

Introducing Families to Research Through Fun, Conversation and Community



Sue Wood: NIHR Applied Research Collaboration and GM Research Engagement Network



Emily Howlett: NIHR Applied Research Collaboration and GM Research Engagement Network GM Research Engagement Network

The Manchester Family Wellbeing Festival showed what becomes possible when research, health, care and community partners come together in a trusted local space. Through family activities, health checks, wellbeing conversations and opportunities to learn about research, the day helped make research feel more visible, relevant and accessible to local communities.

On Saturday the 11th July 2026, with the sun shining over Manchester, we arrived at Xaverian College in Rusholme at 8 o'clock in the morning to help set up for the Manchester Family Wellbeing Festival. The event was hosted by the Greater Manchester Inclusive Research Network ([GM IRN](#)) and part funded by the NHS England funded Greater Manchester Research Engagement Network ([GM REN](#))



The aim was simple but powerful, to create a welcome, family focused space where local communities could come together to talk about health, wellbeing and taking part in research all under one roof.

The idea began back in April, when Dr Maria Ahmed Drake, a local GP and Director of the NIHR-funded [Greater Manchester Inclusive Research Network](#), contacted the GM Research Engagement Network team with an ambition to hold an event that would bring trusted health advice, wellbeing support and opportunities to get involved in research into the heart of the community. When she suggested July, we have to admit we laughed and said not sure those timelines are possible. What we had not fully appreciated was the

power, determination and sheer energy of an incredible team led by John Egerton of [Manchester Local Care Organisation \(MLCO\)](#), Maria Ahmed Drake and the Manchester Integrative Medical Practice.



In just a matter of weeks a venue was secured, the event was advertised, and more than 80 volunteers and 100 stallholders, exhibitors and speakers were brought together. From the outset, the focus was firmly on families and fun. Children's activities were central to the day, making the event feel welcoming, inclusive and joyful. Face painting, henna, crafts, dancing with [Afrocats](#) and drumming with Odopa Cultural Group helped create a lively, relaxed atmosphere where people of all ages could feel comfortable taking part

Around 300 families, from all generations attended. More than 100 blood pressure checks were carried out, alongside point of care testing for diabetes and cholesterol. Health talks were also delivered on a range of topics.

Research teams were also present throughout the day, talking with people about what research is, why it matters, how to take part in studies, and how members of the public can be involved as advisors helping researcher shape what research needs to be done and how studies should be design to help people get involved.



The exhibition hall brought together around 30 organisations, including research teams, voluntary and community sector organisations, and health and care partners. Research organisations included NIHR [North West Regional Research Delivery Network](#) , [Genes and Health](#), [NIHR Applied Research Collaboration](#), Greater [Manchester Research Engagement Network](#), [Vocal](#), [PRIMER](#) at the University of Manchester, Prostate Cancer Research, the [Manchester Biomedical Research Centre](#), Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust [Commercial Research Delivery Centre](#) and the DESTIGMATISE prostate cancer research team.



There was something for everyone, from opportunities to join a Young Person Advisory Group or public advisory panel, to signing up to research registries such as Be Part of Research or Join Dementia Research, taking part in a Genes study, or finding out more about participating in a range of studies.

The voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector and health and care providers were also strongly represented, with organisations including Answer Cancer, Prevent Breast Cancer, Across Ummah, GM Law, Ethnic Health Forum, Manchester Adult Education, BHA for Equality, Sahara Dementia Support for South Asians and Mahtsen CIC, Manchester County Council Community Development, The Dentists of Didsbury, MLCO Neighbourhood Health Champions, Northmoor Community over 65 support, the blood donation service, Somali Adult Social Care Agency (SASCA).



What stood out most was the buzz in the room. Everywhere you turned, conversations were happening, between families, stallholders, volunteers, health professionals, researchers and community organisations. It was a reminder that research engagement works best when it happens through relationships, not just information stands.

The success of the day came down to a few key ingredients. First, precision planning, finding yourself a John Egerton certainly helps. It also relied on the commitment of many teams who were willing to turn up, pitch in and make the day work.

Just as importantly, the day worked because it was fun. Dancing, drumming, crafts, face painting and food all helped create the right atmosphere. The ice-cream van was a huge hit, particularly on such a hot day. We are still not sure who enjoyed the drumming more, young Sid, who attended with his mum, or us. It was tough competition.

But beyond the fun, the day offered a clear lesson for research engagement: communities from a wide range of backgrounds do want conversations about taking part in research, but researchers and research organisations need to show up in community spaces. Trust is built by being present, listening properly, and creating opportunities that feel relevant and accessible.

Having conversations about research alongside conversations about health and wellbeing felt particularly important. People wanted to know more about keeping healthy, accessing advice, and receiving basic health checks and monitoring. Bringing research into that wider wellbeing conversation helped make it feel more meaningful and less remote.



Trusted faces in the room also mattered. Local GPs, Neighbourhood Health Champions and volunteers from the community helped make conversations feel safer and more grounded. The student volunteers from Xaverian College were brilliant and were a real credit to themselves and their college.

A huge thank you to Xaverian College for providing such a great venue, and to all the volunteers, stallholders, speakers, organisations and families who made the day such a success.

This blog is dedicated to the memory of Fizza Ahmed and Emma Egerton.