

Healthwatch Research Engagement Network Eastern European Community Sustainability Work

December 2025– March 2026



Introduction and Background

Since 2023, Healthwatch West Northamptonshire, previously Healthwatch North and West Northamptonshire, has been commissioned and collaborated with Integrated Care Northamptonshire (ICN) for the National Institute for Health Research's (NIHR) and NHS England's Research Engagement Network (REN) project workstream. The REN network aims to enable local Integrated Care Systems (ICS), the NIHR and Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations to work together to encourage diverse communities to be involved in health and social care research.

In 2023–2024, our organisation was one of many local services that were asked to conduct a project that focused on barriers to research engagement, in which we discovered insights into effective methods for successful engagement and ways to encourage individuals to take part in research¹. In 2024–2025, our Healthwatch was the sole commissioned service chosen to carry out a project focused on encouraging research participation within a local population of need². The project's primary aim was to enhance opportunities and promote inclusivity in research participation.

The chosen population of focus for this project was the 2nd largest ethnic group within Northamptonshire, the Eastern European population, who make up approximately 6.7% of the population². Our team worked with the ICN to review local data sets to better understand the population and their challenges and barriers when accessing health services and engaging in research. It was found that the group had low levels of vaccination uptake (15–20% lower than the average population).

To build on preliminary data, we held a small focus group with three members of the local Romanian community to explore awareness of research and experiences of accessing health and social care. Key findings highlighted limited understanding of how to navigate the NHS, with uncertainty about appropriate services leading to use of A&E instead of GP care. Language barriers further restricted access, with difficulties understanding English and limited information available in Romanian.

Participants also expressed distrust in the healthcare system and uncertainty about reliable sources of medical information, often relying on social media.

¹ <https://www.healthwatchwestnorthants.com/report/2024-05-20/integrated-care-northamptonshire-engaging-research-collaborative-project>

² <https://www.healthwatchwestnorthants.com/report/2025-06-12/health-and-care-research-all-reportgroups>

³ Office for National Statistics (ONS)- 2021 Census. Link: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/census2021>

Research was commonly misunderstood as clinical testing, with low awareness of opportunities to share lived experiences to inform services.

The ICN conducted a preliminary informal survey with a large group of Eastern Europeans and found that when asked, they preferred to receive engagement and information in their native languages.

Based on this information, this shaped our approach with how our team would engage with the local Eastern European communities (Albanian, Romanian, Polish, Latvian, Lithuanian and Ukrainian). We hired a Romanian Community Coordinator for the duration of the project, who was a key link during events and engagements as they spoke the most common Eastern European language in Northamptonshire, and they helped to ensure cultural appropriateness and sensitivity. In order to engage with the communities effectively and provide them with information about research we used a mixed method approach.

Our team began by conducting Community Mapping Exercises (CMEs), which involved in person engagement with local Eastern European businesses, faith groups, community organisations and community shared services across Northamptonshire. Through discussions with individuals at these locations we gathered an understanding of which languages were commonly spoken in the services and established relationships which allowed our team to share and post information within the various stores and organisations locations. We created a log of these locations and reported back to them with various translated leaflets later in the project, connecting with 64 businesses in total.

Our team developed a series of informational flyers and leaflets to inform the public about the benefits of taking part in research and the impacts sharing experiences can have on health and care services. We utilised a translating service to have the information translated in the six most commonly spoken languages, alongside a series of social media posts. The translated flyers and leaflets were both printed and shared digitally throughout the project. Our team conducted online research within social media platforms to find different Eastern European pages commonly used by groups within Northamptonshire and our team requested to join over 20 groups and posted within these. We found success within the social media presence, reaching over 20,000 impressions throughout the course of the project.

Part of the project's success was also the use of an AI video platform, which our team utilised to create short informational videos about the benefits of engaging in research. We were able to translate these into the two most commonly spoken languages, Romanian and Polish. These helped deliver the information in native languages with simple images and were well received. We

posted the videos on the project page within our website and shared the link within social media.

Another core part of the project was engaging with the Eastern European communities through event attendance. We attended 18 events within the different communities which included events such as, National Day of Romania, Polish Family Health Day, Moldovan and Romanian Christmas Markets and attending local libraries language cafes. Many of these events allowed our team to have a stand/ table at the event to share information about research with attendees.

At the end of the project we also hosted a large Eastern European cultural celebration event, which focused on connecting with the community and sharing information about research, over 200 people attended the event and over half were from an Eastern European background.

Based on our project work within the 2024-2025 year, we provided the national and local health and care systems with recommendations to inform best practice. These recommendations included findings such as, engaging with communities where they are, in their own culturally relevant formats, providing information in commonly spoken foreign languages, continuing further engagement with Eastern European groups (specifically Latvian, Albanian, Lithuanian and Ukrainian) and sharing more messages through social media.

These recommendations led to the 2025-2026 REN sustainability work, which saw our Healthwatch West Northamptonshire organisation working alongside the next year's REN engagement project.

REN 2025–2026 Sustainability Project

Based on our previous work on the Health and Care Research for All (HCFRA) project in 2024-2025 we found that there was a need for the system to continue to maintain trust and relationships with the groups that they engage with. We recommended that long-term investments be created to enable further engagement and that the encouragement to take part in research be continued.

We shared the impact of providing information in native languages and the benefits of utilising social media platforms to share information. Due to the communities trust in sharing and receiving information online, there is much benefit in posting information through these platforms. One of our previous year's recommendations was to do more engagement with some of the Eastern European communities our team had had less engagement with over the course of the project. We noted that engagement with Albanian community had only reached out to connect after the project had ended, showing interest in more information about the research opportunities our project had been sharing.

Based on all of these findings though the work we conducted, our team worked with the REN ICN team to agree to a sustainability project- which was driven by our own recommendations for engagement to continue and relationships to be strengthened that were formed the previous year.

Objectives

The REN Project Objectives were outlined as the following:

- Maintain and grow engagement with Eastern European communities across Northamptonshire.
- Increase visibility and understanding of NIHR's *Be Part of Research* opportunities.
- Ensure accessibility of research information through translated and culturally appropriate materials where appropriate.
- Build and strengthen relationships with GP services, libraries, and community organisations.
- Capture and report on engagement reach, community feedback, and digital impact.

Approach

The sustainability work was launched using a few of the same methods within the HCFRA project, the approach we utilised was:

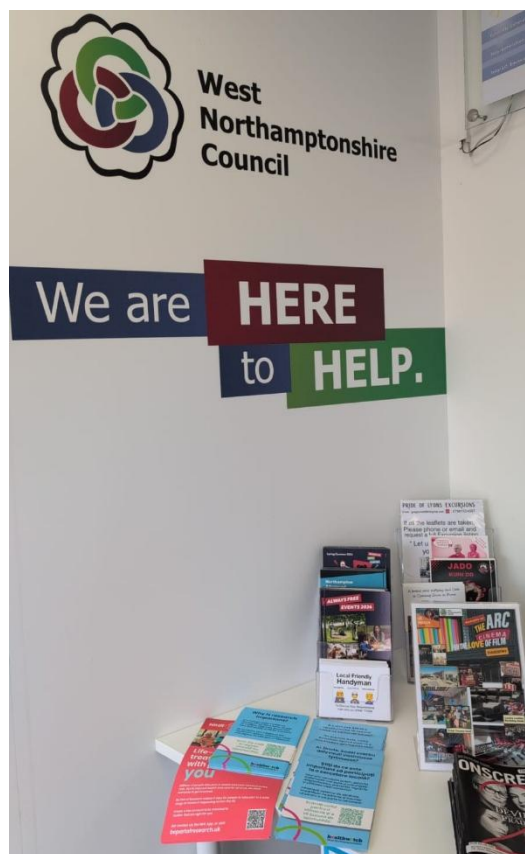
- Social media- utilising the same social media groups and our organisations platforms to share key messages and information encouraging individuals to join the research registry and take part in research.
- Community Engagement- utilising the relationships formed with local organisations and businesses within the Eastern European communities where we previously shared our project's information, by returning in person with new materials (both English and translated).
- Fostering conversations- we worked to connect with the Albanian communities that were keen to engage with our project work at the end of the previous year's work to share more information about research.

Sustainability Engagement

Our team met with the ICN to align project goals based on what the ICN's focus for their 2025–2026 REN workstream. Their focus was similar to the previous year, and they were working with various community organisations to encourage participation in research, by sharing information about the NIHR research registry and also current research studies in need of participants. Our Healthwatch offered to support the project by sharing information about the NIHR research register.

Our team worked to create translated materials in the six most commonly spoken EE languages (Albanian, Romanian, Polish, Latvian, Lithuanian and Ukrainian). We utilised the list of previously translated bank of social media posts to use the wording for new social media posts. We also received NIHR branded flyers in English to be shared when out in the community for engagement.

We used the previous list of engagement locations and visited those mainly within the West of Northamptonshire. Through visiting locations we had

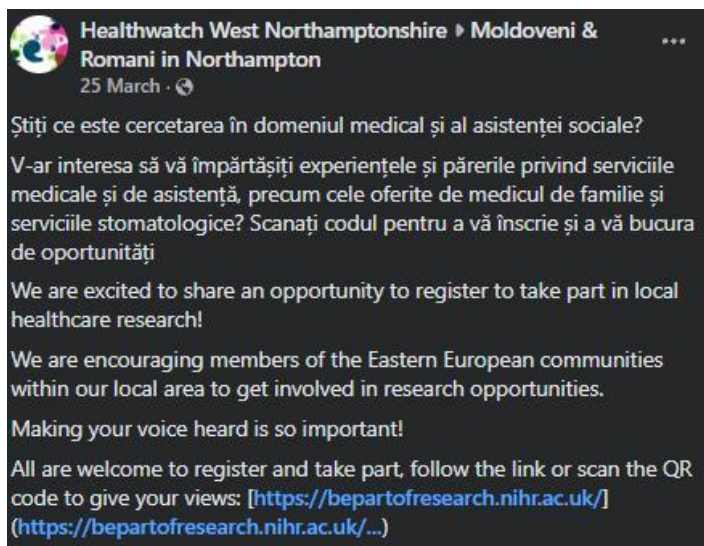


previously engaged with and new locations (mostly community centres) our representatives visited **55 locations** in total.

We printed 2,000 flyers (a mix of translated and English) and shared these flyers to these different community locations. The types of flyers we left at different sites was based on the commonly spoken languages of those who frequented the businesses, we found this information through conversations with staff and/or previous knowledge from connecting through the previous year.

We shared much of the information about the research registry online, by utilising our main social media pages as well as the community groups we had joined the past year. These Eastern European pages were primarily on the Facebook platform. We posted multiple times throughout the three months and our posts were shared in different languages based on the pages, which were primarily Romanian, Albanian and Polish.

We made 19 posts both on our main pages and within Eastern European groups. Our posts reached **11,412 impressions** as of April 2026- 11,211 of the impressions stemmed from Facebook- which was the most used platform and the platform which allowed our organisation to connect with different cultural specific pages.



Connecting with the Albanian Community

Our team worked to connect with the Albanian community through the Albanian Cultural Association, with the hopes of fostering conversations with members of the community. We started our conversations with the lead of the association to discuss the importance of research and our project's aim to speak with their members and share information about research in the Albanian language.

A member of staff and an Albanian volunteer met with the lead of the association for a coffee and chat to discuss more about the project, the aim to encourage individuals to take part in research and how we could best connect with members of the local Albanian community and other Eastern European communities. A major theme that arose from the conversation was around the impact of sharing information online through social media pages, as opposed to the physical leaflets. The explanation for why this would be a better way to reach members of the Eastern European communities was because the online media platforms are the most trusted outlet for news and information, especially for health and wellbeing.

From this meeting our project team was encouraged to focus on what information could be shared online about taking part in research and the link to direct individuals to sign up to the registry to receive information about local opportunities. It was explained that in the opinion of the associations leader, that this would be the best method to reach individuals as social media is the primary resource used for information within their communities. We took this feedback on board as part of our approach for the project, developing additional media posts and members of our team posting and sharing these within local groups.

In this meeting we also discussed the possibility of attending or hosting an event with members of the Albanian community to discuss research and share more about the project.

The ability to host an event or session dedicated to research was not conducive with the Albanian organisation's group schedules and our project timeline, however we were invited to attend and take part in their cultural day celebration.



A member of our Healthwatch project team attended the event and brought translated leaflets with QR codes to share with the event goers. This was a great opportunity to connect with members of the community and celebrate the Albanian food and culture. We spoke to a few members of the Albanian community, sharing flyers for research and encouraging participation by joining the NIHR registry.



Impact and Conversations in the Community

Through continuing the work we carried out previously and continuing to connect with local individuals from the various Eastern European countries, we achieved our aim to maintain a consistent presence in the Eastern European community, to continue to promote research participation opportunities such as Be Part of Research at various locations within the communities of Northamptonshire. Our team reached additional locations, including more community centres and libraries and worked to connect online through various social media groups. Part of our engagement included attending the University of Northampton's Health and Social Care conference, where our team shared NIHR research leaflets, encouraging students to take part in research. While this event was not specifically for the Eastern European community, it allowed our team to engage with students of many ethnic backgrounds.

Our social media posts had positive impacts and reached many individuals online. We were able to distribute approximately 2,000 leaflets at various community locations, many of which were locations where we initially established relationships and revisited to continue to share information about research. Some examples of the locations we visited are listed below:

- Abington, Daventry, Duston, Hunsbury, Kingsthorpe, Northampton and Weston Favell Libraries
- European Markets which included: Livada Store, O&K European Supermarket, Baltika Supermarket, Perestroyka, Krakow Mini Market and more.
- Wootton, Semilong, Spencer Dalington, Kingsthorpe, Abington, Grange Park, and Southbrook Community Centres

Community Connection

Reflections from our volunteers in the community through their engagement:

- “During my engagement in community spaces such as libraries and community centres, I found people to be open, curious, and willing to share their thoughts about health and wellbeing.”
- “Many individuals expressed that having information available in their native language made them feel more confident and included in conversations about research.”
- “I observed that informal, face-to-face conversations helped build trust encouraged people to ask questions and consider taking part in research opportunities”
- “Feedback from the community was largely positive, with several people highlighting the importance of being listened to and having their experiences valued.”



Recommendations for Future Work

Through our REN Sustainability work and past work both exploring effective research methods and identifying what encourages those from minority ethnic backgrounds to engage in research, we have learned the importance of sustaining connections and providing culturally appropriate materials. It is important that communities who experience health inequalities continue to receive information about health and care research and services in a way that is easy to understand and interpret.

We recommend that the following be done to ensure effective, accessible engagement within our health and care systems:

- Continue to invest in community engagement and outreach within minority ethnic communities.
- Ensure that when services deliver engagement with communities that the engagement extends beyond single-purpose outcomes, working to maintain ongoing communication to build authentic relationships and address gaps over time.
- That the use of digital social media platforms and specific cultural pages be utilised as a method of distributing information about research and services.
- That the information distributed be translated in native languages to ensure accessibility and understanding within different ethnic groups.

About West Northamptonshire Healthwatch

Healthwatch West Northamptonshire is the local independent consumer champion for health and social care. We are part of a national network of local Healthwatch organisations. Our central role is to be a voice for local people to influence better health and wellbeing and improve the quality of services to meet people's needs. This involves us visiting local services and talking to people about their views and experiences. We share our reports with the NHS and social care, and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) (the inspector and regulator for health and social care), with recommendations for improvement, where required.

Our rights and responsibilities include:

- We have the power to monitor (known as "Enter and View") health and social care services (with one or two exceptions). Our primary purpose is to find out what patients, service users, carers and the wider public think of health and social care.
- We report our findings of local views and experiences to health and social care decision-makers and make the case for improved services where we find there is a need for improvement.
- We strive to be a strong and powerful voice for local people, and to influence how services are planned, organised and delivered.
- We aim to be an effective voice rooted in the community. To be that voice, we find out what local people think about health and social care. We research patient, user and carer opinions using many different ways to discover views and experiences. We do this to give local people a voice.

We provide information and advice about health and social care services.

Where we feel that the views and voices of Healthwatch West Northamptonshire and the people whom we strive to speak on behalf of are not being heard, we have the option to escalate our concerns and report our evidence to national organisations including Healthwatch England, NHS England and the Care Quality Commission.

Find out more at <https://www.healthwatchwestnorthants.com/>

healthwatch
West Northamptonshire



About Connected Together

Connected Together Community Interest Company (CIC) is the legal entity and governing body for Healthwatch West Northamptonshire.

The remit of the Connected Together CIC includes:

- Contract compliance
- Legal requirements
- Financial and risk management
- Sustainability and growth
- Agreeing strategy and operations
- Agreeing policies and procedures



Connected Together CIC is a social enterprise. It aims to be first for community engagement across the county of Northamptonshire and beyond.

By using our expertise and experience, we can help you in delivering community engagement programmes including workshops, research, surveys, training and more. Contact us to find out how we can help your community.

We welcome ideas and suggestions for projects that benefit Northamptonshire and its community.

Find out more at www.connectedtogether.co.uk

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