

Meeting People Where They Are: Co-Producing Research With Communities

What does a good experience of working with the university as a community researcher look and feel like in practice?

Co-Production Futures Inquiry

14 April 2026



Facilitators: Dr Al Mathers & Dr Bryony Vince-Myers

Contributors: Hannah Walton, Ayad Al-Ani, Saira Ashford, Samina Begum, Lucy Campbell, Virginie Clayton, Sarah Fayette, Abdul Menan Mirza, Victoria Mozley, Yasmin Rahman, Bernard Sudlow, Elaine Unegbu, Susan Jane Webster, Syeda Sadaf Zaidi.

OVERVIEW

- Defining key terms
- Overview of the Co-Production Futures Inquiry
- Findings from the community researcher workshop
- Hopes and calls to action for universities
- Existing and emerging initiatives
- Open discussion - your experiences, and what have we missed?
- Next steps

WHAT WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY ...

- 'participatory and co-produced' research
- 'community' or 'peer researcher'
- 'values'
- 'felt experiences' compared to 'lived or learnt experiences'
- 'community organisations' or 'community partners'
- 'journey mapping'
- 'wake up questions'

THE CO-PRO FUTURES INQUIRY

Aims to propose measures to address barriers to participatory and co-produced research within universities and the higher education sector.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

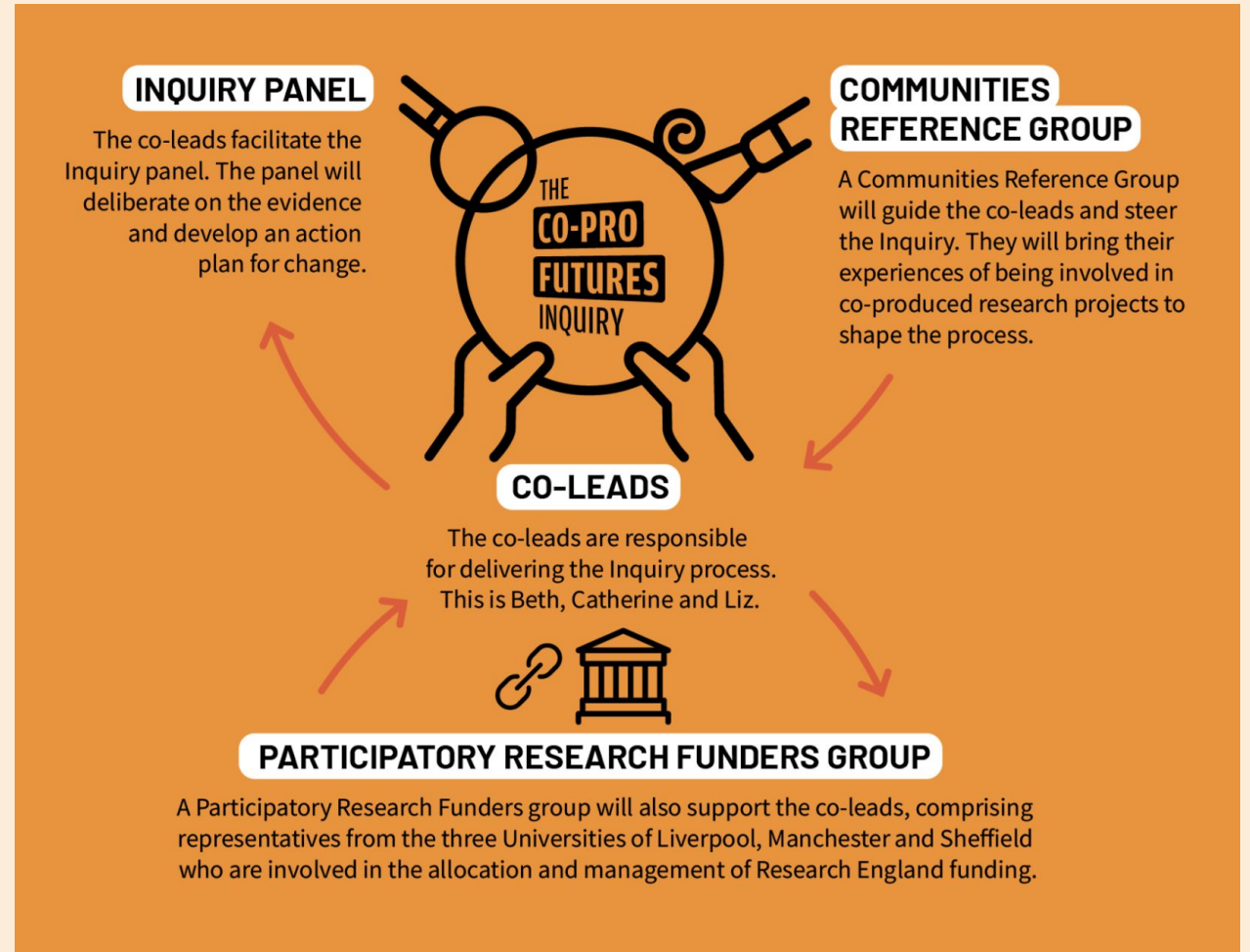
Co-production and participatory research moved into the mainstream.

Increasing expectation from funders that different groups are directly involved in research design, collection, analysis and dissemination.

But there's still more work to do ...

HOW WE'RE DOING IT

Between 2024-2026, this has involved workshops, a public call for evidence and ideas, analysis, interviews, and a high-profile panel to identify actions that can be put into practice.



Co-Pro Futures Inquiry Co-Leads: Prof. Beth Perry (University of Sheffield), Prof. Catherine Durose (University of Liverpool), Prof. Liz Richardson (University of Manchester)

WHAT WE'VE FOUND SO FAR



FAIR FUNDING

PAYMENT AND
RECOGNITION FOR
CO-RESEARCHERS

POWER HIERARCHIES

INFLEXIBILITY AND
OUTCOME-ORIENTED
FUNDING MODELS

SHORT TERM AND
NON-RECURRENT
FUNDING



RESPONSIBLE METRICS

DIVERSE FORMS OF
KNOWLEDGE ARE
UNDervalUED

RELIANCE ON
TRADITIONAL 'ACADEMIC'
OUTPUTS



EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIP

INACCESSIBLE
CONTRACTS & LEGAL
FRAMEWORKS

INTELLECTUAL
PROPERTY

DIGITAL EXCLUSION

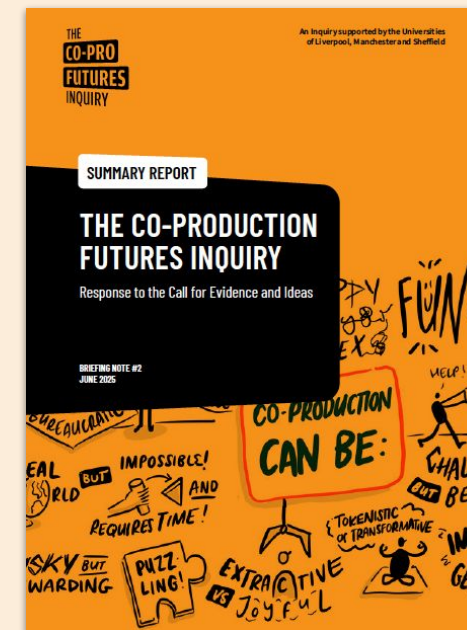


NEGOTIATED ETHICS

INFLEXIBLE AND UNFIT
ETHICAL REVIEW
PROCESSES

INACCESSIBLE AND
'OTHERING' LANGUAGE

LIVED EXPERIENCE,
TOKENISM AND 'TRAUMA
MINING'



[Read the report](#)



While we've heard extensively from academics and university staff, we also want to know...

*What would a good experience of working with the university **as a community researcher** look or feel like?*

THE WORKSHOP

PURPOSE

- Understand community perspectives on what a **“good experience”** looks and feels like in practice
- Work with community researchers to inform the Inquiry’s **theory of change**.
- Generate insights and provocations to inform **panel deliberations**.

OBJECTIVES

- Create a **safe, supportive space** for community researchers and organisations to share experiences and generate reciprocal value and benefit for all
- Value **lived and learnt experience**, recognising intersectional identities and avoiding extraction or polarisation
- Identify what is valued and what needs greater support in **community-university research partnerships**
- **Learn with and from community researchers** about what works in practice to advocate for how structural and systemic barriers may be overcome.

Recruitment

- **80** people submitted expressions of interest, **15** places were offered and **14** people took part
- Participants had experience of co-producing research with a UK university from different perspectives, including:
 - **5** paid community researchers
 - **5** volunteer community researchers
 - **4** representatives from community-based organisations

Workshop format

- 2 hour online workshop
- Group discussion & journey mapping via Miro

What feeling or emotion describes your experience of community research projects, and what made you feel this way?

Across your community research project journeys, what happened at each stage and what helped or hindered you feeling valued?

What would you like the universities to prioritise to improve the experiences of community researchers and community organisations in research partnerships? What needs to change?

“Not just extracting from
community”

LEGITIMISED

“Gave us a voice”

“short-term funding”

CAUTIOUS “power imbalances”

“language barriers”

“momentum sometimes lost”

AGENCY

“have ownership of what we
have done”

What feeling or emotion describes your experience of community research projects, and what made you feel this way?

“Taught how to frame questions
and analyse data”

EMPOWERED

“Energised when... treated
like partners”

“Gratitude for being included”

“Use lived experience to make
change”

IMPACT

“Impactful - can see the
change happening”

AMPLIFIED

“Had direct contribution to change”

“Reach people that are
seldom heard”

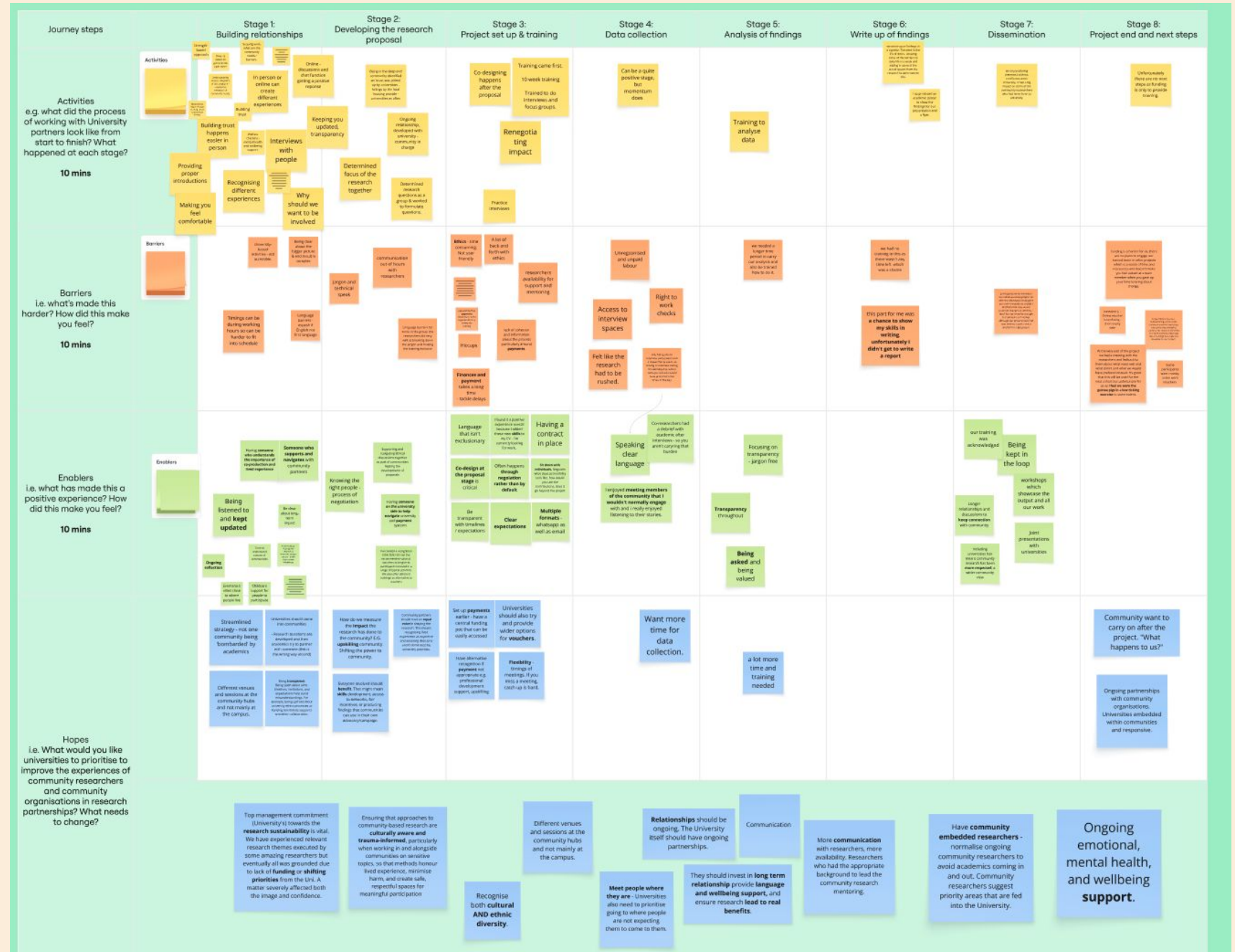
The importance of culture and relationships

Community researchers initially felt **empowered** by their experience working with universities. They felt that their affiliation with the university **amplified** and **legitimised** their voices, enabling them to reach audiences they might not otherwise access and to be heard by those who might not typically listen. As a result, they felt able to use their lived experience to have a positive **impact** within their own community and to policymakers.

However, people were also **cautious** about community-university partnerships. The most common issues discussed related to **short-term funding** and resource constraints resulting in them “**feeling rushed**” during the analysis and/or write-up, and “**losing momentum**” when it came to dissemination. Research partnerships seemed to ‘drop off’ at the analysis/dissemination stage of the journey, with many community partners feeling **let down** or disappointed. Other barriers discussed centred around **power imbalances**, **accessibility** and **language/cultural differences**.

Overall, community researchers called for commitment to **sustaining relationships** and **working as partners**.

Journey mapping exercise - actions, barriers, enablers & hopes



Barriers: Felt experiences of community research journey

ACCESSIBILITY

Language barriers (English not first language)

Jargon and technical speak

Access to interview spaces

Project activities during working hours / when researcher present

"university-based activities not accessible"

PAYMENTS

"Payments should have been organised before the training"

"Convolutd payments process - wasn't allowed cash"

"Difficult back and forth. Had to wait absolutely ages"

ETHICS

"A lot of back and forth"

"Ethics... not user friendly"

Unrecognised and unpaid labour during data collection

Barriers: Felt experiences of community research journey

TIME & FUNDING

Limited time and training for analysis and write-up

"felt like research [data collection] had to be rushed"

EXTRACTION

"this part for me [dissemination stage] was a chance to show my skills in writing, unfortunately I didn't get to write a report"

"I feel we were the guinea pigs in a box ticking exercise"

Enablers: Felt experiences of community research journey

TRANSPARENCY

"Being clear about long-term impact"

"Speaking clear language"

"Ongoing reflection"

"Sharing why research is important to each person - broke down power imbalances"

NAVIGATING NEGOTIATING BROKERING

"Having someone on the university side to help navigate university and payment systems"

Academics checking in after interviews "so you aren't carrying that burden"

EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIP

"A learning researcher rather than a lecturing researcher"

"Being listened to and kept updated"

"Joint presentations with universities"

Enablers: Felt experiences of community research journey

TRAINING & CAPACITY BUILDING

"our training was acknowledged"

"meeting members of the community that I wouldn't normally engage with... I really enjoyed listening to their stories"

"supporting and navigating ethical discussions together as part of communities leading the development of proposals"

LEGITIMACY & IMPACT

"Including universities has meant community research has been more respected, a wider community view"

"workshops which showcase the output and all our work"

Hopes: What would you like universities to prioritise to improve the experiences of community researchers/organisations in research partnerships? What needs to change?

Streamlined & sustainable strategy

- University management should commit to research sustainability to prevent research being grounded due to lack of funding or shifting priorities
- Avoid one community being 'bombarded' by academics
- Approach community *before* research questions are developed

Ongoing & embedded relationships

- Longer relationships and ongoing discussions to keep connection with community
- Universities should be embedded within communities and responsive to community priority areas - avoid "coming in and out"
- "What happens to us?" when the project ends

Community agency

- Recognise lived experience as expertise
- Ensure decisions aren't dominated by university priorities

Impact

- How to measure the impact on community (e.g. upskilling)?
- Ensure research leads to real benefits
- Skills development as an impact

Payments

- Set up payments earlier
- Have a central funding pot that can be easily accessed
- Provide wider voucher options

Time and funding

- More time for data collection
- More time for training

Skills & qualifications

- Qualifications for future careers

Mutual benefit

- Everyone involved should benefit:
e.g: skills development; access to networks; fair incentives; producing findings that communities can use in their own advocacy/campaign.

Transparency

- Be transparent and upfront about aims, timelines, limitations, and expectations (e.g. ethics and funding constraints)
- More communication with researchers

Accessibility

- Use different venues in communities
- "Meet people where they are"
- Flexible meeting times

Support

- Ongoing emotional, mental health & wellbeing support
- Better availability of academic researchers
- Upskilling academic researchers

Respectful partnerships

- Culturally aware and trauma-informed approach
- Respect cultural and ethnic diversity

EXISTING AND EMERGING INITIATIVES

Equitable & respectful partnerships

- [Greater Manchester Respectful Research Charter](#)
- [Civic University Agreements, Civic University Network and the NCIA](#)
- Equitable Research Online Courses (e.g. [Open University PEERS Online Course](#))
- Research hubs embedded in communities

Improving institutional processes

- [Payments](#) and [ethics](#) improvements at Manchester
- Contracts process and intellectual property at Sheffield
- Accessible contracts - Centre for Equity and Inclusion and the University of Hull (Ideas Fund)

Training, qualifications and community-building

- Community researcher qualifications and training
 - [UCL Citizen Science Certificate](#)
 - [Fulfilling Lives peer researcher training](#)
 - [Doing Community Research: Skills Training](#) (Institute for Social Justice, York St John)
- Community researcher networks (e.g. [Young Foundation Peer Research Network](#))

Flexible funding and impact

- Ideas Fund grants programme and [impact framework](#)

INTERACTIVE WEBINAR DISCUSSION VIA WOOC LAP.COM

What are your felt experiences of working with universities? What have we missed?

Webinar attendees' experiences of working with universities were largely consistent with those from our January workshop – ranging from feeling valued and producing actionable insights, to feeling extracted and frustrated by bureaucracy.



48 responses

Which workshop findings resonated most with your own experiences?



46 responses

Are there any other initiatives or best practices that we should know of?

Webinar attendees shared the following emerging initiatives aimed at improving the conditions for participatory research. Our ongoing Co-Pro Futures Landscape Review will build on this by mapping the wider ecosystem of organisations and initiatives in this space. We will share this soon.

Training and qualifications

- [Endorsement and Quality Standards Board for Community Development](#)
- outwith.ed.ac.uk - centralised support for participatory research (including training materials such as field guides, relating to participatory research)
- [Good Practice Mentors](#) free training on coproduction for VCSEs
- [University of Reading](#) training for academics on engagement
- [Bradford City of Culture Community Researchers initiative](#)

Improving institutional processes

- University of Edinburgh - revamp of ethics ("EAGER")
- [Informal network of research libraries](#) exploring how they can enable citizen science/participatory research

Equitable & respectful partnerships

- University of Bath's work on [Relational Practice and Welfare and Wellbeing](#)

Networks, institutes & communities of practice

- [Community knowledge matters network](#) in scotland
- The 'service user' group, [Patient, Carer and Public Involvement \(PCPIs\) group](#), University of Sunderland
- [Binks Hub](#), University of Edinburgh
- [Centre for Collaboration in Community Connectedness](#)

INQUIRY NEXT STEPS & STAY IN TOUCH

Co-Pro Futures Inquiry Next Steps

- Ongoing deliberations with our Inquiry Panel
- Landscape review, mapping the ecosystem of initiatives/organisations (available soon)
- New website and online evidence archive (coming soon)
- Launch of final output (September 2026)

Stay up to date

Join our mailing list: coprofutures@gmail.com

Join our LinkedIn group: www.linkedin.com/groups/14550112/

We'll send the slides to you after the session.