

What would young people like adults to know?

East Ayrshire “Hope-Hack”, June 2023

Report by Cathy Sharp and Emily Whyte, *Research for Real*, Learning Partner, July 2023

Introduction

The “Hope-Hack” (Hackathon) was a full-day, large-scale event for young people held in June 2023 at Ayrshire College in Kilmarnock. Designed by the Hope Collective with the support of East Ayrshire Council and What Matters to You, this was part of a UK-wide series of events to bring together young people from the most vulnerable communities with cross-sector leaders and decision-makers to explore and develop innovative solutions to societal challenges.

The event was attended by over 100 young people aged 14-24 from across East Ayrshire, recruited through social media and other channels and this resulted in a diverse range of young people attending. After a welcome and keynote speaker, the focus of the day was smaller group sessions that explored seven themes:

- Education
- Employability & skills
- Youth work activity
- Feeling safe in my community
- Physical & mental wellness
- Housing and social choices
- Environmental issues.¹

The event ended with a feedback session to local Senior Leaders.² Throughout the day, young people were supported by a team of 19 facilitators drawn from a wide range of organisations that work locally with young people, including What Matters to You, Columba 1400, East Ayrshire Council, East Ayrshire Health and Social Care Partnership, NHS Ayrshire and Arran, The Nest Wellbeing Group, Corra Foundation and Young Enterprise Scotland. Those involved were drawn from dedicated facilitation, community work and participation roles, Allied Health Professions, social work, youth work and school nursing.

The feedback from young people will be used to develop next steps, with young people themselves deciding priorities and how they wish to share their insights and ideas.³ This briefing provides a summary of the perspectives of those that had a role at the Hackathon as facilitators.^a

These perspectives are important as they illuminate the further potential of such an initiative for wider, systemic impact. This briefing is designed to be shared amongst all those with an interest in enhancing the voice and agency of young people in East Ayrshire.

¹ These had been identified through the Brights Spots Survey that supports local authorities to systematically listen to their children in care and care leavers, about the things that are important to them. East Ayrshire took part in a Scottish pilot of the survey in 2022.

² This included the Chief Executive of East Ayrshire Council and the Director General Communities at the Scottish Government.

³ This is being taken forward by the East Ayrshire Promise team, WM2U, Vibrant Communities and Columba 1400.

Overview of the impact of the event

Facilitators identified many benefits from the event and expressed a sense that the work has provided a strong foundation for follow-on action. There are new connections and understandings amongst and between the adults and young people, as well as lessons for the wider professional practices of those involved in facilitation.

Key insights

The event generated a strong interest in and feeling of responsibility for what could happen next, a desire to see tangible follow-up action, shaped by young people.

There is potential for greater systemic impact than might be achieved from a one-off consultation event, however successful in its own right: there is an opportunity to generate a wider 'ripple effect' to change mindsets, cultures, and everyday practices in relation to the voice and agency of young people across services and communities.

Most immediately, important connections and momentum were created:

- There was intrinsic value for the facilitators in hearing the voices of young people that are often silent, their specific ideas and insight into how these might challenge the expectations and assumptions of adults. Such challenge to their own thinking was a welcome outcome for the facilitators.

"They were very specific about what they wanted out of it. It was very clear and very realistic. There wasn't anything they were asking about that was 'out there.' And similar themes came up across the different groups, like wanting something to do in the community."

"I was surprised when the young people said that there is nothing in their community and that what they had before has been taken away from them... That has really stuck with me because this reduction in experiences can impact ... the chance to develop social skills."

"When we were talking to the group, it went in different directions from what we initially thought... we thought the young people might want to explore safety in their community, based on recent instances that had happened in Kilmarnock and East Ayrshire, and instead the place that they felt they needed to feel safe was at home. It was all linked in terms of being at home, and that took a direction that we didn't expect."

- The Hackathon served as a demonstration of how engagement with young people at scale can be achieved. Despite the challenges, there were benefits of a large-scale event in terms of diversity of voices and experiences, opportunities for social mixing with new people and confidence borne of witnessing others taking part.

“... one of the young carers who had attended shared that she walked away feeling a lot of comfort, which has stuck with me. She explained the event has alleviated some of her anxiety as she now knows that she is not the only one worrying and thinking about these issues. Being part of a huge-scale event, with all the ‘high-up’ people and all the young people talking together, created a lot of comfort.”

- There were benefits for the facilitators of meeting each other and of the chance to connect informally with senior leaders.
- There were also benefits in terms of their own ability and confidence in ‘hosting’ conversations with and amongst young people, including the value of listening, the specifics of language and the importance of visual facilitation to demonstrate that the messages were being heard.
- Despite the challenges of the scale and mix of people at the event, many elements worked well; the welcome and provision of hospitality were important to creating the right atmosphere.
- The facilitators benefited from being able to work in pairs and valued the structure to guide the day. The training for the event had been quite brief and so facilitators had to largely rely on their own experience and each other.
- They seem to have tackled these challenges well: they report that they witnessed initial apprehension and anxiety about taking part shift as the day went on and that young people were generally able to take part in meaningful ways.
- Those who had experience of other Hackathons acknowledged that whilst this was one of the largest such events, the young people engaged well and fairly quickly immersed themselves in the tasks. Whilst a few young people left the event at lunchtime, the vast majority stayed for the whole day.

Lessons for future events

Whilst activities don’t always go to plan and decisions often must be taken in the moment, there are lessons for any similar future events, including attention to acoustics, considering a shorter day, changes to the timings and pace of activities and the use of more creative, image-based, and sensory activities.

One idea for the future in relation to the role of senior leaders would set a different tone and enhance the peer-to-peer elements of the event:

“...it could be that the ‘elder states people,’ are in the back of the room, rather than the front and bringing other young people that haven’t been part of the day to hear the solutions... that would be amazing”.

So, what now?

The experience both affirmed and challenged aspects of thinking and practices amongst the facilitators in ways that surprised and excited them and which demonstrate many further possibilities.

- Facilitators have been reminded of the value of not imposing adult views, worries or preconceptions onto children and young people. They powerfully ask: what would young people like adults to know?

“...it was interesting for me in giving young people the floor and opportunity. The adults can perceive what is important to young people, but that can differ from what young people say is important to them and why.”

“I was reminded to trust the creativity and innovation of young people.I was so impressed with their ability to articulate what was important to them. I was probably guilty of underestimating the young people and worrying about how they would cope with the environment as it was really challenging. But I was blown away by their ability to stick with it, to really communicate what they wanted to say and to do that really creatively.”

“You couldn’t predict how the day was going to go, it was so interesting to see what was being created. No matter what adults think the relevance will be, the children and young people have their own views and their own perspectives...”

“Not knowing what we didn’t know was very powerful for us.”

- This experience reinforced the responsibility of working with the next steps.

“Young people will always tell us what they think if we are listening... how we respond to the next steps is what matters.”

“We all have a massive responsibility, and I mean massive responsibility because in fact, the Hackathon becomes completely pointless if we don’t follow up.”

“The genuine worth of this will come when we see young people direct and shape the ‘what next?’ So, it’s not just a listening exercise as a one-off, this has to be about young people feeling empowered to shape and change

outcomes, which could make life better for them. ... I think there has been worth, but there is more worth moving forward."

This was seen both as an individual or team challenge, for example 'to upscale my own participation work' or to inform work with care-experienced children and young people, and a more general appeal to be more proactive in seeking direct engagement with young people:

"... I think often when it comes to the professionals, we are looking at research, and we know how language develops, and teaching that, but we are not always good at actually going to the people that it impacts and asking for their opinion."

There are some specific opportunities identified for wider sharing and influence based on both the feedback from young people and the perspectives of the facilitators.

"I had a couple of really interesting conversations at a strategic level with people who have power, about how we turn this into action. How do we move this forward? ...It's about having people in the room, listening to the energy, and how we pick that up and make sure the conversations continue. I do think we made connections and can capitalise on that. So, in terms of worth, that wouldn't have happened just through strategic meetings and without the energy of the young people."

These include an opportunity to influence the Bright Spots Survey, shape the East Ayrshire Children's Strategic Plan. There are also opportunities to share the learning with service managers, with the Integration Joint Board and with the East Ayrshire WM2U Oversight Board and funders Programme Board.

We hope that this short briefing can be shared widely amongst teams that share the ambitions of East Ayrshire Council and WM2U to enhance the voice and agency of young people in East Ayrshire. To stay connected and contribute to our developing thinking and practice, please contact Jackie Brock, WM2U Programme Manager, jackie@whatmatters2u.org.uk

^a Two group interviews have been conducted with a total of 11 facilitators, conducted by Emily Whyte and Cathy Sharp, Research for Real, Learning Partners for WM2U. In addition, this briefing has been shared with all facilitators for further comment.