



# The Bench Project

A collaboration between Greenwich Inclusion Project  
and University of Sheffield





## The Bench Project

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Front cover image: Esther Johnson



# Common Cause Research

**This case study was produced in 2018 as part of the Common Cause Research project.**

**Common Cause aimed to document and explore existing collaborative research between universities and Black and Minority Ethnic community organisations. The project was funded under the AHRC Connected Communities Programme and included partners from University of Bristol, University of Liverpool, Xtend, University of Nottingham and Runnymede Trust.**

**We hope that these case studies will provide inspiration to those thinking of engaging in collaborative research, as well as insight into the challenges and benefits of such partnerships. Our intention in these case studies is to document the relationship between the partners from the academic institution and the community organisation. We have not evaluated the projects or engaged with the project participants. However, by capturing the perspectives of the partners, we hope to understand the structural and practical support needed to initiate and run projects involving universities and Black and Minority Ethnic organisations.**

**You can find more case studies, resources and information about Common Cause Research at [www.commoncauseresearch.com](http://www.commoncauseresearch.com).**

## At A Glance

### Title

The Bench Project

### Key Partners

**University of Sheffield**

**Young Foundation**

**Greenwich Inclusion Project**

<https://www.griproject.org.uk/>

### Funder

**Arts and Humanities Research Council**

### Dates

**January 2015 – November 2016**

### Website

<http://the-bench-project.weebly.com/research.html>

Selected blogs, reports and publications

- [Manifesto of the Good Bench](#) summarising findings from the project
- [The Benches for Everyone report](#)
- **A [blog on the work of The Bench Project in Woolwich](#)**

- [Four minute clip](#) from the film focusing on the work in Woolwich.
- [Article](#) - Rishbeth, Clare. and Rogaly, Ben. (2017), Sitting outside: conviviality, self-care and the design of benches in urban public space. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers.



**Gordon Square, Woolwich**  
**Photo: Esther Johnson**

## Project Summary

The Bench Project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) to be undertaken between January 2015 and November 2016. The University of Sheffield was the lead research institution with support from Sheffield Hallam University and University of Sussex. The community partners are Greenwich Inclusion Project and The Young Foundation. The aim of the research was to explore stories, memories and activities of people sitting in outdoor spaces, drawing on case studies in two locations: Woolwich, a district in South East London where the work was led by the Greenwich Inclusion Project; and Sutton, a borough in South West London where the work was led by The Young Foundation. The project was interested in looking at urban neighbourhoods where people 'hang out' and where such spaces can become points of exclusion and disconnection or sociability and belonging. The research foregrounded the use of benches, which can be sites of social interaction as well as confrontation and control. This case study is based on interviews with the academic partner at the University of Sheffield and the community partner at Greenwich Inclusion Project who worked with the Nepalese community for The Bench Project.

Greenwich Inclusion Project (GrIP) is a registered charity established in 2012 to address issues of race equality from a strategic standpoint. The organisation provides a number of services including: support to deal with hate crimes; training advice and guidance to employers and service providers on discrimination and assistance for people who feel they have been discriminated against; community engagement providing support to public bodies to develop meaningful public engagement, facilitate community consultations and disseminate information to minority and faith communities about participating in consultation activities; public education and awareness events to improve understanding of race and faith equality; training programmes on race and faith equality; advice to service providers on the provision of inclusive services and best practice; and space for hire for events such as meetings and exhibitions.



The team exploring St Helier's Open Space.  
Photo: Esther Johnson

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The University of Sheffield was founded in 1905 and developed from three local institutions that were brought together in 1879 to form the Firth College, described as a centre for teaching Arts and Science subjects. The University has expanded significantly since its inception and in 2016 had approximately 28,000 students including overseas students from 150 countries.

The Bench Project aimed to make a high quality documentary film as its primary research method. The initial aim of the project was to use a bench as a starting point to generate ideas with participants about experiences around the bench over a period of time; the key focus of the fieldwork led by GrIP was Nepalese elders, with some contributions from other participants. GrIP worked with elders from the Nepalese community who use Gordon Square and Winn's Common in Woolwich to meet and socialise as well as elders attending English Language (ESOL) classes. As the research got under way it became clear that the use of framed research questions was limiting and it was decided to use photography as a means to enable the participants, who didn't speak English, to tell their stories. There was also a concern that the research questions would limit the participant's views towards a Eurocentric perspective, whereas photography would enable them to drive the research process and generate knowledge from their own perspective. Indeed this approach enabled expression about why the elders visited certain places; some of the photographs enabled them to communicate that they visited parks to view flowers and this was linked to their spirituality and memories of an agrarian life. The elders participated in photography workshops, visited the Royal Geographic Society exhibition on Travel Photography, held an exhibition of their photographs and engaged with a filmmaker to participate in making a film about the project. A blog with contributions from the community partner and fieldworker at GrIP gives an account of the benefits and challenges of the project and a report published by The Young Foundation presents the findings of the overall project and work in both the Woolwich and Sutton.

## How the collaboration came about

The academic and community partner first met at a sandpit workshop organised by the AHRC Connected Communities programme. These events bring together academics and communities in intensive residential workshops to generate research ideas and pitch for projects. The academic partner attended as she saw it as an opportunity to broaden her horizons and resume research activity after a period of maternity leave.

**This is a residential workshop that people apply to attend and the organisers select delegates from those applying. Participants in these workshops include academics, artists and those working in the community. This particular workshop was on the theme of 'Disconnection and Division' and delegates engage in discussions, develop and pitch ideas for potential projects. Ideas that gain approval at this event can be submitted for pilot funding and there is potential to apply for larger amounts of funding following successful pilot projects. The people attending this sandpit event were interested in securing funding. I attended the sandpit because I was interested in returning to research after maternity leave.**

(Academic partner)

The community partner attended after hearing about the sandpit from a colleague and a key interest was in securing funding. It was his first time attending such an event and was unclear about what to expect, the event was seen as potentially a good opportunity for a newly established charity to participate in.

**Somebody alerted me to a sandpit workshop where community groups and NGOs and academics would work on collaborative projects. So it was quite good for an NGO to be in that space. And then there was a range of different discussions and**

**we fell into collaborative projects, so I got involved in (discussing) two projects. One was the Benches Project and then there was another one called Creative Interruptions. So that's how I met the two different academics on these projects. I wasn't very clear about what the sandpit was, I learnt when I was there and more in reflection really, so there was no prep work before. I just filled in an application and then I was in the sandpit, and funding is critical for NGOs, so obviously I went. We're a new organisation so you know it was vital that we got funds in. So this was the most probable. So you know we definitely went in there with a savvy NGO head on, I got clarification that I was going from my CEO – she was very very supportive.**

**(Community partner)**

**The sandpit is described as an intense event by the academic partner. The community partner describes it as a space that is not easy to navigate or attend for community participants and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), or not conducive to constructive discussion and debate on matters relating to race, ethnicity and racism.**

**The sandpit is not a good way forward for community groups or NGOs, I think it's probably the worst way forward for NGOs and communities. Because I think that the academic discourse is dominant... it's not a discourse that would land well with everyone. And also it's not clear what it's about. It's like you know forcing a round peg through a square hole, you know trying to get people to collaborate without really knowing each other, so it's a big risk. It worked out well but it was a very big risk. So it was a very White space, very White middle class space, like massively. It sets up a dynamic where you start speaking to White people about ethnicity rather than understanding nuanced issues connected to ethnicity, race and racism. So the fetish of ethnicity that Stuart Hall guarded us against, was definitely there, myself and some others started to talk about structural White**



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**supremacy, and I think that was starting to push back on issues of fetishizing ethnicity. I think there's definitely, for me I wouldn't bring a community into that space because I don't think it's a safe space. Yeah, but as a hate crime coordinator and with a PhD I was used to those spaces and practically I was instructed to find funds - so this is part of the job - to engage with funders on their terms. But yeah, it was a White space, codified by Whiteness. And that is the elephant in the room.**

**(Community partner)**

**The academic partner's initial interest was in developing a project around migration and outdoor spaces. Undertaking focused work with Black and Minority Ethnic communities was developed later, after the sandpit event and when funding was secured.**

**All the people working on The Bench Project were at the residential (sandpit) and this is where we all met for the first time. Initially the focus was on outdoor spaces and benches, focused work with BME communities came later. My academic research has focused on migration and I was interested in the use of outdoor spaces in this context. Race was a new concept for me to understand, 'ethnicity' is more frequently used in my branch of academia and we talked about this with the community partner at the residential.**

**(Academic partner)**

**GrIP is a Black-led organisation and the organisation's focus on justice and equalities means a significant amount of their work is with Black and Minority Ethnic communities; however, working with these communities was not a key focus in relation to attending the sandpit as we already worked closely with many BME communities and organisations.**

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**Well just to be clear GRIP is a black-led organisation, so from trustees to staff to CEO, it's all people of colour. So we were the BME organisation that were in there. So we weren't specifically looking to work with other BME groups, but we were really open to it ... we went there with an open mind really.**

(Community partner)

The academic partner relates that her personal interest within this research was mostly towards 'non-academic' contribution, but with a different focus to GRIP. So whereas GRIP's primary area of expertise was within the area of ethnic/racial inequality or hate crime, the academic partner's was within landscape architecture and the opportunity presented by The Bench Project to look at how the design and management of urban public space could be informed and influenced.

Collaborative projects can explore areas of mutual interest between academics and communities.

**Can a landscape architect learn something from an NGO addressing hate crime and vice versa? What do/can they produce which is of mutual concern? It is important to recognise that raising the voices and influence of BME groups requires some acknowledgement that that non-theory based outputs are a valid and credit-worthy outcome of research.**

(Academic partner)

The initial contact at the sandpit was significant in that it enabled the academic and community partners to meet and work on a potential idea, this facilitated subsequent collaboration on The Bench Project. The academic partner describes the event as useful for meeting people outside her discipline of 'landscape architecture' and that this may not have otherwise happened, so the sandpit event was beneficial in this respect. Overall, the community partner's perspective is that sandpits are far from ideal spaces in which communities can participate or engage in constructive discussion about race and ethnicity. The importance of recognising

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**that non-theory based outputs are a valid output of university-community research collaborations is highlighted.**

## Developing collaborative research

The initial idea to develop a project looking at the use of outdoor spaces came from the academic partner and was developed as a potential pitch at the sandpit, and the community partner was one of the participants in the group discussing this. However, the idea did not gain approval for pilot funding at the sandpit and a convenor at the sandpit subsequently contacted the academic partner to suggest applying for a different Connected Communities grant to fund the project. The academic and community partners kept in touch after the sandpit and discussed the idea further, detailed discussion about taking the idea forward as a project occurred after funding was secured.

**(Academic partner) led the bid, and I was not involved in the bid that much ... I was involved in the thinking, but not involved in the bid production itself. So it was all kind of surprising and then you know the funding came, it was like 'Oh, oh my God we've been successful' ... it wasn't a clear process. And of course there's some blame for me as well because you know I was a case worker at the time, so you can imagine where my priorities were. So people there experiencing harassment from the police, or individuals on the street ... so my caseload was quite big. So therefore I couldn't hold this. That's where I think that's the strategic gap.**

**(Community partner)**

The partners met after funding was secured to discuss the project further. The initial idea was focused broadly around outdoor spaces and safety, this was refined further to accommodate the interests of GrIP and their work on issues relating to justice and equalities.



Visual fieldnote of smoker and bench.  
Image: Clare Rishbeth

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The idea to work with the Nepalese community came from the community partner, GrIP were already working with this community and the focus of the organisation's work is on justice, racism and other equalities issues. One of the challenges in the early stages of developing the idea was that the Bench Project wanted to look at 'what is the relationship of people rubbing along together' and this had to be refined to suit GrIP's interest to focus only on the Nepalese community.

(Academic partner)

Nepalese elders in Woolwich are described as using outdoor spaces more than other community groups and were, therefore, a key group of interest to The Bench Project from GrIP's perspective. The aim of the project is described as being very different between GrIP and academic partners.

I was asked to join that group (at the sandpit), because it was broadly framed around outdoor spaces and safety ... and so obviously I thought racial harassment could work ... and then it kind of got configured differently. But I had a project in mind working with Nepalese elders who are very visible in this area, and I thought right there's something going on there that we could try and develop. So the Nepalese elders were using outdoor spaces a lot more than most other community groups, so I wanted to get underneath that. The aim of the work is ... it's multiple, so I had a very different aim to what the academics had. Very drastically different aim to that. So the academic aims were production of papers, reports. There was another partner involved –Young Foundation ... so they had policy outputs as per normal. But I had a very clear idea of what I wanted to change, and that was ... the social issues that were happening in Woolwich where the council were saying that the Nepalese community are outlaws in Woolwich because their sons are on drugs ... you know the normal pathologizing. And I felt like saying well you said that about the Somali

**community, you said that about the African Caribbean community, and you said that about the South Asian ... you know you keep saying this, so I'm not going to believe it ... so I wanted a separate project with the Nepalese elders to find out what was going on in terms of why they would spend so much time outdoors. Because my hunch was it's probably linked to housing – and the project showed that housing and other complex reasons were the reasons for using outdoor spaces.**

**(Community partner)**

**The objective for the community partner was, therefore, broader than just knowledge generation; it was also to inform improving local policy and strategy around the injustices faced by this community. In this respect, a chain of knowledge is described as linking community knowledge, structural racism and change.**

**So my objective was to understand the perspective of the Nepalese community, and also to represent their views in a way where they could represent their own views. And look at where we can push policy or local strategy in Woolwich around their condition. It was connected to race justice work, social justice work. The knowledge was important because it's Nepalese knowledge, not mine or GrIP or whatever, you know, that's the community that was facing quite a lot of marginalisation and discrimination. So that was the community that would be foregrounded. So the knowledge was linked to communities, and the community's knowledge was linked to structural racism (as community knowledge is marginalised), and structural racism was linked to change. So I didn't separate any of those.**

**(Community partner)**

**A key consideration for community organisations in matching a research topic to the aims and objectives of their organisation is that potential work has to be approved by the Chief Executive (CEO) and possibly also their board of trustees.**

**How am I going to get trustees to roll with Benches Project, you know? If it's changing my programme of work ... which it did ... I have to talk to the CEO and then it's up to the CEO if they talk to the trustees or not but they often do ... because I have to submit a trustee report of my work programme, which I think is really good, because otherwise there's a lack of accountability. Well (Benches) just wouldn't roll, you know it doesn't sound significant to race equality organisations. Unless there were spikes being put up on benches ... I think all things are to do with race equality, but benches don't seem like a hard hitter compared to policing, hate crime. So that's the staple. It's got to be politically salient, so ... and don't forget it's not just the individual dealing with the organisation's aims and objectives, you have trustees that bring the staff to account on those.**

**(Community partner)**

**Arriving at a mutually agreeable way forward is described as a challenge that the partners worked through, this involved debating different interests and objectives to arrive at a workable solution.**

**So we had quite a lot of debate. Migration is bigger than one ethnicity, and that for me seems like a very obvious point, but I wasn't an academic and I wasn't interested in migration studies, I was interested in changing the pathology around Nepalese communities and how there could be social change around that. Because the organisation I work for had two broad aims – race equality and challenging racial harassment. So it's a very simple objective that we had. So that was the same two objectives I brought to this project ... it wasn't about**

**Don't forget it's not just the individual dealing with the organisation's aims and objectives, you have trustees that bring the staff to account on those.**

**broadening migration studies. The Benches Project wanted a lot of work on how lots of different communities use benches in Woolwich ... I don't have time to do that, and I employed somebody who could speak Nepalese. And she didn't have time to do that, so we had to be really specific ... I mean you've seen Woolwich, look how diverse it is – it's way too diverse to work on all migrant groups, you know it's not possible. So we had to work on groups that are experiencing marginalisation. Acutely, acutely, and the Nepalese ... virtually on every indicator are at the bottom of the pile.**

**(Community partner)**

**Negotiating aims and objectives that differ between academics and community partners is described as requiring resilience that comes through experience.**

**I think this is where I worry about people who've got like 10, 15 years' less experience of working in an NGO, it's how to hold the line is something you learn through experience. I certainly didn't know how to hold my line 10 years ago, so it's come through experience. And understanding trustees will always back you up etc. etc. ... knowing that you can do all those things was the reason why I held the line.**

**(Community partner)**

**The idea for The Benches Project came from the academic partner and evolved over time, initially through discussions at the sandpit and then through further discussions after funding was secured. A key challenge highlighted relates to refining the idea to meet academic as well as community aims and objectives and this was addressed through discussion, debate and engaging in open and honest dialogue. Such negotiation facilitated arriving at a way forward and it was agreed that GrIP's work would focus on the Nepalese community, as compared to the original idea of looking at how diverse communities used benches in Woolwich. This more focused approach, that incorporated issues relating to justice and equality for**



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**the Nepalese community, was better suited to the objectives, time and resources available to GrIP as well as meet the objectives of The Bench Project.**

## Funding

The project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) under their Connected Communities programme to be undertaken between January and November 2015. The academic partner led on developing and submitting the bid after both partners discussed ideas about the project and the funding needed, the community partner's workload meant more substantial involvement was not possible. The academic partner describes that working out the project costs with community partners was important, as was being able to pay community partners properly and this was made possible by the Connected Communities grant. The lead community partners at GrIP and The Young Foundation were appointed as Co-investigators on the project and the day rate for the Principal Investigator and Co-investigators was the same.

**Each community partner was paid for 20 days work each (in addition to other project costs), this was important for them to get approval from their bosses to work on the project; also, GrIP is fairly small and less well-resourced than the Young Foundation so this funding was especially important for them.**

(Academic partner)

Engaging with academic funding bids is described as a challenge for community organisations, as the language of the funding bid and process of application is unfamiliar to them. A further issue is the capacity to engage in developing funding bids, and the time and resources needed to do this are highlighted by the community partner as a challenge for both academics and community organisations. A brokering role to support community engagement in the process would help address these challenges.

So I think there needs to be an intermediate that can work with community groups so they can kind of ... not in a patronising way, but kind of take them by the hand and say 'this is how the process works'

It wasn't that clear for me. I mean ... because it's the academics that led and the funding proposal is very academic, so it's not like a funding proposal that an NGO would do, you know here's the output we're going to achieve and these are the outcomes that hopefully would link – it wasn't framed like that at all. (It was difficult to engage) in the language that was used. I mean now I've changed jobs I'm much more used to how academic funding bids work but at that time I just thought this doesn't make any sense ... and I've got a caseload – where do I emphasise? And I didn't know if we would get the funding or not, so you kind of ... that process is fundamentally broken, I think it needs to be fixed really. I have to re-read the bid about 17 times to really understand it, when I've got a caseload to work on. I was an NGO with three staff, so not only did I have a caseload I had to do the operational management as well as programme of work, as well as have a personal life. So I think there needs to be an intermediate that can work with community groups so they can kind of ... not in a patronising way, but kind of take them by the hand and say 'this is how the process works, this is where you could have an intervention, this is what the bid really means, your chances are reasonably high so you know it might be worth spending a bit of time on this' – a much more clear process. I think a brokering role would be a good thing. Because the academics were obviously very pushed and busy as well, so how much time can they spend on it. Everything's done by email, and for me ... and I know this is similar for many other NGOs that work with us – much easier just to pick up the phone or arrange a meeting to come to the NGO, and set a time. An email from an academic about this project versus the borough commander – you can see where I'm coming from. And an email from a victim or a phone call from a victim.

(Community partner)

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The funding period of 11 months is described as being about right by the academic partner, it would have been difficult to sustain an intense project such as this over a longer period.

**The project was intense and would have been difficult to sustain over a longer period, the timing of 11 months duration was about right. The making of the film could have done with more time but it was not a major issue, these things always take longer.**

(Academic partner)

Both partners highlight messages they would like funders to consider in relation to funding these kind of projects. The academic partner indicates the importance of adequate payments for community partners and greater flexibility in university payment systems to be able to move funding between payment categories, to accommodate necessary financial adjustments after a project is under way.

**It is very important to be able to pay community partners properly. There needs to be flexibility in how funding is used and moved between categories, for example deciding to use film and vying between different partners. One community partner had an underspend and the other had an overspend so the project broke even in the end, but it was necessary to have some flexibility to move the money around. Universities don't necessarily like this to happen.**

(Academic partner)

Messages from the community partner, for funders to consider, relate to making sufficient time and resources available for informal contact to build relationships. Secondly, to ensure that funding is accessible to all Black and Minority Ethnic community groups, not just those who are better established, organised and able to engage with funding processes.

**The personal touch in the relationships are fundamental, and that's not there. So you know the human dimension of understanding each other's perspective – going for a tea or something, or coming for a meeting so we can really understand what happens. Then agreeing a kind of action plan all together is absolutely vital. That isn't going to be done by email alone. (Without necessary time and resources) what will happen is that the most well organised BME groups will get the funding. GriP was a well organised ... as you've probably worked out, we were very well organised. You know intellectually as well as kind of socially, we're very well organised. Refugee Youth was very well organised ... I worry about groups that aren't that well organised ... especially new and emerging groups which can't hit the ground running like some of the established race equality groups. And with a strong sense of politics ... I worry that this is open to those who know how to play the game will end up getting the funding. And it's also very middle class, so everything's done written ... in the written word ... emails ... and nothing's done by conversations. A lot of the work I did around this area was through conversations and through telephones – very little was done in the written word.**

**(Community partner)**

**Development and submission of the funding bid was led by the academic partner with some input from the community partner, whose contribution to costing the project is described as important. Equally important is ensuring community partners receive sufficient payments for their participation in collaborative projects. Engaging with academic funding bids is described as a challenge for community organisations, due to unfamiliar language and insufficient capacity to engage in what is unfunded work at that stage; brokering is highlighted as a potential solution to support community organisations in understanding and engaging with unfamiliar academic funding processes. Communication other than in written form can be easier for community organisations to engage with, meaning that telephone**

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**and face to face dialogue may be preferred. Messages for consideration by funders include: allocation of sufficient funding for community partners; greater flexibility in university payment systems; time and resources to support informal contact between partners to build relationships; and equity of access to funding for all community groups, not just those who have been established over a longer period and as a result are better organised.**

## Undertaking the research

Each community partner had oversight of their respective locations, Sutton and Woolwich. The academic partner describes an ethnographic approach to undertaking the research and she initially spent a day with each partner to advise on how to record notes, make observations and so on. At subsequent stages both academic partners and the filmmaker contributed time on site with the community fieldworkers.

**An ethnographic approach was used, traditional research questions don't always work in these kind of projects. It was more a case of fieldworkers hanging out in the chosen spaces and having conversations. There were no questions as such, a range of topics were discussed.**

(Academic partner)

The academic partner, a Principal Investigator on the project, is based at a geographic distance from the community partners and therefore responsibility for undertaking the research was devolved to community partners; the lead partners from GrIP and from The Young Foundation were Co-investigators on the project and there were a further two academic Co-investigators. Notes and documents were uploaded to Dropbox so everyone could see each other's updates and work. The community partner from GrIP has a PhD and this background in academia is described as helpful. Five days of meetings between community and academic partners were built in to discuss the project. Each community partner recruited and managed a fieldworker, also referred to as 'Research Associate', to work on the project.



St Heller's Open Space  
Photo: Esther Johnson

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Each community partner had oversight of their chosen site, the Young Foundation were looking at Sutton and GrIP at Woolwich. Everyone, (all academic and community partners) visited the sites and discussed how these spaces would work. The filmmaker also contributed in terms of what would work on film. Five days, evenly spaced throughout the project were set aside for whole team meetings in Woolwich or Sutton: academics, community partners and the filmmaker. Community partners recruited their own fieldworkers to undertake the research, one in each organisation. (GrIP community partner) has a PhD which was helpful because he already had experience of academia and also knowledge about communities, race and ethnicity and this is very valuable for a project like this.

(Academic partner)

GrIP modified their approach to recruitment of Nepalese elders to widen the reach after realising that a focus on one location, Gordon Square, as initially envisaged would exclude participants that GrIP were aware of who made use of other locations. In addition to undertaking work with people who frequented Gordon Square, recruitment was extended to a park in Plumstead (Winn's Common) and to ESOL classes run by GrIP. This was necessary and also added to the workload.

There were three methods basically that we approached it with, so one was Nepalese elders who used ESOL classes in GRIP. So we ended up doing a lot more work than the bid suggests in terms of time. My time was way more than expected, way more. We pretty much did all the research on the ground, so it doesn't make sense how we got a little amount of money compared to how much ... I understand overheads etc. but the labour is much more in the hands of the NGO in the BME group. So three methods ... we could have stopped at one, but you know it's not the way the BME organisations would work, you know we're there to do the work. One was ESOL, so the Nepalese elders came to do the ESOL. I always



knew there would be some people who would not access ESOL. So then through our connections we found out that some Nepalese elders ... they're all women ... would hang out in a park in Plumstead (Winn's Common). So I cycled up there, and it was true they're hanging out there, so me and my colleague (the fieldworker) who speaks Nepalese, we went to that park and set up the project there. So we'd go to that park every Tuesday or Wednesday, I can't remember ... but I can remember the time, it was always 9.15, because they would hang out there in the summer. And then we met every week there for several weeks, trained them in photography, and then they started taking pictures. So that was the second method, and the third method was just hanging out at Gordon Square, which was that square you walked past. And just talking to anyone - a range of different people, because that was what the academics wanted, they didn't want one community, they wanted a diverse community. So that's the extra work we had to do.

(Community partner)

**The academic partner relates that accommodating community partners to undertake the work they are good at and think is necessary is a good thing. Trust is an important component to facilitate this.**

The community partner decided to have workshops and not just conversations because there is only so much talking to be done. The workshop was on photography and a photographer was employed to run training for the Nepalese community. This was not costed into the budget so academics can get nervous wondering if the additional costs can be met. Supporting people to do what they are interested in and good at is important, it's not just the academic partner's project, it also belongs to community partners. I trusted the partners and this was important.

(Academic partner)

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**A fieldworker able to speak Nepali was appointed by GriP and worked with the community partner to establish contact and engage community participants. Nepalese elders in this part of London are mostly recent migrants arriving after the government agreed to allow ex-Gurkha soldiers and their dependents to settle in the UK; the elders have limited English language, making it difficult to establish new connections in the local area. The broad areas of fieldwork research activity were:**

- **Initial conversations revolved around talking with the Nepalese elders' about their experiences of Woolwich and what they would like to change, including housing, crime and their experiences of racism. GriP were able to provide advice on reporting crime and also held a workshop on housing rights. This enabled meaningful contact and a degree of trust to be established.**
- **A photographer was appointed to run workshops with the Nepalese elders at GriP and at Winn's Common. It transpired that many of them had never used a camera before and the workshops enabled them to learn photography skills. The photography workshops also enabled participants to pick up more English words.**
- **The participants were asked if they would like to hold an exhibition of their photos; however the word exhibition was difficult to translate into Nepali. So a trip was organised to an exhibition at the Royal Geographic Society to view their Travel Photography exhibition. The trip revealed that many of the elders had not travelled by underground before or visited an exhibition. After seeing the exhibition the group discussed what they liked about the photos and whether they would like to have an exhibition of their own photographs in Woolwich. They overwhelmingly said yes they would. This trip also enabled a social element and getting to know each other as well as experience new**

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environments and gain new knowledge; for example, travelling by tube in London.

- Following the exhibition, the elders took more photographs about their lives and these provided a means for discussion. The photographs depicted friendship, addressing isolation by coming together, spirituality, memories of Nepal and an agrarian life. The photos also indicated why many of the participants used benches in outdoor spaces. The elders viewed and discussed their photographs with GrIP staff and selected three to be printed for the exhibition.
- The participants, supported by GrIP staff, worked with a filmmaker appointed to produce a film about the whole project and participated in being filmed.

The challenges of undertaking this work are the increased workload it created. An exhibition of the photos was held but was not well attended, in part due to the effort needed in publicising and attracting a wide audience. However, the photographs are displayed at GrIP's offices and are seen by many people, offering the opportunity to learn more about Nepalese elders in Woolwich. The community partner reflects on the photography process in his [blog](#):

The photography process has shown the rich, diverse, spiritual and layered narratives of the Nepalese elders and how these are negotiated with their experiences of Woolwich and through use of public space. It helped us understand the importance of social connections within this group, how spending time outside is important because it provides connections with wider society, diverse communities, nature and vitally provides opportunities to recharge. It has shown how photography provides a platform for minoritized communities to communicate to wider society and institutions without having to speak English. The challenge is that all this takes a lot of time and hard work. A further

It has shown how photography provides a platform for minoritized communities to communicate to wider society and institutions without having to speak English. The challenge is that all this takes a lot of time and hard work.

**challenge moving forward it to ensure ongoing participation with elders to activate change within society, organisations and the authorities.**

(Community partner blog)

**GRIP developed the research for this project and adapted approaches initially envisaged, including the use of pre-set research questions, to recruit participants and facilitate them to drive the research process as the work got under way. This process for undertaking research with the elders in the Nepalese community illustrates that achieving meaningful community participation requires skills and experience to get to know specific communities, identify approaches that meet their interests and facilitate meaningful participation. Flexibility and willingness to adapt approaches to research envisaged at the start of a project are key; however, this also creates additional workload and requires consideration to support community organisations in undertaking necessary additional work.**

## Accountability

**The academic partner, as Principal Investigator, is ultimately accountable to funders for delivery of the project. Community partners were accountable to the academic partner and the fieldworker was managed by the community partner. The approach to managing accountabilities is described as informal, through regular contact to update and share progress.**

**The community partner highlights that in addition to accountabilities within the project team he was also accountable internally to the board of trustees, so this is an additional accountability to report on the project. The community partner took on the tasks relating to accountability for the project, as this would have been too much to ask of the Research Associate carrying out the fieldwork. It is suggested that a manageable approach to accountability could be achieved by more infrequent reporting requirements.**

**Things like contributing to a blog and making sure we're on track to ... feeding back when the meetings would happen etc. etc. That's a lot of administrative work which ... it's all got to be written as you know, because people like this stuff written. So it's not like I can get on the phone 'Yeah it's going well' ... and it's unfair to put that on the Research Associate, you know it was always myself doing that. I think if there's a programme of work that can be reviewed after every ... I don't know, every three months or two months, rather than more regularly.**

**(Community partner)**

**Goodwill, flexibility, teamwork and prioritising the building and maintaining of good relationships are described by the academic partner as important features of managing accountability.**

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**Goodwill was important and an informal approach is good, it's good to adapt as necessary. Teamwork, everybody talking to each other and regular face-to-face meetings are also important. Trust is important, respecting individual expertise and recognising the constraints that partners work under. Maintaining good relations was prioritised and this is important, otherwise this aspect of collaborative work may not get the necessary attention.**

**(Academic partner)**

**The time needed to undertake and manage tasks relating to accountability is the key area highlighted. Otherwise the informal approach to accountability worked well and was supported by good teamwork, trust, respect for individual expertise and good relationships.**

Trust is important, respecting individual expertise and recognising the constraints that partners work under.

## Outputs and legacy

Several tangible and non-tangible outputs were produced by The Benches Project. Many of the tangible outputs relate to the whole project and GriP's work is incorporated in these. Tangible outputs and their ownership/maintenance include:

- A project website which is owned and maintained by the academic team
- Manifesto of the Good Bench summarising findings from the project and sets out the importance and benefits of benches.
- The report Benches for Everyone argues that the removal of benches from public spaces is damaging to community life and social integration. This report is written by the community partner at The Young Foundation and the academic partner, it is owned and published by the Young Foundation.
- A film 'Alone Together: The Social Life of Benches' was an 18 minute film of professional quality. It presents thoughts and memories of people using benches regularly in the two sites. Subsequent to the research the filmmaker also made a four minute clip focusing on the Nepali elders in Woolwich. Clips for both sites can be accessed [here](#). The film is owned by the filmmaker, 500 copies of the film have been divided up between the two community organisations and their community participants.
- A blog on the work of The Bench Project in Woolwich which includes pieces written by the community partner and the fieldworker from GriP.
- The academic partner and academic Co-Investigator have written a paper which is owned by them.

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- **Several presentations have been made independently by the academic partner and community partner.**
- **Photographs taken by the Nepali community. Individuals taking the photographs have been credited for their photographic work and can keep their photos. Photos used in the exhibition are owned collectively by GriP and Community participants.**

**A photographic exhibition was planned to be held at the end of the project, which was in the winter months, but could not be held at the time originally envisaged and was held later, because Nepalis tend to go to Nepal for the winter; this highlights the importance of giving due consideration to timing. Also, a photographic exhibition may not be something that community partners have expertise in organising and indeed academic partners may not have this either; so extra time and resource is needed either to learn how to do this or buy in the expertise. People from the Local Authority did not engage in the exhibition held after the project was completed but the Nepali community did and this was valuable for them to see their contribution and feel confident.**

**GriP undertook work with the participants that does not directly relate to The Benches Project but was made possible by engaging with the community participants through this project. This work produced outputs relating to issues impacting on the elders such as immigration, housing and the lack of toilet facilities on Winn's Common.**

**What we did, we made our own efforts so ... a couple of things emerged from the Nepalese elders, one was immigration status for their children, so whether they could invite their children to Woolwich ... they're all elders so they're all pensionable ... so we set up a meeting with the community and an immigration**



**solicitor. We also set up a meeting between Nepalese elders and a housing rights charity so they could understand a house of multiple occupation, HMOs ... how some of the elders were living in poor working conditions and what could be done about that. It was a very difficult workshop because if you exercise your right, you've got a very good chance that you could be taken out of your house ... so we had to think more strategically. So take that back to the council and saying you need to regulate HMOs much better. And then ... the other thing was around toilets, we tried to get some toilets opened because the Nepalese elders were using the bushes to go to the toilet. We couldn't get the toilets open, stayed closed ... so those are the tangible things that we'll continue to work on.**

**(Community partner)**

**Non-tangible outputs highlighted by the academic partner are that everyone had their horizons raised, learnt more about spaces, filmmaking, communities and many other things. Each person gained insights into areas that were not their specialism. For GRIP, the non-tangible outputs are described as being the strongest in terms of what was gained by the participants and the insights gained by the wider community, including local services, about the lives of these Nepalese elders.**

**The non tangible ones were I think probably the strongest. So for example when we were training the elders on how to take photographs and whether they wanted an exhibition, the word exhibition doesn't translate well in Nepalese. So we couldn't work out whether we were understanding each other about what an exhibition was ... so there was enough cash in the budget, so we went to the National Geographic in central London. Some of the Nepalese elders had never used the Tube, so we had a lot of fun going up escalators and then going to the National Geographic. Then we hanged out at the National Geographic, which is a lovely place, looked at the photos ... there's some Nepalese photos there of honey bees and what not and caves ... and they're all from an agrarian society so they**

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**really enjoyed seeing these photos of Nepal. Hanged there, had tea and food and came back, had some momos. You know the issue of isolation and loneliness was definitely rapidly taken care of on that day. I think they'll hold onto that, I'll certainly hold onto that as well, so yeah. And also the local authority has got a better insight into how important Nepalese culture is in how they operate. So their photos reflected issues around Hinduism and Buddhism, so you know their whole world view is informed by Buddhism and Hinduism. And that seems like an obvious point, I don't think council fully appreciate that, you know, you're engaging with a very different world view.**

**(Community partner)**

**Several legacies arising from the overall project are highlighted by the academic partner. Follow on funding has been secured by the academic partner and community partner from the Young Foundation, from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, to undertake a project called 'Refugees welcome in Parks: Wellbeing and Inclusion in Public Open Space'. The Benches Project is described as helping The Young Foundation to promote their interest in space and social use of outdoor spaces. There are discussions under way between the academic partner and local authority organisations about addressing mental health by having a 'talking bench' in Sheffield city centre. The filmmaker has benefited from insights gained through doing the filming work and the film has been shown at the Architecture Film Festival Rotterdam. Keeping enthusiasm going after a project ends, especially if it has been an intensive collaboration, is described as a challenge by the academic partner.**

**Legacy from the community partner's perspective is that it does not exist for GriP as an organisation. Legacy is described as an ongoing process, not something you do once and it's done, follow on funding is needed to move the project on to the next phases.**

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**I can't see the legacy. I think ... because when academics go, the NGO is left really with the council, i.e. the main power brokers in the area –how do you influence that? I think its repeat funding. Yeah, has to be repeat funding. So then this project can emerge into phase 2, phase 3, phase 4. I think if it's just short term then it's not going to work. There's no legacy ... legacy is an un-useful term, it's like a process of change isn't it? Legacy sounds like you know you've achieved something. So for me legacy is like democracy, you don't actually get to democracy, you don't actually get to a legacy. Like in democracy, it's a process that is continually ongoing – you can't get to democracy.**

**(Community partner)**

Several tangible outputs have been produced from the overall project and there is clarity about their ownership. Tangible outputs for GriP include the work they have progressed with participants which does not relate directly to The Benches Project, such as on matters of immigration and housing. Non-tangible outcomes emerging from GriP' work on the project are described as more apparent and important, such as the benefits gained by participants through their visit to an exhibition and their photographs are providing insights to the wider community and local services. Legacy is more evident from the academic partner's perspective, and the community partner does not see legacy as a useful term because it gives the impression legacy can be achieved in the short term, when it is an ongoing process that requires follow on funding to realise.



**Gordon Square, Woolwich.  
Photo: Esther Johnson**

## Structural inequalities

**Structural inequalities are highlighted by both partners as having an impact on collaborative work. The academic partner highlights the impact of austerity and cuts on community organisations and that this impacts on their availability to work on collaborative projects. The benefits of collaborative work for community organisations can be relatively less than for academic institutions after a project comes to an end. Sandpit events are questioned for their inclusivity, and both partners have highlighted that the sandpit they attended was not conducive to community participation.**

**Community organisations are under pressure so there is a limit to what additional work they can undertake and this impacts on availability for university-community collaborations. Everybody needs to benefit from the project, its outputs and legacies; but what happens when a project comes to an end. The filmmaker could do things to further develop the work from this project, but how do communities benefit in the longer term? Writing an academic paper is huge but is done outside of funded work so it was not possible to pay the community partner to be involved in writing this. The question needs to be asked 'Is the sandpit egalitarian?' It is too demanding of non-academic partners to take two days out to attend events like this. Some very aggressive academics can participate and this is off-putting to non-academics. The sandpit events are geared around people who are confident and articulate, the event does provide opportunities to meet people which can be good but is limited to those who are confident and able to attend such a gathering.**

**(Academic partner)**

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**The community partner describes the effects of austerity and cuts that community organisations have to continually grapple with, this can impact on availability of staff or on their wellbeing which can in turn have significant impact on collaborative work. Racism has an impact on collaborative work and the lack of Black academics contributes to White academics being seen as the experts. Funding favours academic institutions who get the bigger cut of a grant, a structural inequality that impacts on community organisations participating in collaborative projects.**

**In terms of the voluntary sector, austerity and worries about meeting performance measures to ensure that your main funder is kept sweet. So that is the bread and butter, so you've got to keep that relationship the priority. And then there's all kinds of rumours in voluntary sector organisations, you know there's going to be recommissioning and less funding and you know all that kind of stuff, so you're always in that cloud, I think that doesn't go away. It's quite precarious, so if say (Research Associate) was ill then the project would just collapse if you know what I mean, so it's very dependent on people's health and people staying happy and supportive, so you've got to create the right working conditions so people don't feel pressured but feel supported. The other structural inequality I think is the structures of racism ... you know issues around the council pathologizing communities etc. ... you know puts a lot of hard work onto these kind of projects, there's a lot at stake. And then obviously most of the academics are White middle class, so you know they'll always be deferred to, if you know what I mean, as the experts. You're always kind of fighting for your space ... and I don't think that's a good place to be. So I think the structural inequalities are embodied as well. So ... generally white, generally middle class. And that reflects also I think on the finances ... you know it's not enough. It's very easy to calculate. So why do we only get 13% (of the grant for The Benches Project)?**

**(Community partner)**

You're always kind of fighting for your space ... and I don't think that's a good place to be. So I think the structural inequalities are embodied as well.

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**Universities taking a larger cut of grants clearly has an impact on the amount of funding available for other partners in a collaborative project, a further issue is the number of partners in a project to whom funding is to be allocated. In the Benches project there were five partners, including the University of Sheffield as the lead institution, whose costs had to be met.**

**Several external events are highlighted as having an impact on the project. The earthquake in Nepal in 2015 occurred while the project was under way and this is described as providing an angle to look at how activities in Gordon Square were influenced by this event, in terms, for example, of fundraising. Changes taking place in Woolwich, such as gentrification and the impending arrival of the Crossrail railway line were topics of conversation in the project. Factors impacting on community partners, such as being in interim employment or having to move house, have an impact on collaborative projects because community organisations and their staff are in precarious situations. The Nepalese elders travel back to Nepal for the winter months, highlighting the need to take into account the natural rhythms of community life and how these might impact on collaborative projects. The range of structural inequalities and external impacts on collaborative work highlighted, indicate the wide range of factors that can have an impact, including influence on the kind of conversations that take place in the context of a project. They range from national and local issues such as the impact of austerity and proposed changes occurring in the local area, to factors specific to collaborative work such as sandpit events, racism and imbalance in power and resources between universities and communities. Structural inequalities and external factors have an impact on collaborative projects and the people involved in them, they require due consideration and attention for their immediate and longer term impact.**

## Representing communities

Community participants were recruited by GrIP who broadened the reach by expanding the initial area for recruitment of Nepalese elders in Gordon Square, to include ESOL classes and Winn's Common. Community organisations working with Nepalese people were also contacted by GrIP. The communities represented in the project at the Woolwich site are, therefore, Nepalese elders using these spaces and willing to engage with staff working on the project.

**It would have been good to look at other Nepalis in relation to different age groups, profession and so on but there was not time to do this, so it was decided to focus on older people and the community partner had contact with them already.**

(Academic partner)

The community partner's impression is that widening the reach to include ESOL classes and Winn's Common, in addition to Gordon Square, supported the inclusion of a greater number of Nepalese elders. GrIP's knowledge of the local area and their networks facilitated the identification of relevant locations for recruitment.

**We went to a range of different groups there where Nepalese groups congregate – especially around ESOL classes and small NGOs that work with Nepalese groups. But we also ... because we know the area well, worked out where they are, and we just hanged out with them in Plumstead Park. So that's how we ... it's quite a small group, so you know you can pretty much guarantee you're covering quite a lot of ground, but you can't guarantee completely. So for me you know my kind of intuition just based on my own family experience when I saw lots of people attending ESOL and just thought 'My mum and dad wouldn't go to that' – illiterate**



Gordon Square, Woolwich  
Photo: Esther Johnson

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**people don't go to these spaces, so there must be illiterate groups here somewhere ... and we found them in the park ... and they wouldn't go to these classes. You know it's like an insight from my community of like levels of literacy, and they just won't attend ESOL classes.**

(Community partner)

**Community participants are described as representing themselves through the use of participatory arts such as photography and film. The filmmaker worked with the fieldworker and a translator before filming; direct voice recording was used and subtitles were checked by the fieldworker who spoke Nepali, including checking the use of pseudonyms.**

**And also visual methods, that's why I went for photography that um ... how even can I as somebody, a person of colour, represent the Nepalese community? – I can't. So that's why I really wanted visual methods so at least they could own the research through their lens, through their framing, through their perspectives, and then it's projected on a photograph, so it's not projected by me.**

(Community partner)

**Translation and interpreting undertaken by staff who have links with communities are described as an important feature of representation, and going beyond technical translation is important.**

**Having staff with links in the community and people they can call on to translate and share their understanding of the community, is very important for representation and a bonus when they are on board.**

(Academic partner)



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**The Nepalese elders participating in the project had limited or no English language, and the need for translators to be aware of who they are and or are not representing, is important.**

**A lot of migrant groups can speak English reasonably well, or are learning to speak ... but the Nepalese community came as pensioners, so they've really struggled learning English. Because of the barracks in Woolwich, it's the Gurkha community ... just to give you a context. So community language, you need the right translation and the translator needs to be fully aware of who and what they are, or aren't', representing. So you've got an issue which needs to be really carefully managed.**

**(Community partner)**

**A focus on a specific community, Nepalese elders, is described as enabling GrIP to have as wide a reach as possible to engage this group in the project. Enabling communities to represent themselves was key for the community partner and this was achieved, as much as is possible, by facilitating community participants to learn about and use the medium of photography. Translation and interpreting are highlighted as areas that need significant attention, because in this kind of collaborative project it is important to go beyond technical translation or interpreting; knowledge about communities and clarity about who and what is being represented, or not, are key.**

## University-Black and Minority Ethnic community collaborations

**In order for university collaborations with Black and Minority Ethnic communities to progress meaningfully, the community partner's view is that there is a need to address the lack of staff from Minority Ethnic communities in senior positions in universities. Academia is described as being too dominated by 'Whiteness' and community organisations need to be very clear about what they will achieve and how they will benefit from collaborative work.**

**I mean the universities need to have some self-introspection, why there is so few Black and Minority Ethnic people in higher positions ... or even as PIs (Principal Investigators) ... you need to do some real deep introspection. Some of this is yes understanding BME collaborations, but it's understanding Whiteness within academia, and how it's become so dominant and pervasive and impenetrable. I just can't see how ... it's too dysfunctional. I was a trustee at Refugee Youth as well, that had another project around AHRC, and I'm now a trustee of another BME organisation, and I would ... unless it comes with significant resources for a new project staff member I would say no. Because you've got to really ask whether we can absorb the extra work. And given that the legacy is questionable, we need to be very clear.**

**(Community partner)**

**Both partners highlight messages other people may want to consider in thinking about undertaking similar collaborations.**

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**If you can do it, do it, it is a privilege and you learn so much from different contexts and meaningful discussions. Identify good collaborators you can work with. Finances need to be available to pay community partners properly and accommodate any necessary changes to projects. Focus on relationships, this is very important.**

**(Academic partner)**

**The experience of collaborating on The Benches Project is described as transformative for the academic partner. It provided the opportunity to meet some 'brilliant people' and coming from a practice background the collaboration helped to make sense of academia.**

**Considerations highlighted by the community partner relate to greater clarity about what is meant by legacy, looking at why universities and communities want to collaborate, greater focus on anti-racism and avoiding tokenism.**

**I think maybe really think through what we mean by legacy, and maybe even use different ideas to talk about it. And really understand ... it wasn't really clear why the universities wanted to do this ... other than there was a lot of money being thrown around to collaborate with BME groups ... other than that I couldn't fully understand why academics and universities wanted to do this. And I think most people who've been in the sector for a while can smell tokenism. And I think that could be more damaging than strategic engagement. I think if it becomes tokenistic you know it almost feels like this is classic ... it's about anti-racism really, not diversity. So if this ends up being a splash of colour all around AHRC projects, then you know we've got a significant problem, we've got a significant problem. And given that AHRC funds museums that have robbed and pillaged so many different countries, you've got to question how deep are they going. It's abundantly clear that we live in a country which is characterised and peppered by race inequalities – that's abundantly clear. And that's the government's race**

**I think most people who've been in the sector for a while can smell tokenism. And I think that could be more damaging than strategic engagement.**

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**audit, so it's not figures from some NGOs or ... some major left wing group, this is abundantly clear that we have significant race inequalities in every strata of society, including academia. How committed are funders to that social condition? So the issue is around race equality, not ethnicity.**

(Community partner)

**The feedback regarding university-Black and Minority Ethnic community research collaborations illustrates differences in view between the academic and community partner; in part this reflects their professional areas of interest and experience. Addressing the practical and relational aspects of collaborative projects are highlighted alongside the need to tackle inequalities within universities, wider society and give greater consideration to why these collaborations take place. The need to understand differences between diversity and anti-racism, race equality and ethnicity are highlighted.**

**Both partners emphasised that the project was enjoyable and that despite a number of ways in which the structure and process of these projects were difficult, on a personal level they 'got on' and felt proud of what was achieved. It is clear from the comments that enjoying a project (especially the personal relationships and learning from each other) can happen at the same time as honestly acknowledging problems and inequalities.**

## The future

**The community partner from GrIP has moved jobs since the collaboration on The Benches Project and has no current plans to work on another collaborative project with the academic partner. Engaging in future collaborative projects would be considered if the issue was a priority and it did not involve juggling two distinct interests; matching academic aims for a project with the aims of a community organisation can be difficult.**

**Well I think if I was working at GrIP now would I collaborate? Only if it was an issue of priority. I couldn't do the creative stuff around Benches and keep holding two different messages, it would have to be on an issue of priority – housing, policing, etc.**

**(Community partner)**

**The academic partner is already collaborating with the community partner at The Young Foundation on a follow-on project looking at refugee and asylum seeking people in relation to outdoor spaces. There are no specific plans to develop further collaborative work similar to The Benches Project at this stage, but other connections to benches are being considered, such as in relation to mental health, so things may evolve in the future.**