



County Durham Community Research Network – Workshop Feedback

Introduction

Durham Community Action and the Rural Design Centre are working to develop a rural community research network (CRN) in County Durham. The network will enable local communities to own, lead and research the things that matter to them.

We invited people to workshops to assess the appetite for a local CRN and to hear from people working in local communities about what opportunities and challenges they anticipated.

31 delegates from 27 organisations attended one of the three-hour workshops held in rural locations in County Durham:

- Frosterly Village Hall – July 11th 2023
- Citizens House, Consett– July 13th 2023
- Scarth Hall, Staindrop – July 18th 2023

The information below is feedback from the three events and also from people unable to attend those events who kindly provided their thoughts individually.

Previous Experience of Research
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of clarity about why the research was being carried out • Language used in research can be alienating, people don't feel valued/proud. • People only involved when they are directly affected by a problem. (Apathy) • Tends to be the same people who engage • Assumption that everyone can engage digitally • North West Durham esp Consett "spent up" i.e. over consulted. • Being researched with no feedback given. Important to give feedback so people know that their experience matters
Rural engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural communities can be hard to engage with as they have had to be independent / may not want to share their vulnerabilities. • Building trust with/in rural communities is key • Need to wide range of approaches /activities to engage with people in rural areas • Work with people /orgs who have established trusted relationships • Community researchers should be relatable and credible and understand the areas • Need to address transport (including costs) when aiming to get people together rurally

Themes	
Benefits and Opportunities of a CRN	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upskills local communities • Defines (and solves?) local problems • Improves understanding of real community needs • Highlights rural issues/experience (sometimes missed as not seen as communities with deprivation) • Enables more collaborative conversations/connections across rural Durham • Develops new evidence to support VCS organisations and communities • Opportunity to feed into wider Durham Insight / other data sets • Opportunity to change power status, more equity for local communities • Research as a gateway to future projects • Potential for collaborative funding (?) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk that CRN can't influence decision makers /commissioners unless aligned with their priorities • Not enough money to make a sustained difference • Unclear how the CRN would work • What determines an area of focus or success criteria for the network? • Lack of capacity amongst groups • Intellectual property rights • Keeping expectations realistic • Getting communities to buy in /sustain interest • Impact measurement especially smaller coms populations

Next Steps

Feedback from the workshops will help shape and inform the development of the Community Research network over the next few months. The team developing the CRN are continuing to talk to people in County Durham about the project and welcome further conversations with anyone interested in the CRN.

A workshop facilitated by Professor Sarah Banks from the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action will develop some of the themes linked to the project and will take place on **September 21st** - details to follow.

In addition to the workshop on September 21st, we can offer you an opportunity to use a design thinking approach to develop a project or idea within your organisation. This will help us better understand how this unique approach can work for the CRN.

Design thinking is not just for designers, it enables non-designers to practice skills such as problem identification and framing, visualisation (sketching, drawing and modelling), ideas generation, prototyping, iteration, testing and evaluating blending it with their knowledge and skills.

Do you have an existing project you are working on which could benefit from a different approach? Do you have a group already set up looking at an identified issue or would you like to engage your community to find out what they need from your organisation or service? Design thinking is an approach which can be used to develop your plans.

If you'd like to discuss any ideas further and would like to take up this offer, please get in touch with nick.devitt@ruraldesigncentre.com

For more information about the CRN, contact fiona.christian@durhamcommunityaction.org.uk