

## *Feeling grateful: the day after the 'Young Minds Inspiring Health & Wellbeing Research Event'*

Today I am feeling so grateful and inspired after our first [NIHR 'Young Minds Inspiring Health & Wellbeing Research'](#) event yesterday evening. We have been planning this for so long and I am so glad that we listened to the young people and kept the agenda informal and fun. What struck me most as I observed the gathering of around 80 people from local health, social care, council, voluntary sector, research organisations and young people was the happy relaxed air in the room. We thought a lot about how to make a space for creative thinking where a diverse group of adults and young people could feel at ease and inspired to participate fully in the agenda. Despite the chaos of moving every twenty minutes, trying to juggle food and connect with new people it seemed to work. Most people stayed until the end and a few actually stayed after to make the most of the opportunity to talk to people they hadn't yet had chance to. It helped having a charismatic and experienced facilitator such as [Tom](#) who energised



us at the start and broke any potential barriers by involving us all in shouting welcomes to each other across the room. This served as a great equaliser; as did the use of first names only so that much of the time we didn't really know if we were conversing with someone who we might assume to have more knowledge or experience than us according to their job title. This was very much an experimental and 'live' event and we needed Tom to ensure everyone was confidently guided through the agenda and reassured at appropriate points. Tom was intuitive and brilliant at responding to the dynamics in



the room by flexing the agenda and timing to ensure we didn't overload people or interrupt too many valuable conversations.

The main reason I am feeling grateful is because I feel so privileged to have had the opportunity to work with such an awesome group of young people. Last September, I was lucky to be introduced to each of them by the community organisations they are involved with. Since then Zak, Molly, Katie, Izzy, Jessie and Omar have attended every [Reaching Out North Essex](#) project partnership meeting and led the way in teaching us adults how to involve young people in research as equal

partners. With the support of their community ‘mentors’ Sue and Beth from [Firstsite Young Art Kommunity](#) (YAK), Maria, Iman, Elizabeth and Rosemary from [Refugee Action Colchester](#), Teresa and Nancy from Jaywick [Junior Ambassadors Scheme](#) and Rachel from [Essex Council for Voluntary Youth Services](#) (ECVYS) they negotiated a small share of the project funds to develop their own creative projects. Last night it was so rewarding to witness them sharing their ideas with the audience in a very active and confident way. I can’t express how proud and emotional I felt (I know others did too) to see the younger generation really own and pitch their creative ideas. For some of the professionals who attended yesterday it was a chance to experience the value of harnessing the creative imaginations and insights of young people. Summed up by one local authority Councillor who whispered to me as she left the event *‘I can now see that we simply should not design services for young people without them in the room’* – Eureka! Just to add it was a massive bonus to have parents bring their children along and Barney in particular has offered his own unique insights. That is another thing I have learned about community engagement, there is no need to exclude anyone as long as they are appropriately supported to be there they can make a really valuable contribution.

Another reason for gratitude is for the peer support from colleagues who work across the NIHR infrastructure in our region. The event illustrated that we are working as ‘one NIHR’. It was CRN Eastern who hosted, funded and coordinated the event with lots of collaboration from CLAHRC, Brain HTC and me on behalf of the Research Design Service and I am not shy in saying *‘we rocked this event!’* It wasn’t easy negotiating all our individual organisational agendas and priorities in the planning. However, with Anne quietly pulling the whole thing together and trusting the community partners to deliver the content I think we will all agree it was a huge success. On the day it was wonderful to have the CRN team there in force with their sleeves rolled up getting stuck in - like a team of *party angels* supervised by Ann and Anne it was all set up and cleared away very efficiently – thank you!

Last but not least, I am so grateful to our community partners who always go the extra mile, not just in shaping the project with their innovative ideas, but also in their can do attitude to helping with all things practical such as: venues, taxis, food etc. They are the backbone of the project and it simply would not exist without them. We are learning so much from them about how to be more inclusive in the way we involve people with diverse experiences and especially young people. We now know first-hand the true value of involving community organisations as trusted brokers to engage with the communities they have existing relationships with. They have demonstrated to us, many times, the layers of cultural and social nuances that we are simply not aware of and which if not recognised can immediately break trust. They also have a lot of friends and have helped to introduce us to so many other community partners who helped us attract such a diverse turn out last night – they just invited their friends to the party! I also really felt the power of reciprocity



Yesterday, appreciating that whilst the community partners are supporting our agenda through their projects, we also gave them a forum to promote the important community work they do often unpaid. That is how it should be in genuine relationships; involvement is not a one way street. There are so many other things we are learning which Lorna is diligently helping us to record in the Reaching Out project evaluation which we look forward to sharing at the end of the project.

There is so much more I could talk about; however I am hoping that if I leave enough space others will fill it is with their reflections (**invitation please!!**). I am now looking forward, in the final couple of months of the Reaching Out project, to knuckling down with the team to see which sustainable pathways we can carve for the future. I hope our community partners and young people will want to continue as a virtual 'youth voice forum for research' locally and that other community stakeholders who participated in the event will be interested in adding their voices and resources to this. I am also curious to see if we can pin down one or two emergent research ideas and establish a co-production group with our enthusiastic young partners, relevant stakeholders and of course experienced researchers to develop one or two feasible research proposals. I have already been approached by a couple of local academics from different disciplines who are interested in taking ideas forward and I know that lots of business cards were exchanged yesterday. I hope these ideas are not too inspirational; of course we will need to see commitment in the form of time and resources to make it a reality. I am hopeful and if all else fails we have learned so much about community engagement and signposting young people to involvement choices across the regional NIHR infrastructure. We have also inspired a diverse community to understand the importance of genuine and relevant involvement in research and service design and maybe challenged the status quo. Most of all we have made lots of new diverse connections and friendships which is very exciting.

Thank you all!

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