

Show Up Plus!

Maintaining Creative Participation in the Margins

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PROJECT SUMMARY

The Show Up Plus!, led by Guddi Singh (Centre for Public Policy Research) and Caitjan Gainty (Department of History), extended the 2024 *Show Up!* pilot by sustaining creative engagement between young people and clinicians in south London. Using performance, movement, music and dialogue, the project explored how lived experiences of health, care and inequality can be expressed, shared and understood through the arts.

Working with WHAM, the Powering Up Collective and the Southbank Centre, participants co-created sketches, dances, spoken-word pieces and reflective exercises that examined power, trust and communication within healthcare encounters. A digital platform supported continued exchange between workshops, helping maintain relationships and momentum despite the pressures of school and clinical workloads.

The project culminated in a participatory performance and discussion event at the Southbank Centre, where young people and clinicians presented their co-created work to community members, health leaders, local authorities and arts organisations. The event generated rich conversations about inclusion, empathy and culture change in healthcare. Show Up Plus! has laid a strong foundation for further creative, community-driven work at the intersection of arts, health and social justice.

HOW DID THE PROJECT COME ABOUT?

The Show Up Plus! grew out of an earlier collaboration between the project team, WHAM, and Dunraven School in south London. In July 2024, the first *Show Up!* pilot brought young people and clinicians together for an intensive five-day creative programme that used arts-based methods to explore experiences of health and inequality. The response from participants was powerful: both young people and clinicians expressed a desire to continue working together, deepen their creative practice, and build on the trust that had formed.

Recognising how rare it is for co-production relationships to continue beyond a short pilot, the team sought further support to maintain momentum. The Rapid Response Fund enabled a follow-on phase focused on sustaining engagement, experimenting with digital connection, and developing new creative outputs. Building on the partnerships established during the pilot—especially with the Southbank Centre, who had engaged closely with the initial showcase—the team assembled a cross-sector collaboration that combined clinical expertise, arts practice and community organising.



WHAT HAPPENED?

Show Up Plus! was shaped by a shared commitment to keeping young people at the centre, challenging hierarchies in health, and using creative methods to bridge groups who rarely have the opportunity to speak, think or imagine change together.

Across a series of workshops, young people and clinicians worked with artists to explore experiences of health, communication and care through theatre, movement, spoken word and visual expression. These sessions offered a rare, levelled space where participants could reflect on what happens within clinical encounters and experiment with new ways of expressing and understanding one another's perspectives. The creative work often surfaced unspoken tensions — such as power imbalances, miscommunication, and the emotional labour required on both sides — and transformed them into collaborative material for performance.

Alongside the in-person work, the team developed a digital platform to support continued conversation between sessions. The platform became a vital bridge during periods when young people's school timetables and clinicians' workloads made it difficult to meet, enabling participants to stay connected, exchange creative ideas, and maintain the sense of momentum that had begun in the workshops.

The project culminated in a participatory performance and discussion event at the Southbank Centre. Participants presented collaboratively devised sketches, dances, poems and scenes directly to healthcare leaders, community organisations, local authorities and arts partners. The event created a powerful, emotionally resonant space for dialogue, showcasing the insights young people hold about the health system and the possibilities that emerge when creativity disrupts traditional hierarchies.



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WHAT WAS THE PROJECT'S IMPACT?

Show Up Plus! had a significant and often unexpected impact on both young people and clinicians. For the young participants, the project offered a rare space to articulate their experiences of health and care in ways that felt authentic, creative and valued. Many described feeling “seen” for the first time in a health-related context, and the process helped build confidence, agency and a sense of possibility about their futures. Several young people who had previously felt disconnected from the healthcare system began to see themselves as potential contributors to it — as future clinicians, artists or advocates.

For clinicians, the impact was equally profound. Participants spoke about rediscovering empathy, confidence and a sense of personal voice within a system that often demands emotional containment and performance under pressure. Many clinicians, especially women of colour early in their careers, described the creative work as “restorative,” noting that the process helped them take up space, communicate more openly, and reconnect with the reasons they entered healthcare. These shifts have continued beyond the workshops, influencing how clinicians speak to colleagues, hold clinical encounters, and approach leadership roles.

The Southbank Centre performance further amplified this impact. Health leaders, local authorities, arts organisations and community groups witnessed first-hand the emotional insight and creative intelligence of the young people and clinicians. The event prompted rich conversations about culture change, trust, inequality and the structural barriers that make creative engagement difficult to sustain. Attendees expressed strong interest in supporting future collaborations, with several NHS partners acknowledging the importance of relational, arts-based methods for tackling entrenched health inequalities.

Beyond immediate outcomes, the project generated a set of creative artefacts — sketches, poetry, spoken-word pieces, photographs and performance materials — that will inform teaching, professional development and future research. It also strengthened cross-sector partnerships and opened avenues for sustained work on arts-based approaches to wellbeing, inclusion and leadership in healthcare.

Show Up Plus! demonstrated that creative practice can build confidence, shift relationships and illuminate the lived realities of health systems in ways traditional methods cannot. Its impact lies not only in the artworks produced, but in the relationships, perspectives and possibilities that emerged through the process.

GUDDI'S TOP TIPS FOR IMPACT

1. Keep relationships alive between project phases, even in small ways.

Co-production depends on trust, and trust dissolves quickly when engagement stops abruptly. Maintain continuity through light-touch check-ins, newsletters, or digital touchpoints. These don't need to be resource-heavy, but they signal commitment and keep participants connected while funding catches up.

2. Be open to uncertainty: let the work reveal unexpected impact.

Creative, participatory projects rarely follow a fixed script. Build flexibility into your design and allow space for surprises. Some of the most powerful outcomes in Show Up Plus! emerged not from planned objectives, but from noticing unexpected shifts, such as the deep empowerment clinicians experienced through performance.

3. Use the communication platforms your participants already inhabit.

Meeting people where they are is essential. Whether it's Instagram, WhatsApp, or another digital space, adapting to accessible, youth-friendly modes of communication supports meaningful engagement and helps bridge gaps created by busy schedules, limited resources or institutional constraints.

FURTHER READING

- **Powering Up – Project Learning Pages**
WHAM Project
<https://www.whamproject.co.uk/powering-up/home>
- **POWERING UP: A qualitative evaluation of the art and science of meaningful co-production for health equity**
Forthcoming, BMJ Paediatrics Open.
- **Singh, Gouddi, et al. (2024). "Powering Up: why the future of health equity depends on meaningful co-production."**
BMJ
<https://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/388/bmj.r265.full.pdf>
- **Singh, Gouddi, et al. (2024). "Powering Up: a creative, community-based approach to co-production with young people and clinicians."**
BMJ Paediatrics Open
<https://bmjpaedsopen.bmj.com/content/8/1/e002972>



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Or visit: www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/research/impact