



Ethnicity and Unequal Ageing: Experiences in Rotherham and Sheffield Project

How well were the principles of collaboration achieved?

What can be learned from this experience for future research?

**Authors of this report
Dr. Zanib Rasool, MBE &
Kathy Wilkinson
Steel City Community Consultancy Ltd
www.steelcitycommunityconsultancy.co.uk**

The University of Sheffield commissioned Steel City Community Consultancy Ltd to gain insight, through reflection sessions, on the co-production element of the 'Ethnicity and Unequal Ageing: experiences in Rotherham and Sheffield' project (<https://www.ethnicityandunequalageing.ac.uk/>) funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

The project, led by the University of Sheffield, aimed to improve understanding of ageing and ways in which experiences related to inclusion differ throughout the life course for individuals from different racially minoritised groups, and how these experiences intersect with other characteristics such as sex, religion, socio-economic status, and place. The project, undertaken between 2022 and 2025, sought a collaborative, community-based approach and, in addition to university-based researchers, involved the following:

- Two Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) Co-Investigators - Rotherham Ethnic Minority Alliance (REMA) and Sheffield and District African-Caribbean Community Association (SADACCA).
- A team of Community Researchers recruited from across a range of communities in Rotherham and Sheffield.
- Two Voice Forums - one in Rotherham and one in Sheffield - composed of racially minoritised older people with diverse lived experiences - which regularly advised on the project.
- Policy and Practice Partners spanning community organisations working with racially minoritised older people, older people third sector organisations and community arts associations.

The reflection and insights sessions, conducted between July and September 2025, involved discussions with people from all of the above.

We held conversations with six Community Researchers from Rotherham and Sheffield, both online and face-to-face. We organised two Voice Forum reflection and insight workshops; in Rotherham, ten people participated, while in Sheffield, six attended. In-person meetings were conducted with the leads of the VCS Co-investigator organisations. We also talked with four Policy and Practice Partners, comprising two who were actively engaged with the project and two who provided a letter of support at the proposal stage, committing to involvement should the project be funded, although they did not participate further.



The insights gained from our reflection sessions are grounded in the guiding principles of the "Working Together in Research" (<https://www.diversecitytrust.org/projects/>), which aims to foster a more equitable and effective co-production between universities and communities.

- 1) The research is community-centred, and community partners and stakeholders are involved in the research process. Research is conducted with the community and for the community, and not on the community.
- 2) Being respectful and practising cultural humility, recognising the disparities in power dynamics between communities and institutions, and being reflective of that.
- 3) Recognise strengths and opportunities for mutual benefit, the resources, social capital, knowledge, and expertise that communities hold, fostering reciprocal learning.
- 4) Build lasting partnerships that are sustainable and have a positive impact on the community based on shared values and goals.
- 5) Being aware of and anticipating the differences in each other's calendars, understanding additional commitments and priorities of the partner organisation and participants.
- 6) Making the research process accessible, acceptable, and available, facilitating participant involvement by providing transportation and interpreters, eliminating obstacles, and promoting inclusivity in research.
- 7) Protect communities from harm by ensuring that research is conducted in a safe environment, and participants are not misinformed.



Good practice and what the project did well

(1/2)

- **Fostering a positive environment**

Most participants in the reflection sessions reported feeling genuinely included and engaged in the research. They saw older people placed at the centre of the research and believed their input shaped the project. The university team was seen as being responsive to community feedback, who felt they were listened to and their contributions valued.

They fostered a very positive atmosphere and treated us as equals with everyone else. I really appreciated that. People have senior roles in the university and can be intimidating, but we were treated as equals as a team.

- **Inclusion and accessibility**

The importance of valuing participants' time, through payment of vouchers, providing transportation, and interpreters, was highlighted by Voice Forum members. The project provided an opportunity for older individuals, who had previously never participated in this form of engagement, to contribute; their opinions had never been solicited before.

One of the things that's been unusual, I would say, is getting paid for participating in the Voice Forum, getting vouchers for coming here, and then we have expenses to participate in the workshops. It wasn't a high amount, but it did help. It recognised. It's a good model going forward. You will get engagement.

- **Mentoring and Training**

Reflection sessions with the Community Researchers highlighted that positive support given from the university staff through mentoring helped them to share concerns and manage interviews. Training was clear, well-organised, and built confidence, offering a safe space for open dialogue and reducing hierarchy between academics and the community researchers.

We were provided excellent training on how to do the interviews, how to use the Dictaphone, and how to understand statistics. We worked together as a team to find the participants we wanted to interview and the stakeholders. I'd give it a high-end 9 out of 10.



Good practice and what the project did well (2/2)

- **Empowering older people**

The project empowered older people to adopt a more positive self-perception, seeing ageing not as a disadvantage but as an opportunity to appreciate their experience and wisdom. It is important for all research projects to find ways of empowering those they research.

There are a few individuals who were interviewed, and I have seen their confidence grow... from the Pakistani and Slovakian communities. I feel their confidence grew into something beautiful. They did the drama and acting; it was amazing to see the change in their confidence.

- **Integration**

The project facilitated integration, allowing people from different racially minoritised backgrounds to meet and realise they had a lot in common. The Voice Forum participants said they enjoyed meeting people from other cultural backgrounds, interacting with individuals they would not have otherwise met, and getting involved in community activities together.

We had a diverse group of people from Rotherham and Sheffield, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Irish communities, all of them in one space. It was empowering for them and created harmony. They have friendships now... doing activities together outside the group, which also helps tackle the issue of isolation.



We have also made recommendations that came directly from the reflection and insight sessions.

- 1) Consider what further development and research opportunities are available for the Community Researchers, given that the university has dedicated time and resources through training and mentoring.
- 2) During the recruitment interview, it would be beneficial to inquire with the potential Community Researchers about what additional resources the university can offer them beyond the scope of the project (workshops, networking opportunities, access to the university library).
- 3) Re-assess the time assigned to Community Researchers and determine whether the planned activities can be accomplished within the allotted timeframe.
- 4) The ESRC re-evaluates the funding model for VCS Co-Investigators to ensure that it is consistent with that for universities.
- 5) The university explores having a pool of trained research interpreters shared across Schools as required and offering them further research-relevant training.
- 6) Before seeking research funding, it is essential to obtain the commitment of policy and decision makers to attend sessions, since community expectations tend to increase when working with the universities.
- 7) Greater caution should be taken in managing community expectations, ensuring that university staff communicate clearly with Community Researchers and others regarding the potential changes, if any, that the project can bring about to people's lives.
- 8) The university academics should allocate more space to the Community Researchers and non-academic partners, fostering a more collaborative environment by sharing power at workshops and events, and sharing the space more equally.
- 9) Share outputs and findings with the wider community groups who have not been involved in the research, so they can benefit from the learning.
- 10) Identify and share existing toolkits that have been produced with experienced community members, and which correspond with reflections and insights from this project.

