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Working with conflict in community research

Niamh Kavanagh, Tina Cribbin, Sanjay Thakrar, Oli Soutar, Shakira Evans and Mark Hammond

*Sat round corporate tables,
with corporate players,
who get to decide how to help the very people
who are excluded from the meeting.*

*The power plays out between partners and organisations
each showing the other the emperor's new clothes.
Caught in this enormous din of ego,
I just wanted to fight for our homes.*

*Property developers scratch at our front doors
Prime land for those that chew
and spit out our communities.
Tenants huddle closer
making plans and opportunities.*

*There's no equality.
Projects that try to help
revert back to middle class structures
and decision making
all the while framing co production
in academic books.
Our voices unheard we have no such luck*

*I have faced a lifetime of stress and trauma,
of being decanted,
of yet another displacement
it seems the new order.*

*If real change is what you need
change the thinking
that academic knowledge is the miracle*

*Remember us in textbooks,
academic articles on housing.
We are in the spaces between words,
the catalyst for their work.
We are visibly invisible
We don't get a chance to be critical.*

(Excerpt from 'The Meeting' by Tina Cribbin)

Co-production is a research approach where local communities, researchers and practitioners work together, sharing power and responsibility from the start to the end of a project.¹ It values experiential knowledge for tackling social problems, to co-create new knowledge and meaningful community-led social change.² Yet challenges with collaborative approaches are often glossed over, especially in relation to the difficulties of collaborating in precarious and both emotionally and politically charged contexts. Our aim here is to consider and discuss how power and conflict saturated our project and how we addressed it.

The project is based in Hulme, an inner-city area of Manchester with a rich history and a strong sense of identity. Hulme has seen repeated cycles of urban change since the 1960s, each reshaping the area in profound ways. Recently, expansion from the city centre and nearby universities has brought increased gentrification, replacing social housing with high-end residential blocks and student accommodation – leading to feelings of alienation amongst the local community, particularly for older residents. This is amplified by dramatic cuts to health and public services. In response to these pressures, local residents have collectively organised, finding ways to offer support as well as sustain the sense of belonging that defines Hulme and their idea of home.

Located in the midst of such change is Hopton Court, a nine-storey social housing block. Despite not being designed specifically for older people, the majority of tenants are aged over 50. Growing older in this particular high-rise context brings a series of challenges, which are made worse by health and social inequalities already disproportionately felt by social housing tenants.³

Building on the strong mutual aid and community spirit that exists in the block, older tenants have been actively campaigning against such inequities for years through creative methods such as [theatre productions](#) and [poetry books](#), generating awareness about these issues. The culmination of over a decade of campaigning from tenants led to the formation of a partnership with their housing provider, local community organisations and university academics, who are now collaborating together on a project to co-create a Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC) programme at Hopton Court to support the older community and improve their quality of life and wellbeing.

Originating in North America, NORC initiatives capitalise on a high concentration of older adults living in tower blocks in one area by providing onsite health and social care and support, which in turn facilitates [ageing well in place](#). While NORCs are built through collaborative partnerships, they have a strong tenant-led focus where the voices of older people from the community are central in shaping what the programme looks like.

The main [aims](#) of the project at Hopton centred around strengthening the community through social events and gatherings, the creation of groups for shared interests and wellbeing (such as gardening), the development of a community space, and linking up with services in the local area to strengthen the health and social support for the block.

“As well as helping to support tenants and change on the ground, our role as researchers was to also generate learning about developing a NORC in a novel context, reflecting on the process to understand what the opportunities and barriers are” (Mark Hammond, Researcher)

NORC programmes are relatively new in the UK, having been originally established in the US where economic, social and political structures operate very differently at the community-level. As the collaborative process unfolded between the partners in this project, it brought uncertainties about what might be possible. As may be expected, there were longstanding tensions between tenants and their

housing provider and power imbalances in the relationships between various partners. Wider barriers, including cuts to public funding due to austerity made it difficult for key services such as the NHS Local Neighbourhood Health Team to support the NORC. In other words, there were layers of challenges and conflict that came together to threaten the realisation of the NORC at Hopton, delaying progress and weakening trust.

An example of this is the turbulent development of a community space, which is a key pillar of any NORC and essential in allowing tenants to grow together as a community. At present, the tenants' only place to socialise is a small caretaker's office and a garden when weather permits. In response to this, tenants have poured years of focused effort on realising a community space in the block. In 2022, they contributed to a series of workshops to co-design a new purpose-built building in the gardens of Hopton Court, supported by a charitable grant raised through CLASS, a local community charity.

Unfortunately subsequent senior management changes within the housing association meant that plans fell through, and the housing association instead offered to renovate an unused ground floor flat as a community space. When these plans and proposed completion dates were again delayed, this caused further uncertainty and upset amongst tenants. This culminated in the tenants holding a protest against their landlord outside their offices. Three years on, the community space has still not materialised. Whilst this is, in part, due to changing regulatory frameworks that are outside of the housing association's control, tenants feel disempowered and devalued. This has been worsened by the intense pace of change and gentrification around Hopton Court, where development continues at an exponential rate, primarily aimed at the local student population. This speaks to the more pressing issues around injustice and the tenants' sense of their inability to effect change, despite upholding their end of the bargain throughout the process.

"My experience of collaboration has been like a rollercoaster, going through cycles of HOPE, confusion, frustration and anger, HOPE. Repeat" (Tina Cribbin, Tenant and Community Activist)

Tina's poem at the start of this essay gets right to the heart of the conflict that occurs in community-researcher partnerships. Such tensions have required a responsive, dynamic and sensitive approach from all those involved in the research project. As a team, we had to find ways to navigate conflict and build trust throughout.

Deformalising spaces

Collaborative partnerships often involve organisations that rely on formal structures and processes, which can ostracise tenants. We quickly found frustrations in the project would be heightened by the formal steering group meetings which took place as part of this partnership – a setting which brought the power imbalances to the fore. So, NORC community worker Shakira Evans adopted a different way of engaging, namely simply '*being human*', meeting the Hopton community on their own terms. This deformalised the spaces in which collaboration took place, reimagining what legitimate participation looked like and created different ways of filtering voices up and in between the different worlds of partners.

"I think it's very hard to have a balance of power in formal spaces. They are hierarchical by nature with layers of unspoken subtext. They smell clinical, not of homes and lives. It's really important to create meeting spaces where local people (who are often the real experts) feel they are on the front foot, where they are not having to fight to be listened to. Creating spaces where there's a sense of

familiarity and social support are important foundations for people to feel comfortable enough to 'speak their mind'” (Shakira Evans, NORC Community Worker)

Given the setbacks and tensions, Shakira focused on the positive ‘doable’ things, like knitting the community together through smaller moments of connecting, which brought more isolated tenants out of their flats and kept people interacting. Shakira hosted the Hopton Tenant meetings in the garden, which is at the heart of the Hopton community, with seating arranged in a circle and agendas set by the tenants themselves. Consultation for the new community space was held during a barbeque in the garden where tenants brought food to share and chose music to listen to. They were able to informally walk round the pre-converted space together sharing thoughts and discussing ideas. This approach resulted in 46 tenants (71%) of the block engaging in the survey consultation.

“Deformalising meetings helped to support a stronger, more confident tenant collective” (Shakira Evans, NORC Community Worker)

By bringing authenticity into engagement, Shakira opened up more accessible and equitable conversations, ensuring that a greater variety of tenant voices were included in formal processes that they are usually excluded from.

Flexibility of the funder

Engagement on the ground is often hampered by funding arrangements that perpetuate power imbalance and mistrust. Conscious of this, the project’s funder The Dunhill Medical Trust (DMT), adopted a considered and inclusive funding approach from the outset:

When we were developing the original funding opportunity, we spent a lot of time thinking about how we could facilitate genuine partnerships between researchers, community members and partner organisations. This included setting out clear expectations regarding the active involvement of those living in the community right from the initial application stage through to the running of the project.” (Sanjay Thakrar, Head of Research DMT)

In spite of these measures, due to the way in which funding is awarded, the academic researchers in this project held the funds and so ultimately held the authority to decide how money was allocated and spent. As a research team, we recognised that we needed a greater level of equity in the way that funds were distributed:

“Not only were tenants feeling a lack of control over key developments in the project, but also over resources and funds that sit within the university. DMT approved the creation of a participatory budget for tenants to have control over, and the funds were transferred from the university to a local organisation called CLASS who have worked with tenants for many years. Their Community Savers bank account allows for simpler access to money by tenants” (Niamh Kavanagh, Researcher)

Reflexivity in funding is also key. Often needs arise within a project that are impossible to determine at the start. Oli, the Grants Manager at DMT, stayed in regular contact with us throughout, listening and responding to ensure we had what we needed to manage the project effectively. This led to the funding of mentoring for lead researcher Niamh to enable her to navigate the challenges that came with such a conflict-focussed collaborative process.

“I think having an open and consistent line of communication in this sort of project is really key – as a funder, this gives you a better understanding of the project and means you’re in a much better position to consider any questions or requests when they come in. In this case of the participatory budget, we recognised the value of tenants being able to access and have control over resources on-

the-ground. Really, it all comes down to trust – trusting that those working on-the-ground are often better placed than us to say what the project needs – and being comfortable with the fact that the needs of this sort of research can rarely be predicted in advance” (Oli Soutar, Grants Manager DMT)

Reframing the relationship with conflict

The inequalities that led to this collaboration in the first place are also what makes collaborating so complex. While challenging, it is important not to gloss over the difficulties faced in community research but rather air and reveal them, investing time in processes that help to disrupt the power dynamics so as not to perpetuate such inequalities.

We have learnt conflict is a useful signpost for what needs changing. Unexpected turns and tensions have necessitated different ways to collaborate, ways that work for the community. In this sense, what we have presented here are not simple ‘conflict management solutions’, but instead some moments of a concerted effort from different partners to build trust, along with an active and different kind of listening, to be better engaged with a community experiencing marginalisation, and to support change.

Collaboration needs to be a messy, ambiguous and uncomfortable process, that disrupts as much as it settles⁴ – and this is even more pertinent against the backdrop of austerity and rapid urban change. Seen in this sense, conflict is an intrinsic and necessary part of any coproduction process.

** The co-developing of the NORC at Hopton Court continues beyond the ending of this specific university-funded grant – where tenants continue to collaborate with local community groups and stakeholders to bring about support and resources for the older community.*

¹ NIHR, (2024) ‘Guidance on co-producing a research project’, available: [NIHR Guidance on co-producing a research project](#), accessed 6th January 2025.

² Cornish, F., Breton, N., Moreno-Tabarez, U. (2023) ‘Participatory action research’, *Nat Rev Methods Primers*, 3(34): <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43586-023-00214-1>

³ Office of National Statistics (2016) ‘2011 Census aggregated data’, *UK Data Service (Edition June 2016)*. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5257/census/aggregate-2011-1>

⁴ Lees, L. (2023) ‘What constitutes engaged dialogue in Urban Research? Thoughts from a long time “outsider-insider”’, *Dialogues in Urban Research*, 2(1) <https://doi.org/10.1177/27541258231210201>