Community Engagement Toolkit

This toolkit is aimed at supporting researchers who are developing grant applications with, and for, diverse communities. It has evolved from what our community partners in the Reaching Out Projects taught us about how they would like researchers to engage with them to build sustainable community relationships. We have transferred their knowledge and experience to the world of health and social care research into **ten guiding principles**.

> Community engagement, in this context, goes beyond simply 'involving' people. It relies on building ongoing, meaningful relationships between the community and organisations for mutually beneficial outcomes. It is a collaborative process between groups who are brought together as neighbours or through sharing a common interest or concern. It is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioural changes to improve the situation and wellbeing of the community. (Community Engagement for Social Inclusions)

Do the groundwork and prepare

- Be realistic and check that you have capacity and appropriate resources to support the very early design and development phase of your research (pre-grant). You may be eligible to apply for the RDS Public Involvement Fund.
- This more informal way of working does not fit easily with most university or organisation finance and HR systems. The earlier you can engage the appropriate departments with your plans the better.
- Ask for advice so that you can anticipate and prepare for potential administration and bureaucratic hurdles e.g. how to pay for catering choices preferred by the community which may be outside of approved university suppliers or purchase of art materials etc.

- Conduct an initial risk assessment and consider ethical issues to protect yourself and your organisation. With the help of the community leaders (below) you can also evaluate risks and ethics specific to the groups you wish to engage, such as vulnerability, mental capacity, visits to locations which may be isolated or considered 'unsafe'. This might also include risk to the reputation through bad publicity and provisions for support for yourself and the wider community especially if you are researching sensitive or traumatic topics

2. Find trusted community workers/leaders who can help broker introductions with wider communities

CAST NET WIDE

LOCAL, GRASS ROOTS

ESTABLISHED COMMUNITY FORUMS

BE PATIENT - TAKE TIME TO FIND MOST APPROPRIATE PEOPLE

GOOD TO MEET YOU

ENTER VIA COMMUNITY THEMSELVES

## Find trusted community workers/leaders who can help broker introductions with wider communities

- People who may be staff or volunteers who have deep connections to the community and who may run groups or grass roots organisations. They can help with introductions to their groups and suggest other connections which may be relevant.
- Be patient, it can take time to find the most appropriate people and you need to be aware of individuals who might manipulate their role as 'gate keeper' to voice their own agenda.
- Cast your net wide to begin with and think local and grass roots.
- Find individuals via established community forums such as: Community Voluntary Services, Healthwatch, local authority neighbourhood teams, community health providers and don't forget informal virtual groups (Facebook, WhatsApp etc).

3. Respect the vast knowledge and experience of communities
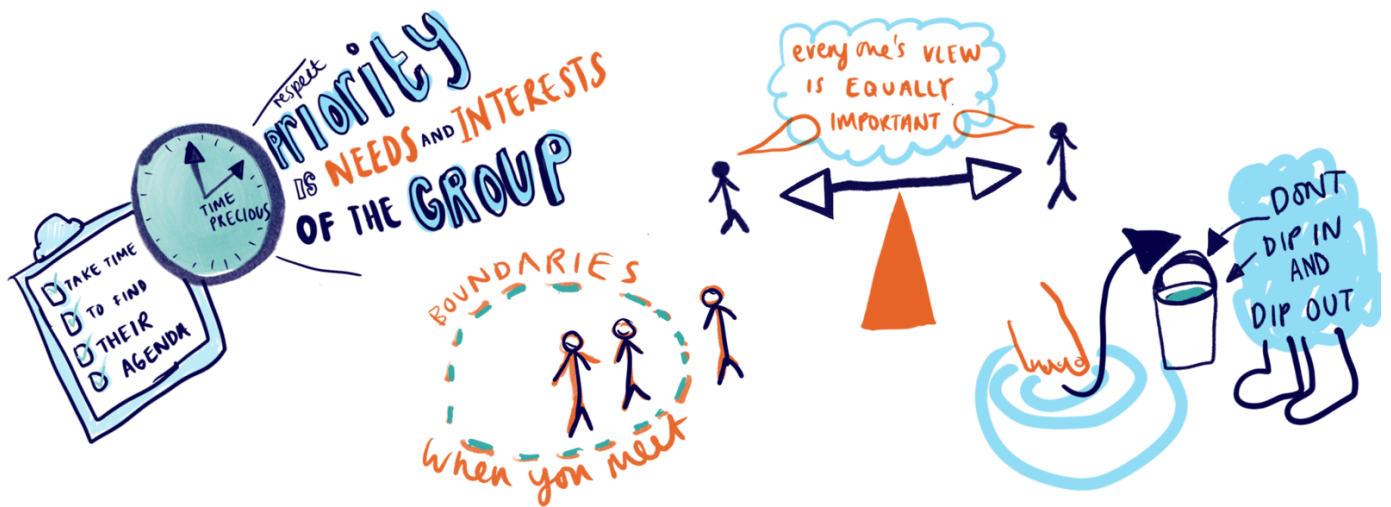
Respect the vast knowledge and experience of community workers/leaders and ask them to help shape the project

- It is always best to approach people as early as possible to start negotiations and involve them as real partners to help shape the project.
- Respect that their priority will be the needs and interests of their community, not research and their time is precious. Take time finding out about their agenda and discovering areas of mutual interest.
- They know their communities well and understand the social/cultural norms and nuances. They can alert you to specific sensitivities around language and topics and access needs.
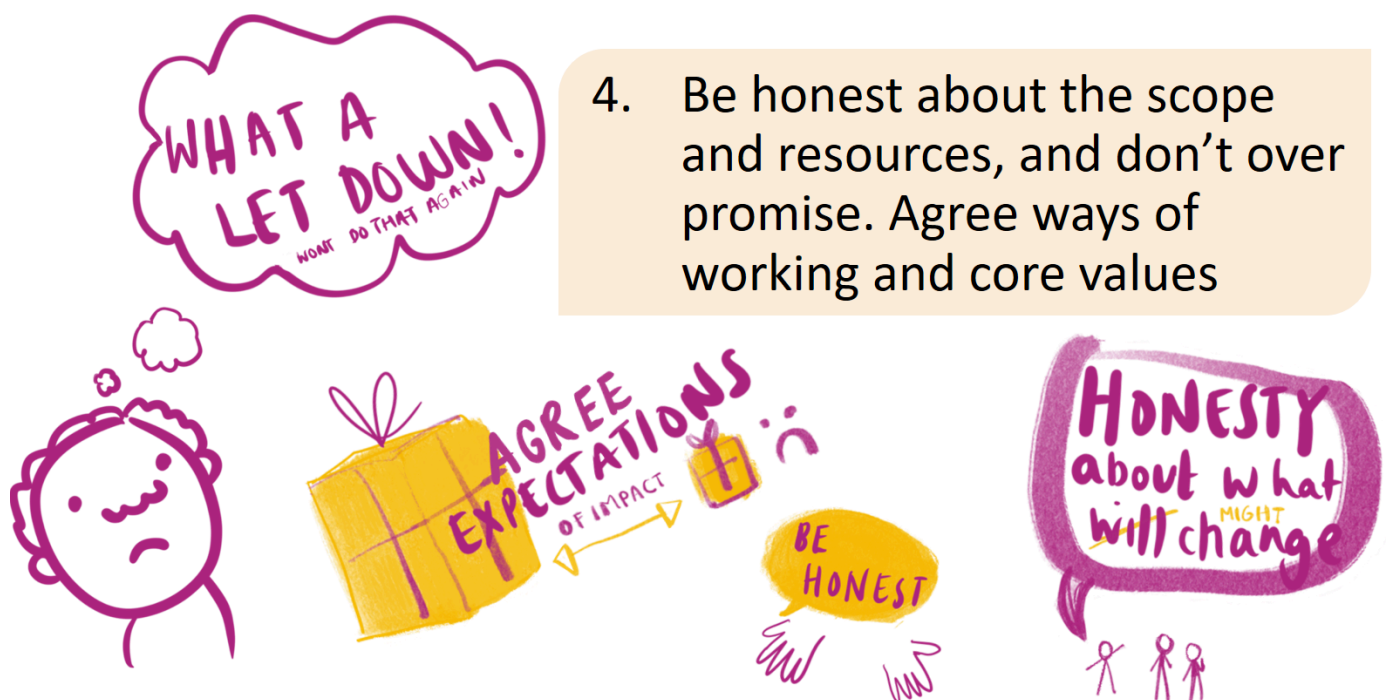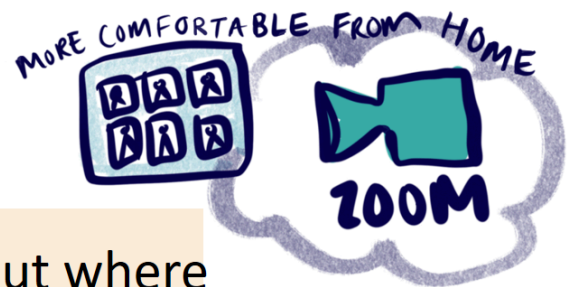
4. Be honest about the scope and resources, and don't over promise. Agree ways of working and core values

Be honest about the scope and resources and don't over promise
Agree ways of working and core values

- Once you realise the value of working collaboratively with community groups it is easy to get carried away. Be mindful not to over promise as some community groups may have negative experiences of researchers letting them down in the past.
- When you first meet with the wider community spend time discussing and negotiating the ground rules and parameters of the project. This process can provide opportunity to understand core values and can be kept in mind and reviewed through the project.

MORE COMFORTABLE FROM HOME

ZOOM

Community

5. Be flexible about where and when you arrange meetings

BE MINDFUL OF ACCESS NEEDS

NEURODIVERSITY

GOING TO A UNIVERSITY CAN BE INTIMIDATING

Be flexible about where and when you arrange meetings

- Fit yourself around others and be willing to meet in community settings and adapt the timing and format to suit the needs of the people you wish to engage.
- Be extremely mindful of any accessibility issues and take appropriate steps to overcome these.
- Always build in time for informal social time and 'breaking bread' or sharing delicious food together.

6. Be generous, build in impact and consider ways to give back beyond your specific project needs

Be generous, build in reciprocity and impact beyond your specific project needs

- Community partners say they feel 'over researched' and like 'nothing ever changes'. So, think of ways to build in positive impact throughout, rather than considering impact as something that happens at the end.
- Reciprocity can be anything from helping community groups to think about how to evaluate their work and apply for funding; providing a talk about a subject of interest for a community event (not necessarily research!) or volunteering with regular community meetings.
- Think beyond the remit of your individual project both in terms of the wider needs of the community and inspiring future research. Value the investment in building relationships for the longer term.

7. Invest time; genuine relationships take commitment and time to develop trust

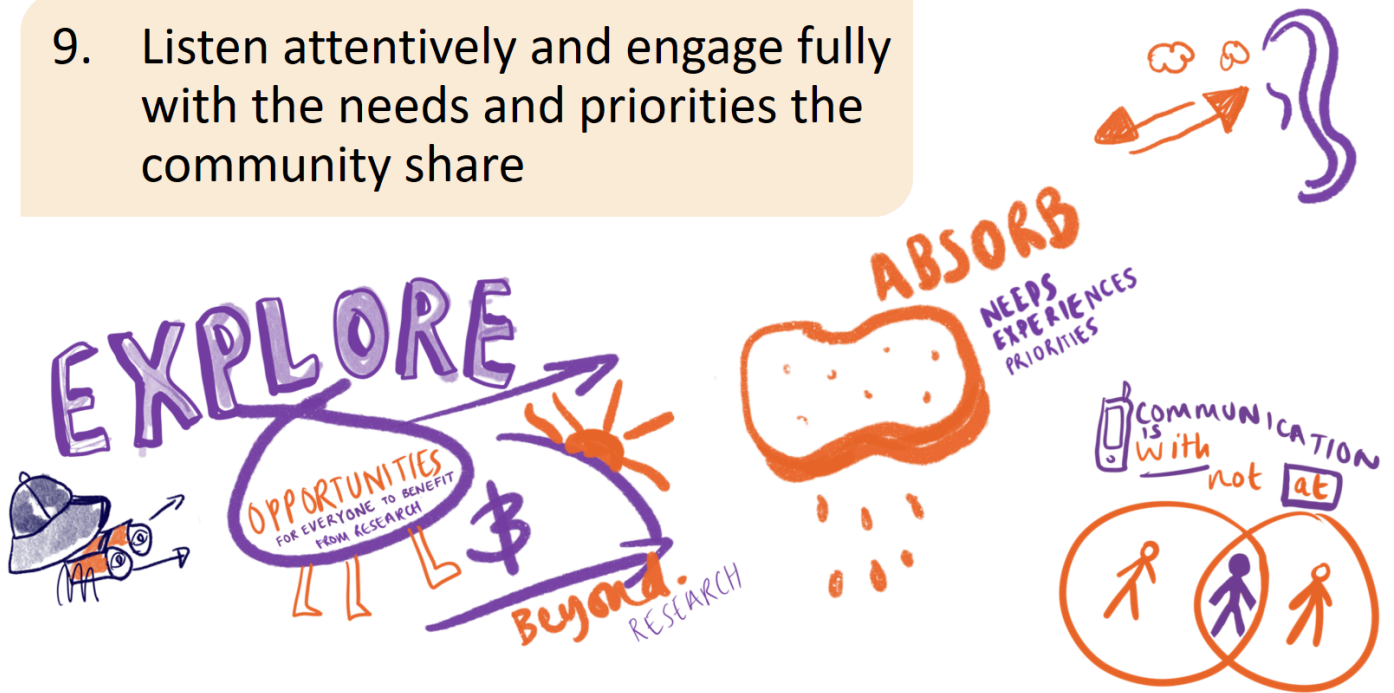## Invest time, genuine relationships take commitment and time to develop trust

- There are no short cuts, it takes time to build both one to one relation with the community leaders/brokers and members of their wider groups that they will introduce you to.
- It helps to have capacity to maintain regular communications and follow up all interactions with feedback and a thank you.
- It's OK to disagree and have different priorities and it's helpful to explore where those differences come from.

8. Be creative and innovative using different ways of working
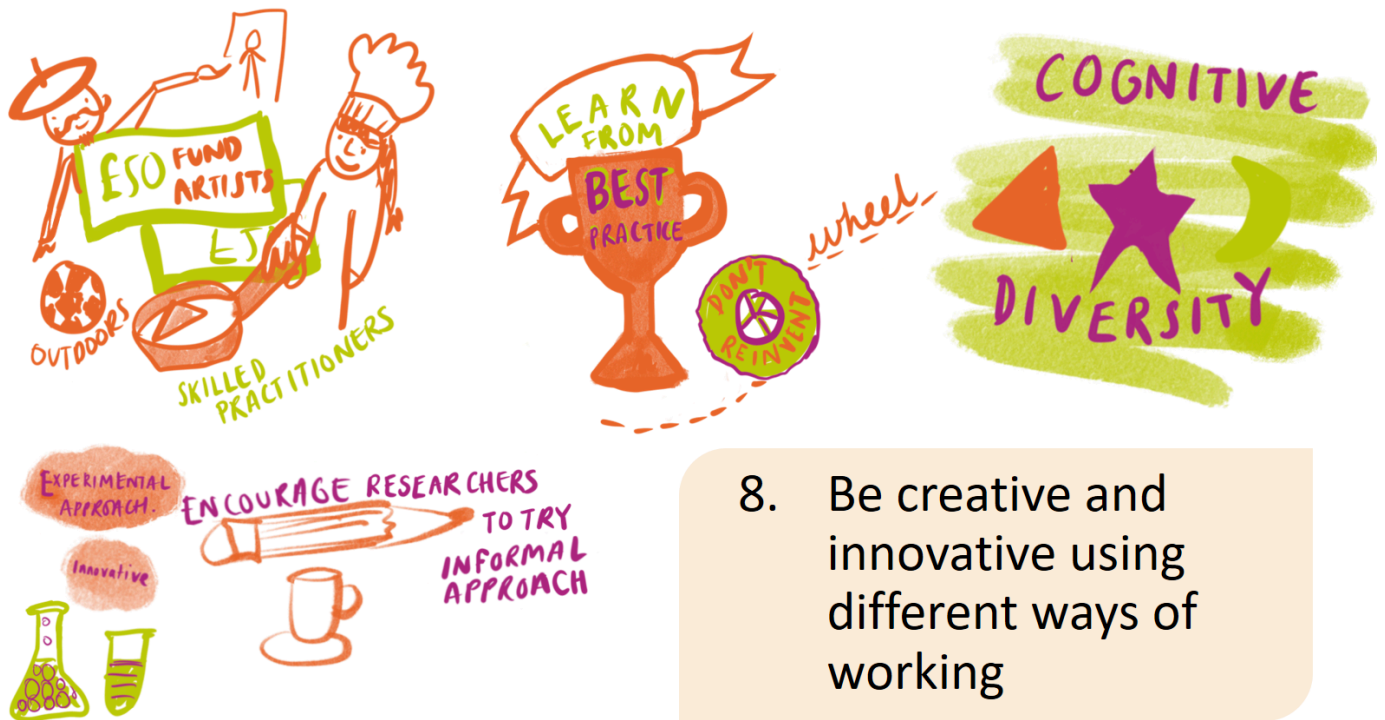
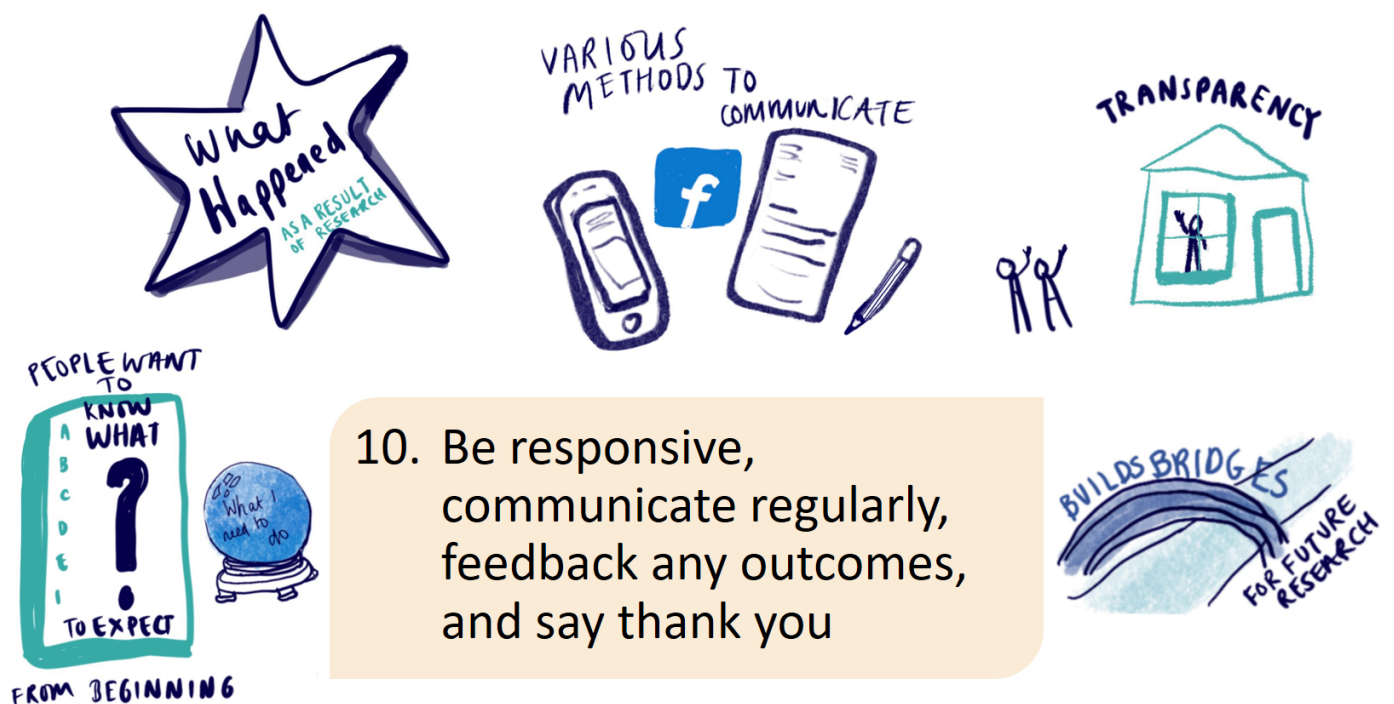## Be creative and innovative about different ways to work and collaborate

- It is strongly advised that, in the early stages at least, you do not attempt to deliver formal presentations about your research or the perceived 'benefits' of research unless they invite you!
- Create plans with your community partners and consider ways to share responsibility and resources to enable them to lead initiatives within their own groups in ways that they think will be relevant, accessible, and enjoyable.
- Be open to very different approaches of engaging and collaborating which may not have clearly defined research-related outcomes other than to simply engage and stimulate conversations.
- Provide funding for skilled practitioners from different disciplines to help facilitate e.g. artists and outdoor skills leaders
- Encourage communities to be experimental and innovative and support more informal approaches.

9. Listen attentively and engage fully with the needs and priorities the community share

EXPLORE

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EVERYONE TO BENEFIT FROM RESEARCH

Beyond RESEARCH

ABSORB

NEEDS
EXPERIENCES
PRIORITIES

COMMUNICATION IS WITH not at

Listen attentively and engage fully with the needs and priorities which the community share

- Absorb the varied lived experiences, needs and priorities and be prepared to shape your research around the needs raised.
- Collaborate with colleagues across the different parts of the research infrastructure (NIHR) to enable pathways to impact, information, and support according to the needs and interests which emerge.
- Explore opportunities with communities for them to benefit from the research in their own work and for them to influence research beyond the specific remit of project

What Happened AS A RESULT OF RESEARCH

VARIOUS METHODS TO COMMUNICATE

TRANSPARENCY

PEOPLE WANT TO KNOW WHAT ? TO EXPECT FROM BEGINNING

What I need to do

10. Be responsive, communicate regularly, feedback any outcomes, and say thank you

BUILDS BRIDGES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Be responsive, communicate regularly, feedback any outcomes, and say thank you

- Finding ways to maintain an interactive a dialogue with communities is time consuming; however, it is essential for sustaining and building relationships.
- It can take time to find the most effective form of communications and in most cases using different media is needed to ensure everyone has access
- Showing gratitude and appreciation can never be underestimated and most people like to know what impact they have had.

Finally, be authentic by connecting person to person and trust the process by embracing challenges and conflicts that may arise – this is often where the magic happens!

Acknowledgements

Created: 6 April 2022