

# Community Connections



Huge thanks to everyone who joined us and shared their experiences.  
The following document highlights opportunities and the shared stories  
(vignettes) from the day.



# SHARED OPPORTUNITIES

## **Engagement@Manchester**

Informal sessions exploring different aspects of public engagement.

University Place, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL

Creative Practice Wednesday 4 February 2026, 12:30pm - 1:40pm

Inclusive Practice Wednesday 15 April 2026, 12:30pm - 1:40pm

For more information email: [engagement@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:engagement@manchester.ac.uk)

## **GM Citizens**

Delegate Assembly Thursday 12 February, 5:30pm - 7:45pm

For more information email: [mags.bradbury@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:mags.bradbury@manchester.ac.uk)

## **Uncertain Futures**

Uncertain Futures will be shown as part of the major exhibition Coming of Age at Wellcome, London.

March to November 2026





# EMBEDDING COMMUNITY-LED EVALUATION IN CO-PRODUCED AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Research funding models are often built around projects that are driven by the priorities of academics/institutions and funding bodies rather than those of the people whose lives are affected by the research. As a result, evaluation questions are designed to demonstrate success against criteria set by those academics or institutions. This can mean they fail to capture the impact the projects have had (if any) in the areas that matter to those communities and limit their potential to create meaningful change.

Over the past two years, academics from Manchester Urban Institute (MUI) have been exploring ways of working that are more open and inclusive, embedding community voices and leadership in a series of co-produced pilot projects that address local needs. They wanted to learn from the pilots in a way that was in keeping with this approach, so they engaged stakeholders in evaluating their own experiences. The project aimed to:

- Increase awareness and understanding of participatory and co-produced research, and its potential benefits, enhancing the university's capacity to support community-driven change.
- Ensure that research is genuinely co-produced (where appropriate) and responsive to local need.
- Create a more informed, reflective, and collaborative research environment that values diverse perspectives and fosters ongoing institutional learning.
- Strengthen and sustain relationships between the university and community partners.

## Who was involved

The core management team and researchers from MUI, working with community organisations including 42nd Street (young people's mental health charity), Dandelion Community (Wythenshawe), Manchester Food Bank, Community Owned Renewable Energy, Civic and Social, Manchester Food Bank, Barlow Moor Community Organisation, Inspire Women Oldham, Ardwick Climate Action and St George's, Collyhurst.

Other key participants include Transport for Greater Manchester, Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the councils within it, NHS representatives, Far East Consortium (Housing Developers) and Melling Media.

## What did they do?

The MUI team supported community-based organizations to define and lead participatory research activities and to develop tools and frameworks to guide researchers in engaging with them. They did this through workshops, knowledge exchange events and targeted focus groups as well as engagement with their Local Advisory Board.

A 360° externally-led participatory evaluation of the pilot projects facilitated reflection among participants and a Manchester-based artist-created visual summaries throughout the process to capture learning on key themes.

## So what?

The evaluation process fostered more inclusive engagement with community partners, providing greater insight into their diverse approaches and perspectives, strengthening relationships and improving communication. The projects also widened existing networks and stimulated peer-to-peer learning. This has provided a better-informed foundation for future co-produced research. The MUI team have already embedded learning in ongoing research, including multiple funded projects with substantial community engagement components.

The project informed a stakeholder evaluation report, a set of artist-created visual summaries on key themes, workshops on writing for non-academic audiences and a manifesto for co-produced research, which includes actionable recommendations. These have been used to share learning about good practice in participatory research both within and beyond the university, as well as fostering further collaboration among academics working on similar community-based projects.

Providing further evidence of the issues caused by known barriers to inclusive engagement, such as time constraints and inflexible funding and payment systems, project findings have also fed into strategic development at The University of Manchester. This wider programme of work aims to improve support for participatory and co-produced research.



# CREATING A MORE FLEXIBLE AND RESPONSIVE SYSTEM FOR ETHICAL ENGAGED RESEARCH

In 2023/24, the University of Manchester mapped participatory research activity across the institution, to identify good practice and barriers to doing it well. This showed there was a lot of confusion about how to navigate formal ethics processes at the university when conducting research that included public and community engagement, and that current structures were making it more difficult and time consuming to do. As other projects, such as the Co-Pro Futures Inquiry, have shown, this is a sector-wide issue.

The findings informed a project that aimed to address criticisms and develop practical, evidence-based solutions to the issues identified, creating an infrastructure that is more flexible and responsive to emerging developments in participatory research.

## What did they do?

April Lockyer, the Head of Research Governance, Ethics and Integrity convened two cross-university groups to move the project forward:

- A Cross-institutional Co-Production Research Review Board: To oversee the project.
- A Cross-institutional Ethical Scope Working Group: To agree the scope of ethical review and which specific ethical issues that relate to co-production research.

## So what?

The Review Board has produced a new set of guidelines for the Ethical Review of Co-Produced Research & Community Engagement. This includes definitions of terms and processes and descriptions of the roles that community members (in the broadest sense) might play in research. It also makes it clear when and when formal ethical review is (and is not) needed and what other best practice expectations should be considered, such as consent, safeguarding and data protection.

We are also establishing a cross-university group to guide the development of a framework of policies, processes and supporting materials aimed at facilitating public, community and civic engagement practice across the University.

The results of the ethical scope working group are shaping the development of more adaptive formal processes. This work is being led by the university's formal Research Ethics Committee (REC).

## Who was involved?

Colleagues from across the university in academic and professional services roles with a concern with ethical practice and public and community engagement in research, from co-production to Public and Patient Participation and Engagement (PPiE).





# STORIES OF CHANGE - CO-CREATING GUIDANCE FOR PARTICIPATORY EVALUATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Universities, charities and other organisations are often asked to provide evidence of the outcomes and impact of their work for funding and reporting purposes. However, traditional evaluation methods don't always capture the nuanced impacts of participatory work, which come about at different stages of the research process and involve multiple people and activities. In these cases, making a link between 'the research' or 'the project' and what happened requires slower, non-hierarchical ways of working that capture depth of change over time. Trying to rush evaluation without accounting for the humans at the heart of the impact can result in overclaiming and damage relationships.

The Inspiring Futures Partnership CIC and The University of Manchester's Professor Sarah Marie Hall have done research together for many years, using reflective tools that are better suited to this task. Their project – 'Stories of Change' sought to co-create guidance that would empower both academics and community partners to better understand, evaluate, and communicate the complex impact of their work and how they got there. The goal was to foster stronger, trust-based relationships between universities, communities, and policymakers, and to encourage the wider adoption of more ethical, inclusive, and transparent evaluation practices across sectors.

## What did they do?

The 'Stories of Change' team tested a series of practical, context-specific evaluation methods co-created with and by The Inspiring Futures Partnership with a diverse community of people who had been involved in participatory research projects, including academics and community partners. Together, they piloted and refined nine innovative evaluation methods across four workshops. This co-creative approach helped Inspiring Futures to develop non-prescriptive, creative guidance to help researchers evaluate participatory research.



## So what?

The nine creative methods for inclusive evaluation were compiled into a free resource booklet and practical handbook. These tools are designed for use by researchers, community organisers, policy professionals, and funders, with an emphasis on facilitated application. The Inspiring Futures team is sharing this learning and resources with attendees of the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE)'s Summit in April 2026. They are also open to further co-creation, recognising that the greatest impact comes from facilitated, collaborative engagement rather than stand-alone resources.

Like the type of work it focuses on, the impacts of Stories of Change are multi-faceted:

- Participants and the delivery team reported greater confidence in exploring and communicating participatory impact.
- The project deepened trust within the core team, strengthened partnerships between participants and seeded new collaborations, including funded follow-on projects and applications.
- It also created opportunities for wider discussions and to support emerging networks, such as the "Good Eggs" community of practice, which brings in additional changemakers from wider circles.
- The work is influencing the university's approaches to academic research culture, community partnership models, and impact. It has also been shared at major conferences and events targeted at Higher Education changemakers, where it has been well received and cited as an example of good practice.
- Stories of Change dovetails with a British Science Association/Ideas Fund project led by the same team, which aims to build evidence and capacity for inclusive community-led research. The development of resources, connections and learning across the two projects has extended their breadth and impact, benefitting both.

## Who was involved?

- Inspiring Futures Partnership CIC (Sally Bonnie, Diane Baxter, and StrongHer TogetHER members). Project leads.
- Professor Sarah Marie Hall, The University of Manchester. Project co-lead.
- Other academics, researchers, PhD students, and professional support staff from the University of Manchester (12 individuals).
- Community organisations (21 individuals), including directors, staff, volunteers, and community researchers.





# 'OVER-RESEARCHED' YET INVISIBLE: A CO-PRODUCTION PROJECT IN HULME, MANCHESTER

Research funding models are often built around projects that are driven by the priorities of academics/institutions and funding bodies rather than those Hulme is an area of Manchester surrounded by three university campuses. Over the past 30 years, new university buildings and student halls have gradually encroached on existing residents' homes and now dominate the landscape. Their construction has been accompanied by an influx of a transient population of people who live and work in Hulme but make a minimal contribution to the wider community.

The high concentration of academics and students in the area means residents are often asked to take part in research projects, providing their time and details about their lives for little reward – neither financial compensation nor noticeable benefits from the research itself. They are rarely told how their data have been used or updated on the outcomes of the projects.

Many Hulme residents are subject to multiple forms of deprivation and live in social housing. They are repeatedly quizzed about the issues they face and their experiences in ways that could be viewed as 'trauma mining'. This can leave them feeling like they have been extracted from – hyper-visible as a 'disadvantaged community' and source of material, yet invisible as multifaceted human beings. Yet, Hulme also has a strong tradition of (successful) community-led activism. Residents have deep hyperlocal knowledge and are often best placed to identify solutions to the issues at the heart of the research. However, they lack the platform (and funding) to do so, reinforcing the imbalance of power between them and 'the universities.'

Building on an existing relationship between researcher Niamh Kavanagh and Hulme resident, poet and activist, Tina Cribbin, this project set out to understand the impacts of 'over-research' on the Hulme community and explore how more equitable relationships can be developed between universities and their neighbours. It sought to model ethical, collaborative research practices that can be sustained beyond a project's duration.

## Who was involved?

- Tina Cribbin (poet and community activist).
- Anthea Cribbin (artist and facilitator).
- Dr Niamh Kavanagh, Research Associate, The University of Manchester (lead researcher).
- Dr Camilla Lewis, Senior Lecturer, The University of Manchester (project advisor).
- The Aquarius Residents and Tenants Association (ATARA).
- 'The Hulme Nannas' and other Hulme residents.



## What did they do?

The research team prioritised relationship-building and collaboration with local community members, particularly those connected to the Aquarius Estate, which has felt the impacts of 'over-research' particularly acutely. They adopted 'gentle methodologies' centred on creative and participatory activities that emphasise care, patience, and sensitivity. The approach was intentionally open and flexible, allowing outcomes to be shaped by the community's priorities and lived experiences.

The team worked particularly closely with an art group of older women at the Aquarius Centre – a community hub on the estate. They led weekly sessions using art (Anthea) and creative writing (Tina) to explore themes of identity, change, community, and invisibility. This culminated in the co-creation of a collective artwork formed from individual canvases that can sit side-by-side to form a Hulme skyline.

Alongside this, the team conducted interviews and workshops with local residents to demystify research processes and encourage critical awareness about research in their community.

## So what?

The collective artwork formed part of an exhibition that was launched at an event at Manchester Museum on 5<sup>th</sup> November, titled 'The Hulme Nannas' exhibition of (in)visibility, community and urban change.' This was later exhibited in the University (something the residents had asked for at the outset). The exhibition and event bridged the gap between the university and local community, promoting positive representations of Hulme and fostering dialogue. The 'Hulme Nannas' titled the exhibition 'The Light Between,' spotlighting the hope and joy they found within the community and project.

Other creative artworks, a film, and podcasts, in which Niamh and Tina reflect on their collaborative journey, were also produced during the project. These will be hosted on a project page on the University's website, included in staff training, and promoted through public events. Collectively, they amplify the voices and experiences of Hulme residents, particularly older women who often feel invisible within both their community and the university context. Residents also gained a greater critical awareness of research in their community and have used this to question what they are being asked to do and take a more active role in shaping research.

The project has demonstrated the value of slow, relationship-centred methodologies in collaborative work, making a powerful contribution to the evidence base that is already informing efforts to better support these approaches at university level, in the wider HE sector and beyond.



# TREE OF LIFE: CONSOLIDATING LEARNING TO DEVELOP NEW RESOURCES TO INFORM COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

When researchers and service providers find it difficult to engage people, they sometimes describe them as ‘hard to reach.’ Yet, often, they are just trying to reach them in the wrong way.

Lack of engagement can have a significant impact on people’s lives, reducing their influence over decisions that affect them, compounding inequalities, and leading to issues such as poorer health outcomes. Approaches that meaningfully involve community groups can help to build understanding of the emotional, and structural barriers that limit engagement and help to address them.

Dr Binish Khatoon has used the Tree of Life (ToL) methodology - a narrative, arts-based process that creates culturally grounded spaces for dialogue and shared reflection to do just that. She worked with the Fatima Women’s Association in Oldham to explore experiences of health, identity, and belonging amongst South Asian women. The process was a collaborative act of learning, which helped participants identify their strengths and challenge one size fits all approaches in cancer care. Whilst that project focused on breast health, this one explores how the methodology could be used more widely, fostering more inclusive, decolonised and effective participatory research practice.

## Who was involved

- Dr Binish Khatoon, Qualitative Methodologist, School of Health Sciences, The University of Manchester.
- Fatima Women’s Association – Manager Fauzia Chaudry and three participants representing the Indian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani communities involved in the initial Tree of Life project.
- Dr Suzanne Johnson, Senior Lecturer, Division of Cancer Sciences, The University of Manchester.
- Naomi Samoei, Research Assistant, The University of Manchester.

## What did they do?

The team drew on their experiences to create accessible resources that will support other researchers to engage meaningfully with community groups on other topics using the methodology. They captured insights from the Tree of Life project, co-developed training materials and ran events to share best practice. The community members have been deeply involved in co-writing research articles, shaping a Decolonising Research Toolkit, and providing critical feedback in both English and Urdu to ensure the work is culturally and linguistically inclusive.

## So what?

The project has deepened collaboration and mutual trust between researchers and community participants. All of those involved also say they feel more confident about participatory methods and more able to use them.

The team has already delivered an extended training session at the University of Manchester, a national seminar at Manchester Museum, and a podcast-style recorded discussion, which can be used for training and engagement purposes. Planned follow-on activities include developing a training programme and creating a digital resource hub for the materials, including the Decolonising Research Toolkit. Ultimately, Binish would like to produce a more permanent seminar or module too.





# COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Listening exercises as part of the University of Manchester's strategy development (Manchester 2035) and feedback on our approach to participatory research told us that local community members want to share their knowledge and expertise with our academic colleagues, as well as learning from and with them – and vice versa. Such dialogues are vital in shaping better ways of working between the university and its neighbours. However, we also heard that formal routes to doing this aren't always as effective as simply meeting each other and connecting as humans without set agendas.

The Community Conversations project tested how the university might facilitate purposeful, but open, conversations in practice. The pilot aimed to:

- Recognise the value and expertise of our communities to contextualise the realities, practices and challenges of engaging with community partners.
- Support academics to actively listen and reflect on the process of building relationships and trust with community partners.
- Develop a framework for conversations that lead to shared insights and deeper understanding.
- Create shared learning about what works (and doesn't) in practice to encourage thoughtful approaches to working in reciprocal partnership in future collaborations.

These aims were underpinned by a commitment to an ethics of care, mutual benefit, and creating safe, inclusive spaces for dialogue and exploring approaches to sustaining meaningful collaborations with community partners and organisations.

## What did they do

The project paired nine community members from across Greater Manchester with academics from the University of Manchester who work in a range of disciplines to see what unfolded.

During the initial stages, the team ran learning exchange workshops with the two groups of partners. They were invited to reflect on potential prompts for the paired conversations and the values and principles that should be central to the project. This resulted in the creation of a set jointly agreed ways of working: a living document that was updated as the pilot evolved.

Following this, the pairs met regularly over a three-month period. The conversations were led by the pairs' interests and motivations, although the conversational prompts provided a scaffold for conversations if needed.

At the end of the project, the team ran an in-person learning exchange workshop to capture shared experience and learning from the pilot. This included two creative evaluation activities: a Ketso exercise that explored what went well, what barriers or challenges the pairs faced and how they might be addressed and a zine making workshop that invited participants to reflect on the values or principles that are important for building, sustaining and closing-down effective partnerships, as well as what a good or ideal partnership might look like.

## So what?

Although just a pilot, the evaluation showed that:

- Participants gained a deeper understanding of each other's perspectives, work constraints, and motivations.
- The conversations and workshops provided valuable opportunities for networking, learning about different ways of working, and the contribution that diverse forms of knowledge and lived experience can make to research.
- There are many barriers that are bigger than this project and which need to be addressed by the Higher Education sector as a whole. However, there are things that can be done, for example, taking the time to develop and sustain relationships.
- Many of the pairs have stayed connected and are working together on joint projects and/or funding applications, even though this wasn't the focus of the pilot.

The Public Engagement team is developing a learning resource that shares useful principles and practices developed from the pilot. The project also provided critical insights into how the University can foster a culture of listening, reflection, and shared purpose and develop thoughtful approaches to partnership working with communities. This has laid the groundwork for future work to establish more equitable, sustainable, and impactful partnerships with our community partners.

## Who was involved?

- Project Operations Group: Dee-Ann Johnson, Kathryn Downey, Dr Laura Breen, Eleanor Seed.
- Facilitator: Dr Luciana Lang.
- Project Advisory Group: Prof Stephanie Snow, Atiha Chaudry, Mags Bradbury.
- Community partners: Representatives from organisations including Blossom, Cheadle Mosque, Hopton Court Resident's Association. Macc, Mustafia Sharif, Mustard Tree, Nurturing Foundations, Petrus and Re:dish.
- Academic partners (University of Manchester): Dr Clara Dawson, Dr Jessica Drinkwater, Professor Julie Froud, Dr Leonie Gaiser, Dr Eva Herman, Professor Giles Johnson, Dr Binish Khatoon, Dr Nicholas Weise, Dr Jane Wood.





# UNCERTAIN FUTURES: METHODOLOGY TOOLKIT, CASE STUDY (MANIFESTO), AND CONNECTIVITY MAP

Participatory research projects often develop over long periods of time, evolving and growing through relationships and multiple interactions and engagements. This can make it difficult to articulate research processes (and how they create impact) in ways funders and higher education institutions require. Uncertain Futures - an art and research collaboration built around three exhibitions that aim to highlight and analyse the intersectional inequalities facing women aged over 50 around work - is one such project.

Uncertain Futures attracted an incredibly diverse range of participants because of the trust built through an advisory group drawn from communities from across Greater Manchester. It is also exemplary in the way the academic and community co-researchers worked together throughout. However, there was no set step-by-step process that others who want to do participatory research well could look to as a model. Instead, the learning centres on meaningful connection, defining shared goals, and driving impact together.

Jointly funded by Manchester Metropolitan University and The University of Manchester, this project sought to capture and share that learning in ways that were in keeping with the team's ways of working but will help others who want to do more equitable and inclusive participatory research. They have done this by developing a case study (manifesto), a multi-media methodology toolkit and a connectivity map.

## How they're doing it

The project team co-created a manifesto on the rights of older women, which set out actions for policy makers, practitioners, researchers, artists, and members of the public. The manifesto declares that 'Women over 50 have the right to equality, good work, recognition of unpaid labour and to participate fully in decision making.' These four themes were drawn from the interviews with the one hundred women over 50 from Greater Manchester that formed the basis of the initial Uncertain Futures exhibition. It serves as both a means of amplifying the women's voices and pushing for change, and a case study.

The team also developed a visual contribution map, which shows the network of actors involved in the research. It captures the complex interactions between individuals, organisations, and intersecting characteristics such as race, disability, and class. It demonstrates how impact spreads across different groups, and how the connections ripple out across time and space – crossing geographical boundaries and sectors. This highlights how challenging it can be to link back to research: whilst influence can be direct and tangible, it can also be part of a meshwork of connections that shape conversations and projects in much more subtle ways.

The map and case study form core parts of the multi-media toolkit. This provides practical guidance for researchers and policy makers on participatory research methods and strategies. Drawing on concrete examples, it explores how to build relationships, trust and effective networks and work towards social change. It emphasises that achieving change can take many years, but there are also individual changes that are as important – because the building and developing of capacity within a project can be the very catalyst for sustainable change over time.

## Who's involved

- Dr Sarah Campbell (Co-Lead Researcher), Senior Lecturer in Health and Social Care, Manchester Metropolitan University.
- Professor Elaine Dewhurst (Co-Lead Researcher), Professor of Employment Law, The University of Manchester.
- Ruth Edson (Lead Project Manager), Manchester Art Gallery.
- Suzanne Lacy, Artist.
- The Uncertain Futures Advisory Group.



## So what?

The manifesto was printed on floor to ceiling banners and became the centrepiece of the final iteration of the Uncertain Futures exhibition. It is now a focal point for the women's policy engagement work. They have also used it to align themselves with other relevant campaigns fighting for social justice and racial and gender equality.

The resources have shaped a collaboration with the Wellcome Collection (part of an exhibition on ageing) and they were used to support a funding bid to develop aspects of the research (outcome pending). There will be further work to share learning and support others to incorporate it into their own projects when the toolkit (a Guide to Community Activism and Participatory Research) is launched in early 2026.

Advisory Group member Atiha Chaudry was awarded a Simon Industrial and Professional Fellowship in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Manchester linked to the project. She worked with colleagues from across the University to exchange ideas around funding applications and the redevelopment of university ethics processes. She also played a key role in the Community Connections project steering group. Building on experiences from the project and Atiha's many decades of work as a community leader and connector, this extended Uncertain Futures' impact on higher education practice.

**Explore the Manifesto - [https://uncertainfuturesproject.co.uk/Uncertain\\_Futures\\_Manifesto.pdf](https://uncertainfuturesproject.co.uk/Uncertain_Futures_Manifesto.pdf)**

**View the Connectivity Map (<https://uncertainfuturesproject.co.uk/research/resources>)**



# THE CO-PRODUCTION FUTURES INQUIRY

Funders and policymakers are increasingly asking for research to be co-produced or participatory. But while there is plenty of guidance for individual researchers, the university systems, and cultures around them are often not set up to support this work.

**The Co-Production Futures Inquiry (2024-2026), jointly funded by the universities of Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield, seeks to address this gap. It brings together collective intelligence on how we can improve the conditions for co-produced and participatory research within UK universities and Higher Education (HE).**

## What did they do'

The inquiry team shares evidence and findings throughout, so others can draw on them. They published a report on the size and shape of the institutional barriers to co-producing research in June 2025, together with a film to bring the findings to life in November 2025.

They are running a workshop with community researchers and organisations in January 2026 to understand what good collaboration with universities looks like. Alongside this, they are reviewing the work of organisations working toward similar goals to show how the Inquiry sits within this wider ecosystem. International conversations with partners in the UK, Brazil, Pakistan, and South Africa have highlighted what more equitable international co-production could look like. They are also developing a new website that will host an interactive, searchable archive of submitted evidence.

The evidence is already shaping funder conversations, pathfinder projects within the three lead universities, and national discussions about research culture. Their final report in September 2026 will map out a way forward for the sector.

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## Who was involved?

- Professors Catherine Durose, Beth Perry, and Liz Richardson and Dr Bryony Vince-Myers.
- An Inquiry Panel of individuals with the power to drive change across UK HE (academics, funders, policymakers).
- A Community Reference Group, made up of individuals from the community, voluntary and public sectors with expertise in co-producing research with universities. They provide critical oversight of the project.
- A Participatory Research Funders Group, who embed learning in the three universities.

