Article

Recruiting and retaining community researchers for a historical research project

Jenny Barke[1] [iD], Tim Cole[2] [iD], Lorna Henry[3], Jude Hutchen[4] and Josie McLellan[2],[*] [iD]

[1]The Young Foundation, London, UK
[2]Department of History, University of Bristol, UK
[3]Independent Evaluator, UK
[4]Wellspring Settlement, Bristol, UK
*Correspondence: josie.mclellan@bristol.ac.uk

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Abstract

This article explores how we recruited and retained a diverse group of community researchers from groups who faced barriers to engaging with research. All were mothers of preschool or primary age children, and fitted one or more of the following criteria: single parent, English as an additional language, first-generation migrant, inner-city resident. We explore the process of recruitment, and making the project accessible, as well as describing the factors that allowed researchers to remain engaged with the project over the course of a year. A dedicated community support worker played a crucial role in resolving barriers to participation, and supporting researchers' well-being and personal development once they were in the group. The article identifies five key challenges encountered across the lifetime of the project, and the strategies we used to address them. We hope our reflections and practical suggestions will make a contribution to the understanding of how people with multiple accessibility challenges can be supported to take part in, and make an essential contribution to, community–university research projects.

Keywords: recruitment, retention, community research, co-production, participatory research, care, inclusion

> **Key messages**
> - A dedicated and skilled community support worker helped potential community researchers to overcome barriers to participation, and created a sense of belonging which benefited both the research and the well-being of the community researchers.
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> - Practical support for the group, such as food and childcare, and creating a warm, welcoming atmosphere were essential in retaining researchers through the uncertainty and messiness of the early phases of the research.
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> - For researchers juggling complex responsibilities around care, work, health and family, it was important to find ways to manage absence, to keep people in touch with what was going on in the group, and to allow them a way back in when they were able to attend again.

Scholars and practitioners of co-produced and participatory research unanimously agree that engaging diverse communities is key both to the democratisation of knowledge production, and the achievement of a richer, more creative research landscape. A body of excellent research has identified the numerous barriers that prevent underserved communities from engaging with research, and has set out helpful frameworks for building ethical collaboration and partnerships (see, for example, Facer and Enright, 2016; Bryan et al., 2018; Banks et al., 2019; Bell and Pahl, 2018). There is also a growing literature on community researcher training (Thomas-Hughes and Barke, 2018; Thomas-Hughes, 2020). Bergold and Thomas (2012: 7) identify a 'basic dilemma … that … marginalized communities are in a very poor position to participate in participatory research projects'. This dilemma, and the inequalities arising from it, is well recognised in the literature (Wallerstein and Duran, 2006; Bryan et al., 2018). However, less has been written on detailed methodologies for recruiting community researchers from marginalised communities, and supporting their engagement with research over a period of time (Radonic et al., 2021 is a thoughtful exception). That is where our paper makes its contribution. It draws on our experience of recruiting a group of community researchers for a participatory history project. All were mothers of preschool or primary age children, and fitted one or more of the following criteria: single parent, English as an additional language, first-generation migrant, inner-city resident. While most of the participants were educated to degree level they continued to experience personal, social and economic barriers to progression into employment and independence. As a team of facilitators (and now writers) we are able to shed light on the process of recruitment, and the ways in which university and community partners worked together in complementary ways to support researchers for the duration of the project.

The project we describe was a university–community collaboration to research the history of Single Parent Action Network or SPAN (https://www.thespanproject.org.uk/). SPAN was an inner-city voluntary sector organisation, set up in Bristol, UK, in 1990 with the aim of making life better for one-parent families. Until its closure in 2016, SPAN reached thousands of people in the UK and Europe via networking, political campaigning, online and in-person support, training, research, adult education and childcare. SPAN left behind a substantial archive, and its former CEO, Sue Cohen, initiated a funding bid with Bristol University and Wellspring Settlement, a local community centre. The project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, aimed to research and preserve SPAN's history by setting up a History Group of a dozen local women, who met once a week for a year. The History Group, facilitated by two researchers and a community support worker, had the freedom to decide how it would research SPAN, and what the public-facing outputs of the project would be. This methodology was chosen as particularly appropriate for a grass-roots organisation such as SPAN, which led on a number of participatory research projects aimed at centring the experience of single parents in their campaigns, but which also offered personal development to participants. Our approach involved recognising 'co-production' as a relational practice that was about both research, and social and practice changes (Phillips et al., 2022; Groot et al., 2019).

The group met weekly at Barton Hill/Wellspring Settlement on Tuesday mornings. The group was co-facilitated by Jenny Barke (JB), Jude Hutchen (JH) and Josie McLellan (JM). Our plan was to meet weekly in term-time for a year, from April 2019 to April 2020, culminating in the launch of co-produced public-facing outputs. In the event, our in-person meetings ended abruptly in early March 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, but we regrouped online, met regularly via Zoom from April to July 2020, and held an online celebration event and film premiere in July 2020.

Twelve women regularly attended the History Group. Six were already known to Wellspring Settlement, three were referred by other community organisations, two came via university contacts, and one via social media. All had children under 10, and seven had preschool children. Six were single parents. Seven were from a ethnically minoritised background. Four were first-generation migrants to the UK. Four were also working in English as a second language, and at least five other languages were spoken within the group. Of eight members for whom we have postcode data, all lived in the 50 per cent most deprived neighbourhoods in the country, with six in the 20 per cent most deprived neighbourhoods and three in the 10 per cent most deprived.

There was enormous ability and capacity within the group. Some had been exceptionally geographically mobile throughout their lives, and were bi- or trilingual as a result. Others had extensive experience of activism, work and volunteering, and brought with them substantial local networks and social capital. Members of the group had worked as artists, teachers, researchers, small business owners, youth workers/group facilitators, pharmacists, cultural ambassadors and restaurant managers. All brought extensive lived experience, and a willingness to discuss this critically and reflectively. Most of the group had studied to degree level, and two had a PhD. Two women had professional training, but no other higher educational experience. However, only one was currently working in a job that reflected her qualifications, and almost all women struggled with confidence in their abilities and felt distanced from academic culture – this pointed to structural inequalities in the labour market linked to childcare, socio-economic and racial discrimination, and migration. The qualities to be found in the History Group are a small glimpse into the enormous untapped potential in underserved communities.

While this article focuses on what we did as a project team to make it possible for people to join and stay in the group, it was first and foremost the range of people involved, the dynamism and quality of the group, the opportunity to learn from each other, friendships that were built, and the discussions and interactions that took place within it, that kept people coming back. One community researcher reflected at an early stage of the project: 'I feel really excited to be in the room with the people that I'm in the room with and I want to hear their stories and their views.' Another said: 'it's like everyone's from different places, everyone's got … a different history … so … it was really interesting … some of them … it's the first time to hear what they're saying. It's … something new in my life … ' (Henry and Cole, 2021: 68).

In this article, we explore how the group was brought together, and supported, and how we used targeted strategies to address five key challenges relating to recruitment and retainment:

1. reaching community researchers who might not otherwise engage with the university
2. enabling and supporting researchers' participation in both practical and affective ways
3. facilitating difference and conflict in the group
4. managing uncertainty and change, both for individuals and during the Covid-19 pandemic
5. creating a good ending and sense of legacy.

Throughout, we argue for the importance of a well-resourced team, with academic and community partner facilitators bringing complementary skill sets.

This article draws on a range of data: the facilitators of the History Group documented the group process throughout the project, keeping copies of feedback and documenting a weekly debrief, as well as keeping our own reflective diaries. We also held recorded conversations intermittently throughout the project, to capture our reflections at certain points. The article is also able to draw on an extensive evaluation report, written by independent evaluator Lorna Henry and academic evaluation lead Tim Cole.

LH observed both History Group sessions and facilitator debriefs throughout the project, and interviewed all members of the project team and History Group members at both the start and end of the project. As this article focuses on our strategies as facilitators on the project, we made the decision not to involve community researchers as co-authors, although their perspectives are included in the evaluation data. Our original plans included writing retreats for community researchers, but the pandemic meant that it was impossible to provide the childcare and dedicated time and space needed for meaningful co-authorship.

Reaching and engaging potential community researchers

As the project began, recruiting a diverse group was our first goal. We wanted to recruit an ethnically diverse group, to reflect both the local community, and SPAN as a multiracial and anti-racist organisation. We were keen that the group would not have a majority of middle-class participants who were already advantaged in terms of cultural and social capital. We also wanted the group to be accessible to people who were experiencing life challenges such as ill health, disabilities in the family or financial difficulties. Although we were keen for the group to include as many single parents as possible, we felt that having single parenthood as a criterion would be unhelpfully restrictive and might limit the size of the group we could recruit. For JH as lead recruiter and the initial face of the project, it was helpful to think about recruiting a group that reflected the diversity of SPAN and its values: 'I felt this was important because the subject matter was close to their personal experience and would contribute to their own learning, development and sense of agency, as well as what knowledge they could bring to the research to record SPAN's history' (recorded conversation).

We wanted particularly to target people who might experience material or perceptual barriers to engaging with the university due to limited confidence, English-language barriers or pressure to gain employment instead. Advice from Annie Oliver, Wellspring Settlement's Community Inclusion Manager, was that posters might raise the profile of the project, but that it was much more important to get out into the community and actually target people. Therefore, JH prioritised engaging with local groups, schools, nurseries and children's centres, and with staff at Wellspring who could recommend individuals who might be interested in the project. Interviews with the researchers show that some first heard of the project from an intermediary they already knew and trusted (see here also Radonic et al., 2021). One said: 'I went to a parenting class and the group leader … she approached me … through someone else. And I thought if she thought it would be good for me, then maybe it would be' (Henry and Cole, 2021: 59). Another researcher said: '[We] had the one to one she asked me, what I did academics-wise … and I told her about my [studies]. And then she said that I might be interested in this research' (Henry and Cole, 2021: 59).

Making people aware of the project was only the first step to engaging them. Our target group was likely to include people with adverse childhood experiences, low confidence, mistrust of authority and at times challenging reactions to group and individual interactions. Providing predictable environments and consistent positive regard, and providing for their basic physical needs, was the foundation for developing relations which supported their engagement. Once people expressed an interest, JH did a lot of work encouraging them into the group. She met with all but two individuals for a private one-to-one session before they joined the History Group. A few individuals made several appointments which were cancelled (perhaps a reflection of stressful and time-poor lives), but they met with JH eventually. This offered an opportunity to have an informal conversation about the project and the individual's skills and experience, personal circumstances and concerns. It also provided an opportunity to signpost to other services, sometimes within Wellspring Settlement but also externally, for benefits advice, mental/physical health services, employment support, free legal advice, parenting support and special needs organisations. This all helped to build a relationship, as well as to reduce barriers to participating in the project. Reflecting on this process, JH described the importance of remaining resilient to repeated meeting cancellations, not being pushy, but recognising that people might need support to engage. JH explained the importance of telling people 'we'd really like you in the group, you'd be really good in this group', and then actively

showing people that they were wanted, a strategy specifically addressing distrust from adverse childhood experiences. JH explains that the question in her mind as she met each potential participant was 'what do we need to do to get you in this group?' (recorded conversation). It was important to allow people to be unsure, and to turn the project down, but also to hold a space, to build confidence, and to be warm and encouraging so help people feel that the opportunity was for them.

The early evaluation interviews show that finding out more about the nature of the research project was also important. For some, their own lived experience as a single parent was central to this: 'I'm a single mum myself'; 'I want to see if there are any differences … between being a single parent say in the '90s and being a single parent now. I think things are very similar … .' Another expressed her desire to test the claims that were made about the impact of SPAN: 'I was part of a single parent family … And I'm … interested to find out what they did then. How they actually helped people? Because it's all right saying it, but what did they actually do? And did it really have an impact on the people?' (Henry and Cole, 2021: 53). Many of the community researchers were pleased to be able to draw on their own previous research experience. Several talked about the project as an opportunity for intellectual stimulation: 'I feel like I'm ready to kind of get involved in something more intellectually stimulating.' Another wanted to 'start using my brain a bit more … I just felt like it was something I can … get my teeth into instead of just sitting back chilling' (Henry and Cole, 2021: 55). A third and fourth wanted to build self-confidence, 'to be more confident in public places', 'to communicate with other people'. A common theme was that it was a strategic decision to join the group, and that the timing was right: 'I'm trying to work my way back to see what I can do … I've lost myself, I used to be really creative, really academic'; 'I've been a bit stagnant for a few years and I just wanted to get back into things' (Henry and Cole, 2021: 56).

Enabling and supporting researchers' participation in both practical and affective ways

We were also conscious that community researchers were likely to need both support and incentives to join the group. Although there are strong arguments for paying community researchers (Bergold and Thomas, 2012: 10), we had decided early on, on the advice of our partners at Wellspring Settlement, that the community researcher roles would be unpaid. Many of the people we hoped to reach were in receipt of state benefits, and it had been found that financial payments, and even payment in kind in the form of vouchers, were likely to jeopardise benefits. (On a subsequent project that did offer the option of financial payment, many researchers turned it down for fear of the impact on their benefits.) Annie Oliver also advised that the payment of community researchers necessitated employment structures such as performance expectations and attendance requirements. These might compromise the ability to retain those who might most profit from the activity but who, for example, struggled with caring responsibilities or health issues. In the absence of financial payment, we felt that it was very important to be clear about the benefits in kind the project would provide, and the ways that we would seek to lighten the 'burden of participation' (Murray and Nash, 2017).

We developed a structured 'offer', which we printed as part of a publicity flyer. The process of developing this written offer was vital in creating clarity among the team about exactly what we were promising to deliver and needed to put in place. This offer was useful as a concrete proposition to discuss with people. Several researchers stressed the significant time commitment in the context of childcare and paid and unpaid work, and the need to make sure that the group would be relevant to them. The decision to join the group (and to carry on attending each week) was a significant one, involving allocating time from a limited budget.

A keystone of the offer was free childcare for preschool children on site, and this was made use of by all but two of the researchers. One researcher reflected: 'So when you're a single parent and it's difficult for you to get involved in things, when you see something, "Oh look that's got a free creche" you feel like you're welcome somehow, it feels like "Oh that's for me, that's something for me"' (Henry and Cole, 2021:

60). For this attender, the availability of childcare was not just a practical issue. It was an important aspect of her feeling welcomed to a space as a single parent, as her needs were understood and met. Not only the existence of the childcare mattered, but also its quality. Many of the researchers were already familiar with the well-equipped Family Centre at Wellspring Settlement, and had used either the creche or the drop-in centre, and knew the childcare team. This was particularly important for one recent mother who was using childcare for the first time:

> [B]eing new to all this, like, mothering thing, I … almost had too high expectations of him and me … I knew the people there because … we had been going to the playgroup there since he was little, so … that really helped to know that … he knew the faces there … And they're just really supportive and … halfway through when everyone would have their tea break, I'd nip down and see him … they were always really good … I said, if he's unhappy at all, just come and get me, I don't want him to be unhappy. So … it was difficult at first, … but they were great and it was really … yeah, really great to have that there, to be able to take part. (Henry and Cole, 2021: 97)

Food and drink were an important part of making the group a hospitable and sociable space. We provided a breakfast buffet at the start of every session, with pastries, soft fruit and cereal bars. At the end of the session, the children who had been in the creche joined us and we shared a meal. This saved researchers from having to get a hungry, tired child home and prepare lunch. For some, the additional food taken home at the end of the session also offered a welcome boost to a tight domestic budget. Providing food again reflected the value of the project and researchers, and also ensured that all researchers' physical needs were being provided for that day:

> [Y]ou don't expect to go to a course where they're going to feed you and that, and good food as well. … I've never experienced that, and vegan and stuff, it was … And I think the diversity as well, because we had like Somalian food and … oh god, … so it was all foods I probably wouldn't have had … . (Henry and Cole, 2021: 97)

A researcher who had recently arrived in the UK remembered the food as part of an atmosphere that had made her feel included:

> [T]his group makes me more confident and comfortable and warm, where I belong and not unconfident. A lot of people encourage me and I think [that] makes me comfortable and warm. … Yeah, for example when [festival name] is coming and members … they [said] we can celebrate … so they ordered traditional food and we celebrated … and it made me feel warm. (Henry and Cole, 2021: 82)

Finally, one-to-one pastoral support from JH as Community Support Worker provided researchers with a regular opportunity to talk about progress and concerns, and for JH to offer signposting and referrals in a range of areas such as mental and physical health, child/parenting support, finances/benefits and job hunting. In fact, we had not originally planned to offer this level of support. The project had been designed with a full-time senior research associate, based at the university, and a community support worker working two days a week, based at Wellspring Settlement. A flexible working request from the successful candidate for the senior associate role meant that we had the opportunity to reconfigure the team, with JB working four days a week, and JH's role expanding from two days a week to three. This increase of time for the community support worker role allowed the role to evolve, with the expansion of one-to-one support for researchers. This focus developed due to JH's background and exceptional skill set, which she describes as 'a bit hybrid', including experience of both therapeutic interventions and community development practice with underserved communities. While no longer working as a therapist, JH's practice is informed by her professional training and employment as a community-based art therapist and a person-centred counsellor and trainer.

Facilitating difference and conflict in the group

Once the History Group began to meet, the aim of our facilitation was to create and hold a clearly defined space in which different researchers' voices could develop and be heard. Facilitation needed to enhance communication in particular, 'making different thought styles visible and linking them around common interests' (Beebeejaun et al., 2014: 560). In feedback, the group were very clear that they valued a clear distinction between facilitators and researchers, and that they appreciated structure and timekeeping. Some researchers would have liked an even more interventionist approach in order to make sure that the group kept to time, and that all voices were heard: 'you've got to look at timing as well in that way, so you've got to say okay, I'll just have to stop you there because we haven't got a lot of time. There's nothing wrong with being a little bit more authoritarian …' (Henry and Cole, 2021: 70). We solicited feedback from the group each week, and this fed directly into planning the following week's session. (We also sought to make this link between feedback and next session design very evident.) We also benefited from feedback and input from LH as the project's independent evaluator, and from Wellspring Settlement's Community Inclusion Manager, Annie Oliver.

We communicated extensively with group members beyond the weekly meetings. We usually sent out a weekly email 'digest' of what had gone on in the group for those who could not attend. A researcher set up a WhatsApp group early on. Although we as facilitators were initially unsure about our role in this, we did eventually join, and this became a key communication channel, and remained active beyond the lifetime of the group. WhatsApp proved much more accessible than email for most researchers, and also allowed communication within the group (from mutual support, to jokes and film recommendations) in a much more natural register and almost in real time. This allowed relationships beyond the group meetings to begin to develop.

A central challenge for the facilitation team was dealing with conflict. We saw conflict and criticism as part of the group process, which it was our responsibility as facilitators to manage or respond to, but with care for the different resilience and sensitivities of researchers. As Bergold and Thomas (2012: 6) put it, creating a 'safe space' in participatory research 'is not a question of creating a conflict-free space, but rather of ensuring that the conflicts that are revealed can be jointly discussed; that they can either be solved or, at least, accepted as different positions; and that a certain level of conflict tolerance is achieved'. Being able to tolerate the messiness of the co-production process was not always easy. There were times when 'not knowing' felt frustrating, and led to doubt in the capability of the facilitators – trust was needed to go through the process, which was harder for some individuals. Collective decision making sometimes seemed laborious, and imperfect communication meant that people felt out of the loop if decisions had been made in their absence. It could feel like we were mired in process, and losing sight of the history of SPAN. There were tensions about the research question, and whether that would reflect the original aims of the project, as well as the outputs and the budget allocated. By and large, we found it best to deal with difficult issues in the group, although discussion and planning between the facilitators outside the group enabled clear thinking and plans for positive progression. When issues were raised on WhatsApp or via email, we acknowledged these and promised discussion in person at the next Tuesday meeting. Conflict was presented as an expected part of the group process, and great efforts were made both to deal with the issues arising and to be confident and calm about working through them. As Rowe and Frewer (2005) note, supporting and encouraging regular discussions where History Group members could air concerns and negotiate conflict was essential. These conversations helped the group to recognise and value different opinions (Harris et al., 2019).

A key strength here was the relationship among the facilitation team. Having three facilitators felt like good fortune: even if one of us was ill/away, we still had a viable facilitation team. If a group member was upset or struggling with a session, we had enough capacity to support them one-to-one. We were lucky enough to have complementary skills (JM: historical research, JH: community development, JB: participatory research), and also to have aligned goals and a similar vision for what we wanted the

group to achieve. Our experience on previous co-produced projects allowed us to have confidence in the process and each other, and to trust that things would eventually be resolved. Our shared faith in each other's expertise was a great asset. It was helpful that we all attended the group every week, and stayed on afterwards for an in-person debrief and planning session. These regular meetings meant that we remained on the same page and were able to process challenging moments. There was something very valuable about absorbing conflict together, not leaving any one person with carrying it in a group session or feeling personally criticised.

Dealing with absence and disruption

Our fourth key challenge was making sure that the group remained a stable and welcoming space at times of uncertainty and disruption, for example, when researchers were unable to attend the group, or after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. An ill child, an extended trip to visit family abroad, chronic ill-health, pregnancy or disruption in living circumstances meant it was often difficult for researchers to attend every week. Researchers were encouraged to let us know if they could not come – and they usually did. JH tended to check in with those who had not attended, either by phone or text. Overall, JH summarised, the message was, 'you're in the project – your place is there to come back to'. This supportive connection was much more than one would tend to offer for a teaching programme, and this extra effort was important in keeping people in the group. One researcher reflected:

> [T]he opportunity is always there for … for them [group members who could not attend] to input on another platform, whether it be email or WhatsApp … So, that's … been a good thing, so even if they haven't able to attend for whatever reason … they've still been able to … feed things into the group. (Henry and Cole, 2021: 86)

On reflection, something that helped researchers to return to the group after an absence was that we were not offering accreditation or payment. We had originally planned to accredit the group's activities (and advertised this in our 'offer'), but in the end this proved complicated, and we chose not to pursue it due to lack of interest in the group. Although for other groups accreditation and payment could have been a very positive incentive for participation, for our group it felt like the absence of attendance requirements and the ability to step back in after a break was enabling.

The start of the Covid-19 pandemic meant a complete disruption of the group, at a time when we were in the final stages of planning our end-of-project event. In the first days of lockdown, our focus switched to practical and emotional support – JH was in contact with researchers on a weekly basis to offer support, talk through their personal situations and questions arising, and see what support they might need. Some of this focused on material needs: did they have enough food, baby supplies (nappies were hard to find) and prescription medicine? Several members were referred for emergency food parcel deliveries, and for financial advice for those on benefits or who were self-employed to access the latest government offers. Another focus of these conversations were ways of maintaining positive mental health, and avoiding isolation. These conversations often lasted between 45 minutes and an hour.

We felt nervous about reconvening the group online, and whether this would exclude some researchers due to lack of adequate technology, privacy and childcare. After checking that researchers had devices at home and were interested in resuming the group, we met online in early April, three weeks after our last in-person meeting. This was intended as an experiment to see how we got on with Zoom, and whether having children at home would make participation difficult. Six researchers attended the first group, and there was a great sense of relief to see others and feel connected. We all quickly developed Zoom skills and ways of having both relaxed open conversations and a more facilitated discussion so that everyone had a chance to talk about what was going on. The group initially met to feel connected outside the home, continue friendships, share frustrations and know that a regular source of support was available:

> You know, recently during this … pandemic, I think that's been a really nice way to … keep people … in touch with each other. And we've also been sharing … other projects that we might be working on or we come across, or things that we think that might interest people … now that we know a little bit more about each other. (Henry and Cole, 2021: 94–5)

One researcher felt that this phase flattened the distinction between facilitators and researchers:

> I don't know, I feel like with this lockdown … you feel like you're closer to people, even though you're not seeing them. … Because people are opening up more about their own lives … Chatting about their own kids and things. So, I think we've all become closer because of that … I feel more on the same level … (Henry and Cole, 2021: 94)

We also shared thoughts, tips and questions around maintaining positive mental health and social connection, physical fitness, shopping tips, accessing medical services, home schooling issues and general reassurance around a difficult and uncharted social experience. Some group members welcomed the group as a space to talk through problems and dilemmas without the tensions of social media or the complexities of friends and family relationships. The group requested that the session took place at the same time as our in-person sessions to restore some sense of 'routine' and normality.

Creating a good ending and sense of legacy

We realised that our postponed in-person launch event was unlikely to take place within the lifetime of the project. Our challenge now was to find a way to facilitate a good ending for the group, which would make clear how much the researchers had achieved and leave them with a sense of the group's legacy. We began to work towards an online event in July, which would publicly present the project and a film that the History Group had made. Working online was clearly more difficult than face to face, as communication was less fluid, technology sometimes failed, medical issues needed attention and home-bound children also needed attention or distraction. A core group of six regularly attended, although not everyone was present for every session. The group managed to plan for the online event, including contributing to a narrated PowerPoint presentation, and the design and editing of a project leaflet. It was striking that everyone's online group-work skills and sense of familiarity with the new media increased rapidly.

Although the online event had never been our preferred option, it was genuinely exciting to present what we had done to a substantial national audience. The feedback from the audience was extremely positive, and the event provided a sense of achievement that would otherwise have been hard to attain under the circumstances. We had a final group session to share our reflections, and presented each researcher with a certificate and a reference detailing their involvement and contribution to the project. As Covid-19 restrictions eased a little, JH met each researcher individually to present them with a paper copy of their certificate and a set of mugs that we had designed using material from the archive (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Mugs created by the project team using images from the SPAN archive (Source: Authors, 2022)

Table 1: Summary of the challenges and strategies used (Source: Authors, 2022)

Stage	Key challenges	Strategy
Recruitment	• How to reach and attract individuals who might not otherwise engage with the university • Recruiting a diverse group	• Contacting individuals • Communicating the offer • Speaking to professionals • Presenting to local groups • One-to-one meetings • Message of 'we'd really like to have you in this group' • Resilience to meeting postponements
Engagement	• Enabling participation in group • Making people feel their work is valued in the absence of financial reward • Building familiarity and confidence	• One-to-one meetings • Full breakfast and lunch • Creche facilities • Predictable set-up
Facilitation	• Keeping a diverse group engaged • Allowing all voices to be heard • Dealing with conflict	• Continued positive regard • Inclusion; recognising and exploring difference • Recognising skills in the group • Time for socialising every week (lunch afterwards) • Fun activities in programme • Balance of education and researcher-led activity (introducing the research process followed by interviewing, outputs, decision making)
Retention	• Helping researchers stay engaged with the group during and after absence • Transitioning the group to online during early stage of pandemic	• One-to-one meetings • Reducing barriers to attendance • Adapting communication • Contacting if not attending • Circulating updates of the week's progress for those absent • Supporting return • Meeting practical and emotional needs during pandemic
Ending and legacy	• Creating a good ending despite Covid • Celebrating and making clear what the researchers have achieved	• Certificates, mug collections to keep, group thank-you cards • Written personal references, one-to-one reviews and ongoing development plan • Public presentation of the project on website, webinar, articles

We also created a personal development budget for the group, in order to facilitate next steps towards further education, training and employment, despite Covid-19 restrictions. This was used by researchers to access a range of services, including career coaching, vocational training and a university history course.

Conclusion

This article set out to explore how to recruit and retain a diverse group of community researchers on a university–community research project. Table 1 summarises the key challenges and strategies used throughout the lifetime of the project.

We conclude by highlighting the overarching elements of our strategy that may be of use to others planning similar projects:

• The presence of a skilled community support worker, whose time was dedicated to the project, was a huge asset for both the research and the well-being of the researchers. In particular, one-to-one

meetings were essential in helping potential researchers to imagine themselves in the History Group, resolving barriers to participation, and in supporting them once the group had begun to meet. The rebalancing of the team to enlarge the role of the community support worker to three days a week was an essential factor in enabling this. In future projects, we would seek to have a more equal balance of time between academic and community support roles from the outset.

- Close collaboration between the members of the facilitation team also played a central role. As Facer and Enright (2016) have shown, time was a key ingredient here, with both academic facilitators spending a full day 'on site' each week. Regular team meetings to plan, debrief and reflect allowed us to take full advantage of our complementary skill sets, and to build robust working relationships, which allowed us to be flexible and resilient in the face of conflict in the group and the challenges of Covid-19.
- Practical support for the group and creating a warm, welcoming atmosphere were essential in retaining researchers through the uncertainty and messiness of the early phases of the research. Good-quality childcare was a non-negotiable prerequisite for all but one of our researchers. Generous provision of food and drink, and taking account of researchers' dietary needs and food cultures, helped create an environment in which 'care' was prominent.
- For researchers juggling complex responsibilities around care, work, health and family, it was important to find ways to manage absence, keep people in touch with what was going on in the group, and allow them a way back in when they were able to attend again.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the Faculty of Arts Ethics Committee of the University of Bristol.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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