for co-ways-of-working enthusiasts

with us

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Big thanks...

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High fives and huge thanks to all of the awesome contributors to Issue 4 of ***with us***.

Better Together was founded and is created on unceded Aboriginal lands. We acknowledge and pay our deepest respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters, community and cultures. Always was. Always will be.

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Editorial

Welcome to the latest edition of ***with us***.

Coming at you with another zine full of real stories of great people embodying ***working with*** - in a mix of areas and ways.

As usual, we've gone high on practicalities and people, and low on buzzwords and jargon so that real life (warts and all) can shine on through.

Massive thanks to the wonderful Abi, Rebecca, Jenni, and Megan for sharing their stories and showing us, in real-life terms, what building better seats at better tables can look like for real.

We hope you enjoy reading these stories and use them to inspire your own ***working with*** adventures; and that they help you build lasting relationships and trust with the people and communities you serve.

We are better together.

Cheers,

Sue

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A nod of gratitude and respect to those who seek to work in meaningful and genuine ways with people and communities. The quiet achievers, countless advocates and leaders from many walks of life, communities and movements who have sat at many tables over many years and paved the way, and for those who build on their efforts today.

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Creating space for Lived Experience

Meet Abi Cooper

Meet the wonderful Abi Cooper.
Currently the Youth Advocacy Lead at batyr.

Abi is an award-winning youth mental health advocate and lived experience consultant. At 24 years of age, Abi is widely recognised for her contributions to the sector; in particular her work establishing the Mental Health Lived Experience Peak Queensland (MHLEPQ), and various projects with major organisations such as Orygen, Queensland Mental Health Commission (QMHC), Arafmi and Consumers Health Forum. With a passion for strategy, policy and governance, Abi uses her own lived experience to inform her work.

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Tell us a bit about your background and how you found yourself to be working in this area.

I've been passionate about mental health in some way or another for most of my life, however my first major experience in advocacy was being a part of Orygen's National Youth Advisory Group. Here, I quickly realised I loved using my lived experience in a way that felt productive and impactful, and decided I wanted to see where these new skills might take me. Since then I've worked on a number of projects from research to policy to public speaking, and in 2020 I formalised this work into my business as a lived experience consultant. In the last few years, I decided that I wanted to have a more direct impact on young people and started sharing my story in schools with batyr before moving into a permanent role in their Lived Experience team, stepping up as Youth Advocacy Lead which is where I am now.

Why is it so important to you?

For me entering the lived experience space really came out of necessity more than anything. I needed to see change for myself and my family, and I needed hope for the future. Now I'm driven more by my passion for creating a better system for the next generation of young people, whether that's through reform or by creating space for future advocates.

What do you love about it?

Aside from the ability to create an impact on a topic very close to my heart; I nerd out about the work I've done in strategy and systems reform. There's something I find really exciting about having deeply nuanced discussions and teasing out all the intricacies of a topic. To be able to look at the bigger picture of an organisation or sector, and relate that back to the impact it has on me as a young person with lived experience is pretty cool.

What has it taught you?

I was freshly 18 when I started working in mental health, so I've really learnt everything about my work ethic and professional abilities through advocacy and consulting. What I didn't expect was to learn so much about power and influence, balance, compromise and patience. Not to mention great listening skills!

When working with people who are experts by their lived experience, what are the most important things that organisations need to think about and get right?

I think it's really important that organisations and individuals respect the history and gravity of the lived experience movement, as well as being aware of the significant role advocacy can have in some people's healing process. In particular, it's vital to have patience - to take the time to hear people out and cultivate a deep respect for the guts and wisdom of those with lived experience.

What frustrates you and what do you find most gets in the way of meaningful engagement and true partnerships?

I've been reflecting a lot on the importance of honesty and integrity in the space, and I believe that too often organisations aren't willing to have a real honest look inwards - which often comes to the detriment of their mission, their staff and those they serve. It should be a first step for an organisation to ask themselves, 'Is this our place?' and have the courage to step back when the answer is no.

What do we stand to gain as a community by building real opportunities, for governments and organisations to really listen to, and work in partnership with people with lived and living experience?

In short, better services, better systems and better outcomes.

Are there any great tools or resources that people should know about?

One of the best things I ever did for my advocacy work as a young person was learning how to share my story in a safe and empowering way through batyr's 'Being Herd' Workshop. This program allowed me to understand my lived experience and control how, with who, and when I share it.

If you could give one piece of advice to other awesome humans starting out in this type of work, what would it be?

Working in lived experience or advocacy means you don't have the typical work/life balance because the personal IS the professional. Learn your boundaries, take time to rest and find your allies.

Get in touch and find out more:

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Here to build the future and this time we're building it for everyone

Meet Rebecca McCash

Meet Rebecca McCash, the founder/heart and soul of FutureTech - a social enterprise offering social and STEAM* based learning programs for neurodivergent youth [*science, tech, engineering, arts, and maths]. Created by people with first-hand experience; each program uses autism-friendly practices, universal design, and inquiry-based learning to inspire the minds of the future and support neurodivergent young people to realise their potential.

Leading the way in collaborative and 'co-ways' of working, Rebecca and her team have genuinely walked their talk by building a whole workplace ecosystem [think culture, well-being frameworks, impact indicators and measures, programs and ways of working] where the neurodivergent voice is always valued, heard and the loudest at whichever table. It's no wonder that FutureTech is going from strength to strength.

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Tell us the high-level story of FutureTech and why this work is so important to you.

FutureTech was born out of a perfect storm of tides, traits and trends.

My strong sense of justice acted as firewood; my natural affinity for systems thinking helped me see how to spark the flame, growing up with a brother who is neurodivergent whom I love more than life itself was the burning fire, and my own journey of trying to figure out why I had so many struggles and what I had to live for acted as the oxygen that kept the fire burning even when it seemed hopeless and impossible.

My brother, Sam, always cast a shadow much larger and more defined than his body would suggest. He was wise beyond his years and had a brain that could see things in people and in the world that no one else could. Diagnosed as neurodivergent as a child, Sam was regularly misunderstood by those around him. Confined and suffocated like a Jack in a Box, his brilliance was viewed as behaviour to be managed rather than nurtured like the gift to the world it was.

I think I have always been aware that inequity en masse exists in our world. I remember in primary school, we took part in the shoebox appeal - where people sent boxes of gifts and goods to Africa so that children would have something to open at Christmas time; I thought even then, how could it be that some people had so much and others so little. When I was around 9, I started an Endangered Animals Club and that was really the beginning of the social justice warrior to come.

Image source: FutureTech website

Armed with my unwavering passion for making the world a better place, I set out to learn as much as I could about the injustices, wars and flawed systems that contributed to the continuation of inequality.

Unfortunately, this noble quest was perhaps too harsh for someone so young. I developed anorexia, major depressive disorder, anxiety and suicidal ideation that resulted in missing almost a year of high school, losing many relationships, too much time and on too many occasions, almost my life.

Sam did what he could to hold our hands during this difficult time. The thought of how hard this must have been for him and my family is still a source of great shame and guilt. Walking along parallel paths; I slowly recovered while he grew into the most incredible, empathetic, funny, and intelligent young man.

Slowly, I reopened my eyes to the world my illness had kept me shielded from. And while the injustices endured with persistence - the more I got to know Sam, the clearer the solution became in my mind.

I remember how completely perplexed I was when Sam returned his exam results, which showed grades well below my own a few years prior. I don't think I have ever been more confused in my life. How on earth could someone who was so obviously intellectually superior get worse grades than I? This had catastrophic consequences on Sam's confidence, his love for learning, and his genuine curiosity about the world, people, and things.

Terrified that this experience would snap the tether between Sam and his destiny to make the world a better place, I began investigating what was happening in schools that stunted minds like Sam's. I quickly became aware that this was not an isolated problem that only impacted my brother.

I moved to Australia in 2016 and was maddened to find the problem significantly worse here. A pandemic of wasted human potential resulting from the persistence of medieval systems of dictatorship determined to judge a fish on its ability to climb a tree.

In its 2018 report, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) found that 92.3 percent of autistic students had some form of educational restriction. In Australia, autistic people have a life expectancy of 20–36 years shorter than the general population. They are nine times more likely to die by suicide, eight times more likely to experience unemployment than the general population (and six times more likely than any other disability), resulting in around 45 percent living near or in poverty. (The Senate Committee Report on Autism)

FutureTech is the response to a world that will not make space for the neurodivergent individuals it will ultimately require to solve some of the biggest and most complex problems humans face today.

Sam's response to my Autism and ADHD diagnosis' in 2022 at 26 years old - 'Uh, duh?'

How do you work with and weave real people's perspectives throughout your work, and can you tell us what that looks like in practical, everyday terms?

FutureTech exists as an intricate, unsymmetrical and sometimes contradictory but always beautiful mosaic of the perspectives, ideas, love and passion of every single person that it has touched. It has never made sense to do it any other way.

I think when you are a multi-disabled person from a fairly working-class background and not a heck of a lot in the way of savings to throw at ideas, you are conveniently forced to really pay attention to what and where the problem exists within the system and how that impacts individuals in a variety of ways. You can't really afford to get it too far wrong, and the reality is that without making space to listen and take action based on the perspectives of the people you wish to serve - you will fail.

That's not to say that failure isn't an important feature of the design process - it is undoubtedly inevitable, and a total lack of failure likely tells you that you have not adequately tested your solution. However, just like every other stage of designing solutions to complex problems, failure and response to it should be driven by the people your solution exists to support.

In practical terms, this really is as simple as paying attention to how people respond to what you have to offer, making space for people to be heard, actively listening and taking feedback seriously, but most importantly, having a genuine willingness to take action as a result—often requiring a level of humility and setting aside one's ego in response.

I know many folks run structured and targeted workshops to get the perspectives of their target market, and this works really well for some. However, we have found this process to happen a lot more subtly and organically, perhaps because we are a team of neurodivergent people designing solutions for neurodivergent people.

Embedding feedback and sharing of ideas into our culture has been something we have found a lot of success in. We don't have much of a hierarchical structure within our organisation as we see every person's input as equally valuable to the success of what we deliver.

It takes a high level of psychological safety to be able to honestly share your feedback, which many neurodivergent people have never experienced, particularly in work and places of learning. So, being very deliberate about creating this is absolutely essential.

What do you find is the difference that it makes?

It is hard to quantify or pinpoint the difference that working together in these ways makes, particularly when it is the only way you have ever done things. I can attest to my experiences of working in environments where co-ways of working were absent or disingenuous and ultimately led to the disempowerment and disengagement of the people you set out to lift up.

Co-design, at worst, will make your solution more effective; at best, it will turbo-charge your solution to heights you could never have imagined—and it is just all-around way more fun!

What works well, and what do you love the most?

I think we do really well in creating a culture of curiosity, questioning, and challenging each other and everything. The camaraderie, love, and out-of-this-world ideas that come from this type of organisational culture are what I love most about our team and the way we work together.

What can sometimes get in the way, and how do you get past it?

The perception of power can be really limiting. For many neurodivergent people, we have often experienced a lot of trauma in relation to work or relationships more generally - typically as a result of misunderstanding power dynamics. Personally, I have always found hierarchical structures difficult to navigate - I never really understood why certain ways of being are limited to people of a certain status within an organisation (or with society more generally). Our strong sense of justice is compounded by our affinity for being the perpetual 'canary in the coal mine', and this can be quite the recipe for disaster in any setting that demands an acknowledgement of socially constructed power disparities. Most of us have experienced the repercussions of speaking up in such situations only to find that our passion, perspective and ideas are not welcomed in most settings where we are actively encouraged to share. It only takes a few instances of your words being used as weapons against you for you to enter into a forced vow of silence that slowly eats away at your confidence and self-assurance until you become distrustful of any idea your brain dares to generate in resistance.

This takes a lot of undoing.

“I think this is where many efforts to genuinely work in these ways fall flat. People underestimate the work that needs to be done to create an environment of psychological safety that is a necessary condition to allow for the unrestricted, frank and honest sharing of ideas and perspectives. People do not even consider the work that needs to go into undoing the lifetime of trauma marginalised people have experienced to even make the psychologically safe environment matter at all.”

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Team FutureTech

It's really hard to solve this problem, and we have by no means come upon a magic algorithm that can be used as a one-size-fits-all solution. But we are quite deliberate in our attempts to break down some of the preconceived social norms that exist within our work and the organisations within which we work. For example, when a staff member calls in sick, they are genuinely thanked and reminded that for them to take care of themselves is for them to take care of the team and the organisation. Burnout is so high amongst neurodivergent people, and this is only exacerbated by the pressure to always perform as non-disabled people would. We have often been reprimanded for taking too much time off and, as a result, are more inclined to destroy ourselves than take a day off to catch our breath. I never want our team to feel that way. Without the people, there is no FutureTech. To take care of themselves is to take care of their sustainability and, therefore, their continued, invaluable contributions to what we are trying to achieve.

What are some of the outcomes you have achieved?

We receive a lot of great feedback from participants, families, and staff alike.

Last year, we gathered as a team to figure out what impact really looked like for us. We discussed what we actually wanted for our young people, and this wasn't necessarily academic achievement or having a massive social life.

What we wanted for them was to have good well-being.

From this, we designed a well-being framework based on evidence, lived experience and our knowledge of good practice gained over years of supporting neurodivergent people. This framework is how we measure the impact of our programs on our young people.

Our framework has ten well-being indicators that are measured at intervals to track progress and help identify any areas of particular need for each young person and the groups as a whole. The indicators have been specifically chosen as important markers for well-being in neurodivergent people. We are well aware that mainstream well-being considerations often miss the mark for our neurodivergent community, which is exactly why we designed this framework. While it looks at more typical areas, such as self-esteem and belonging, there are also indicators focussed on the neurodivergent experience: things like awareness of how their neurodivergence impacts them, strategies for self-support, and self-advocacy. As many neurodivergent people find identifying and communicating their needs challenging, the framework helps us to identify where gaps in well-being exist for our young people and build resources into our sessions in response.

For example, early data from these measures showed us that while our young people knew when they were overwhelmed, they rarely had strategies to support themselves as a result. This is really important information for us to know, as often our staff struggle with similar things. Building resources to help implement these skills into our sessions not only positively impacts our young people, it impacts us all.

I am extremely humbled to say that last year we had a 150% increase in positive responses to well-being indicators as a result of our programs.

The impact we have on our staff is a very happy, unintended consequence of what we do, but I suppose it makes a lot of sense when you consider how integral FutureTech has been to my own well-being and life. The most beautiful example of this is a member of our team telling me,

“I feel incredibly grateful to be part of FutureTech. It has brought me so much joy, and I can genuinely say that I love what I do. The fact that we are supporting the kids through a crappy system means the world to me. This is honestly more than just a job; it is a place where my inner child is healing, and I couldn't be happier.”

Team FutureTech in action

What do you wish people knew about these ways of working and the work of FutureTech?

That you can't just include one or two people with lived experience and call that co-design. Working in partnership is a very important part of any good design, and the majority of voices in the room must be those for whom the design is built.

When looking at co-ways of working, one important thing to consider is who'll have the loudest or most influential voice throughout the process. I've seen many cases where organisations involve one or two people with lived experience in the conversation and call this co-design. Yes, it's a start but unless they're the majority in the room, their voices will be disenfranchised.

While FutureTech is not an organisation made up of 100% neurodivergent people (although I often argue that those not diagnosed are simply not diagnosed), when we do design (or anything else) there are always more neurodivergent people in the room. This means that while everyone's thoughts, perspectives, and opinions are equally valued and heard – it is the neurodivergent voice that is the loudest.

This is a strength and a huge part of our success.

Any last words for our readers?

If anyone would like to chat about enrolling their young person in FutureTech, or about work opportunities with us please reach out!!

Get in touch and find out more:

futuretech

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Rebecca McCash

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Making something for all of us

Meet Jenni and Megan from the All of Us Design Crew

Image: NSW Health All of Us

After listening to a few hundred staff, consumers, and carers about ways to elevate the (human) experience of being part of the NSW health care system; developing a high-level state-wide guide for consumer, carer, and community engagement became a priority for NSW Health.

So, in 2022, the Human Experience Team partnered with Beyond Sticky Notes, Better Together Collective and Good Point Design to make it happen.

Over the next 10 months, consumers, carers, and staff came together to create and launch All of Us: a guide to engaging consumers, carers and communities across NSW Health through extensive collaboration, consultation, and review of 35+ existing guides and frameworks. A Design Crew of 16 consumers, carers, staff members, and provocateurs sat at the heart of the entire process.

Image: NSW Health. All of Us Core Ingredients.

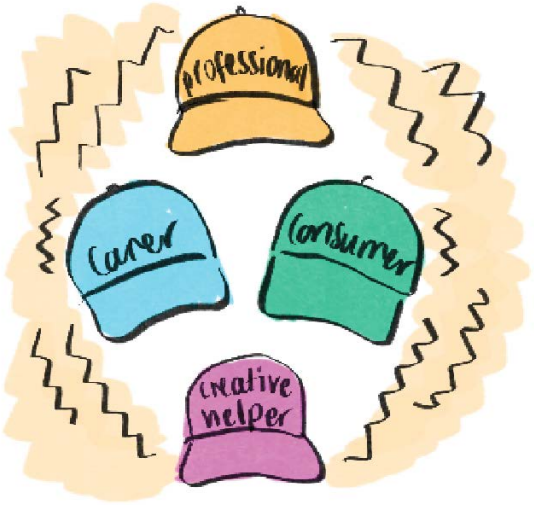

Illustration by Lucy Klippan. Good Point Design.

A year later, the guide and tools are being accessed and downloaded across states and countries (under Creative Commons licence) and used in many ways and contexts.

While this is all great news, we wanted to find out what it was like to be part of the engagement process itself so that others can hopefully learn (and replicate) a lesson or two in their own co-ways of working.

We spoke to Jenni and Megan; two Design Crew members, each of whom wore a different hat in this project, to get their thoughts on participating in this collaborative process.

Meet the wonderful Jenni, a Carer and mum who has tried to make a difference through various advocacy roles, projects, and committees, with varying degrees of success. She shares her experiences of being involved in the health sector over the years, what made her experience as a Design Crew member different, what she appreciated and learned, and her hopes for the future.

What was different from activities or projects you've been part of before?

Oh dear, where do I even begin? The differences were blinding, and there were just too many to list!

Let me give you some context...

In my experience within the carer advocacy space across NSW Health, except for one wonderful local health district employee, I have never felt genuinely valued in my caring role, knowledge or extensive lived experience.

Generally, I began to feel like I could have been a mute mannequin sitting in a chair dressed as a chicken painting my nails as long as they could tick the 'carer involvement' box. So, I just began to sit back and observe.

I recall when I first became part of an "Advisory Group", I noticed that the Carer and Consumer section of the meeting was always the last item on the agenda. They only wanted to hear about "Good news stories". Huh? I was a little perplexed as to why "good news stories" were relevant. A step in the right direction was made to create this group, but then to pop Carer and Consumers contributions in a place where everyone was beginning to think about their next meeting and turning off was an unusual choice, in my opinion. Was being at the bottom of an agenda where the organisers really thought Carers and Consumers belonged?

I don't believe there is ever any malice in these types of decisions; it is just a culture that needs some updating.

Even though I knew it may make me unpopular and ruffle some feathers, I had it moved up to the top of the agenda where it should have been in the first place. As my carer involvement increased, my internal head shook as I thought, 'What you are all doing right now is the problem with Carer and Consumer engagement'. I knew we didn't need to have yet another meeting where half the people didn't turn up or employ another fancy titled '*Clinical Coordinator for the Development and Design of Pencil Sharpening*' or discuss stats and percentages like we did last time. Yawn, they don't need Carers and Consumers here for this. Tick, tick, tick.

I began to notice that the times when people displayed more interest and appreciation of what I had to offer as a Carer was when I was up on a big stage with a microphone sharing my journey (the good, the bad and the ugly) and the failings of "the system". I could have done the same in other smaller projects, but why did a stage and microphone make people notice and appreciate what I was saying more? Even coming up afterwards and hugging me for it.

Sure, it's louder and brighter, but the content would be the same, so shouldn't my value as a Carer be the same -whether I was in a Teams meeting, in a small room, or on a stage in a function centre with lots of those fancy little cakes? It then didn't surprise me to hear stories that Carers were often included in projects (not this one!) because they are "a requirement". Not only was this pretty insulting (but not overly

surprising) for myself and other Carers to hear, but it made it even clearer where Carer and Consumer engagement was failing. With all of this in mind, I will admit that I was hesitant to be part of this Design Crew, where I could potentially be in a similar situation of not being seen or heard once again.

HOWEVER, from the second someone from the project contacted me, I immediately felt different, and it just snowballed from there.

What went really well? Were there any highlights?

> From a Carer's perspective, what really stood out for me during this project was always feeling included, valued, heard, appreciated, respected and more. It was evident from the first point of contact that the organisers were warm, welcoming and genuinely interested in having a variety of people involved, which was like a breath of fresh air! In no way did I ever feel like "a requirement".

The entire process was consistently inclusive, diverse, fun, cheery, supportive, engaging, creative, colourful and explained in simple ways that everyone was able to comprehend. Even during times of confusion, understanding and non-judgemental assistance was always on hand. Increasing Diversity and Inclusion was so visible during this project, and having all those different perspectives enriched our experience.

- "Come as you are". My first morning session as part of the Design Crew had just seen me come off a fairly horrendous evening with my son. As they asked us for a number from 0 – 10 on how we were feeling, I thought, "Please just let the ground swallow me up". As everyone fired off their 6+ numbers, I sheepishly shared a 2. A comforting reply came, and from that moment on, I knew I could just come as I was, and that felt good. The importance of *Creating and Maintaining Safety* for all can never be underestimated.
- In my advocacy work, there has always been an obvious imbalance of carer, consumer, employee and bureaucrat ratios. Very heavy on the latter and very light on the Carers and Consumers. Within this particular Design Crew, there was a wonderful balance. Observing so many groups of people represented with a wide range of lived experiences and perspectives was nothing short of heart-warming. Even though people were facilitating the project sessions, it always felt like 'All of Us' being in it together rather than just sitting back while a bureaucrat ran a meeting or a group. *Power in partnership* is crucial.

- Being given options for days or times for us to get together was amazing and unheard of in my Carer advocacy world. Working full-time has always been problematic for me in attending meetings during the day, so I was very grateful to finally be involved in a project with flexibility and to know that the organisers understood that not everyone is available during business hours and has different responsibilities. Even if someone could not attend a session, there were always alternative ways to stay involved. *Ensuring Accessibility and Welcome* was of obvious importance.
- They took everyone's feedback and actioned it where they could. Now, anyone can allow Carers and Consumers to share their thoughts, but in my experience, those thoughts are rarely actioned. Actually, having the organisers contact me to show me where my feedback had been actioned blew my Carer's mind. *Being Honest and Keeping People Informed* builds mutual respect.
- Getting paid is always a bonus!

Offering Recognition really means more than people know. It's no secret that many Carers struggle financially. Knowing our contributions were actually worth something helps ease our financial burdens and shows us we're valued.

- As a long-term Carer, I have really had no choice but to become quite stoic to cope with everything my son's condition threw/throws at me. This would see me turn many of my feelings off or put them aside so that my son's needs came first. Being part of this Design Crew brought out feelings in me that I had forgotten I have. When I would feel my eyes become teary at various moments throughout the project, I realised just how much being included, valued, heard, appreciated and respected really meant to me and just how much I need it.
- Being part of projects as a Carer often feels like you are a very small fish in an enormous sea of whales. I never felt that way as part of this Design Crew. It felt like being in an ocean of all types of marine creatures just doing their thing and being valued for bringing various perspectives to the ocean floor.
- I can't stress how being part of this Design Crew was the complete opposite of anything else I have ever been a part of. If there was a shining beacon on what Carer and Consumer Engagement should look like - this would be it.

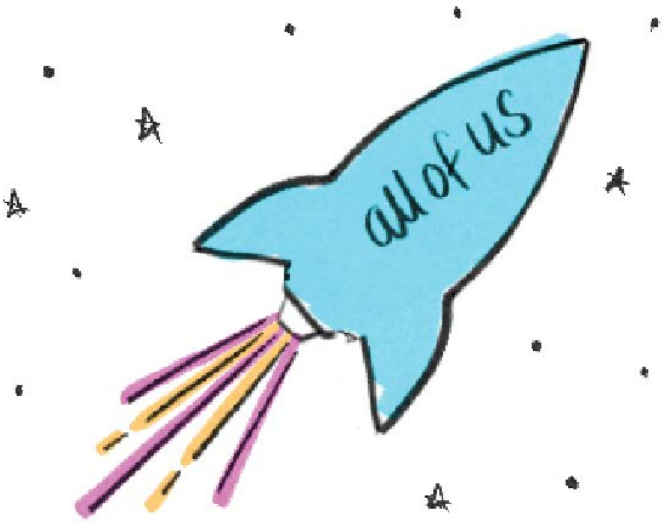

Illustration by Lucy Klippan. Good Point Design.

Was there anything missing that you'd love to see happen next time?

I honestly can't think of much that I would change. I know this experience will stick with me forever.

Dreaming for a second.....I would like the people who organised it to be given funding or whatever it takes to educate the state, the country, the world on how to run a project such as this, alongside Carers and Consumers, and do it extremely well. There are some people who do a job, and then there are some people who have a gift and incorporate it into their job. I want these people to be able to share their gifts and make great change. Never underestimate the message that 'All of Us' sends out. Carers, Consumers and Communities want it. Employees need it. Bureaucrats and politicians definitely need it.

Was there anything that surprised you?

Absolutely everything and that was the best part!

What would you say to other people who are thinking about getting involved in this kind of work?

Go for it because we need more people like you involved. Carers and Consumers often sit at home or in meetings with lots of great thoughts, opinions and ideas (yes, I'm looking at you) but keep it to themselves because they are intimidated by the fancy people, acronyms and the process itself. Just put your hand up, you won't regret it. The people I encountered in this project are some of the most friendly, cheerful, funny, understanding and kind people I have ever met. They restored my faith in there being people out there who believe carers bring value to the table. You want to be a part of that and soak it all up.

Why does working in partnership with consumers, carers, and communities matter from your perspective?

Carers, Consumers and Communities are experts and have an unbelievable wealth of knowledge. Do they have a shiny certificate on the wall that says they are an expert? Probably not. But no one gains more expertise on a subject than living and breathing it day in and day out, and this needs to be respected. The people with the shiny certificates on the wall need Carers, Consumers and Communities on their side, and the best ones can admit it. The first and only medical professional who had a rule that Carers be genuinely included in their loved one's treatment journey is the one who has made such a huge difference in our lives.

"My son isn't having successful outcomes because of him. Or because of me. Or because of his treating team. Or because of his family. Or because of his support workers. Or because of his community. Or because of himself. He is having successful outcomes because we work in collaboration. We respect each other. We hear each other. We include each other. We value each other. All of Us."

Meet the magical Megan.

Having worked across many clinical and non-clinical roles in the New South Wales Health system in Australia over many decades, she really gets the importance and value of collaborative and co-ways of working and making sure that the health system hears and listens to consumers, carers, and communities' experiences, especially those who are seldom heard.

Megan was a member of the Design Crew, bringing the voice of professionals who could benefit from using the guide to do community, consumer and carer engagement better.

She took the time to tell us what it was like from her point of view.

What went really well? Were there any highlights?

I absolutely loved this project. It was different in many ways from consumer, carer, and community engagements I had undertaken or been part of previously. It was the most genuine and respectful engagement I have ever been involved in.

The collaborative relationship with Sue and KA was fantastic. They are terrific to work with. I learned so much through the process, particularly what genuine inclusion and safety can look like and mean to a group. I also learned a great deal about myself; it was a terrific opportunity to reflect on my own work practices.

What was different from activities or projects you've been part of before?

Within my work role, things often need to happen at quite a rapid pace. I think this has often affected the pace of my engagement with consumers, carers, and communities - at times probably to the detriment of those engagements and the people involved.

The pace of the sessions with the Design Crew and during testing sessions was very gentle. I really learned that an increased speed doesn't mean more output or high-quality output. In fact, you can achieve much more with a gentle pace that is inclusive of everyone in the group.

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I had never used a code of care before, but I loved it. It had such a powerful impact on the sense of safety and connection in the Design Crew, which in turn affected how the group functioned and what they were able to achieve. I plan to include a code of care in all my future work.

Was there anything that surprised you?

I was surprised by how much I loved working with hard-copy materials. During one of the Design Crew sessions, we had hard-copy templates, things we could stick on, and coloured pens. In my job, where almost everything is done digitally or in a virtual space, it was such a pleasure to work with hard-copy material in this way. It was a reminder to me not to forget to work with people in this way.

We have had amazing feedback about the hard-copy Methods Cards; people really value having a pack of cards they can work with.

The end product, All of Us, has been welcomed with open arms across the NSW Health system. It's unusual to launch a piece of work of this size and scope into the health system and have it so well accepted. I believe this is a direct reflection of the process used to create it.

What would you say to other people who are thinking about commissioning a project like this?

Go for it! Take your time to plan and to make sure you have a diversity of voices. Using these ways of working takes effort and care, but this is far outweighed by the benefits.

Why does working in partnership with consumers, carers, and communities matter from your perspective?

> I believe that partnering with consumers, carers, and communities is vital at every level of the health system. The NSW Health System serves the consumers, carers, and communities of NSW. As the end users of our system, why would we not partner with consumers, carers, and communities to make sure that we build the best system possible, one that is fit for purpose and meets people's needs?

For those of us working within the health system, often, we don't know what we don't know. A diversity of consumer, carer, and community voices brings a richness and depth of understanding to the issues or projects we are undertaking and often results in novel solutions that would not have been possible without these voices being at the table.

It's no wonder a growing body of evidence shows the positive impacts of partnering with consumers, carers, and communities.

Illustration by Lucy Klippan. Good Point Design.

Find out more about All of Us and the design process here:

All of Us website and tools

Consumers, carers and staff made All of Us. Read about the process

To get in touch with the NSW Health Experience team: moh-patientexperience@health.nsw.gov.au

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Note: We know words are used differently across the health system and communities and change often. Consumers and Carers are the key terms used in All of Us, which is why we've used them here.

The *with us* Thumbs Up

Tools, resources and contemporary practice that get the ***with us*** thumbs up.

Our top three for this issue...

New resource for doing research together

Well done to NSW Regional Health Partners for commissioning this fantastic new resource to help researchers, consumers, carers and health workers co-design and co-deliver medical research.

You can find it here: Doing Research Together

Check before you call it co-design

Try out the co-word fast check and sense check the level of participation that is actually possible before promising a co-word activity.

You can find it here: Co-Word Fast Check Tool

This handy learning tool was made by Sue Muller and Morgan Cataldo

Find practical tools for doing the co-parts better

A new online place to find free practical tools to help you work with people and communities in co and participatory ways - better.

You can find it here: Tools For Better Co-Parts

Thanks for joining us for Issue 4 of *with us*.

We hope that you found some inspiration and gems to inform your own ***working with*** adventures.

Subscribe here to be first to know when Issue 5 lands.

Made with love and hope for the future of ***working with.***

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