
CONFERENCE ABSTRACT

Building capacity for participatory research in voluntary & community sector and academic collaborations – The ‘Research Better Together’ project

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Background: The Research Better Together project (RBT) is designed to build participatory research collaborations between health and social care academics and local health and social care voluntary, community, faith, and social enterprise organisations (VCSFEs). It particularly encourages co-production with populations served by VCSFEs. It has been co-designed by a partnership of organisations including local VCSFEs, an NHS trust, a local community infrastructure organisation and researchers from 3 different universities. .

Approach: Following an initial scoping study to understand existing participatory social care research in Birmingham, a pilot RBT project was designed to provide practical support to build new research partnerships between VCSFEs and university social care researchers. Through National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) funding, RBT has now been expanded to include both health and social care and provides funding and support for VCSFEs and academics to find partners to co-create research projects that involve the communities served by the VCFSEs. Five new partnerships will be able to access funding to support research activity and ongoing support through mentoring, training and a community of practice. The project will also create a suite of resources to support others wishing to run similar capacity building initiatives in their localities.

The project is being independently evaluated by a VCSFE and 2 universities using a Theory of Change approach to understand the underlying relationships and collaborative relationships involved in the project, specifically, what works, for whom, and why.

Results: Our presentation will share the approach we took in RBT and present early findings from the evaluation, focusing on the pilot project. The pilot was successful and supported 5 research collaborations between VCSFEs and academics. These resulted in a number of collaborative outputs including reports, holding workshops, gaining university ethical approval for VCSFE research plans, submission of a funding bid to a national funder, obtaining funding for an intern, building firm relationships, planning for short films to be made about their work, amongst others. At ICIC we will also share news from the 5 new collaborations that are being supported by the current phase of the project.

Implications: Learning from the pilot phase is being implemented in phase 2 of RBT. This includes ensuring the different but complementary skills, experience and capital of partners within research collaborations is most effectively utilised. We are also using learning from the pilot to better understanding the scaffolding (mentoring, support and training) that is most useful to VCSFEs when seeking to co-design research with the communities they support. These are important

lessons for health and social care researchers, funders, practitioners and policy makers given the increased emphasis on collaborative research with communities, in order to ensure that such activity is truly community led.