this research meaningful to the community?
- Are we hearing from a wide range of voices?
- Are we supporting people to take part in ways that help them to grow?
- How are communities shaping the direction of research?
- How are more people able to take part?
- How are we giving back value?

3.2 Guiding principles and values



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](#)



4.0 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 impact).

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



4.1 Practical Steps

We recognise the value of working alongside people and organisations who can provide a better understanding and range of perspectives of the unfair differences in health outcomes across County Durham.

This includes, but is not limited to:

- Local residents, leaders, community groups and (in)formal networks.
- Voluntary, community and social enterprise leaders and organisations.
- Fellow researchers and academics.
- Health and care professionals and practitioners.
- Local and national government partners.



Everyone brings something important to the journey



REACH County Durham Delivery Team member



Who can get involved?

Being clear about who needs to be involved in any particular research requires different approaches so that the particular communities and individuals who will bring the most insight can be identified and engaged with as early as possible.

Partners collaborating in the research journey each bring different strengths, perspectives and responsibilities. Partnering well will help ensure that research is not done to communities, but with and for them. To do this, we want to walk alongside colleagues in spaces within the REACH County Durham collaboration where community involvement throughout the research journey is routinely discussed and reflected upon.

Please visit our REACH website to find out more about groups, partnerships, networks, taskforces, and organisations to reach out to.

“ We recognise the value of keeping the research process relevant and responsive.

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This requires staying alert to:

- Local, national and international health priorities.
- New opportunities and funding.
- Changes affecting communities.
- Good practice and national standards.

Actively staying on track with the influences that may affect how communities get involved in research - such as new health issues, policy changes, funding opportunities, local population changes, and shifting community priorities - will make sure that research stays flexible and focused, even as circumstances change.

You will find links to external sources of guidance and information on our website.

In the research process, exploratory steps are early, small-scale activities that allow assumptions to be tested, relationships to be built, and real-life learning to take place with communities before a commitment to full research projects. They may include informal conversations, community drop-ins, early workshops, or pilot engagement activities. These take time, effort, and resources. But they matter and must be considered. They can be factored into funding bids for future research but must be acknowledged as an important step in helping to determine the direction of any research from the outset.

Identifying priorities together guides our next steps. The subsequent research allows us to explore specific areas that allow us different perspectives and new insights from which to reevaluate our initial priorities. For this, our SPRIGs (Supporting Practice, Research and Innovation Groups) will also continue to evolve and support the collaborative approach.



Monitoring the progress of a research project requires ongoing dialogue. Keeping a note of what questions arise, and how they are answered will serve to support future research activity and help guide others.

We recognise that there are several ways to engage with local communities:-

- Attend local community meetings, [Partnership and Network events](#).
- Host collaborative workshops between sector colleagues.
- Run creative 'beyond words' conversation workshops with local communities.
- Offer REACH Touchpoints (staffed stands) in research, local authority and community settings.
- Contact our Supporting Practice, Research and Innovation Groups (SPRIGs)
- Review local strategies and plans through the CISG.
- Explain population health profiles and data through Durham Insight.
[Durham Insight](#)

4.2 Our recognition policy (Giving back)

Enabling involvement in research requires a responsive, tailored and inclusive approach. This is because different individuals, communities and audiences engaging in research related activities will need to negotiate a variety of barriers to meaningful and sustainable involvement. Identifying how to remove barriers that exist to community involvement in research, such as inaccessibility, lack of confidence, poor resources, and negative past experiences must first be acknowledged. We understand that these challenges can change in nature or significance over time, but that working together to remove them is vital to creating welcoming, supportive opportunities within research.

We also acknowledge that engaging with research in the broadest sense can range from the VCSE sector colleagues directly contributing to strategic research priorities, for example via the SPRIGs, to individuals contributing as research participants as part of specific studies. In addition to research making a practical difference, we also 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. ”

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Giving back may include the following examples, and choosing which ones are most suitable will depend on the context of involvement: -

- Acknowledgement e.g. co-authorship.
- Opportunities for specific training or resources.
- A pathway to further learning and more committed involvement.
- Payments, expenses and/or reimbursement (travel, refreshments, etc.).
- Provision of infrastructure e.g. childcare, respite care.
- Ensuring that participants see how their contributions have shaped research and decisions.



Giving back strengthens trust and makes research more meaningful.



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4.3 Our communications approach (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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We are aware that there are several terms related to Community Involvement in research.

We have a glossary of terms on our REACH County Durham website.

4.4 Our evaluation process (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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4.5 Our impact assessment (Demonstrating real-life benefits)

Demonstrating real-life benefits means showing how community voices directly shape and strengthen collaborative public health research. 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. ”

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4.6 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.



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