

A Personal Perspective

Michelle Gardener, joined ARC KSS as a Public Advisor to the Board last year in April 2020. Below, she explains why she joined, where she feels her involvement has already made a difference and what she's hoping to achieve.

Why did you join the ARC KSS Board?

I joined because I believe in the principles that our population health and social care should be collaboratively steered by those receiving it. Innovation in systems, service design and its delivery that directly influences our lives, is better informed to deliver positive outcomes when it involves those it impacts.

This view is also reflected in the national guidance on patient and public engagement and resonates in the NHS's Long-Term Plan (LTP). Co-production and co-design should be embedded in Public, Community Involvement and Engagement (PCIE) across every aspect of Health and Social Care.

If we are to make a difference and impact on our communities, then our researchers and innovators need to fully understand the experience and impact of those whose lives and services we seek to improve. It's by forging partnerships that we are able to build stronger structures and encourage imaginative and creative, innovative solutions within our health and social care structures.

What is your experience of being a public advisor so far?

Since joining the Board, I have contributed to the strategy review for the structure and engagement of themed advisors across core and cross cutting themes of work. I have taken part in discussions on areas of work at Board level, to ensure the wider public voice have been both heard and considered.

I became a member of the Public, Community Involvement & Engagement (PCIE) Regional Forum and have assisted with facilitation of wider discussion within breakout sessions of those multi-agency meetings.

During my time here, I have also been involved in reviewing research studies for ARC funding, to improve service design and pathways to care and recovery. For example, together with the two other Board Public Advisors, Jason and Eleanor, we have contributed to research reviews and panel committees and have influenced both the PCIE element in design of applications for prospective studies and the way researchers consider, not only their study approach, but also in the recruitment and the involvement of participants and the dissemination of the outcomes of that involvement.

What are the positives and challenges?

It's still early days for public advisors at ARC KSS, but, so far, I have found my experiences to be both challenging and rewarding.

Embedding patient and public voice, in an equal and equitable way, is a central part of any public advisor's role and there's always going to be some degree of support and resistance. On the one hand, a shift in the balance of power, can be very daunting for some professionals across systems and sectors. Those that have only 'dipped a toe' into Public and Community Involvement and Engagement (PCIE) but have now been asked to immerse themselves in it, because it's on the national agenda, may need some time to get used to that. I think that, getting to the point where PCIE becomes, 'just what we do' each day may take some time. It's a big transitional ask as we all step out of our comfort zones to develop and learn new ways of working together.

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Having said that, I do feel supported. I have been met with an eagerness and commitment to deliver on the objectives set out in the NHS's Long Term Plan in my relatively short time here. My journey, so far, has been a positive one. I feel I am given the space and time to contribute and am empowered to share my views, even when those discussions and opinions might be challenging; I do feel colleagues listen. And, although always being heard and understood, can sometimes be a bit of a challenge, I am given both the confidence and space to grow and flourish in my role, building those connections and mutual understanding and respect one step at a time.

Do you feel your involvement is making or will make a difference?

We all want to see innovative health and social care research interventions that will support our systems and services and make an unequivocal difference to individual lives, not only within our communities but throughout the UK and further afield. If a community believes their public and community services have their best interests at heart, then those services are more likely to succeed. They are more likely to have a positive impact on the population's health in a more holistic and meaningful way.

By working together, colleagues and public advisors will be better able to embed the public and community voice in the work that ARC KSS does. I have found my role very rewarding, because coming together in mutual respect and support has been transformative. Joining forces in a structured and uniform way has allowed us all to learn, understand and adopt new ways of working that will help influence how services are designed and delivered. And that's what's important.

I believe that, over time, ARC KSS will inspire and contribute to the overall health and wellbeing of our society by developing and harnessing our researchers. And, while we continue to iron out how we do all this practice, I am delighted to be able to bring my skills, knowledge and experience of working with patients and members of the public to the table. I see it as my responsibility to make sure their views and concerns continue to be heard and I am very excited about that.

What's next?

Moving forward, there is much to be achieved within my tenure on the Board. When representing PPCIE at a strategic level, whilst acknowledging personal experience is always relevant, displaying the ability to consider the wider concerns and issues for those with views different to my own; to champion that view, in a constructive, considered and collaborative way, is critical in continuing to provide the breadth and depth to discussion that is meaningful and supportive of the Boards aims. Having a goal of positively building respect for what Public Advisors can bring to research and the impact they can have on innovation and positive outcomes through collaboration, will aid not only the recruitment and retention, but it can help build those structures and support mechanisms into the infrastructure of ARC, generating a solid foundation for all who follow.

I am looking forward to the coming year and working with my colleagues across ARC KSS. If my journey so far reflects what is yet to come, then I think it will be both a positive, creative, developmental space, which will be a personally highly rewarding and insightful experience.

