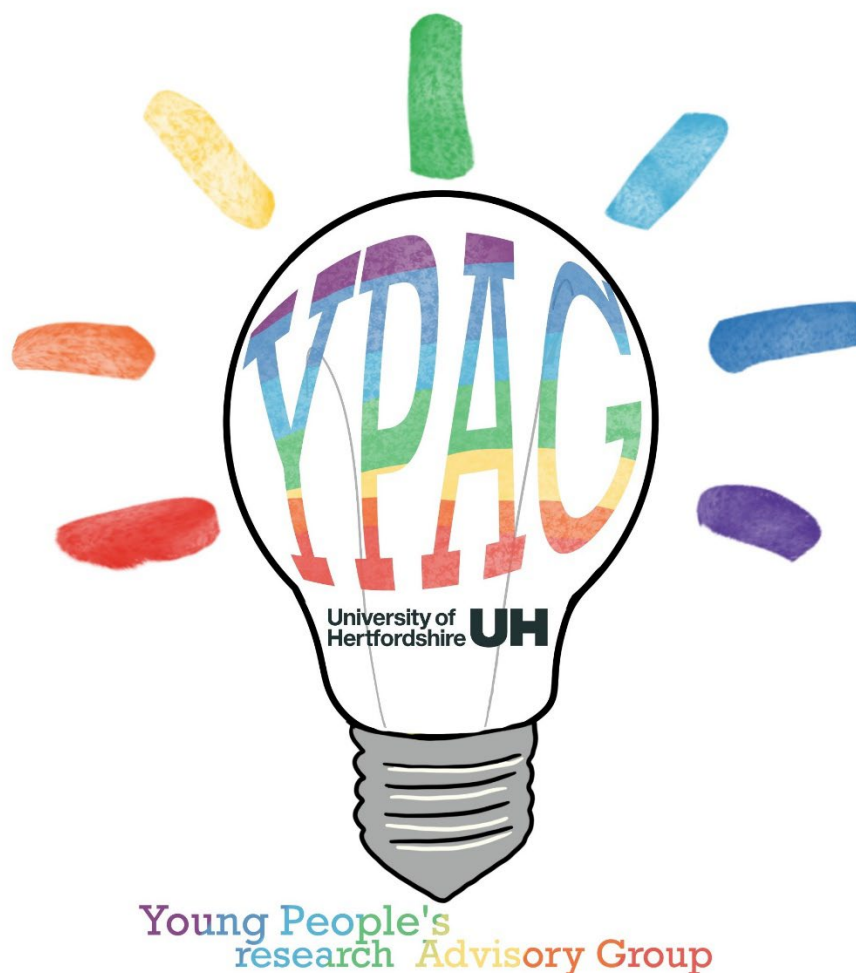


Evaluating the Hertfordshire Young People's Research Advisory Group



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October 2025



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Summary

Background and approach

The Herts YPAG is a research group made up of young people who help researchers. The group is run by the University of Hertfordshire and started in March 2022. In Spring 2025, the group decided to conduct an evaluation – to explore what the YPAG has achieved, and how it could be improved. Three YPAG members and two staff members volunteered to work together as a team to design, carry out, and share the outcomes of this evaluation.

This YPAG ‘*Excellent Evaluators*’ team agreed to focus on three specific questions:

1. How has being a member of the YPAG impacted YPAG members themselves?
2. How has working with the YPAG impacted research and researchers?
3. How can the YPAG be improved for the future?

The Excellent Evaluators team conducted interviews, focus groups and surveys with YPAG members, researchers, group facilitators, and YPAG members’ parents and carers – and looked at existing information collected over the three years – to explore the answers to these questions.

Main findings

Our main findings are:

- Both YPAG members and researchers expressed the value of listening to the voice of young people and incorporating their views within health and social care research.
 - Researchers demonstrated the impact of the contributions that the YPAG had made and the importance of involving children and young people in research, in terms of influencing future project design and understanding what is important to young people.
 - YPAG members, and their parents and carers, shared how being a member of the YPAG had improved members’ confidence, enabled them to build new skills, and exposed them to new experiences.
 - Participants in the evaluation felt that the YPAG was beneficial for building relationships, socialising and taking part in fun activities. The YPAG was also described as an inclusive space.
- However, challenges were highlighted including concerns around tokenism and limited resources.
 - YPAG members, parents, carers, and staff facilitators raised questions around the possibilities of ‘tokenism’. YPAG members’ particularly shared that it is important for members to see the impact of their advice and input.

- Also highlighted were concerns about limited resourcing for the YPAG, and questions about balancing accessibility needs for meetings.
- The evaluation process has generated learning that can be applied to working with children and young people across the research process, particularly around the value of creative activities.
 - Planning for engaging, creative, and interactive meetings ensures members feel part of the process and that their voices are heard and valued.

Key recommendations

- **Researchers** should plan engaging sessions with creative activities and not rely on PowerPoint slides.
- **YPAG members and UH staff facilitators** should collectively produce an updated 'Guide to working with the Herts YPAG for researchers' that provides clearer recommendations.
- Alongside this, **UH staff facilitators** should consider how feedback opportunities could be provided to researchers following their session, so that YPAG members can see the impact of their ideas on the research project.
- The **Herts YPAG should continue to evolve** and support children and young people to engage in research. The Herts YPAG staff team should ensure the YPAG is embedded within the new School of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences at the University of Hertfordshire.

Keywords

Dissemination: sharing the findings of research.

Evaluation: finding out what a project or activity has achieved, what has gone well, and what could have been better.

Focus group: a small group of people coming together to discuss a particular topic, with support from a facilitator (a person leading the meeting).

Primary data: data directly collected for a project.

Qualitative data: data like words (text) or pictures.

Quantitative data: data that involves numbers.

Secondary data: data that has already been collected.

Thematic analysis: generating, understanding, and reporting patterns (themes) in qualitative data.

Tokenism: doing something just to look inclusive, without actually being inclusive or making real changes.

Introducing the Herts YPAG

The Herts YPAG is a young person's research advisory group (YPAG) for children and young people living in Hertfordshire, based at the University of Hertfordshire (UH). The group is part of the Generation R Alliance of UK young people's advisory groups and two international networks: eYPAGnet and iCAN.

About us

The Herts YPAG was established in its current form in March 2022 and currently consists of 13 children and young people aged 10-18 years old. The YPAG is diverse in terms of age, gender, ethnicity/race, school, interests, skills, and career ambitions.

What we do

The Herts YPAG meets online and face-to-face around seven times per year. YPAG members have been supported to gain research skills by working with a wide variety of health and social care researchers and have spoken at conferences and other events.

The group meets to:

- Learn about research and work with health and social care researchers to help them plan and do research about children and young people's health, care, family lives and the community we live in.
- Share ideas about what we think should be researched and get involved in doing research.
- Have fun!

Key achievements

Since March 2022, we have:

- Worked with 31 different researchers about their research and projects, providing advice on topics ranging from encouraging healthy diets, to understanding how the NHS can get more children and young people involved in research, and thinking about the role of school nurses.
- Spoken at conferences, attended national events, and made our own [video](#).
- Built strong relationships between ourselves and others, navigating complex challenges to collectively create a supportive and welcoming environment for both YPAG members and researchers, that can also provide honest and direct feedback to researchers.

Further information

For more information about the group please visit [our website](#).

Our evaluation

What does evaluation mean?

Evaluation is like research, but focused on finding out what a project, activity or service has achieved, what's worked well and what could have been better. Evaluation can happen during a project or programme and/or at the end. Evaluation should involve a range of people to get a well-rounded picture of what has worked, when and how.

Conducting an evaluation helps us to find out what's working and how it can be improved for the future.



YPAG members focus group: designing an 'ideal meeting schedule'

The Excellent Evaluators team

Drawing on the approach used by the [eyeYPAG evaluation](#) (an evaluation of the YPAG at



Moorfields Eye Hospital), a group of Herts YPAG members (Benita Djan, Jacob Wright and Zuyi Su) worked together to co-produce the evaluation with two group facilitators (Lauren Denyer and Helen Abnett). We called ourselves the Excellent Evaluators, and we worked together to design the project,

facilitated focus groups and interviews, and wrote this report.

Evaluation questions:

Together, the excellent evaluators team designed the evaluation to answer three questions:

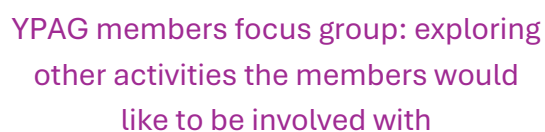
1. How has being a member of the YPAG impacted YPAG members themselves?
2. How has working with the YPAG impacted research and researchers?
3. How can the YPAG be improved for the future?

How did we work together?

The five members of the Excellent Evaluators team agreed to work together to contribute our different skills and experiences. The main way we worked together was through online meetings over Zoom. Different parts of the evaluation were also led by different members of the team, recognising and building on each other's capacity,

What did we do?

- Held two in-person focus groups in May 2025, led by the YPAG members of the Excellent Evaluators team:
 - Focus Group 1 with YPAG members
 - Focus Group 2 with the YPAG facilitators (Lauren, Helen and Louca-Mai).



- <https://doi.org/10.18745/PB.26074>

Table 1: The number of participants reached

Source type	Data type	Number of participants or responses
Focus group	Focus group 1: YPAG members*	7
	Focus group 2: YPAG facilitators	3
Interview	Interview 1	1
	Interview 2	1
Surveys	YPAG members*	4
	Parents or carers	8
	Researchers	7
Secondary data	Researcher feedback forms	16
Total		47

*All members of the YPAG either attended the focus group, completed a survey, or were involved in the Excellent Evaluators team.

We used a recording device to record our in-person focus groups and the online platform Zoom to record our online meetings, and these were then transcribed (written into a script). For our surveys, we used Microsoft Forms to distribute the surveys and then looked at the results in Microsoft Excel.

The Excellent Evaluators team then worked together to analyse the data we had gathered. We did this in lots of different ways:

- For the qualitative data (transcripts of focus groups, interviews, responses to survey questions, creative outputs), we used ‘thematic analysis’¹ to look for patterns or themes from the different data sources. We began by looking for ‘codes’ (interesting or meaningful aspects of the data) together in sections of the text during our online meetings. The UH staff facilitators then applied these codes across all our data and brought our findings to the next meeting so they could be discussed and grouped together into themes.

Fac1 The next thing is if you had to explain to a friend what we do in the group, what would you say? Just put your hands up if you have a ... what would you say?

F We help researchers get experience of talking to young people and give them our ideas to improve their research ... and get pizza.

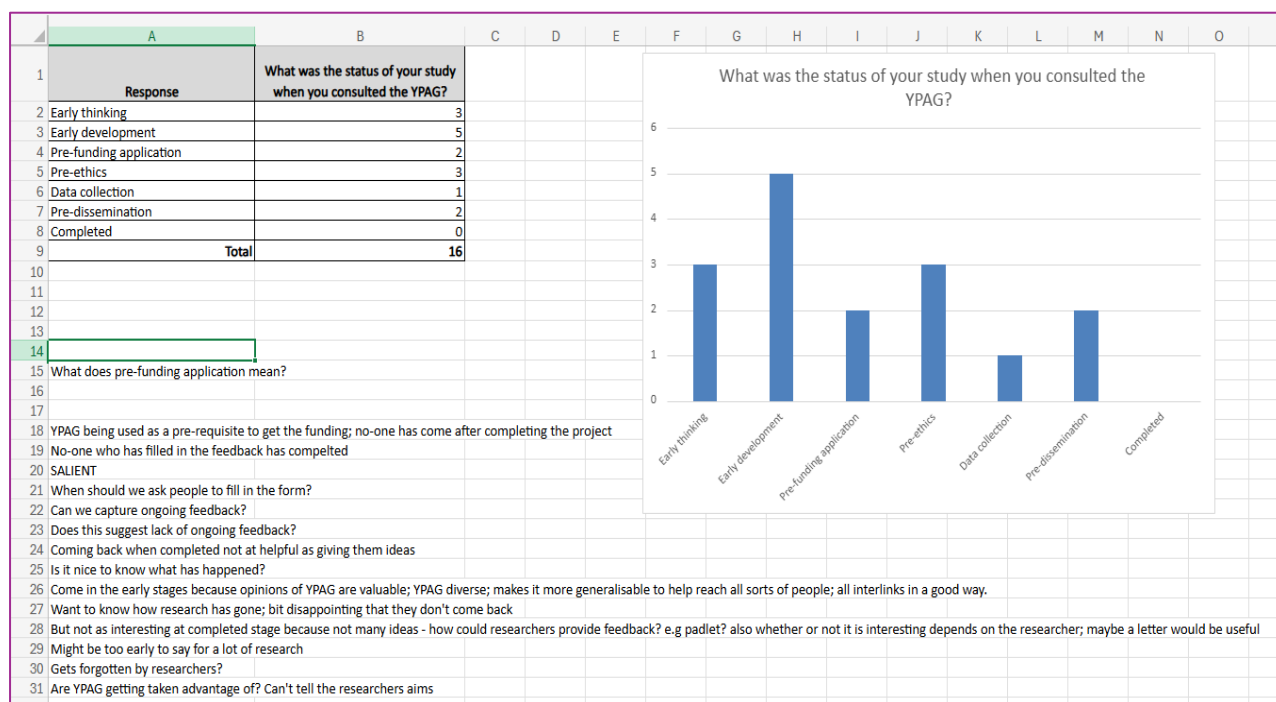
Fac1 Anyone else?

M Yeah we let researchers get a different perspective than they might have in academic adult circles.

Data analysis: using colours to collectively generate codes for the qualitative data

¹ See Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2013) *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners* Sage Publications Ltd

- For other creative outputs, we used a form of ‘summative quantitative content analysis’: counting the number of times different ideas or themes were generated.
- For the quantitative data (using the researcher feedback forms) a UH staff member used Excel to create tables and charts which were then discussed and analysed during our online meetings.



Data analysis: for the quantitative data, a UH staff facilitator created tables and charts such as the one above. This was shared with all members of the Excellent Evaluators during an online meeting, and notes were added to the excel sheet as we discussed what we can interpret from the data.

Findings

The value of listening to the voice of young people

1. The impact of YPAG contributions on research

Researchers talked about the importance of involving children and young people in research, and that this influenced the design of their project and enabled them to understand what is important to young people. For example, researchers said they included YPAG ideas in proposals, project plans, intervention design, a government consultation and an NHS England programme.

According to the researcher feedback forms, most researchers (13/16) generally engaged with the YPAG in the early stages of their research (early thinking, before obtaining funding or ethics approval) and were focused on feedback or getting YPAG members' 'perspective' on tools or ideas. One researcher consulted the YPAG at data collection stage, and two others used their session with the YPAG to think about ideas for dissemination – before sharing their research findings.

In the feedback forms, all researchers stated that they were easily able to get the input that they wanted from the YPAG and that they found the YPAG's advice and comments useful.

“Not only do children and young people have the right to be consulted about matters that affect them, but the research is likely to be improved through their involvement, including in the design at an early stage of development.”
(Researcher feedback form)

“In our first phase of engagement, we did not engage with children and young people, so we were very keen to fill this gap and capture the views of children and young people.” (Researcher feedback form)

2. The impact of YPAG contributions on members themselves

YPAG members, and their parents and carers, shared how being a member of the YPAG had improved members' confidence, enabled them to build new skills, and exposed them to new experiences.

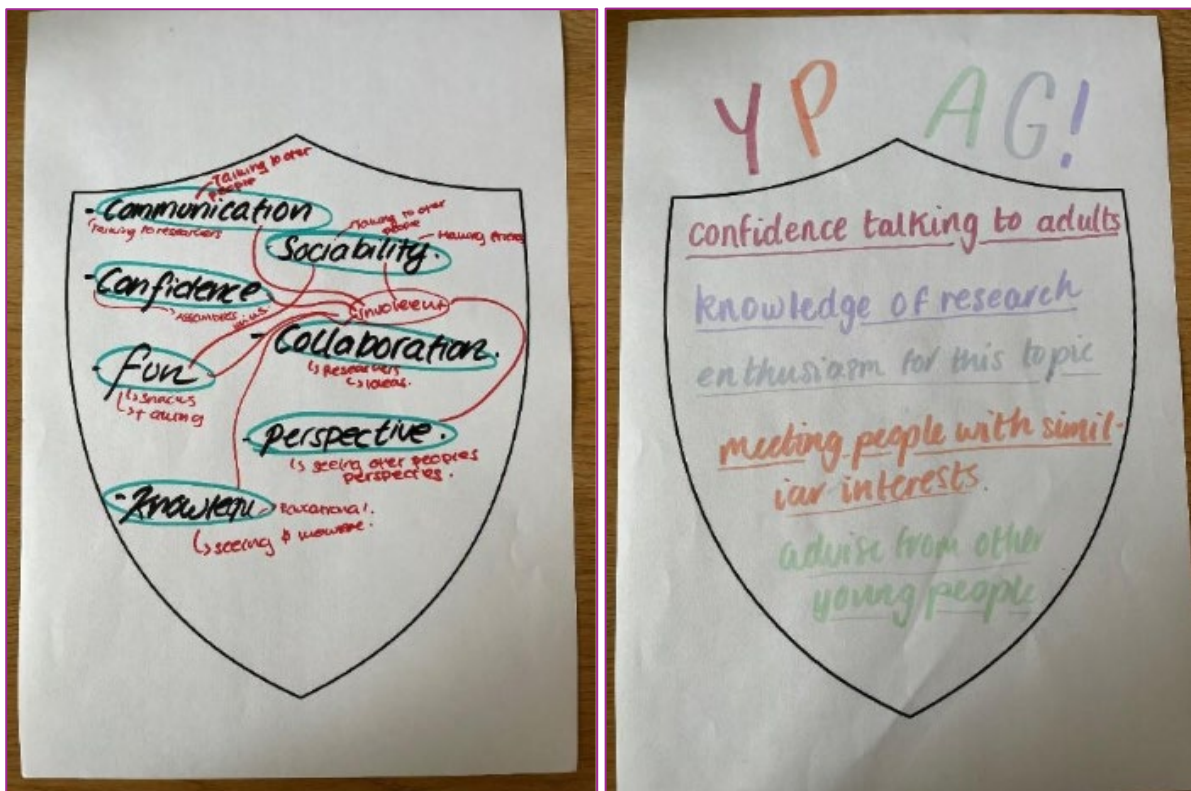
"I have seen a dramatic change in my son since he started YPAG and the changes are all positive. He realises what he has to say is important and he is heard."

(Parent and carer survey response)

"It has definitely boosted my confidence, like talking to other people."

(YPAG member)

During the focus group, YPAG members were asked to fill in a blank shield template with words, images, symbols, drawings or pictures to share what skills or knowledge that they have gained from being part of the group.



Shields created during the YPAG members focus group, in response to the question: 'What skills or knowledge do you think you have gained from being a part of the group?'

In the shields, all the YPAG members used the word confidence, and mentioned something related to research skills or knowledge. Other words used were collaborate, teamwork, involvement, fun and communication.

YPAG members and their parents/carers felt the YPAG has enabled the YPAG members to develop skills, such as in writing and research, and to gain awareness of scientific research and terminology.

“YPAG is a great opportunity for young people to gain valuable experience, make a real impact in research and healthcare, and ensure youth voices shape important decisions.” (YPAG member)

“It’s shaping his future too. He is so proud to be part of the YPAG group and he now has the confidence to put himself forward for other activities with YPAG but also outside YPAG.” (Parent and carer survey)

3. Building relationships and socialising

The social aspect of the YPAG and building relationships between YPAG members as well as with researchers was extremely important for enhancing members’ motivations and encouraging useful feedback. YPAG members strongly emphasised the importance of socialising and having fun, including through food (pizza!) and fun activities. These activities were also seen as important in breaking down barriers between YPAG members and researchers, connecting with young people before the research related discussions.

“I would say because it’s really valuable, and you might like it and you might have some fun and learn something.” (YPAG member)

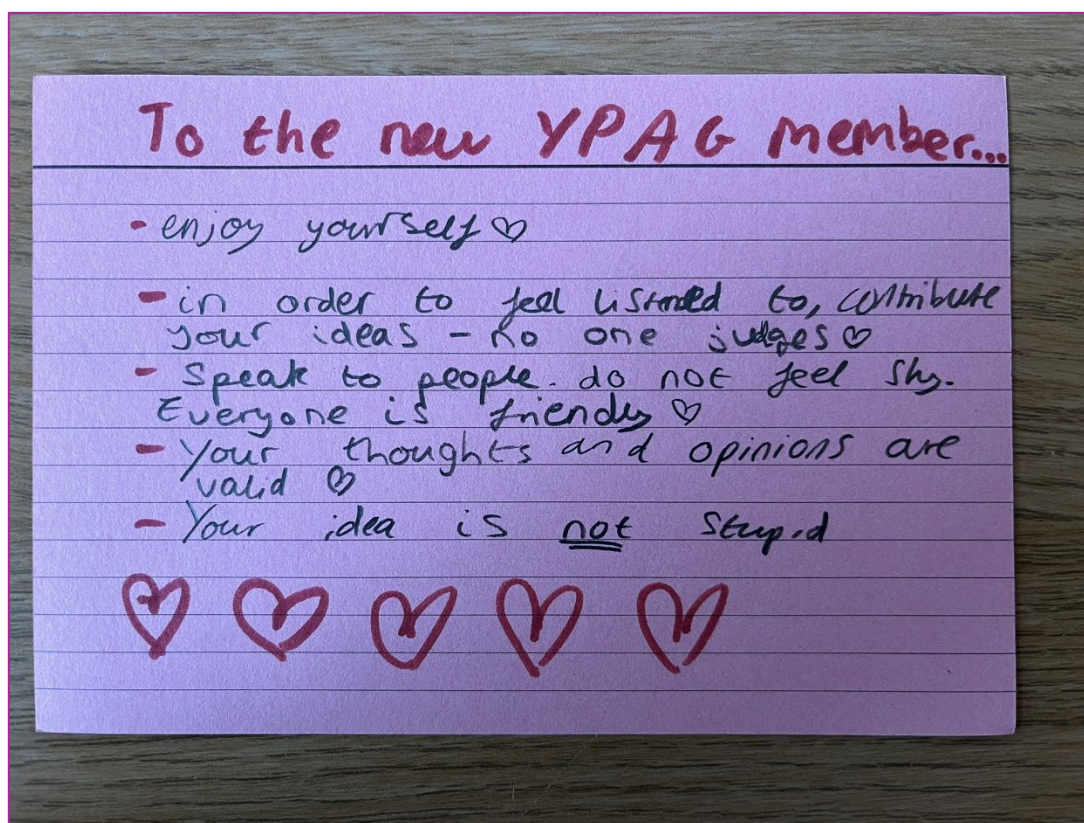
“It fits well with him socially as he gets to meet people and has developed a good relationship with peers.” (Parent and carer survey)

The YPAG was also described as an inclusive space for providing an opportunity for young people to meet people who are not in their local area, as well as providing a sense of belonging.

“The staff have made adaptations to help him stay engaged online and as he loves being involved he tends to be able to stay focused for the whole meeting. The staff will always try and find a way to help and they get the balance right between fun and work/learning. They have learnt how to get the best out of [name redacted].” (Parent/carers survey)

"I can't thank the YPAG enough for how wonderful they have been and for all of the fantastic opportunities you have given my son. You have supported him throughout and in the 3 years plus that he has been attending, YPAG has broadened his horizon and given him chances to do things he would never have got to do otherwise." (Parent/carer survey)

In the focus group, YPAG members were asked to imagine a new member is joining the group and wrote a postcard to them. On the postcards, YPAG members wrote about the YPAG being inclusive and friendly, that it is valuable and that the YPAG is a group that is focused on the practicality of what happens.



A postcard created during the YPAG members focus group, in response to the prompt: 'Imagine a new member is joining the group. Take one of these postcards, and write a message on it to help them feel welcome.'

Challenges

1. Tokenism

YPAG members, parents and carers, and staff facilitators raised questions about the possibilities of ‘tokenism’. Tokenism refers to when members of the public are included in research simply to fulfil a requirement and not for any meaning. YPAG members’ particularly shared that it is important for members to see the impact of their suggestions and input.

“To echo [name redacted], some researchers just seem to want to get young people involved so they can tick it off on the list, or mention it for the funding application or something like that.” (YPAG member)

“Some researchers just come to tick a box... and say oh I’ve talked to some young people. But actually they then carry on doing what they were going to do anyway.” (Facilitators transcript)

The YPAG members’ felt that they didn’t often get to see enough of the impact of their ideas on research projects and would like this to be improved for the future:

“Because like with [redacted] I feel like I’m actually doing a lot to help their project because they come back to us, they tell us how they’ve kind of improved based on what we’ve been saying. But sometimes other researchers yeah, they just leave us ... and it’s like okay what have I done to benefit you.” (YPAG member)

2. Limited resources

Practical issues around administration and arranging meetings came up as a challenge for both YPAG facilitators and parents/carers. One challenge was around creating a balance in the frequency and duration of meetings when there are lots of researchers who want to work with the group.

There were also some differences of opinion from parents and carers around whether online or face-to-face meetings were more accessible. Transport was noted as a challenge for working parents and sometimes providing a lift for their children to meetings was not possible. However, online meetings may not always be a solution due to problems associated with the ability to focus during online meetings.

Engaging children and young people in research

1. Planning sessions

In the researcher feedback forms, researchers highlighted the importance of planning sessions and meeting with YPAG facilitators in preparation for the meeting.

“It was really helpful to be able to meet with you to plan the session and to have an idea of the structure of the session. I had not done engagement work with young people before so was unsure about how it would all go but you helped to put my mind at ease and feel really prepared for the session.” (Researcher feedback form)

“[names redacted] were fantastic in meeting with us and supporting us in how best to engage with children and young people, having this guidance was very much appreciated.” (Researcher feedback form)

In the focus group and in survey responses with those who couldn't attend, YPAG members described enjoying creative and engaging sessions with activities. Overall, a key theme was enjoying getting involved with the research project and providing input and ideas.

“I really liked the more creative projects and also the Christmas parties.” (YPAG member)

“Sometimes if the researcher's powerpoint isn't very engaging with less opportunities to contribute/do activities, that can be boring.” (YPAG member)

2. Feedback from engaging with the Herts YPAG

When we asked researchers about what advice they would give to other researchers looking to engage with the Herts YPAG they described the importance of being prepared and clarifying your objectives. Suggestions included observing sessions, asking for advice and learning from others.

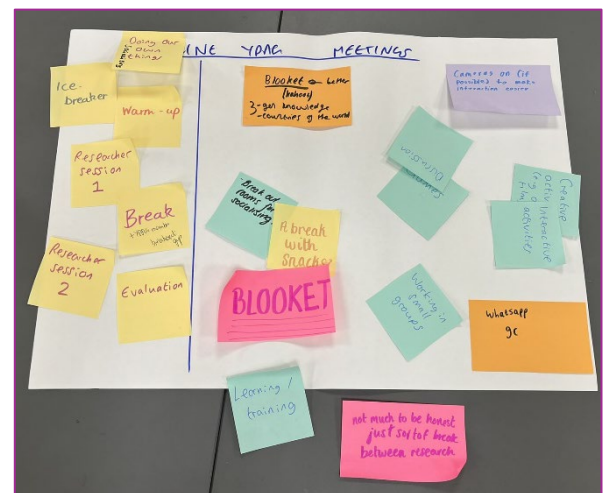
“It's a fantastic opportunity to involve young people in your project design. Be clear about what you need input on.” (Researcher)

“Don't come in cold. Maybe come in and watch a few sessions. And once you see the group and you see them interacting with other people and listen to other people's research, then it doesn't seem so scary or complicated.” (Researcher)

YPAG MEETING PLAN

Ice-breaker	Games
Warm-up	Learning / Training
Doing our own things <i>(during)</i>	Working in small groups
Break	Discussion
Research session 1	Creative activities (e.g. art, film)
Lunch	Interactive activities
Research session 2	
Evaluation	

A break with Snacks.



The ideal online YPAG meeting followed a similar structure, with time for socialising at the beginning with an icebreaker, with a break between the two researcher sessions. The YPAG felt that online games were important for these meetings and suggested Blooket or Kahoot. The YPAG members then discussed how these sessions differ from YPAG meetings they had been a part of.

<https://doi.org/10.18745/PB.26074>

Recommendations

- **Researchers** should ensure they plan engaging sessions with creative activities and do not just rely on PowerPoint slides. Researchers can and should engage with YPAG members and staff facilitators prior to presenting, to help ensure that sessions are accessible and engaging for YPAG members. Researchers are also welcome to observe a meeting prior to their session to see how the group works.
- **YPAG members and UH staff facilitators** should collectively produce an updated 'Guide for to working with the Herts YPAG for researchers' that provides clearer recommendations. As part of this, YPAG members and UH staff facilitators should work together to create a clear values statement for the YPAG, ensuring its mission, aims and objectives are understandable for all, and reaffirming a commitment to reducing tokenism.
- Alongside this, **UH staff facilitators** should consider ways in which feedback opportunities could be provided to researchers following their session, so that YPAG members can see the impact of their ideas on the research project.
- The **Herts YPAG should continue to evolve** and support children and young people to engage in research and work to be embedded within the new University of Hertfordshire School of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences.

Conclusion

The purpose of undertaking this evaluation of the Herts YPAG was to explore what the YPAG has achieved and how it could be improved for the future. The findings demonstrate a clear impact of the group on research but also on YPAG members themselves in terms of building new skills and providing opportunities for personal development.

In the wider context of children and young people's involvement in research, this evaluation adds to the evidence base for involving the voices of children and young people in research and prioritising what's important to them. Engaging children and young people via groups such as YPAGs ensures that research projects reflect their experiences and perspectives. Building on the [EyeYPAG evaluation at Moorfields Eye Hospital](#), this evaluation provides a method, creative activity examples, reflections, and suggestions on how to co-produce an evaluation with children and young people.

Furthermore, this evaluation also provides evidence for the importance of communicating feedback to young people, to demonstrate how their ideas have contributed to the research project, and to acknowledge their contribution.

Reflections from the Excellent Evaluators team

During our last meeting, the Excellent Evaluators team answered some questions to reflect on the process of the evaluation.

What's one thing you're proud of from being part of this evaluation?

Jacob: Leading the focus group, I feel like this really helped with my research skills and my bonds within the YPAG.

Benita: Being able to work in a group as a very independent person and knowing that I'm going to make a change.

Zuyi: Being able to set up and host an in-person YPAG meeting, despite being a very new member. It's something I thought I would find very challenging, but due to support from Helen and Lauren, I managed to accomplish it, so I am quite proud of what I've done being part of the YPAG so far.

What was challenging, and how did you deal with it?

Benita: Understanding some of the material and asking for help. Lauren and Helen have the attitude that no questions are silly, and it really helps with our confidence and asking questions.

Jacob: The whole new research techniques were so hard but all I had to do was ask and it helped me so much.

Zuyi: Sometimes during the focus group it was quiet and hard to gather opinions from everyone, and during the analysis afterwards, it was difficult to interpret what people have said – a sense of ambiguity.

What did you learn — about yourself, or about working with adults/academics?

Benita: I've gained a new perspective of things, the more you read into different types of data, or like different types of research, I think that's really interesting.

Zuyi: I've found a new sense of confidence in myself. I have really enjoyed hosting interviews and focus groups, and they have helped to develop my communication and teamwork skills.

If someone your age was going to do something like this, what advice would you give them?

Benita: You don't have to be too confident. Don't be shy about your thoughts, because your opinions are yours and people can learn from them, so don't be afraid to share them. No question is a silly question.

Zuyi: Always give new opportunities a try if you have time as it will teach you skills you will need in life.

Some thoughts from Lauren and Helen:

Lauren: I have really enjoyed working on this evaluation with the team. I joined the YPAG as a facilitator in October 2024 and leading this evaluation has been a great opportunity to learn about how the group started and how we can improve it for the future. My favourite parts have been running the in-person focus group, our Excellent Evaluator team meetings and watching the YPAG members grow in confidence.

Helen: Working as part of the Excellent Evaluators has been a really rewarding experience. The meetings and discussions we had as a group were always enriching, insightful and reflective. It has been great to think about how the YPAG can continue to develop and become even more valuable for researchers and YPAG members. I'm really looking forward to working with the YPAG to implement what we have found and sharing our learning so others can benefit from this work.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the Herts YPAG members for their co-operation with the evaluation, and for providing their reflections and insights during the in-person focus group or via the online survey.

Thank you to the wider Patient and Public Involvement and Experience team in the Centre for Research in Community Care (CRIPACC) at the University of Hertfordshire – particularly Professor Julia Jones and Dr Elspeth Mathie – for their advice and guidance.

We are grateful to the CRIPACC team for all their support with YPAG activities, and to the CRIPACC leadership team for supporting Lauren, Helen, and Louca-Mai's work with the YPAG.

Finally, a massive thank you to Sonya Prime for her ongoing administrative support for the Herts YPAG. We would be lost without you!

Please cite this report as:

Denyer, L., Abnett, H., Dijan, B., Su, Z., Wright, J. & Brady, L.-M. (2025). *Evaluating the Hertfordshire Young People's Research Advisory Group*. University of Hertfordshire. <https://doi.org/10.18745/PB.26074>

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