

Community Participation Handbook

How to set up and manage a Community
Organisation Advisory Partnership (COAP)



Who is this for?



This handbook is for anyone considering working together with communities, specifically local community organisations, to inform, strengthen and guide their work. For example, those working within local government, commissioners, NHS Trusts, researchers and public engagement practitioners.

Why should I use it?

- Would you like to design meaningful projects/services that reach and engage with your intended community audience?
- Would you like community voices to shape and steer your work, so that it reflects local needs and is valued by your community?

Developing a COAP is one method to ensure voices within the community are heard and their insight valued, to help shape projects/services, so that they work better for those they are intended to serve.

Where has this come from?

This handbook draws on the experience of the Health Determinants Research Collaboration Somerset (HDRC Somerset) Community Participation team, working in partnership with members of the **Breaking Barriers COAP**.

It is a living document. We actively seek feedback from those who have used this handbook to create their own COAPs to learn about how we can strengthen best ways of working.

How to use this handbook

This handbook is designed to provide practical guidance on how to set up and run a Community Organisation Advisory Partnership (COAP) and explains:

- What a COAP is and how it works
- When using a COAP is the right approach
- How to recruit and support members
- How to keep the partnership positive and meaningful over time

It is divided into six sections which is designed to help you set up and manage a COAP. You do not need to read this handbook from start to finish. It is designed so you can dip into the sections that are most relevant to your work.

Use the hyperlinks below on the next page to access the sections relevant to you. If you come across a term you are not familiar with, you can find clear definitions in the Glossary at the back of this handbook.

**You do not need to get everything right straight away.
What matters most is listening, learning and being open to change.**



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1. What is a COAP?

A Community Organisation Advisory Partnership (COAP) is a small group of representatives from local community organisations with direct experience related to your project/service, who can:

- Share relevant professional experience
- Work alongside your team over time
- Help shape decisions, ideas and ways of working

COAP members are not consulted once or asked to comment at the end. Instead, they are involved throughout the life of a project/service and treated as equal partners.

A COAP is just one method of working more closely with the community. The HDRC has developed other mechanisms, which can be used alongside or independently of a COAP, depending on the specific project or service. One example is a Lived Experience Advisory Partnership (LEAP). For more information about what method would be best for your team, contact the HDRC Somerset Community Participation Team: participation@somerset.gov.uk



1.1 COAP members

Representatives from local community organisations bring valuable insight and knowledge gained from their work supporting and engaging with local community individuals, linked to the topic you want to explore.

By working together, the COAP can help guide and influence your project/service, ensuring that the work is relevant, informed, and meaningful to communities it is designed to support.

1.2 How can a COAP help you?

The ways in which a COAP could help inform, advise or steer your project/service include:

- Co-producing a project design and approach
- Co-designing documents and materials
- Checking that project findings and recommendations are relevant and meaningful
- Encouraging participation from the community and widen reach
- Offering advice and guidance on ways of working in partnership with communities
- Raising awareness of the project and help sharing project findings

Ideally, each COAP should agree on a preferred title that reflects the identity of their partnership.

They may choose the name COAP or jointly decide on an alternative title (e.g “Community Organisation Panel”, “Community Advisory Board”) or a more informal name (e.g “Somerset Voices”, “Somerset Together for...” “Somerset Action...”, “Somerset Stars”).



Community Organisation Panel

Community Advisory Board

Somerset Together for...

Somerset Voices

Somerset Action...

Somerset Stars

Case Study: Breaking Barriers

The Breaking Barriers Project, facilitated by the Health Determinants Research Collaboration Somerset (HDRC Somerset), explored the experiences of people living in Somerset with long-term health conditions and/or disabilities, who are currently economically inactive.

The study pivoted from traditional models of research by implementing a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach. This involved onboarding 13 local community organisations across Somerset as Co-research organisations who facilitated conversations with 85 community participants. These organisations support people who are living with long-term health conditions, and/or disabilities, or have caregiving responsibilities.

A COAP was set up with members from some of the 13 local community groups to help inform, guide and advise on various project aspects. This included co-developing the research and data collection approach, reviewing and sense-checking study findings and recommendations. In addition, the COAP co-designed recommendations to improve accessibility and inclusive recruitment. Each organisation involved in the project was recognised and rewarded for their time and contributions. You can view the full Breaking Barriers Report [here](#):

Breaking Barriers: Understanding experiences of long-term health conditions, disabilities and employment



1.3 How does a COAP work?

We recommend that a COAP has no more than 10 members, to help everyone feel heard and involved.

- We suggest meetings are held every 4 to 6 weeks or at least quarterly and last around 60-90 minutes.
- Meetings might take place online, in person, or using a mix of both.
- It is important to agree the meeting format and frequency with COAP members from the start, considering their capacity, availability, and location.

COAP members' time and expertise should always be valued. Please see our **Recognition and Rewards** section for more information and guidance. These options should always be discussed openly with members rather than assumed.

Where possible, a COAP should be sustained beyond the lifespan of one project. Longer-term partnerships help build and maintain trust with communities, support shared learning, and strengthen meaningful community participation in decision-making over time.

1.4 How does a COAP differ from other stakeholder engagements?

Both COAPs and stakeholder engagement/consultations engage with the community, but the **level of participation differs**. We have a useful tool which demonstrates the different layers of participation when working with communities- moving from communities as a recipient to co-production and community-led involvement. To find out more, visit our community page [here](#).

Traditional stakeholder engagement/consultations often involve feedback gathered periodically through surveys or one-off meetings, with the approach/agenda often set through 'top-down' processes with the community as a recipient.

In contrast, a COAP is an ongoing, collaborative partnership, focussing on longer-term engagement, relationship building and mutual benefit that:

Goes beyond feedback	Members work together to anticipate and create solutions, giving community organisations a seat at the table and the ability to influence decision-making.
Provides depth	A COAP offers lived experience and grassroots insight, ensuring decisions reflect real-world needs.
Ensures sustainability	Involvement from a COAP throughout the project/ service helps create solutions that last, rather than short-term fixes.
Promotes inclusivity	Materials and engagement strategies are sense-checked for accessibility and cultural relevance, which traditional consultations rarely guarantee.

Throughout this handbook we will help you consider the steps you may need to take when establishing a COAP in your project/service. The flowchart below offers a brief overview of the topics covered in the rest of this handbook.



Action points:

- ❑ **Membership** – Should contain no more than 10 community members connected to your topic or service.
- ❑ **Purpose** – Carefully consider how a COAP could help you, and what capacity you have to host.
- ❑ **Collaboration** – Are you able to work with your COAP as ‘partners’ rather than being consulted at set stages?
- ❑ **Identity** – Ensure your COAP can choose their own name to provide a sense of identity and ‘buy-in’.

2. Identify the need and capacity for a COAP

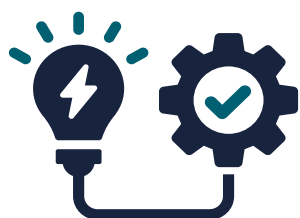
2.1 Where could a COAP add value?

There are many scenarios in which establishing a COAP could be beneficial to embedding community voices within your work. Below we have given some examples, but this is by no means an exhaustive list!



Policy development and review

When creating or revising policies (like housing, social care, economic strategies) having input from representatives of local community organisations that support and engage with people impacted, can ensure policies are practical and truly meet community needs.



Service design and improvement

When designing or improving services like mental health support, disability services, public health interventions or community engagement programs, feedback from representatives supporting community individuals can help tailor services to be more accessible, effective and compassionate.



Changes to service provision and infrastructure

In situations like urban and transport planning, infrastructure development, or changes to existing service provision, having representatives from community organisations that support local residents can ensure another layer of community participation is embedded, enabling further understanding of the real-world impact of proposed changes on residents.



Research and evaluation

When conducting research or looking at how well services are working, a COAP can ensure the work reflects real experiences. Members can help shape the right questions, suggest respectful ways to gather feedback, support access to people who might not usually take part, and help translate what the results mean for local residents.

We encourage you to reflect on the activities you are currently undertaking within your project/service and how establishing COAP could help inform and steer these areas of work.

2.2 What does COAP involvement look like?

Before establishing, it is important to ascertain how a COAP will fit in with your project/service. We have provided some reflective questions to get you started below:

- **What are the key tasks or activities of the COAP?** Will COAP members be able to jointly agree on their roles and responsibilities?
- **How much influence will the COAP have on the work**, and will it change over time? How can expectations be managed to ensure transparency?
- **Would success look like** a co-produced resource or material, or sense checking and providing feedback?
- **How flexible are the outcomes and involvement of the COAP**, and can you be responsive to feedback? (for example, if members wish to be further involved)

Ideally, the final purpose and objectives should be agreed with COAP members, who may also contribute additional ideas to strengthen the work.

2.3 Do you have time and resources to manage a COAP?

It is important to establish a clear consensus with your commissioning team/decision makers about enabling capacity for embedding and managing COAP. COAPs are highly rewarding but need to be managed sensitively and with appropriate resources to ensure working relationships and trust is not broken.

- **What are your roles and responsibilities in supporting the COAP?**
(You are a group member).
- **Have you mapped out project timelines or the number of meetings required?**
Be up-front and manage expectations around project longevity, opportunities for engagement and intended activities for prospective members.
- **How do you plan to support continued engagement with COAP members?**
Do you have capacity or a plan to manage the extra administration involved, such as arranging and facilitating meetings, recognising members, providing updates and support when needed? Do you have the flexibility to work around the needs and requirements from members of the COAP?
- **How do you plan to recognise and reward COAP members?**
Have you secured a budget to cover expenses and for acknowledging COAP members/ community organisations for their time and involvement? Have you considered offering non-financial rewards such as Research and Evaluation skills and development? The HDRC Community Participation (CP) Team can help support you this, feel free to get in contact the HDRC Somerset team by email participation@somerset.gov.uk
- We also have our **'REEL' Training and Development Programme** as well as informative webinars.

We suggest that you hold a meeting where you can explore with your team how you envisage a COAP will integrate with your service.

2.4 How will you find your COAP members?

- **Have you reflected on the networks/contacts you already have available?** Consider, where relationships already exist, where they may need to be developed and whether a longer initial engagement phase is needed before recruitment begins.
- **Attending local community events, forums or networking opportunities** can help build relationships and identify organisations that may be interested in working in partnership. Where relationships are new, it is important to manage expectations around timelines accordingly.

Relationship and trust building with community organisations takes time and cannot always be expected to happen quickly.

2.5 Are you clear how the group will be run?

- **COAP members should be respected and treated as equal partners**, not exploited through ad-hoc arrangements. It is important that communication is clear, consistent and relationships are managed effectively to ensure trust is not damaged.
- **Establish a process to support the coordination of meetings.** During the first meeting, we recommend you ask the group and reach a consensus as to how and when to meet. Would a specific time/day work better or deciding at the end of each meeting?
- **Who will facilitate (chair) the meetings?** Agree together a group, whether the facilitator role should be shared among all partners or managed internally. Adopting a rotational facilitator approach can strengthen shared roles and responsibilities, supporting long-term sustainability of the COAP. Having two facilitators, allows one to lead the meeting and cover the agenda, while a second supports engagement.
- **Who will act as the main point of contact?** Ideally nominate one person for this role to ensure consistency with communication. They should have capacity to hold 1-1 calls and answer questions from prospective members during the onboarding stage.
- **Ask prospective COAP members whether they would benefit from co-developing a group agreement for participation** ('Working Together Principles') and allocate time during the first meeting for this. You might also wish to consider best practices for meeting facilitation and communication covered in the [maintaining engagement section here](#).

It is beneficial to agree and define these roles early on, keeping members well informed and ensuring everyone has a shared understanding of how they will work together.

2.6 How will you reflect on your partnership?

Begin thinking early about how you will evaluate members' experiences and perspectives as part of your COAP.

- **How will you check that the partnership process is working?** In particular, how will you gather and review the experiences and perspectives of individual COAP members so that you can collectively identify and implement any necessary actions when needed?
- **Explore existing evaluation tools**, such as our Stronger Together Scorecard and Spidergram to get a sense of approaches that might work well for your group. These tools will be shared in the resources accompanying this handbook.

Ideally, reflection and evaluation should take place at various points throughout the partnership to ensure members feel heard and feedback can be acted upon quickly, with the chosen method decided together as a COAP.

Action points:

- **Purpose** – Be clear about what you want the COAP to support and why now. Reflect on current activities and how community insight could inform or strengthen this work.
- **Structure** – Agree how the COAP will operate, including roles, facilitation, meeting frequency (e.g. every 4–6 weeks) and whether meetings will be online, in person or hybrid.
- **Support** – Nominate a clear main point of contact and ensure you have the time and resources to manage coordination, communication, check ins and ongoing engagement.
- **Recognition and rewards** – Be clear about how COAP members will be recognised, including budgeting for involvement and considering non financial rewards where appropriate.
- **Evaluation** – Agree early on how you will reflect and review how the partnership is working, building this regularly into meetings and acting on feedback together.



3. Recruiting and onboarding your COAP

Once you have considered the set-up and facilitation of your COAP, the next step is to advertise and promote your group to potential members. At this stage, you might want to consider creating an advert that could be shared with your networks and the wider Community Organisation sector.

3.1 Creating your advert

The advert could be shared via email mailing lists or social media platforms like LinkedIn. All adverts should go through a communication/design team to ensure they are accessible and adhere to brand guidelines.

Aim to keep imagery in the advert thoughtful and inclusive. It is important to bear in mind that in some cases, real-life pictures of people may give the impression of targeting a specific audience. Additional points to consider when creating your COAP advert:

Key checks:



Make sure the advert will be seen by your intended audience, using the right medium and platforms (digital and/or print)



Is the language accessible and clear (BSL, Easy Read, colour-blind friendly)? Avoid jargon, technical terms, and acronyms where possible.



Be clear about eligibility, including who can join, location requirements, and that no prior experience is needed



Clearly state how meetings will take place and their anticipated frequency



Highlight the main benefits and motivations for joining



Check the advert with your communications team before it is shared

We asked COAP members from the Breaking Barriers study to identify what would make them more likely to think about joining a COAP. Some of the themes that arose from this discussion included:

- 1. Being referred through a gateway or network of someone they already trust.**
Peer-matching with someone who has been on a COAP before and learning from each other.
- 2. Understanding how joining a COAP could benefit the organisation and those that they support.** Some of the activities could help them identify areas that can be built on within their service. In addition, their involvement with COAP can be added to internal impact reports as evidence of partnership working.
- 3. Understanding how joining a COAP can improve personal capacity,** for example gaining a deeper understanding of the issues that affect their community.
- 4. Enabling supported conversations with their service users,** helping the organisation to achieve its goals with the benefit of learnings from COAP & any relevant research.
- 5. Helping meet current service requirements with additional long-term benefits** by identifying opportunities, leading to more work in the area and influencing future work.
- 6. Hearing from other organisations and sharing best practice.**
- 7. Valuing people's time and contributions.**

We have an example advert from our Breaking Barriers Study in the **resources section**.



3.2 How and where to advertise to promote the COAP

Based on your responses to previous sections, you should already have an idea about networks you have available to recruit representatives from community organisations, to join your COAP. If you would like further ideas, we recommend attending local VCFSE events to meet with potential community organisations. Spark Somerset is the infrastructure organisation who support the sector and could help link you with appropriate community organisations. It is important to note that building trust and working relationships with community organisations takes time and it is better to establish this rapport ahead of time.

We recommend that you develop the following formats to ensure prospective members are fully informed about what is involved and expected from their participation in the COAP.

Facilitate introductory drop-in sessions (Can be held online, hybrid, or in-person)

- Acts as a taster for potential COAP members, with opportunity to build and grow your community networks.
- Provides the ideal opportunity for those interested to ask questions and find out more.
- Allows you to understand their motivation for joining and determine whether prospective organisations would be a good fit for the project.

Use the Breaking Barriers Study as an example of COAP involvement (see **Breaking Barriers Creative Report**)

- Allows potential COAP members to visualise how the role might look like for them.

Organise multiple events or utilise different formats

- Helpful if you're trying to recruit representatives from across the county.
- If an event is held in a physical location, it needs to be easily accessible, with attendees briefed about disability/access requirements.
- To support and encourage attendance, you may wish to factor in travel costs/expenses for organisations.

Create a simple and engaging video

- Include what you're trying to achieve and how taking part in a COAP will benefit potential members. You are welcome to view some of our promotional videos from the Breaking Barriers study linked in the **resources section**.



The key takeaways are:

The best way to reach the community is by going directly to them.

- **Where** do local community organisations within your project/service of interest operate?
- **How** could you engage with the work they are currently doing?
- **Are** there local working groups, events or forums you could attend?
- **Have** you allowed time to build rapport, establish trust and working relationships with community organisations?

3.3 COAP member brief and agreement

This will be given out to prospective members once they have registered their interest in joining the COAP. The content of the brief will largely be informed by your answers to the reflective questions in sections 2 and 3.

It should include:

- An outline of your project and any eligibility criteria
- The role of the COAP
- Expectations and benefits of being involved along with recognition
- Designated contact to ask any questions

It is advised that you send and receive a signed agreement from those willing to join as confirmation of their commitment and understanding of expectations. The agreement should reflect the roles and responsibilities of both parties, as well as clarity on **Recognition and Rewards**.

An example Brief and Agreement has been provided in the **resources section** for reference.

3.4 Responding to interest and bringing people on board

In response to your advert and/or drop-in session, you can expect to start receiving interest and requests for further information from those wanting to participate. You may wish to set-up an informal 1-1 conversation with interested parties to discuss the COAP and enable personal introductions from your team.

Pre-conversation



Prior to your conversation, ensure you have developed your brief/ preliminary information to be shared after. This will enable you to communicate with potential COAP members about what to expect from joining the group.



It is also worthwhile to prepare some questions to ask potential COAP members during the conversation to support attendance such as how they prefer to receive communication, availability as well as any accommodations needed.



It is important to convey the culture you hope to embed and how you are going to make the COAP feel accessible and collaborative.

During the conversation

Along with your questions, we have outlined some key points below to cover in your initial conversation:

- **The nature and specifics of your project/service.** Who will be involved and who will they be working with?
- **Double check the community organisation meets any eligibility criteria** (e.g. location, service area etc.)
- **What you are trying to achieve and the purpose of establishing a COAP** along with recognition/rewards, support available, and benefits of joining.
- **Make sure that the representative from the organisation is the appropriate person for the role.** Do they have time/capacity to do this? Are they the first person in their organisation to do this?
- **Communicate expected timelines and commitment needed,** the total number of meetings and any additional workload.
- **Find out their preference for length and duration of meetings as well as location** (online, in-person or hybrid).
- **Recognise that being a COAP member is managed alongside their other work and provide flexibility for organisations around their schedule,** individual needs and generous timelines if necessary.
- **Provide an opportunity for them to ask further questions.**
- **It is important to clarify at the end of meeting that they are free to withdraw** from the process/onboarding at any time should they change their mind, ensuring no one feels pressurised to join.

Breaking Barriers COAP members felt it was important to highlight and be transparent about involvement leading to increased workload and managing time constraints, but this is often outweighed by the long-term benefits to their organisation from taking part.

Post-conversation



After the conversation, thank the prospective members for their time and send across the Brief and Agreement for them to sign. Reiterate that they are free to withdraw at any time.

Action points:

- **Language** – Use clear, jargon free language when explaining the COAP and what involvement looks like.
- **Eligibility** – Be clear about who the COAP is for, including any location or service area focus.
- **Design** – Ensure adverts and materials are thoughtful, inclusive and accessible.
- **Transparency** – Be open about the purpose of the COAP, expectations, time commitment, benefits and recognition.
- **Accessibility** – Offer flexible ways to take part and support members to engage in ways that work for them.



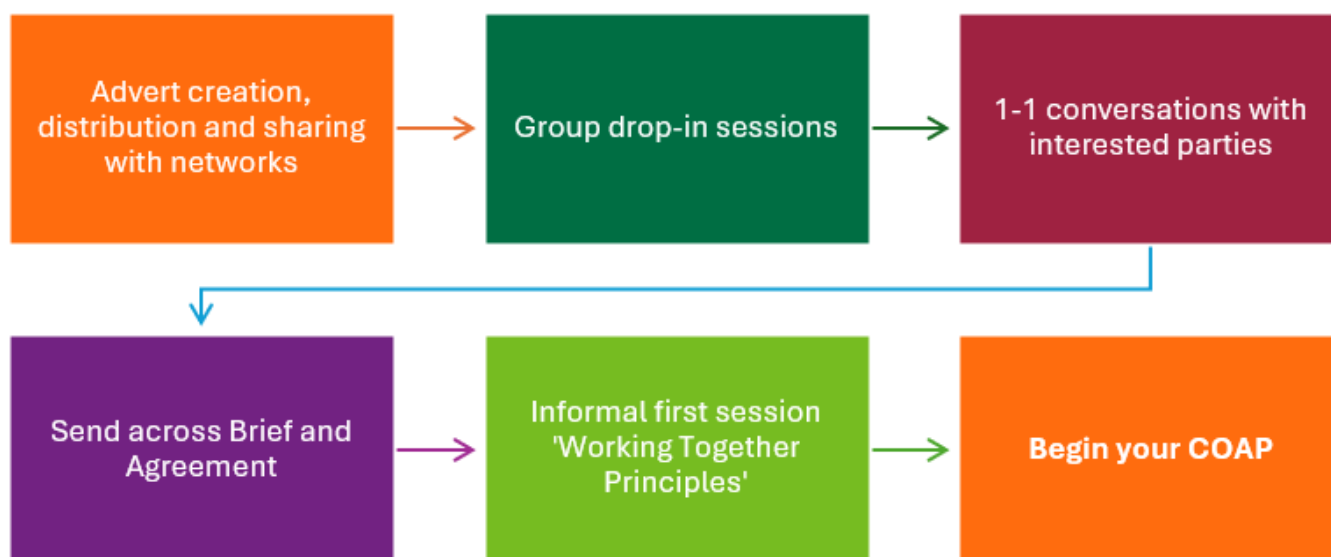
4. Managing and sustaining a healthy COAP

Now you have established your COAP, we have outlined some points below to help with the facilitation of meetings, ensuring members are engaged and the COAP is well-sustained. These points are for reference, so please take and use the information as you wish.

4.1 The first meeting

- **Before you begin any formal meetings as a COAP, we first recommend you coordinate and facilitate an informal introductory session as a group.** This allows members to be introduced to one another and share previous experience and expertise. It enables members to familiarise themselves with the format of your meetings, especially if using software like Microsoft Teams.
- **During this session it is important to go over agreed activities and shared goals of the COAP, any requirements before the meetings, expectations of members and the main point of contact.** We recommend as a group co-producing some 'Working Together Principles' outlining the culture and agreed actions of the COAP. We have provided an example structure and session plan in the resources accompanying this handbook.
- **Finally, within this session we recommend you reach an agreement together with COAP members on the preferred structure, duration and location of meetings (online, in-person or hybrid).** How do they prefer to work as a group, would they rather have drafts of documents/resources to work on together or co-produce from scratch?

We have summarised the steps of recruiting and onboarding COAP members in the flow chart below:



It is important to keep in mind that Community Organisations have differing levels of capacity and resources, so a simple easy step induction process with minimal paperwork would be beneficial.

If research is involved:

- Consider what documents are needed for their service users and for their organisation staff.
- Use accessible technology such as Teams transcription to help with workload.
- Make sure the materials are accessible and written in plain language, so they can be read by a range of audiences.
- Make sure that organisations can easily and simply share information with colleagues so that there isn't a need to revisit material.
- Make sure that paperwork does not become a burden (e.g. for the agreement, it might be helpful to simplify this for smaller organisations).
- Provide clear guidance and training, particularly on dealing with sensitive topics and how to signpost people to further support.
- Offer templates and tools to support engagement and reduce uncertainty (e.g., interview guides).
- Co-develop and refine interview questions with members of the COAP.
- Ensure questions are open, short, clear, and free of assumptions.
- Allow longer leading time for recruitment especially to build in time for relationship building with participants.

If you are considering setting-up a research project and would like some advice and guidance, contact the HDRC Somerset Community Participation

Team: participation@somerset.gov.uk



4.2 Meeting structure

- Each COAP meeting should have clear aims and objectives to support attendance and engagement from COAP members.
- We recommend using terms like “Conversation Points” or “Discussion Points” to prevent the process from feeling overly corporate. Share these with COAP members before the meeting so that there are no surprises or any sense of a hidden plan. This also helps clarify the purpose of each meeting, acting as a prompt to encourage attendance.

Feedback from the Breaking Barriers COAP members indicated that meetings should be scheduled well in advance to support service management, planning, and capacity-building around their involvement. Breaking Barriers COAP members also shared their preference for no preparation work, but if necessary, sharing documents in advance of meetings was useful for them to prepare any comments and reflections they had.

- When working on a task together, we recommend facilitating sessions with a singular focus, preferably having a template or structure of a piece of work/document to start collaboration from.
- This may not always be appropriate, but we found that it generally helps to stimulate discussion and encourages alternative approaches, adaptations, and new ideas.
- The outcome may differ from the original planned structure; however, working collaboratively with communities offers opportunities for deeper, more meaningful insight, involving a wide range of perspectives. This collaborative process ultimately leads to outputs that are relevant, accessible, and impactful for communities.



The key takeaways are:

- **Set clear aims for each meeting** and frame agendas as “Conversation Points” or “Discussion Points” to encourage engagement and avoid overly corporate language.
- **Share information in advance** to build trust, clarify purpose, and support attendance, ensuring there are no surprises or perceived hidden agendas.
- **Plan meetings well ahead of time** and keep preparation minimal, sharing documents only where necessary to support reflection and meaningful input.
- **Focus collaborative sessions on a single task**, using simple templates or structures to stimulate discussion, encourage diverse perspectives, and produce relevant, accessible, and impactful outputs.

4.3 Maintaining engagement

- **We suggest using creative approaches** and hands on activities whenever possible.
- **Invite members to share their own ideas** to strengthen participation and engagement together.
- **Provide opportunities for community organisations to reach out to service users** about the work you are doing together so that learnings can be put into practice.

The topics, tasks or research you are collaborating on should be relevant to the work of community organisations and, where possible, are of strategic importance nationally, so members can see the purpose and bigger picture of what you are trying to achieve together.

- **Offer the option of face-to-face meetings at key milestones** to discuss and reflect on the successes of your partnership in person.
- **Have a process to distribute and showcase findings, updates and progress.** Not only would this be advantageous to COAP members, but it serves as a resource for them to share within their wider networks. This could be in the form of a newsletter, creative report, visual summary or blog post developed together.
- **Updates need to be timely, relevant and accessible** as well as given at multiple points throughout the length of your partnership, to help keep members informed and to continue to foster a sense of belonging and culture of collaboration.
- **At the end of a project, have a standalone session/celebration event** with your COAP to reflect and review your work together, share learning and show members how their input has shaped the final outcomes.



The key takeaways are:

- **Use creative, hands-on approaches** and invite members to share their own ideas to strengthen participation, engagement, and shared ownership.
- **Ensure collaboration is relevant and meaningful**, aligning research topics or tasks with community organisations' work and, where possible, wider strategic priorities.
- **Create opportunities to reflect and connect**, including optional face-to-face meetings at key milestones and clear routes for organisations to share learning with their service users.
- **Communicate progress and celebrate impact**, using accessible and timely updates (e.g. newsletters, visual summaries, blogs) throughout the partnership, and culminating in a dedicated end-of-project session to reflect on learning and recognise contributions.

4.4 Providing support

Another key element of maintaining engagement within your COAP is providing support and checking-in with members. A personal touch is really important to ensure members feel supported throughout the process of onboarding, meeting and engaging with your COAP.

Ways to do this could include:

- **1-1 informal chats/catchups** where you periodically touch base with members. This provides opportunity for members to feel heard, ask questions or raise any potential issues they may have. It also ensures that members feel confident that they are meeting your expectations and fulfilling their role within the COAP. These can be arranged independently but may be more difficult to deliver in practise due to constraints with members' capacity, therefore...
- **Build frequent check-ins into your COAP meetings.** These check-ins can feed into your process evaluation, regularly reviewing and reflecting how well the COAP is working for members and whether they are happy with their current level of involvement.
- **Keep members informed and up to date on any changes** that may impact their involvement as a COAP member (such as changes in personnel, the project and potential future developments) as the group evolves over time.
- **Provide opportunities for peer matching where possible** - linking COAP members with colleagues from local government and/or other organisations working within the same area, to share knowledge and learnings. If you would like to learn more about this process or require support with this, please contact the HDRC team by email participation@somerset.gov.uk, who can assist you.



The key takeaways are:

- **Provide regular support and check-ins** to help COAP members feel supported, heard, and confident in their role, using a personal and flexible approach where possible.
- **Build check-ins into meetings** to regularly reflect on how the COAP is working, review levels of involvement, and inform ongoing process evaluation.
- **Keep members informed of changes** that may affect their involvement, including updates on personnel, project developments, or future plans, to maintain trust and transparency.
- **Facilitate peer-matching opportunities** to connect COAP members with local government colleagues or other organisations, supporting shared learning, knowledge exchange, and collaboration.

4.5 Keeping your COAP safe

Due to the nature of potentially sensitive topics being discussed, with COAP members sharing and giving insight from their lived experience, it is crucial that a trauma-informed approach is embedded and maintained in your work together.

The National Institute of Health Research (NIHR) has produced Trauma Informed Guidance, linked in the [resources section](#), which gives a useful overview of how to develop this approach within your work.

The key takeaway is to embed choice and emotional safety when working together, in order to ensure no further harm comes to those involved because of the themes discussed.

If COAP members are involved in research or evaluation:

- We have included a **Distress Protocol** template that you can use to outline the steps needed to ensure safety and support is prioritised during conversations, along with the wellbeing of participants and interviewers, managing distress when it occurs.

4.6 Checking if the partnership is working

It is important to discuss in your team how you feel managing and working together as a COAP is going, along with feedback from members, to help address power imbalances, making sure the way you work supports everyone. Some useful questions to consider are:

- Who is it working for?
- Who defines the priorities and how we track progress?
- Who decides the way we measure success?

Evaluation also provides a chance for members to voice their opinions on what is working well and what could be done better. To have maximum impact, it needs to be carried out at various points throughout the facilitation of the COAP. This helps members to feel heard, and changes can be made quickly in response to feedback received.

It is important to be receptive to feedback and avoid taking any critique personally.

Some COAP members may not be accustomed to giving feedback in this way or may not always express it diplomatically; nevertheless, it is important to value all feedback and avoid responding defensively.

Once you have considered some options, meet with your COAP members to gather feedback, decide/co-produce what tool would work best for them. Please see the resources section for some examples of tools that you might want to use. Any tools considered should be feasible and workable within your specific project/service. You may choose to use an existing tool, adapt/use parts or co-produce a new tool together.

We recommend that most COAP's would benefit from our **Stronger Together Scorecard and Spidergram**, which:

- Can be used to monitor how participating in the COAP is working for everyone – identifying areas that might need to be strengthened.
- Shows how well you are applying the different **Layers of Community Participation** in your role, from planning to communication, highlighting areas for ongoing improvement.

If you are unsure about what tools to use or would like a more detailed discussion about evaluation methods, please contact the HDRC Somerset team by email participation@somerset.gov.uk for further assistance.



The key takeaways are:

- **You need to decide together**, with members of your COAP, how you would like to evaluate working together and build this in frequently.
- **Be receptive to feedback and avoid treating it as a critique.** Be open to change and recognise feedback as a positive opportunity to strengthen participation, with adaptation a natural part of the group's development.
- **Collectively identify solutions:** It is not the role solely of the COAP co-ordinator to identify solutions to points raised, but rather the COAP as a collective.

4.7 Recognition and rewards

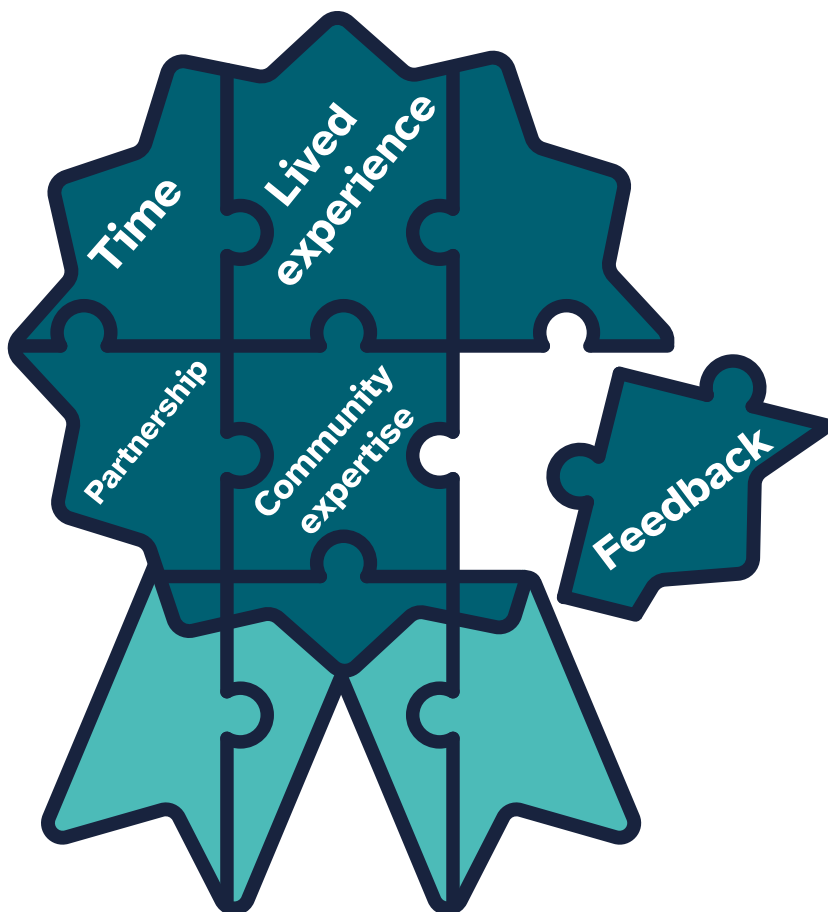
Those taking part in COAP activities should feel valued, recognised and appreciated for their expertise, time, and involvement.

It is critical to make sure COAP members are aware of the different avenues available for recognition and are not left out of pocket. **Ask COAP members** about their preferred way of being recognised and rewarded, allowing members to choose what is most meaningful and motivating for them.

Financially, we advise **a minimum of £20 per hour for each organisation, per meeting**. We recommend your service transfer the total amount per financial year into the **Somerset Community Grants Fund**. This is a community building fund, supporting local community organisations to undertake projects in collaboration with Somerset Council.

Some examples of **other non monetary rewards** include skills development in research and evaluation, support with grant applications and certificates of recognition. Offering a mix of financial and non financial recognition can help make participation more accessible, valuable and sustainable for community organisations.

For HDRC Somerset projects, community organisations and participants are acknowledged in line with our **Recognition and Rewards Guidelines (see resources section)**. This is an evolving document which will be updated to reflect national NIHR and Somerset Council guidance. Please contact the CP team by email participation@somerset.gov.uk for further advice and support on Recognition and Rewards.



For the Breaking Barriers project, COAP members were recognised through a small grant given to their organisation as part of a 12-month agreement, with a commitment to participate in monthly COAP meetings and activities.

Any input given by members of the COAP is acknowledged in associated reports and presentations.

Acknowledging member contributions

In order to maintain trust and transparency with COAP members, it is essential you recognise their contributions and acknowledge their involvement when sharing findings. This could include:

- Reports, presentations or any output where insight and experience from COAP members have contributed to the formation of a piece of work, project or service.
- Establish with COAP members how they would like their contribution to be acknowledged in the outputs produced (i.e. name, organisation, etc).
- Likewise, remind organisations that they can reference their COAP involvement within internal impact reports as evidence of partnership working.



The key takeaways are:

- **Ensure COAP members feel valued and recognised**, asking members how they would like to be rewarded, and not leaving anyone 'out of pocket'.
- **Apply transparent and consistent policies**, aligning with internal or national guidance and keeping members informed as guidance evolves.
- **Acknowledge contributions in outputs**, agreeing in advance how members wish to be recognised (e.g. name or organisation) when sharing findings, reports, or presentations to maintain trust and transparency.

4.8 Closing ‘the Loop’

It is important to demonstrate to members frequently, both the **value and impact of their COAP involvement** in projects/services. Ideally, your COAP will also be involved in designing and sense checking how outcomes will be **shared with the community**.

We recommend you also hold a **standalone session/celebration event** with your COAP to reflect and review findings, share learning and show members how their input has shaped the final outcomes of a project.

Action Points



Clarity

Be clear about how the COAP will work, including meeting aims, agendas, timelines and any changes that may affect members’ involvement.



Contributions

Clearly explain how members will be involved, what their input will look like, and how it will shape decisions, outputs and learning.



Acknowledgement

Agree fair and accessible recognition and rewards together, including how contributions will be credited in reports, presentations and other outputs.



Feedback

Build in regular, collective opportunities to reflect on how the COAP is working, valuing all feedback as a positive input for learning and improvement.



Flexibility

Be open to different ways of working, offering ongoing support, check ins, creative approaches and adaptable meeting formats that fit around members’ other commitments.

Thankyou!



for taking the time to read this handbook. It is co-production ‘in-progress’. This document will be continuously revised and updated, and we appreciate comments and feedback from colleagues who use this in their work.

If you have any questions, would like advice, or want to share feedback on this handbook, please contact the HDRC Somerset Community Participation team at: **participation@somerset.gov.uk**

We encourage you to think about how your COAP could continue beyond a single project. Building long term relationships helps strengthen trust with communities and leads to better, more inclusive ways of working.

5. COAP resources

We have put together a list of additional resources and templates mentioned throughout this handbook below. Some of these are existing resources on our website, while others need to be requested from the HDRC team for access.

* For any document that is dated (i.e. March 2025) please ensure you have the latest version.

Getting Started

- **Is a Community Organisation Advisory Partnership (COAP) right for my team?**

Recruitment

- **HDRC Somerset Example COAP Advert**
- **HDRC Somerset Template COAP Brief & Agreement**

Meetings and facilitation

- **COAP 'Working Together Principles' Example- Breaking Barriers**
- **COAP 'Working Together Principles' Session Plan PowerPoint slide**
- **NIHR Trauma Informed Guidance 2024**
- **HDRC Somerset Distress Protocol Template**

Evaluation

- **HDRC Somerset Layers of Community Participation**
- **Stronger Together Scorecard** – to be used for scoring the Layers of Community Participation (see link above)
- **Spidergram Template** – If you would like to use a tailored Scorecard and Spidergram for your COAP or would like a more detailed discussion about evaluation methods, please contact the HDRC Somerset team at participation@somerset.gov.uk for further assistance.

Recognition and Rewards

- **HDRC Somerset Recognition and Rewards Guidelines May 2026** – please contact the HDRC Somerset team at participation@somerset.gov.uk
- **NIHR Remuneration Policy for Public Contributors**

6. Glossary

COAP	Community Organisation Advisory Partnership
Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) Approach	A collaborative approach that actively involves community members in the entire research process. It emphasises the importance of local knowledge and perspectives, fostering partnerships between researchers, and communities, and support organisations.
Co-production	A collaborative approach where people who use services and those who provide them work together as equal partners to design and deliver projects and services.
CP workstream	The Community Participation Team, based within the Somerset Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC) programme.
Impact evaluation	Measures the effectiveness of a partnership against its intended outcomes.
Lived experience (or experts by experience)	Someone who has direct knowledge or experience of living through a particular situation or event. One example of this could be someone who has lived experience of a long-term health condition or disability.
NIHR	National Institute for Health and Care Research
PPI	Patient & Public Involvement, a term often used in clinical environments with overlapping CBPR principles of collaboration, co-design and co-production, integrating lived experience into research.
Process evaluation	Examines how the partnership operates and is implemented in practice. It helps to understand the internal dynamics and factors like the quality of engagement that influence the partnership's effectiveness.
Public consultations	Gathers a wider range of opinions and is often more transactional. A Public Consultation focuses on broad, periodic feedback.
Sense checking	The process of confirming the real-world significance of findings and relevance of recommendations with community partners and participants.
Somerset Council (SC) Small Grants	A pot of funding used to support local community organisations with research-based projects.
HDRC Somerset	Health Determinants Research Collaboration Somerset. An active 5-year programme, funded by the NIHR, aimed at reducing health inequalities in Somerset. It aims to embed a culture of using evidence in decision-making within local government.
VCFSE	Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise Organisations