

Summary of Sussex Research Engagement delivery

In Phase One of the Pan-Sussex Research Engagement Network (REN) project (2023–24), Sussex ICS and the Brighton and Sussex Health Research Partnership received £100,000 from NHS England to work with local voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) partners. Their goal was to increase research participation among minoritised groups in areas of deprivation. Additional funding from My University Hospitals Charity supported the creation of a network of 15 trained community researchers from racially minoritised, LGBTQ+ and other underrepresented communities. These researchers, supported by the University of Chichester and trained by the Trust for Developing Communities, carried out 42 interviews across Sussex. The project explored people’s experiences with the NHS, their access to health information, and their views on taking part in health and care research.

In April 2024, a Celebration Event brought together community researchers and local organisations to share what they had learned. Researchers spoke about their experiences and the challenges faced by the people they interviewed, including feeling excluded and mistrust in the NHS. Partners highlighted the need for more co-production and research into intersectionality.

After Phase One, the REN project received extra funding from NHS England and the NIHR RRDN South East to continue its work. This supported leadership meetings, partner workshops, and community researchers’ involvement in a film and a research conference, helping to keep momentum going while planning for the next phase.

In September 2024, Phase Two of the REN project was approved to continue developing community-led research in Sussex. A key aim is to embed community research into the health and care research process. Led by REN partner Diversity Resource International, REN Community Researchers collaborated with The Sussex Cancer Research Centre to design a diverse community engagement plan, drawing on insights and recommendations from underserved community members with lived experience of cancer. The resulting engagement plan serves as an exemplar of good practice for other research teams.

Our three local authorities, West Sussex County Council, Brighton & Hove City Council and East Sussex County Council explored how communities can be supported to design and lead their own community research projects, as part of the Research Ready Communities partnership work led by NIHR Regional Research Delivery Network (RRDN) South East.

In 2025, led by REN partner the Trust for Developing Communities, five research engagement projects focused on women’s mental health and those using women’s health services were completed. The creative participatory action projects were developed by REN Community Researchers with the aim to boost women’s engagement in mental health research. With Sussex having some of the poorest mental health outcomes in the South-East, the project brought together community researchers, NHS Sussex, and public health teams to improve research engagement