BOLD ENCOUNTERS

where health systems

and lived experience meet

THE RIGHT TO BE HEARD



Living in a coastal town - reflections from recovery by Jake Hurle

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WELCOME

BOLD ENCOUNTERS: where health systems and lived experience meet is a zine created to connect projects across the Mobilising Community Assets to Tackle Health Inequalities (MCA) programme and celebrate the knowledge, creativity, and lived experience shaping this work across the UK.

These research projects promote people-powered change by exploring together how collaborative community, cultural and nature-based activities can help improve people's health and reduce health inequalities. MCA brings together researchers, community organisations and people affected by inequalities to understand what's already helping, what else is needed, and how health systems and communities can work better together.

Zines allow us to celebrate different voices in one space - and this one is designed to grow in conversation with the people and communities involved. Each issue explores a theme that has arisen through our conversations with projects, centring the contribution of lived experience to health research and practice. When we talk about lived experience, we mean the experience of life challenges such as discrimination and social injustice, health conditions, or the experience of accessing support from health, care or community services.

This is our first issue, which is all about how MCA projects have used a broad range of creative approaches to centre and celebrate lived experience. By sharing creative outputs, reflections on process, and thoughts on the practicalities of using creative methods, we hope to create connections across projects and inspire those outside of the MCA programme who are interested in using creative methods in their work.

How you choose to engage with the zines is up to you - you might read from front to back, or from back to front, or dip in and read the pieces that call to you.

- Chelsea Mac Donnchadha and Danny Sherwood, Co-create

INTRODUCTION

As an Irish Traveller who was researched before I even understood what it was, research was an uneasy word for me before I had language for why. Long before I found my way into participatory and community research I read *Decolonial Methodologies* by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a Māori scholar who described 'research' as one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous language. Those words resonated within me, but I also understood the power that research in the hands of the community could yield.

As I made my way through the submissions in this zine, I was struck by how many of the contributions spoke not of the challenges they were facing, but of the opportunities and benefits of using creative methods. These benefits were diverse, with different projects using different methods, each aligning with what they needed to hold or express.

In Liverpool, Sefton and Knowsley, the poems written and shared by the ReCITE project were created collectively and show how creative methods can allow people who wouldn't take part in traditional research to convey difficult experiences without re-traumatising them.

In South West London, The Abundance Project used community-led walks to identify the assets that were important in their communities. As someone who grew up in Peckham, I too could connect with the importance of chicken shops and the role they played as an after school link up spot (I'm still partial to six wings and chips covered in burger sauce, even if bossman's prices keep increasing).

In North Shields, See Me North used Lego models to support people with lived experience of homelessness to represent barriers and stigmas around homelessness. I was reminded of just how important creative methods are in enabling people with lived experience to share their experiences: *"Things come out. If we didn't do things like this we wouldn't know how to say it"* (Jared, lived experience member).

I hope that you are inspired by these examples of using creative methods to create change, and think about how you might take them into your own work. The creative methods all, in their different ways, gave people a way to be heard.

- Chelsea Mac Donnchadha, Co-create

CONTENT WARNING

Content:

- Health inequalities
- Ethnic inequalities in mental health
- Substance use
- Bereavement
- Homelessness

This zine shares the lived and living experiences of people connected to the Mobilising Community Assets to Tackle Health Inequalities projects, and as such presents some experiences that might be challenging to engage with.

If you have experiences of any of the above, please take time and extra care as you make your way through the zine. If you are reading this because you are connected to an MCA project, your project may be able to offer support.

If you aren't able to access support through an MCA project or one of the services above, please email info@wearecocreate.com and we will try and help you find somewhere.

There are also national helplines and support services for some of the issues addressed in this zine, including:

Mental health
England and Wales: Mind Infoline – 0300 123 3393
Scotland: Breathing Space – 0800 83 85 87
Northern Ireland: Lifeline – 0808 808 8000

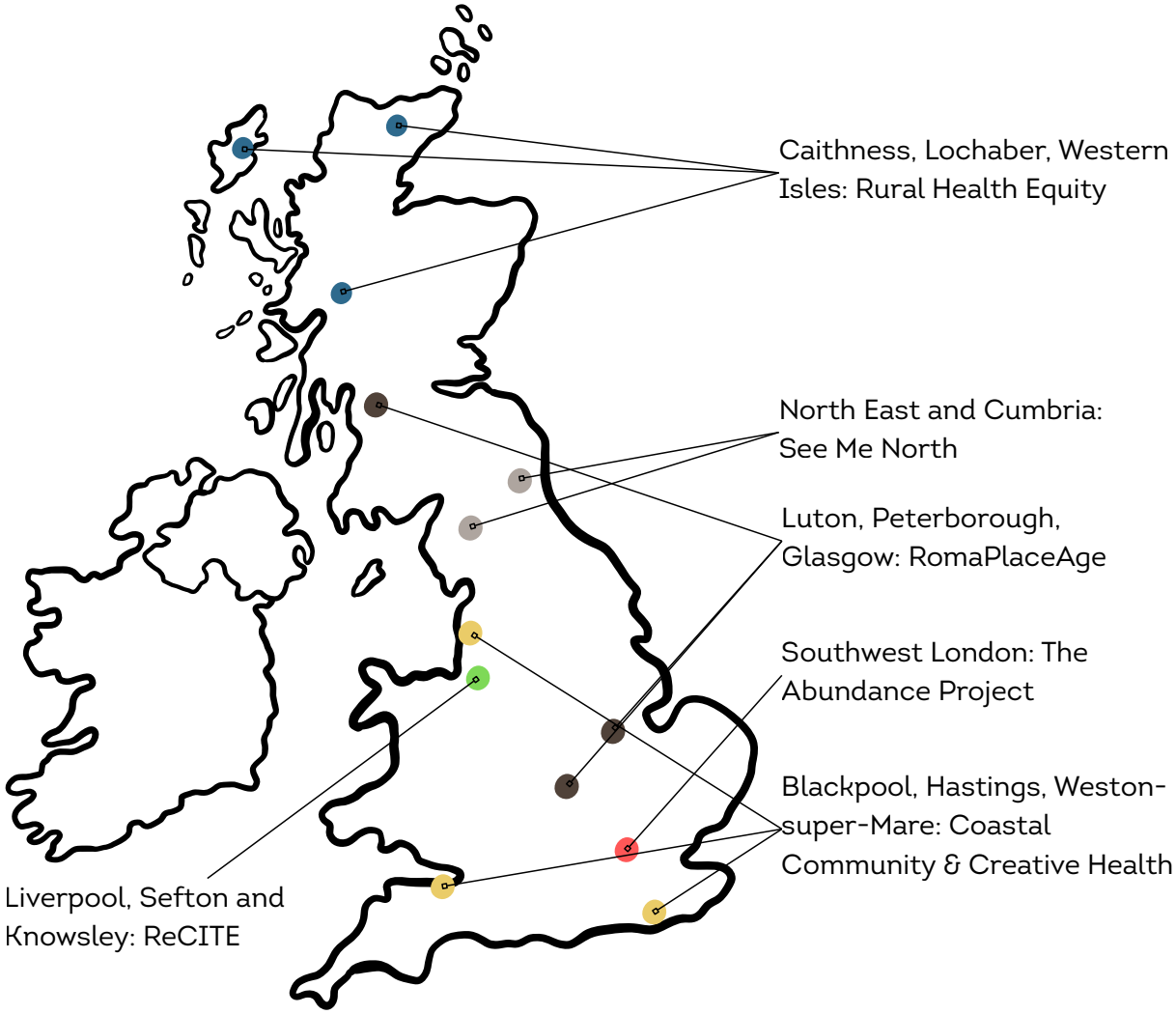
Substance use
England: FRANK – 0300 123 6600 (24hr)
Wales: DAN 24/7 – 0808 808 2234 (24hr, bilingual)
Scotland: Know the Score – 0800 587 5879
Northern Ireland: Drugs and Alcohol NI

Affected by someone else's substance use
Addiction Family Support (UK-wide) – 0300 888 3853

Bereavement
England, Wales and Northern Ireland: Cruse Bereavement Support – 0808 808 1677
Scotland: Cruse Scotland – 0808 802 6161

Homelessness
England and Scotland: Shelter – 0808 800 4444
Wales: Shelter Cymru – 08000 495 495
Northern Ireland: Housing Rights – 028 9024 5640

Map of contents



- *What is health?: Creating understanding through performing arts.* **ReCITE** uses creative approaches to co-create interventions to improve health equity with communities in Liverpool, Sefton and Knowsley. Pages 7-8
- *Walking together: Creative methods that shift power.* **The Abundance Project** focuses on enhancing cultural and green inclusion in Social Prescribing in Southwest London to address ethnic inequalities in mental health. Pages 9-11
- *Storytelling and Co-Production: Roma health in mid to later life.* **RomaPlaceAge** uses asset-based approaches to addressing health inequalities amongst ageing Roma. Pages 12-14
- *Zine making in the Scottish Highlands.* **Rural Health Equity** is a project exploring health inequalities in rural Scottish Highland and Island communities, working across Caithness, Lochaber and the Western Isles. Pages 15-17
- *Reflections on living in a coastal community.* **Coastal Community & Creative Health** is a national partnership to tackle health inequalities in coastal communities. Pages 18-20
- *Connection is protection.* **See Me North** works with people with lived experience of homelessness to create futures beyond homelessness. Pages 21-23

WHAT IS HEALTH?: CREATING UNDERSTANDING THROUGH PERFORMING ARTS

By Aidan Jolly and Abi Horsfield

What is Health!

Health is wellbeing
Overall wellbeing
An active brain
Being able to breathe
To walk
To play

We need appointments
Accessibility
More staff
A name doctor
Out of hours appointments
To be heard

How about more equipment
Free prescriptions
Eye tests
Dentists
A yearly health mot
Continuous services
Not having to tell your story
Over and over and over and over
Access to a real doctor
Just now my only appointment is with Doctor Google

Doctor Distrust

Doctor Distrust
Gossip, mistrust
Pulling away
Scrutinised by the system
Out of balance
Not always present
Doctor Crisis Management
Not everyone's the same
Mental health
Physical health
Education talks about sexual health
Hold it in keep it in
Doctor Misunderstanding
Misinformation
Jargon
Prescription
Antidepressant medication.
Not face to face
I lose patience
My doctor is a phone conversation.
Where is Doctor Follow Up?
I need someone to see me not in crisis
To see me when it's not happening
Before the next time
And I shame me.

These poems were created as part of a series of workshops run by Collective Encounters for the ReCITE programme's advocacy project. The aim was to bring people's lived experience of using health services to health policy makers so they can create systemic changes in health provision to increase health equity.

The workshops culminated in the creation of an interactive performance about health equity, involving participants as actors. These were performed in Liverpool, Sefton and Knowsley. These poems focus on the barriers that people are currently experiencing accessing primary care.

The team working on the ReCITE advocacy project includes drama facilitators and researchers working together with groups of people with lived experience, creating a direct link between the lived experience and the research outcomes. The people who attend are unlikely to have attended if the workshops were not creative, and enjoyable.

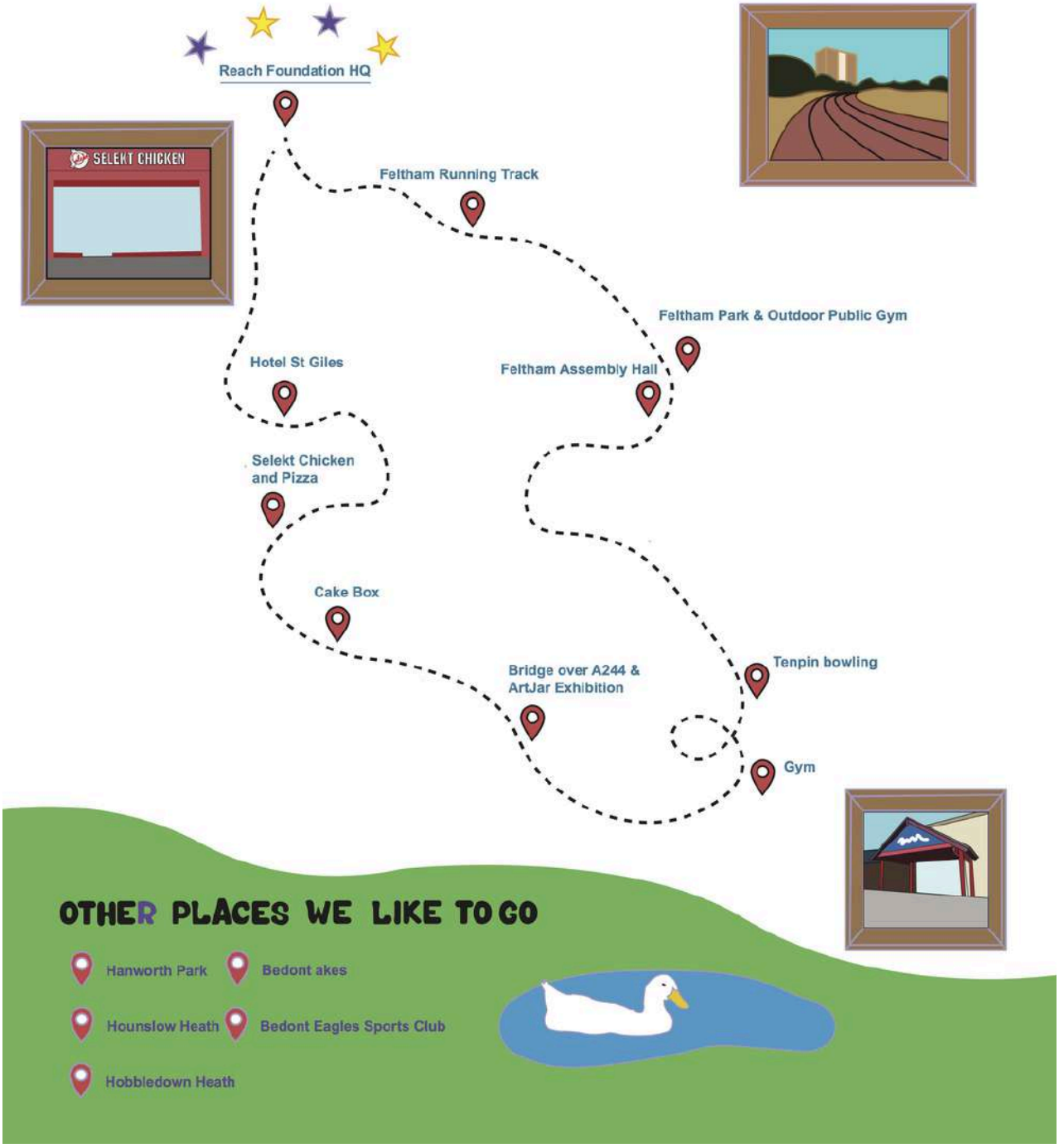
Embodied activities such as creating drama scenarios, songs and poems are more likely to appeal to people than a traditional research process. They allow us to take a trauma-informed approach, in which very personal experiences can be developed into fictionalised characters and situations which do not identify individual experience.

The use of embodied creative methods also means feelings can be safely shared in the workshops. This is then translated by the performance into effective engagement with the audience, including policy makers. Our experience, supported by our own research, suggests that this engagement is more impactful as a consequence of using creative methods.

WALKING TOGETHER: CREATIVE METHODS THAT SHIFT POWER

By Nkeiruka Samuel, Nasra Abdullahi, Muhammad Rashid, Daisy De Almeida, Hadid Azizi, Sarah Aziz, Anna Bosher, Professor Maria Chatzichristodoulou, Professor Tushna Vandrevala, Dr Peter Garside, Dr Silke Zschomler, and Francesca Taylor
Map and photograph credit: Anna Busuttil





Creative methods can do more than help researchers collect information; they can transform who leads the conversation, whose knowledge is valued, and how lived experience shapes research. The Abundance Project focuses on enhancing cultural and green inclusion in Social Prescribing in Southwest London to address ethnic inequalities in mental health. As part of this project, community-led walks became a powerful way of putting lived experience at the centre of the research process.

Rather than asking people to describe their neighbourhoods in an interview or meeting room, Community Voice Champions (our lived experience experts) led researchers through the places that mattered to them. They chose the routes, decided which local assets to stop at, and shared the stories, relationships and experiences that brought these places to life.



Walking together created a different kind of conversation. The community became the setting for the research, with everyday sights, sounds and interactions prompting memories and reflections that might never have emerged in a traditional interview. Participants spoke not only about parks, community centres and faith spaces, but also about belonging, trust, identity and the informal networks that support health and wellbeing.

Importantly, the walks shifted traditional research roles. Community Voice Champions were recognised as experts in their own communities, guiding the process and determining what was important to share. Researchers became listeners and learners, following participants rather than directing them. This simple change in approach helped create a more equal and collaborative relationship, where lived experience was valued as expertise rather than evidence to be extracted.

The photographs accompanying this piece document the walks and the community assets that participants chose to share. They capture the places, routes and conversations that formed part of the research, illustrating how place itself became a catalyst for discussion and reflection.

Community Voice Champion Nkeiruka Samuel reflected on what it meant to lead a walk through her community. She describes the pride she felt in showcasing local strengths, how the experience affirmed her role as a lived experience expert, and how participating in the project has strengthened her confidence and communication skills:
"Because most times I tend to listen, so I'm that silent person in the room, but then I think I've gained that skill of communication – because it's one thing for you to research, another thing for you to share that information."

The full video of the reflective conversation can be watched here.

For us, this is the real value of creative methods. They do not simply generate richer research data; they create opportunities for people to contribute on their own terms, develop confidence in their expertise, and influence both the process and direction of the research. In doing so, creative approaches help ensure that lived experience is not only included but genuinely shapes the knowledge we create together.

STORYTELLING AND CO-PRODUCTION: ROMA HEALTH IN MID TO LATER LIFE

By Aleksander Marinov and Ryan Woolrych

As part of developing asset-based approaches to addressing health inequalities amongst the Roma, the RomaPlaceAge project has embarked on a series of storytelling and co-production workshops called “Shaping Support Together: Roma Health and Wellbeing in Mid to Later Life”.

We have been collaborating with Richard O'Neill, an experienced storyteller and Romani Gypsy with a strong understanding of the communities we are working with. The idea behind the workshops was simple: to create an engaging and accessible way for community members, practitioners, service providers and decision-makers to explore the everyday experiences of Roma people as they age and navigate health and wellbeing support within their local communities.

Each storytelling workshop was devised around the concept of a live television production. Community members, Roma co-researchers, service providers and other stakeholders all took part, and their roles have been to act as directors, actively constructing how each story develops. This creative format encouraged participation from people with different backgrounds and experiences, creating opportunities to contribute their ideas and perspectives.



Each episode (workshop) was based on major themes that emerged from our research: home and identity; institutional representation and rights; and social participation and wellbeing. Each followed the same format:

Welcome
Set the Scene
Raw Footage Scene
Producer Review
Director's Cut
Broadcast Message

In each episode, Roma co-researchers acted out a situation based on real experiences shared during the research. Richard would pause the scene and ask people in the room what they noticed, where they see themselves and/or their organisations in the story, and what could be done differently to better support Roma communities to age well.

Participants then worked together in small groups during the “Director’s Cut” stage to discuss practical solutions and ideas. These suggestions were then used to reshape the story and create a final version, known as the “Broadcast Message”, where the scene was replayed incorporating solutions and recommendations developed collectively by the group.

Storytelling proved to be a powerful tool for inclusion. By using performance, creativity and open discussion participants were able to engage with complex issues in ways that felt accessible, relatable and non-threatening. It gave people the opportunity to think differently, step outside their usual roles and work together to find practical solutions. The stories enabled people to connect emotionally with experiences of ageing, health inequalities and service access, whilst also creating space for different voices to be heard. Rather than discussing problems, participants were able to actively shape the direction of the conversation and co-produce potential solutions. It also created a space where community members, practitioners and decision-makers could learn from one another and share ideas.

The response was overwhelmingly positive. There was humour, laughter and playfulness throughout the sessions, while still engaging seriously with the issues being explored. Most importantly, the storytelling approach helped create an environment where people felt comfortable sharing their views and working together to develop practical recommendations for improving support for older Roma people.

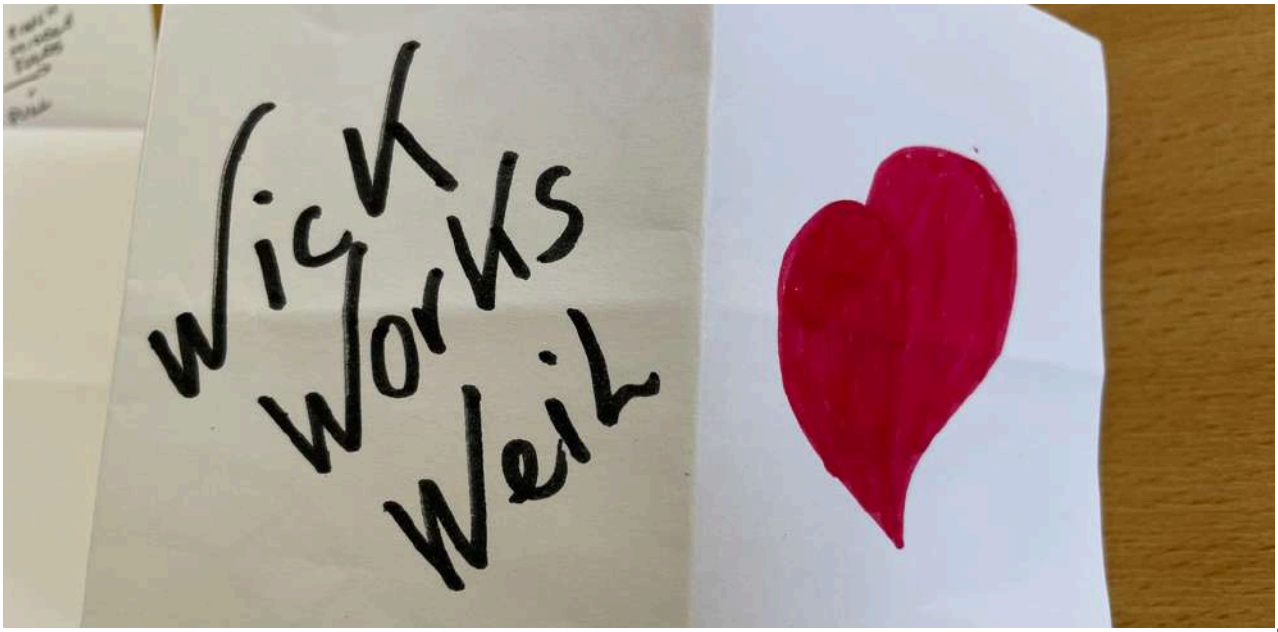
Perhaps most encouragingly, every participant who completed the follow-up survey said the workshop had influenced their understanding of healthy ageing in Roma communities, with many leaving with new ideas and clear plans for how they could improve their own practice and better support Roma people in mid to later life.

ZINE MAKING IN THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS

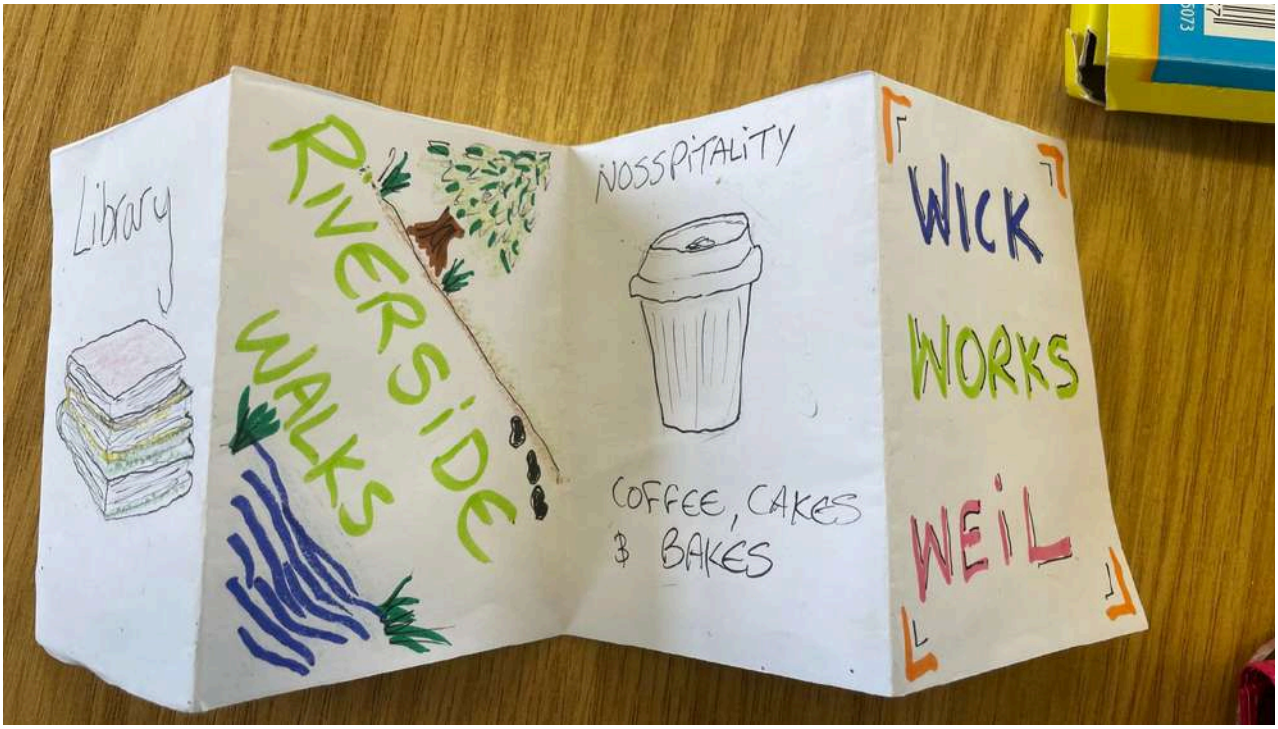
By Liz Ellis

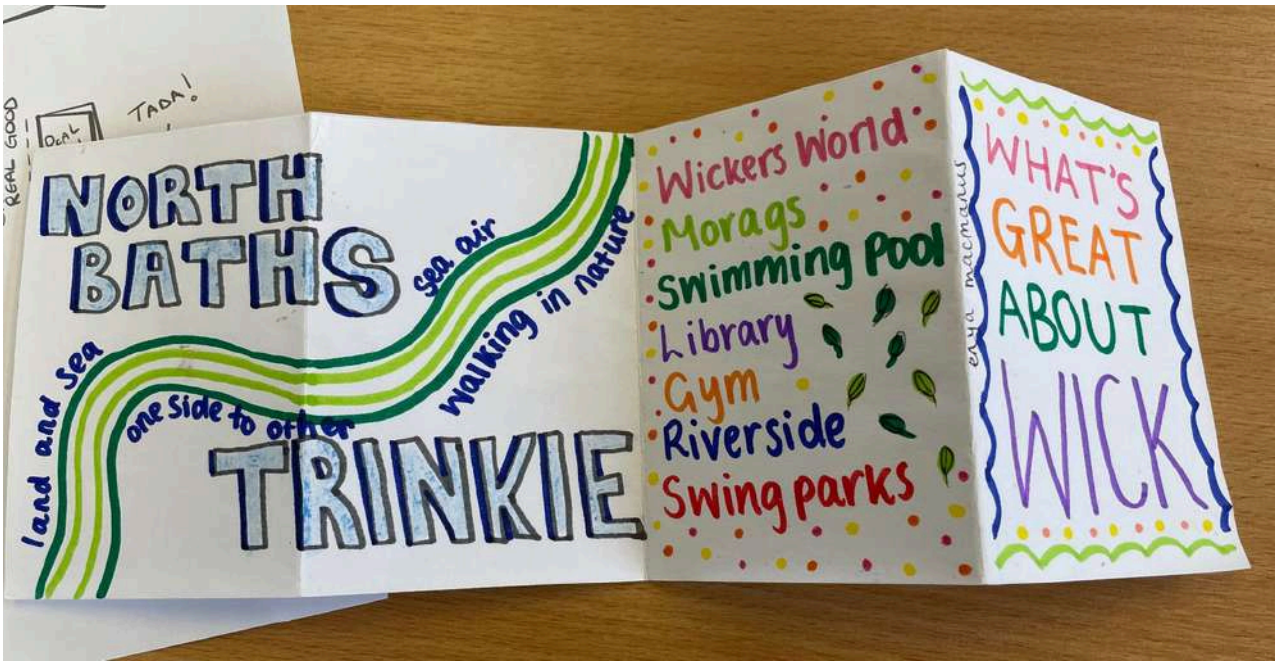
Rural Health Equity is a project exploring health inequalities in rural Scottish Highland and Island communities, working across Caithness, Lochaber and the Western Isles. The project team works closely with local people and groups to make the most of community assets such as museums, libraries, heritage sites and outdoor spaces, helping to build healthier, stronger and more connected communities.

The zines were created over the first four sessions with community researchers based at The Discovery College in Wick, as a way of creating trust and building relationships before starting to explore ways of engaging with creative community research methods. They were asked to think about what they thought Wick's strengths were and what they thought Wick needed. In addition to having a low intensity activity that supported us to get to know each other, the zines also helped identify some initial research priorities and community assets. The Community Research and Evaluation Wick (CREW) might be a small group, but they are incredibly dedicated and we are making great progress. You can find out more here.




SINCLAIR GIRNIGOE CASTLE
welcoming
Handbook on
DISCOVERY
COLLEGE
Peer Support
Social
Safe space
DOLPHINS
WHALES
ORCAS
TRINKIE
DUNCANSBY STACKS


Library
RIVERSIDE WALKS
NOSSPITALITY
COFFEE, CAKES & BAKES
WICK WORKS
WEiL


TADA!
NORTH BATHS
sea air
walking in nature
land and sea
one side to other
TRINKIE
Wickers World
Morags
Swimming Pool
Library
Gym
Riverside
Swing parks
WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT WICK


Beautiful Beaches
Community Spirit
Sense of Freedom
Kids can have a Childhood (as in being able to play outside)
Shoes
more Shops
Better maintenance of roads
more clubs specifically for (ASN) (Autism)
more exclusive
More flights at a better price

REFLECTIONS ON LIVING IN A COASTAL COMMUNITY

By Lucy Selman, Jake Hurle and Magic Jayne

Through the Coastal Community & Creative Health project, we held creative workshops exploring the lived experience of young people who have experienced mental health challenges, people in recovery from substance use, and bereaved people living in Blackpool, Hastings and Weston-super-Mare.

During the workshops, participants explored the role of community assets in their journey and the barriers which prevent access. The workshops were co-produced by 18 co-researchers and 12 artists. Across the sites, 73 participants took part in 103 hours of workshops, and 50 interviews were conducted with participants. Artists worked in the medium best suited to the participants, including drawing, animation, collage, embroidery, sewing, sound and photography.

So far, we have had two exhibitions of the workshop outputs, co-curated by the co-researchers: a week-long show at Weston Museum in 2025 had over 1500 visitors, and a show at Hastings Museum in 2026 had over 1000 visitors.

Using participatory, creative methods allowed participants to share complex perspectives and experiences in a powerful yet accessible way. We have found that creative methods reach individuals unlikely to participate in conventional research. The workshops created the conditions in which participants were able to articulate views and experiences for which they may not have words.

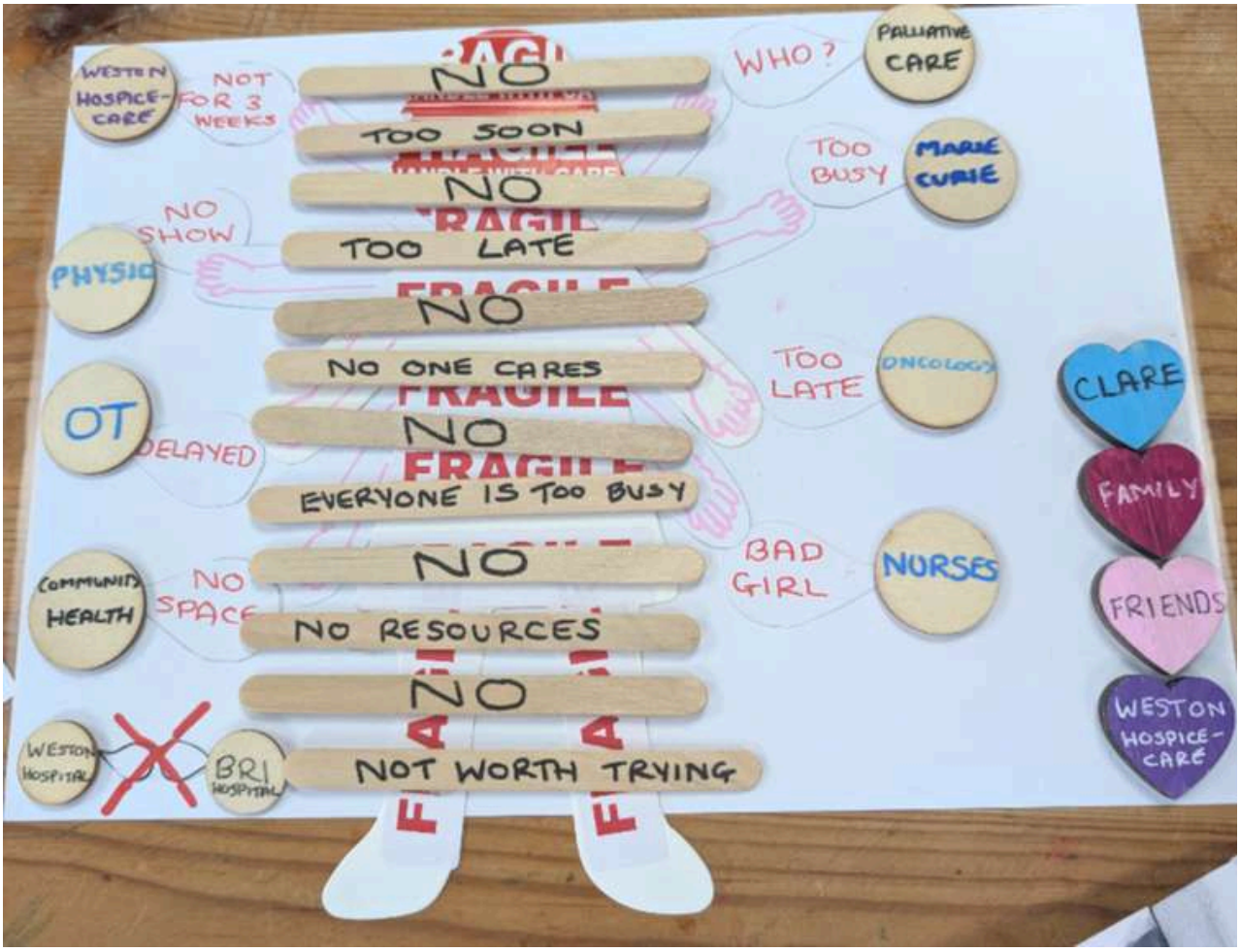
Our example outputs are from two participants from Weston-super-Mare, Jake, who is in recovery, and Magic Jayne, who had been bereaved.



Living in a coastal town - reflections from recovery by Jake Hurle

In Jake's words:

'In some ways the two figures are versions of myself, how I felt using, a fear of going back to those versions of myself. And again, you know, slightly subversive kind of stuff on there about, I don't know, the mixture of like holidaymakers being around addicts and ex-addicts and just what it's like living here... I still feel that in myself, and that's a battle. You know, it's the light and the dark of one's thinking. And it's always there... My commentary in some ways is that if it wasn't for discovering drugs and drink, I wouldn't have ended up here. So there's an irony in that. But actually, I'm really happy here... by discovering assets here, I've been able to change my life. I've been able to reclaim my life, my freedom from drugs and alcohol. I've been able to become a more authentic, spirited person. I've discovered people willing to admit shared experience, shared suffering, and I've been made to feel comfortable around that... I've found like a new way of living.'



Living in a coastal town - reflections from bereavement - Magic Jayne

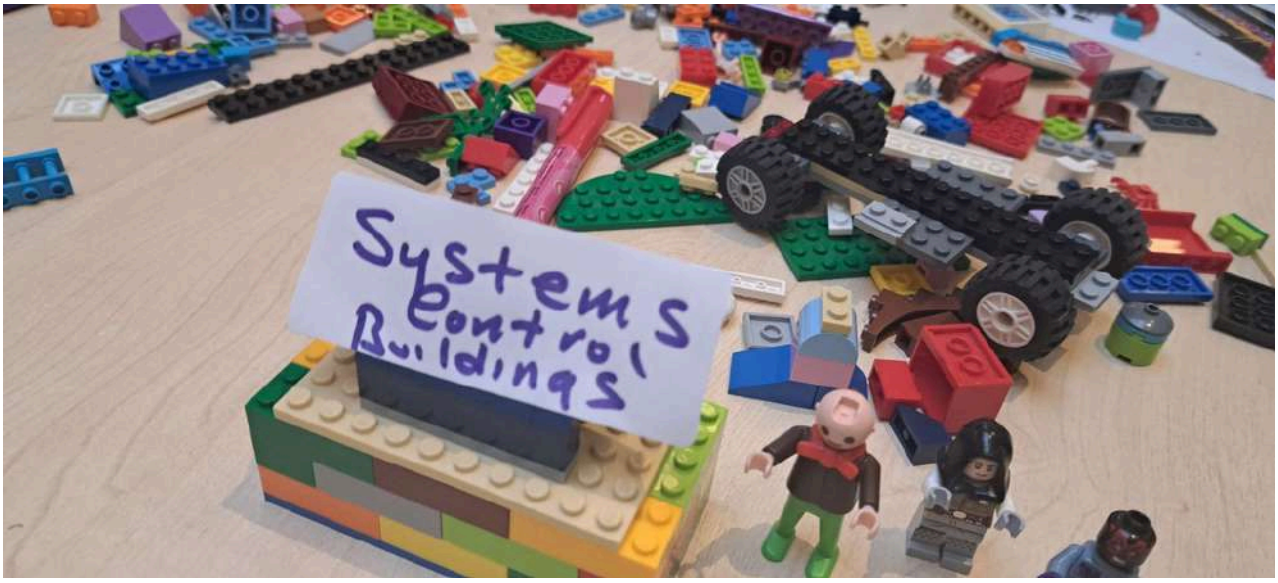
In Jayne's words:

'I just felt like everyone was having these big barriers to me, saying no, and I'm actually fragile underneath it, massively fragile... reaching out with all these arms trying to get help anywhere. So one was too soon... they didn't have any time. I was too late for oncology. No one cares. It's how I felt, because I just reached out to so many people, and nobody was doing it. Everyone was too busy... And then I just felt it's not worth reaching out to anybody, because actually everybody's too busy, or hasn't got the staff, or is not there. So I felt like I reached out to lots of people when I needed help while she was alive. So when she passed, I didn't bother, because I thought, actually, there's no one there to help you anyway, so there's no point, which is why I locked myself in her house... the hearts on the right depict where I did actually get help from, which was primarily family and friends... How do you access the people who actually need support? Because they might not come and search it out. So you might need to put it in front of people... they don't have energy for doing things because they're running around sorting funerals out, and dealing with their emotions, and so you do need to find pathways to give that information to people.'

CONNECTION IS PROTECTION

See Me North

See Me North works with people with lived experience of homelessness to create futures beyond homelessness. They use a wide variety of creative activities, including music-making, painting, poetry, and craft. They also use community-building activities such as a beach day and a forest bathing experience. Here, they share some of the creative activities that have shaped their work.



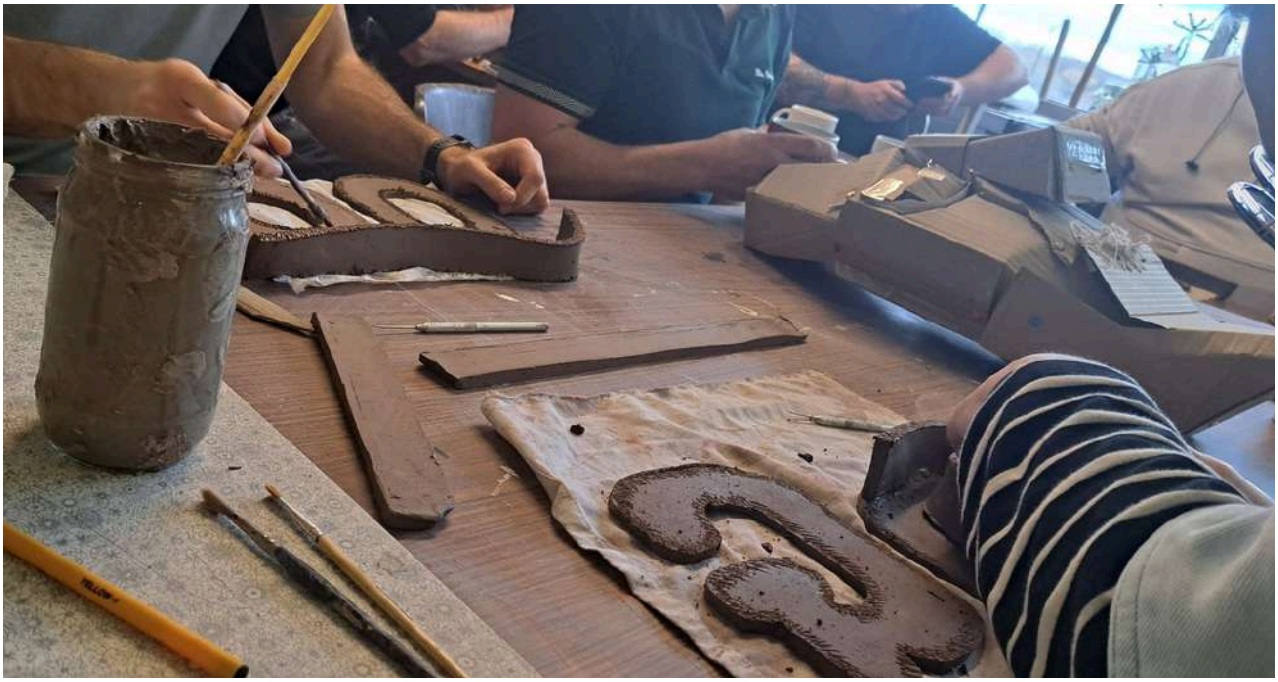
This Lego model was part of a creative activity done at one of our workshops at Helix Arts in North Shields, the purpose of which was to build Lego models which represented barriers and stigmas around homelessness. We then labelled those models with ways to combat and remove those barriers.

“Things come out. If we didn't do things like this we wouldn't know how to say it” - Jared, lived experience member reflecting on participating in the creative activity.



This piece is from a character creation session we did with our Experts by Experience group, the purpose of this was to create characters that will be used in our animations as a part of our project outputs.

“There’s a purpose to it, you find out things about yourself that you didn’t know” - Teresa, lived experience member



This photo was taken while working at Chilli Studios with the women's group of Experts by Experience. The women are working with clay to create the title of our exhibit (Outragency). You can watch a short video of See Me North Experts by Experience working with clay at Chilli Studios using this link or this QR code:

“Connection is protection” - Tiff, lived experience member

For See Me North, creativity supports the inclusion of lived experience because it gives people a shared, low-pressure way to connect and be heard. Activities like pottery, zine-making, and creative workshops help participants build confidence and express things that are hard to put into words directly. They create safe or brave spaces where participants can process difficult experiences collectively. They build a sense of community and mutual understanding - participants describe feeling safe, feeling part of a group, and learning things about themselves and others they hadn't recognised before. And they create artefacts that will be used in a series of exhibitions to tackle stigma. In this way, creativity acts as both a bridge into the group and a tool for advocacy, letting people with lived experience shape and share their own stories on their own terms.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Creative approaches can be dismissed as an enjoyable nice-to-have, supplemental to traditional techniques. The contributions in this zine show that creative approaches can be so much more. They create new possibilities for who gets heard, what they can say and how they can say it. They build the trust and relationships that are the foundations of change, particularly for communities who are mistrusting of services. And they are powerful methods for redistributing power and creating meaningful impact in health systems.

Creative approaches allow for those who might not feel able to take part in traditional research methods to participate. Importantly, the people who are least likely to take part through traditional channels are often those that we need to hear from the most - those marginalised voices that are not represented in our systems. This includes many of those who would receive the most benefit from finally being heard, and those who can do the most to expand our current knowledge.

Creative activities help people to articulate experiences for which they don't yet have words. They build confidence, strengthens bonds with others, and support people to process difficult experiences as they convey them to researchers. This means that the research process provides benefits to participants as well as researchers, moving us from approaches that can feel extractive to a sense of collaboration and mutual benefit.

Creative outputs provide engaging ways to share our learning with our intended audience, adding to the impact of research. In an environment that is saturated with information, creative outputs stand out, connecting with hearts as well as minds, moving us towards action.

The pieces in this zine make a strong case for viewing creative approaches as a key enabler in addressing health inequalities in partnership with those who are most affected by them. For researchers, this might mean being open to new methods, and willing to hand over some control of the process, and trusting that what comes back will produce valuable insight. For policy makers, this means treating creative outputs as evidence in their own right, not as illustration for evidence gathered elsewhere using traditional methods. And for funders and commissioners, this means making the necessary resources available for continued research and practice in creative health.

Danny Sherwood, Co-create

CLOSING

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to and otherwise supported us with the first issue of BOLD ENCOUNTERS. This includes:

- Aidan Jolly, Abi Horsfield and the ReCITE team
- Nkeiruka Samuel, Nasra Abdullahi, Muhammad Rashid, Daisy De Almeida, Hadid Azizi, Sarah Aziz, Anna Bosher, Professor Maria Chatzichristodoulou, Professor Tushna Vandrevala, Dr Peter Garside, Dr Silke Zschomler, Francesca Taylor, Anna Busuttil and the Abundance team
- Aleksander Marinov, Ryan Woolrych and the RomaPlaceAge team
- Liz Ellis and the Rural Health Equity team
- Lucy Selman, Jake Hurle, Magic Jayne and the Coastal Community & Creative Health project team
- See Me North team

We hope it's provided you with an opportunity to understand more about different people's experiences, and how creative approaches can support the inclusion of lived experience in research, and in making our health and care systems better.

If you'd like to share anything about your experience of this issue, good or bad, we'd love to hear from you - please get in touch at info@wearecocreate.com. It might be about the content, or about how we're sharing the zine.

And if there's learning from your work that you'd like to share, or something about lived experience in research that you'd like to hear more about, let us know. Thank you again for being with us and we look forward to our next issue.

-The Co-create Team



MOBILISING COMMUNITY ASSETS

National Centre for Creative Health

UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council

UCL