

Embracing Inclusivity: Navigating the Future of EFCCA Youth Events Through Hybrid Experiences

If there's one thing that we've learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic, it's that making events digitally accessible has become possible!

This is such an important development for those of us who are disabled, have a chronic illness, or have access needs that means it can be difficult on occasions to attend events in person.

With having Ulcerative Colitis, my typical flare up symptoms of urgency and needing the toilet multiple times a day, which are shared by many in this community, means that I often feel much more comfortable not travelling too far from home.

I'm excited to start thinking of how we can plan an in person EFCCA event for Young People that also allows those from across Europe to contribute, engage, and that feels inclusive to those whose IBD means they cannot attend in person.

There's a lot that I've learned from Crohn's & Colitis UK over the past few years, and how they've transitioned to a hybrid model of both in person and digital events.

As a Lead Volunteer for a network of Crohn's & Colitis UK, one of the things that my network has always prioritised was giving people in our community the opportunity to meet others affected by IBD, to share their experiences, but also to just have conversations about absolutely anything, but with someone who understands what it means to be chronically ill! But all face-to-face activity during the pandemic had to stop, thus contributing to the isolation that those, especially newly diagnosed individuals, faced, with many across the UK having to also shield.

Crohn's & Colitis UK spent time developing a programme of online social events, training up volunteers to teach them how to facilitate, how to deal with difficult situations, and how to encourage people to share their stories across a Zoom screen. I met people in these sessions that couldn't make face to face events due to flare ups, but finally had the opportunity to meet others and feel part of a community again, and I felt so encouraged that different ways of interacting with others were finally becoming the norm. Especially as when the return of in person activities began, Crohn's & Colitis UK have continued to offer online social events to complement the face-to-face work that local networks are doing!

I think it's vital to not forget the impact virtual activities had on the chronic illness community, and even though it seems for some as if the pandemic has been and gone, shielding is still a reality for lots



Francesca with two other fellow volunteers raising funds for Crohn's & Colitis UK at the Leeds Arena in 2022

of those with health conditions, and flare ups are unfortunately a part of having IBD - so why can't we do something to connect individuals virtually as well as running an in person EFCCA event?

I have ideas to stream talks on platforms where comments and discussion can happen alongside those physically in the room. I'd love to see a digital 'coffee roulette' where during the breaks between talks, when there might be drinks break for the delegates there in person, there are opportunities to be paired with someone attending the event online to respond to prompts and get to know someone you might never have had the chance to meet before.

There are so many possibilities that I'm really looking forward to chatting more with Crohn's & Colitis UK to find out more on how they prioritise safety and connection at these events, as well as speaking to the wider EFCCA Youth Academy team to hear their ideas to see how we can incorporate accessibility and digital inclusion into our plans.