



Civic University
Network



**Institute for
Community Studies**

Case Study:

Peer Research

Background

Peer research is a participatory research method in which people with lived experience of the issues being studied take part in directing and conducting the research. Peer research recognises that individuals within any community being researched are themselves competent agents, capable of participating in research on a variety of levels, including as researcher.

It aims to move away from the 'extractive' model of social research and to empower people to affect positive change by participating in research and in their own communities.

Peer Research can involve communities in research through different models. In the '**Advisory Model**' peer researchers are engaged as advisors to aspects of research, ie. refining research questions. The '**Employment Model**' involves peer researchers working on specific acts of the research as paid employees. Whilst the '**Partnership Model**' sees community members involved as partners in all aspects of the research process from design of questions, data collection, analysis, write-up and dissemination.

Peer Research in Practice: Thames Futures

Thames Futures was a peer research project led by the Young Foundation in partnership with property developer Barking Riverside London (BRL), to create a **community-led vision** for an area undergoing regeneration in east London. BRL wanted to understand the **hopes and aspirations** of old and new **residents**, and **build trust in the scheme** through the creation of an **accountability mechanism**.

The Young Foundation facilitated the peer research process in order to ensure that decision-making about the future of the ward responded to the priorities and ambitions of local residents and that the development has positive social impacts for the community.

We recruited and trained a group of local residents as peer researchers and supported them to speak to 400 of their neighbours across the area through a range of avenues including at pop-up events, creative workshops, community groups, and through door knocking. A variety of creative and engaging methods were employed to uncover people's hopes and aspirations for the area, including resident 'love letters' to the Thames area and future-thinking workshops with local sixth formers.

The project produced **a detailed and ambitious vision** setting out the community's hopes for the future of the Thames area, with **a list of priorities and associated commitments** from BRL explaining how they will work with the community to achieve this.

Benefits of the Peer Research Approach

- **Empowerment of Communities**- control over research process, skills development
- **Access**- gaining privileged access to people who might be unwilling to engage with professional researchers
- **Lived Experience**- peer researchers' inside understanding of issues enhances the richness & nuance of the inquiry
- **Better Data**- more effective communication, mutual understanding and trust results in more accurate information
- **Activated Communities**- participatory approaches enable communities to become activate in addressing issues
- **Benefits to Peer Researchers**- work experience, employment, skills development, connections, confidence

Summary

Role of Community	Community as researchers, shaping questions, engaging in analysis and creating ideas for action.
Depth of Collaboration	Fairly deep, puts residents in position as researcher, flipping the notion of traditional approaches to consultation. Thames Futures was funded by the developer, but based on high levels of community involvement, with an external facilitator.
Lens	Focus on social outcomes, with a broad place-based lens.
Inclusivity	Reached beyond the usual suspects of consultation. Aimed to include everyone who lives in a particular place. Accessed more people through researchers' existing social networks.
Data Generated	Hopes, ambitions, ideas for action.
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allowing for Honesty- in contrast to traditional forms of consultation, insights in this project were generated through conversations between people from the same community. The trust between researcher and research participant encouraged honesty in responses, resulting in information that better reflected the sentiments of local people.• Diversity of Views- peer researchers were able to quickly access people in their community through existing social networks. This allowed the project to move beyond those who usually participate in consultation exercises and include a more diverse range of opinions.• Increasing Trust & Accountability- the Young Foundation acted as a neutral facilitator of the consultation, employing peer researchers to ask questions and engage local people. This gave local residents more control over the research and it's recommendations for action. In doing so, the project helped to garner greater trust in the consultation process, engaging people more deeply and allowing them to hold the developer to account going forwards.• Building Community Capacity for Action- the project focussed on identifying ambitions and creating practical ways to achieve these. Peer researchers were able to connect with residents to encourage this more active style of participation, which helped to build the community's capacity for action.

Challenges

- **Skills Development**- the peer researchers developed a range of communication, relationship-building and negotiation skills through their role. These people will continue to play a role in ensuring that the vision create by the community is enacted throughout the period of the regeneration.
- Recruitment of peer researchers can be difficult & needs to be managed
- Can cost more than standard consultation- i.e. paying peer researchers
- Requires skilled and experienced facilitation and coordination
- Negotiating a diverse range of viewpoints , experiences and relationships within a community
- Building trust in the process and negotiating uneven power relationships between funders, communities, researchers & research participants.