

2021

The MARCH Network

Making social, cultural, and community engagement central to mental health research

Final Report (2018-2021)





1868
Members

324
Early career
researchers



783
Active Basecamp
members

1
Legacy website launched



4096
twitter followers



31
Newsletters



Named the WHO Collaborating
Centre for Arts and Health



80
Published research
papers

600
"Mechanisms of
action" identified
linking leisure to
mental health



171k
Participants in
MARCH research

12 Special Interest
Research Groups

£280k

Invested in 15
research projects

OUR ACHIEVEMENTS

2018-2021

Between 2018 and 2021, MARCH worked with researchers, community organisations, policy groups, mental health charities, and people with lived experience of mental health conditions across the UK to transform our understanding of the role of social, cultural, and community assets in mental health.

Here's a closer look at our top achievements:

1. Our Research Community

The MARCH Network far exceeded its anticipated reach. Membership grew to nearly 2,000 members, with over 4,000 people following us on Twitter and 324 early career researchers joining our community. We coordinated 12 Special Interest Groups involving 859 members, and nearly 800 members took part in our online Basecamp discussion forum.

2. Research Agenda and Funding

We worked with over 300 members of the network to co-produce a new Research Agenda, published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry Open*, that identified the most pressing research gaps in the field. Guided by this agenda, we distributed £280,000 to researchers to support seven new research projects and eight events for 150 people. These projects led to new insights into key topics, as well as the writing of new guidelines for involving people with lived experience, publishing evidence-based practice resources for community organisations, developing new sustainability indicators for community assets, and piloting new community interventions across different populations.

3. Collaborative Research

In collaboration with members from our network, we have used national datasets and qualitative interviews to map the barriers and enablers of social, cultural, and community engagement, publishing a suite of papers on the implications for asset accessibility and health equity.



4. New Scientific Frameworks

We worked with the MARCH Disciplinary Expert Group to identify over 600 “mechanisms of action” and 139 “active ingredients” that link leisure engagement to mental and physical health, published in *The Lancet Psychiatry* and *Wellcome Open Research*. This work is helping us to understand what it is about engaging in social, cultural, and community assets that is important for health.

5. Policy Influence

We published an evidence synthesis report with the World Health Organization, winning the Global Aesthetic Achievement of 2019. We also shared our work with UK government bodies, including DCMS, DfE, DHSC, NHS England, and several All-Party Parliamentary Groups. The United Nations, United Cities and Local Governments, the OECD, and other international agencies have also relied on our work.

6. Social Prescribing Roll-out

We have also supported the national roll-out of social prescribing by hosting the ‘Arts on Prescription’ conference, collaborating with NHS England to analyse the impact of the roll-out and by presenting at a number of other social prescribing conferences and policy days. We have also launched new social prescribing interventions that are now in clinical trials in the UK, and we are designing and evaluating social prescribing pilots in the US, Romania, Denmark, and Italy.

7. Media Work

Through our partnership with the BBC, we’ve contributed to dozens of television and radio programmes, and we were the scientific partner for the BBC’s annual ‘Get Creative’ festival, supporting the communication of research to the public. As part of this, we ran two major BBC citizen science experiments involving over 98,000 people and made the data publicly available for other researchers to use.

I thoroughly enjoyed the breadth of my engagement with MARCH, be it as a speaker, focus group participant or interested party to the great work being developed across the community. As a passionate advocate for social prescribing, I particularly like the combination of great detail in the evidence presented by Daisy and colleagues, while being mindful of the need to involve everyone in the understanding, regardless of their background, and consistently remembering that this is about people and their wellbeing. I am continuing my support for social prescribing in Public Health England and look forward to working with MARCH colleagues and others across this important social movement.



Craig Lister, Associate
Director Imms and Vaccs
Strategy Lead, NHS

8. ECR Support

We continually support training and development for young researchers and have worked with 65 ECRs to deliver blogs, social media activity, and podcasts. We have run three week-long trainings in the UK and USA for over 120 ECRs, led two research blitz events for community organisations, and supported the Arts Health Early Career Research Network, a community of over 1,300 ECRs. With the Royal Society of Public Health, we also launched a new online course on the effects of the arts, culture, and heritage on health, with free subscriptions available to ECRs.

9. COVID-19 Response

Thanks to the strong links in our network we were able to respond rapidly to the pandemic. We launched a Creative Isolation web page to help people cope with the challenges of home confinement, which attracted 142,000 hits during the first lockdown. We also launched the COVID-19 Social study, the largest UK study on the psychological and social impact of the pandemic, gathering longitudinal data from over 70,000 participants, 30,000 written testimonials, and 400 interviews. 36% of March members played a role in the study's creation, and as a result we've published hundreds of papers and were able to advise multiple government bodies during crucial times in the pandemic. We also launched the COVID-MINDS Network to support and encourage collaboration among academic teams conducting over 170 longitudinal mental health studies in 60 countries.

10. Leaving a Legacy

Even though the MARCH Network has now come to an end, its legacy will continue to be felt. MARCH members have now received over £25 million in research funding from other sources in response to their involvement with the network, and more research grants are in development. We've also created a new website to host resources for our community and to celebrate our collective achievements. Finally, in recognition of our work, the World Health Organization has designated our group the first WHO Collaborating Centre for Arts & Health in the world. This means that we will be able to extend the findings and best practices developed through MARCH to researchers, community organisations, and policymakers around the world.



Being part of MARCH enabled me to see that there was a committed and passionate group of people working in this space.”

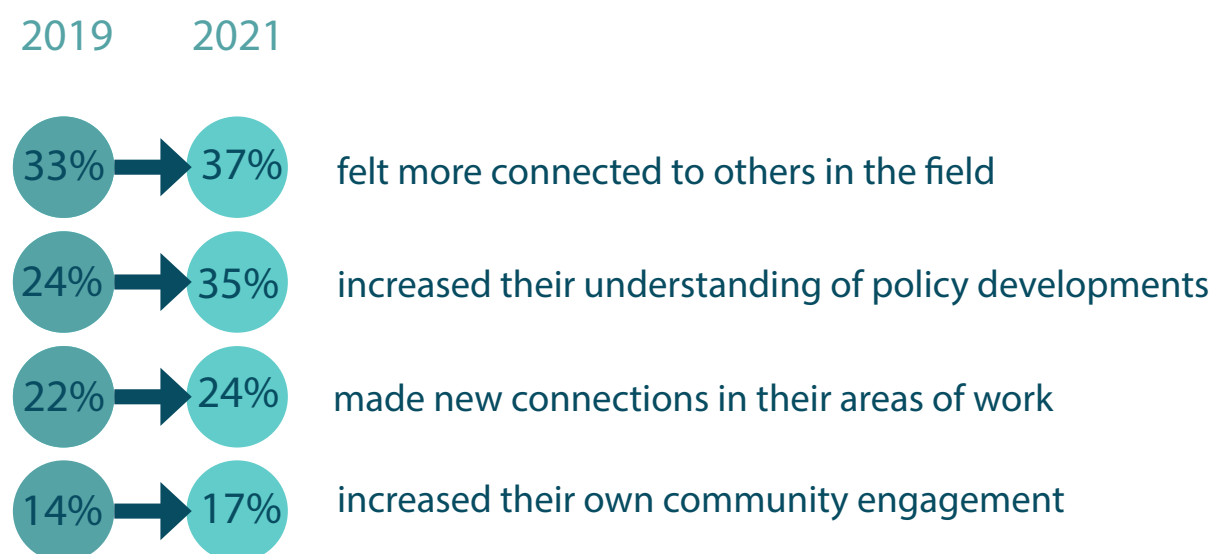
OUR MEMBERS' VIEWS

We asked 100 members for their views on MARCH. Here is what they said.

What are the top 10 ways members engaged with the network?



What did MARCH members gain?





OUR MEMBERS' VIEWS

"The collaborations made are second to none."

"Knowing where to go to for resources has been invaluable."

"It was brilliant to attend the Ethics sessions which balanced ethics in theory with ethics in practice."

"The newsletter is so comprehensive and is such a valuable source of up to date information on practice, research, policy and funding!"

"Working with collaborators in other universities has helped me see how huge this field is and the intersections with different disciplines and practices."

"The highlight for me has been seeing our sector better informed about policy and research developments."

"I've discovered projects via MARCH that I hadn't known about and have shared these with my other contacts."

"We gained information that has helped us deliver a local social prescribing project."

"As an ECR, it's great to feel highlighted and supported by the network... It's also great that ECRs can be so actively involved in research grants and events."

How would you summarise your experience with MARCH?

It has proven to me that academia needn't be such a hostile place.

Relief and gratitude that someone else out there feels the same way as us about the value of alternative approaches to supporting people experiencing mental health distress.

MARCH has been the linchpin for my nascent, interdisciplinary career with arts and health.

[MARCH] leadership and coordination has been inspiring, through a combination of real expertise, enthusiasm, kindness and humanity.



Alison Greenwood,
Dose of Nature,
SIG Co-Chair – Nature,
Outdoors and Mental
Health

My experience of being part of the MARCH Network has been an extremely positive one right from the beginning. As the director of a relatively new charity, I was keen to connect with other people in the field, and when I came across the MARCH Network, it seemed like the perfect place to do that, offering the opportunity to meet people from the academic world, as well as from the public, private, and charitable sectors. Any initial doubts I had that the network might not be relevant for small charitable organisations like ours were soon allayed, and I was delighted to be asked to co-chair the newly formed SIG: Nature, Outdoors and Mental Health. It has been a pleasure to watch the membership of this SIG grow from a handful of people to over 130, and particularly pleasing to see the diverse backgrounds of individuals who have joined the group. It was wonderful to host an initial meeting at the Herbarium in Kew Gardens, and whilst disappointing to have had to cancel another meeting this year due to Covid, the interest we had, again from all sectors, and from private individuals, illustrates the success of the network. As a direct result of being part of MARCH, I met Dr Kaye Richards from Liverpool John Moores University, co-chair of our SIG, and we have worked together over the past 18 months on a number of projects, one of which was a successful application for the network's Plus Funds. The opportunity for organisations like ours to collaborate with academics on new research projects is a huge strength of the network, and the partnership Kaye and I have formed through MARCH is one that is likely to last for many years.

As an early career researcher, being a MARCH Network member has been an invaluable experience. I've had the opportunity to connect, collaborate and knowledge-exchange with researchers, community organisations, individuals with lived experience, policymakers, and healthcare bodies within an interdisciplinary lens. I've been able to develop my skills and understanding of the area through leading on projects and events, including being a co-author on a scoping review for the World Health Organization and on a new multi-level mechanisms of action framework, linking community and leisure engagement to health, under the mentorship and support of Dr Daisy Fancourt. Additionally, I've organised and coordinated events for ECRs in the field to learn and network and have been actively involved with sandpit funding days and their Arts on Prescription conference. This has not only been a great way to learn but a fantastic way to network and build collaborations. Lastly, the MARCH Network provides ongoing support through their social media and newsletters, and during COVID-19, their outputs have been a valuable and uplifting resource for many.



Saoirse Finn, Doctoral
Researcher and ECR
Steering Group Member

OUR SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS

We created 12 Special Interest Groups (SIGs), many of which have now migrated to the Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance. Contact CHWA to learn more.



Arts, Crafts and Mental Health

Interdisciplinary Research Methods



Nature, Outdoors and Mental Health

Digital Community Assets
and Mental Health



Historic Environment and Mental Health

Singing and Mental Health



Early Career Researcher Steering Group

Shared Reading: Literature, Libraries
and Mental Health



Evaluation and Ethics in the
Arts and Mental Health

Arts and Health Practitioner Support



Hip Hop, Spoken Word and Mental Health

Archaeology and Mental Health



OUR PLUS FUNDS

We funded eight sandpit events to bring together researchers, practitioners, and people with lived experience to explore research ideas in the following areas:

- ◇ Social prescribing for mental health
- ◇ Social prescribing for mild cognitive impairment
- ◇ Digital community assets and mental health
- ◇ Singing and mental health
- ◇ Engaging people with lived experience of mental illness
- ◇ Community assets and mental health tribunals
- ◇ Nature connectedness
- ◇ Archaeology and veteran mental health and wellbeing

We also funded 7 more research projects:

£50K high-priority projects:

- ◇ **Solent University:** Researchers engaged with a stakeholder panel to develop a set of guidelines to help heritage organisations deliver safe and effective projects to support people's mental health and wellbeing. The group created a website to disseminate the findings and incorporated their learnings into a further funding bid focused on place-related knowledge exchange projects.
- ◇ **University of Derby:** Using a range of research activities including focus groups, a systematic literature review, and online surveys, researchers established important knowledge and skills that community singing practitioners would need to launch enjoyable, effective, and empowering



It was a real privilege to be able to bring together such a wonderful group of people, to hear their ideas and experiences, and provide them with the opportunity to connect with one another.

The rich narrative data that we captured during the event was at times humbling.

Debate buzzed around the building and delegates took full advantage of the networking opportunities.

This has been an absolutely amazing opportunity.



singing programmes. The group held two webinars, created a website, and developed a toolkit for practitioners, music educators, and researchers.

- ♦ **University of Exeter:** The aim of the project was to develop a set of indicators to assess effective, ethical, and equitable outdoor mental health services and interventions. By conducting in-depth interviews with representatives from organisations and participants, researchers identified and categorised processes and factors that are crucial to sustainability, ultimately developing the SixP Sustainability Framework.
- ♦ **University of East London:** Researchers used systematic mapping, co-production with an expert reference group, and qualitative interviews with focus groups to identify individual, organisational, and population barriers that affect the sustainability of community assets for mental health. Based on these findings, they produced a series of recommendations and published a journal article in *Health and Social Care in the Community*.

£20K innovation grants:

- ♦ **Teeside University:** The research group set out to investigate how two Mutual Aid services that were created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic impacted mental health and wellbeing in Northeast England. The pilot study found that MA services helped people to feel more connected to their communities, to feel a sense of purpose, and to “give something back.” However, some people experienced enduring loneliness, feelings of vulnerability, and shame in asking for help.



The sandpit event was great, and felt like a good starting point to bring research and practice together.

I am sharing some of the new things that I have learnt with others in my professional / peer network. I am likely to be applying for funding for a project that relates to some of my new learning.

From a sandpit event we are in the process of developing two grant applications, which we plan to submit next year.

I have received funding for a sandpit event, and a follow-on ‘plus’ project. The sandpit facilitated the development of a new multi-stakeholder collaborative team. The project is to commence soon and we’re looking forward to gaining insight from individuals with lived experience of mental ill-health.



“

I was part of a team who received £50,000 research funding for a project about sustainability in green social prescribing. As a clinician working in the third sector, I met a researcher and we were then able to put this project together and were delighted to be successful in our application.

Having worked in the area of archaeology and veterans' mental health for some time, the financial support from MARCH has really enabled this work to expand, allowing us to achieve far more and hopefully supporting the veteran-focused archaeological initiatives through our work.

”

- ♦ **King's College London:** King's College London, South London and the Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, and the Consent for Contact Initiative, based at the NIHR Biomedical Research Centre, developed the Creativity and Wellness Survey. They examined participation in creative activities and its impact on wellbeing for mental health service users in South London. A subgroup also participated in an online arts workshop offering reflections on the impact of arts practices. Results are being written up for publication.

“

Through the process of applying we made connections and honed our approaches.

Sadly we were unsuccessful in the funding bid to MARCH but since then we have received some funding from other sources!

A highlight for me was applying for funding as there was helpful feedback even on my unsuccessful application.

”

- ♦ **University of East London:** With the goal to understand how digital community assets may affect mental health, the research group identified benefits and challenges of using digital platforms through in-depth interviews, narrative storytelling, and a project storybook. The cross-disciplinary collaboration involved a comparison of face-to-face community assets, a multiple-platform asset, and an online-only community asset.

In total, MARCH members have received over £25 million in research funding from other sources in response to their involvement with the network.

Members have spoken warmly about the benefits of our Plus Funds, SIGs, and collaboration opportunities:

A highlight was being co-chair of a SIG, hosting a first meeting with a fairly small attendance, but then watching the numbers grow to 130 members.

I've met some really useful research contacts who have been wonderful supports to help me shape my heritage-based programme.

It's been extremely positive, bringing me into contact with people from other fields I would never otherwise have met.

The SIGs have played a key role in supporting me to develop research ideas connected to clinical practice and to link me in with a community of professionals.

The March Network has been a critical and guiding support in the development of my career and research over the last couple of years.

This work has helped our networks and really pushed us forward in our careers. It has been absolutely wonderful to have a project.

MARCH has provided me with an inspiring network of peers with similar interests and has funded projects which will allow for development and collaboration into the future.

MARCH DURING COVID-19

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we mobilized rapidly as a network, drawing on our collective expertise and connections.

1

We established the COVID-19 Social Study, the largest in the UK to track the psychological and social experiences of individuals during the pandemic. With over 70,000 participants, 1.2 million surveys, and 400 interviews, the study provided real-time data on the impact of the pandemic, allowing us to advise the government response to the pandemic, guide community organisations, and inform the public. We published over 100 papers, wrote 44 reports, delivered 25 keynote addresses, and contributed to 1,000 media pieces.



Visit our [website to learn more](#) and read our report summarising our findings and the impact the study has had in government and the third sector.



Your work has been really helpful and I have used your data updates in a number of presentations internally and externally to my trust – thank you!” (NHS Trust Research and Development Director)



I’m so grateful to all involved for that weekly prompt to reflect and adapt and wish you all the best of luck with the analysis and output.” (Study participant)



2

We launched the COVID-MINDS Network to support and encourage collaboration among researchers from over 170 longitudinal mental health studies running across 60 countries.

Visit [our website](#) and learn more about [researchers](#) in our network and the [studies](#) they conducted during the pandemic.

“

I've enjoyed having a support group of other researchers during lockdown!"

“

It's so great to see all these international efforts to investigate mental health and its relationship with COVID-19."



**COVID-
MINDS.**

3

We published a Creative Isolation webpage to support mental health and wellbeing during lockdown. With over 142,000 webpage hits, it was cited as an example of excellence by Arts Council England.

“

I have just discovered your fantastic Creative Isolation site, having completed the UCL COVID survey. What an amazing job you have done! Honestly - the best list of these types of resources about!!! I have shared with many of my friends. Thank you all for your work. We appreciate what you are doing and the care you show for people." (Study participant)

“

The March Network and Creative Isolation project was a fantastic way of seeing how solidarity is key in our fight to maintain the arts at the forefront of a recovery curriculum and wider extra-curricular and skills training for the future generation."

LOOKING BACK: THE MARCH CULTURE

Member feedback - what have been the highlights of being part of MARCH?

- ◇ The network created value for members ★★★★★
- ◇ Members achieved more together than they could alone ★★★★★
- ◇ Members were encouraged to contribute and collaborate ★★★★★

(Member survey 2020)

- ◇ "Learning about all of the positive work being done by so many well-meaning people."
- ◇ "Co-authoring a paper I have been thinking about for some time on ethical challenges in interdisciplinary work."
- ◇ "Finding other practitioners to consult with and learning about projects in other geographical areas."
- ◇ "Involvement in the COVID-19 Social Study to keep tracking my wellbeing and experiences. I am also very grateful for the social isolation activities."
- ◇ "The November conference, which was exceptional!"
- ◇ "The newsletters, which contain superb material, great articles and super inspiring projects!"
- ◇ "Real-world professional development through engagement with Special Interest Groups."

(Member surveys 2020 and 2021)



Yoon Irons,
Associate Professor in Arts
in Health at University of
Derby

I value the MARCH Network and both the research and networking opportunities it has offered. I am part of three Special Interest Groups, and a recipient of Plus Funds. Through the networking events and online communications, I enjoyed meeting other people working in the same field. MARCH Network Plus Funding also enables me to lead a research project, focusing on community-based mental health inclusive choirs/singing groups and their leaders. I am thrilled to be working with community organisations and singing groups/choirs to develop resources, which will benefit singing group leaders and people with mental health needs.

LOOKING FORWARD: THE LEGACY OF MARCH

While the MARCH Network has ended, our achievements and outputs remain, as do the collaborations and research projects of our members. We have developed a number of resources to support this ongoing work including a new website to host our resources and research, a new elearning course on arts, culture, heritage, and health, and an online showcase event to bring together our community. In recognition of MARCH's work, the World Health Organization has designated our research group the first WHO Collaborating Centre for Arts & Health in the world. Through this centre, much of MARCH's work will continue, reaching beyond the UK to countries around the world.

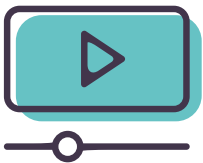
[March legacy website](#)

MARCH Network

In response to our members' requests, we have created a legacy website (www.marchlegacy.org) to serve as a go-to hub for the resources, research, and best practice examples that we've produced and explored in the last three years. Tangible outputs include papers, frameworks, datasets, policy reports, media pieces, and our training programme. The website is a celebration of the work of our community, up and down the country, and we hope that it will be a valuable resource for all working in the field of mental health and cultural and community engagement.

[Celebrating our work together: MARCH Showcase](#)

Over 250 members and supporters joined our MARCH Network Showcase in October 2021, a curated programme of talks, discussions, and taster sessions to celebrate our achievements.



Session 1: Looking back at the achievements of MARCH

Session 2: MARCH and policy

Session 3: MARCH plus funds

Session 4: MARCH early career researchers

Session 5: The WHO Collaborating Centre for Arts & Health



Members carrying the torch

Our members have given us countless examples of how they have taken their work forward having gained experience, knowledge, and contacts through the MARCH Network.

Being part of the MARCH Network has been a great experience and one that has allowed me to develop as an Early Career Researcher. As a successful recipient of Plus Funding, I was able to develop my leadership and research management skills as a Co-Principal Investigator on a study examining the sustainability of community assets.

MARCH has also provided me with the opportunity to develop my research interests around social prescribing, facilitating access and dialogue with key individuals in this field who are not only at the forefront of research but within policy and practice as well. These initial conversations developed fruitfully into successful national and international collaborations that in time will allow us to better understand how, why, and under what circumstances social prescribing works best for those needing support with their mental health and wellbeing.



Daniel Hayes,
Senior Research Fellow at
University College London

I have thoroughly enjoyed being part of the MARCH Network. The chance to share ideas with people with a variety of different experiences has been invaluable in supporting both my professional and personal development. As a recipient of both MARCH Sandpit and MARCH Plus funding, I can truly say that this has provided the opportunity to explore links between wellbeing and archaeology, and heritage more broadly, that wouldn't have otherwise been open to us. Through MARCH my collaborators, Dr Paul Everill and Dr Louise Baxter, I have broadened our networks and further collaborative opportunities, and our cross-disciplinary working has been supported and valued by MARCH. We've also established the Archaeology and Wellbeing SIG, which is home to many a lively debate. MARCH's commitment and willingness to listen to new ideas around evaluation, and their championing of the voice of those with lived experience, is to be commended, and should be a model for other organisations. Belonging to a community like MARCH, with whom I share personal and professional values, is a joy and a highlight of my academic journey to date.



Karen Burnell,
Associate Professor of
Applied Psychology at
Solent University

“ As a director of a CIC delivering music-centred support activities, I have set up two new groups for people living with mental ill health.

I have received funding to deliver Mental Health First Aid to young people.”

I have three ongoing funded projects and collaborations which will form the basis of a fellowship application this year.”

“ I will be looking for future opportunities to bridge the divide between the creative industries and public services, at all levels from grass-roots to national policy.

I will continue practising what I have learned that works in the communities I work within.”

We will continue using these as a way to support public libraries and improve people’s mental health through reading art and culture and by helping find them information to support their needs.”

“ I will be continuing to grow community programmes and continue the legacy of March.

I am taking up further training to implement more effective development of resources to support patients facing mental health challenges.”

We will continue in our own small way to continue to publicise any activity that takes place locally and gives people other options to the medical route for healing their distress.”

We are extending our wellbeing walks to young adults with autism. We’ve received grant funding from a Trust to deliver a pilot programme of walks.”

“ We’re planning to connect with the new WHO Centre.

RSPH Learn[®]

In 2021, we launched our online course: 'Arts, Culture and Heritage: Understanding their complex effects on our health'. Modules explore the evidence on the health benefits of engagement and the predictors and patterns of engagement in the UK. They also cover the work we've done on identifying the active ingredients and mechanisms of action of arts and cultural engagement, and how we can understand and model interactions between these and health outcomes through complexity science. We hope that this legacy course will be hugely valuable for those who are new to the field or who want to advance their research. [View the course here.](#)



WHO Collaborating Centre for Arts & Health

Our new centre builds on the work between MARCH and the WHO over the last three years. It aims to carry out world-class research into how the arts, culture and heritage affect mental and physical health; work with world-leading researchers in the UK and internationally to develop and improve arts and health policy globally; and provide training programmes, toolkits, and resources to support development in the field, including facilitating opportunities for early career researchers. [Learn more here.](#)

THANK YOU

The logo for the MARCH Network, consisting of the words "MARCH Network" in a bold, sans-serif font. "MARCH" is in a larger, darker teal color, and "Network" is in a smaller, lighter teal color below it. The text is centered within a light teal circle.

**MARCH
Network**

The MARCH Network owes its success to its members. Their engagement over the last three years demonstrates the potential of academic and community partners to come together to transform mental health research and practice. We are also very grateful to UKRI and ESRC for their generous funding and support. [Visit **marclibrary.org**.](https://www.marclibrary.org)



**UK Research
and Innovation**

