

# Empowering communities to engage in research across Greater Manchester

Greater Manchester Research Engagement Network



**NHS**  
Greater Manchester

**NIHR** | Applied Research Collaboration  
Greater Manchester

**VOCAL** Bringing people &  
research together

**CAHN** Caribbean & African Health Network

Greater Manchester  
VCFSE Leadership Group





# BUILDING A RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT NETWORK ACROSS GREATER MANCHESTER

Greater Manchester is proud to be home to diverse communities, and it is important that this diversity is reflected in the health and care research taking place here. Greater Manchester Research Engagement Network (GM REN) set out to understand the barriers preventing those who are typically underrepresented in research to engage in the process, and then to put measures in place to break down those barriers and make research accessible to all.

GM REN brings together partners from the local health system, research infrastructure and the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector. Together, the network is working to create an inclusive environment that enables diverse communities to take part in health research, addressing health and care inequalities.

Collectively, the partners have laid the foundations for an inclusive and sustainable local Research Engagement Network that will continue to grow and adapt with the communities it serves across Greater Manchester.

## Aims of the GM REN

- To listen to communities in Greater Manchester to better understand what stops people taking part in research, and how equal partnerships between researchers and the VCFSE sector may enable the most underrepresented communities to have a voice in shaping the research that takes place.
- Co-produce improved approaches for creative engagement and communication in partnership with VCFSE organisations to build trust and trustworthiness in the research system, with those communities currently more excluded from research.
- Develop an improved network-wide system for monitoring and evaluating diverse and inclusive involvement and participation in research within specific areas and communities in Greater Manchester where inequalities are most evident.
- Develop and implement sustainable partnerships based on mutual benefit and shared learning between the VCFSE/ community groups and research teams.
- To improve the way research organisations, work together to support greater participation in research.

*"Illness and diseases which affect the most deprived populations are too often studied in healthier populations. Those most in need and those who would add significantly to our understanding of what works are too often not part of clinical trials and research. Our Research Engagement activity is addressing that directly and helping ensure our research activities engages all our communities. We are doing this by investing in and learning from the work of the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector to build meaningful and trusted partnerships between research teams and communities so those facing the greatest inequalities have a voice in shaping the research that we do".*

**Warren Heppollette**  
Chief Officer Strategy and Innovation NHS GM



## GM REN partners

THE GM REN was co-led by the Greater Manchester Integrated Care Partnership (GM ICP), the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Applied Research Collaboration Greater Manchester (ARC-GM), Vocal, the Caribbean and African Health Network on behalf of the Greater Manchester VCFSE Leadership Group and the Greater Manchester NIHR research infrastructure.

# DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS

Greater Manchester has extensive research infrastructure and a vibrant VCFSE sector supported by Greater Manchester's Integrated Care System. Through the development of the GM REN, these organisations have been working together to strengthen the collective regional infrastructure with a shared goal of supporting diverse communities to become more involved in research.

As a first step, it was crucial to listen to all partners to gain an understanding of organisational barriers and to map the existing collective assets in Greater Manchester to support diverse communities to become more involved in research.

## ENGAGEMENT WORK TO DATE, INCLUDES:

A survey and workshops with research infrastructure organisations across Greater Manchester to find out which VCFSE partners they had worked with, who they wanted to connect with more, how they connected with partners and what barriers they encountered to creating sustainable partnerships.

The collation of case studies of good practice to demonstrate impact for the community, VCFSE organisation and research organisations, and evidence of shared learning.

The Caribbean African Health Network (CAHN), the VCFSE lead for the programme - surveyed VCFSE organisations to understand the barriers and enablers of sustainable research partnerships. CAHN also held online and face-to-face discussions with organisations and individuals and were invaluable in creating the relationships needed to have these conversations with diverse communities.

Existing networks were used, and information was shared

through voluntary sector infrastructure organisations such as 10GM, Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisations (GMCVO), Manchester's Local voluntary and community sector support organisation (Macc), Voluntary Sector North West, the Greater Manchester VCFSE Leadership Group. The REN team built on this intelligence through face-to-face events and workshops, attending activities organised and led by VCFSE organisations.

Working with community connectors from Bolton, the Roma community, The Black Health Agency for Equality, The Men's Room and the Big Life team to scope existing links between research infrastructure and VCFSE organisations. Awakening Minds in Rochdale created an audio of the communities' views on taking part in research about mental ill health.

A visually-minuted consultation on all survey findings with the Greater Manchester VCFSE Leadership Group to co-develop the next steps for how to implement short, medium and long-term objectives.





## WHAT GM REN HAS DELIVERED TO DATE

- Co-developed a Respectful Research Charter with VCFSE colleagues and members of the public, consulting widely on this during a 'Collaboration Week'.
- Recruited and trained Research Community Champions from South Asian and Black African and Caribbean backgrounds, who were deployed into their own communities in Oldham, Rochdale, and Manchester to increase recruitment for two existing NIHR portfolio studies in South Asian and Black communities.
- Scoped possible models for improving coordination and sharing of opportunities via Community Research Champions and VCFSE-led Community Research Hubs.
- Through workshops with Community Research Champions co-developed training for researchers.
- Developed and piloted a learning resource with Community Research Champions - 'A Mile in Their Shoes' - highlighting the importance of these roles in building trust with under-represented communities.
- Delivered four exemplar projects that aimed to boost involvement of excluded groups: people with learning disabilities; children and young people; older adults and two ethnic minority groups (South Asian; Black, African and Caribbean). Working with VCFSE partners to co-develop models and resources to support involvement in research, recruitment into current studies, and training for Research Champions.
- Workshop with Greater Manchester Data Leads to scope the requirements for a prototype for system-wide monitoring of participation with recommendations for the Greater Manchester Integrated Care Partnership (GM ICP).
- Two workshops with leads from the GM ICP; VCFSE Leadership Group and leads from the research infrastructure to scope sustainable models to achieve long term change and impact.



# 205

organisations across GM have contributed to the development of GM REN

# 174

VCFSE organisations

# 20

 research organisations

# 11

 health and care organisations

# 20

 good practice case studies submitted by VCFSE partners

# 215

attendees from 58 VCFSE organisations took part in our collaboration events

# 4

 exemplar projects for often excluded groups delivered

# 20

 data leads and GM NIHR Leaders attended workshop to scope requirements for system wide monitoring

# COMMUNITIES WE HAVE WORKED WITH

- The Caribbean African Health Network (CAHN): Led and supported all GM REN events and has been instrumental in connecting their community and other groups to the work.
- Pathways Associates CIC and People First Merseyside: Ran a series of workshops with people with learning disabilities.
- Vocal's young people's research advisory group, 'Voice Up' and MAHDLO Youth Zone based in Oldham: Worked with young people (11-18) to co-design recruitment materials for the Greater Manchester arm of the D-CYPHR study.
- Inspiring Communities Together: Worked with older people in Salford to develop an animation voiced by people from their own community.
- Co-developed 'A Mile in their Shoes' with eight Community Research Champions from VCFSE organisations working with diverse communities e.g., Awakening Minds, a specialist Punjabi mental health service; and Creative Inclusion, a charity aimed at finding creative ways of including people in decisions that affect them.

*"The project outputs lay the foundation for future engagements with various communities and create a pathway to forging mutually beneficial relationships between researchers and communities, which I am very excited about. Taking part in a successful project such as this is a testament to the power of collaboration and the strength of shared vision."*

**Percy Akudo**  
Business Support Manager at CAHN

*"This has been very exciting to interact with people from different communities, researchers and the VCFSE sector. It is important for us to have these forums to interact with each other and benefit from getting to understand each other beyond just meetings at points of collecting data on research projects."*

**John Alex Muyita**  
member of the Greater Manchester community who contributed to the REN engagement work

- Four Community Research Champions in Oldham; Rochdale and Manchester supported recruitment to two NIHR Research Delivery Network (RDN) portfolio studies from South Asian and Black, African and Caribbean communities.
- Inspiring Futures Partnership CIC, the foundation of Inspire Women Oldham and StrongHer Together, supports women experiencing health inequalities by nurturing relationship-led spaces where lived and learned experiences shape inclusive, community-led research and co-create equitable futures through shared, transformative knowledge.

*"The GM REN team has enabled a strategic and extended approach to co-creating priorities for how we - VCFSE and research communities - work together in health research, to address inequalities, in a fair, respectful and inclusive way. We look forward to continuing to work with this community of practice to embed the benefits of research with our GM population."*

**Professor Bella Starling**  
Director at Vocal

## WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

The research landscape in Greater Manchester is complex and is not easily understood by those outside of it, and the opportunities for involvement in research are not distributed equally across the different regions. There is a need for greater coordination between research organisations as to their community partnerships.

Multiple barriers to sustainable partnerships need to be addressed. Organisational, cultural and institutional barriers get in the way of developing trusted relationships. Research systems and processes need to be more accessible, including better integration of community partners into research teams, research governance and processes. Funding models need to be adapted to fully resource these community partnerships with equitable partnerships between VCFSE organisations and research teams.



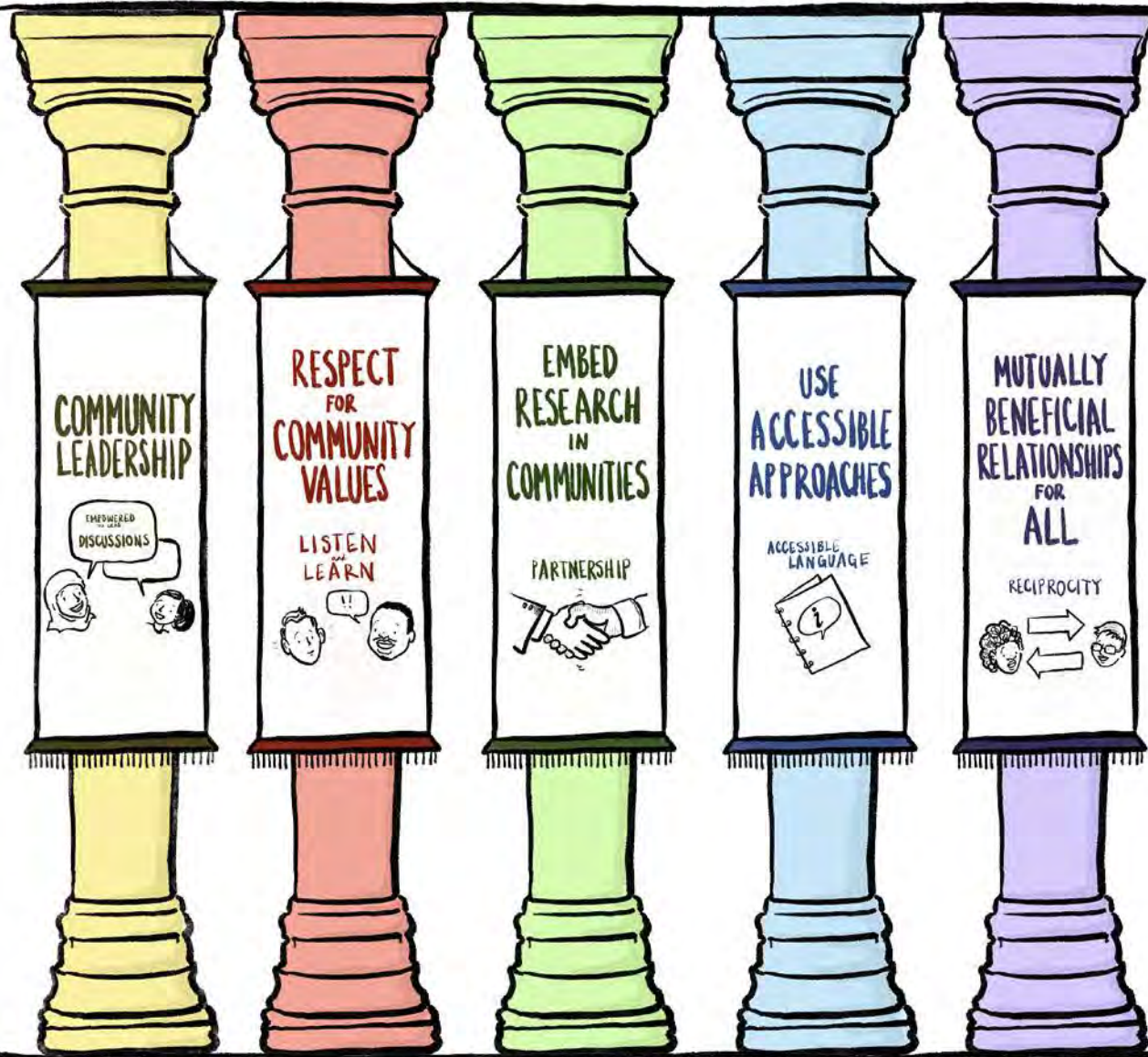
Community leadership is vital to effective engagement with communities about research. Community champions – those that work within VCFSE organisations or groups in the heart of communities – are seen as an important and crucial role to support engagement with diverse communities about research. These champions are often not recognised, adequately funded and lack the connections to network and access support and training.

There is no network-wide system for monitoring participation in research. There are no optimal solutions for assessing 'diverse and inclusive involvement and participation' in research across the research pathway. GM REN's long-term vision is to develop a blueprint for an improved Greater Manchester wide system for monitoring participation in research.



# THE GREATER MANCHESTER RESPECTFUL RESEARCH CHARTER

Strong, equitable, and respectful partnerships between researchers, the VCFSE sector, and Greater Manchester communities will empower those facing the greatest health challenges to actively participate in and shape research, ultimately leading to fairer health and care for all.



Communities with common shared interests and values supported by Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) groups and community leaders are taking charge of their own health and wellbeing. Researchers should recognise and value community led approaches and work to create mutually beneficial partnerships.



# RESEARCH THAT REPRESENTS OUR LOCAL COMMUNITIES

## Case study 1

### A Mile in their Shoes – The role of Community Champions

Made by Mortals

'A Mile in Their Shoes' was an immersive workshop designed and piloted with 17 researchers. The aim was to explore the importance of community champions and the critical role they play in ensuring diverse voices and lived experiences are woven into research design.

Led by the Made by Mortals team, the workshop involved the researchers putting themselves in the shoes of Community Champions to encourage them to delve into the challenges they face: the competing demands on their time, and the immense responsibility of advocating for and supporting their communities day in and day out.

Wide-ranging discussions were opened up around the challenges and opportunities for researchers and Community Champions to work together.

The importance of the community champions role has been captured in a best practice guide.

*"Made me think about barriers more, but also about opportunities."*

*"Appreciation for the hard work of community champions."*

*"Inspiration for how I can try to address some of the barriers/challenges that researchers present to community champions – e.g. giving more time!"*

Reflections from participants in the workshop

## Case study 2

### Co-creating resources to involve more young people in health research

Voice Up (Vocal), Mahdlo Youth Zone, NIHR BioResource (NIHR Manchester Biomedical Research Centre, BRC)

D-CYPHR (DNA, Children and Young People's Health Resource) is the first of its kind study in the UK, recruiting young people aged 0-15 into health research, by donating a sample of spit and some health data. This unique sample collection will help pioneer new treatments and create better care for children. Through interactive workshops led by Vocal and in collaboration with creative partners Salt and Sister Studios, we co-produced posters and flyers with 11-16year-olds. These resources aim to raise awareness and understanding of health research with a Greater Manchester identity and get more young people to join the D-CYPHR study.

*"If we can get the positive message about health research embedded at a younger age, the hope is that young people will take this through into their adult lives."*

Lynsey Priest,  
NIHR BRC Project Manager

*"I think [the researchers] have a better understanding of what young people will stop and look at when joining research."*

Mahdlo  
Youth Zone member





### Case study 3

#### Creating an animation for older adults in Salford to inspire more people to get involved in research Inspiring Communities Together

Inspiring Communities Together is a place-based charity in Salford which aims to improve the capacity and skills of local people so they feel more confident to try new things and get involved to make a difference for their community. Working in collaboration with the Research Delivery Network (RDN), they joined the Research Ready Communities programme and were inspired to want to create a resource which can be used to improve health and social care research literacy with people in mid and later life.

Inspiring Communities brought together members of their community to co-create an animation about taking part in research, using the voices of real, local older people to create authenticity. Based on the findings from the Research Ready Communities report, they drafted a script and identified older people for the “voices” featured in the animation.



### Case study 4

#### Breaking down barriers to community engagement and partnership working with people with learning disabilities and/or autism Pathways Associates (CIC), NIHR Greater Manchester Patient Safety Research Collaboration

Working with the Community Interest Company, Pathways Associates and People First Merseyside, and other academic collaborators, to co-develop research training for people with learning disabilities.

The aim of this work is to provide people with learning disabilities and autistic people with an introduction to research, information on how to become involved in research from a Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE) perspective and how that differs from participation. It will help understanding about what good practice is, and how to break down barriers with people with learning disabilities and autistic people.

Funding from the REN programme is helping to ensure that the work is co-developed, as well as reasonable adjustments are met for people involved in developing this work. Through this work, stronger and more meaningful working partnerships have been created with people with learning disabilities and/or autism wanting to become involved in research.

*“People with learning disabilities are often unfairly excluded from health research. Yet, they experience some of the greatest health inequities. There are many people with learning disabilities and community organisations that want to be involved, to tell us where the gaps are, and have their voices shape research. It’s been a privilege to be supported by REN to develop meaningful relationships, knowledge about research, and the research champion role with this incredible group of people with Lived Experience.”*

**Louise Gorman,**  
Public and Community Involvement Manager  
NIHR Greater Manchester Patient Safety Research  
Collaboration





## Case study 5

### Improving under-representation of Greater Manchester's minoritised and racialised communities in research

Equality Diversity and Inclusion Research Unit, Greater Manchester Mental Health Trust and Training and Support 4 Services and Exiles

Evidence suggests that 'culturally competent' research staff/practitioners coupled with development and deployment of 'Community Research Champions' to demystify research and address mistrust can improve the participation and overall experience of underrepresented communities in health and care research.

To address specific cultural barriers to research participation, our project aimed to:

- Improve research staff's cultural awareness and confidence in engagement and recruitment across diverse ethnic groups.
- Facilitate Community-partnered Participatory Research (CPPR) opportunities to recruit, train, and deploy 'Community Research Champions' (CRCs) to improve research participation in currently under-served populations.

In collaboration with TS4SE, a Community Interest Company (CIC), we conducted discussion groups that brought together people from across Greater Manchester with 'lived experience' of racial inequalities. Together with research staff (clinical studies officers, research nurses, research practitioners), these discussions helped to co-create bespoke training for both researchers and CRCs.

*"We are still in the early stages of implementing evaluating the impact this pilot work. What we learn will inform modifications to enable deployment across more diverse communities and ultimately contribute to co-creating more inclusive research."*

**Professor Dawn Edge,**  
Professor Mental Health and Inclusivity,  
University of Manchester



## Case study 6

### A partnership with Awakening Minds CIC and Made by Mortals CIC

NIHR Applied Research Collaboration Greater Manchester

NIHR ARC-GM partnered with Awakening Minds, a specialist Punjabi mental health service, and Made by Mortals, who bring lived experience to life through immersive audio, film and theatre. Together they explored the barriers to taking part in mental health research.

Awakening Minds (Nasrine Akhtar and Fehmina Parveen) were instrumental in reaching out to members of their community in Rochdale through their trusted relationships and creating a safe space within a community environment. They hosted a workshop in their community and using creative approaches facilitated by Made by Mortals held a discussion about reducing the barriers to participation.

*"We worked with REN team and Made by Mortals, and it was one the nicest experiences I have ever had. We were given the go ahead to prepare an Iftar and it was food the community enjoyed eating from our community, for our community. There were lots of allowances made for our culture and our religion and fasting at the same time. I think the best thing that they did was they came back and they gave us feedback. They made it such a positive experience for us because they respected our community, our time and our people were re-imbursed which is a big thing. To know that you are heard, to know that someone is listening to you and acknowledging you."*

**Fehmina Parveen,**  
Awakening Minds





## Case study 7

### Inspiring Futures Partnership CIC (Inspire Women Oldham)

Inspire Women Oldham continue to support the development of their StrongHer Together group, evolving a community-powered model of research that brings the Respectful Research Charter to life. This approach shows how inclusive, creative, and equitable research can be grounded in long-term, trusting relationships.

StrongHer Together is nurturing a sustainable research culture while addressing health inequalities experienced by women. The model centres relational methods, co-created learning spaces, and shared ownership—developed through meaningful engagement with both academic and community partners.

Recent collaborations, including with The Ideas Fund and the University of Manchester, have deepened our networks and supported new innovative pathways. Co-created projects have built relationships between academic and community researchers, while the “Inspired Garden” model allows women to explore research in their own way and time.

In partnership with Peaceful Minds CIC and the University of Manchester, we co-facilitated a transport poverty workshop in Werneth, Oldham, which supported 24 women through creative research methods and strengthened ties across sectors. These approaches make research more accessible, engaging, and relevant to the communities involved.

*“Our work turns respectful research principles into everyday practice. At its heart, this is about trust and visibility. Research is no longer extractive or exclusive—it’s joyful, grounded, and deeply human. It’s become a shared journey of discovery, where every voice matters, and every story holds power.”*

**Sally Bonnie,**  
Founder Inspiring Futures Partnership CIC (Inspire Women Oldham)



# EMBEDDING AND GROWING THE GREATER MANCHESTER RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT NETWORK

The GM REN has built strong foundations for the region's already rich and thriving research community to develop and adapt to the ever-evolving landscape in which we operate.

Greater Manchester boasts world-renowned research infrastructure, and it's important that these assets are utilised to their fullest potential by working together to increase engagement in research within the diverse communities. To achieve this, GM REN has been working closely with cross-sector partners to challenge systems to ensure sustainability of ways of working that support inclusive research.

The following key steps are needed to help achieve measurable impact within the next five years:

## **Enhancing diverse community engagement and representation**

To achieve research outcomes that better reflect societal needs and priorities, a more joined up and sustainable approach to co-developed projects and initiatives that place diverse communities at the heart of research. This will require long term investment and commitment to shift from a researcher-led to a community-empowered model. A key step towards this is ensuring the VCFSE sector are involved in decision-making processes, ensuring true co-production.

## **Building an inclusive and collaborative research ecosystem**

Frameworks and partnerships that demonstrate increased participation and collaboration across different organisations – such as VCFSEs, universities, research bodies – need to be established. Case studies and “Stories of Change” will highlight this progress and build trust to support cultivation of partnerships.

## **Setting up a coordinated or centralised function**

Bringing individual organisations' expertise and resources into a collective voice, a more coordinated approach to complex issues. Umbrella resource could provide a coordinator function to increase the transparency of research in GM and enable more effective research partnerships that span sectors.

## **Sustainable funding and resource allocation**

A sustainable funding model is needed to provide stable support over the long term. This includes more effective use of resources and increasing funding pots to ensure that projects and partnerships are properly supported. New approaches to leveraging funding in a different way are needed along with mechanisms to measure the impact of this change over time.

## **Accountability and Governance**

Existing governance structures must be made more accessible and visible to VCFSEs, with all research organisations incorporating VCFSE representation and lived experience in their decision-making processes. More clarity is needed on how decision makers are held to account on integrating VCFSE/community input and ensuring research benefits are shared and transparent.

## **Data, evidence and innovation**

There is a need to shift towards evidence-based decision-making in health, with clear metrics for measuring participation, diversity, inequalities, and community-led research projects. We need to agree a baseline and indicators for the reduction of systemic barriers, highlighting progress being made. Capturing the difference made by research (through both stories and data), tracking community involvement in studies and the percentage of researchers working with community organisations to measure collaboration.



*“Building on our activity to date, we can ensure that we continue to increase participation in research to improve the real-world effectiveness of treatments and our whole model of care. Research can and must address disparities in outcomes and experience for the communities of Greater Manchester.”*

**Warren Heppollette,**  
Chief Officer Strategy and  
Innovation NHS GM

*“The Research Engagement Network has created opportunities to draw communities closer to research and shaping research activities based on their lived experiences - ensuring that health solutions are relevant, equitable, and truly meet their needs.*

*By building these trusted partnerships and fostering long-term collaborations, REN empowers communities to be at the centre in driving change and improve health outcomes for future generations.”*

**Charles Kwaku-Odoi,**  
Chief Executive Caribbean and African Health Network

*“To make research more inclusive for the people it is intended for, we need to do more community-led and community-empowered approaches, supported by the VCFSE sector. Achieving this requires long-term investment in the VCFSE sector to develop mutually beneficial partnerships for everyone involved.”*

**Sue Wood,**  
Head of the NIHR Applied Research Collaboration Greater  
Manchester



# KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

## The Greater Manchester Research Engagement Network has:

Listened to a diverse range of communities from Greater Manchester about how they can be better supported to have a voice in research, co-creating the Respectful Research Charter as a framework for improved ways of working.

Developed equitable partnerships with VCFSE organisations and provided funding to support VCFSE organisations to co-develop approaches that better support communities to be involved in research.

Engaged system leaders who can embed learning from communities into system change, raising the profile of the importance of finding better ways of working to support inclusive research engagement, involvement and participation.

Connected research organisations, from across Greater Manchester to ensure a more joined up approach to working with underrepresented communities.

Aligned with GM initiatives such as GM Moving; Fairer Health for All, Live Well and 10GM Data Intelligence programmes to uncover areas of cross-over.











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