



Rural communities deserve to have their needs listened to and understood, and community research has the potential to make this happen.

Introduction

The Rural Durham Community Research Network (RDCRN) brings together local communities, VCSE organisations, and community groups interested in leading community research. The network aims to build research capacity and capability in rural communities to investigate local issues, be fully involved in setting research agendas, contribute their experiences, collect relevant information, and influence positive changes in policy and practice.

Here Jemma Austin, Durham Community Action's Research, and Insight Project Lead shares more about her experience being involved with our recent 'Knowledge for Change' workshops to launch the network, what this opportunity means for rural communities and next steps.

I joined Durham Community Action in February 2025, and I was quickly introduced to the Rural Durham Community Research Network (RDCRN), an innovative project which will run for five years, providing rural communities across County Durham with an opportunity to lead their own research.

After months of prior planning, we launched the network with a series of workshops in the heart of Teesdale, Derwent Valley, and Weardale bringing together members of rural communities with an interest in creating positive change for their communities. The workshops were kindly facilitated by Professor Sarah Banks, a researcher from Durham University.



We were fortunate enough to be blessed with settled Spring weather as we made our way across County Durham through rolling countryside views teeming with baby lambs and wildlife. The journey to these venues highlighted the complex landscape Durham offers from bustling larger towns to dispersed rural areas with smaller communities.

All three workshops were an opportunity for communities to discuss the challenges rural communities face and how community research has the potential to address local needs.

From my perspective, the workshops were a brilliant way to hear from local members of the community who understand the unique challenges their communities experience on a day-to-day basis.

“What stood out the most to me was the agreement across all three areas, that rural communities deserve to have their needs listened to and understood, and the passion behind community organisations who want to make this happen.”

We heard from different community organisations, each bringing valuable experience and opinions to the table. This included a local community representative who wants to understand how to reduce social isolation to a local charity who wants to understand how to remove barriers for communities who face digital exclusion.

The underlying themes throughout all three workshops were to address unfair access to services, sustainability for rural communities and businesses, improved wellbeing for all age groups and addressing the challenges of poverty in rural areas.



Communities are excited about the prospect of developing new research skills and building a community of like-minded people who want to lead community research.

“The workshops showed us that by working together, sharing knowledge, and encouraging creativity community organisations and representatives hold a huge amount of skills and experience. This places them as important drivers for community research.”

As we begin to involve more community organisations in future events and training, we will be developing a space for interested organisations to share good practice, learn new knowledge and hear about community research happening across County Durham.

With a great start like this, we can't wait to see how the network is shaped and developed by our communities. We're excited to see research being led by rural communities as we begin establishing the network over the coming months.

I would encourage anyone interested in creating change for their local communities to get in touch, whether you are brand new to community research or someone who has led research before, we want to hear from you. By building a community who is passionate about community research and the potential this has to create positive change, we can strengthen the voice for County Durham, a unique part of the Northeast leading to fairer outcomes locally and regionally.

[You can find out more and get in touch here](#)