

Arts and Minds (March 2022 – May 2024)

Teesside Mind's vision is for the people of Teesside to enjoy good mental health, enabling them to lead full and happy lives. It works towards this by: offering high-quality services and projects that enable people to improve their wellbeing and build resilience; strengthening its workforce through skills development; increasing its knowledge of high-impact approaches; and building a community of like-minded partners and stakeholders.

Arts and Minds... is a partnership project between Teesside Mind and Stockton Arts Centre (ARC). Run over two years in both Middlesbrough and Stockton, the project delivers weekly 2-hour creative activity workshops with people with emerging mental health problems. Each cohort of 15 participants runs for 6 months, and sessions are led by a local artist with support from a Creative Coordinator from Stockton Arts Centre, a Mind support worker, and a volunteer Peer Mentor from Mind. The workshops are designed to encourage peer support and positive relationships, whilst participants develop artistic confidence and skill. Alongside the workshops is a social events programme, giving participants the chance to build deeper friendships and self-esteem through engagement in various activities.

For project participants, Arts and Minds...

- Provides a low-risk approach to engaging in therapeutic and creative activities, which leads to a sense of accomplishment, improved self-worth, and development or re-discovery of a creative passion. Participants see the world in a different light through nurturing creative expression.
- Fosters the conditions for deep connections and friendships to develop within the group. This, in turn, leads to improved social confidence and ability to develop and repair relationships with family and friends outside of the Arts and Minds group.
- Improves the mental wellbeing of people who have longstanding mental health conditions and have tried a range of clinical approaches. This is likely due to the combined effect of improving self-confidence and developing a supportive social network.
- Empowers individuals through improved confidence and self-esteem, alongside an improvement in overall mental wellbeing. This leads to participants exhibiting their work, leading creative sessions, volunteering, enrolling in educational courses, or finding employment. Notable examples include one participant registering for a university course, one finding regular work with Stockton Arts Centre as a creative practitioner, and several participants going on to exhibit their work.
- Provides the social infrastructure to establish self-sustaining social and creative groups following Arts and Minds; a 'Friends of Arts and Minds' group meets weekly for creative sessions, and another group of participants meets weekly for coffee and crafts.

'I've gone from being in one of the worst positions in my life, one of the most ill I've ever been, to probably the best I've ever been in my life, and that is 100% down to [Arts and Minds]... I had totally got out of practice of dealing with other people. But the way it was facilitated made it so easy to get over those hurdles and it just built up my confidence little by little.'

'The art stuff was phenomenal, it gives you this little bit of skill, this little sense of accomplishment at the end of each day...but building on my confidence with other people, being able to engage in normal conversations again, that just that just got better and better each week, to the point where eventually I've got [Friends of Arts and Minds] I can go to now.'

For Teesside Mind and Stockton Arts Centre, Arts and Minds...

- Demonstrates the importance of utilising creative activities for non-clinical mental health interventions, leading to the long-term learning and adoption of practice.
- Provides refreshing activities for the delivery team, who routinely deal with challenging situations, where they learn new skills, feel a sense of achievement and engage in a time of 'self-care'.
- Forms the basis upon which future successful asset-based community development initiatives can be built.

'I think we're all creative, but sometimes we don't always have an opportunity to do that. I was doing things that I've never done before; it wasn't great, but you know that sense of achievement that I'd made some jewellery or whatever it might be. And I know I'm there to do a job, but actually it gave my brain a bit of a rest. There's a calm atmosphere and it was something to look forward to. I know we should all love our jobs and I do love my job but that was something quite special.'

Arts and Minds delivers significant impact because it...

- Is jointly delivered by a creative team and a mental health professional in complementary roles. These balance the specific creative and pastoral needs of the participants present at each session.
- A holistic assessment of each participant's strengths and needs at the beginning of the programme provides an understanding of how they can be best supported by both sets of professionals, particularly in the first few weeks of attendance.
- Uses art and creative activities as a focal point and a common ground between participants, rather than shared mental health challenges. All participants know that discussion about their mental health is welcome, but not an expectation.
- Convenes a moderately sized group of regular attendees who meet consistently over a six-month period, fostering familiarity and meaningful friendships. A structured social events programme gently encourages participants to re-engage in social activities and further friendships within the group.
- Provides a relaxed, structured and low-pressure environment, where participants can suggest activities that they would like to do, and feel a sense of 'ownership'. Creative Coordinators are highly inclusive, sensitive and emotionally intelligent.
- Recognises people's interests and strengths, rather than focussing on their individual challenges. This leads to a positive sense of self, accomplishment through achievement, and the confidence to engage in activities outside of the Arts and Minds programme.

'It wasn't my decision to move [house and location] and it took me a long time to recalibrate after that. What was I going to do now, in a different place with different people? So, coming here has contributed to getting my identity back, and just recentring myself...I can't say it's the total reason that I feel as well as I do now. But it's bloomin' been a good steady framework...This morning, when I was getting ready to come here. I thought I'm going somewhere where people know me, when I walk in that room. I'm not walking into, you know, a bunch of strangers, I know everyone sitting around that table. I think because you're making new friends and new relationships, you actually give a bit more of yourself.'

'In the past I have done counselling, with counselling and therapy we have to talk about things. And I think that can bring up stuff and sometimes for me, it's not necessarily that I need to talk about how I'm feeling, I just need something to help me manage it. And me managing it isn't talking about it, it's having something to do or to focus on that I enjoy.'





Evaluation of *The Smiles Fund: Arts, comedy and performance for community mental health*

Platform Thirty1

At the Kitchen Table (March 2022 – June 2024)

Platform Thirty1 is a women-led organisation working across the arts, culture, community and education sectors in the East Midlands. It uses creativity and the arts to work on generating agency and power, so that those it works with can tackle any societal, environmental, political, personal or cultural problem that is important and impactful to them, their family and/or their community.

At The Kitchen Table... delivers participatory arts workshops for women living in domestic abuse refuges across Leicestershire, Derbyshire, and Nottinghamshire. The project was co-designed with women in refuges and refuge workers, built on a trusting relationship between the Platform Thirty1 team, freelance creative professionals, and refuge staff and management. Over the course of a year, two blocks of eight weekly workshops are delivered in each refuge by a creative professional, supported by a facilitator. The workshops begin with casual conversation and light refreshments before moving into a visual art activity. The delivery model is grounded in the empowerment of women, achieved through co-designing and co-creating participatory activities and encouraging leadership development, such as inviting women to lead parts of sessions or share their learning with others. Between 2022 and 2024, the project engaged 210 participants across 2 refuge groups.

For the women living in refuges, At the Kitchen Table...

- Provides a safe and supportive environment where participants can focus on enjoyable, stimulating, and social activities, rather than their immediate circumstances. It offers much-needed respite from interactions with statutory agencies or planning for life after the refuge, improving participants' overall wellbeing through engagement in the workshops.
- Fosters new relationships among participants, as they offer praise and feedback to each other, share and coordinate resources, and learn new skills. The workshops boost participants' confidence in engaging in conversations, while the artistic activity creates space for both light-hearted and everyday discussions, as well as the sharing of personal experiences, leading to mutual understanding and friendship.
- Develops new skills or reignites past passions for artistic activities. Participants gain a sense of accomplishment and pride in having something tangible to show for their efforts. Increased confidence and self-esteem often lead to participants pursuing new artistic, support, or employment opportunities. For example, one participant successfully applied for a job as a Teaching Assistant, allowing her to continue her passion for arts and crafts.

'When I do these things, it makes my mind relax'



'It feels really nice to be able to sit and do this together, we are all usually having to do paperwork or look after our kids.'

'When we get our houses, we will put these on the side on display – to remind us of our days in refuge.'



For the refuge staff, At the Kitchen Table...

- Provides inspiration and resources for delivering similar creative sessions with women (and their children) in the refuge, sometimes as an activity for women who have just arrived.
- Creates a neutral and relaxed environment where participants and refuge workers can catch up and share updates.
- Enhances the sense of shared ownership in communal spaces through residents collaborating on artwork and craft pieces for display in the refuge.
- Increases understanding of the importance of artistic activities in improving the overall wellbeing of women living in refuges.

'It really brought home the importance of the work that you carry out to support our clients and how this supports and helps their journey with us.'

For the wider sector, At the Kitchen Table...

- Expands the pool of experienced practitioners trained in delivering work within domestic abuse refuges, skilled in safeguarding, group facilitation, mindfulness techniques, and recognising unconscious bias, while working with women who have experienced domestic violence and abuse.
- Some freelance practitioners have secured employed roles as a result of the training and experience gained through the programme.

'This project has had has made me feel more confident that I can contribute something meaningful.'

At The Kitchen Table generates impact because...

- Prior to the workshops, a strong, trusting relationship is built with refuge staff, leading to openness and a sense of integration between the delivery team and the refuge staff.
- Consecutive weekly workshops with a committed, professional, and compassionate delivery team foster understanding and trust between the team and participants.
- The delivery team plans for adaptability and responsiveness to changing circumstances, ensuring the workshops always meet the needs and interests of the participants, resulting in genuine empowerment and co-creation.
- The artistic activities engage participants physically, offering something tangible to focus on, which indirectly creates conversational space. Sharing resources and working collaboratively fosters mutual support and emotional resilience.
- The creative professional and facilitator have complementary roles, balancing the specific creative and pastoral needs of participants during each session.

In the future, At the Kitchen Table could...

- Work more closely with women in dispersed housing, beyond the delivery of artistic 'packs.'
- Deliver specific workshops for women who are about to, or have recently, transitioned out of living in a refuge.
- Explore how the programme could further support refuge workers, both in their role in the refuge and in improving their individual wellbeing.
- Refine the way that evidence of impact on individual women and change over time is captured.

'It made my day for Wanda to join in despite the language barrier as she can be very isolated with her new baby. She is also very good at silk painting - a new found talent!'



Synergy Theatre Project

COMEBACK: Covid Recovery through Comedy for Prisoners and Ex-Prisoners

(March 2022 – April 2024)

Synergy undertakes powerful work across theatre and the criminal justice system. It uses the power of arts and theatre to open up new possibilities and support offenders, ex-offenders and young people towards more positive futures. With the most disadvantaged over-represented in the criminal justice system, Synergy provides practical opportunities which develop participants' skills, capabilities, and resilience. It also builds a bridge from prison to social reintegration, provides vital support to rehabilitation, and seeks to prevent young people from entering the criminal justice system.

COMEBACK... was a two-year programme 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 have been some of the most isolated during the pandemic. The programme began with a national scriptwriting competition for prisoners and ex-prisoners, with digital courses to encourage submissions. The winning scripts were performed in prisons and in a London theatre. Other courses were provided, which included beginner level courses in playwriting, comedy and the spoken word. The work aimed to use comedy to put joy back into prisoner and ex-prisoners lives, improving mental health of the participants.

For the participants, COMEBACK...

- Offers a platform to showcase their abilities and engage in meaningful opportunities for involvement. Many value the chance to explore and demonstrate their talents, gaining recognition in a positive light. For some, this has been instrumental in changing how their families perceive them, fostering stronger family relationships, which is crucial for sustaining long-term benefits.
- Has helped them develop a range of new skills, both in theatre and writing, as well as valuable life skills that enhance relationships and work. These include empathy, compassion, teamwork, and anger management.
- It has had a notable positive impact on mental health, by offering an opportunity to do something fun and rewarding whilst fostering meaningful connection. This, in turn, has helped them transform their prison experience into a more positive and constructive learning opportunity.
- Has encouraged them to either discover or reignite their passion for the arts, offering them the opportunity to explore how they can incorporate it into their lives more regularly, whether professionally or as a hobby. This longer-term focus fosters positive connections, reduces isolation, and provides a consistent source of engagement and purpose.



"This course can put people on the right path."

"I'm actually a human, I've been noticed for something good."

"I have learned more about empathy, relationships and being "part of" from this course than from anything else in prison (or outside come to that)"

"Creativity, teamwork, cooperating. I need more help for emotional things. I think expanding [my play] Germany 201 may help me. I have a brain injury and it's difficult to understand feelings and contemporary memory issues... I will expand on this."

For other direct beneficiaries COMEBACK ...

- Offers **audiences** an enriching arts experience that, while entertaining, also introduces art to those who might not typically engage with it, challenging conventional thinking and stereotypes in the process.
- Provides **prison staff** with new methods to engage prisoners, resulting in a positive impact on their behaviour.
- Introduces comedy as a new dimension to the existing high-quality productions, enhancing the overall experience for **Synergy staff and audiences** alike.
- Inspires **other prisoners** who watch the performances, opening their minds to their own potential.
- Allows **fellow actors and professionals** to face new challenges while providing valuable support to others.

Gives **families** the opportunity to watch their loved ones perform, bringing comfort and joy as they witness their progress and improvements in mental health.

"Thank you so much for coming to Downview. Please come back at least twice a year and aim to make it a regular thing."



"It was an eye-opening experience working in the prison. It was a friendly and open environment which was something I didn't hugely expect....sometimes you make a judgement on the convicted and label them for their actions. However, actually being in the room, talking to them about their work, adds a level of humanity to them that you are almost taught or expected to dismiss due to the crimes they committed. It's a great feeling, knowing that we can use our passion for the arts to hopefully create some reformation"

For the wider population, COMEBACK ...

- Reduces the costs associated with offending, alleviates the pressure on an already stretched criminal justice system, and contributes to safer communities. While it may be a small step in the broader context of crime, the financial and social costs of offending suggest that Synergy has the potential to generate savings that far exceed its investment.

COMEBACK has significant impact because...

- The staff demonstrate exceptional passion and commitment, with a deep understanding of the people they work with. They engage participants at an appropriate level, encouraging them to challenge themselves and step outside their comfort zones while ensuring they remain supported and engaged.
- They are accomplished professionals with extensive expertise in relevant performance and writing skills. The productions they deliver are of high quality and highly engaging.
- They help participants shift their perspective on what they can achieve and install a belief that they can break the mould. The benefits of participation extend beyond the immediate mental health boost from engaging in courses or performances; they also provide skills that prepare participants for a successful future.
- There is a diverse range of beneficiaries. Unlike many programs that solely benefit participants, Synergy's work positively impacts numerous individuals, including prisoners and ex-prisoners, the professionals and staff involved in the courses, prison and probation personnel, audiences of the plays and recorded media (including other inmates), and, in the long term, the wider community through reduced costs in the criminal justice system and health and social care.
- Their work empowers individuals who would otherwise struggle to find their voice. It opens up opportunities and gives participants faith in themselves, in many cases for the first time.
- Synergy routinely evaluates its initiatives to continuously refine and enhance its work. Its efforts both inside and outside of prisons create continuity, leading to a long-term impact that extends beyond one-off activities.

"Esther is fearless, balanced, and insightful in reading people and understanding their needs. Esther's ability to surround herself with kind and knowledgeable people, like Neil, who is an encyclopaedia of theatre."



"Normally I don't do crowds. For a second, I was thinking how do I just slip out of this? But I snapped out of it and I feel good for doing it."

"In spite of people's crimes everyone has got a different thing that they bring.

You can do one bad thing but have a million things that are good about you."



Evaluation of *The Smiles Fund: Arts, comedy and performance for community mental health*
The Creative Café (March 2022 – October 2024)

Green Shoes Arts is a community-focused charity based in Barking and Dagenham. It delivers high-quality arts projects, led by experienced artists and performers, that enable people of all ages and backgrounds to engage with a wide range of creative and artistic activities. Its mission is to inspire local people to make positive changes through the arts, with an emphasis on wellbeing and personal development.

Through a range of programmes and workshops with people who have disabilities, mental health issues, or are otherwise vulnerable, Green Shoes Arts aims to foster confidence, artistic expression, and social connections within the community

The Creative Café... serves as a social and artistic hub, using creativity to support mental health and community building in Barking and Dagenham. Weekly sessions, initially only in Chadwell Heath provide a welcoming and inclusive space for adults with mental health challenges. Sessions have, since then, expanded to Thames Community Hub satellite sessions. As well as offering opportunities for creative engagement, sessions include facilitated wellbeing and reflective activities. The sessions are led by an artist facilitator and have a flexible format where participants can choose which artistic station they would like to try.

For the participants, The Creative Café...

- Provides a sense of purpose and a reason to leave their homes and interact with others.
- Feels like a safe environment, allowing participants to engage with the session on their own terms by choosing their artistic activity and participating as much or as little as they wish in the group work.
- Takes an inclusive, non-judgemental approach to mental health. Rather than labelling participants as having 'mental health issues', the programme focuses on addressing their symptoms and challenges. This helps reduce the stigma around mental health and creates a welcoming space where participants feel comfortable and accepted.
- Offers an opportunity to socialise while engaging in creative activities. The spontaneous conversations that arise often lead to the development of friendships and support networks that extend beyond the group itself, making the Café particularly valuable for fostering a sense of community and belonging.
- Provides the chance to develop new artistic skills and engage in creative expression. This, in turn, boosts confidence, improves self-esteem, and fosters a sense of personal accomplishment and pride.

Additionally, 83% of Creative Café participants self-reported that "in general, the session made me feel good/more social/calmer."

'Green Shoes is my lifeline.'

'As I continued coming to Green Shoes Arts, I became more confident and made friends.'

'I am so proud of how the group has helped me and built my confidence.'

'I kept coming back to Creative Café for months [and] felt happier, less lonely and isolated.'

I got out and made friends'.

- Participants

For the staff and artists who work with Green Shoes Arts, The Creative Café...

- Enabled facilitators to learn new artistic skills, adding to their toolkit when working with similar populations.
- Provided a fresh approach to engaging the local population, offering creative activities and identifying ways to work effectively with those who have mental health needs.
- Supported efforts to break down local barriers to wider geographical participation.
- Has been an enjoyable and rewarding experience, inspiring new aspirations for the future.
- Helped develop increased resilience in coping with challenges and disclosures.

For the wider population, The Creative Café...

- Reduces stigma around mental health needs.
- Has provided capacity to support individuals with mental health needs, easing the burden on the overall system by catering to those with a higher level of need than originally intended.
- Contributes to the evidence base on delivering effective arts and wellbeing interventions, including for those experiencing poor mental health, and demonstrates how to overcome barriers to engagement, particularly for vulnerable groups.
- Reduces economic costs in health and social care. Research by the Campaign to End Loneliness shows that social isolation costs the UK government £1,700 more per person annually in health and social care compared to those with strong social connections.

The Creative Café generates impact because...

- The facilitators are welcoming and understanding. Green Shoes Arts builds trusted relationships with participants, allowing them the time and space to gain the confidence to engage at their own pace.
- It creates an informal, relaxed environment for relationships and social connections to flourish. As one participant said:

'This is different to any other service I've gone to, because we have time to talk to each other, but not in a forced way'. - Participant

- Green Shoes staff know their community well. They understand the local barriers and challenges and have designed the Creative Café in such a way that it can break these barriers down, making the service accessible and tailored to local needs.
- It works with a range of artists, offering a variety of activities to ensure there is something for everyone, promoting sustained engagement. The small group welcoming and closing activities help set the tone for the sessions and provide a reflective space at the end
- Green Shoes Arts have built networks and relationships with the right local services to ensure the right people are signposted to the sessions.
- The Café is not marketed specifically as a mental health service, making it more approachable and reducing barriers to initial engagement.



Inspiring Creativity (March 2022 – October 2023)

Inspired Neighbourhoods is a social business that has been operating in Bradford since 2011, delivering multi-stranded services that are designed to increase skills and employability, improve health and wellbeing, reduce isolation and social exclusion and create better neighbourhoods. On average, around 16,000 people use its services every year, with active programmes including culturally sensitive psychological support services, independent welfare, housing and debt advice, and community-based educational support services for children and young people.

Inspiring creativity... is a new service for people in Bradford from diverse heritage backgrounds, aimed at supporting people who are experiencing mental health issues through therapeutic art and creative activity sessions. The project approach was informed by a participant survey and resident interviews about artistic and creative mental health interventions, and each session is tailored to meet the needs of participants. The project is delivered through a series of group workshops, and one-to-one / drop-in sessions, which are delivered by an experienced art sessional worker and a mental health support worker with the support of volunteers. The project has prioritised engagement with South Asian communities (typically of Pakistani / Bangladeshi heritage) and refugees who are unemployed, isolated, or experiencing loss. Referrals to the programme are made through Inspired Neighbourhood's broader services, or through organisational partnerships.

For participants, Inspiring Creativity...

- Improves mental wellbeing and confidence, leading to a sense of empowerment and the ability to seek further support, engage in other artistic or cultural activities, or volunteer in the local community. Regular attendance resulted in a 55% average improvement in self-reported anxiety scores. Importantly, 75% of all attendees felt that the groups had a positive impact on their mental health.
- Breaks down cultural barriers and stigma around accessing mental health support and improves self-awareness of mental health challenges, highlighting the role of non-clinical approaches in addressing them.
- Brings together residents to develop friendships and social connections with each other, support each other with their creative activities, and realise that they are not alone in the challenges that they face.
- Offers professional tuition for a range of cultural and artistic activities, leading to the development of new skills or rebuilding participants' confidence to re-engage in former hobbies.
- Acts as a space where their holistic needs can be addressed, and for receiving the necessary support through Inspired Neighbourhoods' services, or a partner agency. For some participants, this was the first time that they had engaged with specific mental health support services.

'Coming to these Textiles sessions has helped me in many ways.

It's helped my ongoing anxiety by meeting and connecting to new people, it's a safe haven where you can relax and get to know each other. It's a great way to connect with others.

I always avoided hand stitching, but I have found it very therapeutic as I have learnt a skill that I am enjoying in my spare time. I can switch off and enjoy myself here without any interruptions.'

For the Inspired Neighbourhoods team, the Inspiring Creativity project has...

- Provided learning regarding what does and doesn't work when engaging diverse communities through cultural and artistic mental health interventions. For example, flexible session timings are important for encouraging people (often women) who may have caring commitments to attend. Activities such as woodwork and drumming are particularly appealing to South Asian men.
- Demonstrated to Inspired Neighbourhoods team and external partners the important role of the arts in facilitating conversation, improving mental wellbeing and fostering a sense of achievement and empowerment.
- Provided the foundation for a new team of professionals trained in art therapy, mental health support, and safeguarding, equipping them for future projects.
- Encouraged the development of a new 'language' for promoting and describing mental health activities, helping to overcome cultural barriers. For example, using terms like 'coaching' or 'workshops' can remove the stigma associated with mental health support.
- Introduced Inspired Neighbourhoods' work to new community members and sparked family conversations about the importance of seeking mental health support. Parents who attended Inspiring Creativity sessions have encouraged their children to engage with Inspired Neighbourhoods' wider outreach and support programmes.
- Strengthened existing partnerships in Bradford and developed new collaborations that can be carried forward into future programmes.

Inspiring Creativity delivers impact because it...

- Is designed and delivered in a culturally sensitive way: the language used to describe the sessions and the programme structure is adapted to address stigma around mental health. Strong partnerships with organisations that engage with different communities, facilitators who speak the same language and understand the culture of attendees, and free translation services all ensure participants can access support in a trusting environment.
- Provides a low-pressure, high-support environment, where participants are invited to engage at their own pace. Small improvements in creative ability and mental wellbeing are celebrated through sustained engagement in the sessions.
- Uses artistic and creative activities as therapeutic tools, helping participants relax, feel empowered by learning new skills, and improve confidence through socialising in a safe and supportive space.
- Offers artistic and creative activities as the primary 'hook' for participants, rather than advertising the programme as mental health support. The variety of activities and flexible group structure cater to different preferences and availabilities.
- Is facilitated by both a creative professional and a trained mental health professional, ensuring high-quality artistic instruction while addressing participants' pastoral and mental health needs in a non-intrusive way.
- Provides immediate referral pathways to Inspired Neighbourhoods' support services and those of partner organisations. Participants gain trust in Inspired Neighbourhoods, and their holistic needs are understood, enabling swift referrals and timely, tailored support.
- Offers professional tuition in a range of cultural and artistic activities, helping participants develop new skills or rebuild confidence in former hobbies.



Evaluation of The Smiles Fund: Arts, comedy and performance for community mental health Creative Connect (March 2022 – October 2024)

Liverpool Lighthouse is an Arts and Community Centre, established in 1998 and based in Anfield, Liverpool. The local area, extending across the North Liverpool wards of Anfield, Everton and West Kensington, falls within the 1% most deprived areas in England. Their aim is to help create flourishing communities of people living more fulfilled lives, through arts engagement and practice.

Creative Connect... is an initiative that builds on Liverpool Lighthouse's extensive experience of co-creating effective, arts-based wellbeing projects for some of the most vulnerable people in the local community. Creative Connect aims to develop a 'Creative Sanctuary' in the heart of the community, where those experiencing (or at greatest risk of experiencing) mild to moderate mental health challenges can engage in a range of different art forms. Alongside this, there are opportunities to open up conversations about mental health and wellbeing in a safe and supportive environment, while also receiving practical guidance and support. Through regular participation, people will be able to connect with others who may have experienced similar challenges, gain new skills, build their confidence and self-esteem, and improve their mental wellbeing. The integration of community wellbeing with professional arts provision, in an environment designed to remove barriers to participation for the most vulnerable, means that participants will also have new development opportunities and be supported in building their resilience over the longer term. 154 people participated in the programme in year 1, and 308 people participated in year 2.

For the people who participate in the project, Creative Connect...

- Provides a welcoming, non-judgemental, and supportive environment where they can connect with others and engage in a range of creative activities, including improvisation comedy, singing (in a community choir), creative writing, music appreciation, textile and fashion workshops, and creative crafts. 96% of participants felt more socially connected as a result of the programme.
- Offers opportunities to perform, showcase their achievements, and play a role in shaping the activities they participate in. An evaluation of the work with perinatal refugee women found that: "It is evident that the individual skill sets have been increased, but predominantly it is the feelings of confidence, of agency (voice) and of empowerment that have had the deepest impact."
- Provides 1:1 pastoral and practical support, signposting, personal development planning, and a listening ear, creating a gateway into creative activities. This helps to reduce the stigma associated with mental health and opens up more positive and productive conversations. 92% of participants said that their involvement helped them access the services they needed, and 84% said that participating had helped them face and overcome challenges in their life.
- Creates opportunities to develop new skills and enables participants to begin a journey towards a more positive future, including through supported volunteering and mentoring opportunities. Furthermore, it can act as a stepping stone towards new employment opportunities and/or involvement in creative activities beyond Creative Connect. As a result of participating in the programme, 21% of participants are now in work, 36% are in education and 50% are involved in volunteering.

'The programme has made me a completely different person, I'm not bad tempered, I don't suffer with depression anymore, it has built my confidence, I can go out and speak to people. Drama has brought me out of myself, I used to be quiet. I didn't think I'd ever be able to do that. I'm really proud of myself.'

– Creative Connect Participant



For the volunteers and peer mentors who support programme delivery, Creative Connect...

- Provides an opportunity to build on the progress made as a participant and to begin to develop new creative opportunities beyond the programme.
- Enables them to use their lived experience to support others and to continue to build their confidence and resilience in a supportive environment.
- Creates a sense of purpose and helps to build new ambitions and aspirations for the future.



'When I first came here to the Lighthouse, I met my friend Hana and Jude [the Welfare and Wellbeing worker] and we did activities like cooking. Once I started coming, I would wake up full of energy, I would go to the Lighthouse, it was amazing, my life changed completely.'

For the wider population, Creative Connect...

- Promotes, through performances, radio coverage, social media, and showcasing work through partners, a more open conversation about mental health and wellbeing, and the benefits of participatory arts activities particularly among those who feel most vulnerable and marginalised in their community.
- Can contribute to the evidence base around delivering effective and impactful arts and wellbeing interventions, including those experiencing poor mental health, and ways to overcome the barriers to engagement and participation often seen in especially vulnerable groups across society.



'Please can you pass on my deep and long-lasting thanks to the amazing women who were on the stage today; my life has been touched and my professional career affected profoundly by their sharing of their journeys.'

Creative Connect generates impact because...

- Practical and emotional support is embedded in the delivery of creative activities, which means that staff and volunteers can build relationships and trust before participants move on to more organised arts activities.
- Participants are included in decision making and are supported to have a voice, including beyond the boundaries of the programme.
- The Creative Sanctuary offers autonomy and choice in relation to which activities people can participate in, and the level of commitment they initially give. The programme also supports social connections, self-expression and experimentation through the arts, and exhibition and performance opportunities.
- The space has been designed specifically to create a welcoming, comfortable and safe environment, including through the use of lighting and the design of the room layout.
- Liverpool Lighthouse is already a well-recognised and central feature of the local community, with wellbeing through the arts being a key part of its core mission.



'Liverpool Lighthouse aims to be a Creative Sanctuary, offering our local communities, vulnerable people, artists and young people a creative, safe space to develop skills and wellbeing.'

'Our programmes tackle the root causes of social disadvantage, creating long-term, transformational change in our community and our city.'



Evaluation of *The Smiles Fund: Arts, comedy and performance for community mental health*

CREATE creative:voices

Creative:voices (March 2022 – April 2025)

Create aims to empower disadvantaged individuals by using creative arts to enhance their wellbeing and reduce isolation, particularly for unpaid adult carers. Through high-quality multi-artform workshops, the organization seeks to improve the confidence, social skills, and connections of these carers with peers and professional artists, ultimately expanding their engagement with the arts and community resources. Since 2003 it has run 11k+ workshops with 40k+ participants across the UK, through partnerships with local service providers/charities/public sector.

Creative: voices... The project aims to enhance the wellbeing of isolated, unpaid adult carers through high-quality, multi-artform workshops, thereby reducing their isolation and improving their confidence and social skills. Led by professional artists, these creative workshops foster connections among participants and with the arts community, empowering disadvantaged individuals and promoting their creativity. Over 30 months, the project aims to conduct hundreds of workshops in partnership with various carer services, focusing on areas affected by funding cuts and high deprivation.

For 9 in every 10 carers, Creative: voices ...

- Improved their mental wellbeing by providing a fun, skill-building, creative, and collaborative emotional outlet, enabling them to feel connected, keep learning, take notice, give, and be active.
- Enabled them to feel connected through collaborative activities delivered in a supportive, safe space that encourages social interaction, self-expression, and shared understanding, helping carers to build relationships with each other and with carer staff.
- Boosted their confidence and self-esteem by providing a safe space where they could open up and be vulnerable in front of supportive participants. This environment helped them take notice of their surroundings and their thoughts and feelings, leading to the discovery of a creative talent or passion and development of skills, increasing confidence.
- Made them feel encouraged, listened to, and valued. Carers contributed their time to be part of a group, exchanged positive feedback on each other's work, and were involved in a collaborative, participant-led process.
- Provided them with space to explore their creativity and to keep learning through interactive work with Create's artists, developing artform skills (e.g. composing a photograph, writing poetry).
- The programme is on track to engage over 600 carers by the end of year 3.

'It's got my brain cells ticking – I've loved it. It has brought back beautiful memories of my mum dyeing fabric in Nairobi when I was a child. I had completely forgotten...It's opened up my world!'

'It's opened up my world! [There's] opportunities to make new friends – they encouraged me to reconnect with literature and now I just signed up to learn to type!'

'I have found myself smiling and saying 'hello' to more people in my neighbourhood.'

'This is where I feel comfortable talking. I always choose this place.'



For the staff and artists, Creative: voices Club...

- Enhanced their programme of activities and fostered new links with partner organisations.
- Taught them how to deliver and implement similar programmes in collaboration with carer services – choosing artforms/themes in consultation with services/carers to reflect their interests/encourage engagement and ensuring participants have creative lead in workshops.
- Increased the number of services they can collaborate with up to 18 services in year 3.
- Gave them more flexibility and creativity in organising sessions and working with smaller groups of participants.

'Definitely brought people together who may never have met.'

'All the participants commented on how enriching it was to spend time with people in their community and feel connected.'



'Participants were allowed to explore their own ideas. The artist asked everyone what they wanted and was so friendly and helpful.'

For the wider sector, Creative: voices ...

- Sustained its expanded programme delivery: CV delivered 89 workshops, a 13% increase from 2021/22. Create launched a new partnership with Wigan and Leigh Carers Centre, bringing the total to 9 carer service partners in Year 1, as intended.
- Built on current partnerships: Create returned to 3 longstanding partner services and strengthened 5 partnerships recently established in 2021.
- Expanded its presence in areas of low arts engagement and high deprivation in the North: in line with its strategic goals, Create delivered 35 CV workshops in Manchester, Sefton, Wigan, and York from its Northwest (NW) hub in Manchester, established in 2021.
- Showcased CV participants during Carers Week (June 2022): Create ran CV workshops during the week and advocated for adult carers by sharing case studies on its website and social media.

Creative: voices has generated impact because...

- With a 13% increase in workshops and a 28% increase in carers reached from the previous year, CV successfully supported 157 carers, achieving high success rates across outcomes, such as improved wellbeing (90%), feeling connected (94%), and increased confidence (80%).
- Feedback highlighted CV as a transformative experience for carers, with many expressing newfound confidence and relief from daily stresses. Many also developed new transferable skills they can apply in future endeavours.
- The programme faced challenges due to the cost-of-living crisis, which affected partners' operational capacity. In response, Create adjusted its approach by offering remote 'Create Live!' options and providing free workshops to alleviate financial barriers for participants.

In the future, Creative: voices could...

- Continue responding to cost-of-living challenges by offering flexible delivery options, such as remote 'Create Live!' sessions, and by providing free workshops to support accessibility.
- Increase its partnerships, expand its regional outreach, and leverage social media to advocate for carer support through creative arts.
- Deliver 229 workshops with an expanded partner network, continuing to advocate for carer wellbeing through creative outlets.



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WILD Young Parents Project

Rant Club (March 2022 – April 2024)

WILD Young Parents Project works with young-parent families throughout Cornwall. WILD is the largest sole-focus young parent charity in the UK, and works with young parents up to the age of 19 or 23 where there are additional support needs or complexities. By working with young parent families, WILD aims to help children to develop strong and secure attachment and avoid the typical poorer health, education, social, and economic outcomes associated with babies and children with young parents.

Rant Club... is a creative project WILD has delivered in partnership with Trifle Gathering Productions (TGP) who produce comedy theatre, immersive theatrical experiences and art-based projects. Its purpose is to explore emotions, particularly those of anger, frustration, and irritation, through the use of comedy and humour. Rant Club aims to create a safe space for young parents to express and share their emotions, which are often not welcomed or accepted. Through a series of workshops and activities, the young parents were encouraged to explore their emotions, vent their frustrations, and create content such as songs and music videos. The project allowed WILD to delve into the creative process and enable the parents they work with to have a voice and share their experiences.

For the young parents, Rant Club...

- Helped them develop a better understanding of their emotions and how to express them, which is crucial for regulating their own feelings and supporting their child's emotional development.
- Reduced isolation by providing a safe space for young parents to connect, share experiences, and feel less alone in their challenges and emotions. It gave them hope and a sense of belonging.
- Enabled young parents to tap into their creativity and build confidence through participation in creative workshops, lyric writing, and recording sessions.
- Offered short breaks from childcare, allowing them to focus on doing something for themselves. It gave them a sense of accomplishment and new belief in their abilities, as they overcame some of their reservations about taking part, particularly in the creation of the video.
- Gave young parents the opportunity to create a song and music video to share with their families and look back on as a reminder of their journey. It empowered them, providing a platform to improve their emotional wellbeing and build resilience through creative and comedic approaches. These experiences can have long-lasting positive impacts on the participants and their families.

'He went from 'I can't do it, I'm not good enough' to 'I'm going to give it a go, what's the worst thing that could happen' over several weeks with mentoring from a dad's worker, his peers and Rant Club.' – WILD staff member

Lyrics from the song reflect the challenges and worries faced by the young parents, but also the positivity they found in coming together:

'I'm contemplating am I good enough, when the other half of me says I'm a diamond in the rough.'



'All the blame and shame can do one tonight. We're doing our best to make it alright.'

I am proud of who I am, I have sacrificed a lot.'

For the children of the young parents, Rant Club...

- Enhanced their current and future relationships with their parents, fostering creativity and secure attachment. This, in turn, has been shown to have many positive impacts, such as a lower prevalence of emotional and behavioural problems, and a decreased likelihood of needing extensive social and welfare services later in life. It better positions the child to thrive at school.
- Helped to mitigate the potential negative impacts of the parents' own childhood experiences and mental health challenges through the project's trauma-informed approach, which focused on addressing these factors to improve the children's well-being.

For the WILD staff, Rant Club...

- Created a set of resources that can be used for creative activities with future cohorts of young parents.
- Produced a video that can inspire and motivate others, alongside a toolkit of activities for use with other young parents.
- Provided new ways to engage with young parents by exploring approaches that hadn't been tried before, such as focusing on humour and comic elements.

'When things go wrong in all our lives, if we can laugh about it, we're in control and we've got a sense of agency.... Comedy helps get out those stories... and our families love it ... being able to laugh about it, it puts them in charge of their past.... If they are laughing about it, they're in control.'
– WILD Staff member

For the wider sector, Rant Club...

- Helped children develop secure attachments with their parents, which makes them more likely to be school-ready and are at a decreased risk of needing additional services later in life. The Early Intervention Foundation emphasises that programmes promoting secure attachment in early childhood, such as parenting support and early years education, yield high returns on investment. In 2014 they found that every £1 spent on early intervention programmes promoting secure attachment potentially saves up to £7 in future social, health, and education costs.¹
- WILD has been recognised as an example of good practice by several partners, including the Local Authority, Safeguarding Children's Partnership, and ICS.

Rant Club has generated impact because...

- WILD brings a deep understanding of the challenges and experiences faced by young parents. Crucially, as many young parents have not had positive experiences with health and social care services, WILD is an organisation they feel safe with, where they feel understood and can build trusted relationships. This encouraged the young parents to be open and engaged.
- TGP brought not only expertise but also sensitivity in delivering their sessions. They were flexible and adaptive in their approach to facilitate engagement and minimise the day-to-day barriers that young parents face.
- Young parents were encouraged to participate and challenge themselves, but were not pressured into doing anything they were uncomfortable with. The bond formed between the parents allowed them to support and encourage each other.
- The young parents worked collaboratively towards achieving a shared outcome. While the creation of the music video was the specific goal, the journey itself had an impact: as their isolation decreased, their confidence grew, and they built their own support networks.

In the future, WILD could...

- Continue embedding the learning from Rant Club into other WILD activities. This has already begun, with WILD Voices becoming more integrated into strategic work and influencing the development of the National Young Parent Network.
- Implement a standardised case study data collection approach to further develop case stories that combine personal experiences with contextual data.



1: Early Intervention Foundation. 'The economic benefits of promoting secure attachment through early intervention.' 2014.

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Three Minute Monologues (April 2022 – August 2023)

For the past 40 years, The Warren has existed to provide the space and freedom for young people in Hull to be themselves and be heard. Its work is underpinned by an 'Empowerment Policy', which gives young people the power to direct the activities of the organisation. The Warren provides a range of co-located support in one setting, and is the only free, open-access mental health service for young people in Hull. It supports around 1,500 young people a year and offers mental health services, employability and skills support, creative health interventions, digital skills and inclusion work, and support for young people who are at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation. In 2023, The Warren attained National Portfolio Organisation status from Arts Council England.

Three Minute Monologues... was a year-long partnership project between The Warren and Middle Child, a Theatre Company in Hull, where young people in Hull took part in six-week blocks of creative writing sessions with the support of a creative writing tutor / spoken word artist, a counsellor, and a support worker. The sessions used group activities and creative exercises to help the participants articulate their thoughts and overcome any previous concerns around writing. The writings that were created at the end of the six weeks were anonymised and passed to local script writers that work with Middle Child, who extracted text, themes or sentences and put them together to make separate monologues. The monologues were performed to a sold-out audience of over 300 people at Freedom Festival, an annual arts festival in Hull. In total, 70 young people engaged with the project, 45 of whom were from the LGBTQ+ community, 9 were from minority ethnic groups, and 5 people did not speak English as their first language.

For young people, Three Minute Monologues...

- Provided a safe and novel space to process things that are happening in their lives. The use of creative methods combined with mental health support (provided by a trained counsellor), led to open discussions where participants could express themselves without limitations.
- Gave them writing tools to use outside of the sessions to offload and make sense of their feelings. Of the participants who completed the survey, 86% reported that the sessions had had a positive impact on their mental wellbeing.
- Empowered them to tell their own story in a creative, thoughtful, or humorous way, including participants who did not have prior strong writing capabilities.
- Fostered the development of new friendships, which continued beyond the sessions. It brought together groups of young people who would typically not connect, who have diverse life experiences and stories to share.
- Encouraged engagement with The Warren's other support services, and engagement with specialist mental health support services provided externally to The Warren.
- Improved participants' grammar, writing skills, and confidence to write. Seven young people have gone on to attend The Warren's latest creative writing project, continuing to use writing techniques to improve their mental wellbeing.

For The Warren and Middle Child, Three Minute Monologues...

- Represented the highest engagement of any creative writing project in The Warren's history.
- Strengthened relationships between staff and young people, creating a safe environment where participants felt they could be honest and trust the staff involved.
- Engaged a diverse group of young people, including those from gender minorities, non-native English speakers, and members of ethnic minority communities.
- Strengthened the partnership between Middle Child and The Warren, fostering discussions around future collaborations.
- Built on the success of the Three Minute Heroes project, further supporting the organisation's evidence base for the importance of creative expression in improving mental wellbeing.
- Revealed participants' desire to perform their own writings in front of a live audience, which was realised in a subsequent programme.
- Required staff to manage challenging behaviour and navigate sensitive topics that could be triggering for other participants.
- Highlighted the importance of access to translation services and raising awareness of additional support available beyond the Three Minute Monologue project.

Three Minute Monologues delivered impact because it was...

- Advertised under the 'Three Minute Monologues' branding, rather than as 'writing' sessions, which could have discouraged people with low confidence from attending.
- Expertly facilitated by staff with a range of skills, ensuring participants' creative and pastoral needs were met. This created a safe and trusting environment, encouraging participants to voice their concerns and engage fully.
- Focused on the topics being written about rather than the technical aspects of writing, which allowed young people to enjoy free and creative expression without worrying about grammar or the perceived 'quality' of their work.
- Delivered in partnership with a local theatre company and creative writers who were familiar with the issues described by the young people, ensuring clear communication and empathy throughout the project.

'We'd go in, and at first, it was like a slightly awkward thing. Nobody really wants to share it. But within a couple of weeks, it became like a therapy session, we all sit and we just silently write. And then at the end, we don't make each other cry, or laugh or just feel and that was like such a beautiful experience.'



'I was surprised with how willing the young people were to 'go deep'. I think as a young person, there's always that worry about what people might think of you or how others may perceive you. So, I think they were they were obviously offered a really supportive safe space, because some of the writing was really deep and really honest.'



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Do It Now Now: Voltage Creates

Voltage Creates (March 2022 – May 2024)

Do It Now Now seeks to offer creative arts opportunities to young unemployed black people in Glasgow and London. To date, they have run close to 100 training programmes, engaged and supported 56,000 people and run made a positive impact on long term unemployed young Black people at risk of mental health issues. These activities are usually accompanied by wellbeing coaching and cognitive behaviour therapy. Do It Now Now seeks to instil consistency and reliability in the lives of young people and help them on their journey to learn how to best cope with the stressors in their lives.

Voltage Creates... Through a training programme, mentorship and peer-to-peer support, we are working with long-term unemployed young Black people aged 18-24 in England and Scotland to co-create and co-produce arts projects, in the form of short films, podcasts and visual arts, that empower them to share their stories, passions and ideas with their local community. The programme was co-created with people with lived experience of the challenges that this programme seeks to address.

For the participants, Voltage Creates ...

- Delivered workshops that are key to their continued confidence and success in their creative endeavours
- Gave them space to create an experience or creative solution that would showcase their best creative skills to their peers and a wider audience.
- Taught them to create a pitch for creative solutions to a creative problem, helping them develop their presentations and portfolios. importantly giving them the space to become confident in their own creative vision.
- Had the opportunity to make the most of their existing tools and resources so that they could feel empowered in their own assets rather than seeking validation or permission through the acquisition of new tools
- Where there was low mental health and wellbeing identified at the beginning of the programme, VC significantly improved them.
- Provided a foundation for the young people to network, build visibility and collaborate.

'I learnt so much in regards to where I can access support as a creative, and have been pushed to think outside the box and ask myself the hard questions I need to for my creative development.'

'Exhilarating to share my work at the pop up and watch people partake in spoken word.'

'I genuinely couldn't be more glad I did this, it gave me so much hope for the future of black creatives.'



'One value that I have gained is the importance of community and not doing things alone. I really admire the programme's emphasis on seeking mentorship, networking and building meaningful connections.'

For the organisation and wider community, Voltage Creates...

- Strengthened staff skills and morale. Staff involved in the programme gained valuable experience in delivering creative interventions, enhancing their mentorship, communication, and project management skills, which boosted team morale and confidence in future project delivery.
- Enhanced organisational capacity for collaboration. The programme strengthened the organisation's capacity to form partnerships with other youth and community organisations, particularly in regions like Glasgow and London, thereby widening its recruitment reach and bolstering its reputation.
- Empowered local communities. By focusing on diversity and inclusivity, the programme empowered participants from underrepresented groups, including young Black creatives and neurodivergent individuals, fostering a sense of community, resilience, and mutual support within these networks.
- Increased visibility and advocacy for youth needs. The programme raised awareness of the challenges and opportunities faced by young people in the creative sector, positioning the organisation as a key advocate for underrepresented youth within creative industries.
- Ensured long-term community impact through skill development. The intervention provided participants with lifelong skills in digital media, project planning, and personal development, which they can apply within their communities, contributing to sustainable personal and community growth.



'I genuinely couldn't be more glad I worked on this programme; it gave me so much hope for the future of Black creatives.'

Voltage Creates has generated impact because...

- It enhanced mental wellbeing. The programme successfully provided a creative and collaborative space that improved mental wellbeing, with participants reporting increased confidence and emotional resilience.
- It provided opportunities for networking and career development. Through initiatives like the Spotify Podcast Club and Creator Fund Pop-up Market, young people gained exposure to industry professionals, aiding their career development and community visibility.
- It built skills and confidence. Training and mentorship sessions significantly boosted skills in digital marketing, project planning, and creative pitching, with 97.5% of participants recording increased confidence in a digital skill.
- It catered to diverse groups, including young Black creatives, neurodivergent youth, and individuals from varied socio-economic backgrounds, providing equal access to creative resources.

In the future, Voltage Creates could...

- Expand networking and showcase events by increasing opportunities for participants to engage in pop-up markets, exhibitions, and networking events with industry leaders to build visibility and professional connections.
- Strengthen partnerships in key regions, focusing on building deeper relationships in areas with fewer existing connections, like Glasgow, to increase impact and accessibility.
- Extend programme delivery flexibility by lengthening the programme's duration with weekly sessions and breaks to accommodate busy schedules and maximise engagement.
- Provide enhanced mentorship and Q&A opportunities with more one-on-one mentorship sessions and Q&A events featuring established creatives to offer practical insights and guidance for young creatives.
- Broaden the focus on digital skills and portfolio development, including workshops on portfolio building, CV creation, and freelancing essentials to better prepare participants for creative careers.

