

BCB Research Clay and Recovery, Jo Mills



Introduction

Following a visit from David Cutler and Harriet Lowe of The Baring Foundation in late 2024, British Ceramics Biennial was given a grant to research and host an event focusing on projects that use clay as a creative medium within the context of drug and alcohol addiction recovery.

In September 2025, British Ceramics Biennial (BCB) hosted a Clay & Recovery Knowledge Exchange. This half day event brought together people with an interest in or experience of using clay as a creative medium within the context of addiction recovery. It was a welcoming and informal space for discussion and reflection. With presentations from three clay and recovery projects from across the UK, the event was a chance for people to find out how these projects are delivered and their impact as well as open up broader conversations.

Following the format of the Clay & Recovery Knowledge Exchange, this report details the contributing case studies, as well as other clay and recovery projects happening in the UK that captured my attention. Some put clay front and centre, others use clay as part of a range of materials on offer. There are some organisations where addiction recovery brings together clients within a broader focus on mental health and wellbeing.



To finish, I have reflected on the research and picked out key considerations. I hope that this reflects some commonalities without downplaying the nuanced approach that is required for this work to have real impact for those participating.

"When it was suggested, I thought, clay, no, it's cold, it doesn't feel very nice. But I went and it's very calming, focusing, keeps me quiet, which is saying something. Not just relaxing, it's mind-clearing." Recast participant

Setting the Scene

The Clay & Recovery Knowledge Exchange was held at B-Arts, a community arts organisation located in Stoke-on-Trent, a short walk from the BCB Studio. B-Arts run a community café on a Friday, so many of the participants enjoyed the lunch offering before the event started. A tour of BCB 2025 in the morning had provided an opportunity for attendees to meet and experience the Biennial exhibits. Within the Biennial, Recast participants featured in Award Voices and Just Be There.



These were important reference points on the tour, to demonstrate the way that the recovery artists had directly impacted the content of the exhibitions, that the Recast project gave opportunity to explore ceramics through making, as well as through appreciation of artworks, and participation in works conceived by other artists.

Following my introduction, David Cutler outlined the dedicated work of The Baring Foundation in supporting arts and health work.



We then heard from researcher, Dr Dena Bagi, Manchester School of Art, who has recently completed her PhD studies. She introduced her Clay Cycle methodology and this was offered as a reflective tool that could be used by workshop attendees.



In simple terms, this entailed the use of a map to gather information that resonated with individuals – they picked out words and added this to the map on the tables. During the closing part of the event, these words were referred back to and grouping of themes took place. A cyclical version of this reflective tool has been used recently to evaluate BCB's Recast project and you can find the resulting report via the link www.britishceramicsbiennial.com/about/our-impact



The Baring Foundation

"We are an independent foundation which protects and advances human rights and promotes inclusion. We believe in the role of a strong, independent civil society nationally and internationally. We use our resources to enable civil society to work with people experiencing discrimination and disadvantage and to act strategically to tackle the root causes of injustice and inequality."

At the time of the event, The Baring Foundation had made 200 grants to organisations working to improve mental health and wellbeing through the arts.

The Foundation has a particular interest in addiction recovery and has a report titled Creatively Minded and in Recovery, which is available to read via the link www.baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/creatively-minded-and-in-recovery/

Case Study One

Recast

Recast is a British Ceramics Biennial project delivered in partnership with Stoke Recovery Service that began in 2017.

The programme is shaped around 8-week blocks of making sessions that occur throughout the year, plus a four-day intensive residency. Clients can attend for more than one block. Exploring a range of handbuilding techniques, the shift to the BCB Studio for delivery has allowed introduction of varied equipment. Sessions are supported by two artists, one recovery worker and sometimes a support artist.

In 2024/25, the project expanded to include both abstinent clients and those who are earlier in their recovery pathway. The project has been shared through exhibitions, podcasts, film, photography and presentation at Ceramic Art London. Project participants have contributed to other parts of the BCB programme - including in 2025, Award Voices and Just Be There.

Presented by artists Zeba Imam and Cath Ralph with Recovery Worker and project participant, Caz Whittaker.



Cath joined the project in 2020 as a support artist, experienced in participatory arts delivery and with a fairly recently begun, yet wholeheartedly enthusiastic, ceramic art practice. Perhaps she would say it had been in the making since birth, with her Potteries' heritage key to her self-identity. Zeba joined as a Support Artist in 2022, following her studies at Clay College and setting up her own ceramics studio in Stoke. She has an academic background in Social Sciences. Cath and Zeba have worked on Recast continuously since joining the project.



Caz participated in Recast during her time as a client at Stoke Recovery Service. Following her employment as a Recovery Worker at Stoke Recovery Service, she supported clients on the Recast programme throughout 2024 and 2025, along with other recovery professionals. Caz has a wonderful way of communicating the experience of being part of Recast. You can hear her talk about this via the link www.britishceramicsbiennial.com/mediaport/recast-podcast-episode-2/ The three speakers also feature in a film documenting the residency element of the programme, available via the link www.britishceramicsbiennial.com/mediaport/recast-film-2023/



We were also joined by Sarah Fraser, who has led and supported the practical sessions as well as introducing a strand called Clay Talk, which rather than being driven by making, was an opportunity to appreciate the ceramics heritage of Stoke-on-Trent with visits to local museums and factories. The Clay Talk workshops allowed participants to bring their own knowledge and understanding (many having direct experience of, or family connections to, work in the pottery industry). This strand came out of conversations with clients about the power of discovering new interests, or rediscovering forgotten ones, as well as the benefits of socialising in public spaces. There is a confidence built through getting out – out of the house and out of the recovery service.

Jenny Harper has played a vital role in the project through her photography, which captures the participants and artists in the flow of the workshop – laughing, concentrating, focusing, discussing. Jenny's photos are invaluable in providing evidence of the transformation that a person may have undergone most importantly to themselves but also to others, providing a challenge to the stigma associated with addiction.

Recast evolved from a project called Typecast, devised by Portraits of Recovery and BCB, about 12 years ago which is described as:

"Essentially the project looked at the parallels that exist between the fluidity of clay and recovery processes."

Mark Prest, Portraits of Recovery

The success of this project allowed Recast to take shape – for the first year as a long-term, regular drop-in clay session at the Stoke Recovery Service base. Some participants attended weekly, others occasionally. The people that

enjoyed it were drawn in by the clay and the chance to be creative. What started out as small, sideways conversations often became deeper, with clients opening up to one another whilst busying themselves with making.

It started out being just about clay and then, because of what the clients were talking about, the service manager spotted the potential for the sessions to be co-facilitated. From then on both the lead artist and recovery worker would jointly plan and deliver the sessions. The clay processes provided a context in which to explore recovery. Grounding the sessions in simple, repetitive tasks, gave space for contemplation. As the clay work became more complex and personal, there was a chance to explore cycles of planning, making, experimenting and accepting within the boundaries of the material and time. The risk of putting something into the kiln, not knowing for sure what would come back out, dealing with surprises and disappointments, became important rites of passage during the project that helped the recovery worker to evidence how the clients were learning new coping strategies.



The chance to participate in a residency (a four-day intensive workshop within the BCB Studio at Spode) has been available each year, allowing for more focused making and introduction of different techniques. The project has been shared and celebrated through exhibitions, podcasts, film and photography. The exhibitions have included a chance for the clients to share their skills with others through a public demonstration or workshop.

Recast has evolved in response to the needs of the recovery service over the years. Sending out clay kits and delivering online was a way of staying connected during the Covid pandemic. Once BCB moved into its new studio, the opportunity arose to host the regular sessions there, allowing the clients to be in a real ceramics studio, a space dedicated to clay and creativity. Through conversation with recovery workers, the value of leading sessions for people who have not yet become abstinent was identified and then provided.

Caz attended the Recast sessions early on in the project and she described it as an activity to *"get addicts out of their own minds and doing something. It was a group of people at a long table, making random things, discussing things about their lives in the chaos of recovery."*

She explained that *"It produces a binding between people. They share addiction but they also share the feeling that they can actually learn to do something new or different. It allows you to build skills, you start small but then you are supported to make larger pieces."*

Caz also talked about the importance of acceptance, that sometimes things do not come out perfectly. One of her most treasured pieces came out of the firing broken, but Caz realized that "It was alright". She assembled the piece in a different way, and the result resonated with her more deeply as it showed how things can still be of value if they have been broken and repaired.

Case Study Two

Recovery through Ceramics

Recovery through Ceramics is a collaborative programme between the Shipley Art Gallery, Recovery Connections and Bensham Grove Pottery in Gateshead. Taking place weekly, people in recovery are inspired by the nationally important studio ceramics collection at the Shipley Art Gallery, and work with ceramicists from Bensham Grove to create their own artwork. The programme takes them through the different techniques of making with clay, working with them to create their own work, culminating in an exhibition at the Shipley Art Gallery. Alongside this, they co-curate a display of work from the gallery's ceramic collection supported by gallery staff. The programme supports the participants' wellbeing through creativity, building confidence, skills and knowledge about ceramics and gives them a new experience to take their minds off the factors that enable addiction. In 2024, the project was nominated for a Museum Association Changing Lives Award.

Visit www.northeastmuseums.org.uk/shipley



Presented by Ben Jones, Project Coordinator, Shipley Art Gallery, Christine Constant and Clare Cantwell, Ceramic Artists, Bensham Grove Pottery, Joe Stringer, Recovery Connections.

I had the pleasure of visiting the Shipley Art Gallery and Bensham Grove Pottery, both in Gateshead, as they were

nearing the end of their second year of Recovery through Ceramics.

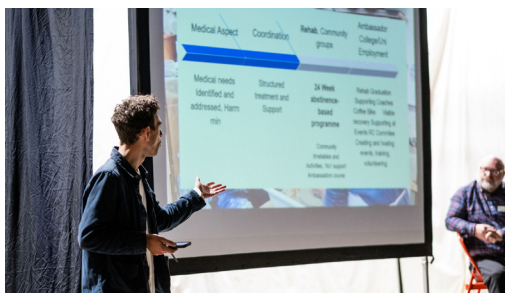
That day, I met the team and several of the participants as they were preparing to display their ceramic work in the main gallery space at the Shipley Art Gallery. The Shipley Art Gallery has one of the UK's most important and largest collections of contemporary craft, including the Henry Rothschild Study Centre's collection of 20th century British studio pottery. The group were sat around a large table, tea and coffee to hand, ready to work out how their work would be exhibited amongst the other displays. This could have been a nerve-wracking moment, but the group seemed to take it in their stride, excited to see how their work had come out of the kiln. The work was fantastic and it was such a privilege to be there to see the reaction of the makers. It was clear that they were proud to be exhibiting their work in the formal setting of the art gallery, but they also seemed relaxed and at home there, thanks to having got to know the space, the staff team and the collection throughout the project.

Recovery Through Ceramics begins at the gallery, with a close look at the collections, including pieces held in the stores. They had curated their own cabinet to include pieces that spoke to them, including a number of works by Kerry Jameson. They then moved to Bensham Grove Pottery to start their own work with clay, supported by professional potters, including Christine Constant and Clare Cantwell. Bensham Grove Community Centre is a special place. It is a thriving centre for adult education based in and around a house that was gifted to the people of Gateshead by the Spence Watson family. The Pottery is set in the heart of the Community Centre and is well-loved by a great number of people.



The range of work created by the participants spoke of the sensitivity and care of the team working on the project. It was clear that the participants had been given the individual support and encouragement to not only learn new skills but to push these to create works that spoke of their own personal interests and experiences. One participant was so pleased with her work, each one she described as *"a proper banger"* her face lighting up with mischievous pride. During their presentation at the Clay & Recovery Knowledge Exchange, Clare Cantwell described the challenge of helping someone create something that might seem almost impossible in the medium. This

particular challenge was a sculpture of a cat, but not just a cat, a cat being washed with a jug of water. This work certainly kept the lead artists' minds whirring as they advised on how to make this vision a reality.



Joe provided the context of the project, which takes place in the North-East of England; an area that has the highest number of deaths linked to drug misuse in England - almost twice the national average. Recovery Connections is one of the country's largest lived experience recovery organisations, covering Middlesbrough, Stockton, Darlington, Redcar, Hartlepool, Gateshead and Sunderland.

Ben described how Tyne and Wear Museums and Archives have been dedicated in running a recovery programme for the last twenty years; connecting creativity, health and wellbeing and recognising the positive health impacts of cultural participation. This long-term engagement gives the programme a sense of confidence, it knows the positive impact that arts and cultural engagement can have. This systemic support, coupled with the experience and tenacity of the lead artists, matched by the enthusiasm of the participants, means that the ceramics produced live up to the grand setting of the Shipley Art Gallery. The team were looking forward to a weekend event to celebrate the work with specially invited guests and the public. The Shipley would clearly have been a lively place to be that day.

Case Study Three

Anderson Green project, The Art House Sheffield

A free homemade meal and an art or pottery class for anyone on a recovery journey. Led by a team with lived experience this is a place for anyone on their path of recovery who needs support, help and encouragement along the way.

Assisted by the Carver Street Parish Nurses, and the expert tutors at The Art House, participants are invited to share their journey in a safe space free of judgement and to find fresh joys in learning new creative skills.

Central to this work is offering a safe and supportive space for people navigating mental health challenges, loneliness or social isolation. Through

accessible, clay-based creative activities, the groups foster a sense of belonging and personal agency, with community and food central to its ethos. The workshops are a collaboration which are led by staff and volunteers, some of whom are themselves on their road to recovery.

The Art House is situated in central Sheffield. Adjoining St Matthews Church, it is easy to find for those visiting the city and a familiar landmark to those who live there. When I visited The Art House, Jon Gardner showed me around the 4-storey building and introduced me to Amanda Packham who runs the Monday pottery wellbeing group and Ted Green who co-leads the Anderson Green project. Jon is a key member of staff; it is clear that he is passionate about nurturing the creativity of people facing challenges to their mental health, and both arts education and professional nursing experience inform his approach. There was a commercial painting class taking place at the same time as the wellbeing pottery group, so the building was lively, albeit quiet, filled with an air of concentration. The building has fantastic facilities, from a gallery space, a kitchen and eating area, studios for painting, drawing and printmaking as well as extensive pottery facilities. It is full of plants, pots and activity. Many of the wellbeing group participants had been attending the class for several years, and it was clear that the session was incredibly important to them. Sessions are free to attend, and The Art House fund these using income generated through paid classes and studio membership, exhibitions and fundraising events.



Jon described how the context of Sheffield was key to understanding how The Art House operate. The heritage of Sheffield is world-renowned for the manufacture of steel, in particular knives and cutlery. Pride in making things is something that The Art House encourage through their offer of arts and pottery courses and classes. It connects with communities as they experience how making things can make them feel good. Jon described a stark contrast in the social determinants of health between certain areas of the city, with a gap of 20-25 years in life expectancy. The majority of The Art House's members come from the leafy suburbs, and are able to pay for their classes and membership. This income funds the wellbeing classes and the Anderson Green project for participants that would not be able to access the facilities otherwise. The charitable status of The Art House and the services it provides are



something that the members are really proud of and many support the charity by volunteering their time.

The Art House have experienced financial difficulties but through hard work and an overhaul of their funding model, they have weathered the storm and continue to provide a space for people to explore their creativity.

The Anderson Green project was started by Ted Green and Scott Anderson. They became aware of The Art House when they were introduced by the Carver Street Parish Nurses during the early days of their recovery from substance misuse. Through conversation with The Art House staff, Ted and Scott began to shape a project that engaged people working through their addiction recovery. Ted is a keen cook and he identified that food would be a good way to draw people into The Art House. He became certified in Food Health and Hygiene, and began to dream up meals that could be served. Friday nights were identified as a good time for the session as people are looking for something to do or a different way of socialising whilst learning to live in abstinence. It began modestly, with some paper, some clay, and a hot meal - simply opening the door to anyone who was interested or hungry. They then got to know people and let the project grow organically. Creative tasks were low-risk, quick and most of all fun. They played games like pass the parcel with clay. Jon described the popularity of clay. He said *“as soon as they got clay in their hands, paper went out the window”*.

The kitchen space is key to the project, but also provides a significant role in The Art House as a community space. It is a busy space shared with the church, so lots of different people (members, class participants, the nurses) cross over in that space as they pass through the building.

As the project developed, different themes were explored such as self-portraits. This was a real bonding experience, as people began to explore how they see themselves and others, with a lot of opportunity for kindhearted humour. As people got to know each other, they would share stories about food, family, memories, care, self-care and feeding themselves. They would ask one another *“How would you*

make that out of clay?” Jon described how making helped people to *“get out of their heads, and into the world”*. He told a story of one person who came along who believed he didn't care about anything. However, after 2 or 3 weeks, when something he had made cracked in the kiln, he was in tears. He didn't attend the project for a week, but when he returned, it was clear that he'd recognised the value in what he had been doing at the project. He made several things after that, that fortunately, didn't break. The experience of 'losing' that piece helped him to reflect on his sense of self-worth whilst building resilience.



Ted brought along the first piece he made - a wolf head. He said *“It made me realise I had a bit of skill with sculpture or pottery. It went in to be fired and came out a lot darker and it had a crack down the side. That brought me closer to it – it didn't matter that it had a crack or scar – I related to it”*. This piece goes pretty much everywhere with him now.

At the time of speaking, Jon described how the project had delivered 25 workshops and served 350 hot meals. Building on this enthusiasm, The Art House have continued to deliver the project into 2026.



What else is happening?

Other projects that I spoke to during my research.

North Tyneside Art Studio– Bethany Stead

North Tyneside Art Studio is the only specialist art for mental health service in North Tyneside, with over 30 years experience. They provide a safe, supportive environment where people can discover how creativity can support mental health and personal recovery. Bethany is a ceramic artist who supports those interested in working with clay. At the time of speaking to Bethany, they were using a shopping centre unit to deliver their activity. Bethany spoke about how clay was popular as there seemed to be less

pressure around failure (compared to drawing or painting) and that it connected people with having a “*childlike sense of the world.*”

Veterans into Clay - Mary Watson, University of Sunderland & Veterans in Crisis

Mary is over halfway through an Arts & Humanities Research Council funded creative practice PhD. Entitled Clay (co)Construction, she is exploring how creative clay practice can improve health, wellbeing and social isolation within the veteran community in Sunderland. This is a collaborative doctorate, partnered with local charity Veterans in Crisis Sunderland and funded through the Northern Bridge Consortium.

Mary developed a community group titled Veterans into Clay, which meet weekly to work creatively with clay, learn new skills and socialise. The group exhibited work at the National Glass Centre, October 2024 - January 2025. In the second year, Mary's focus is on giving the group more lead in the creative direction. They will be working from a shop front in Sunderland so they have discussed creating items that they might sell.

Chilli Studios

Based in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and set up in 2004, Chilli Studios is a registered charity in the North East that delivers creative services to those who are, or are at risk of experiencing mental health problems, and those who experience other forms of social exclusion.



They run a multi-disciplinary arts studio, with heavily subsidised membership costing £15 per month. Staff members, Carole Hall and Keith Hoffman, who are also artists, ensure that ceramics is a medium that attracts a high proportion of members. Members have access to group workshops, projects and exhibitions, and the studios are open four days per week 10am – 4.30pm.

Harley Pottery

Since 2016, the Harley Foundation has worked alongside Nottinghamshire MIND as part of their Well Community project. This initiative is designed for adults struggling with their mental health, or feeling isolated or disconnected from their community. It offers the opportunity to become involved in workshops, courses and group activities to support and improve well-being.

The Harley Pottery run eight ten-week Creative Ceramics courses per year. These are led by Ruth Waller, a professional artist, and a mental health professional from MIND.



ANEW Way to Peel an Orange - Portraits of Recovery and ANEW, Manchester, working with artist Joe Hartley

Portraits of Recovery is the UK's only visual arts charity inspiring and supporting people affected by and in recovery from substance use (Recoverists).

ANEW CIC is a progressive, family orientated organisation with a strong emphasis on connection, authenticity and creating long-term sustainable outcomes for individuals who have substance misuse issues and other symptomatic pressures associated with this such as homelessness, and mental ill health.

For ANEW Way to Peel an Orange, designer Joe Hartley co-produced work with ANEW's recovery community during Hartley's five-month residency with ANEW in Tameside (Greater Manchester, UK). This work was exhibited at the Castlefield Gallery in August – October 2025.



Project 6 with Emilie Taylor, Altar / Burning Place and Landmark

Project 6 is an award-winning voluntary sector drug and alcohol charity working across West and South Yorkshire. Currently working in Keighley, Bradford, Sheffield and Doncaster.

Emilie Taylor is a qualified Art Psychotherapist with twenty years experience in community arts and creative health provision. Emilie is an Embedded Researcher at Sheffield Hallam University, currently working with Doncaster Creative Health Board and their Creative Health Providers.

Emilie's work with Project 6 includes the projects Altar/ Burning Place and Landmark. The projects are directly informed by Emilie's experience as an artist but also a recovery professional, and they are richly co-produced with the clients involved. Emilie works with other artists to create projects that centre on making with clay, but also incorporate wood-firing, sound recordings and photography.



What do you need:

- Space – Clay needs space but this does not have to be a studio. There needs to be enough room to make, to store materials, to dry work and the space needs to be easy to clean. Taking clay into alternative settings, where people already are, allows them to try out this new activity in a familiar environment. If sessions are delivered in a ceramics studio, it gives people a chance to occupy a different public space, which in turn, can promote an alternative sense of self.
- An invitation – People need to be invited to participate, to try something out, and then to lead the way.
- Time – Clay is simultaneously quick and slow. It is immediate, as one can see how it changes in one's hands, but slow, as one waits for things to dry, to be fired and then glazed. It also takes time to build trust and connections, and for people to become comfortable in a creative workshop setting.

- Experts – Where projects respect the experience of all involved, and reflect upon this throughout, the impact is felt more deeply as a result of the connections and rapport created.
- Reflection – Clay can be a challenging material and this is part of its charm in scenarios where people are attempting to rebuild their own resilience. It requires letting go of control and allows a sense of reconciliation if things don't go according to plan. Thoughtful and supported reflection is a way of acknowledging this process.
- Tea and biscuits– All of the workshops made sure that people felt comfortable and cared for.
- Money – This work requires financial investment in order to deliver an experience that is responsible and effective. Long-term funding commitments allow for not only sustained engagement but a greater chance of deeper success through the regularity of the sessions. This can enhance the connections between people, building stronger support networks and allowing confidence to build as participants take creative risks and build resilience.
- Dissemination – Different types of output communicate in different ways – ceramic work, photography, written or spoken word, film. These all contribute to a rich exploration and representation of what is happening within these projects. It is a way for the participants to see themselves afresh. Exhibitions provide a chance to be seen, acknowledged and for stigma to be challenged, but most importantly, a chance to celebrate and share with others.

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