

Just interact with us as human beings

Written by a **young man** from Project Future, **Dr Isabelle Cullis** a Clinical Psychologist and Deputy Project Lead, and **Annaliza Gaber** an Education and Employment Coordinator.¹

Project Future is a community-based holistic mental health and wellbeing service for young people aged 16-25 who have experiences of the criminal justice system and/or are affected by serious youth violence. The project is situated in Haringey, North London, one of the ten most deprived wards in the UK where the community experience multiple health, social and racial inequalities.

Project Future aims to improve young people's wellbeing, access to services, education, employment and training opportunities with the long-term aim of reducing marginalisation and offending. The project has been co-produced alongside young men in the community, underpinned by the ethos that they are experts in their own lives and are best placed to know what would support their community.

The project is staffed by a team of Clinical Psychologists, Specialist Youth Workers, an Education and Employment specialist and local young people employed as Community Consultants. A primary focus of the work is to wrap therapeutic psychological support around all interactions with young people, attending to their emotional and developmental needs, as well as practical issues of self-care and safety. Project Future is primarily a community-based service which also offers support to young people known to the project in custody.

Co-production at Project Future has enabled young people who typically do not seek support to engage in help. It underpins all aspects of the work and is core to the safe and effective delivery of the service.

Co-production happens in a multitude of ways at the Project, from young people designing their own support and 'what help looks like' to co-creating and delivering projects and making decisions about the service together with the team. Youth Employees at Project Future have contributed to local and wider systems change through conducting research, delivering training and taking part in consultations in order to influence legislation and policy change. This work puts young people's voices at the heart of social

action, so they are being heard on what the issues and solutions are.

The project is a partnership between Mind in Haringey, Barnet, Enfield and Haringey NHS Mental Health Trust, and Haringey Council.

The experience of Project Future

We've captured a conversation between a young man in prison (young person) and a Clinical Psychologist (I) and Education and Employment Coordinator (A) working in the Project Future team. The young man shares experiences of his life, being in prison and support he's accessed from the project. They talk about co-production at Project Future, what makes it different from other services and ideas for what other services could learn from this one.

I: What did you think about Project Future the first time you came?

Young Person: We used to have a youth hub in the local area, and it got shut down. I thought the project was basically the next youth hub. I followed my friend there and saw people chilling, playing FIFA and some of my friends were in the kitchen cooking. I didn't know what you were doing and to be honest, I thought you guys were feds. I thought maybe you were trying to keep people off the streets and give people a place to go... but I wasn't sure what your intentions were and whether you were reporting back to the police. When the team came into the room I would stop talking and feel wary around them. I have been like that all my life... only opening up with friends and being wary of my environment.

I: Why do you think you felt wary around the team?

Young Person: It's like we've been moulded to be a certain way... having a lot of trust issues as a young person felt normal to me. Growing up as a young black person in my community we witnessed a lot of unjust things. As a child I saw unarmed black men killed by the police and when I would walk home from school at the

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age of 12 or 13, I would always get harassed by police officers.

There were times I got arrested for things I had nothing to do with. When I was 14, I was arrested and I had no idea what was going on. In court they said the suspect was 6ft with long hair and at the time I was only 5ft 5 with short hair. I'd been at home with my mum and brother at the time that the crime was committed but I was charged anyway. It felt like my solicitor just didn't seem to care and it was like they were thinking 'we have a young black man here, let's just go and convict him.'

I guess that left me feeling like every professional I came into contact with I couldn't trust.

I: What do you think the impact of experiences like that has been for you and your friends?

Young Person: I think it made us think we didn't have a chance. I think we thought we were always going to be labelled 'wrong' so what's the point? I wasn't committing crime but as a child I remember thinking 'I don't have a chance' so I might as well make money instead of not doing anything and getting the blame anyway. It meant I ended up committing more crime.

In the community we had no one helping us or showing us a different way, even in school. All the teachers seemed to care about was if you turned up to class. No teacher is going to say to a child 'what's troubling you?' or 'come sit down and tell me what's going on'. My friends and I bonded a lot through these bad times and trying to help each other. Losses of friends did bond us together too and we just wanted to see each other do well in life. There were no role models out there showing us the right things so I had to learn as I grew.

I: When did you start to learn about what support was available at the Project?

Young Person: I saw that some of my friends were working at the project and I started speaking to them about it. They told me that the project could help with things, like getting a job, or if you got arrested, or if you were going to prison you could chat to them. I still didn't access any help then, I brushed it off because I wasn't sure. Then I heard that you were helping someone with an immigration case, they told me about what you were doing and that was when I thought maybe I could get some help too. I started speaking to one of the psychologists and she was cool. She kept

what we spoke about close and I respected that privacy and how she handled the situation. I could see that she was serious about helping me. She proper done her thing and I respected her for that. She didn't push me too much either, she let me make the decisions and I had to set the boundaries. If I wanted her to contact my solicitor, it was a decision I had to make... If they came to court, that was a decision I had to make, obviously they put stuff out there as an option but then it was up to me.

I'm one of those people who doesn't trust professionals, I haven't had good experiences of professionals. They talked a good game but then they never actually did much.

I: It sounds like a bit of a risk for you to trust the project team?

Young Person: It was, it was, but I'm glad I did. It's helped me a lot, with lots of different things. Even with my lawyer, you lot helped with the relationship, it helped me have a better understanding of what needed to be done and what was going to happen next.

I recognised the good that you were doing, not just with me but with other people. I saw you helping people with courses and getting things like their CSCS cards and jobs. I saw the good you were doing and that you

actually cared. When you have come to court as well, that has meant a lot. Other professionals would neglect people in those circumstances. I hadn't ever been to any other services for support, not voluntarily anyway. I had my youth offending worker, but I had to go to that so that felt different from what you're doing.

I: I think an essential part of what makes us different is that we work alongside young people and the community.

Young Person: I think that makes you all more approachable, that you have young adults working alongside you and it gives us opportunities too... to be part of the conversation.

I: What was it like being in prison during lockdown?

Young Person: Lockdown was hard for me, the isolation and not being out. Being in a closed confined space for a very long time was difficult. I need to stay active and I couldn't do that.

I feel like being in prison this time has been better than the other time. I've been calmer and focused on

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things like academics. These regular conversations with Project Future via the video link have really helped me because you're thinking more about what you want to do, making plans and sharing ideas. And also, just chatting to someone and getting things off your chest.

I: Is there anything else that's helped during this time?

Young Person: Reading has helped a lot. It's a kind of positive that's come out of lockdown because when you're in your cell you have a lot of time on your hands and I don't think I get much from watching TV. For me 'knowledge is power'. I want to know things and want to be able to have conversations about things. I don't want to be one of those single-minded people, even certain conversations I have with people in prison help with that. We don't talk about the same things all the time. Obviously, I hear people talk about gang things, road things,² but I don't really like talking about those things... I take myself out of those conversations.

All of this 'I done this'... I don't like that; I like talking and reading, especially about politics and history.

I: What is it that you find helpful about history or politics?

Young Person: You've got to understand the past to know how to change the future. Growing up, I didn't really have a chance. The environment I was in set me up to fail, I think there's so much to change still in our society, especially the area I'm from. A lot of things like school made it hard for us when I was younger. We'd get kicked out and permanently excluded and then you're left with nothing to do. I've seen so many younger men running the street and I'd ask them 'what are you doing?' and they'd say they got kicked out of school. In our area there's only so many places where there are (Pupil Referral) Units and the unit in Haringey is in an area I'm not safe in. So, you've got to give young people like me an alternative. I went to the unit because I knew I wanted to get back into mainstream school and I always saw education as important. I struggled and had a lot of fights there but a lot of people just didn't turn up.

I: How would you describe the support from Project Future since you've been in prison?

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Young Person: I've never had support like this. Project Future are the only actual professionals I've met who care about young people and care what happens to them. You lot visit me every month and it shows me you care about our well-being. You've always asked if we need help... Coming to court, or when we are getting released from prison, speaking to probation or sorting out family visits, you're always willing to help. You've helped my family too and that's been so important.

You can lose your way in here and the video link visits have really helped me a lot. The conversations have made me think more about myself and my future. I thought at the start maybe you would just come and see me once but you kept it going and checking up on me and making sure that I haven't lost my head.

It helps being in here (in a foreign nationals' prison) because it's calmer and a lot of people are really focused on their cases and look out for each other too. We help each other go through this process and there are more people looking out for you. It's very different from other jails.

A: It sounds like you are providing a lot of support for other people

I: It makes me think that you're being the role model for others that you didn't have?

Young Person: Yeah, I didn't really have that growing up and so one of the things that feels important is to be able to do that for other people because I didn't have that.

There was one person in prison who was helpful to me. In my first sentence in 2016, we were doing a bricklaying course and I got close with the instructor. He was teaching me a lot of things and I could tell he was good people. He pushed me, excelled my expectations and I built things I never thought I would... I built a shed! He taught me things I still remember and can still do.

I think what was helpful was the way he spoke to me. He treated me like I wasn't a prisoner; he was teaching me and I felt like I was on an apprenticeship. He believed in me and that made me believe I could do it. I think that did a lot for me and it made me want to come out and work in construction.

2. Referring to being on the road/streets a lot and all the things that come with that.

I: What has the support from Project Future helped you to do in your life?

Young Person: It's helped me to grow, I've grown a lot, especially in the past year. It's helped me to think about my future a lot and where I want to be and what I want to do when I come out.

I'm a bit older now, more mature and I feel like I'm in a different place in my life now to previous years. Getting older now and seeing my son getting older helps me realise I need to sort out my life. I want to set a good example to my son and I want to be someone he can look up to. I've got so tired of the cycle and I don't want to get stuck or have that mindset so I've got to break out of this. This is my life now.

A: What's helped break that mindset?

Young person: Talking to family definitely and talking to you. It's been helpful having friends in here as well. I think the way we communicate with each other and motivate each other helps me. I have friends from my country here and we have the same kind of background and share the same values. We talk to each other and encourage each other saying 'we need to be better, do better'.

I can talk to you lot about anything, you've made this comfortable space for me. Helping me to open up in times when I've been struggling, I know you lot have been there for me. Engaging with me so casually and being interested in what I want in life. You lot do things differently.

I: There are key evidence-based psychological theories and approaches that we draw on at Project Future, but for me a lot of it is just being genuine and human in the work that you do. I've noticed a lot of change in you in the last two years, has anything surprised you?

Young Person: I wasn't expecting us to get so close. You know me properly and personally, my family too. I've always been guarded, but I've let you lot in. Before that I had only opened up to my friends and like I said I've always been wary of my environment and who I would speak around.

I: What do you think has enabled you to do that?

Young Person: You lot never forced me to do anything. You let me go at my own pace and I

appreciate that. It took time to get to this point. It took me at least a year or more to trust the team and now we are here five years on. Properly having engaged with you all for five years.

I: What do you think other services could learn from Project Future?

Young Person: I want prison staff to learn from how you approach and talk to us. You don't always have to have a business or professional hat on... just interact with us as human beings. In jail, we're not talked to by staff as people, that makes us not want to interact with staff or ask for help.

Prison staff need to learn that the prison population is not made up of bad people, just people who made bad choices and all those people have a story. The other day I saw a governor having an argument with one of my friends, the things he was saying got me mad. He was saying 'you're a criminal so I don't have to say anything to you' and 'you're stuck in here but I'm going home'. We don't need staff to come and judge us... we have already been judged. When you hear people saying all these things it just makes me think 'what do you expect to happen'? It makes me want to stay away from them and not interact with them, it goes back to (the

question of) — who can I turn to?

It's probably why people in here help each other so much. If the staff aren't helping us, who's going to help us?

A: What would you change/improve about prisons if you could?

Young Person: I would improve education and make sure that people get access to proper courses. Not just English, Science and Maths, but give people a proper education like you get at university. This is a foreign national jail and there aren't a lot of courses available for people, so there isn't much productive stuff that you can do or educational options for people.

I: How do you think co-production could be used to improve things in prisons?

Young Person: They could have more council meetings and opportunities for people to speak and share ideas. They could appoint some prisoners who can speak for the wing and meet every week or fortnight to raise concerns.

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The way people get spoken to here... People are getting talked down to and there is a lack of help. This is one of them prisons where everyone is going through immigration stuff so how come there isn't much help about immigration stuff? A lot of the prisoners are asking for help but the guards don't know much... The Home Office are supposed to be around to help but they only come once in the week and it's the same time we go to the gym. Everyone else is banged up and when we're going out, the immigration lady comes. She only sees a few people in their cells and she sneaks onto the wing. If you're banged up you wouldn't know she was there...

Foreign national prisons need to have a room where the home office representative sits in and anyone can access them and ask for help... Rather than waiting three or four weeks, you need that interaction early. That's what they've got in detention centres, they have a few of them offices where you can seek advice.

I: If those things were done in prisons, what do you think that would enable?

Young Person: It would better people's lives and give people some control. Letting people think, plan and decide where they want to go in their lives helps them feel like an adult. Whether or not you have made mistakes, people want to be in control of their own lives and not be told which path they have to go down. To be respected as a human is important. Not being respected brings down your self-esteem and that stops you from thinking you can fulfil anything.

Young person: Why do you think co-production is so important?

I: The young people we work with are often labelled 'hard to reach' and aren't being seen in other mainstream, statutory services. Young people struggle to access those services, often being labelled as too complex or being positioned as dangerous. Their vulnerabilities are commonly not seen or acknowledged meaning they miss out on help and the risks for these young people remain high. Having countless experiences of being disempowered by services and systems doesn't leave young people with much trust in professionals as you described earlier... Many of the young people we work with have also had contact with the criminal justice system and spent time in prison which can sometimes offer opportunities for things like wellbeing support or access to education. However, young people have told us that there have been many barriers to this or that the help that was offered wasn't right for them. From the outset, Project Future has employed young people seeking to shift the balance from power historically being held by a service, to giving young people a voice and agency. We've learnt so much from young people, like the importance of being genuine, patient and delivering support in a flexible and accessible way.

A: What has this enabled?

I: Co-production and centring young people's voices and experiences has enabled us as professionals to learn a different way of doing things and has been essential for the safe delivery of the service. Alongside principles from Narrative therapy and Community Psychology we have adapted the service approach so that it better meets young people's needs. For example, letting young people have autonomy over their own help-seeking, being flexible and offering holistic support for young people with wellbeing and psychological ideas wrapped around that help. You might be helping a young person with their CV or even just playing table tennis but within that interaction you could also be discussing their strengths, skills and resources and/or discussing ways of managing stress. You may also just be chatting and hanging out enabling young people to build enough trust with you to ask for help. Employing young people has also been key to supporting other young people to engage and build trust in the team.

Young people often want to contribute to their community and create change in the systems surrounding them. Social action work is a central part of our work and aims to address how societal inequalities affect young people's wellbeing and can lead to them getting caught in cycles of offending. Working alongside young people who bring so much creativity alongside the experience of living through these challenges has led to young people curating exhibitions of their artwork (reflecting their experiences), training teams and contributing to policy change at a local and national level.

I: What do you think some of the challenges can be in this way of working?

A: Challenges have often related to issues that young people continue to face. Young people in the community we work within experience significant stressors that include navigating work whilst homeless or managing debt, physical and mental health. These need to take priority and may require the young person to attend appointments, which can be additional barriers to working. Youth employees in our project continue to be able to access holistic support and keyworkers as service users.

I: I think for me the other thing is finding ways to genuinely co-produce can be a struggle for services. Co-production takes trust and time and we've been able to build co-production into all levels of the service, however often statutory services can be restricted by funding, capacity or predetermined models of working. Genuine co-production requires a lot of trust from the community and funders too as often you don't know what a service will end up looking like! Drawing on an evidence base is essential, but the work can also allow for creation of practice-based evidence that can then be shared with wider systems.