The PANELS Project
(PArticipation of under-served young people in NE London health and wellbeing Services)

Summary Report
November 2026



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At the time of publication findings in this report had not yet been peer-reviewed

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FUNDED BY NIHR | National Institute for Health and Care Research
NHS North East London

SUMMARY

If we want equitable, place-based integrated care systems which address health inequalities, we must design them with the young people most affected, not for them.

Why was the project needed?

Young people are experts in their own lives, yet many, particularly those who are under-served, have limited opportunities to influence the decisions, services and systems that affect their health and wellbeing.

What was the PANELS project?

PANELS (PArticipation of under-served young people in North East London health and wellbeing Services) was a partnership between a community organisation, university and NHS Trust which brought together young people and adults working with them in Redbridge to explore how local health and care systems and services could better meet the needs of under-served young people.

What did we learn?

The project found that young people should be involved as partners throughout the process rather than consulted at individual stages.

The Project also highlighted the importance of creating safe and inclusive opportunities for participation, working alongside trusted community organisations, and ensuring that young people's views are acted upon rather than simply heard.

What makes partnership work effective?

The project demonstrated that effective partnership working relies on bringing together different forms of expertise. Young people bring knowledge of their lived experiences, community organisations bring trusted understanding of local communities, and professionals and researchers contribute specialist knowledge and evidence. Together, these perspectives can help create services that are more accessible, responsive and effective.

What needs to happen next?

The findings from PANELS suggest that organisations seeking to improve outcomes for young people should invest in meaningful participation, prioritise under-served and seldom-heard young people, and embed co-production and partnership working into how services are planned, delivered and improved

Why does young people's participation in health and care matter?

Children and young people make up around a quarter of the UK population but receive only 11% of NHS funding. At the same time, demand for health and social care services is increasing, particularly for mental health and community support[1].

Children and young people in the UK often have poorer health outcomes and experiences compared to those in similar countries, and health inequalities are also widening. Factors such as poverty, where someone lives, ethnicity, and other personal circumstances can all affect health and wellbeing throughout childhood and into adulthood. These challenges are often greater for under-served groups, who may face multiple and overlapping barriers.

Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child[2] all children and young people have a right to the highest possible standard of healthcare (article 24), to have a say in matters that affect them (Article 12), and to express their thoughts and opinions and access information (Article 13). Establishing child-centred practice by involving young people in decisions about the care they receive, the services they use, and the commissioning, development, delivery and evaluation of health and care services and systems ensures that these better reflect their priorities and concerns[3]. Involving young people in the planning, delivery and evaluation of health and care systems and services helps to ensure that those systems services are more responsive, inclusive, and better meet young people's needs.

What was the PANELS Project?

The PANELS (PArticipation of under-served young people in North East London health and wellbeing Services) project was a collaboration between the University of Hertfordshire, Community Action Redbridge and NHS NE London. From late 2024 to Spring 2026 the project worked in partnership with local young people and professionals in the London Borough of Redbridge. Redbridge is a diverse borough, home to a wide range of communities. However, the borough also faces challenges including high levels of poverty and inequality, limited support for young people, and a voluntary and community sector that is less connected than in some other areas of North East London.





The project aimed to create a strong and lasting partnership where young people, and adults who work with them, can learn and work together to explore how participation can best improve the health and wellbeing of under-served young people aged 15-25 in an integrated care system[4].

Project Aims:

1

Developing a place-based partnership of adults and young people which builds on existing local groups and connections.

2

Bringing people together to explore what matters for under-served young people's health and wellbeing, what good and inclusive participation looks like in practice and how young people and organisations can work together to make this happen.

3

Evaluate the project in collaboration with young people, reflecting on lessons learnt, what went well and what could be improved in future partnership working.

[1] https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/work-we-do/state-of-child-health
[2] https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/
[3] Brady, L.-M. (2020) Embedding young people's participation in health services: new approaches. Bristol: Policy Press. https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/embedding-young-peoples-participation-in-health-services.
[4] https://www.england.nhs.uk/integratedcare/what-is-integrated-care/

What did we do?



Set-up
- Recruited Young Advisors
- Carried out initial stakeholder mapping

Evaluation
- Focus groups
- Surveys
- Reflections and feedback

1 2 3 4

Community building
- Engagement with local young people
- Community workshops
- Community of Practice meetings
- Stakeholder workshop

Dissemination
- Co-produced accessible resources
- Sharing learning

The project brought together young people living in Redbridge and stakeholders across statutory, voluntary and community services.

Young Advisors:

7 local young people were recruited and employed by Community Action Redbridge as Young Advisors. They were involved throughout the project via regular online and in-person meetings, co-facilitated workshops and meetings, supported peer engagement, represented and presented on the project in national and local events and conferences, and contributed to the design and data collection in the project evaluation.





Engaging young people:

Engagement activities, co-led by the young advisors, reached approximately a further **70** under-served local young people through community-based sessions and two online workshops. These included young people who were care-experienced, young refugees and asylum-seekers and other under-served groups. This engagement explored lived experiences of local health and wellbeing, identifying recurring themes: mental health, access to services, community safety, participation in decision-making, and inequality.





Stakeholder engagement:

Following initial stakeholder mapping, engagement of those supporting and providing services to young people comprised approximately **150** interactions with **58** professionals, an in-person workshop, and six Community of Practice meetings. These created structured opportunities to explore participation, rights-based approaches, health inequalities and creative health practice.

Evaluation

Method:

We collected feedback using a range of methods including surveys and focus groups with the project team, young advisors, and young people and adults involved in the project. We also reviewed meeting notes, reflections from the project team and Young Advisors, and feedback collected during events and activities.

What did we learn?



Key lessons for engaging under-served young people

Shared commitment to youth voice

A key facilitator of effective partnerships was the shared commitment among stakeholders to improving young people's health and wellbeing and making services more accessible and responsive to their needs. Community of Practice members were keen to learn how to engage a wider and more diverse range of young people and use these insights to improve their practice.

"[S]ometimes you go into a different space and hear that they've collaborated or engaged with young people and sometimes I feel it's such a small portion of young people. What are we doing about all of those other voices that we're not reaching out to? And so, I suppose understanding more about what it means when we engage with young people, what we really take away from it and how we can get better at it". (CoP member – focus group).

Young advisors and other young people emphasised that involvement requires more than just listening to young people, it also requires acting on.

"I wasn't sure how effective my voice was going to be and how heard it actually was going to be, and…I wasn't sure how working with older people was going to be". (Young advisor – focus group)

Implications: it is important to involve young people as partners in decision-making and showing how their contributions can lead to change.

The importance of a locally led and place-based approach

A locally led and place-based approach enabled stakeholders to draw on their knowledge of local health and community services. This strengthened engagement, built a shared understanding of young people's health and wellbeing needs, and informed a vision for service transformation.

"[I]f people have got some connectivity to this work through local conversations that are happening on a person-by-person basis, they are much more likely to then actually want to engage." (Project team member).

Young people highlighted not only broader challenges affecting health and wellbeing (for example, exam stress, poor quality housing, lack of green space, food poverty), but also the importance of their lived experiences in the area, including awareness of services and support.

"If I was looking for opportunities, be it like recreational, I wouldn't pick Redbridge to be the place that I go to. It would be like central London or Stratford" (YP in-person workshop)

Implications: NHS and community organisations should work alongside local communities and young people when designing services to ensure they reflect local needs, priorities and experiences.

Creating safe and inclusive shared spaces

Bringing young people, professionals and organisations together in safe and inclusive spaces helped build trust and strengthened relationships and supported meaningful collaboration. Young Advisors consistent and active contributions in meetings strengthened the project's credibility and created more opportunities to develop practical solutions together which further supported the collaboration.

[T]he initial get together [workshop] …was really powerful. Being on the table with the Young Advisors face to face was powerful and the outputs from that were really good". (CoP member – focus group).



"I do feel like I have been listened to… [S]ometimes we do go into rooms and we are the youngest people [there], but… instead of letting that hold us back we just take it on board and we just go ahead and share our views and represent young people". (Young Advisor – focus group).



"We were fortunate to have built the trust needed to reach these groups – but it took me a lot of persistence, relationship-building and resilience" (Project team member, Reflective log)

Implications: investing in trust, relationships and inclusive spaces can strengthen collaboration between young people and professionals.

Valuing diverse perspectives

Stakeholders viewed the different perspectives and experiences as an asset to partnership working. Young people emphasised that their views and lived experiences often differed from the perspective of the adults and professionals, providing valuable insights that may otherwise be overlooked.

"…[Y]oung people and adults obviously have different views on different stuff, so it's good to get them together so that they can understand each other's views." (Young Advisor – focus group)



"If you involve young people in thinking about health systems and services, then you can end up having like a better design for the services and like something that entices young people more." (Young person – online workshop)

Implications: young people's lived experiences should be recognised as valuable expertise when designing services and support.

Meeting young people where they are is essential

Meeting young people where they were, through flexible and trauma-informed approaches, helped create safe and inclusive opportunities for participation. The diversity of the project team also helped create an environment where young people felt able to speak openly and honestly.

"[One young person] …shared an Islamic perspective on homosexuality with me — as a visibly Muslim facilitator, I found this especially powerful. It showed that we had successfully created a safe and respectful space through the way we presented ourselves and the project". (Team member reflection log).

Implications: organisations should use flexible, inclusive and trauma-informed approaches to participation and adapt activities to meet young people's needs.

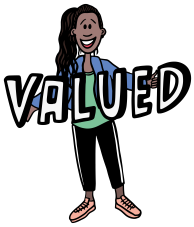
Participation should be mutually beneficial

Young people reported a range of benefits from their involvement, including increased confidence, new skills and opportunities to influence decision-making. They also valued the opportunity to connect with other young people and share experiences.

I've learned to be more confident. More open... I feel like my communication skills has levelled up to be fair. My planning skills as well. (Young Advisor – Interview)

"I've enjoyed the events and the workshops and getting to meet young people, getting to hear their views, getting to actually feel like I'm gonna make a difference. In terms of benefits, I think that this role has really given us some quite good soft skills, transferable skills that I can use throughout my life, skills that I can put on my CV and just use in the future". (Young Advisors – Focus Group)







Implications: it is important to ensure that participation benefits young people as well as organisations, creating opportunities for learning, development and allowing meaningful influence.

Challenges

Barriers to participation are often systemic



The project faced several barriers that affected participation and collaboration. In the early stages, there was a lack of clarity about the project's purpose and what it offered, which made it harder to build a shared understanding and engage stakeholders.

Changes in staffing and the Integrated Care Board (ICB) funding landscape created extra challenges for the project. Some organisations had limited capacity, which made it harder for them to take part fully. Smaller community organisations often found this particularly difficult because they had fewer resources.

The time-limited nature of the project also made it harder to build and sustain relationships. Many young people also experienced personal challenges, including financial hardship, digital poverty and accessibility barriers, which sometimes affected their ability to participate.

These findings emphasise the importance of providing sufficient time, resources and support for meaningful partnership working.

Making an impact

Our evaluation found evidence of a range of short and medium-term impacts resulting from the project. These include:

Strengthened cross-sector relationships and improved communication between VCSE organisations and statutory services.

Increased interest in and commitment to meaningful youth participation in strategy, decision-making and service development.

Young Advisors reported greater confidence, new skills and increased influence in decision-making spaces.

Modelled inclusive involvement of under-served young people.

Contributed to early system-level changes, including improved accessibility of local authority meetings.

Contributed to local strategic planning and service development, helping ensure that young people's experiences and priorities inform future work.



Secured additional funding to build on the project's learning and impact.





The Impact of Young Advisors: Reflections from Nyrah as a Public Co-Applicant

Being involved in PANELS has shown me how valuable it is to have young people directly involved in shaping projects, services and decision making. Young people's experiences and perspectives can highlight issues that may otherwise be overlooked, particularly for those who are under-served and seldom heard. I feel that our involvement helped bring a different perspective to discussions and encouraged organisations to think more carefully about how accessible and inclusive their services and decision making processes are.

Personally, being a Young Advisor has helped me to become more confident in expressing my views, communicating with professionals and contributing to discussions where young people's voices are genuinely valued. It has also given me new skills and a better understanding of how local services and organisations work together. I think the experience has been particularly valuable because it has shown me that young people can have a meaningful influence, rather than simply being consulted after decisions have already been made.

I also think the findings around barriers to participation are really important. For all types of young people to be involved, organisations need to recognise that participation is not always equally accessible to everyone. Providing the right support, resources, flexibility and enough time to build relationships is essential to making youth participation genuinely inclusive and sustainable.

What we're doing next

We are working with young people and stakeholders to:

- Coproduce creative and accessible resources with young people and project stakeholders to share learning and support implementation.
- Continue sharing learning to support youth participation and partnership working.
- Co-create a theory of change to guide future work.
- Plan and develop further research.



Implications for policy and practice

Our findings suggest that organisations seeking to improve outcomes for young people should:

Move Beyond Youth Voice
Create opportunities for co-production, shared decision-making and youth-led approaches.

Embed Participation
Invest in and embed youth participation as a core part of service planning, delivery and improvement.

Prioritise Inclusion
Engage marginalised and seldom-heard young people in ways that work for them.

Start Local
Build relationships and co-design services with local young people, communities and organisations.

More information

For further information about the PANELS project and other publications, including our co-created zine and films:

Project information



Watch our films about the project:

The PANELS Film

'Making of' Film



Acknowledgements

The PANELS project was funded by an National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) programme development grant (award 207070) and supported by the NIHR Applied Research Collaboration East of England with additional funding from a University of Hertfordshire ESRC Impact Acceleration Award. Any views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

We would like to thank all the young advisors for their time, insights and willingness to be part of the project, particularly our young co-applicants/leads Nishit, Geena and Nyrah, and our young advisors Amber, Areez, Deen, Rajdeep, Scott and Zayd. This project would not have been possible without their invaluable contributions.

With thanks also to project team members, particularly Dr Yvonne Robinson and Prof Daksha Trivedi (UH), Saeeda Bugtti and Simon Cross (Community Action Redbridge) and Kath Evans (NHS NE London).

We are also grateful for the support and collaboration of our project hosts and partners, North East London Integrated Care Board.







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