



**Personal reflections on the challenges of  
user led research,  
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# Introduction

- Focus of presentation – reflection on changing UK research priorities
- Concern about ‘relevance to the real world’, of engaging with research users and delivering research ‘impact’
- The UK research councils are placing increasing emphasis on ‘user engagement’
- EPSRC played an important role via EQUAL since the 1990s in ensuring the active engagement of older users
- As a social scientist I will focus of the social science research council, the ESRC and ‘user engagement’
- But before a short context



# Traditions of user engagement within the social sciences

Within the social sciences there are a range of research approaches that raise issues about the researcher's relation with the world.

- *Feminism* – 'the personal is political' highlights the politics of research, emphasising such issues as reflexivity, relations with 'subjects', representation, and voice, particularly concerns about power
  - *Emancipatory disability and service user controlled research* - developed by movements of health and social care service users, including, for example, the disabled people's and psychiatric system survivors' movements
  - *Participatory action research* (PAR) refers to variety of research practices, takes lived experience as starting point, involves collaborative research, education and action that is oriented towards social change
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# Drivers from outside higher education

- Government strategic vision for higher education and academic research from the 1993 White Paper *Realising Our Potential* to the 2009 *Higher Ambitions: The future of universities in a knowledge economy* – user engagement been encouraged

Impact of these policy shifts seen in:

- Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) *Research Excellence framework* (REF)
- Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Strategic Plan 2009-14 and Delivery Plan 2008-11
- Active citizenship - voice of citizens heard in shaping public policy and public services

# Government policy: 2009 Higher Ambitions report

- Although research is important in its own right, its benefits cannot be harnessed without strong links between researchers and users' (BIS, 2009, p.54)
- 'Concern that many academics are reluctant to take time away from the 'publication treadmill' to work closely with, or spend time working in, organisations in the private, public or third sector that use research' (BIS, 2009, p.68)



# Judging the 'quality' of university research

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) consultation document  
2009

'Reward and encourage the effective sharing, dissemination and application of research findings and the productive interchange of research staff and ideas between HEIs, business and other research users (HEFCE, 2009, 6)

'To assist in assessing user significance (beyond the academic sphere), institutions will be invited to include a short statement with any output for which they believe that such significance may convincingly be asserted ' (para 40, HEFCE, 2009, 13)



# User engagement for the social sciences: Economic and Social Research Council

- 'To advance knowledge and provide trained social scientists who meet the needs of users and beneficiaries, thereby contributing to the economic competitiveness of the UK, the effectiveness of public services and policy and the quality of life ESRC Strategic Plan 2009-14 (2009, 3)
- 'All our major new research investments will be driven by the twin imperatives of scientific quality and impact. this can only be achieved by the meaningful involvement of both producers and users at all stages of the research process – the 'co-production of knowledge' (ESRC Delivery Plan 2008-11, 2008, 2)
- In the Strategic Plan the 'active two way dialogue and collaboration between social scientists and potential users throughout the research process and beyond is crucial' (ESRC, 2009, 23), and ESRC indicate that, 'user engagement strategies will be more directly assessed through the application process' (ESRC, 2009, 25).



# Why engage with users?

- To deliver impact:
  - Academic
  - Societal
  - Economic
  - Policy and practice

# Generating impact: co-production

- Involving users at all stages of the research
- Well planned user engagement and knowledge exchange strategies
- Co-production of knowledge – scope for generating higher impact
- Portfolios of research activity that build reputations with research users



# User engagement

- My PhD (SSRC funded) Newcastle University – multi-disciplinary research centre, tradition of collaborative research in teams for variety of research funders
- Embraced feminist methods
- In the past seven years my recent research funded by Age Concern England and ESRC, and I have begun to increasingly embrace more participatory methods





# ESRC: brief history

- Established 1965 (result of The Heyworth Committee, and Report)
- Provide financial support for social science research
- Keep under review the state of research and advise the Government
- Keep under review the supply of trained researchers
- Advise on the application and dissemination of research
- Give advice to users of social science research



# Study of why people volunteer (research grant, 2004-5)

- Research idea, collaboration with Dr Sue Baines, Manchester Metropolitan University
- Preparing the bid – not just undertaking literature review, talking to but crucially listening to users (voluntary organisations, volunteers and policy makers)
- 2 key questions on application form
- Potential impacts: academic and policy impacts
- User engagement and communication plans: design stage, fieldwork and dissemination



# The research process

- Case study research, one community and social welfare voluntary organisations active in that community
- Data gathering tools: repeated, systematic observation; collection of documentary evidence; interviews with key informants (officers in local economic development and social inclusion, managers and workers in organisations using volunteers); focus groups; and 'life history' interviews with a selection of volunteers.
- Project generated a lot of interest within the community – we worked interactively
- Dissemination event sponsored by local organisation – over 50 people attended





# End of award report and press release

- ESRC project press release of August 2006
- Contacted by academics
- Articles in The Charity Times (August 2006), The Independent (16.9.06)
- National organisations - including Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), and the Disability Rights Commission (DRC)
- Other localities – including Lewisham Council and Eastbourne CVS Bureau.





# Impact grant (2006-7)

- To undertake additional knowledge transfer activities following the completion of (R000 22 0592).
- To share learning and experience with research users
- To ensure that the research already undertaken informs policy through active engagement with the stakeholders



**Volunteering in the community**

**Mark**

Mark is in his 20s and lives with his parents in Community and is autistic, and gets very nervous in new situations. He has volunteered at Community Concern Erewash (CCE) in the laundry since 2001, equipped with his Mum, Mary. Rather than being afraid-based Mark valued anything that involved him being 'out and about' but in an environment where he felt supported and at ease. Aspiring to be the Laundry van driver really appealed to Mark. Mark's placement began with an induction course, and then he began volunteering on a Thursday helping Therese with the collection and delivery of clothing for the laundry from around Community. This can take up to seven hours.

Although it has been a long, slow process Mark's social horizons have grown. He now has the confidence to speak to strangers who visit CCE. This has been possible because he has found CCE to be a friendly place, where he feels comfortable, valued and welcome, and gets all the support and encouragement he needs from visitors, the organisers. Mark has gone on to acquire volunteer certificates, and for the first time last year he attended the CCE Christmas party, and he spent every minute, dancing and chatting with other volunteers, something he would never have done before his days with CCE.

**Linda**

Linda is in her 40s and lives with her husband and two sons in Community and is a long standing and very reliable member of Community Concern Erewash's (CCE) fundraising team. Linda is a multiple volunteer and also volunteers for two other organisations in the community (including Home Start), as well as helping CCE with occasional extra volunteer work, such as helping in the laundry club. Linda is a regular diner, she has normal vision. She befriends a boy who lives three streets away. Some days she is able to volunteer without assistance, but on other days she needs assistance to enable her to volunteer.

She was introduced to CCE by a friend, who asked her to come and help, as they were short of volunteers and in the past five years she hasn't looked back. Linda loves talking to people and she says she makes a difference to 'neighbourly people'. Volunteering has given Linda a lot of confidence, but it is not just the volunteer work that Linda enjoys, she has loved the training opportunities that CCE has given her. These last five years have been tremendous for me. I have got loads more confidence. I have gained certificates, really achieved things I didn't think I would ever do. If I wasn't for CCE putting me on courses. Also if it wasn't for the volunteer work I would be stuck in the house 24/7. For Linda volunteering gives a structure to her week, and a role outside the home. She wants to give something to the community, where there are people worse off than I am. The day will come when I have to give it up, and I just hope that someone will be there to support me.

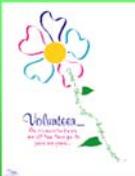
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**VOLUNTEERING HELPS YOU "GET ON"**



*"I'm doing things in the community and I'm helping myself in the process"*



*"I have gained valuable work experience through and through attending training"*

**Community Concern Erewash**  
 For more information on becoming a Volunteer  
 Tel: 0115 944146  
 E-mail: [communityconcernerewash@tesco.net](mailto:communityconcernerewash@tesco.net)

**HELP BUILD A BRIGHTER COMMUNITY**



*"I look forward to a chat every week with my Volunteer Shopper"*



*"I've always been active... I still am!! Thanks to Volunteering"*

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# Activities

- Case study community – leaflets, posters and web-site for a local charity
- Engaging users of research including policy makers, organisations that involve volunteers, and advocates for the interests of disabled and older people who are, or may become, volunteers
- Contributed to a Disability Rights Commission report; work supported by Age Concern
- Developed a toolkit to support inclusive volunteering





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# ESRC

ESRC Seminar Series  
Mapping the public policy landscape

Active citizenship and community relations in Northern Ireland




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## BROADENING THE BASE OF THE VOLUNTEER WORKFORCE

Funding from the ESRC's Impact Grants Scheme has helped inform policy on how the base of people carrying out voluntary work can be broadened. The project was run jointly by Nottingham Trent University and the University of Newcastle upon Tyne and centred on Community Concern Erewash (CCE), a provider of care services for people with social needs in Cotmanhay, Derbyshire.

Following the successful completion of earlier ESRC-funded research entitled, *Doing One's Duty: A Case Study of Volunteering in a Deprived Community*, that focused on voluntary and voluntary workers in the East Midlands, this project was designed to share the learning and experiences that were gained from the research. It provided knowledge transfer and influenced policies locally, regional and nationally with bodies, such as: Community Concern Erewash, the Government Office for the East Midlands, Age Concern England, the Disability Rights Commission and the Office for the Third Sector.

**Community Concern Erewash**

Community Concern Erewash (CCE) is a registered charity and social care service provider based in Cotmanhay, Ilkeston, Derbyshire. It carries out services for local residents that include: gardening, decorating, DIY, and fitting security and safety equipment. In addition, it also carries out projects, such as a 'Befriending Scheme', a 'Shopping Scheme', laundry service and luncheon clubs. These enable residents who need help and support to remain living with dignity in their own homes. CCE draws volunteers from the whole community; its remit is to reflect the community.

"We recruit volunteers from all parts of the community."  
 "It's about supporting people in the community."  
 "Our projects are developed by listening to what the community needs."  
 "Our volunteers reflect the community in all its diversity."  
*Comments from the Chief Executive, Community Project*

CCE has an additional approach in its activities. It recruits people into volunteering and supports them through training that is designed to enhance their own confidence, skills and qualifications. This has the added benefit of improving the quality of life of community volunteers – as well as those to whom they give their services.

Further details of CCE are available at:  
[www.communityconcernerewash.co.uk](http://www.communityconcernerewash.co.uk)





# Demography and ageing

- 1993 White Paper, Realising our Potential
- Foresight report – raised awareness of demography and ageing
- Attempts to coordinate research efforts to focus on demography and ageing
- 1995 EQUAL initiative launched
- ESRC developed a specific research programme Growing Older, focus on quality of life in old age
- Then came the New Dynamics of Ageing programme



# Sustaining IT use by older people to promote autonomy and independence (Sus-IT) (2009-12)

Funded as part of NDA Programme

NDA specified, 'participatory research methods to engage older people in the development of products, services or research... and the effective communication of users' was a priority'.

User engagement is embedded in the NDA programme in a number of ways:

Via a requirement for projects to engage with older people and other research users and,

At the Programme level, by the Older People's Reference Group (OPRG).



# Sus-IT work package: Facilitating participation

To provide and maintain:

- an actively engaged pool of older people and their groups;
- support for researchers in all WPs for participatory methods, principles and ethics;
- spaces (physical and virtual) and opportunities for older people to engage with and validate the research;
- a dynamic knowledge base of older peoples' diverse interests, needs and expectations as related to ageing, quality of life and ICTs.



# User engagement and Sus-IT

- Working collaboratively with older people (panels & informal groups)
- Co-production principles
- Group of older 'critical friends'
- Advisory group
- Leading work package on facilitating participation – partnership working
- role ensure that older people's concerns and perspectives drive and inform all stages of the research





# Festival of Social Science: 'Improving Everyday Life: Getting connected to public services'

- Cotmanhay Enterprise Centre, Cotmanhay Road, Ilkeston DE7 8PF  
March 19<sup>th</sup> 2010
- The ESRC funds about 70 events across the country in one week in March every year that takes social science beyond higher education buildings
- In one case study community holding an event: older people from Erewash (Older People's Forum; local charities) and Derby (Age Concern); statutory (Derbyshire CC, including library service), Erewash BC (LSP, web team), and non statutory sector (local charities) and the Sus-It team
- Knowledge sharing event - digital engagement journeys from our research participants; opportunity for older people to have hands on demonstrations of how to access online services from statutory and nonstatutory sector