

# 1 Why do community research?

## What is research?

Research is a way of finding and gathering information in a systematic way. It can be very simple, asking questions like:

*How many people visited our community centre last year?*

*What were the most popular activities?*

As well as finding out facts and figures, research will put this information into context. For example, knowing that 317 people used your community centre last year is only the first step. You will also need to know things such as:

*Is this as many as we expected?*

*Did they like using it?*

*Did some people use it more often than others? Why?*

*Why didn't more older people (or young people / parents / people with disabilities / people from the new estate ... ) use it?*

*How have other community centres attracted a broad range of people?*

You might then find yourself asking more

general questions ...

*How has our community changed in the last few years?*

*What are the issues that people living here face in their daily lives?*

*Who should be providing what services?*

Approaching these questions in a structured way, gathering your information, thinking about explanations and using what you find out to help you develop your project are all parts of the research process.

## Why do community groups need to do research?

Increasingly community groups are being asked to prove the need for their services, to provide evidence of their effectiveness in providing services or to provide data on outcomes to funders. They need to be accountable to their users, the broader community and their funders. In a climate of tight control on local government spending, each service needs to show its unique value. Community groups also use research to develop their services, helping them to fulfil

their missions. Research carried out by your community group can help you to:

- **assess the particular needs and wants of a group of people or local community**
- **find out if people's needs are being met**
- **identify trends in services**
- **map existing local services and organisations and find out what others are doing**
- **monitor and evaluate a service or a project.**

It can also help you

- **provide information for fundraising, lobbying or campaigning**
- **deliver services and activities in a way that is best for people**
- **prioritise and make best use of limited resources**
- **create a good relationship with those who use your services**

- **encourage people to get involved in your group or organisation**
- **promote your group or organisation as open and accountable to users.**

Here are some examples of the way community groups have used research methods for

### 1 Service development

### 2 Funding

### 3 Lobbying for change

- 1 To shape current or future services in order to deliver more focused and relevant services to users. This can include consulting your users about what is needed or evaluating existing services.

#### Example

*A festival group in central London was awarded funding from the National Lottery Charities Board to organise an 18-month project encouraging local people to become more involved in their community. The festival consisted of activities, workshops and events with the themes of participation and sustainability. Central to the project was ownership by the community. With this in mind, the organisation wanted to conduct*

*meaningful research into the community's ideas and opinions to shape the festival programme. Their consultation used focus groups to reach some of the more marginalised members of the community as well as open meetings with residents and community groups. The aim was to explore how issues of sustainability affect people's daily lives and what activities people wanted to be involved in.*

- 2 To apply for funding for service development, using research as evidence of need. This can include conducting needs assessments, feasibility studies and mapping service provision.

#### Example

*A neighbourhood organisation wanted to investigate whether a furniture recycling project would be feasible. An additional aim for the project would be to provide work in an area of youth unemployment. With the aid of a consultant, they investigated grant funders looking at a wide range of suitable grants, and also the process of becoming a training organisation through the New Deal initiative. They researched other similar projects and their charging policies and also potential donors. They also identified*

*an appropriate structure for the management of the project and drew up a possible business plan.*

- 3 Lobbying local service providers to make changes in the services they provide.

#### Example

*Under the Community Care charter, carers should be given a certain amount of support from the community they work in. A rural community council and a local branch of the Carers Association wanted to assess whether carers were getting the support they had been promised and whether this was sufficient for their needs. They sent out a postal questionnaire to nearly 1500 carers in the area asking about their personal experiences of caring. About 440 replied and a smaller group were interviewed by phone in more detail. They then presented a report to the social services department showing whether any progress had been made in implementing the charter and making recommendations to improve services for carers.*



## Skills and preparation

Community and voluntary groups often grapple with the question 'is our research "proper" research?' As long as you follow the basic principles which underpin all research, your research will be valid. The basic skills needed to carry out research are the ability to:

- **know what you want to find out**
- **ask the right questions without suggesting the answers**
- **listen to what people are actually saying**
- **take accurate note of the answers**
- **observe what is going on around you**
- **think about what the answers might mean**
- **communicate with lots of different people**

There are a number of useful techniques that help us carry out research and get the best results we can. We explain some of these in later sections of the pack.

The key to successful research is careful planning. Planning will also help you make

best use of the limited time and resources you have available. You need to be clear about what you actually want to find out and why. An understanding of basic research theory will help you to ask the right questions, use appropriate methods and collect relevant information. Good preparation is essential, saving you time, energy and resources in the longer term.

## Getting support

Many areas and communities have been the focus of many different types of research and consultation: needs analyses, benchmarking exercises, community audits. You may sometimes meet hostility or apathy if people suspect that your research will not lead to significant local changes so ask yourself:

- **how will the findings of this research be used?**
- **how will this research help to change things?**
- **what notice will be taken of the results of this research?**
- **how do I communicate the results to the people involved?**

You may find there are some other objections to meet as well.

*It costs too much/takes too long, but ...*

- **collecting basic information can be very useful and involve little extra time on a daily basis.**
- **collecting information can be built into your everyday work practice. For example, brief evaluation forms, a comments and suggestions book, a questionnaire in a local newsletter, asking staff for their views.**
- **in the end it's a waste providing things that people don't want. An investment in consultation and research may save resources in the future.**
- **overall, it contributes to the value of the organisation.**

*It raises people's expectations, but ...*

- **make it clear why you are doing your research.**
- **always explain the context of the research and be clear where you can make or influence changes. Be prepared to act, otherwise what is the point of consulting?**
- **make sure you report back the results and, if necessary, explain why suggestions couldn't be implemented.**

*You can't consult everyone, but ...*

- **you can use appropriate methods to make sure you get a cross-section of views.**
- **think about all the groups of people whose voices should be heard and the different ways of including them.**

*People will never agree ...*

- **you're probably right!**
- **at least you will be able to make decisions with full information about different views and the issues involved.**

*People aren't interested ...*

- **people are busy and may think that you won't take any notice of their views anyway. There is a danger of over consulting and no results.**
- **make it easy for people to participate – encourage comments and feedback to them afterwards. We all want to think our views have been listened to and taken seriously.**
- **encourage people to get involved. It can be very exciting and a good learning experience.**

*No one has complained so far ...*

- **never assume that your service is perfect.**
- **if you haven't had complaints it may be that people don't know how to complain, can't be bothered or think you won't listen.**
- **ask them for their views, you will be surprised what useful suggestions they might come up with.**

## **Where will your information come from?**

There are really only two ways of getting hold of information:

- **Finding it out yourself. This is called 'primary research.' Most of this pack is about groups doing research themselves. Perhaps the most important aspect is consulting people to ask them for their views, thoughts and opinions.**
- **Using information already collected. This is known as 'secondary research' or 'desk research.' See sections 7b and 7c [pages 58-69] for how to use written information and using the Internet to help you with your research.**

You will probably need a mixture of primary and secondary research, if only to find out if the answers to your questions already exist, or research has already been done on your topic.

