

Grounded in Community:

Nottingham Citizen Social Scientists:

Overview, Early Impacts and Learning

Report September 2026

Nottingham Community and Voluntary Service

Coventry University

Nottingham City Council

Welcome Message

The Public Health team is delighted to share this report on the Citizen Social Science project. It captures the journey of the project, the insights gained to date, and the achievements of Nottingham's Citizen Social Scientists. Their enthusiasm, dedication and hard work have shaped the success of the project, and we would like to thank them for the significant contribution they have made. This report should be read alongside the companion report which provides a summary of individual research projects and their findings.

Centre for Inclusive Evaluation

Coventry University

Nottingham Community and Voluntary Service

Nottingham City Council



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Foreword by Councillor Helen Kalsi



I am delighted to introduce this report on the Citizen Social Science project, delivered in partnership with Nottingham residents, communities, Nottingham Community and Voluntary Service (NCVS) and Coventry University.

Citizen Social Science is built on a simple but powerful idea: that local people should have the opportunity not only to contribute to research, but also to shape it. With training and support, residents have worked alongside communities to explore issues that matter to them and gather insights that might otherwise go unheard.

This approach reflects the ambitions set out in the Nottingham City Council Plan 2025-2029, particularly the following themes:

A Renewed Council is about good governance, meaningful engagement and making better use of evidence to inform decisions. Few initiatives demonstrate these ambitions more clearly than empowering residents to become part of the research process itself, helping to ask the questions that matter most to Nottingham's communities.

A Council Which Delivers for Local People is reflected in the project's ability to create benefits for both communities and individuals. The work has generated valuable insights that can help improve health and wellbeing across the city, while also giving participants the opportunity to develop new skills, build confidence and connect with others.

What makes this project especially valuable is that everyone involved benefits from it. Participants gain skills, confidence and the opportunity to research issues that matter to them. Communities can share their experiences in ways that feel natural and authentic, through conversations with people they know and trust. Stakeholders and decision-makers gain a deeper understanding of people's lives, helping them to develop services and solutions that better meet local needs.

Perhaps most importantly, Citizen Social Science helps strengthen trust between communities and organisations. When people see that their experiences are listened to, valued and acted on, they are more likely to get involved in shaping the future of their neighbourhoods and our city.

As we reflect on the findings in this report, it is important that we continue to provide feedback to those involved, showing how the insights gathered through their work have informed decisions and made a difference. The success of Citizen Social Science should not be measured only by the research it produces, but also by the lasting partnerships, greater understanding and positive change it helps create.

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this project. Your passion, commitment and willingness to share your experiences have helped create stronger evidence for decision-making and a stronger voice for Nottingham's communities.

Foreword by Helen Johnston (Interim Director of Public Health)



Understanding the health and wellbeing of our communities and taking action to reduce the health inequalities that exist across our neighbourhoods is at the heart of public health.

Nottingham is a vibrant, diverse and ambitious city. It is a place where people are proud of their communities and where strong support networks exist. However, we also face significant challenges. Too many people experience poorer health outcomes than the national average, and many spend more of their lives in poor health. These inequalities affect how long people live and their quality of life, opportunities and wellbeing.

To address these challenges effectively, we must first understand them. Data, research and evidence play a crucial role in helping us identify need, understand trends and assess whether our actions are making a difference. Yet numbers alone cannot tell the full story. Behind every statistic are people, families and communities with experiences, insights and perspectives that help us understand not only what is happening, but also why.

This is where the Citizen Social Science project has made such an important contribution. Through our partnership with Coventry University and Nottingham Community and Voluntary Service (NCVS), we have worked with residents as active participants in the research process. Citizen Social Scientists have defined research questions, gathered evidence and explored solutions to issues that matter to local people.

The wide range of experiences within the Citizen Social Science cohort reflects the diversity of Nottingham itself. Their lived experience, local knowledge and commitment have strengthened the quality of the evidence generated through this project. Community-generated evidence provides valuable context to the data already available to us, helping to explain the experiences behind the figures and identify solutions that are practical, meaningful and based on the experiences of those most affected.

The importance of involving communities in research and decision-making is increasingly recognised. This project demonstrates the value of moving beyond consultation to genuine collaboration, where residents become partners in creating knowledge. In doing so, we strengthen trust, build relationships and ensure that decisions are informed by a broader and more inclusive range of evidence. By embedding research-informed practice within Nottingham City Council, and by investing in approaches such as Citizen Social Science, we are strengthening our ability to make decisions that are transparent, accountable and responsive to local needs.

This report demonstrates the potential of Citizen Social Science to support a healthier and fairer Nottingham. It illustrates the value of working with communities as research partners and highlights the important contribution that lived experience can make alongside other forms of evidence.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to everyone involved in delivering this project, including our partners at Coventry University and NCVS, and especially our Citizen Social Scientists. Their enthusiasm, commitment and expertise have been central to the project's success, and I look forward to seeing how their work continues to shape research, policy and practice in Nottingham in the years ahead.

1 Executive Summary

“It is an honour to be able to tell their stories.” *Citizen Social Scientist*

Overview

Citizen Social Science, also known as Peer Research or Community Participatory Research, is an approach to research that places communities at the centre of generating knowledge and understanding. Rather than participating solely as research subjects, residents become active partners in shaping research questions, gathering and interpreting evidence, and developing recommendations for change.

In early 2026, Nottingham City Council Public Health team commissioned Coventry University and Nottingham Community and Voluntary Service (NCVS) to develop and deliver a Citizen Social Science programme. The programme explored how community-led research can generate valuable insights into the health and wellbeing of Nottingham residents while strengthening research skills, confidence and capacity within local communities.

What we set out to achieve

In the short term

- Develop research knowledge, skills and confidence among a diverse group of Nottingham residents.
- Support Nottingham City Council’s Public Health team to gain deeper insight into the experiences and priorities of local communities.
- Test the feasibility, value and practicalities of delivering a Citizen Social Science programme in Nottingham.

In the longer term

- Generate community-led evidence that can help to improve health outcomes and reduce inequalities across the city.
- Strengthen opportunities for communities to be involved throughout the research lifecycle.

What we did

A diverse group of Nottingham residents were recruited through local networks and trained as Citizen Social Scientists via a bespoke programme delivered by Coventry University in conjunction with Centre for Inclusive Evaluation.

Participants developed skills in:

- Research design
- Designing surveys and interviews
- Delivering focus groups
- Ethical research practice
- Qualitative and quantitative methods
- Data analysis and interpretation

Following their training, Citizen Social Scientists undertook community-led research projects aligned with the priorities of the Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy with research mentorship provided by Coventry University the Centre for Inclusive Evaluation. Throughout the programme, NCVS provided practical, pastoral and administrative support, helping to reduce barriers to participation and ensuring that researchers were appropriately supported and valued for their contribution. Researchers were remunerated in line with National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) guidance and established national practice. This recognised the value of lived experience, promoted inclusive participation and acknowledged the

unique expertise that community members bring to research.

What communities told us about health and wellbeing

A thematic analysis of findings from all Citizen Social Science projects identified shared themes relating to the factors that are barriers and enablers to health and wellbeing across Nottingham's communities.

Our circumstances can shape our opportunities for health and wellbeing

- Health and wellbeing are interconnected and influenced by social, economic, and cultural circumstances.

People need support that is accessible, appropriate, understanding and respectful

- Both the practical organisation of support and people's relationships with health, care and community support workers may affect whether they can access services whilst feeling safe and remain engaged.

Health information needs to be clear, practical and trustworthy

- The clarity, relevance, source, and accessibility of health information may affect whether people understand, trust, and feel able to use it.

Relationships, belonging and community are important for wellbeing

- Social isolation, difficult relationships and exclusion may affect wellbeing; supportive relationships, community connections and opportunities to participate may help people feel valued and included.

Families, carers, parents and children also need support

- Parenting and other caring responsibilities can affect carers' health and wellbeing; practical, emotional and family-centred support can help them sustain their caring roles while looking after their own health.

Across projects, participants highlighted that health and wellbeing are shaped by people's circumstances, relationships and access to support, not solely by individual choices. Understanding diverse lived experiences, building trusted relationships, strengthening social connections and recognising the role of families and communities were identified as key to improving health and wellbeing outcomes.

What we learned about Citizen Social Science

The first phase of the programme demonstrated that Citizen Social Science is both a feasible and valuable approach within Nottingham.

Participants from a wide range of educational backgrounds successfully completed research projects and developed new skills and confidence. The programme showed that, with appropriate training, mentoring and support, community members can undertake valuable and meaningful research.

The programme also reinforced the value of lived experience within research. Citizen Social Scientists brought local knowledge, community connections and personal insight that helped to shape research questions and provide a richer understanding of the issues being explored.

Several factors were identified as vital to successful delivery:

- Strong partnerships between Nottingham City Council, Coventry University and NCVS.
- Sufficient time to recruit a diverse group of participants
- Established community relationships and trusted networks to support recruitment and engagement.

- Accessible training combined with ongoing mentoring and support.
- Practical, administrative and pastoral support for participants.
- Appropriate recognition of participants' time, expertise and contribution through remuneration.

Key recommendations

Short term

- Review project findings and share insights through relevant partnerships, boards, and networks.
- Where appropriate, incorporate them within existing health and wellbeing strategies, programmes, and partnership priorities, contributing to service improvement, innovation, and improved outcomes for local communities.
- Build on the success of the programme by maintaining engagement with trained Citizen Social Scientists and identifying opportunities for them to contribute to future research, community engagement and service improvement activity.
- Share learning from the programme across Nottingham City Council and partner organisations to increase awareness of Citizen Social Science and its potential applications.

Medium term

- Develop further Citizen Social Science projects aligned to local strategic priorities and areas where community insight may be valuable to decision making.
- Strengthen connections between community-generated evidence and service improvement, ensuring findings are considered within commissioning, programme development and evaluation processes.
- Evaluate the impact of participation on Citizen Social Scientists, including skills development, confidence, community involvement and progression into further research or employment opportunities.

Long term

- Establish a sustainable Citizen Social Science model within Nottingham, with clear governance, partnerships and resources to support ongoing delivery.
- Embed Citizen Social Science as a routine approach within public health and wider partnership work, enabling communities to play an active role in generating evidence and informing approaches to local challenges.

Looking ahead

The programme has demonstrated the value of combining local knowledge, lived experience and research skills to better understand the issues affecting Nottingham's communities. Through strong partnerships and the commitment of Citizen Social Scientists, the programme has generated valuable evidence to support delivery of the **Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy** while building confidence, skills and research capacity within local communities.

Strong foundations are now in place to build on this success and develop a sustainable approach to community-led research in Nottingham. By continuing to invest in and support Citizen Social Science, Nottingham can strengthen community voice, enhance evidence-informed decision-making and contribute to a healthier, fairer and more inclusive city.

Scan to view the Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Nottingham

2 About Citizen Social Science

> **"Everyone has unique experiences and viewpoints and combining these can give a richer understanding than assumptions alone."** *Citizen Social Scientist*

What is Citizen Social Science?

Citizen Social Science, also known as Peer Research or Community Participatory Research, is an innovative approach to social research that offers the opportunity for community members to be actively involved in the research process from start to finish. Rather than participating solely as research subjects, the approach places communities at the heart of defining problems, designing studies, collecting and analysing data and sharing findings with others.

A defining characteristic of Citizen Social Science is the belief that people with lived experience are experts in their own communities and circumstances. It recognises the value of enabling those closest to community challenges to investigate and explore them, broadening participation, generating richer evidence and strengthening understanding of social issues. By empowering citizens to take part in research it can also inspire greater community action, as people who are involved in researching issues are often motivated to help create positive change.

The 10 principles of Citizen Social Science[1]

1. Citizen Social Science projects **actively involve** citizens in scientific endeavour that generates new knowledge or understanding. Citizens may act as contributors, collaborators, or as **project leader**.
2. Projects have a genuine **science outcome**. For example, answering a research question.
3. Both professional scientists and citizen social scientists **benefit from taking part**. Benefits may include the publication of research, learning opportunities, personal enjoyment, social benefits and the potential to influence policy.
4. Citizen Social Scientists may, if they wish, participate in **multiple stages** of the scientific process. This could include developing the research question, designing the method, gathering and analysing data, and communicating the results.
5. Citizen Social Scientists receive **feedback** from the project.
6. Citizen Social Science is a research approach like any other, **with limitations and biases**. However, it provides opportunity for greater public engagement and democratisation of science.
7. Citizen Social Science project data is made **publicly available** wherever viable.
8. Citizen Social Scientists are **acknowledged** in the project results and publications.
9. Citizen Social Science programmes are **evaluated** for their scientific output, data quality, participant experience and wider societal or policy impact.
10. The leaders of Citizen Social Science projects take into consideration **legal and ethical** issues surrounding copyright and intellectual property.

In summary, Citizen Social Science enables citizens to work as equal partners in research projects, combining lived experience, local knowledge and research methods to generate new insights.

[1] European Citizen Science Association (ECSA). *Ten principles of citizen science [Internet]*. Berlin: ECSA; [cited 2026 Aug 15]. Available from: www.ecsa.ngo/10-principles

Through ethical, transparent and collaborative research, benefits for participants, communities and wider society are created.

Why we developed the programme

Nottingham City Council is committed to increasing the use of research and evaluation, and promoting evidence-informed decision-making across its services. To support this ambition, the Public Health Team developed a Citizen Social Science project pilot to explore the value of involving residents more directly in research.

In the short term the programme aimed to:

- Develop research knowledge, skills and confidence among a diverse group of Nottingham City residents.
- Provide Nottingham City Council's Public Health team with greater insight into the experiences, perspectives and priorities of local communities.
- Test the feasibility, value and potential of Citizen Social Science as an approach to generating community-led evidence and building community research capacity.

In the longer term the programme aimed to:

- Enable community insights to be used to identify unmet needs and emerging priorities.
- Use community-generated evidence to support improvements in access, experience and outcomes related to health and wellbeing and public health services.
- Strengthen community involvement throughout the research process, supporting a more participatory approach to understanding and addressing local challenges.
- Build sustainable community research capacity within Nottingham, providing an opportunity for residents to play an ongoing role in generating evidence.

Utilising Citizen Social Science to advance Nottingham's health and wellbeing priorities

From the outset, a key consideration of the project was its alignment with the Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Nottingham, which is agreed through the Nottingham City Health and Wellbeing Board. The Board brings together representatives from the NHS, including GPs and hospitals, social care, public health, the police, community and voluntary sector organisations, elected members and Healthwatch. Together, they work to improve health and wellbeing outcomes and reduce inequalities across Nottingham's communities.

The Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Nottingham sets out a shared vision, principles and priorities for action over a three-year period, focusing on areas where collaborative action can have the greatest impact on population health and wellbeing. It identifies a number of shared priorities that build on, and strengthen, the work already being delivered across organisations and communities throughout the city.

The priorities for action for 2025-2028 are:

- Alcohol
- Best Start
- Eating and Moving for Good Health
- Severe and Multiple Disadvantage
- Smoking and Tobacco Control
- Work and Health

Aligning the Citizen Social Science programme with these priorities provided an opportunity to place community experience and insight at the centre of research and learning. Through the involvement of

Scan to view the Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Nottingham

people with lived experience and trusted local voices, this approach explored issues that were both important to communities and relevant to strategic priorities. This resulted in the generation of community-led evidence with the potential to inform local policy, service development and decision-making.

Developing Citizen Social Scientists

Nottingham City Council's Public Health Team commissioned Coventry University, an experienced training provider, to design and deliver a bespoke, accessible and inclusive training programme for trainees. Following the training, Citizen Social Scientists were supported to apply their learning by undertaking small-scale research projects aligned with the priorities of the Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Nottingham. Throughout this process, Coventry University in conjunction with the Centre for Inclusive Evaluation provided ongoing mentoring and research support, helping participants to develop their skills and successfully complete their projects.

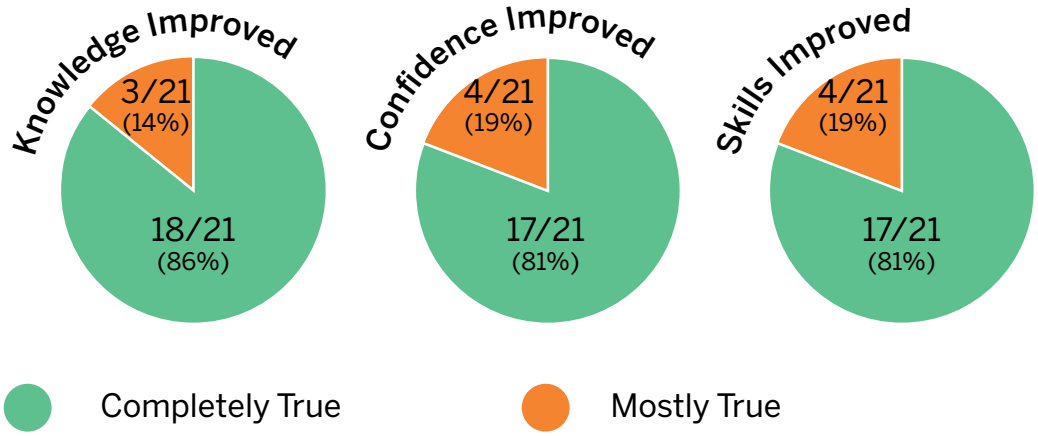
What participants learned

Trainees, recruited via local partners Nottingham Recovery Network, Nottingham City Council's Care Leavers and Public Health's Healthy Communities Teams, attended four half-day sessions, with training being delivered via interactive presentations and small group discussions:

- What is Citizen Social Science?
- Introduction to Research Methods
  - Qualitative and quantitative
  - Social surveys
  - Interviews
  - Conducting focus groups
  - Photo elicitation
  - Conducting research ethically

The sessions also provided the opportunity for trainees to plan their research projects.

The training evaluated well:



Feedback highlighted a very positive and accessible learning experience:

> **"They explained everything in easy words, not like the academic one — I really liked that."**

> **"I have enjoyed learning about peer research... and how this is used to create change."**

Participants particularly valued the:

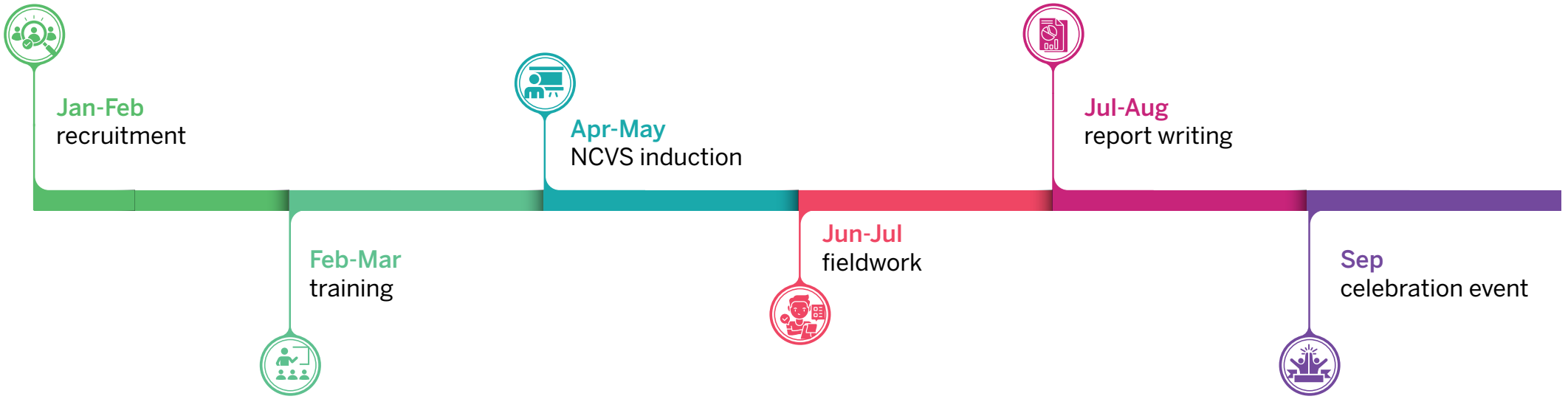
- Interactive and inclusive delivery
- Practical and creative methods (e.g. role play, arts-based approaches)
- Opportunities to collaborate and learn from diverse perspectives

To support Citizen Social Scientists during the fieldwork stage of the project, Nottingham City Council commissioned NCVS to provide operational coordination and participant support. This included administration, communications, practical support, and the management of project-related costs, enabling Citizen Social Scientists to undertake their research activities effectively.

This approach helped to reduce barriers to participation, maintain engagement throughout the fieldwork phase, and ensure that participants were appropriately supported and valued. In turn, it enabled Citizen Social Scientists to focus on collecting high-quality data and insights from local residents.



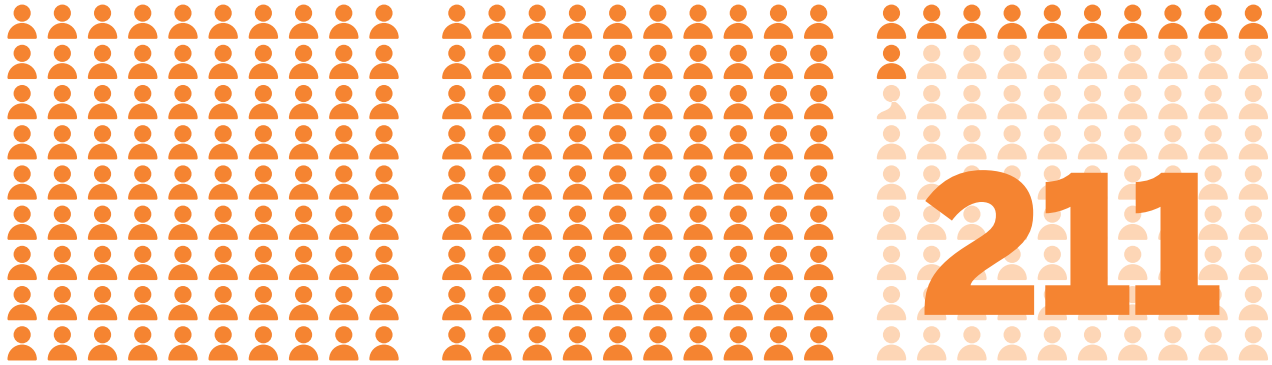
Programme Timeline



3 Citizen Social Science: Engagment at a Glance

Total number of local citizens engaged with

25
Citizens completed training



18
Projects completed by August 2026

Methods used by Citizen Social Scientists

2
Focus groups

11
Interviews

7
Surveys

Project Alignment to Local Health and Wellbeing Priorities for Nottingham*

6
Alcohol

3
Best Start

2
Eating and Moving for Good Health

5
Severe and Multiple Disadvantage

1
Smoking and Tobacco

2
Work and Health

5
Wider themes

*some projects aligned with more than one priority

4 Collective Insights on Health and Wellbeing from Citizen Social Science Projects

The results of all the projects completed by August 2026 were reviewed collectively, each project being allocated a unique reference and key project findings thematically analysed to highlight what communities reached were telling us about what both helps and hinders their health and wellbeing. The key themes identified through this analysis are presented below. Please refer to the accompanying report, Grounded in Community: Nottingham Citizen Scientists' Insights for Health and Wellbeing for further project details.[1]

Our circumstances can shape our opportunities for health and wellbeing

Health and wellbeing are interconnected and influenced by social, economic, and cultural circumstances.

Participants described how income, housing, employment, childcare, and migration-related experiences can influence their ability to look after their health and wellbeing. Their accounts highlighted that people found it difficult to act on health information when they did not have enough money, stable or suitable accommodation, appropriate facilities, time, or practical support.

> **"You're in a room with a microwave and kettle, trying to rebuild your life...how are you supposed to cook a fresh meal when you don't even have a hob, let alone the extra cash for fresh veg?"**
> (Participant quote, Project 2)

People's employment experiences also contributed to their wellbeing. In some accounts, repeated rejection from opportunities, being unable to use their existing skills and loss of professional status were described as affecting confidence, identity, hope and a sense of belonging. Some migrants especially, described additional barriers, including qualifications not being recognised in the UK, requirements for a UK work experience, and restrictions associated with visa or immigration status.

People's experiences suggested that support may be more helpful when it considers their wider circumstances, rather than addressing individual needs in isolation. This may involve connecting people with practical and financial assistance, recognising their existing skills and qualifications, or improving access to inclusive routes into employment.

People need support that is accessible, appropriate, understanding and respectful

Both the practical organisation of support and people's relationships with professionals may affect whether they can access services whilst feeling safe and remain engaged.

Participants described several barriers at different stages of seeking and receiving support - long wait times, brief appointments, limited continuity of care, and difficulty accessing outside of normal working hours, all of which hindered their ability get help and maintain positive changes.

1 Each project was assigned a unique reference number for identification purposes. Please note that the accompanying report Grounded in Community : Nottingham Citizen Scientists' Insights for Health and Wellbeing is organised by Health and Wellbeing Themes rather than by project reference.

[Regarding recovery from drug and alcohol use]

> **"Yes. I would like more recovery inclusive safe spaces to go."** (during off-hours)
> (Participant quote, Project 5)

In addition, some people also described that language barriers and lack of interpretation services further created difficulties in using services. However, availability was not the only concern. Participants reported that shame, stigma, fear of judgement, cultural misunderstanding, previous negative encounters affected their ability to seek help, speak openly, and remain engaged – particularly with sensitive issues such as mental health, drug and alcohol use problems, and recovery. A person's first contact with a service can be especially important. Participant accounts suggested that the way support is provided is as equally important as availability.

> **"If that first contact is welcoming, non-judgemental, and supportive, it greatly increases the chance that someone will stay"**
> (Participant quote, Project 7)

Confidential, compassionate, persistently non-judgmental therapeutic relationships, with person-centred care provision that considers people's cultural backgrounds and beliefs, can help them feel safe, respected and remain engaged with support. Evenings, weekends and periods of time with little structure may be times of increased vulnerability for people recovering from drug and alcohol use problems. Participants described the importance of practical accessibility of services, continuity of care, interpreters, information availability in their preferred languages, and valued services with flexibility to respond to changing needs and periods of greater vulnerability.

Health information needs to be clear, practical and trustworthy

The clarity, relevance, source, and the accessibility of health information may affect whether people understand, trust, and feel able to use it.

Participants reported that health information is most useful when it is easy to understand, relevant to people's lives and clear about what they can do next.

[Regarding food labels]

> **"I don't really know what the red, amber and green labels mean."**

People also identified information to be more useful when it respected their culture and was available in their preferred language and appeared less likely to trust information from formal services if they had previously experienced stigma, judgement or poor treatment. Participants also found information more credible when it was shared by trusted professionals, community groups or people with relevant lived experience. However, information alone was not enough. Participants also reported a need for affordable, realistic opportunities to act on it, including access to healthy food, safe spaces to be active, and practical support that fits around work and caring responsibilities. People recovering from drug and alcohol use problems also felt that realistic expectations, relapse planning, regular routines, hobbies and meaningful activities can help sustain their recovery.

Relationships, belonging and community are important for wellbeing

Social isolation, difficult relationships and exclusion may affect wellbeing; supportive relationships, community connections and opportunities to participate may help people feel valued and included.

Loneliness, social isolation, difficult family relationships, migration, feeling excluded were common themes affecting people's well-being. Some migrants reported not feeling fully accepted either in the UK or in their country of origin. Other people found it difficult to develop relationships because of social anxiety, language differences, or fear of exclusion.

People reported that supportive relationships, peer networks, shared activities and welcoming community spaces made them feel valued and included. These spaces can also provide practical help, opportunities to learn skills and routes into other support.

[Regarding community spaces]

> **"Most of us came here as visitors, but now we don't see ourselves as visitors anymore. We see ourselves like family."** (Participant quote, Project 11)

Trusted community organisations were described to act as a bridge between residents and formal support services. Digital spaces were also described as an environment which people move through in everyday life and can influence their wellbeing. Safe, moderated platforms may be particularly helpful for some neurodivergent people and others who find face-to-face interaction difficult, providing a link between online engagement to meaningful community participation.

Families, carers, parents and children also need support

Parenting and other caring responsibilities can affect the carers' health and wellbeing; practical, emotional, and family centred support can help them sustain their caring roles, while looking after their own health.

Families and carers often provide a great deal of support to people experiencing drug and alcohol use problems, mental health difficulties or challenges. They reported that they found it difficult to balance care and concern with maintaining healthy boundaries and looking after their own wellbeing.

> **[Attending support groups] gave family members the language, tools, and strategies needed to navigate drug and alcohol use problems and practice self-care, dispelling guilt and shame.** (Project finding, Project 10)

Parents also reported facing pressures related to childcare, work and other responsibilities, housing, lack of sleep, and children's development or behavioural needs. Feeling confident as a parent did not remove these practical and emotional pressures. Families and carers of those with drug and alcohol problems, reported that they may benefit from peer-support groups, practical information, education and coping strategies. Supporting the wellbeing of the family can strengthen relationships and make caring arrangements more sustainable.

Summary Findings

Participants reported that their health and wellbeing were influenced by a range of factors including their living conditions, relationships, and access to support. People's circumstances and experiences differed, and people described that they were more likely to thrive when they felt respected and connected, had sufficient financial and practical resources, could access clear information and trusted support that reflected their individual circumstances. Understanding of people's different realities, building trusted relationships, strengthening social connections and recognising the role of families and communities were highlighted as key in supporting health and wellbeing.



5 Impact Beyond the Programme

After completing their research project, the Citizen Social Scientists were asked to share their thoughts on why they engaged in the programme and the things they were most proud of. Their responses were thematically analysed and the following themes identified:

Interest in learning and contributing to research

Participants were primarily motivated by a desire to learn, and to contribute to research that explored issues of importance to them and their communities. Although most were interested to learn more about the programme and develop new skills, some entered the programme with a degree of uncertainty. Participants described specific interests in the topics of public health, community inclusion, intergenerational relationships and understanding the experiences of local people. Several viewed taking part as an opportunity to contribute to meaningful research while gaining a better understanding of issues affecting their communities.

> **"I took part because I wanted to better understand the experiences, views, and challenges within my community"**
> *Citizen Social Scientist*

Growth in confidence and research skills

Increased confidence emerged as a strong theme across the shared reflections. Some participants described moving from uncertainty or self-doubt towards a greater belief in their abilities. Many highlighted the confidence gained through conducting interviews, communicating with community members and completing research activities.

> **"At the beginning, I doubted whether I could do it, but I stepped outside my comfort zone, listened to people's stories with respect, and completed something I never imagined I would. It has given me confidence in my ability to learn, contribute, and support others in the future"**
> *Citizen Social Scientist*

Alongside their growing assuredness, participants reported developing practical research skills and reflected positively on their development as peer researchers. Particular skills highlighted included learning and practicing using different tools in qualitative research, applying these in a community setting and completing projects from start to finish.

Value of lived experience and community voice

Participants highlighted the importance of lived experience in both shaping and informing research. Many were motivated to take part because they wanted to use their own experiences to contribute to research, while others described gaining a greater appreciation of the insights that lived experience can provide. Participation appears to have helped some individuals reframe their personal experiences as a strength and has helped them to recognise that people's everyday experiences have value and can contribute meaningfully to research and community understanding.

> **“My lived experience became my strength, and my strength became my contribution”**
> *Citizen Social Scientist*

Closely connected to this was the importance of hearing and representing the experiences of others. Participants valued opportunities to listen to community members, understand different perspectives, and create space for people to share their experiences. The opportunity to bring together different viewpoints to increase the understanding of community issues was valued.

> **“I was privileged to conduct research that benefits communities and creates positive social change”**
> *Citizen Social Scientist*

Research as a route to community improvement

Participants’ involvement in the project was commonly linked with the potential for and desire to bring about positive change in their communities. Many spoke about wanting their research to improve understanding of local issues, raise awareness, support others, or inform future improvements within their communities.

> **“It has been rewarding to support conversations that may help inform future improvements and strengthen community understanding”**
> *Citizen Social Scientist*

They described feeling rewarded when their work contributed to meaningful discussions, increased understanding, or created opportunities for community voices to be heard.



6 What We Learned and Implications for Future Projects

Citizen Social Science is a feasible and valuable approach

The programme brought together residents with diverse educational backgrounds, experiences and perspectives. It demonstrated that effective community-led research draws not only on formal qualifications, but also on lived experience, local knowledge and strong community connections. Through training and support, participants developed their research skills and confidence, enabling them to investigate issues that mattered to their communities and generate valuable insights.

Successful Citizen Social Science requires an enabling and well-resourced infrastructure

The programme benefitted from a combination of strategic leadership and investment from Nottingham City Council Public Health, expert training and research mentorship from Coventry University in conjunction with the Centre for Inclusive Evaluation, and dedicated local coordination and infrastructure provided by NCVS.

As the training provider was based outside Nottingham, additional local capacity was required to support participants and coordinate programme delivery. This included participant coordination, communications, remuneration processes, pastoral support, and practical assistance before, during and after training and fieldwork activities. Alongside the Public Health Team, which provided local coordination during the training phase, NCVS played a vital role in maintaining participant engagement, facilitating community connections, and providing the administrative infrastructure that enabled Citizen Social Scientists to apply their skills in practice.

The programme's achievements were underpinned by sustained investment in training, mentoring, coordination, relationship-building, participant support and programme administration. Together, these elements created the necessary environment for meaningful community participation and successful delivery of community-led research.

Equitable participation is complex in practice

Appropriate remuneration is an important component of meaningful participation. Recognising participants through payment helps build trust, supports sustained engagement and demonstrates that lived experience and community expertise are valued.

The programme budget included remuneration for up to four days of activity per Citizen Social Scientist, reflecting the expectation that participants would undertake small-scale research projects following completion of their training. In practice, many participants invested considerably more time than originally anticipated, demonstrating a strong commitment to producing high-quality research and exploring issues they were passionate about.

The programme also sought to recruit a diverse cohort capable of bringing the perspectives of communities and groups that are often underrepresented in research and decision-making. Recognising the different circumstances of participants, a flexible and inclusive approach to remuneration was required. While the programme offered payment in recognition of participants' time, expertise and lived experience, some individuals were unable to accept direct payment due to factors such as benefit regulations, visa restrictions or personal circumstances.

Working closely with participants, NCVS played an important role in identifying alternative ways of recognising and supporting involvement where direct payment was not appropriate. This included providing equivalent forms of support and reimbursement, such as travel vouchers and other approved alternatives, alongside reimbursement of project-related expenses. This flexible approach helped ensure that participants were able to contribute without being financially disadvantaged, while maintaining the principle that their time, knowledge and expertise should be recognised and valued.

Recruitment is time-consuming and is often strengthened by existing relationships and trusted networks

The programme was designed to recruit a diverse cohort of Citizen Social Scientists to ensure representation from communities that are often underserved by research. Recruitment was supported through established local networks, including Nottingham Recovery Network and Public Health Healthy Communities Teams and Community Champion Network, which reflected a broad range of ethnic backgrounds and community perspectives. The importance of including people with lived experience of substance use in discussions relating to local health and wellbeing priorities was also recognised. Existing relationships with commissioned service provider, Nottingham Recovery Network, helped the project team to reach and engage these individuals effectively.

The programme successfully engaged participants from a range of communities and highlighted the value of working through trusted networks and established community relationships. Recruitment was effective where strong partnerships already existed, providing routes into communities and helping to build confidence in the programme. While the project team had hoped to attract a greater number of younger participants, there was less opportunity within the project timescales to develop and strengthen relationships with organisations working with younger people. This demonstrated the importance of allowing sufficient time for engagement and relationship building when seeking to involve new groups and communities.

Overall, the programme demonstrated that Citizen Social Science can support more inclusive evidence generation by creating opportunities for people who may not traditionally participate in research to contribute to local decision-making. Existing community relationships and trusted partnerships were important enablers of recruitment, while the experience reinforced the importance of investing time in developing new connections. This will ensure that in future, the programme can reach an even broader range of voices and experiences.



Key recommendations

Short term

- Review project findings and share insights through relevant partnerships, boards, and networks.
- Where appropriate, incorporate them within existing health and wellbeing strategies, programmes, and partnership priorities, contributing to service improvement, innovation, and improved outcomes for local communities.
- Build on the success of the programme by maintaining engagement with trained Citizen Social Scientists and identifying opportunities for them to contribute to future research, community engagement and service improvement activity.
- Share learning from the programme across Nottingham City Council and partner organisations to increase awareness of Citizen Social Science and its potential applications.

Medium term

- Develop further Citizen Social Science projects aligned to local strategic priorities and areas where community insight may be valuable to decision-making.
- Strengthen connections between community-generated evidence and service improvement, ensuring findings are considered within commissioning, programme development and evaluation processes.
- Evaluate the impact of participation on Citizen Social Scientists, including skills development, confidence, community involvement and progression into further research or employment opportunities.

Long term

- Establish a sustainable Citizen Social Science model within Nottingham, with clear governance, partnerships and resources to support ongoing delivery.
- Embed Citizen Social Science as a routine approach within public health and wider partnership work, enabling communities to play an active role in generating evidence and informing approaches to local challenges.



7 Looking Ahead

“It has been rewarding to support conversations that may help inform future improvements and strengthen community understanding”

Citizen Social Scientist

The first phase of the Citizen Social Science programme has demonstrated that this approach is both feasible and valuable within Nottingham.

The programme aligns closely with Public Health ambitions to strengthen community insight and ensure that services and decisions are informed by the experiences of local people alongside other forms of evidence. By placing residents at the centre of the research process, Citizen Social Science provides an innovative way to generate rich, locally grounded insight that may not be captured through more traditional engagement or research approaches.

Through partnership working between Nottingham City Council, Coventry University and NCVS, strong foundations have been established for future delivery. Processes, policies and support arrangements, including participant remuneration, mentoring and pastoral support, have been developed and tested, creating a framework that can support future projects in an effective and sustainable way.

The wider benefits of the programme are already being demonstrated in practice. In addition to generating valuable community-led evidence, it has helped build local research capacity and establish a network of skilled Citizen Social Scientists who can contribute to future engagement, research and service improvement activities. Trained Citizen Social Scientists have already contributed to wider system activity, including supporting the Travel Well Evaluation, and engagement work within Integrated Neighbourhood Teams.

The programme has also had a positive impact on participants themselves. Evaluation findings showed improvements in knowledge, skills and confidence among those who completed the training, demonstrating the potential of Citizen Social Science to build both individual and community capacity.

As the programme develops, continued evaluation will be important to understand its longer-term impact on participants, communities and informing practice. Further learning will help identify how Citizen Social Science can be embedded most effectively within local systems, strengthen the evidence base for this approach, and inform the development of a sustainable model for Nottingham.

Looking ahead, Citizen Social Science offers a strong foundation for community-led research in Nottingham. By continuing to invest in people, partnerships and lived experience, and by building on the learning generated through this first phase, the approach has the potential to generate deeper community insight, strengthen trust between communities and services, and support better outcomes for residents across the city. Over time, it also offers an opportunity to embed community-generated evidence as a routine and valued part of public health improvement, service development and local decision-making.



8 In Their Own Words





"she made me feel confident in my abilities"

"I felt inspired"

"I wanted to understand how research can improve people's health and wellbeing."

"I took part because I wanted to better understand the experiences, views, and challenges within my community"

"I'm most proud of successfully conducting interviews"







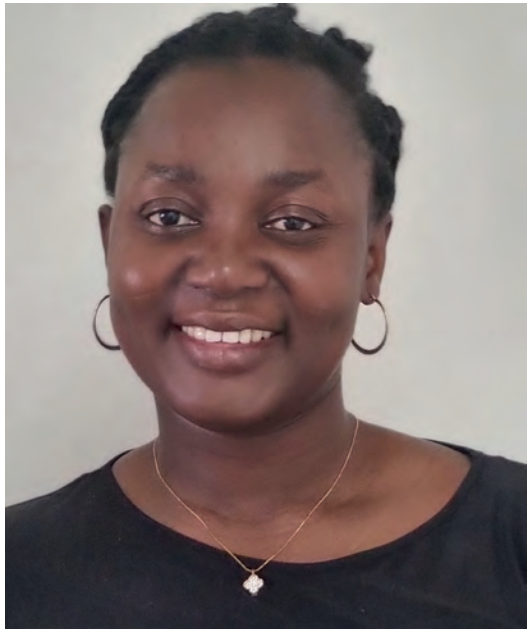


> **“Learning how members of the public can actively contribute to and shape research, rather than simply being participants, provided me with a new perspective on community engagement. It demonstrated the significant role that lived experiences and public voices can play in generating meaningful research that directly benefits society.”**

> **“The achievement I am most proud of was sitting down and doing the interviews, it gave me a great sense of achievement and confidence completing the process and hearing everyone’s views”**









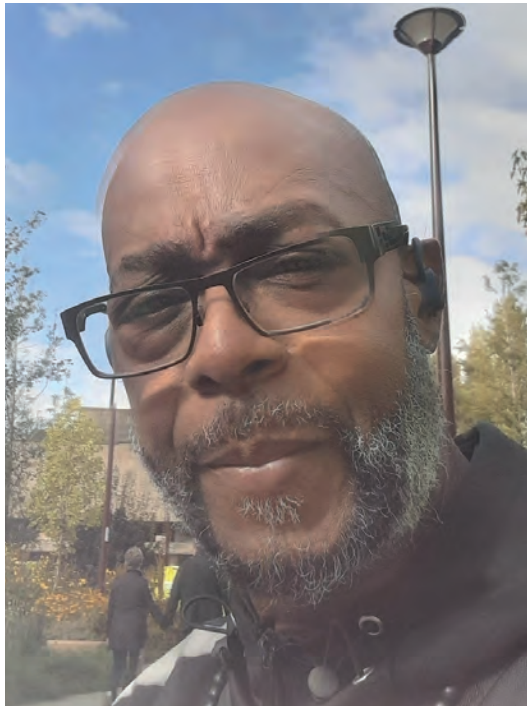
“but this project introduced me to public and community-based research, where people’s experiences play a key role alongside data”

“I wanted to give people a voice through research”

“It was rewarding to know that my contribution could make a difference.”













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