



Responding to COVID-19 in the Liverpool City Region

The Impact of COVID-19 on Methods and
Approaches to Community-Based
Participatory Research

Wayne Shand and Sue Jarvis

Map of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) boundary (in red) and constituent local authorities



Data sources: Westminster parliamentary constituencies (December 2018 - ONS), local authority districts (December 2018 - ONS), and combined authorities (December 2018 - ONS)

The Impact of COVID-19 on Methods and Approaches to Community-Based Participatory Research

Key takeaways

1. Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) methods, which are particularly important to understanding the wider health and social implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and the public policy response, have been severely impacted by public health restrictions.
2. The transfer to on-line and socially distanced CBPR methods in response to the pandemic has proven challenging in practice – especially where digital forms of engagement and training for CBPR have not been ‘designed-in’ to research from the beginning. For CBPR, practical and ethical issues can form significant barriers to quick adaptation of research methods.
3. The widespread adoption of online and digital research methods during the COVID-19 pandemic has not only created a range of shorter-term difficulties for researchers, but also raises long-term implications for research training and practice more generally.
4. The effects of the pandemic on individuals and communities have underlined the importance of building flexibility into the design of CBPR processes.
5. Despite the difficulties of adapting research methods during the pandemic, the City Conversation case study demonstrates the value of adopting an asset-based approach to capture local insight and lived experience to inform public policy-making.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a fundamental impact on all aspects of life. Alongside the tragic deaths and long-term health consequences for people affected by the virus, has been a narrowing of social interaction and restrictions to the use of public space. Emergency health regulations have enforced social (and physical) distancing and isolation to prevent spread of the virus, with resulting shifts in behaviour, as individuals seek to minimise risks to themselves and their families.

In this context, where the pandemic has both health and social significance, community-based research methods bring particular benefits. They can help to reveal the human consequences and reactions to the pandemic, revealing disproportionate impacts on social groups and informing

the design of policy and public health responses. At a human level, Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) can enable people to feel listened to and more involved in decisions being made by, seemingly distant, national and local government.

While particularly valuable during a crisis, the methods used in CBPR have been seriously curtailed by the public health responses to the pandemic. As found in the recent City Conversation project, led by the Heseltine Institute with the City of Liverpool and MyClubmoor community initiative, the use of established research tools, such as interviews, focus and discussion groups, observation and face-to-face surveys have been made practically and ethically difficult. However, the challenge of adapting and continuing community-based research during the pandemic has generated insights into the

efficacy of qualitative methods, where face-to-face interaction has been restricted.

This policy brief provides a review of recent literature and a case study of the City Conversation to examine how CBPR methods have been affected by the pandemic and the implications for research practice.

2. COVID-19 and Community-based Participatory Research

There is a growing literature exploring the impact of COVID-19 on qualitative research commissioned and undertaken during 2020. Rapidly introduced public health mandates, across a range of contexts, have caused significant disruption to the delivery of research projects at a time when qualitative

investigation brings particular benefits to understanding differential health, economic and social impacts on more vulnerable sections of the community.

The pandemic creates a challenge for research with at risk groups. Low income, elderly and people with disabilities are more susceptible to the health impacts of COVID-19 within the general population and are therefore priority targets for qualitative research. However, due to barriers caused by income, access and skills, these groups are also least able to adapt easily to virtual forms of research engagement and data gathering that have been necessitated by social distancing regulations during the pandemic. Recognising and overcoming these challenges has been an important driver of innovation in qualitative research.

Defining Community-based Participatory Research (CBPR)

CPBR is a method that aims to equitably engage a variety of stakeholders, such as community members, public service agencies and academics in the research process.

As a form of Participatory Action Research, CBPR recognises the inherent value, particularly for public policy development, of involving local residents or service users in knowledge creation. The active involvement of community members as researchers is intended to make research processes more equitable, but also incorporate the unique perspectives, access and experiences that individuals within targeted communities may bring. While the practice of CBPR will vary across research projects, with user involvement possible at all stages of the research process, there are some common characteristics that include:

- opening up / demystifying research for communities targeted as participants;
- enabling co-creation and co-learning between academic and community partners;
- creating a shared knowledge resource of benefit to researchers and participants;
- improving the skills and experience community members and capacity of community organisations to participate in research; and
- building trust between research organisations and targeted communities.

CBPR can provide a challenging environment, creating additional ethical considerations of working with and through community-based researchers and navigating potentially complex power relationships. Where effective engagement, planning of research and shared ownership of data and dissemination are in place, CBPR can offer unique insights into the lives and experiences of deprived or low-income communities.

Research published during 2020 has identified how rapidly implemented public health regulations have led researchers to adapt methods and approaches to enable continued qualitative investigation during COVID-19. While a challenge, the crisis has provided an opportunity to creatively review and reframe research to respond to changed conditions, while retaining the core principles of participation. In redesigning projects to operate within COVID-safe conditions, researchers have had to balance the ethics of conducting research that may create additional burdens on participants, with the added responsibilities of bringing excluded voices to the fore. Adaptation has encouraged reflection on the changes in responsibilities of researchers and their duty of care to participants, as methods of interaction have shifted to on-line forms of engagement.

For CBPR projects, social connections are vitally important and social distancing measures have limited these essential interactions. At all stages of the CBPR process, the ability to establish rapport between researcher and participant, to build bonds of trust and a sense of collective endeavour are key, but have been curtailed during the pandemic. While interactions have, in many circumstances, been adapted through use of technology, most notably the use of teleconferencing platforms, this has had mixed effects; creating both practical and ethical issues for researchers.

The adoption of online communications methods has advantages in cutting the time and costs of participant engagement, with reduced need for travel and the possibility of condensing research activity, where technology is available. For some CBPR participants, the security of research from a home environment makes involvement more attractive and causes less anxiety than participating in new in-person group encounters. However, the

move to online working shifts the emphasis of community research away from participants to platforms, communications networks and the functionality of technology. It also reveals the effects of social and income disparities, where issues of poverty, disability and a disinclination to use online and social media may further marginalise the very people that CBPR intends to connect with.

Working on-line, the researcher has a number of disadvantages in being disconnected from the physical reality of the research space. Alongside social interaction, seeing and being seen in the community provides an important grounding that shapes the design and approach to managing research activity. Connecting on-line allows the researcher less control over the environment for interviews and group discussions and heightens risks to confidentiality and harm. The use of technology reduces the visibility of non-verbal cues to engagement and distress, potentially placing both the researcher and the participant in difficult situations.

Where CBPR participants have access to technology, the use of digital communications opens up the possibilities for greater use of photovoice techniques and the creation of shared visual narratives in the form of images, video and web content. As an investigative tool and a means for community participants to express and reflect on their own feelings and experiences, the use of digital techniques can extend spaces for research. In the context of COVID-19, visual methods to explore feelings and experiences of isolation, relationships within the home and community and reflections on the emotional connections with the external environment can provide important insights.

While the pandemic has created significant challenges for community-led research, it has also stimulated innovations that are likely to have a lasting effect. The use of on-line methods is arguably a permanent change that will require an evolution of research practice to account for unequal access to technology, but is likely to have increased prominence within method of qualitative enquiry.

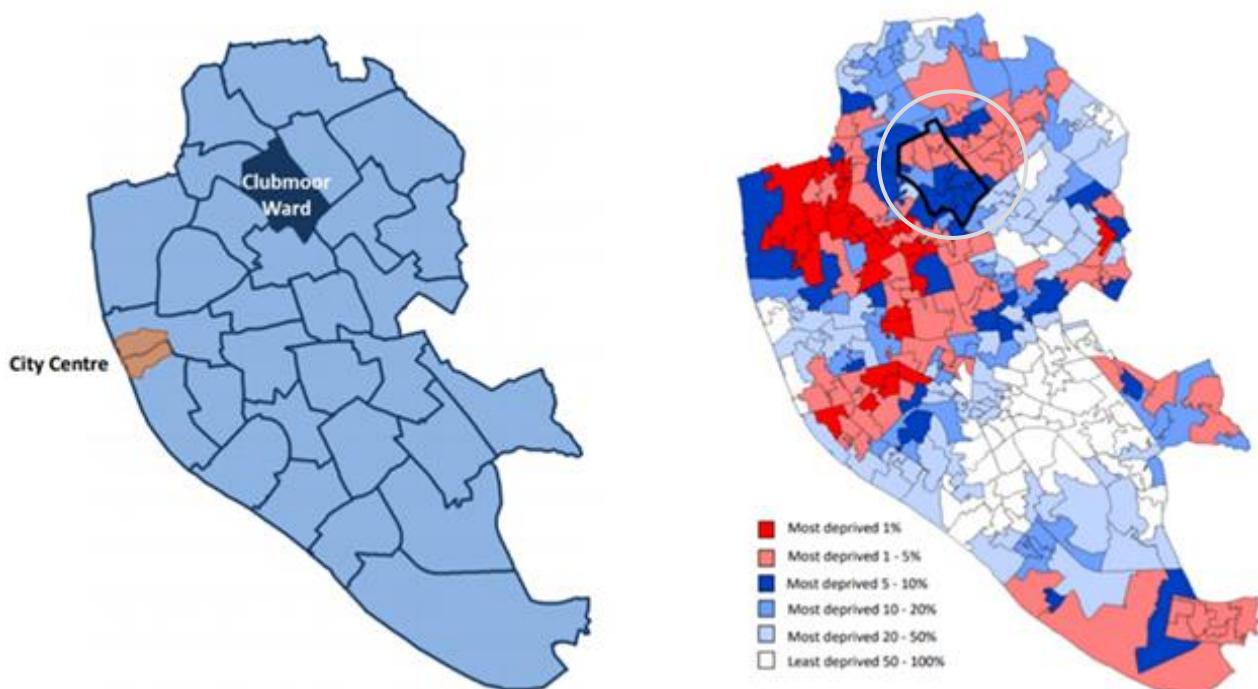
3. City Conversation in Clubmoor, Liverpool

In December 2019, the Heseltine Institute alongside Liverpool City Council and the MyClubmoor Partnership Board received research funding from the UKRI's enhancing place-based partnerships in public engagement programme. The project aimed to develop participatory approaches to community engagement that would lead to a better understanding of local issues and contribute to the design of more effective public services.

The Clubmoor ward in north Liverpool has a population of around 15,000 people. It is a neighbourhood experiencing high levels of deprivation, with 85 per cent of the area falling within the lowest 10 per cent on the national Index of Multiple Deprivation – figure 1. [Compared to the City of Liverpool](#), Clubmoor has lower household income at around three quarters of the average; over one third of children living in poverty (34.1 per cent compared to the City average of 27.7 per cent); and 41.2 per cent of the working age population with no qualifications, significantly higher than the average of 28.7 per cent for Liverpool.

While socio-economic indicators highlight the effects of poverty on wellbeing and life chances in Clubmoor, there is a strong and stable community, with active volunteering culture among some residents. The community was awarded funding from the Big Local Trust, commenced in 2014, to deliver a ten-year programme to improve the lives of local residents and the living environment of

Figure 1. Location and deprivation level of Clubmoor ward in Liverpool



Clubmoor. Activities are focused on realising the full potential of the talent and capacity already present within the community: to use the skills available; to facilitate joint decision making; and to create structures of reciprocal support. Establishing and strengthening networks across the community and with public agencies creates potential to experiment and inform the design of more effective public services.

The City Conversation project was structured around a CBPR methodology and intended to be highly visible community-led research. Resident engagement and data collection was to be undertaken by Community Researchers: individuals from the community, front-line public agencies and local charities trained in basic qualitative research methods. The project planned to gather insights and generate local discussion on aspects of everyday life in Clubmoor that could inform the [Liverpool City Plan](#) and contribute to the Council’s social asset-based approach to regeneration.

The project started in January 2020, but was soon affected by the pandemic and

had to quickly adapt research methods and partnership approaches to lockdown conditions. The strong partnership between stakeholders led to an agreement to revise the methods to move the research on-line, adapting the postcard survey that was due to be distributed face-to-face in community venues to a web-based survey; individual interviews in community centres to telephone; replace focus groups by Zoom calls; and use of Facebook to gather resident inputs. The key changes to the project are shown in Figure 2.

While the project met many of the original objectives, particularly in respect to building trust and the foundations for future partnership action between the City Council, Clubmoor community and the University, the pandemic created a need to reshape the CBPR approach as public health conditions changed.

The adaptations had mixed success. The project helped to strengthen partnerships and create and test methods of Community Researcher training, however on-line research methods proved less effective in realising the levels of resident

Figure 2. The City Conversation – method changes in response to the pandemic

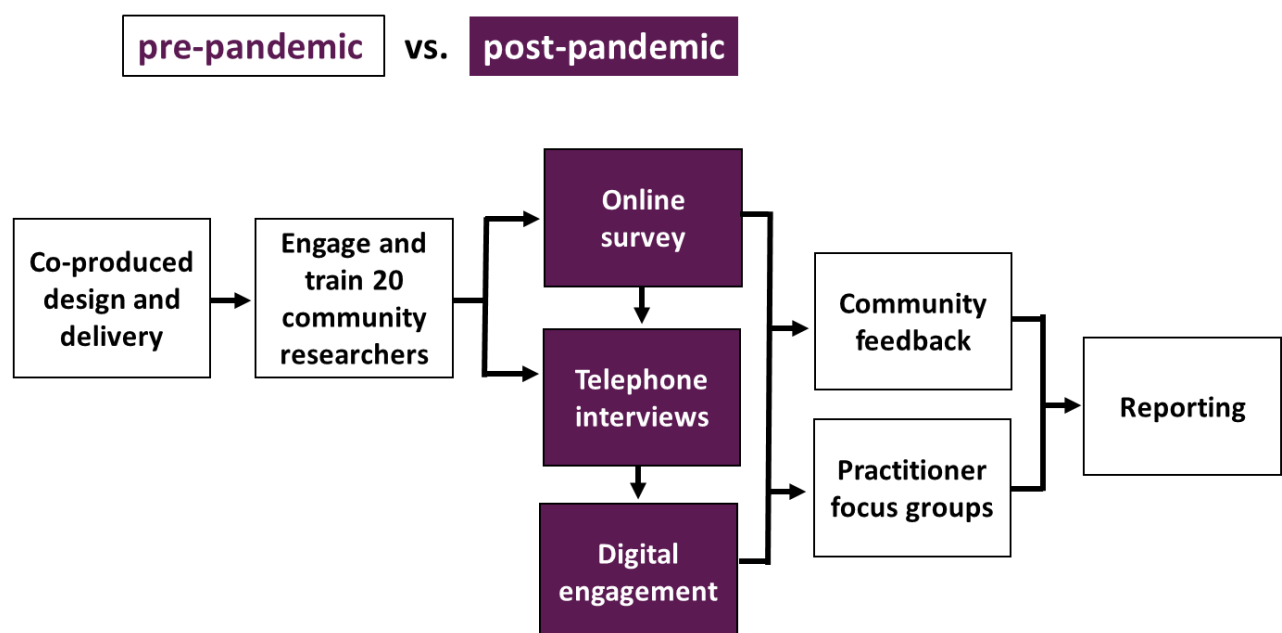


Figure 3. The City Conversation – challenges of adapting to the pandemic

Adaptation Approach	Key Challenges	
	Practical	Ethical
Face to face survey → on-line	Limits to ppt recruitment	Data sharing (email)
In person interview → telephone	Recording / transcribing	Privacy issues
In person focus group → Zoom	Researcher access to IT	Managing power dynamics
Community Researchers	Limits of pre-training	Increased risks of harm
Data gathering via social media	Engaging interest	Privacy issues

participation anticipated at the start of the project. The key practical and ethical challenges highlighted during the project are summarised in Figure 3.

The central challenge to adapting the CRBR approach to the lockdown conditions was the limited scope to retrain Community Researchers to undertake data collection and analysis using on-line tools. There were practical difficulties to provide the Community Researchers with the equipment they would need, but also many of the individuals that had received the original training were busy in front-line roles, working with vulnerable people in the community. There were also ethical issues and risks of placing Community Researchers in role where they may be underprepared to respond to problems that arose during the research. Due to these concerns the role of Community Researchers to undertake the data collection was reduced, with data collection undertaken by experienced community workers rather than local residents, as planned.

Despite the difficulties of adapting the research during the pandemic, the project has generated useful data on residents' views on the needs of their community that has contributed to the City Plan policy. The success of the initial training of residents and front-line workers in CBPR methods has been enthusiastically received by public agencies in the City

that see the approach as useful to explore health and housing policy issues. The project has generated significant learning and resources that can support further community-led research.

4. Policy implications

The direct involvement of targeted communities in the development and delivery of research not only brings the depth of engagement needed to design effective public policy, but can also accelerate the translation of research outcomes into action. Using CBPR methods, the inclusion of intended 'beneficiaries' allows policy recommendations to be calibrated to fit the specifics of need – working with the grain of existing community strengths and assets. Co-production of ideas, policy responses and delivery avoid the imposition of costly and ineffective top-down measures, improving the efficacy of interventions.

The City Conversation project has demonstrated the value of knowledge co-production and the important contribution that lived experience and different perspectives bring to the design and articulation of public policy. Very often individuals and communities have the answers to the challenges they face, but they need policy-makers to support and enable them to achieve change rather than do what public agencies think is

'best'. The learning from the project will inform Liverpool's multi-agency People Power Partnership, which is supporting the implementation of the City Plan by adopting an 'asset based' approach to deliver improved outcomes for the citizens of Liverpool.

In this context, the [Institute for Global Prosperity](#) recently issued a call to action to policy makers, academics and citizens from across the UK to 'bring people into policy-making' as part of a radically different approach to reimagining prosperity post-pandemic. They argue that policies that reflect the lived experience of people and communities are crucial to ensure policy is focussed on the things that make a real difference to a citizens' experience of prosperity.

With the significant and disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on older people, disabled, low income and BAME communities, there is added need to ensure that these groups are able to contribute to public policy design, during the post-pandemic recovery. Evidence from available literature and directly from the City Conversation in Liverpool, demonstrates the potential of CBPR to engage residents as active agents in research. Key lessons for public policy include:

- the opportunity to integrate CBPR methods into public policy design – involving local residents in research and service design processes that draw on local experience and insights into the needs of deprived communities;
- increased joint planning and collaboration across public, academic and community-based organisations to build research skills and capacity to co-produce knowledge for public policy; and
- the need to further develop and test on-line and digital methods of

participatory research to overcome digital inequalities and capture the full potential of photovoice techniques for CBPR.

5. References

- Dodds, Sarah, and Alexandra Claudia Hess. 2020. "Adapting Research Methodology During COVID-19: Lessons for Transformative Service Research." *Journal of Service Management*, online advance.
- Flicker, Sarah, Robb Travers, Adrian Guta, Sean McDonald, and Aileen Meagher. 2007. "Ethical Dilemmas in Community-Based Participatory Research: Recommendations for Institutional Review Boards." *Journal of Urban Health*, 84, 478–493.
- Valdez, Elizabeth Salerno, and Aline Gubrium. 2020. "Shifting to Virtual CBPR Protocols in the Time of Corona Virus/COVID-19." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19.
- Vindrola-Padros, Cecilia, Georgia Chisnall, Silvie Cooper, Anna Dowrick, Nehla Djellouli, Sophie Mulcahy Symmons, Sam Martin, et al. 2020. "Carrying out Rapid Qualitative Research During a Pandemic: Emerging Lessons from COVID-19." *Qualitative Health Research*, 30, no. 14.
- Viswanathan, Meera, Alice Ammerman, Eugenia Eng, Gerald Gartlehner, Kathleen N. Lohr, Derek Griffith, Scott Rhodes, Carmen Samuel-Hodge, Siobhan Maty, Linda Lux, Lucille Webb, Sonya F. Sutton, Tammeka Swinson, Anne Jackman, Lynn Whitener. 2004. "Community-based participatory research: assessing the evidence." *Evidence Report/Technology Assessment (Summary)*, 99, 1–8.

The Heseltine Institute is an interdisciplinary public policy research institute which brings together academic expertise from across the University of Liverpool with policy-makers and practitioners to support the development of sustainable and inclusive cities and city regions.

Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place
University of Liverpool, 1-7 Abercromby Square, Liverpool, L69 7ZH

 Follow us @livuniheseltine

About the authors

Dr Wayne Shand

Wayne is an independent researcher and consultant specialising in urban economic development and poverty issues. Wayne has a PhD from the University of Manchester and is an honorary research fellow at the Global Development Institute. His research interests are focused on co-production of development and the role of low-income communities in delivering inclusive and sustainable change.

Sue Jarvis

Sue is co-director at the Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place. Sue has significant experience of developing public policy responses to legislation and national and local government agendas. For example, she has undertaken key roles in the development of a succession of Liverpool City Region plans, from the multi area agreement, city region deal and devolution agreement.

The information, practices and views in this Policy Brief are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Heseltine Institute.

COVID-19 Policy Briefs can be accessed at: www.liverpool.ac.uk/heseltine-institute