



UNIVERSITY OF  
LIVERPOOL

Heseltine Institute for Public  
Policy, Practice and Place



# *The City Conversation*

Building Place Based Partnerships for Inclusive Growth in Liverpool

Final Report



Liverpool  
City Council

 MY-CLUBMOOR



UK Research  
and Innovation

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The University of Liverpool, Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place, confirms that it has made every effort to adhere to UKRI's reporting guidelines and to provide an accurate interpretation of the evidence available.

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Date: 05/05/2021

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# 1. OVERVIEW OF PROJECT

The City Conversation project was a partnership involving the Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place at the University of Liverpool, Liverpool City Council and the MyClubmoor Partnership Board, a Big Local community development scheme. The project has focused on the Clubmoor ward, a neighbourhood in north Liverpool that has experienced long-term deprivation despite successive regeneration initiatives, over the last 30 years.

The aim of the project was to develop participatory approaches to community engagement that would lead to a better understanding of local issues and contribute to the design of more effective public services. The original objectives were to:

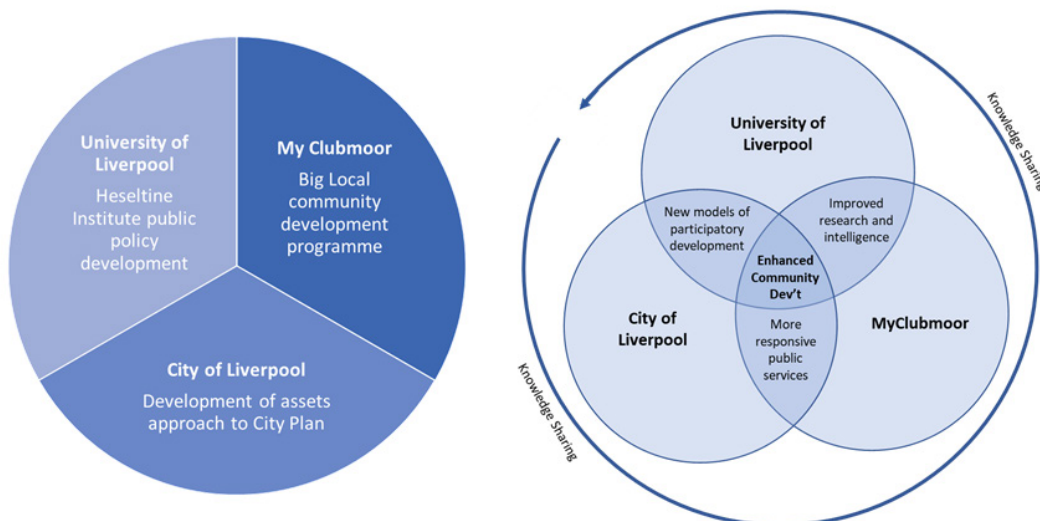
- strengthen connections and trust between the collaborative partners and local community to better understand residents’ priorities;
- pioneer co-creation methodologies with disadvantaged communities;
- engage 60 residents and introduce a different conversation with communities that focuses upon prevention and early intervention;
- gather data and intelligence to inform and shape future public services in Liverpool;
- build local capacity through training 20 community researchers;
- deliver 6 citizen focus groups and 2 community workshops; and
- evaluate the approach and disseminate learning across the UK and beyond.

The objectives for the project became more important in light of Covid-19 and the health, social and economic effects on the community. As set out in appendix 1, the methods of engagement and research approach were fundamentally affected from the outset by the pandemic.

The original design and approach to the project was informed by the experience of partners in Liverpool, a strong history of neighbourhood engagement, and the existing capacity and activity of partner organisations. As set out in figure 1, partners had existing and intersecting interests in exploring models of enhanced community development activity that underpinned the original funding application and sustained involvement in the project during the pandemic.

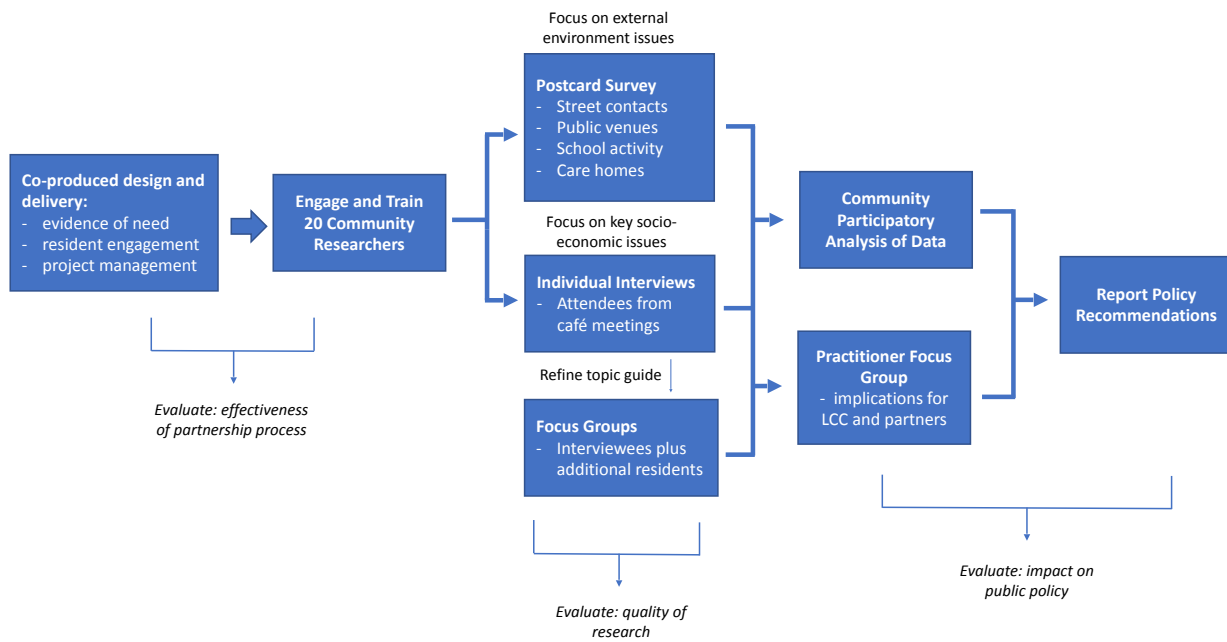
The main activities of the project were training of community researchers to undertake a postcard survey, a series of 1-1 interviews with local residents of Clubmoor and focus group sessions with residents – figure 2. The structure was designed to engage a large number of Clubmoor residents in the project to identify the key positive and negative perceptions of their community (postcard survey), to explore these in greater detail (individual interviews) and to discuss how problems could be addressed through partnership between community and public agencies (focus groups).

**Figure 1**  
Stakeholder Intersecting Interests



**Figure 2**

## City Conversation Delivery Framework



Analysis and application of the research was undertaken through workshop sessions with the community and engagement with practitioner organisations, including public bodies (e.g., local authority, police, health services etc.) and community-based service organisations (e.g., faith groups and charities). The process was intended to generate new information through a participatory process to inform public

policy design. The delivery of these activities was affected by Covid-19, a summary of the adaptations to methods are described in appendix 1.

A description of participants and respondents to the main activities is presented in figure 3. These data reflect the revised research methods used in light of Covid-19 conditions.

**Figure 3**

## Summary of Participant Characteristics

Activity	No. Participants	Characteristics
Community research training	23	Participants included local residents, members of community organisations and public service groups. Of those attending, the majority (73%) were female.
Online community survey	48	A majority of responses were from women (67%) and all responses were from people identifying their ethnicity as White. Response rates were highest among residents aged 30 – 69 years, proportionately greater than the share of the population and low among 18 – 29 and residents aged 70+.
Telephone interviews	27	Participants had an average age of 49 years and were mostly female (65%). All that provided details said their ethnicity was White British.
Digital engagement	Reach 1,059	User characteristics unknown. Based on 4 Facebook posts there was an average engagement of 179 people and an average of 6 shares across the topics.
Two practitioner workshops	20	Included local authority, Police, housing associations, Citizens Advice and health.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF THE EVALUATION APPROACH

The project developed an approach to evaluation structured around the three main components of the project – see figure 4. Evaluation was intended to run alongside the delivery of the project; capturing learning and informing decision making of the project steering group. Given the relatively short timetable for the project, this approach was most useful to provide a live assessment of the success of the methods and outcomes as the project progressed. In light of the need to constantly adapt the project, to respond to changing public health conditions, the formative approach to evaluation proved useful to reflect upon experience to generate new ideas. The key evaluation questions used by the partners are set out in figure 4.

The evaluation questions were designed to provide useful insights into local project delivery, the future use of participatory methods for policy development and learning to feed into the national programme. The questions used locally have a close alignment with the programme evaluation questions and are intended to generate evidence to contribute to the national findings and discussion.

The project used a mix of methods and tools in undertaking the evaluation. As the primary aim of the project was to develop

and test new approaches to partnership-led community engagement there was an emphasis on qualitative methods. For the City Conversation, testing improvements in partnership working, in levels of trust and communication and awareness of participative approaches to policy development were key for the project. Methods used include the following.

- Documentary review – project steering group minutes, partner policy papers and other relevant materials generated by the project. Undertaken to understand the policy environment and effectiveness of the steering group meetings.
- Participant observation – steering group meetings and partner workshops. Undertaken to understand partner dynamics, level of collaboration in problem solving and degree of interest in applying participatory methods.
- Data analysis – surveys, interviews and social media activity by the project. To assess the level of participation against project targets.
- Interviews – with project partners. To identify changes in confidence levels and trust in partnership working.

**Figure 4**

### Key Evaluation Questions

Project Component	Key Evaluation Questions
Partnership process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was the steering group an effective means to direct the project?</li> <li>• Did the steering group enable partners to better understand each other?</li> <li>• Has the project improved the prospects for future partnerships?</li> </ul>
Research data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was the design of community-led research methods effective?</li> <li>• Did the research generate target levels of community participation?</li> <li>• Did the research generate new and useful data for policy development?</li> </ul>
Policy impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did practitioner organisations respond positively to the research findings?</li> <li>• Has the project encouraged future use of participatory methods?</li> <li>• Has the project influenced the design of public policy?</li> </ul>

### 3. PROCESS

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The initial design and execution of the project worked well, with a strong partner commitment to continuing and completing the project through the pandemic. Covid-19 provided a major challenge to the delivery of participatory research, but also severely impacted on partner agencies and their capacity to contribute to the City Conversation. Local authority, health and community partners were very stretched in delivering additional support to vulnerable community members. In this context it would have been entirely legitimate for partners to withdraw support. However, despite the additional stress, partners worked hard to adapt the project to make it deliverable within changing public health conditions.

Key areas of the project that worked well included:

- the partnership approach and willingness of stakeholders to continue to adapt the project through changing public health conditions;
- the training of community researchers (local residents, community and public sector workers) to undertake the engagement and research activity;
- quality of inputs from individual interviews; and
- support from practitioner organisations and willingness to continue to work collaboratively beyond the City Conversation project.

The principal challenges and areas where the delivery went less well, were largely due to enforced social / physical distancing and the inability of the project to fully adapt the research methods to comply with public health requirements. As the project had been designed for face-to-face contact and highly visible community-based activity, adapting this to entirely on-line delivery created a number of challenges that affected both the level of participation possible and the response levels.

Key areas of the project that worked less well included:

- very limited ability to use the community researchers for online and telephone-based data collection – practical and ethical issues prevented community researchers from collecting data;
- limited responses to the surveys and the interviews – the number of responses to the online survey was significantly below the level that was anticipated from the community postcard survey;
- the ineffectiveness of social media as an engagement tool – despite established Facebook networks, few people actively responded to posts or invitations to engage; and
- the loss of focus group discussions from the planned activity, in particular the opportunity to involve residents in data analysis.

A key objective for the research was to strengthen relationships and build trust between community and public sector stakeholders. The partnership mechanisms and project management structures that were established at the start of the project and ongoing commitment to adapt the methods made a major contribution to strengthening relationships. Discussions with community partners have confirmed that they have a better understanding of how the local authority works and feel more empowered and able to engage Council officers in dialogue. Public sector practitioner organisations have indicated that they recognise the contribution of organised communities to delivering effective services that will shape their thinking and actions beyond the project.

The only significant changes to the project were due to the Covid-19 pandemic – as outlined in appendix 1. The basic structure of the original design of the project remained unchanged, but with significant variation and adaptation of the research methods and tools. The primary issue for delivery of the original aims and objectives related to the ability to undertake face-to-face engagement within the community and the impact of this on the number of participants.

# 4. OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

A key objective for the project was to strengthen dialogue and engagement of public and community partners in developing policy and services. Feedback from both MyClubmoor participants and from Liverpool City Council indicates that they have gained a better understanding of each other and the opportunities and constraints for future actions. Particularly through the operation of the project steering group, partners have gained experience of collaborative working and problem solving that has helped to build trust. This is expected to have lasting benefits for participatory working in Liverpool.

Alongside improved understanding and confidence in partnership working, has been development of new research skills. MyClubmoor and Liverpool City Council have broadened their awareness of the potential use of participatory methods in community engagement and policy development. MyClubmoor in particular have had an opportunity, through the project, to apply new techniques that can be applied to the future design of local activity.

The project has also established a method of engaging and training community members and frontline workers to be researchers. This has not only created a cadre of trained individuals that can be involved in future community-led research activity, but has established community-led research as a practical tool for public agencies to use. Developing a strategic approach for community engagement is one of the priorities of Liverpool's People Power Partnership and a specific action is to embed learning from the Clubmoor research into the city's asset based approach to neighbourhood working.

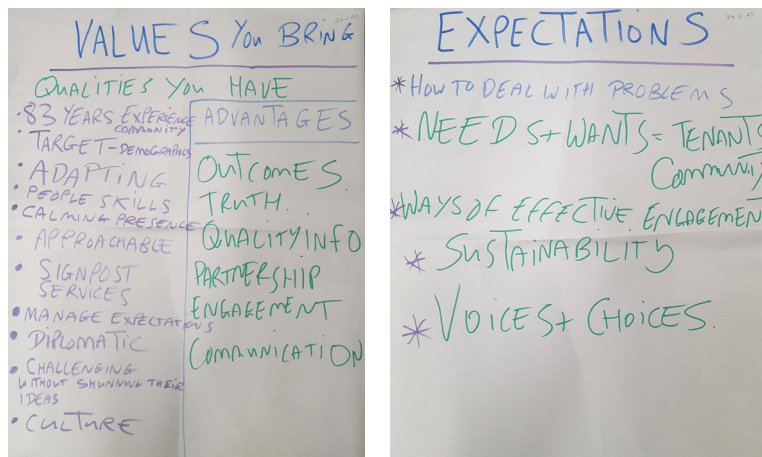
The strengthening of partnership working and the development and application of participatory approaches to community research and engagement achieved the outcomes that were expected. More broadly, the context of Covid-19 and the limited scope for face-to-face contact within the community, severely undermined the level of response and potential for new insights to be generated from the project. We tried to offset this gap by working closely with MyClubmoor's creative projects officer to promote the project via other activities that were introduced when the first lockdown was eased such as the Incredible Edible on-street growing scheme, but this had limited impact.

There has been important learning from the project about future engagement activity that will inform the design of community-led research. Key areas include a need for wider dissemination and inclusion of partner organisations at the planning stage of projects and integrating the use of digital and social media into data gathering activity.

An unexpected outcome generated by the project was the development of a community researcher toolkit which will be made available as a city wide resource. Another outcome specific to the locality was a ward profile providing an overview of key demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the area. This included data generated by researchers at the University of Liverpool (2018 Internet User Classification) to add value to the analysis of the more generic ONS data sets.

Figure 5

## Community Researcher Workshop Training Sheets



## 5. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

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The design of the City Conversation relied on the work of the community researchers engaging residents within the Clubmoor community to generate responses to the survey and interviews. The initial responses, both from MyClubmoor and from the community and local stakeholder organisations to the researcher training were very positive and gave a strong indication that a participatory method would be effective. Partners fully expected that there would be a high response to the community postcard survey and there were contingency arrangements to boost the rate where needed. The involvement of community researchers also provided a means to snowball contacts across the neighbourhood to address any gaps in participation during the fieldwork.

As described in appendix 1, Covid-19 and public health restrictions severely limited the scope for face-to-face engagement of community members. The restrictions resulted in significant changes to the project research methods, the outcome of which was a much lower level of participation than originally planned. Alongside a reduced overall volume of participants from Clubmoor, the diversity and representativeness of participation fell below that anticipated. The age profile, gender, ethnicity and spatial coverage within the deprived ward fell short, with a lack of younger, male and BAME respondents than optimal. The spatial distribution of responses was also biased to the southern part of the community where MyClubmoor was most active.

While the project steering group was able to identify gaps in engagement, the mechanisms to remedy the problems were not available in the context of lockdown conditions. The partners sought to move activity on-line and shift engagement to using social media and digital methods. This provided a means for the project to continue, but failed to generate the level of participation expected. The project had limited success in using existing MyClubmoor social media networks to generate new responses from the community into the research. The partners identified a number of potential causes for this including: a lack of specificity or direct benefit in 'selling' involvement in the research; fatigue within a deprived community that were targeted for contact by a number of public agencies; and also, evidence that the dominant internet user characteristic of the area is people that do not have access to the internet or when they have access do not actively engage in on-line activity.

Despite lower than anticipated participation in the project, analysis of the findings indicates a high level of consistency in responses. When asked about the aspects of the community that residents liked and would change, there were significant levels of agreement across responses (see figure 6 overleaf).

While the size of the sample prevented detailed disaggregation of responses, at a headline level there appeared to be common agreement on the issues for public policy. As indicated above there were no negative impacts from the project, with partners and the community members involved, willing to continue dialogue beyond the City Conversation.

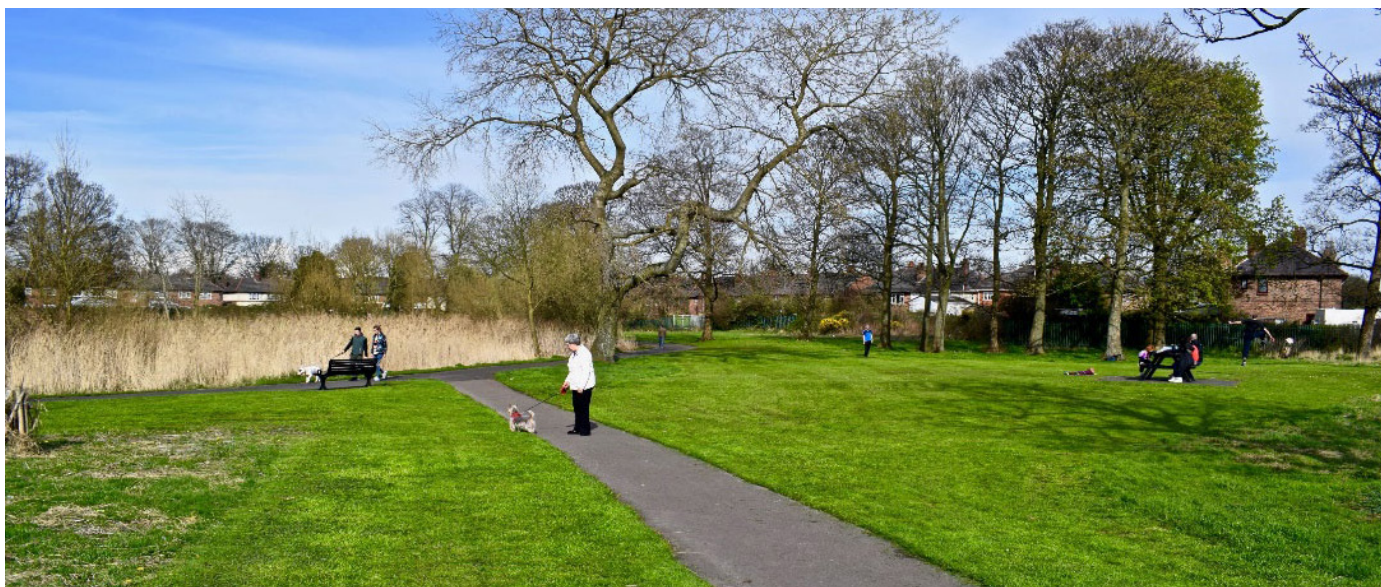
When participants were asked what public agencies can do to support Clubmoor, some referred to increased investment (e.g. highways, policing, youth provision); but more respondents referred to enhanced communication with public agencies, either as an end in itself (consultation) or as a condition for more participatory decision-making. Residents recognised that blended approaches to engagement were likely to be the most inclusive and far-reaching. Digital tools (e.g. social media) were perceived to be more effective in connecting with younger people. For older residents more traditional and face-to-face methods (e.g. postal materials, doorstep conversations and community meetings) were favoured.

In designing future phases of this programme, UKRI is encouraged to consider how it could extend successful short term pilots such as the City Conversation into a longer term place-based partnership for public engagement programme. For example, extending the Liverpool project would help develop the nascent research capacity in Clubmoor and ensure meaningful co-production between the project partners continues into the City Plan policy implementation phase. It would also support inter-disciplinary knowledge exchange beyond the immediate funding period. The advantages would be twofold: first, embedding the role of academic institutions into the locality and broadening the university's interactions with multiple stakeholders; and second, providing longitudinal research potential with and about these localities to influence public policy decision-making.



**Figure 6**

Best Things about Clubmoor, according to Residents



*“The thing that I like the most is the green space, and like I say, about the Ducky and the parks and stuff like that; that for me is the most important thing. I like being outdoors and being able to access that.”*

**Interviewee**



*“I want [the pandemic] to go away, but some parts of it I'd like to keep, you know? People chatting to their neighbours, people doing a bit of shopping for people – it's no bad thing.”*

**Interviewee**



*“The best thing about Clubmoor is the community, who time and time again has come together to help vulnerable people within the community”*

**On-line survey respondent**

## 6. WHAT'S NEXT?

The City Conversation has provided an important opportunity to strengthen dialogue and partnership working between the Clubmoor community, the University of Liverpool and Liverpool City Council. The experience of delivering the project, particularly in the adverse context of Covid-19, has increased enthusiasm to continue to work together, to use the participative research tools developed through the project and create opportunities to involve community researchers in new local engagement and data gathering activity.

Discussions with both practitioner organisations and with MyClubmoor have identified a number of continuation activities that will provide a strong legacy for the project.

- Develop and produce a participatory methods toolkit that can be used by public and community organisations.
- Identify follow on engagement and research activity to enable community involvement in the implementation of the multi-agency Liverpool City Plan and input into the design of public policy in health and housing.
- Apply participatory techniques to update and refocus MyClubmoor planned activity to respond to Covid-19 recovery.
- Explore potential for the University of Liverpool to establish a community research hub for the City Region.
- Investigate options for partner-based funding applications to pilot and evaluate approaches to service co-production in Liverpool.

**Figure 7**

### The City Plan for Liverpool



The key lesson from the project has been the importance of trust building between research and community organisations. Through the project the University of Liverpool has gained an understanding of how it can contribute to community-based and community-led research activity in the future, by offering a source of trusted and supported information and advice. The University has a particularly important role as a provider of technical advice and guidance, as a source of data analysis and as a repository of information on the city's communities.

As a partnership the City Conversation has demonstrated the value of knowledge co-production and the important contribution that different experiences and perspectives bring to the design and articulation of public policy. While funding for community-based activity will remain an issue, for universities and local partners, the project has demonstrated that more integrated approaches that employ participatory methods in data collection and policy development can be affordable if planned into delivery processes from the outset.

An extension of the approach piloted in the City Conversation project, in particular delivery of the Liverpool City Plan, will require a long-term commitment to capacity building of grassroots organisations. Extending community involvement in service design and delivery will rely on the presence of locally trusted organisations that are able to mobilise and communicate with local residents; creating a culture where engagement and participation are mainstreamed.

## 7. FINANCIAL REPORTING

See below for a summary of expenditure associated with the project.

**Figure 8**

### Financial Summary

Cost category	Amount spent	Details
Travel	£31.30	Pre-pandemic the project team travel costs were negligible; and face-to-face meetings did not take place at all from mid-March 2020 due to the pandemic. Anticipated travel costs for participants and for community researchers were not incurred due to the pandemic.
Meeting costs	£25.50	Meetings pre-pandemic took place on the premises of partner organisations, thereby incurring little expense. Face-to-face meetings were then curtailed entirely in the wake of the pandemic.
Engagement costs	Nil	The pre-pandemic project design would have incurred significant expenditure on venue hire and participant expenses, among other categories of engagement related spend. Social distancing rules meant that the engagement costs were curtailed and the project switched to online and telephone-based methods.
Project research/ feasibility study	£40,415.06	
Estates and indirect	Nil	

# APPENDIX 1 – IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The public health restrictions implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic had a fundamental impact on individuals and communities, and by extension on the delivery of the City Conversation project. The project structure and methods were designed to maximise interpersonal contact, community involvement and public visibility of the research within the Clubmoor neighbourhood. Specifically, the role of community researchers to engage residents and to undertake data gathering and analysis was central to testing the role of locally grounded participatory research for policy development.

The initial stages of the project, including establishing the steering group and management arrangements and the community researcher training workshops, were delivered before the first lockdown in March 2020. However, all subsequent project activities were redesigned or rephased to comply with public health requirements. As set out in figure 9 (compared to figure 2), the resident engagement activity and data collection were adapted to operate virtually or using social media routes. As reported above, this had a significant impact on the number of residents involved in the project, as well as the capacity of public

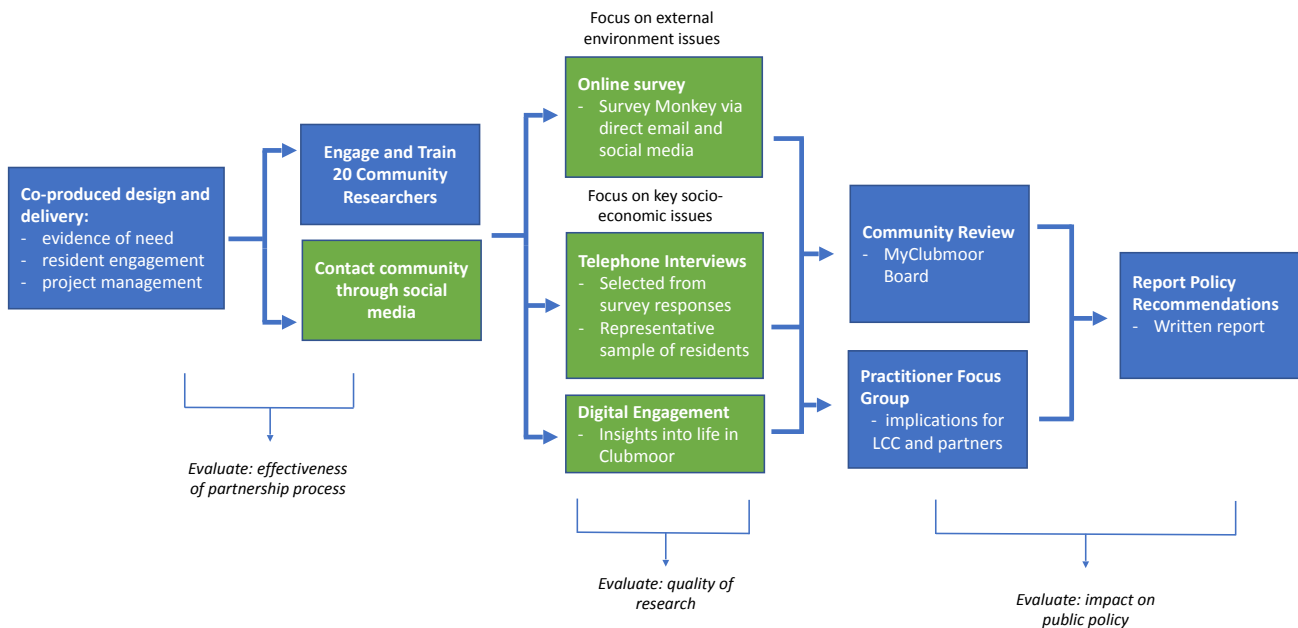
and non-governmental organisations to be involved in the project, whilst coping with greatly increased demand for services.

Despite very challenging conditions, the majority of the core aims and objectives were met through the project. The main aspects that did not meet the original expectations related to the level of resident involvement in the project, particularly that, for ethical and practical reasons, the community researchers were not able to undertake the engagement or interview activity as planned.

The adoption of digital methods of research allowed for the project to continue and for useful data to be collected, but this was fundamentally limited by not being part of the preparatory design of the research and the high levels of digital exclusion present within the Clubmoor community. The results of the research and the potential offered by participatory methods have been well received by partners and practitioner organisations, with the experience and tools developed during the project creating a useful resource to explore fully the implications of Covid-19 on community wellbeing.

Figure 9

## Revised City Conversation Delivery Framework



\*Green boxes indicate changes

## APPENDIX 2 – PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE

### Community Researcher Training

The 23 Community Researchers were recruited via MyClubmoor Partnership's activities / interactions with community groups, residents groups and other local networks. No prior research or related work experience was needed to become a researcher – only an interest in the local area. From the 18 completed evaluation forms collected after the training workshops, there was a high level of satisfaction among participants. All of the attendees completing forms provided positive feedback overall on the quality of the sessions, with a majority (95%) reporting satisfaction with their understanding of the project, the use of research techniques and their ability to perform as community researchers. Comments included:

*"First time I visited MyClubmoor Hub and really enjoyed the entire session and looking forward to being involved in the near future."*

*"Was useful to meet people from all the different areas/networks."*

*"Just what the community needs."*

*"Fab teaching. Lovely and plentiful food. Nice venue."*

### Figure 10

### Training Workshop



After public health restrictions were imposed the project steering group continued to keep the community researchers informed about the delivery of the project and informal feedback indicates that the majority are willing to be involved in future events once conditions are back to normal.

### Practitioner organisations

Two workshops were held with public and community-based practitioner organisations to share the results of the research and to open a discussion on implications for policy and future collaboration. While no formal feedback was sought on these meetings, both sessions were well attended and had strong participation by all participants. Many practitioners accepted that a lack of joined-up working and communication between service providers had historically hampered their ability to deliver collectively for local communities. Practitioners spoke of a clear desire to work more collaboratively with partner organisations and pointed to progress in this regard. They also recognised the enormous value generated by the creative and resilient grassroots community sector in response to Covid-19.

The continued commitment of the project partners throughout the pandemic period, plus the willingness of multiple partners to participate in the stakeholder workshops demonstrated the perceived value of having place-based partnerships in public engagement. There was a real interest among practitioners to connecting into the City Conversation activity and using participatory methods, including the community researcher training in Clubmoor. In a post-Covid context there is clearly an imperative for practitioner groups to jointly plan for recovery and as part of this to employ methods to involve and engage communities.



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## Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place

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