So, You're Thinking About Becoming a Community Researcher?

A working document, co-created with love, laughter, and lived experience.

A Handy, Honest Guide for Anyone Curious (or New) to the Role

Written by and with community researchers in Reading, Plymouth, Tower Hamlets, and Brighton & Hove.

Part of the legacy work of the FoodSEqual Project.

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Welcome!

If you're reading this, you might be curious about becoming a Community Researcher or maybe you've just started and you're wondering what you've signed up for. Either way, you're in the right place.

This little handbook was co-created by people just like you — people who didn't start out as "researchers," but who care deeply about their communities. We've gathered real stories, lessons learned, and honest advice to help you feel more confident, more prepared, and less alone.

There's not just one way to be a Community Researcher.
And you don't have to have all the answers.
We're learning together.

This is just a snapshot — a window into the experiences of a group of community researchers who came together to reflect and share.

The stories, skills, and insights here won't cover everything — but we hope they offer something useful. There are many ways to be a community researcher, and all of them are valid.

A note on funding: This is paid work (and properly resourced)

Let's be clear: Community Researcher (CR) roles are paid. This work is resourced, so people's time, energy and expertise are respected.

💼 **Payment**: Community Researchers are paid for their time and contributions (employment/contract arrangements vary by site).

📃 **Project budgets**: Activities and workshops have dedicated budgets to support delivery (e.g., room hire, materials, travel, childcare where applicable).

🎟️ **Participant thank-you's**: Community participants may receive vouchers or honoraria to reduce barriers to taking part — not as "payment for opinions."

📣 **Up-front clarity**: Rates, hours, and how payment works (payroll/invoicing) are discussed at the start with your local coordinator.

🤝 **Ethical practice**: The work isn't reliant on unpaid labour; resourcing is part of doing it well and doing it fairly.

"It meant we weren't just hoping people would volunteer — we could plan properly, respect people's time, and support each other fully."

Too many good projects never get off the ground because there's no funding. This one showed what's possible when people are resourced and respected from the start.

1: How we got started.

No one here planned to be a "community researcher." Most of us didn't even know what that meant at first.
We came for all kinds of reasons:

🛒 To get a voucher
😊 For something to do
👋 Because a friend invited us
🥗 We were already volunteering at a community place and someone said, "You'd be great at this!"

"The boss told me some foodie people were coming and said, 'Can you sort them out?' So I did!"

"I came, had fun, and decided to stay."

"I didn't know what I got myself into — but I listened, learned, and now I wouldn't change it."

"I was helping out locally when someone asked if I'd be interested in becoming a CR — I had no clue what it meant, but I said yes. I'm glad I did."

Everyone's story is different.
But what brought us together
is that we cared — about our community,
about making positive change in the community,
about building connection.

2: What even IS a
Community Researcher?

It's hard to explain at first — and that's okay.
A Community Researcher helps gather, understand, and share the stories and experiences of local people and ensures that the experiences and insights of everyday people shape decisions, services, and systems in their community.

That might mean:

🦻 **Talking to people in your community about their experiences**

👫 **Being non-judgmental, respectful, and making people feel comfortable to share their experiences**

📊 **Helping academics understand the local picture**
📝 **Making sure research feels real, not just theoretical**

❓ **Helping design research questions that actually make sense to people**

🎉 **Running or supporting community events, workshops, or projects**

🔍 **Helping to offer local and community perspectives on the data – what does the data mean?**

📢 **Communicating the results using creative methods, connecting with a range of audiences, communities and stakeholders**

🌍 **Taking local action based on engagement with the community**

"It's about making sure real voices get heard. It's a link — between the academics and the community."

Some of us found that being a Community Researcher gave us structure, purpose, even new friendships.

"It's given me confidence. I've made friends. I feel like I've helped change something in my community."

Others found confidence, a better sense of wellbeing, and pride in seeing change happen.

"I got to know people personally. They trusted me enough to share what was going on in their lives."

"It's about capturing people's perspectives and making sure their voices are heard and respected."

"I've learned how people live, what matters to them, and how they navigate challenges. That kind of knowledge is powerful."

"We're often the bridge — the people who translate between community life and research, so that what matters locally can shape decisions."

Being a CR is also about making people feel comfortable, being respectful, and not judging others.
It's about removing barriers so that different voices and experiences can be heard.

3: What do we bring to the role?

🗣️ Worked behind a bar? You've got people skills
🏡 Raised a family? You know how to manage chaos
🎨 Love designing? Posters and blogs, here you come.
🤟 Good listener? You're golden!

"I love having a laugh and a joke to lighten the mood. It helps people relax, and they open up more."

"I worked as a foster carer — you learn how to really listen, how to care, how to notice when someone needs something even when they don't say it."
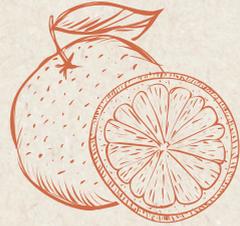
"I can talk to anyone — it's just in me."

"I've worked in admin, I know how to get things sorted."

"I care deeply. People feel better around me — I don't even have to say much."

Forget what you think " research skills" are. Most of what we bring comes from life.

You don't need to change
who you are to be
a Community Researcher.
Who you are is exactly
what's needed.

🗣️ Clear, everyday communication:
Turning "jargon" into plain language people can use is
a real skill in this role.

⚖️ The confidence to make space for quieter voices
(and gently rein in the louder ones) helps everyone take
part.

🔍 Knowing the local community, culture, and language
makes a lot of difference.

This role isn't about
qualifications.
It's about presence.
Curiosity.
Humanity.

4: What have we learned? So much - and often and by doing, not reading.

📚 We've learned about consent, data, and policy. Not only that, we've also learned the importance of ethics and cultural sensitivity.

👂 Our listening skills are sharper — especially less biased listening.

🧠 We think more critically — and with more care.

🧩 We've facilitated, brainstormed, run events, and even done presentations.

🗺️ Tried new facilitation methods (like mapping or imagining futures) — and learned how to manage expectations ethically.

🤝 Recruitment is relational: we've crafted quick "one-minute pitches," planned for reminders, and rolled with the fact that life happens.

"All opinions and personal experiences are valid and valued."

📝 Plain language matters: we've learned to translate dense materials and acronyms into everyday words so more people can join in.

⏳ Co-production is slow and sometimes frustrating — and policy change takes time. But when people come back and keep engaging, it's worth it.

🎓 Training has helped — from EDI to safeguarding, boundaries, and suicide prevention. It's made us more confident, empathetic, inclusive and safer.

🔍 Structured reflective practice has helped too — jotting notes, using shared boards, or doing small check-ins builds learning over time.

⏰ We're better at managing time and tasks at hand.

"I've learned how to read data and how to listen without bias."

"I never knew how much went into research before. Now I do — and I can be part of shaping it."

"I ran a whole workshop and did a presentation in front of a room full of strangers — I'd never done anything like that before. I didn't think I could. But I did."

We learned how to support one another.
To build skills and confidence.
To show up. To try again.
That's real learning.

5: What's helped us thrive?

**None of this happens in a vacuum.
Behind every CR is a web of support.**

What helps?

👥 Having a team that encourages you

🤝 Supportive coordinators who hold space and care

📚 Knowing the purpose of the research;
what are you trying to achieve, what information you want

⚖️ A healthy balance — respecting that CRs and researchers
both have jobs, families, and lives

⏱️ Regular check-ins — even short ones — and a bit of weekly
structure for reading, writing, and debriefing kept us steady

🌍 Cross-site meet-ups were energising — sharing approaches
and small wins made us feel part of something bigger

🎨 Playing to each other's strengths on outputs
(some writing, some visuals, some facilitation)
made the work better — and kinder

🔄 Flexing with team changes and pivots is normal
— good communication helps us adapt.

"We weren't left to figure it out alone.
People invested in us.
Not just with training — but with
energy, time, belief."

"It's the people —
it's always the people."

Whether it's a quick check-in, a cuppa
before a session, or someone saying,
"You're doing great,"
— the who matters.

🕰️ Time to rest, reflect, and be real

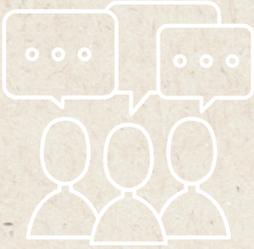🌍 Knowing you're not alone — even when things get hard

📚 Training that gives confidence we did right by participants

💬 Bonding as a team

☕ Quick check-ins, a cuppa, or just someone saying "You're doing great"

6: What did we do when things got tricky?

Let's not sugar-coat it — things will get tricky. But you're not alone.

👂 **Talk to each other**

💡 **Ask for advice from coordinators or peers**

🧷 **Share openly and in confidence**

🌱 **Take time out when we need to**

🗣️ **Name power gently — avoid "saviour" dynamics; stay empathetic and boundaried**

📅 **Expect real-life logistics — plans shift, so we use reminders and flexible sign-ups**

🧰 **Practice hard conversations (suicide-prevention training gave us language we didn't have before)**

📝 **Keep language accessible — if something feels jargon-y, we rewrite it together**

"If it's something difficult with the community, I try to talk it through. If I need a break, I take one."

"If I'm stuck, I talk to someone I trust. Sometimes I just need to hear a different perspective."

Challenges are part of the job. So is asking for support.

7: The Role of a Supportive Coordinator

If there's one thing that kept coming up again and again, it was this: a supportive coordinator can make or break the CR experience. A good coordinator isn't just there in the background. They are the steady hand, the advocate, the person who holds things together when everything feels messy.
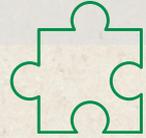
Here's what coordinators bring:

🧭 Guidance — Helping decide if a research topic is right for the local area, and making sure the community is properly represented.

👥 Connection — Advising who to speak to, making introductions, and bridging gaps between the community and academics.

Problem-solving — Supporting us when communication gets difficult, whether inside the CR team or with the wider project.

💬 Advocacy — Raising our concerns with researchers or project leads so the work stays grounded in the community.

👐 Holding space — Reminding us we don't have to figure it all out alone.

💡 Key Learning:

Investing in coordinators isn't optional. It's vital.
Without them, CRs risk feeling isolated
and projects risk losing their way.
With them, CRs can thrive, communities can
feel heard, and research can truly make a difference.

8: Final Thoughts (For Now)

You're here because something drew you in
— a conversation, a curiosity, a calling.

⭐ You don't need to be perfect.

⭐ You don't need a PhD.

⭐ You just need to be open, kind, and willing to learn - have a passion for what you're doing.

⭐ This work will change you. It'll stretch you, surprise you.

⭐ But it will also bring you satisfaction and a sense of achievement.

"You are already enough."

"You already bring something that matters."

Welcome to the work.
We're so glad you're here.
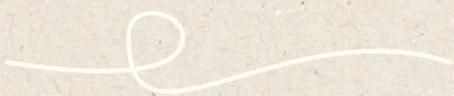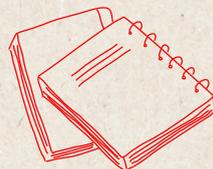
Case studies - a deeper dive into topics & themes from our 'handy guide.'

Written by Community Researchers in FoodSEqual's four local research hubs; Reading, Plymouth, Brighton & Hove, and Tower Hamlets.

🌱 What is FoodSEqual?

FoodSEqual (Food systems Equality) is a 5 year research project funded by UKRI as part of the Transforming the UK Food System strategic programme. Its aim is to make healthier, more sustainable food accessible for everyone — especially for those often left out of decision-making.

At its heart, FoodSEqual works in partnership with local communities, policymakers, and businesses to co-produce practical solutions: from better food environments to fairer supply chains.

This collection of case studies shows what that looked like across four local research sites — Reading, Plymouth, Brighton & Hove, and Tower Hamlets.

"Researchers are embedded in the heart of four UK communities, bringing local residents together with food manufacturers, retailers and policymakers to co-develop systems and policies that can provide affordable, sustainable, culturally appropriate and healthy food that people want to eat."

👥 The Role of Community Researchers

Community Researchers (CRs) are central to this work. They connect academic researchers with the lived experiences of local people, ensuring that the project is shaped not just by data, but by voices from the ground.

These aren't abstract "examples."
They are lived experiences, personal reflections, and moments that shaped the research, individual researchers and communities themselves.

✳ Case Study 1 — Building Trust, Building Bridges

**"People can trust us, they know
you're from the same community,
you ask people questions and they
just start talking."**

Community Researchers often found that being part of the community themselves broke down barriers. Trust wasn't something that had to be "earned" in the same way as external researchers — it was already there.

"We learnt that one of our roles would be to be a bridge between "jargon" and the community. Through the workshops I now have a better understanding of how to translate research aims to make them accessible to community members. I got to understand the necessity of ethics, GDPR and the decision-making processes involved in co-designing and running research workshops. After the research workshops I was involved in sharing the outcomes to the research participants, and our peers across the project. This involved working with my fellow Community Researchers on a creative visual output, which allowed us all to work to our strengths."

**"Our research is a lot freer than if you
are a PhD student, we can come
together as normal people from the
community and make stuff happen."**

☀️ Case Study 2 — Finding My Confidence

"I sat in on a meeting with the Food Policy Coordinator for the Council! This gave an incredible insight into local government and the Policy Coordinator even said that Community Research was the 'missing part' in what she does."

"This experience taught me that Community Researchers can and should have opportunities to present findings directly to decision-makers. Our perspective bridges academic findings and community experiences in a way that can be particularly compelling."

"Your unique perspective and observational style can be strengths—embrace them rather than trying to conform to a single model of research."

"Being part of this project opened my eyes to the way researchers communicate to the government and decision makers. I didn't think it was the universities that were involved in proposing policy and things like that. Now I know that research can make a difference, you can submit findings to the government, and it might make a change. That's the value of community research. For example, I care a lot about additives in food and would like to see more done about this, and organic food being made more available to communities."

For many, taking part as a CR meant stepping into new spaces — and discovering skills they didn't know they had.

🤝 **Case Study 3 —**
Highlights of Working Together

"One of the highlights for me has been checking in with the other Community Researchers from across the project, participating in bi-monthly online meetings with the researchers from Reading and Plymouth, updating each other on our projects and sharing learning."

"We got to learn about the community researchers in other places and realised we are all on the same page. I even had the chance to visit and get to know different community projects, such as a chance encounter with the Diversity Business Incubator in Plymouth over lunch. I realised there are not just community researchers across FoodSEqual, but also people making change beyond that in other towns and cities. You are not on your own. We are just a little portion of the scale of people taking action, there are other things going on we don't know about. It's good to get together with other people making change, get inspiration and learn about what they are doing."

At the FoodSEqual Annual Assembly we had the chance to meet face to face with the wider community research teams and spend time discussing our different approaches, achievements, and challenges.

"It was interesting to see diversity across all the Community Research teams, in working styles, approaches and the methods used."

🔍 Case Study 4 — Reality Checks

"Co-production can be frustrating and tangible results aren't forthcoming – but the rewards of seeing regular participants returning to workshops eager to take part, feeling that their voice has been amplified and their opinions matter and will help to make a change, outweighed any negative feelings I had."

Not every part of the journey was smooth — but learning to navigate challenges was part of what made the role meaningful.

"I sometimes struggled with the academic language used in research, breaking scientific words down into lay terms would have been helpful. This challenge made me even more aware of the importance of accessible language when working with communities."

🛠️ Case Study 5 —
Practical Tips for Future CRs

📖 "Don't be afraid to ask for clarification of terms, this will help you translate complex concepts when working with community members. Keep a glossary of terms as you go—something I wish I'd done from the start."

🧩 "The early accommodation of different needs, such as neurodiversity, is something I'd highlight as crucial for any Community Research programme."

🙂 "During recruitment sessions, I discovered that body language was a good indicator of who was receptive to conversation. I found that being open, smiley, and helping people complete forms increased engagement. I noticed that even small touches like saying 'I'll be there too' created comfort and familiarity."

💜 "Take care of your wellbeing throughout the process."

🌱 Case Study 6 — Growing Through the Work

For some, being a CR became a turning point — not just for the community, but personally.

⭐ "I have learned and applied interpersonal skills many times over the last year in my community researcher role, and I think it makes me better at what I do day-to-day. Here are two key areas I feel I have developed in:

⭐ My own conduct. Approaching people with a genuine but non-pushy attitude; I think I always feel a lot of empathy and I always want to help. However, culturally and through my personality, I am aware this might come across as telling someone what to do, rather than asking them what would help them the most and how I can help them do that.

⭐ Intervening when I see that some louder voices drown out others. I have learned ways of ensuring all conversations, opinions and experiences are being heard and valued equally, even if differences are stark, and helping others in being more empathetic in those discussions."

💬 "When I first started I would have thought it wasn't for me, but you listen and learn and realise you can do it; it was out of my comfort zone."

💬 "Realising the difference you can make to your community."

💬 "You have to be patient and smile. You have to be prepared to listen; sometimes people want to tell you their life story as well."

⚖️ Case Study 7 —Sensitivity, Ethics, & Representation

CRs also reflected on how important sensitivity and ethics are in the work.

"We wanted to be clear the community would be properly represented."

"When listening to people's stories, I have learned to notice where I may have assumptions. I feel I have a better appreciation now of some of the complex challenges, which food is embedded in, faced by people in my community."

"I pride myself on being a good communicator with people across all backgrounds, but having EDI training and delving into unconscious bias, intersectionality, privilege and power imbalances and the differences between equality and equity, I now feel better equipped going into other communities across the city and engaging with different people."

Support from coordinators and researchers made this possible — helping ensure the work wasn't just "for" communities, but truly with them.

📱 Case Study 8 — Tools & Practical Support That Made a Difference

Having the right tools — pens, diaries, phones, laptops, or even travel cards — was essential. It meant CRs could do the work without dipping into their own pocket.

"There should be enough budget in a project — if you don't have a phone or laptop you would struggle as a community researcher. Laptop supports independence."

Having resources in place gave CRs the freedom to focus on the research itself — and to feel respected and supported.
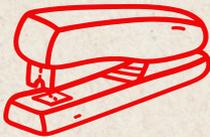
✨ Conclusion —
Why These Stories Matter

These case studies show that being a Community Researcher isn't just about collecting data — it's about building trust, finding confidence, and making space for voices that are too often ignored.

They remind us that funding and resources matter 💰 not just goodwill. That support and sensitivity matter 🤝 so research is fair and inclusive. And that community voices matter 🗣️ because they bring insight, humanity, and change.

Community Research is messy, inspiring, and deeply human work. And as these stories show, CRs aren't just participants in research — they're the missing piece that makes research real.

THANK YOU

With thanks to the FoodSEqual Community Researchers,
past and present, from
Reading, Plymouth, Tower Hamlets and Brighton & Hove
for sharing learning, reflections and insights.

Patricia, Reading Community Researcher
Vandy, Reading Community Researcher
Jo, Plymouth Community Food Researcher
Joanna, Plymouth Community Food Researcher
Julia, Plymouth Community Food Researcher
Laura, Plymouth Community Food Researcher
Star, Plymouth Community Food Researcher
Yve, Plymouth Community Food Researcher
Shazna Hussain, Tower Hamlets Community Researcher
Sajna Miah, Tower Hamlets Community Researcher
Maria, Brighton & Hove Community Researcher
Nikki, Brighton & Hove Community Researcher
Sophia, Brighton & Hove Community Researcher
Rachel, Brighton & Hove Community Researcher
Amanda, Brighton & Hove Community Researcher
Holly, Brighton & Hove Community Researcher
Cailen, Brighton & Hove Community Researcher
Emma, Brighton & Hove Community Researcher
Holly, Brighton & Hove Community Researcher

Find out more about the FoodSEqual Project
research.reading.ac.uk/food-systems-equality