



Assessing the impact of participation in People's Health Trust programmes

Summary Report (Wave 3)

July 2023



About this summary report

This summary report provides an overview of the key results from three waves of research assessing the impact of participation in the People's Health Trust's Local Conversations and Active Communities programmes.

More about this research is on our website, http://www.social-life.co/project/peoples_health_trust/

The research was commissioned by People's Health Trust. The aim was to examine the ways in which community-led projects are building social connections and collective control to improve health and wellbeing. We would like to thank the project participants and practitioners who shared their knowledge, hopes, and worries with us. We appreciate their expertise and the time they put into this work and hope the report will provide useful insight.

The report was written and published by Social Life (text by Dr Olimpia Mosteanu with contributions from Lavanya Kumaran and statistical modelling by Alix Naylor).

Social Life was created by the Young Foundation in 2012, to become a specialist centre of research and innovation about the social life of communities. All our work is about the relationship between people and the places they live and understanding how change, through regeneration, new development or small improvements to public spaces, affects the social fabric, opportunities and wellbeing of local areas. We work in the UK and internationally.

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People's Health Trust is a charity addressing health inequalities in England, Scotland and Wales. We work to ensure that where you live does not unfairly reduce the length of your life, or the quality of your health. Our work focuses on:

- Funding and support for communities
- Using our evidence and learning to influence change locally and nationally
- Working with our networks of funded partners to offer support, shape our programmes and policy, and ensure their voices are well represented with decision-makers.

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This summary report discusses key results from three waves of research aimed at assessing the impact of participation in People's Health Trust's Local Conversations and Active Communities programmes. The three waves took place between April 2021 and March 2023.

Building on People's Health Trust's theory of change, the goal of this research is to understand the ways in which community-led projects can improve health and wellbeing outcomes. The research contributes to a detailed understanding of how health and wellbeing are experienced by project participants. It also brings attention to local barriers and assets that may shape the social determinants of health.

Key results:

1. Short-term changes linked to participation in People's Health Trust's programmes

The projects funded through People's Health Trust programmes have a positive impact on participants' confidence. By providing people an opportunity to come together and join activities, projects also impact positively on participants' skills. Participation in local projects had a positive impact on participants' social networks, supporting them to expand their social links and ties. Surveyed participants from both programmes had more positive perceptions of social connectedness, belonging and trust but less positive perceptions of safety after dark than people living in areas characterised by similarly high levels of disadvantage.

2. Achieving community power and its impact on longer-term changes

Increasing participation in the two programmes had a positive impact on participants' levels of community power. On both programmes, stronger social networks, improved confidence and skills and more cohesive communities had a positive impact on participants' community power. Improved experience of community power, achieved through participation in Local Conversations, had a positive impact on the wellbeing of project participants. Improved levels of community power had a positive impact on the self-reported health of participants in Active Communities projects.

3. The role of local contexts

Across the two programmes, the cost of living and job opportunities were identified as key local challenges by participants in the projects funded through People's Health Trust. Participants on both programmes see relationships with people in the local area and the accessibility of nature (parks, gardens, green spaces) as assets.

4. Practitioners' perceptions of the programmes

Practitioners and participants largely agreed on the positive impacts the projects have on participants' health and wellbeing, skills development and social connections. The majority of practitioners found that projects created opportunities for partnership work, supporting longer-term positive change locally.

Local Conversations is a funding programme that enables people to have voice, control and influence over the things that matter to them locally. Residents get together to identify and agree local priorities and then take action to help address them. Using investment from the Trust over a longer timeframe than many traditional grants, residents are supported by a local anchor organisation in their neighbourhood to realise their long-term vision for the area. The process of bringing about change is led by residents and involves deep and continuous engagement and conversations with different groups of people within the community, including residents who may not normally participate in local decision-making. Local Conversations are situated in relatively small neighbourhoods or communities of interest - typically around 4,000 to 10,000 people. The Trust typically provided around £300,000 in funding to support each Local Conversation for an initial period of two years, with subsequent funding to neighbourhoods each year for up to nine years. The Trust funds 12 Local Conversations and the programme, launched between 2014 and 2016, will be concluding at the end of 2023.

Active Communities has been running since 2013 and supports participants to develop project ideas relevant to their areas, to strengthen social connections and build greater collective control. By empowering participants to take the lead and by putting processes in place to address the issues that are important to them, the programme aims to support local communities and neighbourhoods. Projects support local neighbourhoods and communities to come together and take action on issues that are important to them. This could be anything from tackling social isolation through meeting regularly and engaging in arts, music, or simply chatting, to working together to enhance the area they live in. The Active Communities programme is an open small grants programme for projects lasting up to two years.

The research answers three interrelated research questions:

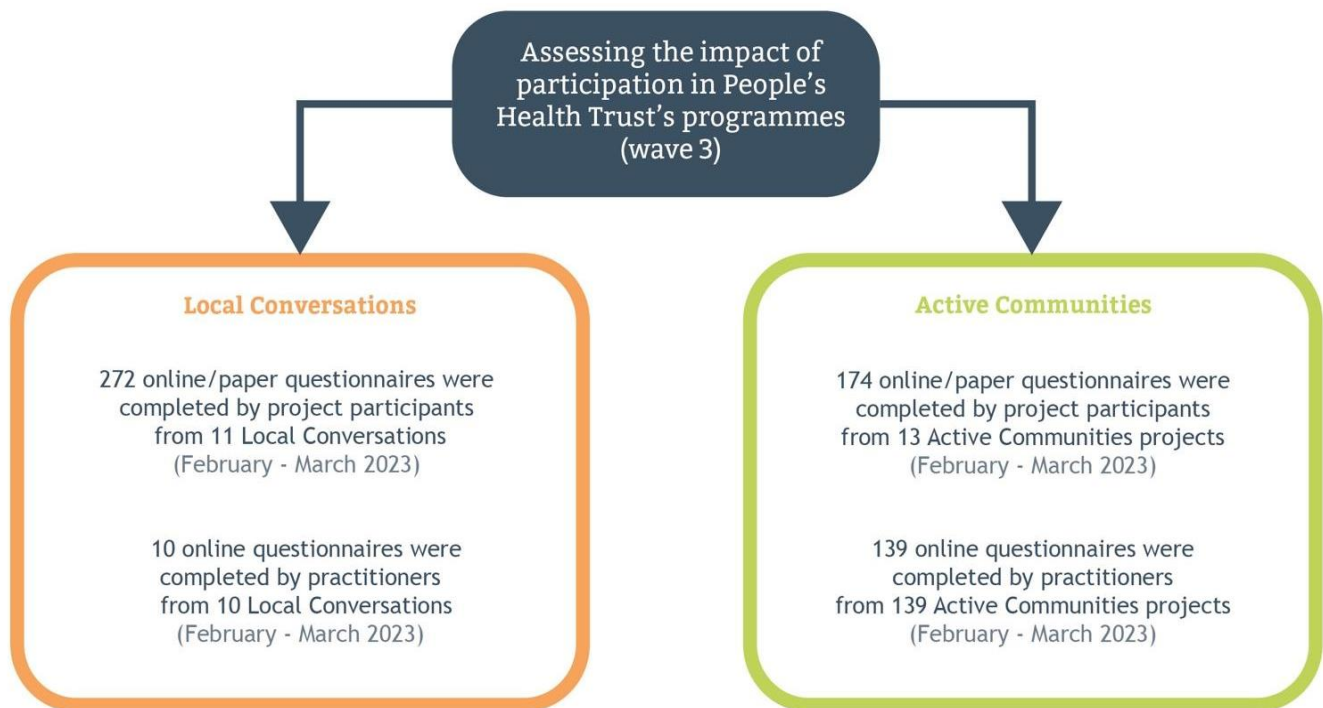
1. How do practitioners evaluate the progress of each programme in relation to key elements of the theory of change?
2. What is the effect of participation in the Trust's programmes on local people?
3. What is the role of local contexts in supporting or hampering positive outcomes for individuals and communities?

The third wave of research took place between February and March 2023, about a year after the second wave. At the time of the research, COVID-19 restrictions had been lifted for some time but the impact of the pandemic on local communities was still being felt across Great Britain. The cost-of-living crisis was another key concern for many local groups and individuals. When considering the key findings from the research, it is important to remember these factors may impact upon people's perceptions of the local projects and their neighbourhoods.

The research draws upon studies previously commissioned by People's Health Trust and their theory of change, and adds to the findings from the previous two waves of research carried out in April-July 2021 and in March 2022. It makes use of comparisons with nationally available datasets (Community Life Survey, Understanding Society Survey, the National Survey for Wales, and the Scottish Household Survey) and across the Trust's programmes to further understand the impact of community-led projects. The Understanding Society Survey questions were benchmarked on Wave I (2019) except "walk in the dark" which was benchmarked on Wave F (2015) as that was the last time it was asked. For the Community Life Survey and the National Survey for Wales, the benchmarking was run on the 2018-2019 data, while the Scottish Household Survey questions were benchmarked on the 2019 dataset.

To understand the impact of the two programmes, responses from surveyed participants were compared to aggregate data for people living in either 20% or 30% most deprived communities in the UK (surveys in different countries focus on different geographies). The report refers to these comparative geographies as areas characterised by similarly high levels of disadvantage. The survey has a common set of questions that allows the research team to run analyses across all the Trust's projects. The questionnaire includes questions that align with nation-specific surveys - the Community Life Survey for England, the National

Survey for Wales, and the Scottish Household Survey. These help us observe any differences between projects run by the Trust in England, Scotland, and Wales, and make use of relevant surveys in our comparative analyses.



With one exception, the same Local Conversations projects participated in all three waves of research. Due to shorter grant funding timescales and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on staff and participants, the Active Communities sample shifted across the three waves. Only three of the Active Communities projects that took part in wave 2 were involved in wave 3, and four projects that participated in wave 2 were not involved in wave 1.

11 Local Conversations (272 participants) were involved in the third wave of the research. Across projects, 68% of the surveyed participants were female and 32% male. The majority self-identified as White (62%), 26% as Other, 9% as Black, 2% as Asian, and 1% as Mixed. There was a somewhat even split between the 30-44 age group (28%), the 45-64 age group (34%) and the over 65 age group (22%), with 9% of participants aged between 25 and 29, and 7% aged between 18 and 24.

13 Active Communities projects (174 participants) took part in the third wave. Across projects, 76% of the surveyed participants were female, 22% male, and 1% non-binary. 53% of the Active Communities participants were White, 32% were Asian, 4% Mixed, 3% Black, and 8% other ethnic group. In terms of their age distribution, 34% were in the 45-64 age group, 31% in the over 65 age group, while 19% of participants were aged between 30 and 44, 8% between 25 and 29, and 8% aged between 18 and 24.

The data gathered across **the three waves of research** gives us insight into how effective community-led projects are to affect short- and longer-term change in health equity against an uneven background shaped by demographic, economic and geographic factors. By repeating the research over a period of time, we have been able to work with a larger dataset and increase the robustness of the overall analysis.



Local Conversations invited to take part in Wave 3 (left); Active Communities projects invited to take part in Wave 3 (right)

Key findings

1. What is the effect of participation in the Trust’s programmes on local people?

1.1 Short-term changes (analysis based on combined dataset, Waves 1 - 3)

The projects funded through People’s Health Trust’s programmes had a positive impact on **participants’ confidence** (in the third wave, 75% of surveyed participants in Local Conversations and 92% of those in Active Communities programme reported that the projects helped them to feel more confident).

By creating opportunities to come together and join activities, projects **impacted positively on participants’ skills**. In the third wave, 91% of the surveyed participants involved in Active Communities projects and 74% of those involved in Local Conversations projects said they had learnt or developed new or existing skills through the project.

Participation in local projects had a **positive impact on participants’ social networks**, supporting participants to expand their social links and ties. Surveyed participants from both programmes had **more positive perceptions of social connectedness** than people living in areas characterised by similarly high levels of disadvantage:

- 84% of those surveyed agreed that the friendships and associations they had with other people in their neighbourhood meant a lot to them, compared to 49% of people living in areas with similarly high levels of disadvantage.
- 78% of those surveyed agreed that they regularly stop and talk with people in their neighbourhood, compared to 57% of people living in areas with similarly high levels of disadvantage.
- 80% of those surveyed agreed that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together compared to 70% of people living in areas with similarly high levels of disadvantage.

Surveyed participants from both programmes had **more positive perceptions of belonging and trust but less positive perceptions of safety after dark** than people living in areas characterised by similarly high levels of disadvantage:

- 76% of those surveyed agreed that people in their neighbourhood can be trusted, compared to 56% of people living in areas with similarly high levels of disadvantage (in England only).
- 76% of those surveyed agreed that they feel they belong to their neighbourhood, compared to 56% of people living in areas with similarly high levels of disadvantage.
- 60% of those surveyed agreed that they feel safe walking alone in their area after dark, compared to 84% of people living in areas with similarly high levels of disadvantage.

In the third wave of research, we further explored whether perceptions of safety after dark are influenced by survey demographics such as gender, seeking to understand the impact this might have on the wider analysis. For both programmes, analyses do not single out gender as the only factor with an impact on perceptions of safety after dark. Self-rated health and project target groups also play a role, making it difficult to attribute the low perceptions of safety after dark to only one factor.

1.2 Achieving community power and its impact on longer-term changes (analysis based on combined dataset, Waves 1 - 3)

Projects funded by People's Health Trust had a positive impact on collective action and community power, adding to the evidence base substantiating the Trust's theory of change.

Increased participation in Local Conversations and Active Communities projects had a positive impact on participants' community power. For both Local Conversations and Active Communities projects, **stronger social networks, improved confidence and skills and more cohesive communities also had a positive impact on participants' community power.**

Improved experience of community power, achieved through participation in Local Conversations, had a positive impact on the wellbeing of project participants. Improved community power had a positive impact on the self-reported health of participants in Active Communities projects.

Data across programmes and nations shows that surveyed participants **had more positive perceptions of community power** than people living in areas with similarly high levels of disadvantage:

- 80% of those surveyed agreed that when people in their area get involved in their local community, they really can change the way that their area is run, compared to 51% of people living in areas with similarly high levels of disadvantage.
- 57% of those surveyed agreed that they can influence decisions affecting their local area, compared to 22% of people living in areas with similarly high levels of disadvantage.
- 74% of those surveyed agreed that they would be willing to work together with others on something to improve their neighbourhood, compared to 59% of people living in areas with similarly high levels of disadvantage.

The programmes are making a difference in people's lives, which confirm the evidence from the previous two waves of research.

Many surveyed participants who answered the question about whether the project is making a difference in their lives (an open-ended question), gave between one and four reasons for the impact. In the third wave, Local Conversations participants mentioned that **projects impacted positively on a variety of aspects of their lives**, including their networks (37% of those who answered), collective action (23%) and improved mental health and wellbeing (18%). Active Communities participants noted that projects made a

positive impact on their social links and ties (64% of those who answered), improved health and wellbeing (42%) and provided an opportunity to attend activities (40%).

2. What is the role of local contexts in supporting or hindering outcomes for individuals and communities? (findings from Wave 3)

The **cost of living and job opportunities** were identified as key local challenges by participants on both programmes funded by People's Health Trust. For participants in both programmes, **relationships with people in the local area and the accessibility of nature** (parks, gardens, green spaces) were both seen as assets. These results corroborate findings from the previous waves of research.

Continuing trends from the first two waves of research, most surveyed participants **became involved in the projects** funded by People's Health Trust because of a combination of individual and community-driven motivations, including wanting to help the community and having an opportunity to learn new skills.

The survey of practitioners helped us **understand whether local projects were able to return to normal operations once COVID-19 restrictions had been lifted**. All Local Conversations practitioners who responded reported their projects were running normally, while 90% of Active Communities practitioners agreed projects were back to operating as normal.

Practitioners of both programmes were also asked **whether any particular groups of people had been hard to engage in the past six months or were not involved in project activities**. 70% of surveyed Local Conversations practitioners said they struggled to engage certain local groups (falling from 75% in Wave 2). Only 38% of Active Communities practitioners said that was the case for the project in which they were involved (falling from 46% in Wave 2).

When asked what made steering groups or sub-groups work well or less well in the past six months, **Local Conversations practitioners noted the deterioration of participants' mental health and wellbeing**. They sought to adapt project schedules to make it easier for participants to engage. Nonetheless, they made clear that difficulties participants faced in their lives affected their ability to engage with the project.

3. How do practitioners evaluate the progress of each programme in relation to key elements of the theory of change? (findings from Wave 3)

Ten Local Conversations practitioners and 139 from Active Communities projects took part in the online survey. The focus of this strand of research, as in the prior two waves, was to **gather insight into how practitioners evaluate project progress against key elements of the theory of change**.

Practitioners and participants largely agreed on the **positive impacts the projects have on participants' health and wellbeing, developing skills and improving social connections**. This corroborates the results from the prior waves of this research.

The survey also finds that the majority of practitioners feel projects **created opportunities for partnership work**, supporting longer-term change locally. These results are largely consistent with the previous waves of research:

- 78% of Local Conversations practitioners who responded to the survey and 33% of Active Communities practitioners reported that the projects increased residents' influence over neighbourhood services.

- 89% of Local Conversations practitioners and 72% of Active Communities programme practitioners agreed that their projects supported local services.
- 89% of Local Conversations practitioners and 76% of Active Communities practitioners said that the projects facilitated new partnerships between local projects or organisations with common goals or interests.
- 78% of the surveyed Local Conversations practitioners and 56% of Active Communities practitioners noted that the projects increased the community's access to assets (for example money, or places to get together).

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