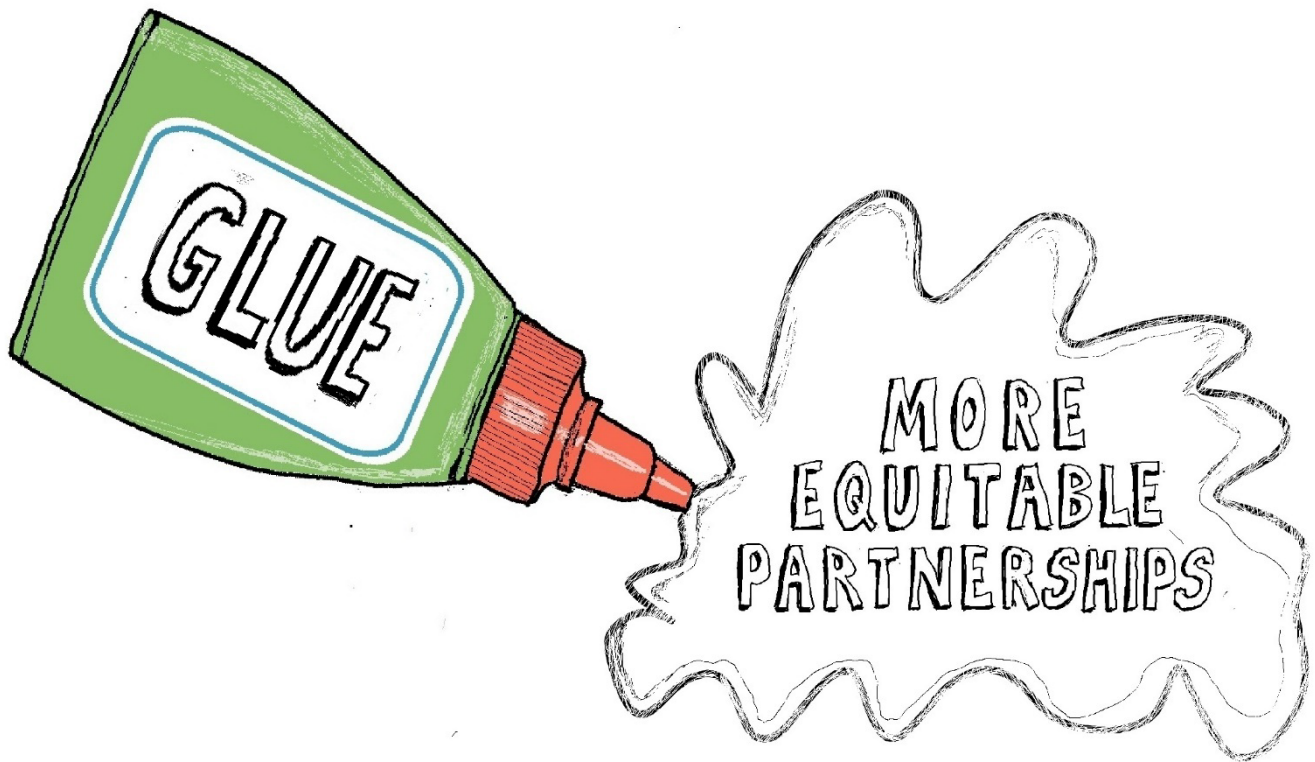


# ‘Part of the glue’

How research funders can support  
more equitable partnerships  
between community organisations  
and academic researchers



April 2026

**CO-PRODUCTION WORKS**



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## INTRODUCTION FROM THE VIVENSA FOUNDATION

**At the Vivensa Foundation, we invest in those who have great ideas and methods for helping all of us to age well in the UK.**

We go about this mission in multiple ways. These include providing funding and support for researchers working in ageing-related research, and for community organisations who provide services to older people, in the UK.

In recent years we launched a number of research funding programmes which aimed to bring these two areas of our work together, by funding proposals which saw academic research teams working in partnership with community organisations (what we refer to as “community-engaged research”). This review focuses on two of these programmes, which together funded 11 projects at a combined value of over £3m: namely our programme focussed on [building and developing suitable living environments and communities for an ageing population](#) (shortened to ‘Suitable Living Environments’), and our programme focussed on [interventions targeting the social determinants of healthy older age](#) (shortened to ‘Social Determinants’).

Our motivation behind these funding programmes was multi-fold. But key to our thinking was a recognition that community organisations have a deep understanding of what matters to them and the people they support, and so can drive useable and impactful research centred on the needs of those ‘on the ground’. In addition, one of our core values is ensuring equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in the work we support. The genuine involvement of community organisations should be central to delivering research that engages with underserved communities – which is vital if this research is to address the health inequalities which persist in our society and be of relevance to our increasingly diverse ageing population. Only when this is done meaningfully can the work we support truly help **all** of us to age well in the UK.

As a research funder, we appreciate that the way such funding programmes are designed and delivered can influence – both positively and negatively – the relationships between the various partners involved. **At various points in the report, we have highlighted actions that we took in the development of the funding programmes, or have introduced since, to try and support equitable partnerships within the projects we funded.** To this end, it is pleasing to see that all the community organisations featured spoke about the benefits of their involvement in these projects. However, we recognise that there is more we can do, and we look forward to implementing the review’s recommendations in our work moving forward. We also know that there are other organisations doing valuable work in this space, and our aim here is to highlight and draw from this.

Ultimately, we hope this report helps other research funders to support more equitable partnerships in the community-engaged research they fund. If you have any comments on the

review, or ideas for how we might work together to address the recommendations, we would be very happy to hear from you.

We would like to extend our gratitude to Pete Fleischmann for carrying out this independent review and authoring this report. We are also incredibly grateful to everyone who contributed to the review as an interviewee, took part in a focus group and/or provided a contribution to the report.

## FOREWORDS

“Our experience at Inspiring Communities Together, of working as co-designers and delivery partners with the University of Salford, showed how funders’ expectations, processes and values can support genuine partnership, rather than a more traditional model where the voluntary sector is brought in only to support delivery. On this project, the Vivensa Foundation treated community organisations as equal partners. Our time was properly resourced, lived experience was valued alongside academic expertise, and there was flexibility in how the work was delivered. This created the right conditions for trust, shared decision-making and meaningful outcomes.

We believe this approach matters because funders are uniquely placed to influence how community–research partnerships work, not just on individual projects but across the wider system. By developing clear guidance for funders, we hope to see a shift towards more equitable funding approaches that prioritise co-design and partnership working from the very beginning. For this to happen, funders need to invest realistically in community capacity and leadership, and support evaluation frameworks that reflect outcomes defined by communities themselves, not only institutional priorities. Ultimately, we hope this guidance will help funders act as enablers of long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships that lead to stronger research and more meaningful change for communities.”

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**Bernadette Elder, Executive Director, Inspiring Housing Community Land Trust (former CEO of Inspiring Communities Together)**

“There is a desperate need for work that respects, values and gives voice to the experience and expertise of communities across the UK. The people who live in areas condemned as deprived, depleted or left-behind are easily ignored and often overlooked, even by those seeking to change their lives for the better. These communities experience the steady stream of initiatives, schemes, plans and policies that land in their neighbourhoods as being done *to* them, and they can spot the pitfalls, flaws and context-blind thinking a mile off.

Research can help to change that picture, especially when people are given the opportunity to set agendas, mobilise capability and make the case for change on their terms. Doing that alone is tough, so funders, universities and researchers should support communities to contribute in productive, mutually beneficial and sustainable ways. As this review highlights, that’s not a straightforward task, but there is an active and growing community of people ready and willing to help the sector invest in, support and nourish research agendas that genuinely value and benefit from the experience and expertise of communities.

Our work at UKRI has demonstrated that there is a huge enthusiasm among communities to get involved in research. They recognise the opportunity not only to enhance and enrich academic research, but to capture and showcase the lived experience of their communities and catalyse the change they know is needed. My hope is that more funders, universities and academics see the huge potential behind this enthusiasm and support communities to become a central part of the UK's rich and varied research landscape.”

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**David Chapman, Public Engagement Lead, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)**

“Despite commitment in academia to valuing community partnerships, communities rarely enter academic research as equals – whether in terms of the knowledge they are seen as holding, the funding structures that support them, or the point at which they are brought into the research process. A key aspect, therefore, of the [Amar Bari, Amar Jibon \('My home, my life'\) project](#) (ABAJ), was how much the funding conditions created the conditions for what followed within our project.

The Vivensa Foundation’s funding call required community organisations to be embedded as funded partners from the earliest stages of proposal design, and that policy decision mattered hugely. This meant that academic and community partners could participate as equals: equally resourced and equal in our stake in how the research was designed. Funding conditions cannot do everything, but they helped establish an equal starting point which then created possibilities for genuine collaboration within the ABAJ partnership. We could plan and design research that drew on a diverse set of expertise and fostered a sense of shared ownership, remaining aligned throughout and building capacity and mutual learning for all involved.

This experience suggests something important about where change needs to happen. Funders hold considerable power in determining whether community-engaged research is participatory in name or in practice. Our experience suggests they should use it more deliberately and routinely by embedding community organisations within funding calls, with equal partnership becoming the norm rather than the exception. Building on this, I also hope that community involvement extends further into shaping funders’ research agendas from the outset, so that funding priorities reflect the concerns of those most affected. There is also a need to look beyond the level of projects to consider how relationships between academic and community partners can be sustained both as a form of impact, and as a pathway to delivering it.”

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**Dr Manik Gopinath, Senior Lecturer in Ageing and Principal Investigator for the ABAJ project, The Open University**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This review explores how funders can improve partnerships between community organisations and academics in the research they support. It combines existing guidance with interviews and focus groups with community representatives, academic researchers and funders.

## SUMMARY FINDINGS

Community organisations enjoy many benefits through their involvement in research partnerships. Common themes of a good partnership between community organisations and academic researchers include a shared sense of mission, mutual respect, understanding and trust. Working in a particular geographic area also has numerous benefits in relationship building, fostering a sense of shared mission and enhancing cost-effectiveness.

This review identifies several structural and systemic issues which underly the relationship between community organisations and academic researchers.

There is a complex power dynamic between community organisations and academic research teams, which echoes wider societal inequalities. Both groups are experiencing enormous financial pressures and uncertainty. The power differentials are not straightforward. But usually within collaborative research projects, the research team will have more power and resources than their community organisation partner.

In addition, there is a difference, both real and perceived, in emphasis between the objectives of academic researchers and community partners. Academic researchers' primary task is producing knowledge, whereas community organisations are grounded by their geography and/or by their mission to serve the interests of a particular group of people.

A further barrier to good relationships is the culture and administrative systems of academia. Often this seems to lack the flexibility to completely accommodate partnerships between academic researchers and community organisations.

Sustainability is also an enormous issue for both community organisations and academic researchers. Often it is difficult to continue the good work of a research partnership once a particular project or grant has come to an end.

Research funders – through their funding calls and requirements, eligibility criteria, overall approach etc. – have an important role to play in facilitating and supporting community-research partnerships.

## SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations herein set out a pathway for research funders to support more equitable relationships between community organisations and academic researchers. They aim to lessen any structural barriers and to support the relational nature of partnership working. A full set of recommendations is included in the main body of the report, but are split here into separate headings.

### **Nurture relationships**

Research funders should become more active in fostering relationships with community partners, and between community and academic partners. They could do this by:

- Forming direct relationships with community partners.
- Being available for direct discussions with community organisations during the application stage.
- Convening programme-wide, facilitated action learning sets or reflective practice groups for community and academic partners.
- Building in funded time for relationship development at the beginning of projects and/or programmes.

### **Set clear expectations**

Research funders need to provide more information and clarity about their expectations for community-engaged research. They could:

- Co-create, with community organisations and academic researchers, a clear definition and set of principles for community-engaged research.
- Offer more clarity / guidance around the capacity implications of engaging in research projects.
- Develop processes and policies that enable community organisations to cover the true (full economic) cost of their contributions.

### **Diversify research funding models**

Some of the current, more traditional, research funding processes and models present barriers to community organisations who wish to join research partnerships. Research funders could:

- Develop staged funding calls which incorporate enough time, funding and support for community organisations to fully participate.
- Once grants are awarded, maintain a flexible, iterative approach.
- Provide funding for infrastructure, learning and partnership building.

- Assign a portion of the project budget to community organisations, to be spent towards aspects of the research as they and/or the people they serve decide.
- Provide a range of funding models to ensure that community organisations are supported to take a leadership role in research projects.

### **Funding research eco-systems**

An eco-system approach blends project-based funding with supporting places and relationships. Developing an eco-system mindset enables research funders to address some key concerns of community organisations, including those around voice, equity, capacity, community development and sustainability. Research funders could:

- Invest for the long-term, aiming for sustainable development in relationships, communities and research capacity. For example, by considering pre-award seed funding and post-award follow-on / bridging funds.
- Consider the role of development co-ordinators or other intermediaries / brokers to convene and facilitate partnerships in some research programmes.
- Support a range of co-located organisations to increase place-based capacity, research skills and sustainability.
- Develop ongoing relationships with key community organisations, but also provide targeted resources and be proactive to ensure seldom heard groups can participate.
- Form partnerships and alliances with other funders to maximise sustainability.
- Develop a pool of consultants / agencies which can help to fill community organisations' knowledge, skills and capacity gaps.

### **Include communities in research processes**

To support more equitable partnerships, and address potential power dynamics, between community organisations and academic researchers, research funders need to adapt their processes and governance. Research funders could:

- Co-create a strategy for offering community organisations a greater role in research funding governance and processes.
- Steadily offer more opportunities for representatives of community organisations to take part in internal committees, groups and activities.
- Adapt methodologies such as James Lind Alliance and Experience Based Co-design to achieve greater alignment between the research priorities of communities and academic researchers.

## INTRODUCTION

There is currently unprecedented interest in community-engaged research. There is an enormous amount of guidance available for researchers wishing to collaborate with community organisations. There is also advice and literature aimed at community organisations wishing to engage with academics. Research funders are in a uniquely powerful position to influence and shape these research collaborations. However, there is currently very little guidance available to research funders wishing to invest in partnerships between academic researchers and community organisations.

As more community-engaged research is supported, there is a pressing need for high quality guidance aimed specifically at research funders. This exploratory review aims to begin to address this lack of guidance. It achieves this by looking at the available literature and speaking to community organisation representatives, research funders and academic researchers.

The review seeks to gain a better understanding of the factors that both facilitate and hinder effective community-engaged research. And, perhaps most importantly, it explores how research funders can improve the partnerships between community organisations and academics in the research they fund.

The review focuses primarily on the ‘Suitable Living Environments’ programme funded by the Vivensa Foundation, but also includes two interviews with community partners involved in the Vivensa Foundation’s ‘Social Determinants’ programme.

## BACKGROUND TO THE FUNDING PROGRAMMES

Launched in April 2021, the “Building and developing suitable living environments and communities for an ageing population” programme (or ‘Suitable Living Environments’ programme) aimed to attract innovative proposals that supported collaborative projects between academic researchers and community organisation partners.

The eight funded projects were announced in 2022 and were based in a range of locations across England. All the projects had a lead applicant based at a university.

The topics addressed by the funded projects were varied and include exploring the housing choices of Bangladeshi elders, testing new assistive technologies in a ‘living lab’, using wearable technology to investigate how to make homes safer, co-creating and evaluating a community-based food model, and investigating the impact of COVID-19 on older people’s social connections.

All the studies used community-engaged research methods to some extent. However, the approaches to including older people and community organisations as partners were diverse.

The “Interventions targeting the social determinants of healthy older age” programme (or ‘Social Determinants’ programme) launched in June 2022 and, like the ‘Suitable Living Environments’ programme, required that proposals involved academic researchers working in partnership with community organisations.

Three research projects were funded through the programme in 2023, each led by a lead applicant based at a university in England, encompassing topics including the identification and targeting of digital exclusion, designing more joined-up physical and mental health care for older adults, and testing a specialised ‘link worker’ role to support older adults with cerebral palsy.

With both programmes, the Vivensa Foundation’s aim was to promote researchers and community organisations working together in genuine partnership, to undertake research with real-world relevance and the potential to make a difference at a local, regional or national level.

## METHODOLOGY

The review included:

- Desk research to identify relevant existing guidance for funders.
- Interviews with representatives of community organisation involved in the ‘Suitable Living Environments’ and ‘Social Determinants’ programmes.
- Sense-checking focus groups with UK-based community organisation representatives, research funders and academic researchers.

A detailed methodology, and a discussion of the limitations of the review, is included in the appendices.

## REVIEW SAMPLE

The desk research included:

- 115 Google links.
- 6 links supplied by the Vivensa Foundation.
- 4 links provided by ChatGPT.

Of these 125 pieces of data, 27 were judged to be of possible relevance. Of the 27, six reports or websites were assessed to be of particular interest, and these were examined in further detail. Four of these reports / websites were identified as being most relevant as they specifically focussed on advice and guidance to funders. These were:

***Power, participation and transformative change: how funders can help***; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2023.

***Beyond project funding: How can funders nurture healthy systems?*** Collaborate, 2023.

***Four Approaches to Supporting Equitable Research Partnerships***; UK Collaborative on Development Research / ESSENCE, 2022.

***An equitable future for research and innovation. Building sustained community involvement in knowledge production***; The Young Foundation's Institute for Community Studies (commissioned by UK Research and Innovation), 2022.

Summaries of the six reports and websites (the four listed above, plus two others judged to be of lesser relevance but still of value) are included in the appendices.

13 representatives of community organisations involved in Vivensa Foundation funding programmes were interviewed online.

Four focus groups were then held with:

- Five representatives of community organisations.
- Three representatives of research funding organisations.
- Six academic researchers, across two separate focus groups.

Two additional one-to-one interviews were held with research funder representatives who were unable to attend the funders' focus group.

### **About the community organisations**

The community organisations included a wide variety of organisations of different sizes, client groups and scope. Some specialised in services to older people whilst others had broader offers. The sample included small community housing associations, almshouses, user groups and charities, a well-established citywide ageing partnership and some large housing associations and technology-enabled care providers.

The full list of organisations who contributed to the review is provided in the "Acknowledgements" section at the end of this report.

## FINDINGS

### THE WAYS IN WHICH COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS CONTRIBUTE TO RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

Typically, the community organisations' contribution to a research project involved facilitating access to participants and organising activities such as product testing, interviews and focus groups. Some organisations were engaged in project advisory and leadership groups, contributing to tasks such as recruitment of project staff. In other projects, the community organisation employed a researcher and were involved in data gathering and analysis. One community organisation specialised in knowledge transfer and communications, and this was their unique contribution to the projects they were involved in.

Some projects had an element of community development; for example, co-creating and hosting a programme of activities. In all cases, the community organisations' key contribution was a deep understanding of, and commitment to, their clients and community.

### BENEFITS TO COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS OF ENGAGING IN RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

All the community organisation representatives interviewed cited a range of benefits they enjoyed through their involvement in the research partnerships, both for their organisations and the wider community they support.

These included learning new skills, forming new partnerships and networks, and gaining new confidence and capacities. Their involvement helped them understand their communities better. In several instances, the evidence generated by the research project was used to access further funding or to influence local policy.

*...involvement helped us develop several key skills and build capacity within our organisation, and we enhanced our research and funding bid application skills...also [we] broadened our network abilities, gaining connections with new organisations and academics, and also, we strengthened our presentation skills and shared our project experiences with diverse audiences.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 11)**

*Our community is seeing us being involved in new, cutting-edge research that is trying to support them. So, it's given us credentials.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 7)**

*The benefit for us, is about hearing our customers authentically, telling somebody what they want in their home.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 13)**

*...because of [the project], the council funded food initiatives for older people.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 9)**

*So I think we left a legacy of the potential for research to be carried out very effectively within our living environments.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 2)**

*[Community members] learned a lot of new skills themselves. So it wasn't just about, you know, we'll take from your stories. They learnt a lot about how pictures tell a story, but they also learnt how to take pictures. At the end of it, they actually produced the whole book, that was something really important to the older people [involved in the project].*

**(Community organisation interviewee 1)**

## INGREDIENTS OF A GOOD RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP

The strength of the relationship between the community organisation and academic researchers is a key factor in the ability of a team to achieve its aims and objectives. In many of the projects, effective, high functioning partnerships were formed. This section examines the ingredients that helped to create a good research partnership.

A strong relationship includes mutual respect, understanding and trust. This is underpinned by a sense that the partners have complementary skills.

*I think you become a better you. If you get involved in these things, you understand your topic better. You do a better job. Your life is better. But the core to that, the key to that, is having the right partnership, working with people you get on with.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 3)**

*People relate to people, not to institutions, so relationships are critical. Investing upfront in creating trusting relationships as a core foundation of effective collaboration has been incredibly important. We've seen how the connections that are formed through this work proliferate and go on to create more opportunities and bring more people in... 'thickening the soup' of connection between the university and the community in multiple ways.*

**(Collaborate blog excerpt, 2023)**

*We are coming with different skills and experiences...There's respect for each other and for what we are bringing into the discussions... And we all felt that we are all valued for who we are and what we are bringing. And at the same time, we are very open and we want to learn from each other.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 10)**

*I love this combination of intellectual curiosity, community and neighbourhood-facing work. ...that's a sweet spot in our work.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 3)**

Several of the research partnerships arose out of longstanding relationships and collaborations over many years. This provides a firm foundation for effective and successful projects.

*We were in a fortunate position that we already had a very strong relationship with the university. We were already on the same page.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 1)**

Creative and constructive working relationships were also formed between academic researchers and community organisations who did not have any previous history of working together.

*I think they found us from the internet, and they read about our experience and what we are doing for the community... it was quite amazing, actually, how everything sort of clicked between all the partners. And everyone just got in there saying, 'this is what we can contribute, this is what I can contribute, this is what we want to get out of it'.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 10)**

Another dimension of a good research partnership is a shared sense of mission in which both partners, though perhaps bringing different perspectives and skills, share a common wish for change.

*I think [a good partnership] is relational, it's about trust, it's about curiosity, it's about mission. So...it goes with the grain of what we're [already] doing.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 3)**

Working in a particular geographic area has numerous benefits in relationship building, fostering a sense of mission and enhancing cost effectiveness.

*Taking a place-based approach is the most efficient way to build relationships and test the model.*

**(Collaborate blog excerpt, 2023)**

*Being able to co-locate a lot of the activity means that you can do more for less. So that's certainly a factor. I think it also helps in terms of the communities that you are participating with.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 4)**

If a partnership is well managed and governed, this increases the likelihood of a successful outcome.

*I think [the academic researchers], to give them full credit, project managed this [study] in a way that enables everybody to participate equally and to have a good say, but also to draw on the expertise of each of those contributors or actors, so that the final report that's being published shortly is very inclusive.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 5)**

## SOME OF THE STRUCTURAL ISSUES THAT MAY LEAD TO DIFFICULTIES IN RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

All of the projects included in the review produced successful outcomes. Nevertheless, some projects experienced more conflict and difficulties than others. This section does not explore specific difficult episodes, issues or dilemmas within particular projects. Rather, it considers some of the underlying systemic and structural issues which can lead to challenges within projects. If it is possible to eliminate or reduce some of these issues, then it is less likely that difficulties will arise within projects. And if project partners have a better understanding of the systemic and structural issues which may underly conflicts, then when problems do arise it might be easier to work together to resolve them.

However, it is worth saying that partnership working is a creative process which may at times feel challenging.

*Collaboration needs to be a messy, ambiguous and uncomfortable process, that disrupts as much as it settles, and this is even more pertinent against the backdrop of austerity and rapid urban change. Seen in this sense, conflict is an intrinsic and necessary part of any co-production process... Yet challenges with collaborative approaches are often glossed over, especially in relation to the difficulties of collaborating in precarious and both emotionally and politically charged contexts.*

**(British Science Association essay competition excerpt, 2025)**

A central issue that lies behind all the factors identified in this section is the power differential between most community organisations and most academic institutions. This is a complex issue which reflects wider societal inequalities. Some of the community organisations included in the review, but not all, are themselves relatively large institutions. The research teams are typically based within universities with thousands of employees and considerable resources. However, the teams undertaking the research itself may consist of a small number of people, some of whom may themselves be on precarious short-term contracts.

*[People tend to see] universities as big organisations, with lots of power. Actually, what we've got is a lot of little teams within universities who have the desire to do this research.*

**(Academic focus group participant)**

*Neither universities nor communities are homogenous entities, but nebulous, de-centralised micro-systems with multiple different constituencies who value different things and operate in different ways.*

**(Collaborate blog excerpt, 2023)**

Nonetheless, in the context of a 'typical' research project in which the lead academic researcher is the grant-holder, the power dynamic sways toward the academic researchers (who hold the formal award agreement with the funder). The researchers will typically have control over the budget, be responsible for distributing the resources and will lead the direction of the project. In addition, the unequal power dynamic is expressed in less tangible ways through the language and culture of research.

*There's no equality.*

*Projects that try to help*

*Revert back to middle class structures*

*And decision making*

*All the while framing co-production*

*In academic books.*

*Our voices unheard...*

**(From "The Meeting" by Tina Cribbin, quoted in British Science Association essay competition excerpt, 2025)**

A similar power dynamic may also occur between community organisations and research funders.

*We learned we needed to do more to acknowledge those power dynamics and ongoing reflection led us to understand that we were operating from a minus trust level.*

**(Joseph Rowntree Foundation report excerpt, 2023)**

A consistent issue raised by community organisations is an awareness that they are receiving less money than their academic partners.

*Universities are a lot more expensive than us. So obviously, there is not an equal distribution [of funds]. And you can only apply for, you know, the resource that you need. So, if your staff are paid 20 pounds, and university are paid 40 pounds, it's never going to be an equal distribution, is it?*

**(Community organisation interviewee 1)**

*...the costs are so high in terms of the university. And bless them, the researchers know this, and they can't get away from it. But what that does is then squeeze the remaining budget. And all the other organisations, the charitable organisations, housing associations, are scrabbling over small amounts of money. The universities are recognising our value but can't do anything because they're stuck by their own funding constraints.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 5)**

The solutions to this issue are complex. In the academic focus group, participants spoke about the financial pressures universities are currently experiencing and how this influences the kind of projects academic researchers can take on.

*Universities are strapped for cash and need the overheads to survive. So my fear is that getting community organisations more involved [in research] might make that even more difficult for academics, to persuade their universities to get involved [in community-engaged research].*

**(Academic focus group participant)**

One potential way to address this power dynamic is to allow the community organisation to be the grant-holding partner (as opposed to the academic institution). Some community organisations said they would like to be research project grant-holders. But one community organisation representative said that they did not wish to become the grant-holder, because

their small financial department would not have the capacity to deal with the increased workload.

The community representatives interviewed highlighted that there is a difference – whether genuine or perceived – of emphasis between the objectives of academic researchers and community partners.

*The university, they're very much focused on, 'what's the learning from this?' - full stop. We're very much interested in, 'what's the learning that we can take forward from this and carry it on?' and so I think that's something that's different between a university and a community organisation.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 1)**

*We made a decision very early on as an organisation, that in terms of research, we would be involved in research if it met two criteria: one, that they answered the questions that our community wanted to answer specifically; and two, that it helped us to advocate for the change that we were seeking. This is about understanding what we need to do to help our community and trying to make that happen for them. So we come from a different place.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 7)**

*You know, research is great, and it's great to be involved in something, but so what? What next?*

**(Community organisation focus group participant)**

There was also acknowledgement of this issue from some of the research funders.

*The community want to make an impact in their local area. They're serving a particular community in a particular place. The university has a less tangible set of outcomes and impacts that they're wanting to achieve.*

**(Individual funder interviewee)**

Community organisations are grounded by their geography and/or by their mission to serve the interests of a particular group of people. Some of the community representatives felt that academic researchers, in part due to the very nature of academic funding cycles, do not share as strong a connection to a place and/or client group.

*I think this is just the nature of research projects; the funding ends [and] that research team move on to different things. So it is difficult to keep that continuity, to really embed those learnings when your collaborator is no longer there.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 8)**

*Researchers are a bit like consultants sometimes [in that] they're always looking out for the next piece of work, actually like builders. We found that recently, they never quite finish it off, you know, because they've always got to get [on with] the next job.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 3)**

The administrative regime of academia, especially around contracting, user payments and ethical permissions, also presents some structural barriers to equitable partnerships.

*Academics tend to speak very formally. They position a lot of their ideas in written language, without the use of imagery and things like that. That took a little bit of getting used to, and is certainly a challenge to fully get your head around, especially if you're then going to include residents as part of a process who are even further removed from that sort of text heavy approach to things.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 4)**

*There have been a few places where we don't necessarily have the same shared understanding of collaboration.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 6)**

*If you were working with the university for the first time, you wouldn't be aware that there's going to be this time lag, and they have to receive ethical permission.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 4)**

*I think administratively, there has been some issues...[academic] researchers being used to working in a research way, universities having their systems, and us having our systems. How do you collaborate on that level?*

**(Community organisation interviewee 7)**

In the academic focus groups, participants spoke about how the current university system makes it more difficult for academic researchers to form equitable partnerships with community organisations.

*We were fighting against our university to get them to accept that we could put in a bid for this type of funding, and it's getting worse and worse, because the universities are strapped for cash.*

**(Academic focus group participant)**

Sustainability is an enormous issue for community organisations.

*Yeah, so sustainability beyond the project was our work package within the project and within the bid right from the start. So we recognised its importance, of having something that lived beyond the project itself. However, it's been one of the biggest challenges. How do you perpetuate something that you believe has been successful and has value when the funding is removed [or finished]?*

**(Community organisation interviewee 4)**

*It would have been nice for [the funder], perhaps to have that conversation and had that thinking, even if it was to link the community organisation up with another funder.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 1)**

*...commercialisation, is a challenge, in nearly all types of research we do. I don't think we think, 'how can we commercialise this, turn this into products at the end of it?', but we know that it does help in terms of dissemination and having a life beyond the initial research...But the challenge is, often, getting engagement from commercial organisations to buy into what you're doing.*

**(Community organisation focus group participant)**

A consistent issue that community organisation representatives raised was the amount of time the research project was taking and the constraints that put on their capacity.

This time pressure applies to the bidding process, when organisations work at risk. This is especially challenging for smaller organisations with very limited capacity.

*If you spend even 10 hours' work on a funding application like this, and then you're not getting anything back from it, it means you can't do other things.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 12)**

Academic researchers are more accustomed to the process of applying for research funding and tend to see writing proposals as part of their role. But they noted the need for longer application windows.

*So when the call came out, we already had a connection with the community groups and some of the stakeholders that we knew we were going to be working with. However, even then, we found it a real challenge to bring the bid together within the timeframe, I think there was a really short window for that initial expression of interest...And as a first time [lead applicant] trying to navigate a very kind of complicated, bureaucratic university system which, in our case, usually asks for a finished application ready four weeks before it's due to go in. It meant that we had a week between the briefing meeting and when I needed to get the bid together, to work with all these different partners. So I think just a little bit slower pace during that design process, I think is really necessary.*

**(Academic focus group participant)**

Participants in the academic focus groups also commented on how a time-pressured and complex bidding process can affect their relationship with a community organisation partner.

*It's hard enough as academics to be putting in that kind of time [to develop a proposal]. But it did feel like there was a huge ask of the community.*

**(Academic focus group participant)**

*When we take them [community organisations] into these [research bidding] processes, we are pulling resources away from their core business, and they are often very underfunded and working in very pressured contexts. For us, because we didn't end up ...getting the funding, we actually felt like we'd really let down our partners.*

**(Academic focus group participant)**

Several community organisations acknowledged that they had underestimated the time they would need to spend on the research project.

*Obviously, in hindsight, you know, if we had anticipated the additional workload, we would have included higher staffing costs in the original funding application.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 11)**

All the community organisations remained committed to the research projects and were glad to be involved, but the feeling of being under-resourced persists.

*I don't think we anticipated the demand it would place on our time. We're really proud to be associated with it, but I'm also conscious on reflection that actually we've completely undervalued our time.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 5)**

## WHAT CAN RESEARCH FUNDERS DO TO IMPROVE PARTNERSHIP WORKING BETWEEN COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS AND ACADEMIC RESEARCHERS?

This section sets out a range of measures which interviewees, focus group participants and the key reports indicate could address some of the issues raised in the review.

It begins by describing two overarching shifts in the attitudes, approach and culture of research funders. These are firstly to involve community organisations more fully in the process of funding research, and secondly to take an eco-system approach to funding. The section then continues with some more specific measures that research funders could take.

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### INVOLVE COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS MORE FULLY IN THE PROCESS OF FUNDING RESEARCH

The issue of power permeates the relationships between research funders, academic researchers and community organisations. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023) report says funders need to “acknowledge and work towards our own transformation...”. The report suggests that one way of achieving this is to “reduce the disconnect between funders and those they fund”. It argues that unless funders can form closer connections to the people they serve, they will not be able to keep in check their own biases and assumptions.

The representatives of the community organisations said that they have valuable insights to share with funders about the needs of their client groups and communities.

*We're all cut back to the bare bones of our capacity, and all of our work is much more complex than it's ever been in the past...it's even more important that we [community organisations] get involved, because there's even more evidence out there of need.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 12)**

However, there was a feeling among the community interviewees and focus group participants that there can sometimes be a separation between the reality of their day to day work and the priorities of academic researchers and funders.

*I've had these conversations with [community organisation] trustees, where the trustees are saying, 'how are the research findings informing our decisions?'. I don't really have the answer to that, so I think that's something that should be brought into, the pre-thinking of, working with community organisations.*

**(Community organisation focus group participant)**

*Community organisations know the challenges that we face. We know the problems we're trying to solve on a tangible level. So it makes sense that community organisations should instigate [funding programmes], because these are the problems that we as an organisation face on a daily basis.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 8)**

In the literature, interviews and focus groups, several approaches to addressing this sense of disconnection are proposed. The Young Foundation's Institute for Community Studies (2022) report suggested increasing "community representation in decision-making roles over funding".

*This includes working collaboratively with different community groups in all parts of the funding process, from setting priorities to deciding funding criteria. These could be community commissioners, roles on committees designing funding, or collaborative setting of research agendas and research priorities.*

**(Institute for Community Studies report excerpt, 2022)**

The community organisation representatives also mentioned the need for a greater role in research governance.

*I am on [a funder's advisory group] but, as far as I'm aware, am still the only community organisation representative. I don't think that I should be the only community representative...*

**(Community organisation interviewee 9)**

Interviewees also felt that community organisations should have a larger role in the design of research programmes.

*...perhaps what they need to think about when they're developing these projects...if they want to work with the community, what does that look like? And perhaps, if they got some community organisations together and thought about it from their perspective as well, would they have got more out of it?*

**(Community organisation interviewee 1)**

In the academic focus groups, it was suggested that one possible approach to engaging community organisations in shaping grant programmes was to seek to better align the priorities of community organisations, academic researchers and research funders using an established methodology used in health research.

*Is there scope for having James Lind Alliance<sup>1</sup> priority setting exercises?*

**(Academic focus group participant)**

This could help address the concerns raised in the community organisations' focus group.

*I think what would be helpful is maybe [funders] doing workshops with community organisations where they can really connect the research to their day-to-day operations. Because what often happens is [research activity is] almost like a separate thing.*

**(Community organisation focus group participant)**

If the priorities of community organisations and academic researchers were more systematically aligned, this might reduce some of the tensions that arise in research partnerships.

Participants in the academic researcher focus group drew attention to the tensions that can exist between the perspectives of community organisations and members of communities. So, it is important that any priority setting exercise reconciles the interests of research funders, academics, community organisations and community members. Both the James Lind Alliance methodology and other approaches used in health service improvement, such as Experience-based Co-design<sup>2</sup>, take great care to ensure that the perspectives of all involved groups, including the public, are given equal weight.

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<sup>1</sup> The James Lind Alliance (JLA) brings patients, carers and clinicians together to identify and prioritise unanswered questions that they agree are the most important, so that researchers and funders are aware of the issues that matter most to the people who need to use the research in their everyday lives.

<sup>2</sup> Experience-based Co-design is a structured, participatory approach to service improvement that brings together professionals with patients and carers to co-design services based on shared emotional experiences rather than just clinical outcomes.

## VIVENSA FOUNDATION CASE STUDY



As part of the development of the ‘Suitable Living Environments’ programme, we sent out a survey to our community at large – both academic researchers and community organisations – to understand what they would like to see in the funding call, and what key topics / questions they felt should be addressed.

Through this process, we connected with two organisations – Johnnie Johnson Housing (now part of Sanctuary) and United St Saviour’s Charity – who indicated that they would like to be involved as community organisations with whom researchers could potentially partner. They fed into the call by also defining their needs and capacity (i.e. the sort of research questions they would like to answer, levels of involvement and what they could offer to prospective research partners). This information was included in the guidelines for the call, and representatives from both organisations were involved in the webinar which took place during the application process.

Both Johnnie Johnson Housing and United St Saviour’s Charity were involved in the assessment panel for the ‘Suitable Living Environments’ programme, to ensure they had a say on any proposals that sought to partner with them. Also on the panel was an equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) expert and representatives of other external community organisations, including a member of our then Community Grants Committee, to help bring a community perspective to the assessment process.

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### DEVELOPING A LONG-TERM ECO-SYSTEM APPROACH TO FUNDING

The second shift is to develop an eco-system approach to funding. This, as the title of a report by Collaborate (2023) puts it, means moving “beyond project funding”. An eco-system-based funding approach imagines a more active role for funders in terms of building and sustaining relationships and taking a more long-term, place-based / neighbourhood approach.

It is interesting to note that one community representative interviewed found it difficult to envisage research funders taking such a different approach.

*Nobody's going to give you some money to say 'we want you over the next three years to build a relationship with the community from a university perspective', are they?*

**(Community organisation interviewee 1)**

Other interviewees said that research funders could have more of an active role in facilitating relationships between academic researchers and community organisations.

*So a bit like in terms of developing relationships, how does one prepare and build that, the confidence, the capability of those organisations? And I think this is where [a funder] could become part of the glue to generate this sort of relationship.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 5)**

One interviewee was already involved in an eco-system approach and described how this contributed to sustainability.

*I think the fact that we built an eco-system and a partnership around these programmes means that we've already planned in a way of working to sustain the work in one form or another.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 3)**

Another focus group participant described how they were looking to form a long-term relationship with a university.

*We've worked with several universities now. I feel like we're at a stage now where we're looking for a long-term strategic partner, where we can develop a body of work over a period of time. Because what happens, and it just is the way it is, researchers move to the next funding call. And you lose that intellectual capital, as they move on...then you have to establish a [new] relationship with another university...what we're exploring now is creating a longer-term strategic relationship with a neighbouring university, instead of this project based [position].*

**(Community organisation focus group)**

The reports / resources considered to be most relevant by our literature review also consistently argued for a long-term approach to funding.

*We hope [our framework] will help funders to identify how they might intervene differently and encourage community groups and researchers to consider how they can collectively contribute to a wider movement for change.*

**(Collaborate blog excerpt, 2023)**

*Long-term core funding is needed that devolves power, recognising that people doing the work have more expertise in knowing what is needed than those who fund it. The lack of long-term investment in what is needed creates untenable high risks of burn out.*

**(Joseph Rowntree Foundation report excerpt, 2023)**

*Long-term funding, sustained and invested beyond specific projects or research teams, is crucial for sustaining equitable partnerships. The funding of research institutions and their partnership building eco-systems must move beyond notions of short-term portfolios or investments.*

**(ESSENCE report excerpt, 2022)**

*Taking a long view: thinking about building long term resilience as a central aim in funding strategy, so that everyone involved can benefit sustainably. To achieve this, 'success' and 'quality' should be understood differently, not just as one-off outcomes, but as ongoing results from the collaborations and relationships built during the work that was funded.*

**(Institute for Community Studies report excerpt, 2022)**

An eco-system model connects with government's place-building priorities such as English devolution, the focus on mayoral command authorities, and initiatives from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) such as the Local Innovation Partnership Fund. As well as the emphasis in health policy on prevention, neighbourhood health plans, strengthening community well-being and reducing long hospital stays.

*The main impetus behind [government place-based policies] is around economic growth and the clustering of research & development strengths within particular geographies to drive economic activity, and job creation. The kind of classic model that [government] refers to as the triple helix, is where you've got local authority, university and business all coming together. But in some cases, they're also bringing in the third sector and potentially more community-focused organisations to drive decisions around investment as well.*

**(Individual funder interviewee)**

Research funders may also be able to mitigate some of the knowledge, capacity, power differential and trust issues which community organisations may experience by using intermediaries or brokers. These are freelance contractors who support community organisations in their research activities. For example, the British Science Association's Ideas Fund, supported by Wellcome, piloted a new approach to funding place-based community-

engaged research. In the Ideas Fund the role of Development Coordinators evolved to support community partners in navigating the research process.

*The Development Coordinators are very skilled in creating and holding these spaces. It's an incredibly relational role, weaving together connections to foster relationships, understanding, support learning and build trust, often acting as a translator between two very different worlds. At a time of incredibly stretched capacity in the community sector, this facilitative role is even more important.*

**(Collaborate blog excerpt, 2023)**

In the community organisations' focus group, a different approach was suggested to address the possibility that community organisations may lack specific skills which are needed to see through or maximise the benefits from their engagement in a research project.

*Can funders signpost to a pool of subject experts to support this kind of activity. So, a pool of consultants [who] are available should a particular skill set not be available within a community group?*

**(Community organisation focus group)**

*I think sometimes commercialisation is one of the outputs we want to see. But you know, if we could reflect on how there's more opportunity in future funding to really structure some approaches to commercialisation. I think that could benefit.*

**(Community organisations focus group)**

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## CREATE CLEAR STANDARDS FOR COMMUNITY-ENGAGED RESEARCH

The need to create clear standards for community-engaged research was expressed by numerous interviewees and was included in several key reports / webpages.

*This included setting out clear expectations regarding the active involvement of those living in the community right from the initial application stage through to the running of the project.*

**(British Science Association essay competition excerpt, 2025)**

However, there was a sense among interviewees that it was unclear exactly what the research funders' expectation was for community organisations' role in a particular project or partnership.

*And I suppose for us, it was a bit like, are we doing it right?*

**(Community organisation interviewee 1)**

*I think everyone would say this is a genuine partnership. But what does that actually look like?*

**(Community organisation interviewee 12)**

*I think there needs to be protocol around how you integrate lived experience into each level of research and different ways to do that. But maybe some sort of introductory handbook from the funders to set the tone might be useful.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 7)**

### VIVENSA FOUNDATION CASE STUDY



In 2024 the [Almshouse Resilient Communities \(ARC\) for the Future project](#) team, who were funded through the ‘Suitable Living Environments’ call, published [this paper](#). It used the ARC project as a case study to explore “how the potential benefits of co-production can be achieved within the constraints of current academic systems.”

In terms of community-engaged research, the team outline how they employed co-production – what they define as “a participatory approach to research that involves working with (as opposed to on or for) non-academic participants” – during the development of the application and in the research, and the benefits this brought.

It is pleasing to see that our requirements, as outlined in the funding call documentation, helped to shape this approach. For example, “The funder made it clear that they expected some form of co-production in the proposed studies”, and “When the research question and general approach were developed, they were discussed with three older almshouse residents. This was undertaken in part to comply with the funder’s requirement for PPI [patient, carer and public involvement]”. However, the paper also points out areas for potential improvement, some of which are raised in this review. For example, the relatively tight timeframe for applications to be developed and submitted limited how much decision-making on the overall research design could be shared outside of the core project team. Overall, the team states, “The funder was a key actor in creating the context in which the research was conducted” and that this contributed to “successful co-production”.

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## CHANGING FUNDING PROCESSES TO MAKE THEM MORE ACCESSIBLE TO COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

As outlined in the previous section, community organisations may lack the resources, experience and capacity to bid successfully for research funding and/or to be lead applicants.

One interviewee suggested a two-stage process.

*Two-stage, I suppose, something that was a bit simpler, you know, flesh out what your project is, and we'll fund the first three months for you to develop your project?*

**(Community organisation interviewee 1)**

### VIVENSA FOUNDATION CASE STUDY



Both the ‘Suitable Living Environments’ and ‘Social Determinants’ programmes were designed as two-stage funding calls, with a shorter “expression of interest” (EOI) stage followed by a full application for shortlisted teams. This process was intended to reduce effort for those who weren’t shortlisted at the EOI stage, although it should be clarified that shortlisted applicants didn’t receive funding to develop their full applications.

As part of their EOI application, teams were asked to submit a short video focused on how the community organisation partner(s) had helped to develop the proposal, and how they would be actively involved throughout the research project. The videos were a helpful way of demonstrating to us whether the proposed partnership was genuine, but applicants had mixed feelings towards them. Whilst some agreed that it allowed them to more clearly show the strength of their collaboration, we heard from some applicants that they found the process of creating the video challenging and/or daunting.

In the academic focus groups, it was suggested that a longer application process could help provide more time for engaging with community organisations in the design of research proposals. They also suggested that bridging funding could support community organisations to implement research findings once the initial award funding had ended.

*I think particularly the follow-on funding, or the bridging funding – not necessarily for academics, but for communities – I think is really important.*

**(Academic researchers focus group participant)**

A much more iterative and flexible approach was suggested by the Ideas Fund.

*Applicants were not expected to submit a final, polished product, but invited to share their vision for the change they want to see, the shifts needed to help enable this, and the kinds of activities that might contribute.*

**(Collaborate blog excerpt, 2023)**

## VIVENSA FOUNDATION CASE STUDY



The [Vivensa Academy](#) is an inclusive network of researchers, clinicians and community organisations with a shared interest in the health and well-being of older people. The [Vivensa Academy Ignition Fund](#) allows UK-based members of the Academy to apply for up to £5k to support activities linked to the aims and key values of the Academy. These include fostering relationships between researchers and community organisations.

Launched in June 2024, the creation of the Ignition Fund was informed by a recognition that forming partnerships and discussing potential ideas requires time and resource. The scheme is intended to be flexible and could be used, for example, to support relationship and idea development in advance of a larger funding application, or to facilitate the secondment of a researcher to a community organisation.

In addition, since the launch of the ‘Suitable Living Environments’ and ‘Social Determinants’ funding programmes, we have developed a follow-on funding mechanism. This is not designed to fund further research *per se*, but instead to support work which increases the reach and/or impact of a previous Vivensa Foundation-funded research project (e.g. embedding some of the findings in practice). We are currently considering how community organisation partners can take the lead on this follow-on work, where there is a desire to do so.

The Institute for Community Studies suggests:

*Diversifying types of funding: making different types of funding available to suit the needs of a greater variety of applicants, including funding to support partnership building*

*and idea development, funding for pilots and ‘try and learn’ models, and funding for infrastructure, training and learning – not just for ‘research projects’. By having a diversity of funding models on offer (for example both long-term and short-term funding opportunities), a broader range of groups can benefit from, and see benefit in, engaging.*

*Changing funding processes: so community organisations can be lead recipients and controllers of funding in funded partnerships. Where there are financial or due diligence barriers, for example for funders investing in hyperlocal or informal community groups, working with intermediary organisations may help to ensure community partners can still control and lead the process where they are the most relevant group to do so.*

**(Institute for Community Studies report excerpt, 2022)**

### VIVENSA FOUNDATION CASE STUDY



With both the ‘Suitable Living Environments’ and ‘Social Determinants’ funding programmes, applicants were able to choose from a range of possible funding / award types, depending on what best suited the needs of the partnership and the research they were looking to do (for example, smaller-scale seed funding versus larger project funding). Whilst we provided indicative timescales and funding amounts for each award type, we were open to applicants exceeding these if they could provide a justification.

For all of our research funding programmes – including those highlighted in this review – we also make it clear that we expect the involvement of any community organisation partners to be costed into the budget at their full economic cost.

Larger research funders may find it difficult to adapt their processes to effectively devolve power and resources to community organisations. So, there may be a role for intermediary agencies, such as smaller funders, to pilot new approaches.

*The big funders have such influence. But it is smaller foundations who are more nimble, who are able to experiment, and [can be] a testing ground, then some of that learning could be absorbed into the bigger funders.*

**(Individual funder interviewee)**

*I think there is value of being able to call something a pilot. I think it is immensely powerful to just be able to say 'we're just experimenting with this'. It gives you a lot of license to do grant-making in a different way.*

**(Individual funder interviewee)**

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## **MORE ACTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS**

As the community organisations were usually not the grant-holders, they often had a much more distant relationship to the research funder than their academic partners.

Community organisations suggested that they want a direct relationship with the funder, even if they are not the grant-holder. This includes during the application process and once funding is awarded.

*I do think that next time, if we did something like this, I would want to meet the funders myself and understand the application more myself and feel more confident that I could ask the right question.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 7)**

*I feel sometimes that I'm hearing things third-hand. So, one improvement that could make it better is if, from the beginning of the project, [one] had some sort of relationship with the funder, so you knew them, just to understand the parameters.*

**(Community organisation interviewee 6)**

The community organisation representatives had some practical suggestions about how a closer relationship with a research funder could be enabled.

One idea was a review meeting.

*...could [the funder] check in and see how the relationship is working between the university and the community organisation, just to make sure it's not wholly extractive? Could [the funder] be a critical friend, if there were any issues, to make sure that the community organisation is getting the support it needs?*

**(Community organisation interviewee 2)**

*Perhaps, what we didn't have in place was kind of a review... do you have points in the project of, 'is this working? Is this not working?' Like honest conversations?*

**(Community organisation interviewee 8)**

Another was for the research funder to present to the organisation's board.

*One thing possibly that could have been done by [the funder] was for them to come and present to our board.*

### **(Community organisation interviewee 2)**

The key reports / webpages suggested an active and more informal approach to building trust and getting to know communities.

*I think having an open and consistent line of communication in this sort of project is really key – as a funder, this gives you a better understanding of the project and means you're in a much better position to consider any questions or requests when they come in. In this case of the participatory budget, we recognised the value of tenants being able to access and have control over resources on-the-ground. Really, it all comes down to trust – trusting that those working on-the-ground are often better placed than us to say what the project needs – and being comfortable with the fact that the needs of this sort of research can rarely be predicted in advance.*

### **(British Science Association essay competition excerpt, 2025)**

*Human-centred approaches – visiting organisations in their own communities, having conversations over lots of cups of tea. Taking an informal getting to know you approach – as opposed to asking people to enter a space we had created in a formal consultation / workshop way or carrying out formal surveys.*

### **(Joseph Rowntree Foundation report excerpt, 2023)**

*Having co-designed the Fund with community members, researchers, and others, we knew we wanted to trial a different and more relational funding approach, one that enabled community groups to take the lead in working with researchers in innovative ways. We also knew that to get funding to communities who are often overlooked by these opportunities, we would need to provide wraparound support, removing barriers wherever we could and learning about how best to respond to challenges that came up along the way.*

### **(British Science Association report excerpt, 2023)**

*It also means letting communities steer how and when engagement happens and actively seeking to adapt to the needs of those who may have greater engagement barriers.*

### **(Institute for Community Studies report excerpt, 2022)**

In the funders' interviews and focus group, whilst being firmly committed in-principle to funding more equitable relationships between academics and community organisations, there were some notes of caution about taking a more actively relational approach to research funding.

For example, there were concerns about research funders' capacity to engage more actively with everything they fund.

*We don't have direct relationships with everything we fund. We have direct relationships with the bigger stuff, but we don't have direct relationships with everything. So I can see it happening, and it does happen, I think, for some of the bigger stuff, where we want to encourage a collaboration and we want to try and support it. But even then, it's more kind of inviting them to the same thing, so that they'll network and get the same information, rather than us doing something specific. So maybe that's a shift that could be worked towards.*

**(Research funders' focus group)**

Central to all research funding processes is assessment and decision-making – it is, of course, not possible to fund every request for support. In the research funders' focus group, participants were asked to name one thing that they found challenging about their role. The funder representatives in the group were unanimous that the requirement to prioritise proposals and areas of need was difficult.

*...there's so much that we would like to do, there's so much that people want us to do, and having to choose what we do and to work to the priorities and strategies that are set for us is challenging.*

**(Research funders' focus group)**

The more relational approach to funding was seen by research funders as beneficial.

*If you do this groundwork, it's going to lead to better outcomes.*

**(Research funders' focus group)**

However, research funding organisations' typical processes could be seen as having developed over time in order to reduce the emotional costs, and increase the objectivity, of decision-making. This is one reason why research funders may resist taking a more relational approach.

*One of the reasons that institutions like ours make decisions in the way they do is because it takes out all the emotional labour and, it's like, [decision making] is an administrative process. So, it's not about you personally. Whereas, when you transition to a more relational approach, it feels much more personal and emotional.*

**(Individual funder interviewee)**

### VIVENSA FOUNDATION CASE STUDY



Throughout the application process for both funding programmes, and during the research projects themselves, we've attempted to facilitate opportunities for contact between ourselves and the involved community organisations. For example, we:

- Hosted a webinar during the application submission window, giving prospective applicants (both community organisations and researchers) an opportunity to ask questions to us directly.
- Organised an online cohort catch-up for teams funded under the 'Suitable Living Environments' call, where they could meet and learn about each others' projects.
- Tried to ensure that community partner representatives were included in the annual progress update meetings that we held with the project lead and wider team during the lifetime of the project.

The review suggests that this contact was achieved more with some community organisations than with others. This may be because our communications tended to go through the academic lead, who was our main point-of-contact during the project.

We'll reflect on how we can facilitate more direct contact / relationships between ourselves and community organisations, and between the community organisations in different projects, within future community-engaged research programmes.

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## CONTACT WITH OTHER COMMUNITY GROUPS

Many of the community organisation representatives who were part of the 'Suitable Living Environments' funding programme would welcome more contact with the other community organisations funded by the programme.

They valued the contact that had been facilitated by the Vivensa Foundation.

*I think in an ideal world, it would have been nice to have had some sort of relationship [with other community organisations in the programme]. After all, we were all delivering against the same outcomes, but we're all delivering something slightly different. And so it was interesting, at that [cohort] event, to meet the different partners and hear about their stories and what they've been doing.*

### (Community organisation interviewee 1)

Some participants thought there could have been more contact, but noted that this had to be realistic and balanced with other calls on community organisations' time.

*Because while I think there will be some commonality between projects and between challenges, there will also be difference. So, you may well find that increased contact would mean challenges faced by one which had already been met and had found a solution from another. So I think over a three-year project, I think contact every six months, rather than only once, during a three-year project would probably have been better.*

### (Community organisation interviewee 4)

*I think it would have been helpful for [the funder] to connect the community organisations within the project for a community of practice, or shared learning...it would have been helpful to have this kind of shared learning from the beginning*

### (Community organisation focus group)

If the research funder did convene more opportunities for community partners to meet, it would help if this was independently facilitated.

*Community of Practice might be a great idea, but I think it would have to be facilitated.*

### (Community organisation interviewee 9)

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Within the 'Suitable Living Environments' and 'Social Determinants' programmes and beyond, the Vivensa Foundation are already supporting innovative, effective and fruitful partnerships between community organisations and academic researchers. This review's recommendations aim to continue and strengthen this good work. The review also contributes to the wider funding sector by bringing together evidence on this topic from a variety of sources. As more funders actively support community-engaged research and share their learning, our understanding of good practice will grow.

This review demonstrated that there is considerable unanimity among both the interviewees, focus group participants and within the guidance literature. Therefore, this section sets out a clear pathway for research funders to follow to improve partnerships between community organisations and academic researchers. The approach aims to mitigate the structural barriers to more equitable relationships, and at the same time emphasise the interpersonal and relational nature of partnership work.

The recommendations are developed around five themes:

- Nurture relationships
- Set clear expectations
- Diversify research funding models
- Fund research eco-systems
- Include community organisations in research processes

The themes are interlocking and closely linked to one another. Therefore, some recommendations could arguably fit under several different themes.

In addition, whilst the funding programmes and research projects included in this review all have a focus on ageing and older people, the recommendations are intended to be generalisable to other research funders looking to support other types of community-engaged research.

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### NURTURE RELATIONSHIPS

The review reinforces that equitable, empathic, trusting relationships are fundamental to strong and effective partnerships. Research funders have a role in fostering mutual understanding between community organisations and academic researchers. Increased reciprocal knowledge of the different institutional and systemic pressures operating on both partners will lead to stronger collaborations. If relationships are healthy, most issues that arise in research projects can be overcome. The review recommends that research funders become even more active in fostering relationships with community partners, and between community and academic

partners. These activities should be incorporated into funding agreements / programmes and be fully costed, so they don't place additional financial burden on community organisations. This could include:

- Forming direct relationships with community partners, even when they are not the grant-holder.
- Funders making themselves available for direct discussions with community organisations during the application stage.
- Convening programme-wide, facilitated action learning sets or reflective practice groups for community and academic partners.
- Holding regular review meetings with community partners to ensure projects are on track, rather than intervening once there is a problem.
- Going out to meet communities.
- Building in funded time for relationship development at the beginning of projects, as part of the design of new funding calls / programmes.

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## SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Research funders need to provide more information and clarity about their expectations for community-engaged research. This will help community organisations, but also academic partners, understand what activities can and cannot be funded. It also supports community organisations in their relationships with academic partners, as there is more transparency from the funder about the expectations of equitable partnerships. However, it is also important not to be too prescriptive as good practice in community-engaged research is constantly evolving. Research funders could:

- Co-create, with community organisations and academic researchers, a clear definition of community engaged-research, as well as a set of principles for the role of community organisations in funded projects.
- Offer more clarity around the capacity and time implications of engaging in research projects, so that community organisations can develop realistic funding proposals and budgets.
- Develop processes and policies that enable community organisations to apply for the true (full economic) costs of their contributions.
- Incorporate the above in more detailed application guidance notes.
- Offer guidance and/or training for research grant-holders about expectations for community organisation involvement / engagement.

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## DIVERSIFY RESEARCH FUNDING MODELS

Some of the current, more traditional, research funding processes and models present barriers to community organisations who may wish to apply for funding. Smaller organisations may lack the expertise and/or capacity to initiate and develop applications to research funding calls, especially if funding calls are for more complex and long-term research projects. There are several actions which research funders can take to mitigate these barriers:

- Develop staged funding calls which incorporate enough time, funding and support for community organisations to fully participate. For example, including an initial call for ideas, partnership building and proposal development, followed by a more substantial bid.
- Once grants are awarded, maintaining a flexible, iterative approach which is sensitive to the uncertain and highly pressurised environment in which community organisations currently operate.
- Large funding bodies may consider commissioning smaller organisations to pilot innovative grant programmes / funding mechanisms and then use the learning to inform their own practices.
- Assign a portion of the project budget to community organisations, to be spent as members of the community decide.
- Consider how community organisations can be supported with bridging / follow-on funds to implement and embed research findings more fully.
- Provide a range of funding models to ensure that community organisations are supported to take a leadership role in research projects. Such models could include supporting community organisations to:
  - Be lead applicants.
  - Be equitable sub-contactors to universities.
  - Work with intermediary organisations to direct funding to smaller or informal organisations.

## VIVENSA FOUNDATION CASE STUDY



During one of the ‘Suitable Living Environments’ projects, the applicants reached out to ask whether they could allocate some of the project funds (which were held by the university partner) to a “participatory budget” which community members would have control over. In this case, to allow community co-researchers to organise social events to engage the wider community in their social housing block.

We approved the request, recognising that it allowed community members to have greater ownership over the project budget. We are interested in exploring whether we can more formally build similar mechanisms into future community-engaged research programmes.

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## FUNDING RESEARCH ECO-SYSTEMS

An eco-system approach supports stronger and more equitable relationships between academic researchers and community organisations. The approach can help to ensure that the voices of community organisations are embedded into policies, such as the government’s place building, prevention and neighbourhood health initiatives. Such an approach blends project-based funding with funding places and relationships. It is important to acknowledge that a place-based / neighbourhood approach is not a cure-all. For example, a localised, place-based approach may limit the numbers and diversity of those participating and involved in the research. However, developing an eco-system mindset enables research funders to address some key concerns of community organisations, including those around voice, equity, capacity, community development and sustainability.

Involvement in research brings significant benefits to community organisations. However, their primary task is to support their communities. Knowledge production may form part of their approach, but only when it is fully in service of their primary aims and objectives. For academic researchers, knowledge production and dissemination is a key task and they may be less embedded within a particular place or community of interest. A more place-based and eco-system approach recognises, and attempts to address, this key difference between the aims of community organisations and academic researchers. Research funders could:

- Invest for the long-term, aiming for sustainable development in relationships, communities and research capacity. For example, by considering pre-award seed funding and post-award follow-on / bridging funds.
- Co-create research funding calls with community organisations.
- Consider the role of development co-ordinators, or other similar intermediaries / brokers, to convene and facilitate partnerships in some research programmes.
- Support a range of co-located organisations to increase place-based capacity, research skills and sustainability.
- Develop ongoing relationships with key community organisations, but also provide targeted resources and be proactive to ensure seldom heard groups can participate.
- Form partnerships and alliances with other funders to maximise sustainability.
- Develop a pool of consultants / agencies which can help to fill community organisations' knowledge, skills and capacity gaps – in particular, community organisations may need support to commercialise and/or disseminate research outputs.

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## INCLUDE COMMUNITIES IN RESEARCH PROCESSES

To support more equitable partnerships between community organisations and academic researchers, research funders need to adapt their own processes and governance. These changes need to be co-created with community organisations. This involvement needs to be carefully and sensitively designed, to avoid giving organisations or individuals unfair advantages or access to confidential information about other grant-holders or funding calls. Research funders should model the behaviours they wish to encourage. Incorporating community organisations into their processes and governance will enrich research funders' understanding of community organisations, their clients and the role they can play in good practice in grant-making. Research funders could:

- Co-create, with community organisations and academic researchers, a strategy for offering them a greater role in research funding governance and processes.
- Steadily offer more opportunities for representatives of community organisations to take part in internal committees, groups and activities.
- Adapt methodologies such as James Lind Alliance and Experience Based Co-design to achieve greater alignment between the research priorities of communities and academic researchers.
- Nominate a senior member of staff to lead on community organisation involvement.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the following organisations who contributed their time and knowledge to the review:

[Bangla Housing Association](#)

[Greater Manchester Combined Authority \(GMCA\) Ageing Hub](#)

[Housing Learning and Improvement Network \(Housing LIN\)](#)

[Inspiring Communities Together](#)

[Joe McLoughlin Consulting](#)

[Sanctuary](#) and [Astraline](#)

[The Guinness Partnership](#)

[United St Saviour's Charity](#)

[UP - The Adult Cerebral Palsy Movement](#)

[West of England Rural Network \(WERN\)](#)

[British Science Association \(BSA\)](#)

[Diabetes UK](#)

[Economic and Social Research Council \(ESRC\)](#)

[National Institute for Health and Care Research \(NIHR\)](#)

[UK Research and Innovation \(UKRI\)](#)

[Manchester Metropolitan University](#)

[Northumbria University](#)

[The Open University](#)

[University of Bath](#)

[University of Sheffield](#)

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Front and back cover artwork by [Jolie Goodman](#).

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY

The review included desk research, interviews and focus groups.

Desk research was initially undertaken to understand what, if any, guidance is currently available to research funders seeking to support partnerships between community organisations and academic researchers. Then the reports and websites identified as relevant were treated as review data.

Internet searches using terms such as ‘guidance for funders engaging with community partners’ and appropriate synonyms were undertaken. An AI search via ChatGPT was also completed. The websites of funders, including those supplied by the Vivensa Foundation, were examined. A snowballing approach was followed to ensure the search was as comprehensive as possible. The searches were conducted between 30 July and 7 August 2025. Any materials published after this period were not included.

### **Interviews**

Using insights from the scoping phase and through discussion with Vivensa Foundation staff, a document to guide the interviews was developed (see Appendix 3). The interviews were conducted online.

The interviews were recorded on Zoom and transcribed by Otter ai.

### **Analysis**

The review included as data:

- Key reports and websites.
- Interviews with representatives of community organisations that were involved in research funding programmes run by the Vivensa Foundation.

All data was subjected to a simple content analysis using the qualitative data analysis software MaxQDA.

### **Sense checking**

The draft recommendations were sense checked with:

- A focus group of representatives of community organisations involved in the two Vivensa Foundation research funding programmes.
- A focus group of representatives from research funding organisations.

- Two individual interviews with representatives from research funding organisations.
- Two focus groups with academic researchers involved in the two Vivensa Foundation funding programmes.

Full details of all involved organisations can be found in the acknowledgements.

### **Limitations**

Every effort has been made to ensure the review is as rigorous as possible. However, the review is exploratory and limited in its scope. Some potential limitations of the review include:

- The short literature search period may have excluded some relevant literature.
- The review focuses on two Vivensa Foundation research funding programmes, both of which focused specifically on aspects of ageing and improving older people's health and well-being.
- The sample of community organisation representative and academic researcher interviewees / focus group participants was skewed towards those who had been successful in securing funding – although the review also included those who were unsuccessful in applying to the funding programmes.

Whilst the findings are influenced by these factors – and may therefore not be relevant to all community-engaged research partnerships – they are intended to be as generalisable as possible.

## APPENDIX 2: SUMMARIES OF THE SIX KEY REPORTS AND RESOURCES ASSESSED TO BE OF PARTICULAR INTEREST

### **1) Power, participation and transformative change: how funders can help; Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), August 2023**

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/power-and-participation/power-participation-and-transformative-change-how-funders-can-help>

“This report documents learning from JRF’s work alongside organisations led by people in poverty over the past five years, on what funders can do to build power and support transformative change at a grassroots level.”

“The Grassroots Mobilisation programme of work was part of the 2017-2021 JRF strategy to build public and political will to solve poverty. There was an ambition to ‘work alongside’ people with direct experience of poverty to amplify voices and put them at the heart of the debate. At the time there was little joint organisation understanding behind what this meant in practice.”

“This learning draws from:

- Five years of practice-based learning (2018-2022) in continuous conversation and reflection with organisations led by marginalised communities. Mainly carried out through one-to-one meetings and sometimes group reflection spaces.
- An internal reflection with JRF staff involved in delivery of the programme.
- An external learning project which focused on honing the funding practice that emerged out of the Grassroots Mobilisation strategy.”

This JRF report is evidenced based, clear and thought provoking. Although its focus is anti-poverty campaigning rather than academic research, it contains an enormous amount of transferable knowledge.

### **2) Beyond project funding: How can funders nurture healthy systems? Collaborate, January 2023**

<https://collaboratecic.com/insights-and-resources/beyond-project-funding-how-can-funders-nurture-healthy-systems/>

“Collaborate is a social consultancy pioneering collaborative thinking and practice to tackle complex challenges across the UK. Collaborate worked with the British Science Association to identify what a healthy system for public engagement with research looks like and how to develop a funding programme to support this.”

Collaborate have published a series of blogs on how funders can support community research. A brief initial piece of work involved desk research and seven interviews with experts in the field. They then collaboratively developed a framework entitled ‘Indicators of a healthy public engagement system: a draft framework’. The framework has been tested in practice in three UK locations by co-developing funding applications for place-based work. The framework is not aimed specifically at funders, although it does include content for funders.

The blogs include learning from the funding process and the actual project work as it progresses. There are lots of lessons and learning about the process of conducting a radically different approach to funding, to try to increase community ownership of research. This includes taking an iterative, relational and highly flexible approach. Although the focus is on public engagement in research rather than community-engaged research, the publication includes an enormous amount of transferable knowledge.

### **3) Four Approaches to Supporting Equitable Research Partnerships; UK Collaborative on Development Research / ESSENCE 2022**

[https://www.ukcdr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/UKCDR\\_ESSENCE\\_Equitable\\_Research\\_Partnerships.pdf](https://www.ukcdr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/UKCDR_ESSENCE_Equitable_Research_Partnerships.pdf)

“UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR) is a UK government agency that aims to build coherence between government departments and other funders of international development research. ESSENCE is an international initiative that enables donors / funders to work together towards more coherent approaches to health research in international development.”

The report was developed by a taskforce of international research funders, including UKRI. It includes practical advice and case studies about developing and sustaining equitable research partnerships. The focus is on international development and on creating more equitable research partnerships between high income and low / middle income countries. However, as there are similar issues, such as those around power differentials, there is some guidance that may be transferable to funding collaborations between academic researchers and community organisations in the UK.

### **4) An equitable future for research and innovation. Building sustained community involvement in knowledge production; The Young Foundation’s Institute for Community Studies (commissioned by UKRI), July 2022**

<https://www.youngfoundation.org/our-work/publications/an-equitable-future-for-research-and-innovation/>

“This summary report shares the results of discussions with community representatives about how we can improve the ways in which knowledge is produced, used and communicated across the UK. These discussions focused on how formal institutions such as government, research funders and universities – which is typically called ‘the research and innovation (R&I) system’ – can more equitably involve those community groups and organisations (with less power or representation) through the way they fund, create and value knowledge. The key question for the scoping review was: how can involvement between communities and R&I be more equitable and sustainable?”

This summary report includes a number of recommendations for how funders can support more equitable research partnerships with community organisations.

**5) The Ideas Fund: Supporting community-led collaboration with researchers. An insight report; British Science Association, July 2023**

<https://readymag.website/theliminalspace/4230631/>

This web-based report discusses the British Science Association’s Ideas Fund, which:

“...launched in January 2021 with the aim of enabling the UK public to develop and try out ideas that address problems related to mental wellbeing, by working in partnership with researchers. Run by the British Science Association and funded by Wellcome, the Fund offered an exciting opportunity to test out a new approach to community-led collaboration with researchers. Individuals, community groups, and charities have been invited to apply for and hold the funds and are supported to build relationships with researchers on their own terms. [It]... had a particular focus on reaching communities that are traditionally overlooked by this work, such as young people, rural or minoritised ethnic communities.”

“In the two years that The Ideas Fund has been active, ...[It]...awarded grants worth more than £3m to more than 70 projects in the four regions.”

Advice to funders is not the main emphasis of the report; however, it does contain some valuable insights on how funders can support more equitable partnerships.

**6) Working with conflict in community research – an essay; British Science Association, March 2025**

<https://www.britishecienceassociation.org/essay-13-dunhill-mancs-working-with-conflict>

“Creating knowledge together: Exploring the power of community-engaged research” is a collection of essays that explore community-engaged research. This particular essay includes a section entitled ‘Flexibility of the funder’. This describes how the Vivensa Foundation (then known as the Dunhill Medical Trust) adopted a considered and inclusive approach to how they

funded a community housing research project. The essay also highlights and reflects on the challenges that can arise, and are often necessary, in collaborative community-engaged research projects of this nature.

## APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW GUIDE

### **Preliminary**

Welcome and introductions

Check information sheet has been signed and if there are any questions

Inform that the interview will last about 45 minutes and that it will be recorded on Zoom. Notes will also be taken - ask if that is ok?

The interview is about your experience of the being part of the 'Suitable Living Environments' / 'Social Determinants' funding programme. The funder of the programme, the Vivensa Foundation, is interested to find out about community organisations' experience of being involved in the programme. With a view to creating some guidance for research funders who wish to support partnerships between community organisations and academic researchers.

Any questions before we begin?

### **Questions**

#### **You and your organisation (at the point of being involved in the project)**

- Name and role
- Please briefly describe your organisation
- Do you / your organisation have any previous research experience? If so, please briefly describe

#### **Your involvement in the 'Suitable Living Environments' / 'Social Determinants' project**

- Please briefly describe your organisation's role in the research project funded through the Vivensa Foundation's funding call focussed on 'Suitable living environments for an ageing population' / 'Interventions targeting the social determinants of healthy older age'

#### **The Application Process**

- How did you / your organisation get involved, how did the partnership start?
- What other organisations were / are involved?
- How was the proposal developed and how were decisions made?
- What was your experience of the application process?
- How could this have been improved?

#### **Working in partnership**

- What do you think your involvement in the project brought to the partnership? (and how was this received by your partners?)

- How were decisions about implementing the research made?
- How was project funding and resources distributed between the partners?
- How did the distribution of funding and resources work in practice?
- How did the timelines work for you / your organisation?
- What made the partnership work well and what were the main challenges?

### **The role of the funder, Vivensa Foundation**

- How did the funding arrangements / processes affect the partnership and the project more generally?
- Did you have any role in reporting to the funder?
- What, if any, direct contact with the funder did you have?
- Did you ask your academic partner and/or funder for anything during the project? For example, more resources or time, how did they respond to your request?
- What made the funding arrangements / processes work well and were there any challenges?
- What could the academic partner and/or funder do to make things work better for you / your organisation?

### **Capacity and sustainability**

- What contact, if any, did you have with other community organisations involved in your project and/or with the wider programme?
- Were there any benefits from the research for your organisation and/or your community?
- Were there any downsides or unintended effects of being involved? (If so, what could the funder have done to mitigate these?)
- What effect on the capacity and sustainability of your organisation did your involvement in the project have? (If negative, what could the funder have done to mitigate these?)
- Did your involvement build any new skills or capacity in your organisation?
- When the project ends (or if it has ended) what do you think its legacy for your organisation and community will be?
- When the project ends (or if it has ended) would you be open to continuing your relationship with the academic partner(s) and/or funder? If so, what would this look like, what would be useful for you?

### **Reflections and advice**

- Were there any spaces within the project for learning and reflection?
- How was learning from the project captured at your organisation?

- What advice would you give to community organisations getting involved in similar projects?
- What advice would you give to funders who wish to fund partnerships between community organisations and academics?
- In an ideal world what would you want a similar funding call to look like?

### **Finally**

- We will be hosting a workshop for some interviewees to sense check some draft recommendations of the research, would you be interested in taking part?
- Before we finish, do you have anything you'd like to add or any questions to ask me?

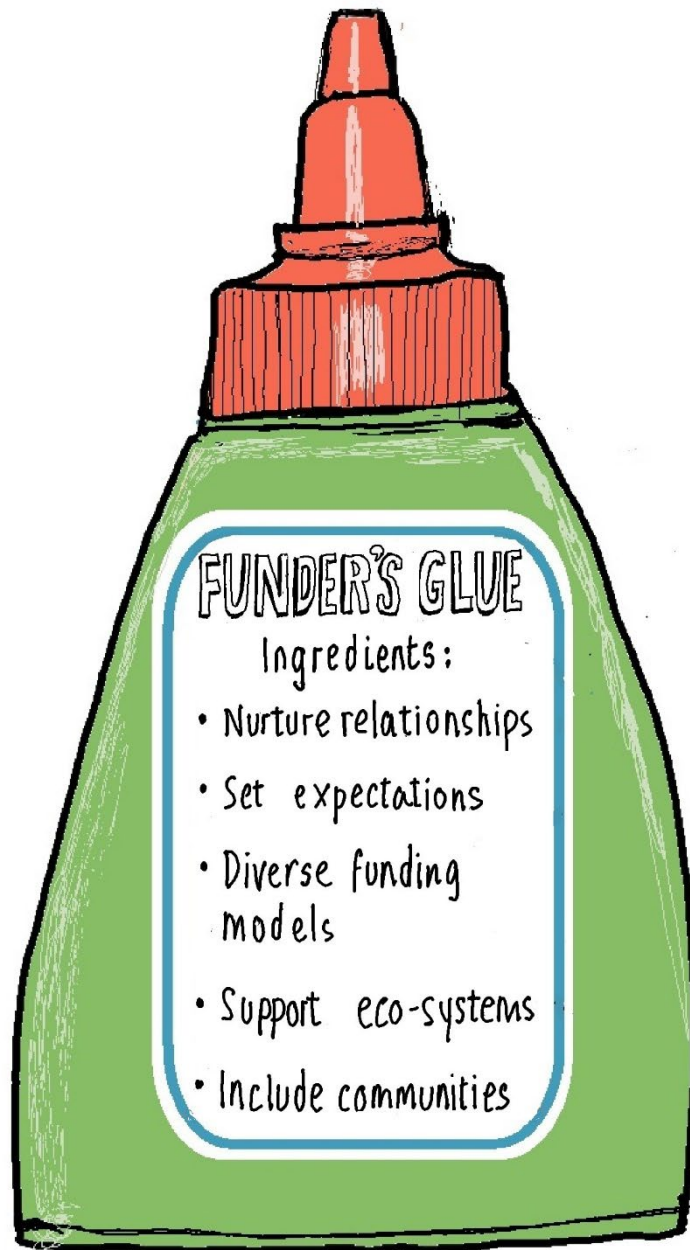
## ABOUT THE VIVENSA FOUNDATION AND CO-PRODUCTION WORKS

### **About the Vivensa Foundation**

[Vivensa Foundation](#) is a charitable company limited by guarantee (Registered company no. 07472301; Registered charity no. 1140372). It is a member of the Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC) and a recognised National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Research Delivery Network (RDN) Non-commercial Partner. It provides funding for academic and clinical researchers from across the disciplinary range, as well as social innovators working to deliver and improve health and social care services, to deliver improved later life outcomes.

### **About Co-production Works**

[Co-production Works](#) is a consultancy which specialises in supporting organisations across public services to work in equal partnerships with people who use services, carers and citizens. Co-production Works offers a range of services including facilitation, training, research, strategy development, reflective practice groups and coaching.



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