



Evaluation of The Smiles Fund

Final Report

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1 Purpose of this report

This report presents the findings of a mixed-method process and impact evaluation of The Smiles Fund, implemented by Comic Relief. The fund involves 10 funded partners delivering projects that use art and comedy to promote positive outcomes for people's mental health and wellbeing. The £2 million programme has been co-funded by Walkers.

The evaluation has explored the impacts that the projects have had on people in their communities and whether (and how) participation in arts and comedy, alongside other forms of support, has benefited people's mental health and wellbeing. Our work also explored what high quality and effective arts- and comedy-based service delivery can look like when supporting people with mental health challenges.

The report summarises the findings of the overall programme evaluation, with consideration given to the impacts at the level of individual projects, the programme as a whole, and the wider sector. It should be reviewed alongside the individual case studies that have been developed for each of the funded partners.

2 The Smiles Fund

2.1 Background and context

Around one in four people in the UK will experience a mental health problem every year, with the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated lockdowns, isolation and job losses worsening already worrying trends in mental health. Furthermore, economic and racial disadvantages often act as additional stressors, increasing the risk of poor mental health and wellbeing.

In 2021, Comic Relief and Walkers launched The Smiles Fund, a £2 million programme to support early intervention and community-based approaches to mental wellbeing. The initiative encourages active participation in arts and comedy (not just as spectators) to promote mental wellbeing, foster social connectedness, and build resilience to tackle everyday challenges.

The vision behind the programme was to help challenge the stigma around mental health and provide community-based support for people who are experiencing emerging symptoms of poor mental health at an early stage. Ten grants were awarded at the end of 2021 to organisations working with people facing:

- Discrimination and disadvantage
- Prolonged uncertainty and unemployment
- Emerging mental health / wellbeing challenges, and / or
- Loss and isolation.

Funding was available for a minimum of 18 months to a maximum of 30 months, with a value of between £100,000 and £300,000. The Fund was intended to be awarded to between eight and ten projects; ten proposals were ultimately funded. The call for proposals closed in September 2021, and all projects will have completed by the spring of 2025.

2.2 Funded Partners

The following table provides an overview of each of the 10 projects that were awarded funding.

Project title, organisation and start - end date	Summary of project
Arts & Minds, Teesside Mind (Formerly Middlesbrough & Stockton Mind), <i>March 2022 - May 2024</i>	Mind and Stockton Arts Centre supported people with mild to moderate mental health problems to improve their wellbeing, self-esteem and social connections through arts activities. People were referred by Mind's 16 Social Prescribers working in local GP practices, but self and other referral arrangements were also in place. Participants received a holistic assessment and support over 24 months, with 8 x 6 month long art projects delivered twice per week in the Arts Centre and a community location, and including activities such as textile, illustration, clay and creative writing, digital art, and a weekly social group.
At The Kitchen Table, Platform Thirty1 Limited <i>March 2022 - June 2024</i>	At The Kitchen Table worked with women living in refuges in Leicestershire and Derbyshire. The aim was to bring about a more positive sense of self and sense of belonging, improving their mental wellbeing through facilitated art sessions offered by art practitioners. The artistic sessions provided regular holistic and creative activities designed to carve out space for free expression and experimentation. They took place in communal areas, at the kitchen table, and in the shared houses the women reside in.
COMEBACK: Covid Recovery through Comedy for Prisoners and Ex-Prisoners, Synergy Theatre Project, <i>March 2022 - April 2024</i>	Synergy Theatre Project ran COMEBACK: a two-year project of comedy-focussed theatre productions, competitions and courses for prisoners and ex-prisoners in and near London, improving mental wellbeing, building resilience and nurturing creative talent for disadvantaged adults who were some of the most isolated during the pandemic.
Creative 4 Life, Green Shoes Arts CIO, <i>March 2022 - October 2024</i>	Creative 4 Life (C4L) was a project of early-intervention arts activity for adults experiencing emerging mental wellbeing challenges in the London borough of Barking and Dagenham. Participants took an active part in designing a project that aimed to prevent mental wellbeing deterioration. In particular, they delivered two weekly Creative Café sessions which allowed participants to try a variety of different art activities, whilst socialising in a safe and welcoming environment.
Creative and Well People, Inspired Neighbourhoods CIC, <i>March 2022 - October 2023</i>	Inspired Neighbourhoods CIC offered arts and comedy-based activities to support people's wellbeing in Bradford. A twelve-week project was offered to over-18s, aimed particularly at South Asian and refugee communities, ending in an exhibition of their work. This project built on their existing mental health services and allowed them to reach people with less acute (mild to moderate) mental health needs. The project joined mental health expertise with arts and comedy specialists, giving people new ways to express and manage feelings, and improve their wellbeing.
Creative Connect, Liverpool Lighthouse <i>March 2022 - October 2024</i>	This project reached vulnerable adults who accessed its wraparound support such as ESOL classes or its food pantry. Funding was used to extend the existing arts-wellbeing project, involving improvisational comedy, a choir, sewing, and creative writing. It also created a parallel Creative Sanctuary Space in which adults were able to access drop-in

Project title, organisation and start - end date	Summary of project
	<p>arts sessions as their first step to joining the arts projects, or to just begin with a cup of tea. The project had move-on stages where participants could volunteer to raise awareness about their arts and wellbeing journey, as well as to take part in public performances of their work.</p>
<p>creative:voices, Create <i>March 2022 – April 2025</i></p>	<p>This project continued the expansion of creative:voices (C:V): high-quality multi-artform workshops for isolated unpaid adult carers, led by Create’s professional artists. The direction of expansion was, primarily, in terms of geographic spread across the UK with a view to reach to more adult carers. C:V enriched the offer that carers’ services can provide, enabling carers to take a break from caring to focus on their own wellbeing by collaboratively exploring their creativity. Workshops were run in blocks of 6 weeks, twice per year. Each carers service received 12 weeks of provision per year.</p>
<p>Rant Club, WILD Young Parents Project <i>March 2022 - April 2024</i></p>	<p>Rant Club was a two-year project to improve the mental wellbeing of young parents (aged between 18 and 25) in Cornwall. Rant Club helped young parents express their 'unstoried emotions'. Through a series of workshops, participants were encouraged to engage in a three-minute rant ("what's your beef?"). These rants helped participants express previous experiences of emotional pain and trauma. Comedy, the organisation believes, is rooted in pain and the rants formed the basis of future artistic expression: stand-up, podcasts, poetry, beatbox and songwriting. The project culminated in the development of a song and music video. The lyrics were developed using young parents’ words and they took part in recording both the song and music video.</p>
<p>Three Minute Monologues, The Warren of Hull Limited <i>March 2022 - August 2023</i></p>	<p>The project offered young adults in Hull the opportunity to use creative writing to express their feelings and explore mental health issues. The Warren ran three courses of up to 12 weeks, where service users were offered a safe space where they could record their feelings, experiences, or stories. This content was anonymised and shared with local professional creatives, who used them to develop a series of three-minute monologues to be performed, shared, or engaged with. This guided self-reflection was designed to support people to feel heard and to begin a journey of empowerment.</p>
<p>Voltage Creates: Empowering Disenfranchised Young Black people in the UK, Do It Now Now <i>March 2022 - April 2024</i></p>	<p>Do It Now Now sought to offer creative arts opportunities to young unemployed black people in Glasgow and London. These activities were accompanied by wellbeing coaching and cognitive behavioural therapy, aiming to bring consistency and reliability into participants' lives and help them learn coping strategies for life's challenges.</p>

Table 1: Overview of The Smiles Fund projects (funded partners)

3 Evaluation approach

The evaluation of the Programme was commissioned at the end of 2023 and the beginning of 2024. In a novel approach for Comic Relief, all partners were invited to participate in the recruitment process, giving them the opportunity to choose the evaluation team. Four partners chose to take part, and this approach received very positive feedback as it demonstrated and valued their inclusion.

3.1 Rationale for our approach

This evaluation was delivered over five phases and was based on a Collaborative Outcomes Reporting approach to evaluation. Collaborative Outcomes Reporting is a participatory evaluation approach that enables us to understand the outcomes and impact of the fund in a way that produces project-level stories and reports in collaboration with the funded partners, while holding sight of the collective impact of the fund as a whole.¹

The evaluation approach was designed to address the questions and needs of three broad audiences. These are:

- The funded partners
- The funders (Comic Relief and Walkers), and
- The wider sector.

Figure 1 below shows the three audiences and the types of questions that are relevant to each.



Figure 1: Evaluation audiences and areas of interest

3.2 Activities undertaken

We began our work by reviewing the available documentation (including project plans and progress reports) related to the fund and for each of the funded projects. Initial discussions were

¹ See for example: <https://www.betterevaluation.org/sites/default/files/COR.pdf>

held with all funded partners, during which we proposed and agreed upon various options for evaluation support that would be useful to them. This information was then used to develop a Theory of Change for the Fund, along with an inception report.

After the inception report was approved, we conducted individual activities with each of the funded partners, creating outputs for them to use in their own work and funding applications. We synthesised the findings from each partner's work and held two workshops to validate our findings. Further details of the work with each funded partner are outlined in Section 3.3 below.

3.3 Work with the funded partners

In this section we briefly describe the activities with, and outputs for, each of the funded partners. These outputs are available separately [here](#). This varied depending on various factors such as their capacity to engage, the timelines of their work, and the evaluation skills that existed within the organisation.

Project and organisation	Work undertaken	Outputs
Arts and Minds, Teesside Mind,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review of all project documentation submitted to Comic Relief Interviews with 5 project participants Interviews with 3 staff members, including the project leads from both Teesside Mind and Stockton Arc, the creative partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impact summary Graphic / visual describing impact of project
At the Kitchen Table, Platform Thirty1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review of all project documentation submitted to Comic Relief Review of external evaluation report (covering this project and one other) Review of all creative professional logs Review of participant journey logs 1-1 interview with Chief Executive and Project Lead Review of grant-making data on similar projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impact summary Graphic / visual describing impact of project Evidence / literature review of topic area Overview of grants made to similar projects
COMEBACK: Covid Recovery through Comedy for Prisoners and Ex-Prisoners, Synergy Theatre Project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review of all project documentation submitted to Comic Relief Watched a prison performance and interviewed audience members (including prisoners, prison staff, non-prisoner actors, a theatre reviewer and a Synergy trustee) Telephone / video interviews Interviews / conversations with project staff and volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impact summary Overview of the range of service users from a prison play Two case study stories from Synergy participants
Creative 4 Life, Green Shoes Arts CIO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review of all project documentation submitted to Comic Relief 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impact summary

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ran a journey map creative activity at the Creative Café • Conversations with project staff and volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two case study stories from Creative Café participants
Creative and Well People, Inspired Neighbourhoods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of all project documentation submitted to Comic Relief • Review of internal evaluation report • 1-1 interview with project lead 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact summary • Graphic / visual describing impact of project
Creative Connect, Liverpool Lighthouse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of all project documentation submitted to Comic Relief • Review of related research • Analysis of case studies (participants and volunteers) produced by the project team • Conversations with project staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact summary • Journey based case study for a representative / typical participant.
creative:voices, Create	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of all project documentation submitted to Comic Relief • Conversations with project staff and volunteers • Review of data and data collection mechanisms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact summary
Rant Club, WILD Young Parents Project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of all project documentation submitted to Comic Relief • Review of other case study outputs • Watched the young parents' music video and the Docu-film made about Rant Club • Conversations with project staff and volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact summary • Journey based case study based on an imagined journey for a 'typical' participant. • Template for data collection for case studies
Three Minute Monologues, The Warren of Hull	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of all project documentation submitted to Comic Relief • Review of internal evaluation video 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact summary • Graphic / visual describing impact of project
Voltage Creates: Empowering Disenfranchised Young Black people in the UK, Do It Now Now	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due to the project being completed before the evaluation commenced, their capacity to engage further was limited. However, we conducted a thorough review of all project documentation submitted to Comic Relief to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the project's outcomes and impacts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact summary

Table 2: Overview of activities undertaken with each funded partner

The findings presented in this section reflect the overall outcomes across the Fund. While there is naturally some variation in the extent to which these findings apply to all funded projects, those relevant to a small minority have been specifically identified. More specific findings related to each of the Funded Partners can be found [here](#).

4 Outcomes and impact

Our evaluation found that funded partners have delivered successful, high-quality and creative interventions for improving mental wellbeing. In this section, we describe the benefits for the participants and some of the wider outcomes and impacts generated by the Fund.

4.1 The participants

The Fund had a profound and wide-ranging impact on all participants involved. Across many of the projects, participants reported experiencing greater overall happiness, reduced feelings of loneliness and decreased social isolation. The creative activities provided a therapeutic outlet, helping many to cope with personal challenges and traumas. Engaging in these activities provided emotional support and made participants feel more positive during difficult times.

"Being part of these creative workshops has been like a lifeline. It's not just about doing art. It's the feeling of belonging, the friendships, and having a safe space to just be myself. I feel less alone and more confident. I've found parts of myself I thought I'd lost."

Friendships and social connections

Many organisations observed improvements in participants' social isolation levels, when those who were previously socially isolated engaged in many creative activities. The projects served as platforms for people to meet, form friendships, and establish supportive networks. For some, the benefits were as simple as providing a daily purpose and a reason to leave the house. Some participants mentioned that attending activities took up most of their day, including getting ready and travelling by bus.

The friendships and social connections formed during these activities were identified as a key long-term benefit of the projects. Participants who had previously struggled with loneliness greatly valued these relationships, which helped build emotional resilience and confidence. These bonds not only alleviated loneliness during the programme but also fostered friendships and connections that extended beyond the funded period.

"These sessions are my reason to get out and connect with people. I used to spend most days alone, but now, meeting others who understand and being part of a group makes such a difference. It's more than art—it's a break from the loneliness and a reminder that I'm not alone. I feel like I've got people in my corner now."

These activities provided participants with a safe and supportive environment to focus on artistic expression, offering a sense of purpose and a meaningful distraction from day-to-day challenges. Being part of a supportive community enabled them to take control of their activities and decisions. Some participants expressed that they rediscovered parts of themselves through the process, especially after personal challenges or trauma.

New skills and confidence

For many participants, engaging in creative activities helped them develop not only artistic abilities but also essential interpersonal and life skills. They gained new competencies in areas such as communication, anger management, and frustration control. These skills often extended beyond the creative space, positively impacting other areas of their personal lives. The sense of achievement from creating an artwork or completing a project gave participants something tangible to share with friends and family, and the pride associated with this accomplishment provided a significant boost to their self-esteem.

"I never thought I could do something like this, let alone show it to my family. Learning these skills...how to manage my emotions and communicate better... has helped me in ways I didn't expect. It's not just about the art; it's about proving to myself that I can achieve something. I feel proud to have something to share, something that shows I'm making progress."

Purpose and empowerment

These combined impacts fostered a sense of empowerment among many participants, with individuals reporting a greater sense of control over their lives. The creative activities provided them with a renewed sense of purpose. A notable outcome of the funding was an improvement in participants' confidence. However, confidence took on different meanings for different individuals. For some, it involved overcoming fears, such as travelling to an activity. For others, it was about being themselves, expressing their views, or actively engaging in activities. This newfound confidence extended into other areas of their lives.

"This [project] helped me realise that I'm capable of so much more. Just getting on a bus to come here was a big step, but now I feel more in control. It's not just about what I do here; it's about finding a part of myself I thought I'd lost. I'm ready to take on more in my life, and I have something to look forward to each week."

For some organisations, the end of the funding means they will no longer work with the participants. However, for others, the relationship has continued, either through a wider service offered to individuals or through other initiatives. For example, Synergy has been able to offer jobs to some of the prisoners they worked with upon their release, ensuring sustained impact and greater opportunities. In other organisations, staff have gained sufficient artistic or creative skills themselves to continue supporting participants independently.

Resilience and sustainable change

These impacts highlight the value of this funding not only in addressing immediate mental health concerns but also in equipping individuals with the tools and confidence to build better futures. While the funded projects cannot fully resolve the complex challenges faced by many service users, such as homelessness, poor physical health, or immigration issues, the legacy of these projects is a greater level of resilience and strengthened support networks. These connections and skills enable participants to navigate challenges with the help of enduring relationships and newly developed competencies.

"Being part of this group has given me strength I didn't know I had. Life isn't easy, but having friends here and knowing I have skills to cope makes me feel like I can handle whatever comes my way. The confidence I've gained and the people I've met aren't just for now...they're part of my life moving forward."

Although the end of the Fund has led to the discontinuation of some specific activities, participants have developed many positive experiences that will help them face other life challenges and setbacks in the future.

4.2 Wider outcomes and impacts

While the impact on direct participants of the programme is unquestionable, it is important to remember that they were not the only people benefiting. We also found evidence of the broader reach of the projects and their impact on other individuals and organisations.

4.2.1 Funded partner organisations

The Fund has provided partners with an opportunity to explore innovative methods of supporting the people they work with. They have received encouragement and support throughout this journey, utilising the programme to introduce new concepts and activities into the support they provide. For some, this involved incorporating more creative and arts-based activities, while for others, it prompted a focus on larger activity streams than they would typically undertake. Additionally, it has inspired some, like WILD Young Parents Project, to integrate comedy into their work as an alternative therapeutic medium.

The programme promoted a flexible approach, facilitating the adoption of new methods and approaches in service delivery. This adaptability led to a greater willingness to innovate and respond to participant feedback and evolving needs, resulting in more effective project delivery and a deeper understanding of best practices. For instance, the Arts and Minds Project used creative workshops with flexible formats, allowing participants to engage as much or as little as they wished. The inclusion of social events created a stronger bond and sense of ownership among participants, adapting to their preferences and needs.

Partners reported that they built relationships with other community organisations, local services, and health providers as part of their projects. These connections fostered collaboration, resource sharing, and an expanded referral network, allowing partners to extend their reach and impact for the future. Platform Thirty1 developed strong partnerships with domestic abuse refuges across the East Midlands, while Inspired Neighbourhoods established strategic partnerships with organisations in Bradford allowing them to collaborate towards addressing the mental health needs of the diverse community.

Some projects developed tools that could be re-used or adapted for future workshops or outreach initiatives. Similarly, recordings of final outputs—such as music videos, performance films or scripts—can inspire future participants or influence perceptions of different client groups, helping to improve reach and engagement. These creative outputs have a life beyond the initial funding period, serving as both valuable resources and personal achievements. This creates an important legacy. For example, the WILD Young Parents Project's music videos, Do It Now Now's podcasts, and Synergy's filmed prison play are reusable assets, offering a tangible legacy of participants' journeys and resources for future activities. Several

organisations have also been able to secure further funding as a result of the work and their insights gained through the programme. For example, Green Shoes Arts received funding to establish a Creative Café for teens and young people, made possible by demonstrating the success of their work as part of The Smiles Fund. Funding from a recognised organisation like Comic Relief also provided legitimacy and visibility for the funded partners, which helped attract new participants, engage community stakeholders, and secure additional funding, thus enhancing programme expansion and sustainability.

4.2.2 Staff, creative professionals and volunteers

Partners report that staff have been upskilled and have additional tools to add to their arsenal when supporting vulnerable people they work with. For instance, in several organisations, the artists and creative professionals reported that they had gone on to improve or change their practice in the light of their experiences in the programme. Refuge staff from Platform Thirty1 benefited from observing the therapeutic impact of their project on residents and gained inspiration for similar creative sessions.

4.2.3 Other individuals

In addition to the key groups of people who benefited as outlined above, there were others specific to the various areas of work. For example, the performances, whether live, screened, independently viewed, or displayed in galleries had an impact on the audiences who experienced them. In some cases, such as the Synergy Theatre Project prison play, family members were able to share in a moment of pride for their relatives. In other instances, diverse audiences had their views and preconceptions challenged by the art they witnessed. For example, the Rant Club song and music video was a powerful mechanism for challenging perceptions of how young parents are seen.

Finally, other professionals who worked with the participants also experienced benefits across several funded projects. This included prison staff as well as health and social care professionals involved with the participants. For example, prison staff found that they were dealing with less incidents with those involved in the programme.

4.2.4 Society

Overall, the funded work has also had a positive impact on wider society, though these benefits are difficult to measure and quantify due to their diversity and potential to unfold largely in the longer term. Liverpool Lighthouse's and The Warren's projects contributed to public health by fostering social connections, hence reducing people's sense of isolation, which is a key factor associated with improved mental health. By supporting people in one of the most deprived areas, Liverpool Lighthouse's project eased pressures on social and health services and created pathways to employment and volunteering, promoting economic resilience.

The programme has likely helped to reduce demands on primary care and social services through its preventative mental health interventions, which diminish the need for more intensive services and yield long-term savings for public health and social care systems. Additionally, by providing support to individuals with immediate needs that the public health system may lack the capacity to address, the funded work is expected to reduce the frequency of crisis events, often costly for the NHS, social care, and the criminal justice system. Notably, the learning from the work undertaken by Liverpool Lighthouse to engage with perinatal women in the asylum

system has been adopted into maternity care provision in some NHS organisations, improving the quality of perinatal care that these women receive, and promoting more efficient and effective practice by midwives.

Other benefits include pathways to skill development provided by partners like The Warren, whose project enhanced participants' employability through transferable skills such as communication and teamwork. These skills open opportunities for employment or volunteering, enabling participants to make economic contributions to their communities. Looking further into the future, the projects also lay a foundation for longer-term benefits, such as supporting young people and families, fostering family connections, and reducing reoffending rates.

Finally, the projects enriched communities culturally by engaging individuals who might not typically participate in creative activities. This increased cultural engagement contributes to a society where arts and creativity are accessible to a wider range of people, promoting a sense of belonging and cultural enrichment. For example, Inspired Neighbourhoods' engagement with South Asian and refugee communities in Bradford promoted cultural participation among individuals who often face barriers to creative involvement. This inclusive approach has enriched the community culturally, creating space for diverse artistic expressions and strengthening community cohesion.

5 Ingredients of success

The success of The Smiles Fund projects can be attributed to several key factors that enabled them to create lasting positive change. The following "ingredients of success" outline the core elements that made high-impact outcomes possible and highlight valuable insights for future work in this area:

- Building strong, trusting relationships
- Establishing collaborative partnerships
- Using effective language and marketing approaches
- Selecting accessible, welcoming venues
- Emphasis on art as the engagement 'hook'
- Combining creative activities with social opportunities
- Recruiting skilled facilitators and delivering high quality sessions, and
- Showing passion and commitment throughout.

Central to the programme's success was the focus on building strong, trusted relationships between participants and facilitators. For many individuals, especially those facing social or mental health challenges, engaging in a new activity requires a level of trust that takes time and consistent effort to develop. The funded partners invested in creating a welcoming and inclusive environment, ensuring that participants felt supported and valued. This foundation of trust enabled participants to engage more fully, openly sharing their experiences and actively participating in group activities.

Alongside strong positive relationships with participants, the funded partners established robust partnerships with local organisations, health services, and community groups, amplifying the programme's reach and effectiveness. These collaborations helped projects engage participants who might otherwise have remained isolated, and allowed for more comprehensive support through access to other services. By working together, organisations pooled resources,

shared knowledge, and created support networks that will extend beyond the programme duration, enhancing outcomes for participants.

Many funded partners discovered that framing their work as mental health support did not always resonate with potential participants. While referrals from collaborative relationships were valuable, a broader marketing approach was essential to attract participants initially. Language often emphasised the activity itself, presenting it as a social opportunity rather than a mental health programme, making it more appealing to participants.

Venue choice also significantly influenced participation. Familiar, non-threatening spaces encouraged engagement, while inaccessible or intimidating locations could create barriers. Teesside Mind reported that using iconic local venues, which participants might not otherwise visit, provided an effective hook for initial engagement. For others, familiarity or accessibility, such as being on a convenient bus route, was more important.

Evidence suggests that creative arts alone can improve mental health. However, many projects also integrated social and targeted support elements. Art served as the 'hook', with sessions framed as creative rather than explicitly mental health focused, making them more accessible. The language and description of sessions were carefully crafted to emphasise enjoyment and connection. Rather than marketing sessions as mental health support, projects emphasised opportunities to engage in fun, creative activities for those feeling a bit lonely, bored, or wanting to do something creative. By focusing on terms like 'social engagement' and 'skill-building', they created a more approachable environment that encouraged greater participation.

Combining creative activities with social opportunities proved highly effective in fostering positive social connections and reducing isolation among participants. Projects often included group-based activities that encouraged teamwork, discussion, and mutual support, allowing individuals to form relationships naturally through shared interests. These social elements provided participants with a sense of belonging and purpose, strengthening their community connections and sustaining friendships beyond the Fund. One funded partner noted that having hands-on activities improved conversation quality, enhancing the support they could provide. The expertise of facilitators and the quality of creative sessions were essential to the Fund's impact.

Many projects employed skilled practitioners with both artistic expertise and experience of working with vulnerable groups, ensuring sessions were engaging, safe, and productive. High quality facilitation balanced creative expression with structured support, enabling participants to express themselves while benefiting from professional guidance. For some partners, the quality of the final artistic outputs was a crucial success factor. However, for others, particularly where individuals focused on personal activities rather than a shared product, this was less critical.

Ultimately, without the passion and commitment of the funded partners, the programme's impact would not have reached the same level.

6 Delivery challenges faced by Funded Partners

However, there were also a few challenges that the Funded Partners had to overcome:

- Recruitment of participants due to a hesitancy to engage in activities labelled as mental health

- The need to develop new referral pathways with trusted community organisations
- The inconsistent attendance of participants meant that some delivery models had to be adapted
- The level of complexity of mental health issues and other challenges facing the beneficiaries
- Outcome Monitoring as traditional assessment tools felt intrusive or inappropriate.
- Reliance on external partners for referrals and external venues

Funded partners encountered several delivery challenges that impacted the planning, engagement, and sustainability of their projects. However, through innovative strategies, flexible approaches, and collaborative efforts, they were able to mitigate these issues and continue to deliver valuable services to their communities. This section outlines the key challenges faced and the solutions implemented to overcome them.

One of the initial challenges was participant recruitment, as many were hesitant to engage in activities labelled as mental health support due to the stigma surrounding these services. This deterred individuals who would benefit greatly but felt uncomfortable with the “mental health support” label. Given the level of need in the area, this was unexpected for some funded partners and required a degree of rebranding, with partners reframing their language to create a more welcoming atmosphere, as explained above. Some people from particular demographic backgrounds or sections of the local communities also avoided the projects for other reasons, such as language barriers, logistical or timing challenges, or simply not seeing creative activities as ‘for them.’

To improve attendance and make the offers more appealing, funded partners took additional steps, for example:

- Partnering with trusted community organisations to develop new referral pathways and promotional opportunities, as participants were more likely to attend when encouraged by a trusted organisation.
- Running sessions with support workers who shared the cultural background of the target group or spoke the same languages.
- Offering sessions at different times of the day or arranging group-specific sessions to foster a ‘safe space’ (e.g., women’s groups, youth groups).

Alongside initial engagement, some partners faced challenges with inconsistent attendance. Given that many participants had complex needs and led unpredictable or chaotic lives, this inconsistency was expected. Irregular attendance affected participants' ability to engage consistently, limiting the potential for long-term impact and affecting the cohesion of ongoing projects. Many partners adapted their approaches to ensure value could still be delivered without participants needing to attend every session. For instance, Green Shoes Arts adopted a drop-in model rather than requiring participants to commit to a set number of sessions. This approach allowed participants to attend when they felt able, making re-engagement easier and increasing accessibility. Additionally, the drop-in model broadened the programme’s reach, allowing new participants to join more readily.

In some cases, participants needed time to “open up” and build trust with each other and the delivery team, resulting in a slower establishment of certain project aspects. As partners aimed to be participant-led rather than prescriptive, some delivery elements were delayed. For

example, Teesside Mind began delivering social activities later than planned to allow participants the time needed to develop trust and rapport.

The strain on statutory services meant that many funded partners encountered participants with complex, overlapping needs, including mental health issues, housing instability, and social isolation. This high level of need posed a challenge as the projects were designed for early intervention or low-level support, stretching the teams' capacities. Some partners found this disruptive to the flow of creative arts sessions, requiring resource diversion and raising concerns among other participants. To support participants and reduce disruptions, funded partners undertook triaging or assessments to identify support needs, provided one-to-one support during or outside sessions, and referred participants to other relevant groups or services. Partners also strengthened their support frameworks by collaborating with other community organisations and local services. By connecting participants to additional resources, partners could address complex needs more comprehensively. In cases requiring intensive support, clear guidelines ensured appropriate referrals to specialist services while maintaining a safe, welcoming space within the creative activity.

The limited capacity of statutory services also created challenges in finding suitable support for participants. For example, a participant's mental health might necessitate a mid-project referral to additional support, or participants hoping to continue with therapeutic creative activities after the funded project might find no availability in alternative activities (where they even existed at all). Teesside Mind reported a shortage of alternative (non-clinical) creative activities for participants to access once their own project ended. This suggests that the sustainability of the programme risks being limited without investment into local services over the longer term.

Monitoring outcomes and impacts posed a unique challenge, as many traditional assessment tools, such as pre- and post-surveys, felt intrusive or inappropriate for the supportive, low-pressure setting. This lack of reliable metrics limited some partners' ability to quantitatively monitor and demonstrate their impact. Partners opted for more participant-friendly evaluation methods, including qualitative case studies, outcome star models, and light-touch surveys. Journey maps telling individuals' stories and contextual data showing the long-term impact or scale of challenges were developed as part of our evaluation. These tools allowed partners to gather impactful insights without overwhelming participants. By collecting reflective feedback and building case studies, funded partners developed a robust qualitative understanding of project benefits while preserving the supportive atmosphere central to their work.

A final key challenge was the extent to which some of the funded work relied on external partners. Several partners depended on external venues and organisations to deliver their services, which occasionally led to scheduling conflicts, location changes, and logistical disruptions. For example, The Warren moved venue mid-project, which some attendees found difficult, while Teesside Mind initially faced staff recruitment challenges, resulting in a slower project start than anticipated.

7 Feedback and learning for Comic Relief

7.1 Comic Relief as a funder

Overall, the funder-partner relationship was perceived as very positive, with funded partners generally holding Comic Relief in high regard. Many spoke about the opportunities created by

the funding and felt it allowed them to try new approaches in their work. The funding enabled partners to be ambitious in their goals and objectives, exploring initiatives they might not have attempted otherwise. For instance, several partners noted that the funding inspired them to use comedy in innovative ways they had never explored before. This ambition to experiment was partly due to the substantial value and duration of the funding, which was highly appreciated. Such funding durations, often up to two years, are uncommon in creative health interventions, which typically last only 6 to 12 months, which is often insufficient to undertake mostly new activities. However, given the time it takes for the trust to be developed with some of the more vulnerable participants, as outlined above, there were still challenges around the timeline for some projects.

The funding also provided organisations with visibility they might not have achieved otherwise. The Warren of Hull valued their involvement in Red Nose Day and the opportunity to discuss their project on BBC Radio 1. They appreciated having a Comic Relief Stories Producer and photographer visit their project, resulting in high-quality photographs to promote the sessions and market their activities.

Funded partners highlighted the high level of trust that Comic Relief placed in them, supporting exploration through trial and error within a supportive environment that encouraged innovation. Generally, partners identified several positives about Comic Relief's attitude. They valued the active involvement in visiting projects, showcasing their work, and attending high-profile events, which helped raise the profile of the funded organisations and their work, adding a sense of pride and recognition for both staff and participants.

Furthermore, Comic Relief's flexible approach allowed partners to adapt their projects based on participants' needs and evolving community situations. Partners felt comfortable discussing challenges openly and believed their feedback was genuinely considered and acted upon. This openness fostered a strong sense of collaboration, helping organisations adapt and respond effectively. Access to top-up funding was important for some partners, particularly in managing cost pressures due to inflation. For example, one funded partner, which was required to align staff pay rises with their local authority, found top-up funding essential to maintain the project's delivery and quality.

Finally, partners appreciated that Comic Relief's approach was not overly bureaucratic or controlling, and aligned with the different partners' objectives. They reported that the funder's requirements and expectations were designed to help achieve shared goals, rather than adding unnecessary administrative burdens. For several partners, however, the technical reporting system was frustrating and challenging. They spoke of significant difficulties accessing and downloading previously uploaded documents and of issues with Comic Relief documents being incorrectly uploaded or difficult to locate.

Overall however, the experience of working with Comic Relief was very positive and enjoyable. Funded partners found the grantee interview process thorough, enjoyable, and positive, with clear aims and requirements outlined in project documentation and funding calls. Throughout the project, Comic Relief remained supportive, engaged, and pragmatic. They valued that their views were included in a range of matters, such as the recruitment for the evaluator and the considerations for future funds.

7.2 Considerations for evaluation

Some of the funded partners conducted their own internal evaluations or partnered with an external evaluator. These evaluations were of good quality and helpful for our work.

As part of our evaluation, we reflected with the funded partners on the challenges of evaluating projects like those undertaken in The Smiles Fund and considered the implications for future evaluations. Participants in these projects often have complex and fluctuating needs, making it difficult to establish consistent evaluation metrics. Additionally, traditional evaluation methods involving pre- and post-assessments, such as wellbeing scales, may not be suitable for all participants due to the sensitivity and intrusiveness of such assessments.

Future evaluations should therefore account for barriers like inconsistent attendance due to chaotic life circumstances, health issues, or other external factors. This will require adaptive approaches which recognise that long-term or regular attendance may not always be possible, yet shorter engagements can still yield substantial benefits. Evaluators should consider alternative methods, such as case studies, self-assessments over time, or light-touch outcome measures that capture participants' progression without overwhelming them or undermining the principles of the programme itself.

7.3 Considerations for future funding

While the funded partners generally felt that the Fund was well run and successful, there were a small number of recommendations for future funding:

- **Opportunities for peer learning and problem-solving:** Future funding could provide more opportunities for organisations to collaborate and share experiences with other funded partners. This would allow partners to network, share best practices, solve problems, and exchange lessons learned from overcoming similar challenges. A collaborative approach would not only help organisations sustain their work but also foster innovation and service improvement. Understanding how others have resolved similar issues was viewed as both practical and reassuring, especially when facing common challenges. It was noted, however, that due to the varied nature of these projects, they may have different challenges and needs. One useful suggestion was to bring projects together at the outset, to boost opportunities for informal networking.
- **Celebrate the achievements more externally:** Many projects have achieved substantial impacts or overcome significant challenges. As creative and artistic projects, they often produce visually engaging outputs that could be shared more widely. Even beyond visual elements, some partners expressed interest in seeing what others have accomplished. Although the varied timing of projects can make this challenging, with some projects ending well before others, optional events throughout the Fund's duration could enable partners to celebrate achievements at appropriate times.
- **Foster relationships with other funders and help connect partners:** The Funded Partners believe it would have been advantageous for Comic Relief to introduce them to other funders. This would help sustain and further develop Comic Relief's investments, ensuring continuity of successful work through additional funding. Establishing a network of funders would be beneficial, as it would make it easier to connect partners with other funders for future projects, thereby enabling the continuation of their work.

- **Evaluation activity:** Starting evaluation processes earlier in the project cycle was seen as a potential improvement, even though standardised methods may not always suit the audiences. One advantage of this approach is that it could allow for more comprehensive data collection, but it is also likely to increase evaluation costs.
- **Consider the technical reporting system:** A few partners reported challenges with Comic Relief's technical reporting system, possibly due to compatibility issues with their own internal systems. While this may stem from local system differences, exploring adjustments to improve ease of use in future reporting may be beneficial.

Future funding activity

The funded partners suggested that Comic Relief could better leverage its role as a funder with a strong public profile to raise awareness and advocate for continued investment in creative mental health interventions and for the efficacy of arts-based approaches to boosting mental wellbeing. This is especially important given the capacity issues facing traditional mental health services and the demonstrated potential of creative programmes to fill these gaps, particularly by reducing social isolation and offering therapeutic benefits. Consequently, there was a sense that funding should prioritise raising the profile of this work and supporting long-term advocacy efforts.

One funded partner suggested that whilst the current fund allowed space for innovation, there would be value in offering either a) a fund to scope the development of new approaches or b) a fund that is released at a certain point in a grant cycle, to allow funded partners to create their evidence base for emerging areas of impact. For example, Platform Thirty1 found that their work had a significant impact on staff in the women's refuge and would have valued a secondary fund to allow them to capitalise on this at the same time as delivering their existing project.

8 Conclusions

This evaluation of The Smiles Fund illustrates the transformative potential of arts and comedy-focused interventions in supporting mental health and social wellbeing, especially for individuals facing isolation, trauma, or emerging mental health challenges. The Smiles Fund, with its unique focus on creative, community-based approaches, provided funded partners with the flexibility and resources needed to design responsive and impactful projects. Through active participation in arts and comedy, service users experienced improvements in self-esteem, emotional resilience, and a sense of community connection, underlining the therapeutic power of creativity.

Key factors contributing to the success of The Smiles Fund projects included building trusted relationships between facilitators and participants, creating welcoming and accessible spaces, and fostering strong local partnerships to extend impact. The programme's flexibility enabled partners to tailor services to meet participant needs, particularly valuable for communities hesitant to engage with traditional mental health services. Additionally, the programme's emphasis on social interaction within creative settings fostered lasting connections, benefiting participants well beyond the projects' completion. For some participants, the projects have been truly life-changing, as they have opened up huge new opportunities or given them the confidence to take advantage of opportunities they wouldn't have done otherwise. For many others, the impact although meaningful, was perhaps a little less profound, with the benefits being more about doing something enjoyable whilst creating the conditions for longer-term

resilience. Nevertheless, it is clear the overall improvements in mental wellbeing across the entire fund are substantial.

It is important to recognise that The Smiles Fund has not only improved individuals' lives but has also benefited a much larger range of people. This includes professionals, both paid and volunteers, who have been involved in the work, audiences of the outputs and families of the participants.

The Fund has also strengthened the capacity of partner organisations to sustain and expand their projects. Many funded partners are now better positioned to attract additional funding, thanks to the credibility gained through support from Comic Relief and Walkers. For many, however, sustainability remains a challenge, as several partners face difficulties in securing ongoing funding to maintain or grow their initiatives. Additional support and funding opportunities, particularly for the secondary impacts observed during this evaluation, would enable these organisations to deepen their impact and sustain the momentum created by The Smiles Fund.

In conclusion, The Smiles Fund has delivered meaningful impact across its target areas, offering valuable insights for future investment in creative mental health interventions. Lessons learned from this evaluation can guide funders, policymakers and practitioners in maximising the reach and effectiveness of arts-based approaches to mental health, ensuring that more individuals benefit from these powerful, accessible, and community-driven methods.

Smiles Fund Theory of Change

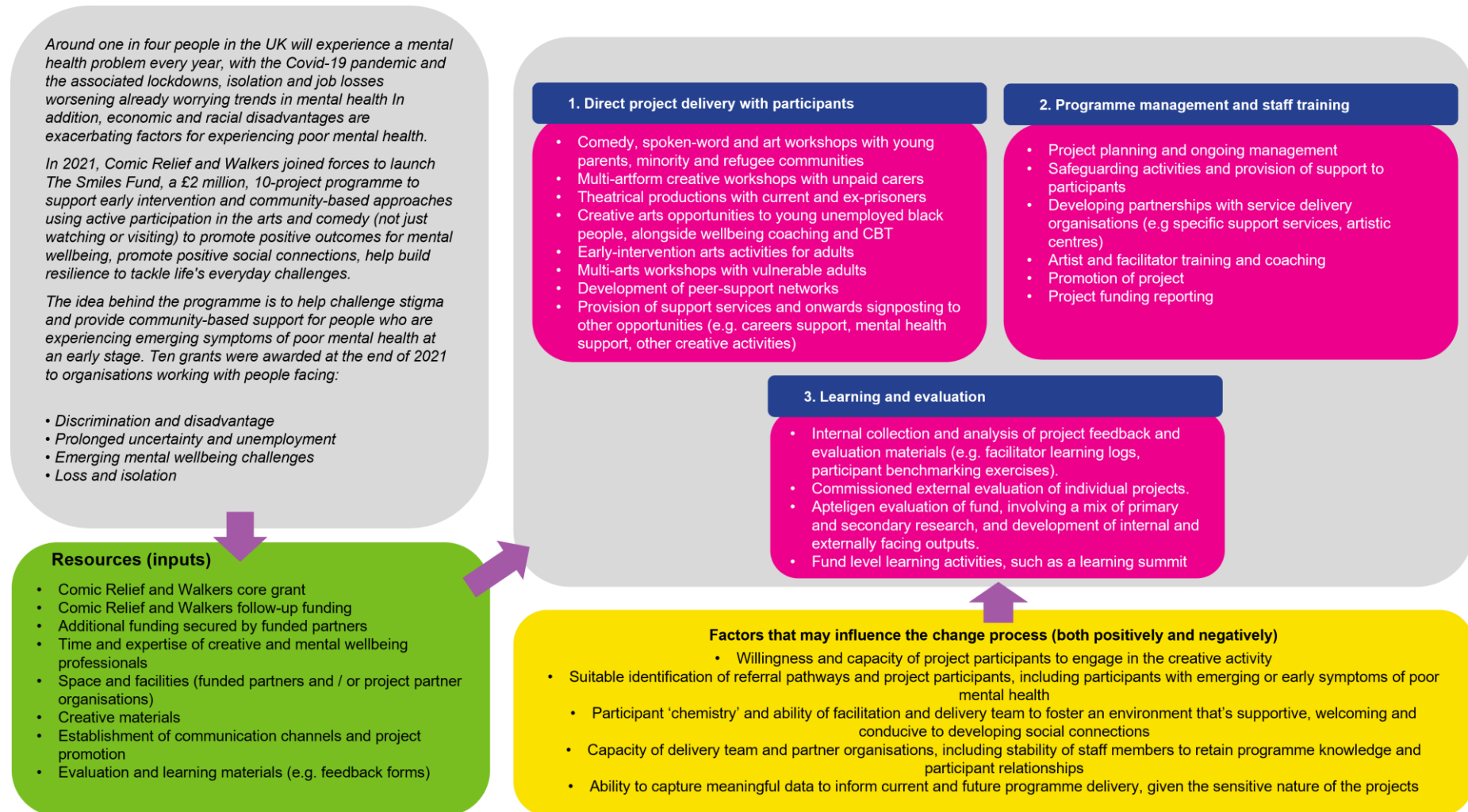


Figure 2: Smiles Fund Theory of Change – Core Programme Activities

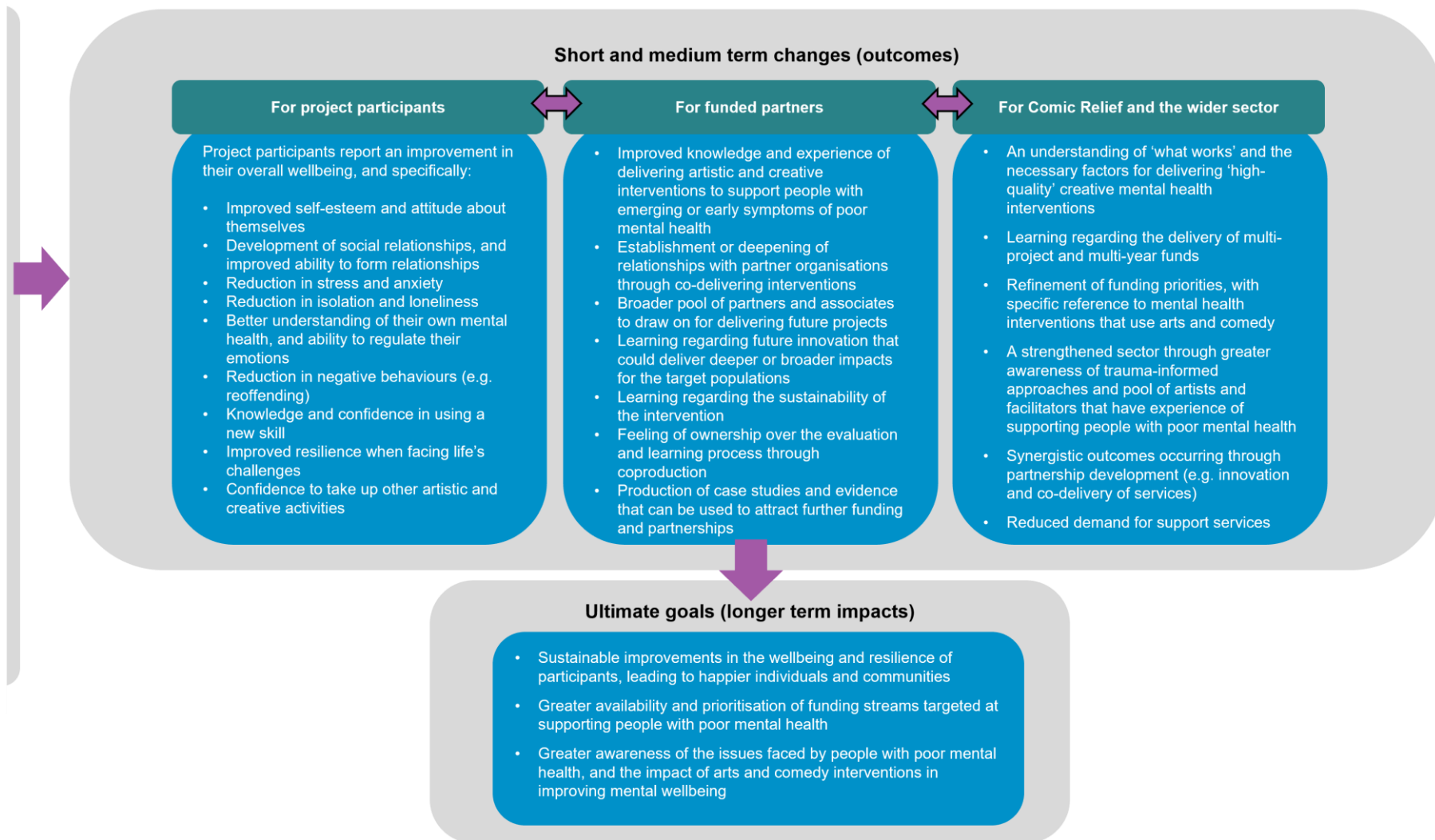


Figure 3: Smiles Fund Theory of Change – Outcomes and longer term impacts

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