GMCVO

Research

Good Evidence: A guide to help community organisations produce research that gets taken seriously

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COMMUNITY FUND

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to members of Greater Manchester Third Sector Research Network who contributed their ideas, and especially Ali Hanbury and Alex Tan for reviewing the draft guide; and Lucy North for the layout and design.

Note on text: Words in **bold** are defined in the glossary at the end of this guide.

Contents

Introduction

What is research?

Research is organised and open-minded investigation into information and experience that seeks to provide new knowledge about a topic or question. Here's one definition: "An attempt to systematically describe, explain, or explore[1]." The key words here are "systematically" – i.e. it is organised – and "explore" – which suggests the conclusions are not known at the start. Rather, they come directly out of the analysis of the information collected during the research process.

The word 'research' can refer to both the process of doing research, and the **research outputs** – such as reports. 'Research' also refers to the everyday gathering of information. However, this guide is referring to the structured gathering of information with the purpose of answering one or more clearly defined research questions.

For more about research questions see the Designing a Research Project section of this guide.

Research is about producing new **knowledge** in some shape or form. This may be gathering knowledge and understanding about different and particular kinds of **phenomena**. Or it may be more about understanding *how* things work and *why* people do certain things, as well as uncovering patterns in phenomena, including experiences.

This guide focuses on **qualitative** research, which asks 'how' or 'why' things have happened through finding out more about the experiences of research **participants**. Most community researchers use **qualitative** or **mixed methods** as they enable researchers to explore participants' understandings and views of a particular topic, and study context, interrelationships and complexity.

For more on qualitative research see 'Choosing an approach' and 'Writing a research question' in the Designing a Research Project section.

This guide also sometimes refers to methods used in quantitative approaches, when they are used as part of a mixed methods approach to tackle particular risks to trustworthiness and credibility.

Why do community organisations need to think about trustworthiness?

Research by community organisations can risk not being seen as trustworthy, because it is often undertaken by people who are not academically trained researchers. In addition, research by community organisations can be perceived as

biased, because it is seen as having been carried out solely to further the specific interests of the organisation.

For more on this see the Bias section.

You can counteract these assumptions by showing that your research is trustworthy through the way that you design and carry out your project, and report on your findings.

In addition:

- Trustworthy research **findings** are more likely to be used by others, such as other VCSE organisations, decision makers or commissioners, to influence improvements for communities who are the subjects of research inquiry.
- Trustworthy research processes give research participants confidence and encourage them to feel it is worth being involved in your project.

The Ambition for Ageing Equalities Board found that community organisations have many strengths that help them produce useful research findings. However, low levels of technical knowledge and less research experience can undermine the potential of these[2] strengths.

This guide explains how you can address all these concerns and ensure your research findings are trustworthy by planning your project carefully, applying research techniques and processes correctly, collecting **data** appropriately, and analysing your data rigorously.

See the next section for more on what we mean by 'trustworthiness'.

How to use this guide

We have produced this guide for community organisations undertaking their own research or doing research in partnership with other institutions. It has been informed by consultation with members of the Greater Manchester Third Sector Research Network[i], and by our own experience of carrying out research with community-based organisations over many years.

- Part I comprises three short sections on Trustworthiness, followed by Ethics and Bias, which are crucial considerations in trustworthiness.

- Part II goes through the research process stage by stage, addressing the key issues related to trustworthiness at each stage, and signposting you to further information. Sometimes concepts discussed in one part of the process may also be relevant at another stage. We have included 'Deciding to Undertake Research' as the first step, to support you to think about whether you have the time and resources to produce trustworthy research findings.

[i] https://www.gmcvo.org.uk/Greater-Manchester-Third-Sector-Research-Network

Although we have set the process out as linear, it can be more cyclical, or **iterative**. You may find that as you move through the stages you loop back on yourself, making changes and refining your research process as you go along. For example, you may begin analysis and find you need to collect more data, or you may refine your research question after looking at data collected through early interviews. For this reason we recommend you scan the guide as a whole before you use it as a reference to dip in and out of as you go along with your research project

Resources

The guide includes links to research papers and reports that go into more depth. This helps us to keep the guide short, and make sure that we don't produce a guide that simply repeats what is already out there. Some of these papers may seem quite complex at first, so we recommend exploring the links in more detail after you have done a first read-through of the guide.

We have focused on resources that are freely accessible to community researchers on the internet, and that we have found professionally useful. These include academic articles, published research guides, booklets and guidelines.

We have included resources that come from a range of perspectives and are written for different audiences. This guide aims to provide a relevant context for these resources so that community organisations doing research can make use of them.

The references list at the end lists all the resources included in the guide, alphabetically by author. It is good practice to keep track of all resources you use so you can find them again, and reference them in your project report.

Key resources

We have found a few 'key resources' that cover the whole research process in more depth than we can in this guide. They are written in an accessible style and we think they are essential reading. We recommend that you familiarise yourself with these key resources and refer to them as needed:

- ARVAC's straightforward guide to research for community organisations[3].
- New Philanthropy Capital's guide to qualitative research for charities[4].
- This Open University Good Research Guide to Small Scale Social Research Projects goes into detail about good practice in many aspects of research[5], but does not include participatory approaches.
- We also recommend this Durham University guide to participatory action research[6].

References for all the resources in this guide are listed in order at the end of each section, and also alphabetically in the Reference list at the end. We have not included dates accessed: all resources were accessed in September 2021.

[1] Bell, K. (Ed.) (2013). *Open education sociology dictionary*. [online] s.v. Research. Available at: https://sociologydictionary.org/research More recent editions of this are available to buy online or in print

[2] Wilkinson, S., Bonetree, C. and Berry, H. (2020). *The value of small community-led equalities research projects*. [online] Manchester: Ambition for Ageing. Available at: https://www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/sites/default/files/The%20Value%20of%20small%20Community-led%20Equalites%20Research.pdf

[3] ARVAC, (n.d.). Community Research Toolkit [online] Available at: https://arvac.org.uk/resources/

[4] Mcleod, R. and Noble, J. (2016). *Listen and Learn: How charities can use qualitative research*.[online] London: New Philanthropy Capital. Available at: https://www.thinknpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Listen-and-learn_Qualitative-research_Final1.pdf

[5] Denscombe, M. (2010). *The Good Research Guide for small-scale social research projects*. [online] 4th ed. London: Open University Press. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/file.PostFileLoader.html?id=582a0dbf217e20276533f5a5&assetKey=AS:428404664213506@1479151039119 (NB More recent editions of this are available to buy online or in print)

[6] Pain, R., Whitman, G., Milledge, D and Lune Rivers Trust (n.d.) *Participatory Action Research Toolkit: An introduction to using PAR as an Approach to to Learning, Research and Action* [online] Durham: Durham University & Lune Rivers Trust. Available at: https://www.durham.ac.uk/media/durham-university/research-/research-centres/social-justice-amp-community-action-centre-for/documents/toolkits-guides-and-case-studies/Participatory-Action-Research-Toolkit.pdf

Part 1: Three Core Concepts

1. TRUSTWORTHINESS

What we mean by **'trustworthiness'** in relation to qualitative research

"A trustworthy study is one that is carried out fairly and ethically, and whose findings represent as closely as possible the experiences of the participants" p. 50[ii]

You may be familiar with the concepts of validity, reliability and objectivity, used in **quantitative** research. Trustworthiness in qualitative research is more problematic, and involves understanding some less familiar concepts, such as the **subjectivity** of the researcher.

Academic researchers Yvonne Sessions Lincoln and Egon Guba developed widely used **criteria** for establishing trustworthiness in **qualitative** research. These are supported by **'strategies** for trustworthiness' - key techniques for ways of working, checking, and recording your research at various points in the process. These criteria and strategies help to make sure that qualitative and mixed methods researchers collect enough of the right kind of information, describe it clearly enough, and analyse it appropriately.

This paper is an in-depth discussion of reliability and validity[7] in qualitative research, and puts the emphasis on 'rigour' in the way you carry out research.

How to apply criteria and strategies for trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba's four criteria for trustworthiness apply to the research as a whole, but you are likely to employ the key strategies at certain stages of the process.

The table on the next page may help you think about what the criteria mean, and has some suggestions of which strategies to use to support trustworthiness at different points in your research project.

- Column 1 offers a key question for each of the criteria to help you think critically about your research.
- The resources below the table give fuller explanations of the meanings of the terms in column 2, and examples of how to use these strategies.
- Column 3 refers to the section headings in this guide that relate to each stage of the research process.

[ii] Padgett, D. K. (2012). Choosing the right qualitative approach(es). In Qualitative methods in Social work Research. SAGE Publications, Inc.,

Criteria	Strategies	Research process stage
Credibility How confident can you and your audience be of the *accuracy* of your research findings?	**Triangulation** Collecting or using multiple things of the same kind so that they support the credibility of each other. E.g., data triangulation means collecting the same kind of data at different times, or in different locations, or from different kinds of people.	• Various - different types of triangulation can be used at various stages of the research process.
	Member checking Feeding back to people who were involved as participants to get a sense from them about the accuracy of the data collection, analysis, and findings of the research.	• Throughout • Analysis • Presenting Your Findings (e.g. in reading through draft report) and as part of Dissemination
	Prolonged engagement Taking time to get to know and build trust with participants, collect rich data about them and the context of their lives.	• Data collection
	Persistent observation Picking out and drilling into the most relevant details in the data you are gathering, in order to focus more on them.	• Data Collection
	Peer debrief and support Going over the research plan and interim findings with an impartial person or group.	• Planning • Collecting Data (e.g. when piloting questionnaires) • Presenting Your Findings (e.g. in reading through draft report) • Dissemination
	Negative case analysis Looking for data that don't fit the overall pattern and analysing it to see what you can learn.	• Collecting Data • Analysis
Transferability Can the findings of your research be applied to *other contexts*? Will the research findings still make sense if someone asks the same question of other similar groups of people, in similar situations, or who have similar experiences?	**Thick description** Providing concrete detail about your observations, the participants' experiences, and how, where and when you collected the information – to give a clear picture of the context and help your audience interpret the data and understand how it applies to their own context.	• Collecting Data • Presenting Your Findings
Dependability Are the findings consistent? Would the findings be the same if the study was done again with the same participants in the same context?	**External audit** Having someone outside the research project check that your process has been thorough and rigorous. You need to keep an *audit trail* (below) to help them do this.	• Throughout – make sure to do this before finishing the project to give time to address any issues arising before publishing your findings, if appropriate
Confirmability Are your research findings neutral, and not shaped by researcher bias, motivations or interests? Can you show this?	**Audit trail** A record of the choices and decisions you have made as you went through the research process to help an external auditor check that your process was thorough. It will also help you learn and adapt your project as necessary as you go along. You can create an audit trail by keeping minutes of meetings as well as keeping a research diary.	• Throughout
	Reflexivity This relates to being prepared to reflect on your relationship to the research topic, question and participants, and to your stake in the outcome of the research findings.	• Throughout • Presenting Your Findings (i.e. in the research report) • Dissemination (e.g. when talking to others about the value of your research)

This table was adapted from table 2 of criteria and strategies for trustworthiness in this paper[8].

This book chapter goes into Lincoln and Guba's strategies in more depth[9].

This website covers the strategies or techniques for trustworthiness in more detail[10], with references.

This report has a simple explanation of the criteria for trustworthiness[11], although it uses slightly different terms. The author uses 'valid' to refer to credibility and transferability, 'confirmable' for confirmability'; and 'dependable' for dependability.

Dr. Jaroslaw Kriukow explains the key strategies in this short video[12]

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[7] Cypress, B.S. (2017). Rigor or Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research. *Dimensions of Critical Care Nursing*, [online] 36(4), pp.253–263. Available at: https://journals.lww.com/dccnjournal/FullText/2017/07000/Rigor_or_Reliability_and_Validity_in_Qualitative.6.aspx

[8] Korstjens, I. and Moser, A. (2017). Series: Practical Guidance to Qualitative research. Part 4: Trustworthiness and Publishing. *European Journal of General Practice*, 24(1), pp.120–124.

[9] Treharne, G.J. and Riggs, D.W. (2015). Ensuring Quality in Qualitative Research. Qualitative Research in Clinical and Health Psychology, pp.57–73.

[10] Cohen, D. and Crabtree, B. (2008). *Qualitative Research Guidelines Project –Lincoln and Guba's Evaluative Criteria*. [online] Qualitative Research Guidelines Project. Available at: http://www.qualres.org/HomeLinc-3684.html

[11] Mcleod, R. and Noble, J. (2016). *Listen and Learn: How charities can use qualitative research*.[online] London: New Philanthropy Capital. Available at: https://www.thinknpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Listen-and-learn_Qualitative-research_Final1.pdf

[12] Kriukow, J. (2019). "Validity and reliability in Qualitative research (6 strategies to increase validity"). [online] *YouTube.* Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=B_dEsGCT7CE

2. ETHICS

How is ethics related to trustworthiness?

A trustworthy research process is guided by **ethical principles** that prioritise the wellbeing and safety of everyone involved in the project – including both participants and researchers. Conducting research can put you in a powerful position, and an awareness of ethics can help you use this power responsibly.

For more on power see the Deciding to Undertake Research section.

Community-based organisations are likely to be used to thinking about **ethics**, as they routinely work with vulnerable people, and have to consider participants' wellbeing in all their work. This experience can help you think about the possible impact of your research project on research participants.

The Good Research Guide to Small Scale Social Research Projects includes a practical appendix on ethics based on four principles[13] that researchers should conduct research that

- protects the interests of the participants;
- ensures that participation is voluntary and based on informed consent;
- avoids deception and operates with scientific integrity;
- complies with the laws of the land. (p 331)

This guide for health researchers has a section on ethics in qualitative research that prioritises the wellbeing of participants[14].

This guide from Scotland's Third Sector Research Forum sets out five principles for ethics in community research[15]: need, integrity, accountability, confidentiality, and safety.

This accessible guide to ethics in Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR)[16] goes further: it summarises the ethical challenges in community research as:

> *"…the ways power and control are negotiated, how people's very personal experiences are shared and made public, and how the different needs and expectations of the participants are balanced in the design of the research process. When the research is closely related to people's everyday lives these issues become more significant." (p4)*

It outlines seven ethical principles: mutual respect; equality and inclusion; democratic participation; active learning; making a difference; collective action; and personal integrity. It then provides guidelines on ethical practice in planning, doing and sharing research.

For more on CBPR see the Design section.

You should carry out an ethics assessment at the planning stage, but keep in mind that ethical issues can arise throughout the process.

For more on ethics reviews see the Planning Your Research Project section.

[13] Denscombe, M. (2010). *The Good Research Guide for small-scale social research projects*. 4th ed. London: Open University Press. [online] Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/file.PostFileLoader.html?id=582a0dbf217e20276533f5a5&assetKey=AS:428404664213506@1479151039119 (NB More recent editions of this are available to buy online or in print)

[14] Mack, N., Woodsong, C., MacQueen. K., Guest, G, and Namey, E. (2005). *Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide* FHI360 [online] North Carolina: FHI360. Available at: https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/Qualitative%20Research%20Methods%20-%20A%20Data%20Collector's%20Field%20Guide.pdf

[15] Scotland's Third Sector Research Forum (2021) Guide to Applying Ethical Research Principles [online] Edinburgh: Scotland's Third Sector Research Forum. Available at: https://evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/FINAL-TSRF-guide-to-applying-ethical-research-principles.pdf

[16] Centre for Social Justice and Community Action. (2012). *Community-based participatory research: A guide to ethical principles and practice* [online] Durham: Durham University. Available at: https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/cbpr_ethics_guide_web_november_2012.pdf

3. BIAS

How does bias affect the research process?

The Collins English Dictionary defines bias as "a concern with or interest in one thing more than others[17]." In research different types of bias at different stages of the research process can affect the trustworthiness of the project as a whole, and the credibility of the findings. Bias can also result from a researchers' own background and beliefs, and what participants want to get from the research.

Bias can occur at any stage of the research process, from writing the research question to designing the research, collecting data, analysing data, and drawing conclusions. If you are aware of this you can take action to reduce the risk.

Confirmation bias occurs when research is used to confirm existing beliefs. It can arise at any stage, from writing a biased research question, to ignoring contradictory data during collection or analysis, or drawing conclusions that are not fully supported by the evidence. You can minimise confirmation bias through challenging assumptions, rigorous data collection and analysis techniques, member checking and peer debriefing.

For more on these see the 'Strategies for trustworthiness' table in Trustworthiness section.

Bias at the planning and data collection stages

Selection bias occurs when your **sample** does not reflect the characteristics of the **population** as a whole. It may be less of an issue in qualitative research because you are less likely to generalise from samples in the same way. However you will still need to make sure to include a wide range of viewpoints – and be conscious of why you are including them. One way to include a wider range of perspectives is through continuing to recruit new participants until **saturation** is reached, i.e. until no new views are expressed, but you will need to be clear why you are continuing to seek new viewpoints.

For more on sampling see the Collecting Data section.

Bias can also come about as a result of the way you recruit participants. You need to be careful that how you communicate, which channels you use, and where you recruit does not shape the research findings. For example, when evaluating a project you should recruit participants at the start of the project and try to follow up on anyone who disengages. If you only interview service users at the end of the project you are evaluating your research findings risk being biased in favour of people who found the project useful, because they stayed engaged with it. This is called **survivor bias**. It is also important to acknowledge recruitment limitations, such as the failure to speak to disengaged people. For more detail, see the chapters on surveys and

sampling, and experimental design[18] in The Good Research Guide to Small Scale Social Research Projects. The channels you use for recruitment can also introduce bias, for example using digital surveys may exclude individuals and groups of people who don't have access to technology to participate.

Participants themselves can also introduce bias into a research process.

- **Observation bias** acknowledges that participants in observational studies change their behaviour because they are being observed. Using strategies which build trust and rapport, such as prolonged engagement, can help to reduce the risk of this.
- **Acquiescence bias** describes the tendency of participants to agree with statements offered by researchers.
- **Social desirability bias** describes the way that participants may offer answers which they think will be more acceptable to the researcher, especially for sensitive topics. Piloting, i.e. testing out questionnaire and interview questions, or using triangulation of other methods can reduce the risk of these.

For more on prolonged engagement and triangulation see 'Strategies for trustworthiness' table in the Trustworthiness section.

Bias at the analysis stage

It is also possible for bias to undermine research findings through the way that researchers analyse data and draw conclusions from what they observe. One common mistake is to assume **causation**, i.e. that one factor has led to another associated factor. This can lead to mistaken conclusions, and reduce the reliability of your findings and the overall credibility of your research. Be careful to think about alternative explanations for associations between factors. You can do this through peer-analysis and calling on colleagues from different organisations or sectors to analyse your data. It is rare for **qualitative** research to lead to conclusions about chains of causation; you are more likely to be able to make such claims in **quantitative** research when a study has been designed to investigate whether particular factors have given rise to particular outcomes or had particular effects.

For more on quantitative vs qualitative research see 'Writing a research question' in the Designing section.

Be careful also not to overclaim the importance of your findings, or make unfounded claims about how generalisable they are. You can avoid this by always acknowledging that your data is specific to the context within which you collected it.

An example:

A study finds that people who visit green spaces more frequently report better mental health than those who don't. It is tempting to draw the conclusion that visiting green spaces improves people's mental health. But there could be alternative explanations. People with better mental health may be more able to leave the house to visit green spaces – so the causation may be the opposite to your initial conclusion. Alternatively, there may be other factors at play. Poverty is linked to worse mental health, and areas of poor housing have less access to green space. So visiting green spaces and mental health may not have any causal connection at all – but be linked by a third factor of financial resources. Unless you have evidence otherwise (for example data from interviews where people make explicit connections between visiting green spaces improving their mental health) you can only draw the conclusion that visiting green spaces is *associated* with better mental health, but not that it *causes* better mental health.

It is impossible to completely avoid bias in the research process. Sometimes it is out of your control, for example if you have to do walking interviews in different weather conditions. Make sure when you write up your study that you are transparent and acknowledge any possible bias and the affect it may have had on your findings. This is both more ethical, and also increases credibility and identifies where further research may be needed. This resource goes further into the effect of different types of bias[19] on a research project (pages 9 and 38).

For more on writing up your study see 'Writing a research report' in the Presenting Your Findings section.

Reflexivity

Qualitative researchers understand that people see the world differently from each other, and this includes themselves. They reflect on and acknowledge how their identity and position may impact on the research, through **reflexivity.**

For more on this see the 'Strategies for Trustworthiness' table in the Trustworthiness section, and 'Reflecting on the research process' in the Presenting Your Findings section.

Bias and participatory research

Participatory research approaches are particularly vulnerable to accusations of bias because they involve people who have a direct interest in the research outcomes. Advocates of participatory research approaches argue that they redress the bias inherent in non-participatory and traditional research approaches by **critiquing** existing systems and giving unheard people the opportunity to amplify their voices. However, they also acknowledge that it is especially important to demonstrate the credibility of participatory research to counter the perception that it may be biased.

This report discusses the assumption of bias as one of the barriers in service user controlled research[20]

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[17] *Collins English Dictionary*.(n.d.) [online] s.v. Bias Available at: https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/bias

[18] Denscombe, M. (2010). *The Good Research Guide for small-scale social research projects*. [online] 4th ed. London: Open University Press. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/file.PostFileLoader.html?id=582a0dbf217e20276533f5a5&assetKey=AS:428404664213506@1479151039119

[19] Moser, C. and Vu, U. (eds.), (2017). *What researchers mean by…: Easy-to-understand definitions of common research terms in the health and social sciences*. [online] Ontario: Institute for Work and Health Available at: https://www.iwh.on.ca/sites/iwh/files/iwh/tools/what_researchers_mean_by_2017.pdf

[20] Turner, M. and Beresford, P., (2005). *User Controlled Research: Its meanings and potential*. [online] Eastleigh: Involve Available at: https://www.invo.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/documents/UserConRpt081205.pdf

Part II: Stages of the Research Process

1. DECIDING TO UNDERTAKE RESEARCH

Why do community organisations undertake research?

Many community organisations undertake their own research or get involved in research projects led by others – for example, statutory bodies such as health or social care providers, other VCSE organisations (as with the Ageing Equally? projects supported by Ambition for Ageing[iii]), or academic institutions. Reasons to get involved in research include:

- To better understand the community and people you support.
- To investigate potential services or areas of work to develop.
- To test new ways of working.
- To assess or evaluate the performance of your organisation or a project.
- Because your organisation is required to assess the impact of its work by a funder.
- To develop relationships and partnerships with other organisations through undertaking research together.

This list includes many more reasons to undertake research[21], and frames them as research questions.

Whatever the reasons you decide to embark on a research project it is important to think about whether it is needed, or whether the evidence you hope to uncover is already out there. You can find this out by conducting a **literature review**.

For more on literature reviews see 'Focusing on the research topic' in the Designing a Research Project section

This guide to 'Understanding Impact' can help you think about how to undertake rigorous and useful evaluation[22]. This Better Evaluation blog explains the differences and relationship between evaluation and research[23].

You should begin a research project with an open mind and be prepared to be surprised by your conclusions. Your research findings may show a need for a service/organisation, demonstrate the success of a project, or show how service users benefitted from a project. But these should not be the starting point for a piece of research as they contain inbuilt assumptions and could lead to biased conclusions.

For more on conclusions see the Analysis section, also see the Bias section.

[iii] See https://www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/ageingequally for more on these.

Is it worth it?

Research is time consuming, costly, and requires learning new skills. There are many good reasons to do research, but it is important to think about whether it is worth it to your organisation and to the people you support. Think about whether your organisation has or can access enough capacity and resources. If you are going into partnership with others, think about how much control or influence over decision making you will have. The evaluation of Ambition for Ageing's Ageing Equally? programme[iv] recommends that community organisations consider how both the knowledge produced and the process of being involved in a research project might benefit the organisation, the individuals involved, and the wider community.

How are issues of power relevant to research design?

The idea for a piece of research could be initiated within an organisation, in response to a call for research, or from a university or statutory body that wants to partner with a community-based organisation. Each of these different starting points has different implications for who has control over the project, who can make decisions about it, and how much room there is for flexibility in the project. You should also consider the power relationship between the researchers and the participants. How much power participants can have in decisions about the research question, approach and methods, and the analysis is another way of looking at power relationships in research design.

ARVAC's guide describes a spectrum of participation[24] ranging from informing, through consulting, involving and collaborating, to empowering and also has guidance on working with universities.

Working with academic partners

Universities sometimes approach community organisations for their role as gatekeepers to their community, giving access to its members or service users as potential research participants. Being a named research partner as part of an academic bid for funding can add legitimacy and trustworthiness to the project.

If your organisation is approached, think about whether the proposal meets your ethical requirements, and what level of participation is offered to you and your members. Ask "who benefits?" and think about the resource implications, as getting involved in research can be time-consuming. Be clear on whether your involvement, and that of the people you work with, is remunerated appropriately and costed into any research funding that the university has. Include the costs of staffing, venue hire, catering, transport, child-care and incentives. This resource on co-inquiry[25] focuses on relationships between academic and community partners.

This resource includes useful guidance on creating a policy about promoting external research opportunities[26] to community members.

[iv] See https://www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/value for the full evaluation and recommendations

[21] ARVAC, (n.d.). *Community Research Toolkit: Why Do Community Research?* [online] https://arvac.org.uk/community-research-toolkit/why-do-community-research/

[22] Noble, J., O'Flynn, P. and Kazimirski, A.(2020). *Understanding Impact: Using your theory of change to develop a measurement and evaluation framework* [online] London: New Philanthropy Capital. Available at: https://www.thinknpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Understanding-Impact-.pdf

[23] Rogers, P., (2014). *Week 19: Ways of framing the difference between research and evaluation*. Better Evaluation. [online] Available at: https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/blog/framing_the_difference_between_research_and_evaluation

[24] ARVAC, (n.d.). *Community Research Toolkit: Who is Doing the Research?* [online] https://arvac.org.uk/community-research-toolkit/who-is-doing-the-research/

[25] Beacon North East (n.d.)*Co-inquiry Toolkit: Community-university participatory research partnerships; co-inquiry and related approaches*. [online] Durham: Beacon North East Available at: https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/beacon/CoinquiryTookitFINAL.pdf

[26] Twocan Associates.co.uk. (2008). *Getting it right for service users and carers, Getting it right for research: How to decide whether to help researchers find people to take part in research, guidance for researchers working in health charities*. [online] Hove: TwoCan Associates. Available at: http://www.twocanassociates.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/WellcomeGuideFINAL.pdf

2. DESIGNING A RESEARCH PROJECT

Embedding trustworthiness at the design stage

The design stage is where you lay the foundations for your study, embedding trustworthiness from the start. This means thinking about the approach you are taking, focusing in on your topic, and defining the research question.

What is the worldview underpinning your research enquiry?

Community research is often about understanding people's lives, and it frequently borrows approaches from social science disciplines such as **sociology**. You don't need to have a thorough knowledge of sociology, but if you understand why you are taking a certain approach it is easier to explain the decisions you make, and this can increase the credibility of your research design. All research projects, investigations and enquiries are based on particular beliefs about how knowledge is formed and shared. These are expressed in frameworks called **paradigms**. These two paradigms are commonly used as a basis for research:

- **Positivism** is the belief that society is ordered and can be understood **empirically**, i.e. through observation and experiment. Positivists argue that 'social facts' exist in the world and shape individual actions. Positivist studies, like scientific studies, start with a theory or **hypothesis** and test this by collecting and analysing data. This is called deductive research. Reality is interpreted through 'hypothesis testing'. Positivists tend to use more quantitative methods.

- **Interpretivism** is the belief that there is no single social reality and the world must be understood through the beliefs, motives and actions of individuals in their specific social context. Interpretivists argue that it is the meanings that individuals attach to their actions or experiences that is important. Interpretivist studies start by collecting data and aim to derive a theory about the phenomenon or research topic from analysing the observed data. This is called **inductive research**. Reality is interpreted through **"sense making"**. Interpretivists tend to use more qualitative methods.

You can read more about research paradigms on this website[27] if you are interested, though it is quite technical.

This video explains the research paradigms and how they link to different ways of understanding the world and different kinds of knowledge.

There are many specialist sociological terms - our glossary includes some sociology definitions from this website[28].

Choosing your research approach

There is a variety of qualitative approaches or designs that suit different types of questions.

Common approaches include ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory and case studies. Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is also one of these approaches. This article summarises the different approaches[29], and explores how they relate to different research questions. This guide to good social science research clearly explains the different approaches[30], when to use each one, and the pros and cons for each. However it doesn't include CBPR or other participatory approaches.

You don't have to relate your research to a specific approach to make it trustworthy, and it is better not to do this if you don't have a full enough understanding of them. The most important thing is to be clear on your research question and to make sure that the methods you propose will enable you to answer the question.

Community Based Participatory Research

Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) involves community members as equal partners with professional researchers. CBPR aims to empower participants and their community, as one of the outcomes of the project. CBPR is sometimes described as **'emancipatory'**, because community members are empowered by being involved in it.

Even using CBPR to carry out research puts your organisation in a position of power relative to the research participants. In addition, in CBPR community members act as researchers, contributing to power differentials between members of the community, so it is still important to think about the ethical implications described in the Ethics section. There may also be specific risks when community members act as researchers, for example in ensuring participant confidentiality within the community.

This community toolbox outlines the advantages of CBPR[31] and describes several levels of participation in research. This toolkit gives a clear description of participatory research methodology[32].

Focusing on the research topic

Focusing in on your research topic will help you to define your research question. You can do this by conducting a **literature review** to identify what is already known about your research topic, current debates, and knowledge gaps. Through the literature review you may also find out about different research approaches and methods in your field. Reviewing the literature will help make your research more trustworthy through clarifying the rationale for the research; providing guidance on its design; and putting your research into context. It is an iterative process that you can return to as themes emerge from your research.

If you are working with an academic partner they may lead on the literature review, but there are online resources to help you do this yourself. Google scholar is a good starting point[33] for finding academic literature – simply search "Google scholar" then enter your search terms. You can often request an academic paper that is not open access from the author. You can also use the Open Access Button to find or request open access versions[34] of research papers.

You can also use general Google searches to find informative **grey literature**, such as booklets and guidelines produced by third sector organisations. This information sheet provides a good guide to finding and assessing grey literature[35].

Keep a list of everything you read, in case you want to return to it or refer to it in any reports. You can set up a simple spreadsheet, or use reference management software which automatically creates a **bibliography** such as Jabref[36] or one of these other reference management programs[37]. If you don't use one of these programmes you can get help creating references in your chosen style using an online **citation** generator such as "MyBib[38]", **Harvard referencing style** is a common style used in the UK.

At this stage it is also useful to think about the intended audiences for the research, and what they will be interested in too.

For more on this see the Dissemination section.

Writing a research question

When you have crystallised the focus of your research, you are ready to identify and clarify your research question/s. It is really important to get the initial research question/s right, to generate the type of knowledge that you're interested in, and to strengthen the findings, recommendations, claims and outcomes of the research.

Quantitative research usually sets out to prove or disprove a hypothesis, and often uses closed questions, that will produce a yes or no answer, e.g. "Does having access to the internet reduce social isolation?".

Qualitative research generally uses open questions, as in the table below. In qualitative research you may review the question and develop it as you find out more about the topic of the enquiry from the research participants. In participatory research the research question is usually co-produced with members of the community who are taking part in the research.

Types of qualitative research and questions:

Type of research	Purpose	Common question words
Exploratory	Scopes out what's happening in little understood situations and generates ideas for future research	What
Descriptive	Gives an accurate profile of people, events, situations	What, where, who
Explanatory	Explains the causes of situations (evaluative) or patterns and relationships	Why, how, what is the role / relationship / cause / impact / effect
Emancipatory	Creates opportunities for social action (action research) and / or addresses power imbalances (critical research)	What effect / impact / change Any open questions

Adapted from box 5 (p.49) in this paper[39].

This online book chapter looks at how different types of research influence the research question[40].

Once you have drafted a question you can use the FINER criteria to check it is sound: **F**easible, **I**nteresting, **N**ovel, **E**thical and **R**elevant. You can read more about the FINER criteria, the PICOT framework and other useful resources[41] for developing a research question in this blog.

For more on the differences between qualitative and quantitative research, see 'Writing a research question' in the Designing section.

Also see ARVAC's guide for an explanation of differences between qualitative and quantitative[42] studies.

These examples illustrate how research questions can be developed:

You want to find out how a new therapy service has helped some clients. Your initial thought might be "How did our therapy service benefit clients?" but this is biased because it assumes positive changes. Amending the question to "Did our therapy service benefit clients?" creates a closed question, which again won't generate the knowledge you want. Changing the question to "What impact did our therapy service have on clients?" may be an improvement, but leads to questions about what types of impact you're looking for, and who is measuring that impact. This could lead you to look at the aims of the service and amend the question to be more specific, for example. "How did clients view the impact of our therapy service on their lives?"

Ambition for Ageing wanted to find out more from under researched marginalised communities about what was important to them about ageing in their localities. They devised a broad exploratory research question to call for research proposals that was flexible enough to meet the interests of individual community organisations, but which also reflected the approach of the programme to focus on ageing in place and positive assets: "What makes a good place to grow older for people who belong to minority communities?"

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3. PLANNING YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT

Planning for credible findings

The planning stage of a research project is when you decide on which research methods you will use, who will do the data collection, how you will recruit participants and how many you will need, and how you will ensure that the fieldwork is done ethically. You can use the strategies for trustworthiness and the principles outlined in this NPC guide[43] to guide your planning.

See the sections in Part one on Trustworthiness, Ethics and Bias.

Conducting an ethics review

You should start thinking about ethics right from the start of planning your project, by conducting an ethics review. This is a type of risk assessment for a research project; it is a way of reviewing the plan and all the stages of the research to ensure that the project does not cause any harm to anybody and that the study produces appropriate and proportionate good-quality data. The ethics review should scrutinise all aspects and every stage of the project for potential risks, and mitigate them as far as possible. Doing the ethics review at this early stage provides you with a good opportunity to think through the practicalities of actually delivering the research project in detail.

For more on specific issues at different stages see the sections on Collecting Data and Analysis.

Some researchers argue that a traditional rules-based code of ethics does not fit well with CBPR, which requires greater consideration of relationships. This paper looks at some ethical challenges in CBPR[44].

Universities must carry out an ethics review of any research project in which they are involved, for legal reasons. They have ethics committees to review applications from researchers.

Informed consent

Everyone who participates in your research project must give their informed consent to taking part. This means you must:

1. Ensure that you have given each participant enough information about what participation entails, why you are collecting data from them and how you will use it and take care of it.
2. Record their consent, usually by asking them to sign a consent form, although you may decide it is acceptable to record their verbal consent, as is sometimes the case in oral history projects.

3. Inform participants about the fact that their participation is voluntary and their right to withdraw from the research project.
4. Provide participants with the details of someone (not the researcher) they can contact if they are not satisfied with how they experienced participation.

Who to involve in the research project?

The planning stage is when you work out who are the **stakeholders** of your research project, and decide who will be involved in the project and what their role will be. Stakeholders include anyone who may have an interest in your research – whether or not they are directly involved in the project. Of the people directly involved, who will you involve at which stages of the project - planning, collecting data, and analysis?

In participatory approaches such as CBPR, participants and other stakeholders are involved throughout. This can enhance the project's credibility and make the findings more relevant to certain audiences, because it shows that you have engaged with people who are directly affected by your research topic.

Choosing research methods

This is the point in the research process to choose the appropriate research methods and tools. Some research methods are more resource intensive than others – for example, surveys and interviews may take a lot of staff or volunteer time to arrange and carry out, and can produce a lot of data to analyse. Think about the resources available to you to when you are choosing your research methods.

For more on these issues see the sections and resources on Collecting Data and on Analysis

You also need to think about how easy it will be to use them with your research participants. Look at your research project from the perspective of potential participants. What barriers might they experience? How can you make their involvement more enjoyable? What will they get out of participating? How are you comfortable engaging and communicating with participants? What interpersonal skills do you have that could help? Your choice of methods will also affect how many people you need to recruit.

For more on this see 'How many participants do you need?' and 'How do you involve the right participants?' below.

Choosing more than one research method can increase the trustworthiness of the research overall, and the credibility of your findings, this is known as **triangulation of methods**. You may be familiar with the most popular research methods in qualitative research including interviews, surveys and focus groups.

Some CBPR will involve the participants themselves in selecting the methods. There are many creative methods that may be more interesting to both participants and researchers; all methods produce data that requires analysing, so consider what

skills and tools you may need to analyse can be carried out when selecting your methods.

For more on triangulation see the 'Strategies for trustworthiness' table in the Trustworthiness section.

This is a good overview of available methods[45] by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies, this excellent field guide has useful checklists for various methods[46].

This website is a good depository of presentations on qualitative methods[47].

This collection of working papers focusing on methods[48] is part of the Morgan Centre for Everyday Lives.

How many participants do you need?

The type of methods you use and the number of respondents you collect data from will affect how much time, skills and money you need. To work out how many participants you need to recruit, you will have to balance how much data you need to collect, process and analyse, against how much capacity you have to do the work.

Every person who participates in your study gives their time in the hope that they are contributing to better research results, so it is unethical to collect large amounts of data if you don't have enough capacity to include it in your analysis. To avoid this you will need to factor in the implications for time, skills and money of your choices of research methods and sample size.

Research by community organisations often involves collecting data from participants whose first language isn't English. If this is the case for your project, you will also need to consider the financial and staffing resources you may need for translation and interpretation – both when collecting data from interviewees, and when analysing it.

In qualitative research, you need to select your sample carefully and systematically in order to generate sets of data that can be compared in ways that speak to different aspects of your research question. Sample size is not as relevant in qualitative research as it is in quantitative research, where you need a large sample for meaningful statistical analysis.

Qualitative research data tends to illuminate more depth and breadth of an experience or topic from a smaller number of participants. Quantitative research data has larger numbers of participants and will often make more generalised claims. This article highlights how you can use qualitative research to look at a smaller number of **cases** in more detail[49], illuminating your research topic from different angles or viewpoints.

This article includes a useful guide to sample size[50] in qualitative studies This blog outlines considerations for choosing a sample size for basic surveys[51] and gives suggestions for further reading.

How do you involve the right participants?

Who you recruit and how you do it will affect the information you are able to collect. Think about what communications channels you have access to, and how these affect who you can reach. Thinking about these questions will also help you guard against introducing bias into your study through participant recruitment.

For more on this see the Bias section.

It can be difficult to recruit research participants, and no study is perfect. You should openly acknowledge any shortcomings of your sampling, and the possible effects on the data, to lessen the risk of undermining the credibility of your research. As at every stage of the research process, always make sure you understand why you took certain decisions and be ready to reflect on the implications.

Different sampling strategies

There are a number of different sampling strategies, that each suit different research questions and populations. If you are studying a particular known population, such as a list of service users, you can use **probability** sampling to pick participants at random from this list. If you are researching phenomena affecting a wider population, you will need to find another **non-probability** method for selecting participants. These methods include:

- **Quota sampling** – selecting participants in specific proportions on the basis of their characteristics, e.g. an equal number of parents and non-parents.
- **Purposive (or purposeful) sampling** – selecting participants who can provide in-depth and detailed information about the research topic.
- **Convenience sampling** – engaging only with people to whom you already have access.
- **Snowball sampling** – recruiting by asking participants you know to refer you on to people with similar experiences.

In addition to these there are also other sampling[52] techniques.

In all types of sampling you should consider how to ensure that marginalised people, within the population you are studying, are well represented to hear a diversity of voices and to amplify the voices of those often missed in research.

Sometimes you may need to recruit new participants during data collection, for example if you need to better understand unexpected new issues that arise. You could decide to continue to collect data until you have reached **saturation** – i.e. when no new points are being raised by participants.

This paper has a good discussion of qualitative sampling[53], and different sampling strategies. There is a useful short section on sampling in this document[54] (p18).

Chapter 1 of the Good Research Guide to Small Scale Social Research Projects has advice on choosing and implementing a sampling strategy[55], including sample size.

Think about how you will share the research findings

The planning stage is a good time to start to think about how you will eventually share your research findings, although you may not make a detailed dissemination plan until later.

For more on this, see the Dissemination section.

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4. COLLECTING DATA

Data Collection and credibility

This stage, also known as **fieldwork**, is often the first thing people think about when they hear the word 'research'. Fieldwork centres around collecting data using the research methods you chose at the planning stage. It is important to follow best practice in your chosen research methods, as the credibility of your results will depend on the integrity of your fieldwork.

Each method carries specific risks for bias. For example, if you use research methods that rely on collecting data through asking people questions, e.g. in surveys, interviews or focus groups, you need to ensure your questions are unbiased and unambiguous. You could mitigate this risk by testing your **research tools** such as creating a pilot questionnaire with a small group of people prior to the fieldwork starting, and / or through asking peers to comment.

For more on this, see the Bias section.

You can improve the trustworthiness of your results by collecting data in more than one way, i.e. through triangulation of methods. Different research methods can complement each other by exploring the research topic from a slightly different angle and allowing you to compare the different types of data you collect. Note that the analysis will be more complex if you use more than one data collection method, so you need to make sure you have enough resources for this.

For more on triangulation see the 'Strategies for trustworthiness' table in the Trustworthiness section.

The guidance for research methods in the Good Research Guide to Small Scale Social Research Projects includes helpful information about data collection for each[56].

You can find comprehensive guidance on data collection issues relevant to different methods in the repository of toolkits for creative research methods[57] at the Morgan Centre for Everyday Lives.

Further resources on research methods are listed in 'Choosing research methods' in the Planning section.

Data Quality

It is important to think about how you will preserve the quality of the data you have collected, in order to make your research process trustworthy. Qualitative research projects can take place over long periods of time and involve collecting different types of data. You need to ensure the data you collect is recorded, processed and stored in an organised way, that keeps it safe and in good condition. This will enable

you or anyone else to go back to it at a later date and understand what was collected, how it was collected, who from, when, and why.

You need to ensure that raw data, i.e. the knowledge collected from participants, is collected, processed and stored in a way that preserves all the information, including **metadata** (descriptions of the data) that will be necessary for analysis. It should be labelled in a way that anonymises the participants. This guide has a good chapter on data management and storage[58].

Spending time preparing data for storage also provides an opportunity to reflect on what you gathered. This can help you to identify new lines of inquiry, build a gradual understanding of what the research is uncovering, and formulate emerging findings.

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5. ANALYSIS

How to ensure your analysis is trustworthy

The aim of data analysis is to describe, interpret or explain what the data you have collected tells you about your research question. Rigorous and thorough data analysis will help to ensure that your findings are seen as credible, and will prevent bias creeping in as a result of you getting lost in the detail of the data. This requires that you follow a systematic, structured process of analysis that deals with the data as a whole, in all its complexity. You need to provide clear links between the data you have collected, the conclusions you draw, and your research questions.

This process of analysing qualitative data is likely to be complex and you may have to go through your data, for example interview transcripts, in detail, many times in order to identify and draw out all the relevant information and themes it contains. This can involve processes of assigning codes to data, sorting data, and identifying the themes that emerge. You can do this manually, for example by setting up tables in Word documents or Excel, using Post-it notes, or using tools such as databases with which you are already familiar. Some researchers use specific software packages to analyse qualitative data such as NVivo. These are costly and require additional skills and training to be able to use them effectively.

The important thing is to be systematic and document your process and choices. This means you will be able to explain to others how you processed the data to arrive at your conclusions, so they can judge for themselves whether your conclusions are trustworthy. All of this takes time - we have found that community groups often underestimate how long and how much expertise it takes to fully analyse data.

The ARVAC community research toolkit has a chapter on data analysis that discusses technical issues[59], and this research paper has a detailed systematic description of how to do participatory data analysis[60].

The chapter on qualitative analysis in the Good Research Guide to Small Scale Social Research Projects addresses how to use the criteria and strategies for trustworthiness to verify research findings[61], with checklists for both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Description versus interpretation

Descriptive analysis is usually more suitable for questions that are about 'What...?', rather than 'Why...?' or 'How...?'. For example, you may want to find out what a certain phenomenon looks like in practice, or about the range of phenomena relating to a particular theme. You can also use descriptive analysis to generate statistics from survey data, simply summarising what the survey found without making any claims about the statistical relevance or wider applicability of your findings.

Interpretive analysis aims to answer 'So what?' questions and dig deeper to make sense of what you have been told by participants. Are there differences in the

information collected from different participants? Can you see any patterns or contradictions in the data? What do these tell you about the issues you set out to explore? Reflecting on these questions will show that you have thought about your data and how it helps you answer your initial research questions.

In the Good Research Guide to Small Scale Social Research Projects the introduction to the analysis section expands on the differences between description, interpretation and explanation[62].

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[62] Ibid.

6. PRESENTING YOUR FINDINGS

Writing a research report

You can present research findings in many ways, depending on the study's aims, methods and intended audience. Whichever way you present the research you will usually produce of a research report.

A research report has two purposes: to tell others about what your research found, and to demonstrate how the findings of your research are trustworthy. It does this by providing an opportunity for **reflexivity** – an important aspect of **confirmability** – and by showing enough information about the context to allow readers to make judgments about potential **transferability** of research findings.

For more on these see the table on Strategies for trustworthiness in the Trustworthiness section.

The report should include a methodology section describing your overall research design, and giving demographic and contextual details of your participants or other subjects of your research. This allows you to reflect on the research process, and enhances the audience's understanding of where the data came from.

When you write up your research you will have to edit what you have found, which can create a risk of introducing bias. It may be tempting to gloss over difficulties in the project, but the report will be more trustworthy if you are transparent about any problems, potential biases, or other limitations to the research.

For more on this see the Ethics and Bias sections.

There is a standard structure for research reports, which allows readers to follow the process of a research study and see how the findings lead to the conclusions. You may also want to make recommendations for future action or further research. If you choose not to follow this structure you need to clearly explain your choice or risk not being taken seriously.

Your research report should also acknowledge the main stakeholders, thank funders and participants, and include a references list of the key works mentioned throughout it. The references list following the Appendix of this guide is an example of how to do this. Finally, don't forget to put the year of publication on your report, to make it more useful to other researchers. If you are publishing it online you can also embed the full citation for the report as metadata, so that other researchers can cite it accurately.

This webpage explains how to add metadata in Word that you can save in PDF format and has a reminder to create filenames that use underscores to replace spaces between words[63].

The ARVAC guide lists some ways of presenting findings and outlines a research report structure[64].

The Open University's Good Research Guide chapter on Writing up the research explains the conventional structure for reporting academic research[65], and offers ideas on how to justify your choice of methods.

A draft report is a good opportunity to employ member checking and peer debriefing as strategies to improve trustworthiness. Sharing a draft report with others is also a way to start to disseminate your findings.

For more on this see the Dissemination section.

Reflecting on the research process

In community research, researchers often study topics that they themselves have a stake in, and the information collected may relate to the researchers' own lives. The relationship of the researcher to the topic and participants – called **researcher positionality** - influences what a researcher notices and how they interpret what they find. To reduce the risk of bias and increase trustworthiness of their findings, researchers need to be aware of their stake in the findings, and demonstrate this.

You also need to reflect on how the study went - your success or otherwise in recruiting participants and collecting data, the quality of the data, and whether you chose the right methods. This will allow you to apply the learning to any follow up research that you undertake. Openly acknowledging these reflections in your report shows you have taken them into account during analysis and will enable your readers to put your conclusions into context.

How to make your conclusions credible and your recommendations sound

Your conclusions answer the research questions in light of the evidence you have gathered and presented. They should clearly connect to your findings and come directly from your analysis so that the reader can trace your conclusions directly back to the evidence you have collected.

Any recommendations for further action should be based on the conclusions. Recommendations should explain to different **stakeholders** what you think they should do in light of the conclusion/s you have reached. This website has some guidance on how to write good recommendations[66].

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[63] Accessible Document Solutions (2017). *How to Add Metadata to Your PDF Files*. [online] Accessible Document Solutions. Available at: https://accessible-docs.com/pdf-metadata/

[64] ARVAC (n.d.). *Final Stages – ARVAC*. [online] Community Research Toolkit. Available at: https://arvac.org.uk/community-research-toolkit/final-stages/

[65] Denscombe, M. (2010). *The Good Research Guide for small-scale social research projects*. 4th ed. London: Open University Press. [online] Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/file.PostFileLoader.html?id=582a0dbf217e20276533f5a5&assetKey=AS:428404664213506@1479151039119%20

[66] Commonwealth of Learning (n.d.). *Report recommendations*. [online] colelearning.net. Available at: http://colelearning.net/who/module3/page43.html

7. DISSEMINATION

Sharing your research findings to influence change

The purpose of disseminating research is to get your findings to the people who can use them. This may simply mean sharing the report you have written, but depending on who you want to influence it may be appropriate to disseminate your findings in other ways. You may have an audience in mind before you start the research, but new ones might also emerge as you develop recommendations.

When planning your research write a dissemination plan identifying the key purpose and messages for key stakeholders. As the project progresses, review the plan and add detail. The dissemination plan should answer these questions:

- **Why:** What is the purpose of dissemination? –For example, to raise awareness and let others know what you are doing; to inform and educate the community; to engage with the wider community and get input or feedback on your work; to promote or 'sell' your research findings.
- **To whom**: Which audiences are you talking to? Do a stakeholder analysis to identify your internal audiences, external audiences including policy makers and others who could influence change with your research findings, and who in the wider community may have an interest.
- **What:** What are the key messages you want to get out there? Keep these simple and try to use the language of each target audience. Take a look at some of Ambition for Ageing's briefing papers[67] for examples of how to write key messages.
- **How:** What methods will you use for dissemination to different audiences? These typically include circulating a report, sending out press releases, writing posts and making content for social media, giving conference presentations – and for academic studies, preparing journal articles. Depending on your audiences and research methods you could consider other activities such as workshops, websites, exhibitions and performances.
- **Accessibility**: How will you reduce barriers to accessing your research findings? Make sure that target audiences can access your research and your dissemination methods are accessible. For example, an Easy Read version or a simpler version of your research report would be helpful for people with learning difficulties, people who find reading difficult, and people who use English as a second language. Ambition for Ageing's Equalities Board did this for the Ageing Equally? research projects it supported.[v]
- **When:** What is the schedule for dissemination activities? For example, you will likely do awareness raising during the project, when carrying out peer debriefing, and organising community engagement activities. Final promotion of findings and recommendations will come at the end of the project.

[v] See ambitionforageing.org.uk/ageingequally and ambitionforageing.org.uk/equalities-board-research-projects-201718

This list has been adapted and updated from this factsheet on research dissemination[68].

This factsheet has a useful section on developing messages for different audiences[69].

Involving stakeholders in dissemination

Although disseminating findings happens at the end of the project, you can enhance your stakeholders' trust in your research by sharing aspects of your work as you go along.

Participants are key stakeholders in community research, and involving them in dissemination is a way of treating them ethically and closing the **feedback loop**. It is important for them to know about your key messages and recommended actions, so that they can see what difference the research could make, and help to hold people to account to implement these actions.

You can also share your initial findings with a few people before you publish it more widely – ideally with colleagues and others who know your research topic well. This is known as 'peer debriefing and support'.

For more on member checking and peer debriefing see 'Strategies for trustworthiness' in the Trustworthiness section.

[67] Ambition for Ageing (n.d.). *Resources | ambitionforageing.org.uk*. [online] www.ambitionforageing.org.uk. Available at: https://www.ambitionforageing.org.uk/resources

[68]European Commission (n.d.). *Managing projects factsheet 6: Elaborating a Dissemination Plan*. [online] European Commission. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/chafea/health/beneficiaries-corner/documents/factsheet-06.pdf

[69] Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (2014). *Quick-Start Guide to Dissemination for Practice-Based Research Networks*. [online] Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Available at: https://pbrn.ahrq.gov/sites/default/files/AHRQ%20PBRN%20Dissemination%20QuickStart%20Guide_0.pdf

AND FINALLY…

Getting on with it!

So what now? If you have read all the way through this guide, you are ready now to use it as a reference. As you work through your project, refer to the relevant section in this guide, the key resources listed at the start, and any relevant resources in each section. You may also find it helpful to connect with other community organisations doing and getting involved in research. Look for a forum or voluntary sector umbrella organisation in your area. In Greater Manchester you can join the Greater Manchester Third Sector Research Network[vi], hosted by GMCVO.

Community organisations get involved in research because they want to bring about change through tapping in to the knowledge held by communities. We know that undertaking a research project is a big commitment of time and effort, and making sure your findings are credible and trustworthy requires skill. We hope that this guide has encouraged you to feel you can do it well, and produce valuable, useful new knowledge that will help to change things for the better for your communities.

[vi] https://www.gmcvo.org.uk/Greater-Manchester-Third-Sector-Research-Network

Appendix

Checklist of key things to think about to embed trustworthiness at each stage of the research process:

At each of the stages below think about the specific points listed, and also:

- How to include strategies for trustworthiness (see Trustworthiness p.9)
- What ethical issues you need to consider (see Ethics p.12)
- How to reduce or mitigate the risk of bias (see Bias p.14)

Deciding (p.18)

- Why undertake research
- Whether it is worth it – balancing what you want from the process against the time, cost and your ability to carry it out
- How much power, influence and control you have over decision making and design

Designing (p.21)

- What paradigm your enquiry is based in (optional)
- Which research approach to use
- Whether to use a participatory approach and why
- Carrying out a review of existing knowledge about your research topic or a literature review
- What the audience for your research might be interested in
- How to formulate your research question to collect the information you need

Planning (p.26)

- Carrying out an ethics review
- Who your stakeholders are and who to involve at different stages of the process
- Which research methods to use
- How many participants you need
- How to recruit the right participants
- Which sampling strategies to use

Collecting data (p.31)

- How to implement your research methods, including testing them
- How to preserve the quality of the data you collect

Glossary

This is a list of terms used in this guide. The ARVAC glossary is more comprehensive.

Aquiescence bias	When respondents or interviewees have a tendency to agree with the researcher or interviewer; also called 'agreement bias'; see 'how to apply criteria and strategies for trustworthiness' on p.xx
Audit trail	A document or set of documents that records all decisions made throughout the research process; see 'how to apply criteria and strategies for trustworthiness' on p.xx
Bibliography	A list of all the sources used for reference in a project.
Cases	Units of study, the things you are researching: these could be individual people, organisations, places, or events, depending on your research topic
Citation	A reference to a written source of information
Confirmability	How far the findings can be confirmed by other researchers through looking at your research processes and decisions; see 'how to apply criteria and strategies for trustworthiness' on p.xx [adapted from this paper on trustworthiness in qualitative research[i]]
Confirmation bias	When research is used to confirm existing beliefs; see 'how to apply criteria and strategies for trustworthiness' on p.xx
Convenience sampling	When you recruit your sample of interviewees from a group that is easy to contact or reach; see 'how to apply criteria and strategies for trustworthiness' on p.xx
Credibility	How confident audiences can be in the accuracy of your research findings; see 'how to apply criteria and strategies for trustworthiness' on p.xx [adapted from this paper on trustworthiness in qualitative research[ii]]
Criteria (singular: criterion)	A set of standards for judging or selecting something
Critique	To review something carefully and critically
Data	Raw information in any form (e.g. numbers; text, images) collected for analysis
Dependability	Whether findings are stable and do not change; see 'how to apply criteria and strategies for trustworthiness' on p.xx [adapted from this paper on trustworthiness in qualitative research[iii]]
Emancipatory research	Research that aims to empower marginalised people through creating opportunities to take part in collective social action; see 'community based participatory research' on p xx
Empirically	Being based on observation or experiment
Ethical principles	A set of standards based on a system of moral principles

Ethics	A system of moral values that guides behaviour
External audit	Independent examination of a process or set of records
Fieldwork	The data collection stage of research when you carry out e.g. interviews and other non-laboratory research methods
Findings	The learning from the research, i.e. details of what the research shows or finds out; more often called 'results' in quantitative research [adapted from this qualitative research glossary[iv]]
Grey literature	Research papers and material that has been produced outside commercial channels or is unpublished
Harvard referencing system	A way of citing references in a document by giving the author's last name and year of publication in the body of the text, and the full citation at the end of the document in a references list; the referencing system used in this guide
Hypothesis	An assumption that you will test through carrying out research
Inductive research	Research that looks for new information emerging from data collected, rather than testing a hypothesis [adapted from this social justice researcher's website[v]]
Interpretivism	A research philosophy or paradigm based on the belief that society can only be understood through the subjective interpretations of individuals see 'choosing your research approach' on p.xx
Iterative process	A process that involves repeating stages as you refine your understanding
Knowledge	The information, skills, and understanding that you have gained through learning or experience [vi] [from this dictionary definition]
Member checking	Sharing data, findings or a summary of findings with research participants to check for accuracy
Metadata	Data that provides information about other data, such as title and author of a paper, or date collected and name of person or place it was collected from
Mixed methods	Research that uses a mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate a question
Negative case analysis	Looking for cases that contradict emerging findings and using them to develop the findings further; see 'strategies for trustworthiness' table on p.xx
Non-probability sampling	Using a sampling method to select cases from the overall population that does not rely on selecting at random from the total population
Objectivity	Judging facts based on evidence without bias, or referring to personal feelings or preferences [adapted from this dictionary of sociological terms[vii]]
Observation bias	Forms of bias that occur because of research subjects being affected by being observed (also called the hawthorne effect), or because of researchers having expectations about what they will find out (the observer-expectancy effect); also called 'observer bias'

Paradigm	A way of thinking about or seeing the world that affects the actions you take, the choices you make, and the way you understand and explain what you see
Participants	People taking part in a research project e.g. as interviewees; the people you collect information from in your research
Peer debrief and support	Asking a qualified person who is not involved in the project to look at and give feedback on the research process and documentation to ensure it is of good quality; see 'how to apply criteria and strategies for trustworthiness' on p.xx
Persistent observation	Focusing on the most relevant aspects to examine them in more detail
Phenomena (singular: phenomenon)	Things, experiences, situations, or events
Positivism	A research philosophy or paradigm based on the belief that truth is discovered through using objective scientific methods see 'choosing your research approach' on p.xx
Power relations	Interactions between different people or groups of people who have different status in the community or in wider society; the way that social interactions are affected by these differences
Probability sampling	Choosing a sample at random from a larger known population (e.g. through numbering each member and using a random number generator to select a sample of the size you want)
Prolonged engagement	Spending a long enough time engaging with research subjects in their context to be able to understand the meaning, relevance and significance of their situation to the data collected from them [adapted from this qualitative research guidance website[viii]]; see 'how to apply criteria and strategies for trustworthiness' on p.xx
Population	In research means the entire group that you are interested in finding out about e.g. people over 50 living in a specific neighbourhood
Purposive sampling	Selecting participants on the basis that they have particular knowledge about the topic that you are interested in (e.g. ensuring disabled people are represented when researching older people's views on public transport)
Qualitative	Investigating characteristics of something, looking at what something is like; resulting in data that cannot be expressed in numbers, e.g. text, images, sound recordings
Quantitative	Investigating amounts of something, such as looking at how many of something or how often it happens; resulting in data that can be expressed using numbers
Reflexivity	Reflecting; reflecting on something e.g. data; reflecting on one's own feelings, beliefs, judgements and motives and how they affect the research process; see 'how to apply criteria and strategies for trustworthiness' on p.xx and 'reflexivity' on p.xx
Research outputs	The publications, reports and channels sharing details of the research process and findings
Research tools	The things you use to collect information during fieldwork, such as observation forms, interview schedules, questionnaires

Researcher positionality	Self-reflection by the researcher on how their views and beliefs relate to the research topic and project
Sample	The cases (e.g. individuals) from which you collect data
Saturation	The point when new data does not add any new perspectives or new angles on your research question; see 'bias at the planning and data collection stages' on p.xx
Selection bias	Any bias that results from recruiting participants who differ in a particular way from the population you are studying that affects the your research findings; see 'bias at the planning and data collection stages' on p.xx
Sense-making	The way that people make meaning out of experiences or information [adapted from this oxford bibliographies definition[ix]]
Snowball sampling	Recruiting further participants by asking research participants to refer you to others to involve; also called chain-referral sampling; see 'different sampling strategies' on p.xx
Social desirability bias	A form of bias that happens when participants respond to questions in the way they think the researcher wants them to, even without meaning to due to power relations, or because of the way that questions are asked; see 'bias at the planning and data collection stages' on p.xx
Stakeholders	All the different types of people who have an interest in your research project
Strategies (singular: strategy)	A way of doing something; a plan for achieving an aim
Subjectivity	Being influenced by personal values, experiences and beliefs
Survivor bias	A type of bias in evaluation studies that comes from selecting only participants who have stayed with a project to the end, and not including participants who dropped out of the project you are evaluating
Tendency	An inclination
Thick description	Including description of the context as well as observing and describing the phenomenon itself
Transferability	How far research findings can be generalised and applied to other contexts; see 'how to apply criteria and strategies for trustworthiness' on p.xx [adapted from this paper on trustworthiness in qualitative research[x]]
Triangulation	Using and combining several research methods, researchers, data sources or theories to collect or analyse data which increases the validity of findings; see 'how to apply criteria and strategies for trustworthiness' on p.xx

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