Practising what we all preach

East Ayrshire 'Grow as We Go' event
Report by Cathy Sharp, *Research for Real*, Learning Partner, August 2023

1. Background and overview

WM2U and the Nest Wellbeing Group co-hosted a local "Grow as We Go" learning event in June 2023. With support from the coordinator and learning partner, five community members played an active part in the design and co-facilitation of the day. The event was intended to support conversations about progress towards the changes sought in Cumnock and Muirkirk and to create renewed energy and commitment to make and sustain further change. These changes, which might be characterised as 'early help in action', are:

- Seeing a positive difference on the ground
- Better mental health for children and families
- Real supportive support at the right time
- A sense of looking towards a positive future
- A sense of belonging to a valued group, feeling that you matter and are valued within it.

Whilst children and young people were not present at the event, the group are highly motivated by their desire to support change for all children and young people, not just their own or those they know. They are especially concerned about the long-term impact of Covid, as children have missed out on experiences and are struggling now and are fully aware that family life is not always benign for children.

In planning the event, the group of parents were clear that 'we want people to come who can and want to make change, including those who hold budgets and other resources'.[1] Almost 40 people attended the event held at Netherthird Community Centre. The participants were drawn from the local community and practitioners with a role in the locality, with a rough 50:50 split.[2] The Nest

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[1] The event took place in the same month as the Hackathon at which some of the participants had also been present.
[2] Four of the (non-WM2U) professionals that attended had been part of the most recent VBLE in December 2022, alongside three of the parents.

Wellbeing Group and other community members are very engaged in offering volunteer-based formal and informal support for other members of the community, and their reputation, contacts and approach were significant in encouraging local people to attend. It is a testament to their commitment to change that they took part in the day in such a positive manner and encouraged others to do the same, despite navigating recent setbacks in their efforts to secure a building for the group.

The spirit of the day was very much about making sure that everybody there was able to take part 'as a human being', not wearing official badges or lanyards and sharing experiences with each other on an equal and safe basis. To encourage community members in particular to share their experience, a small-scale 'Photovoice' exercise was initiated a few weeks beforehand.[3] Some of the photographs that people took were shared at the start of the event by the Nest Wellbeing Group to help people understand what is important to them and set the tone for the day. The rest of the event was based on engagement with and discussion of stories from parents and practitioners, with a focus on the insights and implications for each of those present.[4] The final session explored progress in relation to the desired outcomes, using an adapted 'World Café' process that allows participants to choose which topic to discuss and move to other discussions in the time available.[5]

Feedback from participants at the event suggested that the attention to the creation of friendly and safe atmosphere had been important in allowing people to take part, even though it wasn't easy for everyone there to play a full part. This briefing focuses on the key messages arising from the day and highlights remaining challenges for WM2U.[6]

Key insights

There was a positive and challenging atmosphere in the room, a sense of a common agenda and shared hope that change is possible. It was an important occasion as it allowed people to see and hear the collective passion and commitment to make a difference.

- An enduring theme was the importance of trusting, non-judgemental relationships, and practices. The importance of being listened to, of genuinely being heard and of working together to focus on possibilities for change. There is a clear message that 'mutual respect between services and the community needs to continue to improve'.
- The stories shared highlighted key elements of how professionals engage with families, the role of the community and challenges for services, whilst also noting that some progress has been made. Small, yet significant changes show the value of the community as a unique source of knowledge and connections, in its own right, rather than mainly being seen as a safety net when services fail.
- Parents and community members are clear that the existing system is not working for them. The part of community as a resource has been undervalued. Yet, the bringing together of parents and practitioners by WM2U has enabled sharing of insights about what does work and what still needs to change, with impacts on professional practices.

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[3] Photovoice invites people to become active 'research' participants by 'voicing' their experiences, perspectives, and interpretations through the photographs they take and using them to share stories.
[4] These stories were collected from parents and practitioners who had attended the VBLE in December 2022.
[5] https://theworldcafe.com/
[6] With thanks to those parents and practitioners that provided comments on a draft report.

- There is agreement about the importance of the five WM2U high-level outcomes and the inter-connectedness between them, although there are also many on-going challenges to make the expression of a common purpose a reality.
- A sense of belonging is evident amongst those with experience of WM2U, the Nest Well-Being Group and in other groups in the community that offer people spaces and occasions to get to know each other in new ways. This safety and trust encourage growing individual and collective agency amongst people, often built despite considerable personal hardship and trauma.
- The shared commitment to creating better mental health for children and families is a galvinising force and there are positive signs of progress in several respects, for example, in relation to understanding about what is needed in the community, wider awareness of neurodiversity, ACEs and the impact of parental mental health on children. It is also positive that there is confidence that young people have many ideas about what would help. Other ideas for improvements were more sharing of information about what is available, better childcare, more help for Dad's, and early support for new parents.

Looking ahead

- With prospects for place-based partnership in mind, it was felt to be positive that people were there, even though there was disappointment at the absence of some key stakeholders and decision-makers, especially given the shared challenges that remain. Despite the significance of this unusual opportunity to meet and learn with practitioners and the community, for some, other priorities took precedence in the final week of the school term.
- There was recognition that the best prospects for the future lie in the collaboration of services and communities, where the community is a clear and valued partner, able to draw on untapped resources to reach people, offering timely and 'real supportive support', and able to contribute to joint initiatives or 'tests of change'.
- Despite these developments that support better mental health, there remain issues of stigma, a lack of understanding about trauma and recovery, and deaths from suicide and drugs. The continuing work confronts the significant complexities of living with and responding to trauma, understanding and supporting recovery in non-judgemental ways, and addressing the impact of poverty.
- There is frustration that whilst change is possible and some staff 'are listening and doing things differently', the slow pace of change, difficulties engaging with schools and with decision-makers risk derailing the progress that has been made to date.
- Workloads, a lack of autonomy or discretion to make decisions, fear of repercussions and the consequences of error are significant issues for practitioners. Yet, despite these factors, there is goodwill amongst these parents and practitioners to develop ideas further in the light of their learning so far.

The challenge remains to develop mutual understanding of what it means to genuinely 'be alongside', to 'work with' rather than 'do to', and to shape practical ways to build on the existing progress and goodwill created. Evidence from elsewhere highlights that any failure to address early challenges or losses, to address conflict and loss of trust, risks reducing feelings of neighbourhood belonging and connectivity and creates barriers to community agency and control.

2. Learning from stories

A selection of stories based on the experience of community members and practitioners were shared at the event. These were discussed in small groups and analysed using a structured and timed process. Participants were encouraged to write or draw on the tablecloths as they were talking and listening. Whilst detailed notes of these discussions were not made, the following issues were aired:

How professionals engage with families
"Talking helps if you have someone to listen".
"When you struggle to make a decision about if you want to brush your hair or not".
"No wonder she couldn't get out of bed, I know how she feels!"
"Does a family have to go off the rails to access services?"
"Tell people why you feel the way you feel."
"Jumping through hoops to access help".
"Why do services have a louder voice in what's good for her?"
"We need other ways to communicate than the phone – we need a local base".
"What support do you need to make it better?"

The role of the community
"I want to change it for my kids and everyone else's"
"I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for these groups in the community"
"Our group is like family – we can see that in all the groups".
"Forming local and more natural connections and friendships".
"The football team is not the manager or the players, it's the supporters like a village or a town. Services and policies come and go but the folks are always there."
"Where's the Dad, and the rest of the family?"
"Setbacks can be a force and galvanise a group – 'what's for ye, will no go by ye".

Challenges for services
"If there are so many services involved, why has it taken a year?"
"Services need to come into the community centre and listen".
"Staff need to know that things are on".
"We need to educate people about different types of trauma".
"Stop giving out methadone".
"One of the risks is that professionals will be penalised – we need to support them to treat people as individuals and respond to need, instead of reaction (crisis response)."
"Decisions are made at the management level – they are not even at this event – says it all".
"Consistent challenge of how budgets are allocated".
"Can we have a budget per worker – and trust them to do the right thing? (HEART)"
"The risk is we do too little, too late".

Making progress
"Focus on the positives and how far we have come. We are all positive, it keeps us gaun"
"We have a shared vision and values and opportunities to talk like this."
"Are we celebrating success in the wrong areas?"
"How do we measure more equitably?"

This was followed a further small group 'Unfolding Story' exercise, that uses a series of prompts to capture thinking and provide feedback to the whole room. The word cloud below is based on the

initial prompt 'My word of the moment is…' and conveys both the positive and challenging atmosphere.
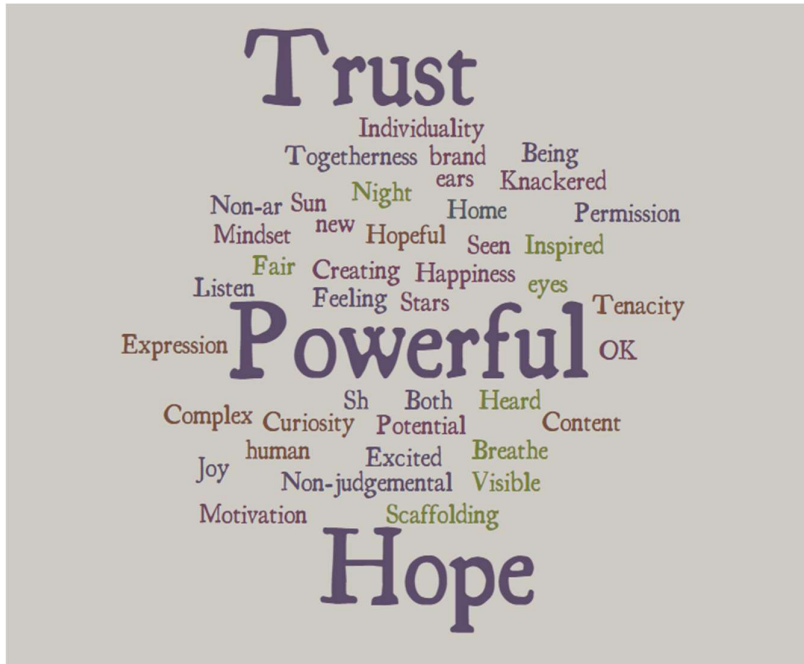
## 3. Outcomes: What's changing? What still needs to change?

Discussion of progress towards outcomes shows agreement about the importance of these outcomes and emphasises the inter-connectedness between them.

"You need a sense of belonging, without it you can't feel part of it - a sense of belonging and connectedness is important for participation".

Such a sense of belonging is evident amongst those with experience of WM2U, the Nest Well-Being Group and in other groups in the community. This is based on the way people are treated with kindness and compassion, the focus on relationships, the creation of a safe space and offer of peer support. Such supportive help from within the community was suggested to be more accessible, sustainable, and less stigmatising than that available from services, as 'people don't feel they have to hide as much'. The availability of a range of activities within the community has offered people spaces and occasions to get to know each other. Whilst these activities have been significant in enabling local people to be alongside each other in new ways, addressing stigma and fear within the community, this was also characterised as 'the community picking up the slack'.

Figure 1 below is based on a selection of photographs taken by members of the community to illustrate 'feeling safe and welcome' and 'taking part' as part of the 'Photovoice' exercise.

Figure 1: Feeling Safe and Welcome and Taking Part
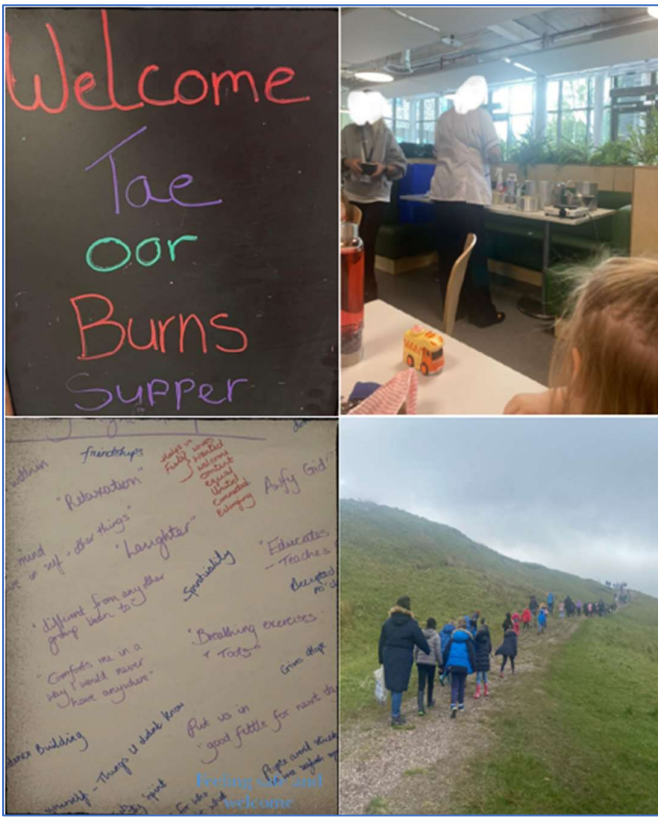
Whilst it was suggested that staff feel a similar sense of belonging and comfort in school environments, this is much trickier for community members, who experience a 'them and us' culture, where they do not feel heard and experience judgement which produces frayed relationships and defensiveness:

> *"It feels like we are talked down to in language and with words we don't understand".*
>
> *"They don't listen, we're not heard".*

This belonging and connectedness has helped to make progress in some areas and a clear message is that 'mutual respect between services and the community needs to continue to improve'.

Despite setbacks and continuing challenges, there are signs of a sense of individual and collective agency amongst the community members, often built by overcoming considerable personal hardship and trauma:

> *"…recognising and valuing yourself and what you want to give to others".*
>
> *"The NEST wellbeing group are an unstoppable force – the ambition is there, wanting to do more".*

"A power shift is happening – we are making the right people uncomfortable, the community is realising they have power of their own."

What's helping is the continuing attention to community voice, the sense of togetherness and safety that many individuals feel by being part of something bigger that 'gets them out of the house'. The photographs in Figure 2 were taken by two community members to help share their experience of feeling safe(r), in the context of their experience of trauma.

Figure 2: Feeling safe(r)

The shared commitment to creating better mental health for children and families is a galvinising force. Whilst there are still much to be done, there is now greater recognition of neurodiversity amongst children in schools, social and traditional media, and community groups. There is also more knowledge about Adverse Childhood Experiences, of children's mental health issues and better recognition that parental mental health has an impact on children.

It was suggested that there is better understanding about what is needed in the community, that 'CAMHS is not the answer' and that there aren't single solutions, but that everyone has a part to play. Counselling in schools was acknowledged to be changing and some community mental health practitioners were praised for their signposting to forms of support. There has also been welcome recent investment in an online mental health service for young people.[7] There is also more emphasis on 'taking services to communities' for example, 'sporting activities are a big improvement on what we used to have'.

Despite these developments that support better mental health, there remain issues of stigma, a lack of understanding about trauma and recovery, and deaths from suicide and drugs.

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[7] Kooth is a free online counselling and emotional well-being support service providing young people aged 14-24 years living in East Ayrshire with a safe and secure means of accessing support with their emotional health and wellbeing needs from a professional team of qualified counsellors.

> *"What worries me or makes me angry is…. not enough is being done about mental health. Lives will be lost to suicide, drugs, the cost of living."*

Access to services remains challenging, particularly but not solely for young people, due to issues such as transport and the fact that most services are only available during the school day. There is a need to continue awareness raising and normalising the language that enables people to talk more easily about their mental health. It was acknowledged that young people have many ideas about what would help and that 'school isn't always the answer'. Ideas for improvements include more sharing of information about what is available, better childcare, more help for Dad's, and early support for new parents.

4. Conclusions: system change- practising what we all preach

This report paints a mixed picture and a challenge to those interested in the realities of place-based system change. It describes a defining moment in the work of WM2U that calls for shared values to be put into action.

The power and potential of bringing parents and professionals together is evident. There is agreement that the desired outcomes are important, people can identify the ingredients which support system change and have enough evidence that these work in practice to make them want to continue.

> *"It had stuck in my mind that one of the parents at the recent values-based leadership experience had said 'it's the small things that make a difference'. I realised that we were asking too much of the mother. Every service had bombarded her with information all at once. I said, 'I think we need to stop! We are giving you mountains to climb' – and she said 'yes, and I can't even get out of bed'. So, I changed tack and instead I asked, 'what can I do today?'"*

Small, yet significant changes like this show the role of the community as a unique source of knowledge, connections, and compassionate and responsive peer support, showing community has value in its own right, rather than a 'safety net when services fail'.

Stories from those professionals and parents that took part of a VBLE in December 2022 show how their thinking and practice is being influenced by their encounters with each other. Now the experience of community members of being alongside some professionals provides a growing confidence in their potential contribution to joint initiatives or 'tests of change'.

Mobilising voice and agency in this way around agreed actions, with professionals alongside would be a significant form of system change. The ingredients include:
- A willingness to work alongside others, bringing the best of community expertise and professional experience together.
- Recognising the knowledge, skills and resources that already exists in communities and can be further resourced.
- The importance of how people are 'met' with compassion and as equals, without judgement.

- Retaining a positive outlook, noticing the good, as a strengths and solution-focused approach, able to motivate and sustain participation.
- Doing what matters to the individual, listening and acting on what is heard, checking out and keeping the conversation going.
- Recognition of personal experience of trauma, how this manifests itself in daily life and inhibits help seeking behaviours.
- Measuring what matters. Acknowledging even apparently 'small' individual and collective achievements and successes, even if there is still some way to go.
- Expecting and not being stalled by setbacks and barriers to change.
- Putting money at the heart of the community.

There is a keen awareness of the continuing, systemic barriers to change amongst all parties and frustration that the failure to act on repeated messages risks 'people and good staff giving up in the face of inaction'. There is also awareness of the financial impact on services, the cost of crisis interventions, and the human consequences and harms that arise from a failure to act earlier. Evidence from elsewhere highlights that any failure to address early challenges or losses, to address conflict and loss of trust, risks reducing feelings of neighbourhood belonging and connectivity and creates barriers to community agency and control.[8]

Workloads, a lack of autonomy or discretion to make decisions, fear of repercussions and the consequences of error are significant issues for practitioners. Yet, despite these factors, there is goodwill amongst these parents and practitioners to develop ideas further in the light of their learning so far.

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[8] New Local (2023) Rapid review of community agency and control, as final outcomes, or enablers of place-based interventions to improve community wellbeing, https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/rapid-review-of-community-agency-and-control/