What is community research and why should you do it?

Community Research Resources Bank

Norfolk Community Foundation

Together, Norfolk shines brighter

WHAT IS COMMUNITY RESEARCH?

By community research we mean any activities that gather knowledge, insights and experiences within communities to help build understanding and lead to positive change. This includes 'peer research' where people with lived experience of the matters being studied are involved in designing and carrying out the research.

Community research is conducted for a variety of reasons:

- To ensure the knowledge and experiences of the community are understood and heard.
- To give people power and agency to shape what happens in their local community.
- To understand the impact of work in the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector.
- To understand the best way to design and deliver services.
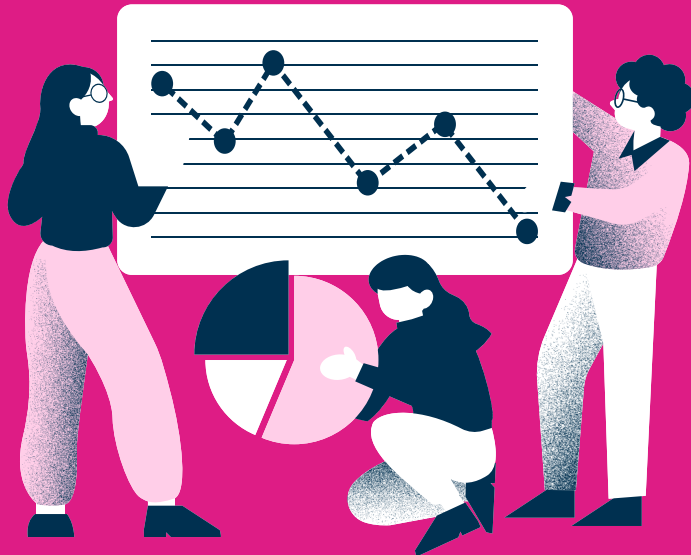
DIFFERENT TYPES OF RESEARCH

1) Primary research

Primary research is research where data is gathered which has not been collected before, making the data set a primary source. Primary research is conducted when there is little information that already exists on the topic which you wish to gather information on. It is gathered using methods such as:

- Interviews.
- Focus groups.
- Questionnaires.

2) Secondary research

Secondary research is data that already exists as it has been collected by someone else. It can be used when a data set already exists which relates to your research topic but can be analysed in a new way to answer your research questions. Some examples of secondary data sources include:

- Official statistics.
- Academic sources.
- 'Grey literature', for example, government documents, evaluations, think tank reports.

Secondary data can be used alongside primary data you have collected yourself to support or counter your findings. Secondary data can also be useful in helping to provide an overview of any current information or relevant literature that is already available before you start your research, to help provide context to the reader. For example, if your research is focused on young people's mental health, it might be helpful to give the reader some context around the current number of young people affected by mental health problems. This data can then be analysed in comparison to the findings from your primary research.

APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY RESEARCH

There are two main approaches to community research: quantitative and qualitative.

Quantitative data

Quantitative community research gathers data which can be translated into numbers, such as statistics. This approach helps to give a broad overview of a research topic, rather than a detailed insight. Quantitative research uses closed questions to obtain its data. Closed questions are questions which either have pre-selected answers to choose from, or are answered with one or two words.

Example:
Which activities would you like to have during youth club?
1. Table tennis.
2. Board games.
3. Music.
4. Video games.
5. Other.

Closed questions can limit the amount of detail the researcher can gather, but they allow for a broad insight to be obtained and data which is easily comparable.

> There are multiple research methods which can be used to gather quantitative data. Examples of quantitative research methods include:
>
> - **Surveys: a way of collecting factual data about a population group on a large scale. Surveys capture a population's opinion at one point in time.**
> - **Questionnaires: asking questions to a select group of individuals.**
> - **Opinion polls: a survey to measure the opinion of a specific population on a specific topic.**
>
> These methods of data collection are useful if you are looking to carry out research with a large number of people.

Qualitative data

Qualitative research produces data as words and is used when a researcher would like to gain more in-depth information and insight about their research topic. Specifically, qualitative research can be helpful when a researcher would like to identify how individuals think and feel about a specific topic.

Qualitative research uses open-ended questions to obtain data. Open-ended questions give participants the opportunity to write or share a detailed answer and not be limited by specific options or one-word answers. Although this can be more time consuming for participants and can be more difficult for a researcher to compare data, it allows for a wider range of answers to be given and gives participants a chance to explain their answers to questions.

Examples of qualitative research methods include:
- Interviews: a conversation with an individual or a group of people about your research topic.
- Focus groups: a group of individuals brought together to discuss the research topic.
- Ethnographic research: using a variety of research techniques to observe an individual or community in their own environment.

Which approach should you use?

The approach that a researcher uses is dependent on the information they wish to find out through their research, their resources, and their capacity. Both approaches can be used alongside each other in a research project if it suits your research topic. This is known as 'mixed methods' research. Using both approaches can also help to balance out the limitations of each research approach e.g., qualitative data can provide in-depth information whereas quantitative data cannot.

To decide which approach to use, consider the following points...

Qualitative Research

- You want to explore something.
- You are looking to answer a 'why' question.
- You are looking to carry out more in-depth research with a smaller number of participants.
- You have the time and resources to conduct more in-depth research methods.
- You would like to carry out different types of analysis on words, for example thematic analysis.

Quantitative Research

- You want to measure something.
- You are looking to answer a 'how many', 'how much', 'how often' question.
- You are looking to carry out broad research with a large number of participants.
- You have the time and resources to develop and conduct qualitative research e.g., producing and sharing questionnaires.
- You would like to carry out statistical analysis.

WHY DO COMMUNITY RESEARCH?

Community research can provide community organisations with important information which can be utilised to help to expand and/or develop their services in line with the needs of their community.

Research can help a community organisation to:

Understand the community and their needs:
Research gives community organisations the opportunity to engage with the communities they work with, to understand their needs and whether the community organisation is meeting these needs through their current work. The information gathered through the research can provide evidence to inform how they adapt and develop services in the future.

Try and test new ideas:
Research can be used to test new ideas of working with a community and gauge their thoughts and feelings towards an organisation's new approach.

Develop relationships:
Research can help develop a good relationship with those using a community organisation's services by ensuring their voices are heard. It can also be a way to connect and collaborate with other services working in an area.

Support funding:
Research provides a catalogue of evidence, documenting the impact and importance of an organisation's work. This can support funding applications and strategic conversations with partners.

Develop understanding of local services:
Research does not just have to focus on the work of your own organisation but can also be a way to learn and identify similar local services in your area. This could be useful for signposting within the community, but also to demonstrate to funders that the work being carried out by your organisation is unique and valuable within your locality.
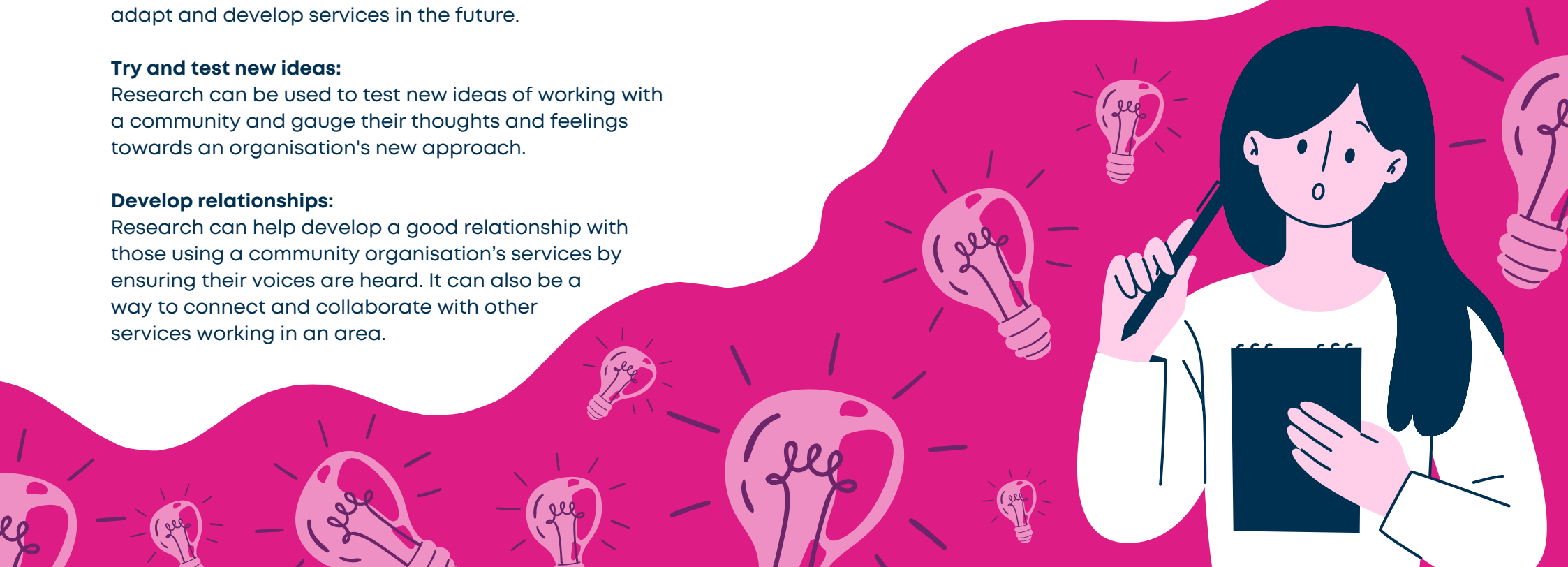
Want to find out more?

Read our other guides on community research

1

What is community research and why should you do it?

Discover the ins and outs of community research, the approaches you can take, and why it matters.

2

Designing your research project

Find out what you need to think about when developing a research project, including deciding your research questions, involving people, ethics, data management and more.

3

Carrying out research

Learn how to recruit research participants, gather and analyse your insights, and write up your findings.

4

Further resources

Explore helpful links and resources to learn more about community research.

NIHR | Clinical Research Network East of England

Find out more or get in touch

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