

Greater Manchester Public and Community Forum

Learning from Greater Manchester's People and Communities During the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Greater Manchester PCIE Forum

The Forum brings together people leading Public and Community Involvement and Engagement (PCIE) work around Greater Manchester. Our aim is to maximise diversity and inclusion, enhance the value of ongoing work, and create shared actions to improve the health and well-being of people living in Greater Manchester. The membership includes PCIE leads (both staff and public) from health and care organisations linking with the NIHR Applied Research Collaboration Greater Manchester (ARC GM) and Health Innovation Manchester (HInM) including: universities within Greater Manchester; NIHR infrastructure; health and social care providers; the GM Health and Social Care Partnership (GMHSCP); voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector.

The outbreak has further cemented the value of working as a collective to share resources and gather insights about what is important and what should be prioritised in terms of involvement and engagement during these challenging times.

The following identifies key themes and learnings to emerge so far and have been summarised by forum members:

- **Community relationships & co-production.**

Experiences during the pandemic have highlighted the importance of maintaining and utilising existing relationships and networks, particularly those developed by the voluntary sector in relation to individuals and communities that experience disadvantage. These groups and those grass roots organisations that are working with them, have a huge amount of insight to share. It is important for formal organisations (such as those researching and delivering healthcare) to recognise that people from communities are best

placed to identify the problems they face and to innovate appropriate solutions. Grassroots VCSE and infrastructure organisations are vital to supporting and facilitating co-production, but we need to value and resource this work properly. A rapidly changing landscape is presenting challenges, but co-production is still possible and more important than ever.

Working in partnership with Greater Manchester Poverty Action, Maddy Hubbard (Co-production Lead GMHSCP) has maximised existing connections to deliver a Co-Production webinar highlighting the above issues. This explored how authorities and agencies may be able to co-produce more of their existing activity and their recovery plans. It also encouraged participants to share some the challenges and experiences of co-production in the context of Covid-19. Maddy is leading the [GMVCSE co-production network](#) in her new role as Engagement and System Change Manager for Action Together.

- **Diversity & Inclusion.**

Discussions have identified the particular importance of engaging and involving marginalised and seldom heard groups regarding challenges and solutions. This should include a focus on those disproportionately affected by the pandemic such as BAME communities. Charles Kwaku-Odoi (Chief Officer) from the [Caribbean and African Health Network](#) (CAHN) reported on a number of online events to bring individuals and organisations together, so they can continue to engage and rapidly respond to the needs of different communities during the pandemic and beyond. CAHN conducted a recent survey on the impact of Covid-19 within the Caribbean and African community that highlighted the need for culturally sensitive services as well as concerns about social isolation and mental health (download report [here](#)).

Nasrine Akhtar of 'Awakening Minds', Oldham, shared experiences of supporting local BAME communities during the crisis and activities to support mental [health](#). The active involvement of local BAME communities is key to the work of Diversity Matters North West ([DMNW](#)). Chief Officers, Gemma Gaskill and Rehana Begum reported on their approach to ensure project activity is carried out 'with' and/or 'by' members of the community rather than carried out 'to', 'about' or 'for' them. This includes peer mentoring and joint research activity. Community involvement is embedded in the DMNW project evaluation framework.

Forum member Nick Filer talked at a recent meeting about experiences within the Jewish community (approx. 30,000 in GM) and the importance of ensuring that the wide range of minorities are considered in relation to inequalities associated with Covid-19. [The Board of Deputies of British Jews](#) have highlighted that the Jewish population may be more severely affected by Covid-19 than other ethnic groups.

Basma Issa (a member of HInM Public and Community Panel) has reported that many of these issues are also relevant to other minority groups such as people living with dementia, Syrian refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants. The financial impact of the pandemic is having far reaching consequences, as many Syrians continue to support family members still living in Syria. Basma noted that the restrictions on social gatherings was particularly difficult to deal with during the fasting month of Ramadan and Eid. University students living in halls of residence and the elderly, were particularly affected by spending this spiritual month alone; missing evening family meals and prayers which are two of the core elements of this important period contributed to a sense of isolation

As many NHS services are increasingly moved online, language barriers and digital literacy is exacerbating existing health inequalities particularly in the over 50's, leading to a deterioration in physical and mental health. To overcome these challenges, Basma Issa has been communicating Government advice and changes to COVID restrictions in Arabic, via a Syrian community WhatsApp group.

In addition, Bella Starling presented on behalf of the VOCAL team on their work to engage BAME communities. VOCAL's BAMER Research Advisory Group (BRAG) is a group of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic community leaders who provide input and advice to promote inclusive research that addresses the needs of Greater Manchester's diverse communities. BRAG and VOCAL have contributed to several local and national COVID-related research proposals and have blogged about the [disproportionate burden of COVID-19 on Black and Asian communities](#).

Discussions within the forum have led to a new engagement project (a partnership between CAHN, National Institute for Health Research Greater Manchester Patient Safety Translational Research Centre/ NIHR GM PSTRC, NIHR Applied Research Collaboration GM/ ARC GM , and Health Innovation Manchester) to explore the experiences of pregnancy and maternity services

for women of colour during the pandemic to co-produce future work to address inequalities and improve maternity care.

- **Poverty, Inequalities and Homelessness.**

COVID-19 has emphasised existing inequalities where those in low paid jobs are placed at greater risks or have lost all their income overnight and have been unable to access benefits. In the case of homelessness, people who are already massively disadvantaged and at risk of major and life-threatening illness are now facing even greater risks. Policy response has led to creation of temporary housing influencing a complex picture of benefits and risks, especially as temporary accommodation closes down. There could also be groups that are facing challenges such as homelessness and poverty, that have not experienced this before. Throughout the pandemic [Groundswell](#) have tried to ensure the voice of lived experience of homelessness is heard from people across the country.

Through the [#HealthNow](#) project (presented by Rachel Brennan, #HealthNow Network Co-Ordinator), in which Groundswell is the lead partner, regular meetings have been held in the 3 pilot areas of Greater Manchester, Newcastle and Birmingham alliance meetings have been held regularly bringing together local stakeholders from housing, health and homelessness with people with lived experience to raise issues, discuss plans and develop actions to improve the experience of people who are homeless throughout the crisis. Groundswell also established a research project to monitor the impact of covid-19 on people experiencing homelessness and have conducted interviews with people across the country which a published in a [fortnightly briefing](#).

Organisations including Healthwatch and the #HealthNow network led by Groundswell and Shelter are responding to these challenges via their community research and initiatives. Groundswell are also working in partnership with the NIHR GM Patient Safety Translational Research Centre and Health Innovation Manchester to investigate access to health care for homeless people during the pandemic.

- **Community experiences of health and health care during the pandemic.**

Many people have experienced major changes in day-to-day life – some positive and some negative. There are major concerns about mental health.

We are very aware that the public is not a homogenous group and people will have very different experiences accessing services and the need for support according to their own personal circumstances. Discussions with public contributors within HInM and wider activities by forum members have highlighted such variations and the need for varied approaches to capture such experiences. Some approaches identified have included poetry, a photo diary, video stories and blogs.

Varied approaches have already been adopted by forum members. For example, researchers at the NIHR GM PSTRC have worked with their mental health public involvement and engagement group to produce a virtual exhibition on the subject of 'Hope during the COVID-19 [pandemic](#)', and a set of short films reporting on experiences of people with early stage dementia and carers within community settings is in development. The [VOCAL team have developed a webcomic to highlight experiences of young people during the pandemic](#). Additional activities will be accessible via our forum website soon.

Developing understanding of the impact and effects COVID has had on people's experiences of NHS care – for COVID and for all other conditions – will be important for shaping policy and service development going forwards. Stephanie Snow leads the NHS at 70 project and is working with over 50 volunteer interviewers to capture people's experiences in real time and build a 'digital archive' that will serve as permanent evidence-[base](#). Feedback from volunteer interviewers and upwards of 250 interviewees highlights that creating these social connections during this period of physical isolation is positively impacting the well-being of everyone [involved](#).

- **Digital inclusion and exclusion.**

In a recent session focused on this topic, members shared experiences and work to tackle digital inequalities and social exclusion. A key theme has been the common problems of many people in getting appropriate access to technology and needs for support and improving digital literacy. Sharing our experiences, resources and learning will promote more effective involvement and engagement. In a blog, Paul Hine, Director [at Made by Mortals](#) (people powered musical theatre) has shared his experience of moving face to face activity, with under-served communities online. Through their remote approach they have seen vulnerable people overcome their fear of technology, make connections in new ways, extend their social networks and find resilience

to the challenging times we all face through participation in creativity with others.

They have also found opportunities to adapt their methodologies for a digital setting and improve their reach. Covid-19 is creating new involvement and engagement opportunities. Online activity may mean that some opportunities are more accessible to certain groups such as those with mobility issues whilst excluding others. [Digital Buddies](#) (Salford Foundation) shared their innovative approach to improving social connections for people who struggle using technology for communication. Participants are paired with digital volunteers to provide friendship and support and has been successfully tackling loneliness and social isolation in local communities. Janice Murray (Manchester Metropolitan University) has worked with children who use technology to communicate to support their literacy development, enabling greater access to online forums and interaction with peers. This was done in partnership with [AT Therapy](#).

Emma Jones from Healthwatch talked about a video made by Healthwatch Manchester and released on YouTube to provide instructions an instructions regarding how people create an account on the NHS Patient [Access portal](#). This was made in response to feedback from Manchester residents on their experiences of being asked to register to use online NHS services such as booking GP appointments and ordering repeat prescriptions. Many reported that they found it difficult to sign up. Healthwatch also had many people calling at the start of the pandemic concerned around physical access to services. Healthwatch have been keen to assist people in shielding by being able to register online. Members of the forum have also worked in partnership with Health Innovation Manchester to co-produce community engagement regarding access to digital services within primary care across Greater Manchester (e.g. discussion groups co-produced with Awakening Minds and Made by Mortals).

Acknowledgment:

Thank you to all forum members who have generously shared experiences and worked together to summarise key themes and learning in this document.

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