

How to... co-commission research

by
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**What Makes Gipton? A project by artist
Andy Abbott for the Gipton Gala 2019,
commissioned by the East Leeds Project.
Photos: Jules Lister**

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Have you ever wanted to do research but either didn't have the resources or expertise to do it alone?

If the answer is yes, this 'How to...' guide might be just what you're looking for. This guidance is aimed at all those working in the cultural sector, but not necessarily with experience of research projects, let alone co-commissioning. It provides some practical information and reflective questions, based on real-life experiences, that will help you develop a research project with partners.

Drawing on a collaborative research partnership, between visual arts organisation the East Leeds Project and architectural practice Bauman Lyons, the guide shares some of our learning and recommendations before signposting you to some additional resources.

Why co-commission research?

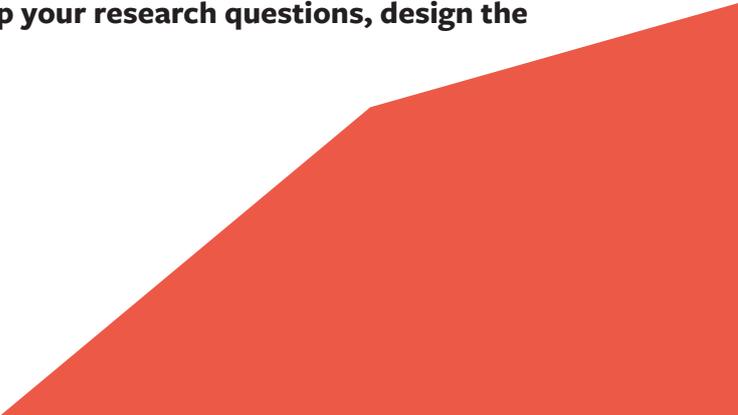
Working collaboratively, whether you're an individual or organisation, brings multiple benefits.

- **AMPLIFICATION:** It's a great way to amplify voices as we generally shout louder when we shout together.
- **COST EFFICIENCY:** Collaboration can bring financial benefits too. Working together maximises the cost-effectiveness of research.
- **DEVELOPING A LEARNING CULTURE:** Taking part in collaborative research can nurture a spirit of enquiry among your colleagues, provided everyone feels involved from the earliest stages. This is a great way to encourage your whole organisation to become a learning one.
- **DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES:** Co-commissioning research can bring fresh ideas and questions into the equation, enabling the partners to work across disciplines and to see things from new perspectives.
- **MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL COLLABORATION:** Co-commissioning can also be the first step in developing a mutually rewarding process of collaborative investigation that allows urgent questions to be explored and understood in a way that could not be achieved individually.
- **REACH AND SCALE:** It can enable partners to reach participants and audiences that are new to them and, by working together, can make bigger and more challenging research projects feasible. Findings that have greater reach and rigour provide a compelling evidence base as the foundation for future activity and approaches to funders.

And finally

- **LEGACY:** These factors can have a lasting legacy on the partners' work by extending the scope and reach of their research activities, developing new skills, providing opportunities for ongoing partnerships and helping your work to become more sustainable.

If none of your partners are already working within an academic context, you might consider bringing an experienced researcher into the project from the beginning to help you shape it – they will be able to help you develop your research questions, design the process and evaluate and share your findings.



Case study: The East Leeds Pavilion

In 2018 we began a conversation with Bauman Lyons Architects [BLA] about our ambition to create the very first Maker Space for this side of the city, which we call the 'East Leeds Pavilion'. BLA were also seeking real-world opportunities to test *MassBespoke*, their innovative new construction system designed for communities who want to build.

We quickly realised that we shared interests in stimulating economies beyond the city centre and growing opportunities for co-production and local ownership. But we also recognised that we needed to test the appetite for the project locally, find out more about makers already based in east Leeds, and map local assets that might come into play.

As a small-scale arts organisation, the East Leeds Project [ELP] has little capacity to do research on our own. But working in partnership we invited local residents and artists to join us in forming a Project Team to steer the research collaboratively.

Questions, challenges and opportunities

In our research, we needed to find out:

- whether there was a need, demand and appetite for a Maker Space in east Leeds
- the most appropriate location
- how it would be funded and managed
- what sort of creative practices it would support

It was critical to co-produce the research with the local community right from the beginning. Working collectively as the Project Team, we developed a series of questions to guide our thinking and you might find these useful for your own project:

- Who needs to be part of the research conversation?
- What are the research questions – what do we want to find out and why?
- What research methods can we use?
- What sort of outputs are we looking for?
- Is there any research already out there that we can draw on?
- What is the intended longer-term impact of the research?
- How do the partners intend to engage with and learn from the project?
- How can we ensure that the research is mutually beneficial?
- Where and how will we share the findings?

Things you need to consider when working collaboratively

Working through your planning and framework questions collaboratively will help strengthen the partnership and your research project, making it clearer and more compelling to others and potential participants. But in adopting the principles below there are some key issues you need to reflect on together.

Embrace challenge

Working collaboratively inevitably raises questions about the power dynamics among the partners. One partner may have more capacity than another, resulting in them having more influence over the research and its outcomes. There are pros and cons to working with people who share your values. While a good working relationship will offer mutual support and a sense of shared endeavour, there are benefits to having challenge in the relationship too. This might introduce unexpected aspects to the research, shift your thinking in new directions, or add value to your process and findings by making them more rigorous and compelling.

Recognise difference

When the research partners differ in scale, however, this can create challenges for producing an equitable partnership. Larger organisations such as Universities or major arts institutions can always be in the room, as they have resources and everyone is getting paid to be there. There might be higher levels of bureaucracy to contend with, meaning things move at a slower pace than you'd like. You should also think about what happens to the project if your original contact leaves – who will take their place?

Clarity

Be clear about each partner's capacity from the beginning and make sure there's clarity about the roles and responsibilities. Be open about any gaps in knowledge up front, and any misunderstandings along the way.

Make 2 + 2 = 6 or 7

Small organisations often don't have the time, skillsets or budget to undertake research. Working collaboratively with other organisations of a similar size not only allows your money and time go further but also gives you a strong collective voice.



What Makes Gipton? A project by artist Andy Abbott for the Gipton Gala 2019, commissioned by the East Leeds Project. Photos: Jules Lister

Practical considerations

It's easy to lose sight of the nitty-gritty details and practicalities that need to be addressed to make your research collaboration a success. The list of questions below give a framework of key areas to agree with your partners – you might want to write these up as part of a contractual agreement or planning document, thinking about risks at each stage of the process:

- How will the research be funded and resourced?
- How will people's time and input be recognised financially?
- What kind of roles and responsibilities does the research project require?
- Are all the skills required within the current partnership team? If not where can you access them?
- Within the partnership team, who is best-placed to take on the different roles and responsibilities? How does this align with the existing schedules and commitments of the partners?
- How long will the research take and how can it be broken down into stages?
- What resources can you share and where might you find additional ones?
- Who owns the intellectual property generated through the partnership?
- What will the outputs from the project be and who will decide what these look like?

Ethics and equity

Above and beyond the usual ethical questions of your work within the context of co-commissioning, when working collaboratively with partners and research participants there are some additional issues you have to consider:

- How do you respect the partners' different experiences and skills?
- How do you prevent a hierarchy emerging, where one partner or voice dominates?
- How do you avoid a directive approach to research and carefully design and manage a process that delivers value and a good experience for all participants?
- Whose responsibility is it to protect the data that you collect?
- You need to think about how you can create a 'level playing field' where everyone's perspective and opinions are valued.



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Creating a level playing field – what we have learnt

Our Project Team is primarily made up of local residents and artists plus staff from both organisations. We've worked hard to ensure that we create the time and space to accommodate the needs of everyone in our Project Team. To do this we

- Used familiar settings in the community for Project Team meetings and created a warm welcome by offering refreshments and a relaxed, social setting. This helps put participants at ease so they're less likely to feel they're being 'researched at'
- Language can create barriers, so we avoid using technical jargon in group conversations.
- We consciously involve all members of the group and make sure that there is space for everyone to speak – if they want to!
- We build costs for travel, childcare or personal assistance into our project budget so that people with additional needs can take part
- We've set up a 'Slack' group so that we can keep in touch and share information with some of the team members outside of meetings
- But not everyone is digitally savvy or has access to technology, so we had to make sure this didn't exclude people in other ways by having multiple means of communicating

Consider how you can create an environment within your own project where all partners can take part in an equitable way.

Sharing outcomes, delivering impact

When your research is completed it's important that your work doesn't stop. For your research findings to make meaningful change and impact, for organisations and individuals alike, you need to share the outcomes and tell your story.

Also ensure that your collaboration doesn't falter at this key stage. The partners should collaborate on evaluating and sharing the outcomes. There may not be any specific recommendations from your research, just a series of profound insights and epiphanies so think carefully about how to communicate their value.

Think creatively about how you can tell the story of the research in interesting ways, for example online or through social media, using memes, infographics or other creative and engaging responses by artists, illustrators or filmmakers.

But what happens if your findings are uncomfortable and not what you expected, or one partner refuses to accept them? It helps to have agreed a process for this with your partners in advance, detailing how, where and when the research findings will be shared. For example, all of the research partners could sign up to a Memorandum of Understanding at the beginning of the project, detailing all the key points of their agreement.

Meet regularly to share information and any concerns, and assess how the project is progressing – a shared responsibility for all partners. This will help to prevent misunderstandings as you will touch base with the original aims of the research more regularly and develop a closer and more meaningful working relationship.

Embedding the learning across your entire organisation. Can you inspire your colleagues and deepen an appetite for this kind of knowledge within your organisation and more broadly? How can you do this in a way that reflects your vision and values, to make dissemination of your findings a great experiential and learning touchpoint?

Involve everyone in your organisation in the research from the beginning. Seek their input and make sure the research is relevant to their work. Be transparent about the process and share regular updates: don't simply expect the recommendations to be adopted 'cold' at the end.

And finally:

Remember that research should be a learning process. Enter into collaborative research with a genuine curiosity, not just to authenticate what you think you already know. Remain open to change throughout the process instead of taking a rigid approach – embrace unexpected learning opportunities.

Continuing advocacy and engagement

We're working on sharing our research findings to date by producing a free newspaper that will be distributed across east Leeds later this year. This is a familiar format that will share our findings in an accessible way alongside engaging visual content. It will also act as an invitation to new partners to get involved in the next stage of the research and act as an advocacy document for future fundraising.

BLA's professional relationships also led to an invitation to co-author a chapter for an academic journal and this has helped us find new audiences for our work and the research findings.

Conclusion: What did we learn about collaborative research?

Co-commissioning research in this way is a very rich and rewarding process. For the East Leeds Project, the value has really been in having the right partner to work with, and benefitting from BLA's professional knowledge, skills and networks. Most importantly, they share our ambitions and enthusiasm for the project.

The only tensions that arose were around the capacity of two small-scale organisations trying to find the time to keep the project moving forwards. Being able to work with University students and interns, however, has increased our capacity to carry out the research.

Above all, working collaboratively has increased the reach, visibility and credibility of our research and we're now well placed to move on to the next stage: feasibility and capital fundraising for the Maker Space. As we do so, we'll need to put in place a tighter framework for the partnership, as we need to secure higher levels of research funding and the responsibilities and risks increase accordingly.

Even if your plans are big a small-scale collaborative project is a good way to test the waters and get a feel for how the partners work together, before seeking funding and committing to a larger and more complex project.

Before beginning your own research project, think carefully about which partners to approach. Collaborative research works best when the partners are a good fit and have shared vision and values.

If you set out on the right foot, co-commissioning research will be the beginning of a rewarding new collaborative journey.

**Have you undertaken a similar project?
What did you learn?**

Share your reflections and learning with us at ccv@leeds.ac.uk and we'll feed this into future versions of this 'How to...' guide.

Glossary

ethical review

The process for helping researchers think through the potential consequences of their project and how to deal with them, including the risks and benefits for both researcher and participants.

informed consent

Permission granted by a research participant in full knowledge of the possible consequences including potential risks and benefits.

Further reading and resources

The **Arts & Humanities Research Council** [AHRC] has produced a guide to good practice for research partnerships in the Arts and Humanities, aimed at businesses and arts organisations as well as academic researchers. Its website also has case studies on research partnerships.

<https://ahrc.ukri.org/documents/guides/partnership-working-in-the-arts-and-humanities/>

Arts Council England has resources for developing partnerships on its website.

<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/improving-performance/partnerships>

The Audience Agency has a guide to commissioning research effectively. It looks at things to think about in undertaking primary research, including research methods, and key considerations and challenges.

https://www.culturehive.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/AB_A-Guide-to-Commissioning-New-Research.pdf

Culture Forum North is a network of partnerships between Higher Education institutions and cultural organisations across the North of England. Its website has numerous case studies on collaborative research projects and they have also written a How to Guide as part of this series.

<https://www.cultureforumnorth.co.uk>

About the contributor

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