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Key messages:

- Community representation is necessary addressing local health inequality needs. Clear, consistent communication manages PPI expectations, supports informed engagement and adapting to project needs.
- Prioritise non-hierarchal PPI collaboration that values input, facilitates community invested interest to foster authentic engagement and meaningful outputs to address local health determinant needs.

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An impact evaluation of the Health Determinants Research Collaboration Medway Public Advisory Group

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A new public health initiative funded Health Determinant Research Collaborations (HDRC) across UK local authorities (LA) to address health inequalities, enable LA capacity of evidence-based decisions to improve public health outcomes. Patient and public involvement (PPI) is integral to ensure local needs and priorities are appropriately met. HDRC Medway's Patient Advisory Group (PAG) are Medway PPI representatives. This qualitative evaluation gathers insights from the first PAG cohort June 2023 - October 2024 to inform upcoming years and provide recommendations to effectively integrate PPI within public health initiatives. Semi-structured focus groups were conducted with PAG members (N = 6) via Microsoft Teams facilitated by a University of Kent researcher. Questions were co-developed with the HDRC Medway Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement Lead. Analysis followed thematic analysis procedures with 2 researchers and the PPI lead to code transcripts, develop meaningful themes and subsequent recommendations. 5 main themes identified; positive psychosocial gain as PAG member, role expectations and understanding impacted perceived contributions, reiterating PAG's impact on wider HDRC Medway aims reinforced perceived value, group management and communication, personal investments and hopes post PAG. Insights provide transferable recommendations for PPI collaborators to understand how to support and enhance PPI efficacy and engagement in public health. Positive reflections highlight strengths on experiences and personal value of their contribution to addressing health inequalities. Common challenges highlighted adapting administrative practices and for researchers to plan to mitigate PPI cliff edge and negative fallout. Effective PPI collaboration requires meaningful direction, clear communication, inclusive facilitation fostering interpersonal cohesion, reinforcing continued value and impact to maximise engagement and public health outputs.