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Transformations in Community Collaboration II:
**Guide to High-Quality
Community Engagement for
Health and Wellbeing**



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Community collaboration: a cornerstone

“

Collaboration with communities is core to improving health and wellbeing for all Londoners.

*Yet community collaboration does not yet happen at scale or sustainably. **Why not?***

This handbook asks why – given the evidence base for how powerful collaboration can be. It provides practical ways that people at all level of health and care systems to move from rhetoric to reality and how we can take all of the lessons that we have on what good looks like and put them into practice.

I view this as essential reading for anyone involved in shaping or implementing community engagement strategies.

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Professor Kevin Fenton CBE
Regional Director, OHID London
Regional Director of Public Health, NHS London



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Transformations in Community Collaboration II

This guide started with a focus on global and UK-wide case study research on inspirational practice.

The initial research found 300+ publications already giving advice, guidance, case studies and examples.

We saw that community-centred approaches are being discussed in lots of places, for lots of different types of outcomes and with lots of communities.

BUT there remains growing frustration about community engagement not being sustained, resourced or supported to happen at the scale, quality and impact it could and should.

If there is so much awareness and attention,
why does community-centred work not happen
at scale and sustainably?

Some key concepts



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Summary of key concepts

Engagement is when two groups **connect and interact** with each other, and **both parties experience change** as a result.

Community is **any group of people who share something** in common, but usually when it comes to community engagement, we have something more specific in mind, and **not spelling it out can create misunderstandings**.

High-quality means engagement that is **proactive, dialogic and impactful**.

High-quality **community engagement is a core activity of our health and care systems**, not something that only happens within specific roles or organisations.

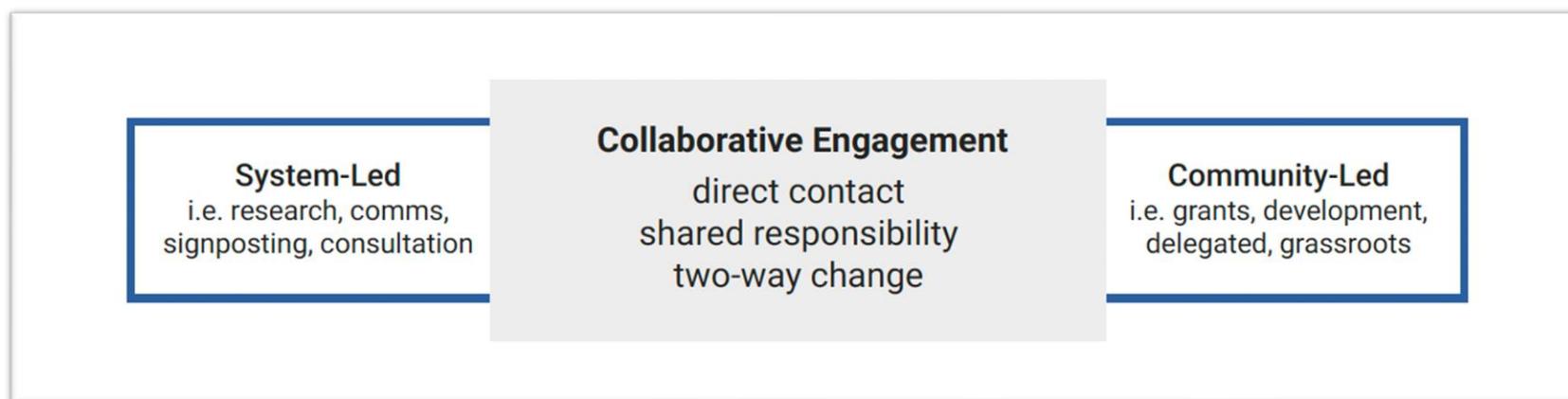


Defining community engagement

Community engagement and collaboration sits within 'community-centred approaches,' ranging from social prescribing to participatory grant-making, and an almost infinite array of activities in between.

By collaborative community engagement, we mean any activity in which different groups have direct contact and interaction with one another, like two gears meeting in a car's transmission, to make something bigger happen. It is:

- bi-directional interactions,
- between groups of people who share an interest,
- where meaningful negotiation of process, decisions or outcomes occur, that are
- particular to a specific context.





Defining community

Community is a useful term that helps us manage a lot of complexity. However, unspecific language can also create confusion, misunderstanding, and artificial boundaries. Before engaging with communities, it's useful to reflect on the assumptions we are bringing and how the communities define themselves. And sometimes, it's even useful to change the words we use.

In the health and care systems, we may mean:

- A **place or geographic boundary** to define scope for services, like a street or a neighbourhood, a borough or region.
- A **culture, or a group of cultures**, that experience persistent health inequity. We might cluster these together and create a label like BAME, South Asian, or Gypsy Roma and Travellers.
- Collections of individuals who don't share a social or cultural relationship, but some sort of **condition or life experience**, like people at risk of diabetes or people with a disability. It's more of a sub-population or demographic that the health system wants to manage as a group.
- A **proxy for or bridge to various communities**, like voluntary or charitable organisations, faith leaders, or grassroots special interest groups.
- Sometimes we even **mean an absence of community**. We try and create new social groups because old ones have disappeared or are no longer serving the needs of today's society, and people are lonely and suffering in isolation.



High-quality engagement

High-quality engagement can be achieved in many ways, at many different levels of scale and complexity. What's important is that the ingredients for meaningful collaboration are present: making a proactive effort, engaging in meaningful dialogue, and experiencing reciprocal change. High-quality engagement:

- **Reaches out proactively:**
 - ✓ going to where people are
 - ✓ including people who aren't already engaged
 - ✓ making engagement accessible to suit different people
 - ✓ valuing people's time fairly.
- **Has dialogue and relationship at its core:**
 - ✓ expanding the understanding of all parties involved
 - ✓ creating connections over time that extend beyond the bounds of a single interaction
 - ✓ happening across 1:1, group, and asynchronous settings
- **Makes an impact on everyone involved**
 - ✓ expecting change within all parties – both the community and the system
 - ✓ holding space for the difficult and the vulnerable and facing the issues people bring head-on
 - ✓ looking for synergies instead of treating situations like a zero-sum game





Barriers to scale and sustainability

Community-centred approaches can...

- Force us to face limitations: our own, our organisation's, the system's
- Shift and challenge boundaries that have been developed over many years of practice
- Question our role and expertise
- Make us face responsibility for problems that are uncomfortable or difficult to resolve

Ultimately, these dynamics often trigger elements of fear, avoidance, concern and nervousness that trigger institutional inertia and prevent scale beyond individual or local practice.

Even with all the time and money in the world, we won't do community engagement if it feels like a threat. These types of deep fears arise from real tensions, but they also stand in the way of our realising the many benefits of community engagement.

What you can do...



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There are things that individuals, teams and organisations and systems can do.

1. Starting from why:

- Defining purpose for yourself, your team and your organisation that connects engagement with deep drives
- And co-defining the agenda with communities

2. Taking ownership of relationships:

- Being specific, clear, purposeful and invested in the relationships that matter
- Developing the skills and methods to conduct dialogue at any scale and from any position in the system

3. Showing impact:

- Defining, measuring and understanding what matters – together
- Ensuring engagement is documented and artefacts created that build bridges rather than leave a series of isolated projects





1. Starting from Why

Why are we doing community engagement... honestly?

- Why are YOU doing engagement – what is your personal why?
- Why does your TEAM want to do engagement?
- What drives your organisation to do engagement?
- What reasons are shared with communities?

Putting it into practice...

A clear view on why we are engaging and how it benefits us helps us foster the open and curious attitude, alongside the perseverance, that makes high-quality community engagement possible.

If you are a community engagement practitioner: You've already had direct experience of how community engagement helps fulfil you, personally and professionally. When you're bringing new people and teams into the process, we'd recommend helping them reflect on their specific 'whys' to engage.

If you are a commissioner, clinician, or service provider: It can be hard to carve out the time and attention it requires. However, we've seen that no matter what drives you, community engagement offers ways to step beyond current tensions and limitations, and more fully achieve what you've set out to do.

If you're a senior leader: Just like individuals, different organisations have different ambitions, identities and value systems. As a leader, we recommend practicing regular dialogue with your teams and the communities you serve to surface and align what drives everyone, individually and collectively, so that vision can be brought forward into your dialogue with communities. (That also gives the organisation internal ways to practice and develop the skills of dialogue.)



2. Own your relationships

How do you take responsibility for turning up and engaging well and move from transactional to relational working?

- Facing up to historical injustice and mistrust
- Listening and being present
- Supervision and staff support
- Being vulnerable and open
- Curating engagement intentionally
- Engaging with larger groups of representative voices
- Asking people how they want to communicate
- Using artefacts to continue the conversation over time

Putting it into practice...

As people working within health and care, we are forming relationships and having conversations all of the time. High-quality community engagement is built from these fundamental building blocks that all of us can use, and can use effectively, with a bit of practice and planning.

What we are suggesting is that we can all be more proactive about our relationships and conversations, and take responsibility for making them adult, open, and two-way. As we do this, some of the most important issues to consider include:

- *Demonstrating our love and vulnerability to the community, as representatives of institutions.*
- *Developing and practicing active listening skills, and offering supportive listening spaces to our staff.*
- *Learning about and mastering a broad range of dialogic formats, from 1:1 to informal and formal groups.*
- *Planning in the time and money to proactively reach out to people and compensate them for their time.*

3. Show impact



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How do you who these conversations and relationships result in tangible change?

- Being clear about what's on the table
- Finding ways to respond to individual and transactional issues
- Use community dialogue to frame institutional performance metrics
- Ensure culturally responsive and racially equitable evaluation
- Measure the intangibles that really do matter

Putting it into practice...

Like the meme, 'pics or it didn't happen', high-quality community engagement is documented, and that record helps build trust and accountability, increases accessibility, and drives ongoing dialogue.

At its simplest, this means making sure to write things down and share them. How things are recorded and shared should be agreed as part of the engagement. And this can shift and grow over time, creating artefacts that are meaningful and beautiful in their own right.

If you are a community engagement practitioner: You're often the connective tissue, and it's crucial to make sure the time and effort to document what's happening is planned in and resourced. Networks like London Creative Health City can connect you with practitioners, facilitators and artists who work at the intersection of community and health.

If you are a commissioner, clinician, or service provider: You're really where the rubber hits the road in terms of action – being able to turn ideas into new experiences. Make sure that you're communicating back to communities what happens with their experiences and ideas.

If you're a senior leader: High-quality community engagement should deliver meaningful outcomes that are core to your organisation. However, this impact can't always be measured and evidenced in the ways that are most familiar. Thinking through these issues is a set of skills and expertise that should be fostered within your organisation so that evidence can be more effectively surfaced and sustainable funding is easier to secure.

For community engagement practitioners...



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We see all the great work you're doing despite the many barriers that get thrown up every day. You're probably already doing most of what we've outlined, but we hope you can find some useful resources and inspiration in the guide and resource library.

We'd suggest a focus on:

- Making the language around community engagement very specific and documenting as much of your process and outcomes as possible for others
- Helping the other people you work with reflect on their whys for community engagement and demonstrating how it helps people do 'their day job' and realise their own ambitions
- Finding ways to bring your other system colleagues into engagement and help them practice and gain confidence with relational ways of working
- Continuing to develop skills around dialogue and network weaving, as that facilitation is the glue that makes all of this possible
- Exploring arts-based methods as a way to richen engagement and create enduring artefacts that help close the loop



For commissioners, clinicians, or service providers...



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We know that the demands of driving toward short-term targets in a system under pressure makes it difficult to focus on the longer-term, relational, and non-transactional elements of care. We also know that it takes a serious toll on your own health and wellbeing. We don't want community engagement to be yet another problem in that stack of problems, but a meaningful, accessible, and transformative part of your practice.

We'd suggest a focus on:

- Thinking about communities and community engagement in more specific ways, and the types of adult, peer-to-peer relationships you'd like to build
- Finding ways in which community engagement helps you and your organisation be better at the things that are important to you
- Seeing all the ways you can bring your expertise and experience into dialogue with communities at any scale, including the 1:1 conversations you have every day
- Identifying ways to start with smaller, more incremental change to help fuel the bigger changes that need to happen
- Thinking about different ways to evidence what you're doing for maximum impact





For senior leaders...

We know you're carrying a lot of responsibility towards your teams, your institutions and your service users. It takes courage hold difficult conversations and challenge deep, unspoken rules of how we work, and we appreciate all the many ways you try to make change happen.

We'd suggest a focus on:

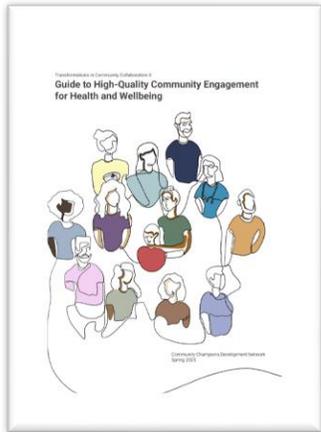
- Breaking open the 'black box' of community-centred approaches so that you can ensure that high quality engagement is part of the mix, and you know the key attributes to look for when judging it
- Thinking about ways to align non-individual and non-transactional work to your group's mission and processes, so that your teams' processes and systems shift and change to accommodate relational community work more naturally
- Getting engaged, too, learning ways to incorporate dialogue into your individual and small group conversations. Good listening is seen as key aspect of leadership and predictor of leadership potential
- Identifying places where might want to budget and invest - for example in recruiting and paying participants, hiring expert facilitators, commissioning deliberative dialogue, or establishing competencies in community-responsive evaluation



The resources

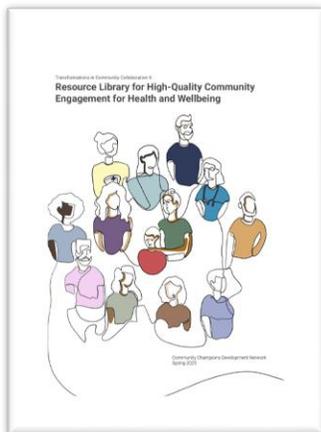


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[Guide to High-Quality Community Engagement for Health and Wellbeing](#)

- Focuses on community engagement as a sub-set of community-centred approaches defined by bi-directional dialogue and change.
- Sets out barriers to adoption and scale that include and go beyond well-trodden ones of resources and measurement.
- Provides advice for individuals, teams and organisations on what they can do to increase the amount and quality of engagement.



[Resource library](#) with 150+ resources, categorised across:

- Evidence: make the case for community-centred approaches and / or show how to evaluate and measure
- Guidance: official guidance on implementing community-centred or participatory approaches more broadly, or expert opinion and commentary on what makes for good practice, including self-reflection on lived experience.
- Method: how to's including case studies, training, and creative or arts-based outputs.
- Setting: touches upon an interesting population, setting or context - for example, working with children, people with disabilities, or in a particular type of clinical setting.

The resource guide

150+ resources...



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		Evidence	Guidance	Method	Setting
10 leadership practices which empower communities	UK - London		●		
<p>Enfield Council's Grace Murray explores the link between leadership and community power in local authorities. In this article she shares ten pointers for community-powered leadership. Some of these tips include: we vs us and them; being present in the day-to-day; bringing your fuller self to work; having fun and being kind in difficult times; and having a humble posture/servant leadership.</p> <p>Murray, G. (2024). 10 leadership practices which empower communities - New Local. New Local. https://www.newlocal.org.uk/articles/10-leadership-practices-which-empower-communities/</p>					

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		Evidence	Guidance	Method	Setting
"Freedom": The Promotion of Mental Health Through Co-Production in Organizations	Italy	●			●
<p>Results show how the different dimensions of empowerment are promoted in and reduction processes supported empowered outcomes on an individual level, such as satisfaction was perceived to promote empowering processes, such as a sense of safety and value of each subjectivity, and promotes participation and recovery.</p> <p>Costa, C., Madeo, A., Bolognini, P., Linda Degli Esposti, Filippi, M., Lamberini, F., Morrone, M., Matteo Masetti, (2024). "A Feeling of Safety and Freedom": The Promotion of Mental Health Recovery Through Co-Production. Community Mental Health Journal. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-024-01279-2</p>					

		Evidence	Guidance	Method	Setting
Common ground in	UK	●		●	
<p>Artificial intelligence (AI) can help groups reach a consensus during democratic deliberation by Nyhan and Titiunik). The authors trained a large language model called the AI mediator that helped small UK groups find common ground while discussing issues like Brexit, immigration, the minimum wage, climate change, and universal childcare. Compared with human mediators, AI mediators produced more palatable statements that generated wide agreement and left groups less divided. The AI's statements were more clear, logical, and informative without alienating minority perspectives. This work carries policy implications for AI's potential to unify deeply divided groups.</p> <p>Tessier, M. H., Bakker, M. A., Jarrett, D., Sheahan, H., Chadwick, M. J., Koster, R., Evans, G., Campbell-Gillingham, L., Collins, T., Parkes, D. C., Botvinick, M., & Summerfield, C. (2024). AI can help humans find common ground in democratic deliberation. Science, 386(6719). https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adq2852</p>					

		Evidence	Guidance	Method	Setting
"A place you haven't visited before": Creating the conditions for community dialogue	Global		●		
<p>This case study from the WHO's Healthy Communities movement examines the problems and promises of dialogue for reinvigorating public discourse. The article explores three tensions communities experienced as they attempted dialogue. These tensions included those between collaboration and hierarchy; between valuing communication as a medium for or an impediment to social change; and between representing diversity and developing consensus.</p> <p>Zoller, H. M. (2000). "A place you haven't visited before": Creating the conditions for community dialogue. Southern Communication Journal, 65(2-3), 191-207. https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940009373167</p>					

		Evidence	Guidance	Method	Setting
Active Inquiry	UK - Scotland			●	●
<p>This performance arts company creates theatre and arts projects with and for communities, based on the work of Augusto Boal and the Theatre of the Oppressed models. Theatre is used as a catalyst to uncover and challenge injustice. A current project, Drama for Democracy, is a four-year Legislative Theatre project with the aim of using Scottish theatre spaces as sites for participatory democracy.</p> <p>Active Inquiry. (2024). Active Inquiry - Home. Active Inquiry. https://www.activeinquiry.co.uk/</p>					

For more...



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If you need any further information, please contact office@adphlondon.org.uk