

ARTS & MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMME 2020–2025

Evaluation report, July 2025

By Mark Robinson with Imogen Blood and Lorna Easterbrook

ARTS & MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMME 2020–2025: EVALUATION REPORT, JULY 2025

About the Baring Foundation

The Baring Foundation is 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 facing discrimination and disadvantage and to act strategically to tackle the root causes of injustice and inequality. More can be found in *A History of the Baring Foundation in 50 Grants*. Since 2020, the Foundation has focused its arts programme on creative opportunities for people with mental health problems.

About the authors

Mark Robinson

Mark founded Thinking Practice in 2010, to write, facilitate, coach and advise across the cultural sector, having previously been Executive Director, North East at Arts Council England. Since then Thinking Practice has worked with 200 organisations and individuals from artists to funders. Future Arts Centre published his book *Tactics for the Tightrope: Creative Resilience For Creative Communities* in 2021. Mark has also directed festivals, poetry publishers, arts organisations and worked in adult education. He is a widely anthologised poet: the title poem of his 2024 collection, *The Infinite Town*, is carved onto a plinth on Stockton High Street, out of which emerges an animatronic steam train by the artist Rob Higgs, every day at 1pm.

Lorna Easterbrook

Lorna began her working life as a theatre stage manager before moving into social policy, training, qualitative research and evaluation, and writing, across adult social care, mental health, housing, poverty, and the arts/heritage. She frequently uses storytelling approaches in her qualitative and training work, particularly Most Significant Change (MSC). Before becoming freelance Lorna worked for Age UK and the King's Fund. She works solo and with others, and has worked with Imogen on mental health, adult social care, and housing projects, and with Imogen and Mark on arts programme evaluations.

Imogen Blood

Imogen is the founder of Imogen Blood & Associates, a Manchester-based consultancy established in 2009. She began her career as a qualified social worker, before moving into research and consultancy. She specialises in promoting equality and improving effectiveness across the public and not-for-profit sectors, working across the arts and culture and housing and care sectors. She has recently carried out research for the Greater London Authority/ Department of Health on specialist mental health supported housing and led the national evaluation of Arts Council England and Baring Foundation's Celebrating Age Programme.

Imogen, Lorna and Mark also collaborated together on the evaluation of Arts Council England and Baring Foundation's Celebrating Age Programme.

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*The Most Significant Change stories are available in a separate document at:
www.baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/arts-programme-external-evaluation-2025.*

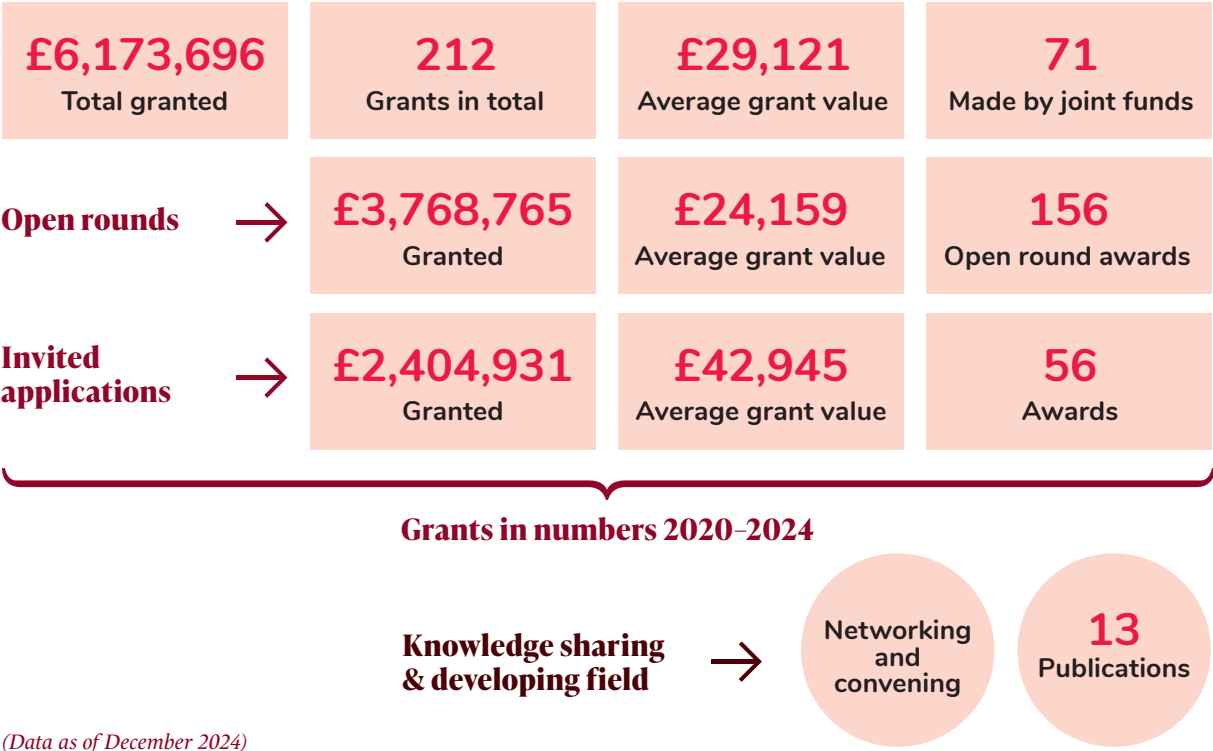
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Photo courtesy of Company Chameleon

1. Summary



IMPACT: OBSERVATIONS

- Strong progress has been made in supporting activity and the people in the field, spreading good practice, developing expectations and sharing models.
- Diversifying the field has been a major focus, especially in relation to global majority communities and gender.
- Support has built confidence in practitioners and organisations as well as commissioners and participants in creative activity.
- Enabling growth towards sustainability has been positive in challenging circumstances: 68.3% of people agreed support had helped with the sustainability of their organisation or work.
- The Foundation is highly regarded for how it has modelled trust and flexibility as a funder of people working a highly complex field.

INSIGHTS AND CHALLENGES

- The programme has made a positive difference to a rapidly developing field but there is still a lot to do as the field feels under-supported and unrecognised, and is fragile and precarious.
- Amongst potential priorities of settings, locations, or people, widening access and deepening practice based on people and their organisations/work has potential to support sustainable and diverse practice.
- Partnerships, collaborations, and frameworks, are leverage points – but the arts and mental health system is highly complex and changing, and requires stronger approaches to evidence and data to make the case sustainably.

- Although the relational approach of the Foundation is welcomed, it carries risks relating to power dynamics, transparency and succession planning. The alignment around values rather than outputs and outcomes is a healthy aspect of the approach.

BARRIERS AND ENABLERS

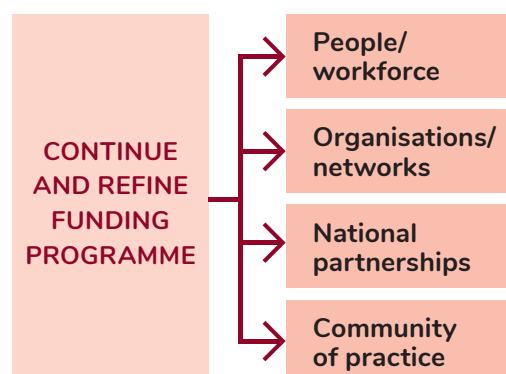
Key enablers of positive impact in building the field of arts and mental health include:

- unrestricted funding at crucial points;
- visibility and advocacy;
- place-based and ecosystem-based approaches;
- Baring Foundation's open, relational, and adaptive approach, and straightforward application process and proportionate reporting;
- conferences, events and publications;
- peer-support, training and development;
- programmes addressing diverse communities and specific needs;
- good support for practitioners working in or moving into formal health contexts;
- development opportunities for under-represented groups.

Barriers to development include:

- lack of understanding between health and arts practitioners;
- in-built challenges of working with people with complex mental health and other needs;
- social and structural barriers for some participants and practitioners;
- tokenism;
- lack of core funding or consistent long-term commissions;
- constant changes in NHS creates complexity;
- fragmentation of sector;
- over-specification of programme outcomes;
- lack of connectivity with funders in adjacent sectors.

RECOMMENDATIONS



1. Continue to focus the arts programme on arts and mental health for at least five more years from 2025 to further mature the field.
2. Target investment on developing a sustainable, inclusive arts and mental health workforce.
3. Invest in a small number of sustainable, diverse and inclusive organisations that can help develop the field of arts and mental health.
4. Develop a new round of national funder partnerships.
5. Develop a Community of Practice and associated programme of knowledge sharing to disseminate learning and good practice.

For the full recommendations, see page 34 of this report.

2. About this report

PURPOSE

This report considers the Baring Foundation's Arts Programme since January 2020, when it began to focus its Arts programme on arts and mental health. Following a competitive tendering process, the Baring Foundation commissioned Thinking Practice to provide an independent evaluation of the programme, and to inform thinking on the direction of the next five years, with the working assumption that the focus on arts and mental health will continue until at least 2030. Fieldwork was conducted in late 2024 and up to April 2025.

The evaluation has focussed on the following questions:

1. How well has the programme helped to build the arts and mental health field?

- What has the Foundation done well and what improvements or changes could be made?
- How has the programme reflected the Foundation's commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and human rights?
- What relevant changes have occurred in this field in the last five years and what has the influence or contribution of the programme been?
- How well have we succeeded in supporting arts organisations working in this field?

2. How should the Foundation focus its efforts to support arts organisations in the field over the next five years?

- What areas should the programme focus on in future to build the field as it develops?

- What changes are needed, assuming similar levels of resources from the Baring Foundation (currently up to £2 million per year)?

The report aims to:

- give a flavour of what the Programme has done;
- set out our observations on the impact and ways of working of the Programme;
- summarise the insights and challenges these observations might have for the Foundation;
- make recommendations for future directions.

METHODOLOGY

For this research we employed a mixed methods approach that included the following elements:

- a data review of project descriptions, Arts Committee¹ and Board meeting papers from 2020 onwards, and final project reports where available;
- 13 stakeholder and key informant interviews (see Appendix 1);
- an anonymous online survey sent to 206 grantees and completed by 82 respondents (a response rate of 39.8%);
- A Most Significant Change (MSC) process involving development of 20 stories with a range of grant recipients. Invitations were made to a selection designed to include projects across all four nations of the UK, different scales, art forms and areas of practice, and the different funding rounds. Each story has been approved by the story sharer. All stories were discussed in at least one of three online roundtable panel sessions with a range of stakeholders considering stories and potential learning;

¹ Members of the Baring Foundation Board of Trustees are appointed to serve on programme committees and make grant decisions.

- A fourth, place-based, roundtable with stakeholders in Greater Manchester.

The aims of the methodology were:

- to provide rich quantitative and qualitative data to inform learning;
- to root our evaluation in the experiences of those working in the field;
- to create shared reflection on the successes and limitations of the programme from those with a stake in and experience of the field of arts and mental health.

Freelancers and smaller organisations involved in the MSC process, either sharing and developing stories or in the roundtables, were paid an honorarium. All those who shared a story also received feedback after the roundtables.

Quotes from MSC stories are used to illustrate our observations.

MSC stories are published in a separate document where they are clustered to relate to the main themes of the report.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations of this evaluation include the following.

- With 213 grants made, we could not engage with every recipient. The online survey gave all an opportunity to feed in, and the response rate allows for confidence in analysis.

- Describing all changes in the field over the last five years would be a massive task. We use the facilitated roundtables and stakeholder interviews to explore key changes, including ones occurring during our work, such as announcements about the future of NHS England in March 2025.
- The report does not attempt to examine or describe in detail the range of benefits for individual participants in the funded activity, or the impact on mental health of those involved. These are often described in the individual reports to the Baring Foundation and are briefly summarised here. The report focusses instead on the organisational and field development aspects of the Programme as a funding programme.
- This evaluation has not looked at projects supported by devolved co-funded grants made by Arts Council Northern Ireland, Arts Council Wales or Creative Scotland, but has included projects from each of these nations.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

We have followed the Foundation's approach to language in this report. The Foundation uses the term "mental health problem" but recognises that others may wish to use other terms such as mental health distress, mental illness, mental health challenges and survivor. Mental health problem is chosen as a phrase in common usage, including by organisations such as Mind.

3. Overview of programme and activity

Grants in numbers 2020–2024

£ 6,173,696 Total granted	212 Grants in total	£29,121 Average grant value	71 Made by joint funds
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Grants per type of application 2020–2024

	OPEN ROUNDS			INVITED APPLICATIONS		
	Grants in total	Number of awards	Average grant value	Grants in total	Number of awards	Average grant value
2024	£1,422,262	32	£44,446	£580,317	13	£44,640
2023	No round			£952,853	19	£50,150
2022	£670,338	13	£51,564	£351,261	10	£35,126
2021	£792,165	25	£31,687	£340,500	8	£42,563
2020	£884,000	86	£10,279	£180,000	6	£30,000
Totals	£3,768,765	156	£24,159	£2,404,931	56	£42,945

(Data as of December 2024)

OVERVIEW

In January 2020, Baring Foundation began a 10-year programme of funding participatory arts and mental health projects, with associated publications under the umbrella name *Creatively Minded*.

The Arts Programme promotes access to culture and creativity as a right for people with experience of mental health problems. The programme’s objectives are to:

- fund work that gives voice to people with mental health problems and challenges stigma;
- increase the quantity and quality of arts activity for people with mental health problems;
- demonstrate models of good practice;
- increase the public profile of this work;
- engage the support of policy makers and funders.

The programme is led by David Cutler (Director), assisted by Harriet Lowe (Communications & Research Manager), and supported by Jannat Hossain (Programmes Manager) and colleagues.

The Programme is also supported by two Arts Advisers, Sabra Khan and Daniel Regan. Sabra was until recently the producer of the BEDLAM Arts & Mental Health Festival and the Executive Director of Sampad South Asian Arts, and now works for the National Trust as General Manager for Birmingham and the Black Country. Daniel is the founder of the Arts & Health Hub, and a photographic artist. All grant and other funding decisions are made by Trustees on the Baring Foundation Arts Committee.

The activity of the Programme broadly falls into four areas:

- Grants Programmes – open calls and invitations
- Funding partnerships
- Publications and knowledge sharing
- Networking and convening

GRANTS PROGRAMMES: OPEN CALLS AND INVITED APPLICATIONS

For the first five years of this Arts Programme, over £1 million has been available each year, with different priorities for different rounds of grant applications. Baring has commissioned or carried out research and discussions into specific areas of interest to explore and inform priorities. Grants are given directly either through open calls with guidelines, or through invited applications. Overall, 213 grants totalling £6,213,676 have been made, with an average grant value of £29,172.

Invited applications account for 40% of total expenditure and 26.7% of grants. This includes partnership grants to national bodies such as Arts Council Northern Ireland, Arts Council Wales, Creative Scotland and Museums and Galleries Scotland who then manage open grant schemes which organisations can apply to. This represents just over a third of the investment made via formally invited applications, meaning 74% of funding is in practice open to application. Invited grants tend to lead to larger grants averaging £43,785 and those from open rounds £29,172.

However, if we take out the 2020 open round, when grants were either £8,000 or £12,000, the average grant size from open rounds and invited grants is very similar at £42,395.

Strategic/invited grants increased as a proportion of annual investment over the last five years, which is largely attributable to increased knowledge of those active in the field over the period and the development of substantial national partnerships.

Open calls

During the first year (2020) of the Programme, Covid-19 brought multiple periods of lockdowns across the UK. Aside from funding to four organisations for specific projects, research or events, the Programme focused on distributing unrestricted funding. Often referred to as 'core funding', these awards could be spent by each mental health and arts organisation as they saw fit, given the then significant challenges and changes that were resulting from shared public spaces being shut, income streams hugely disrupted, and everyone – whether artists, participants, or audience – required to be distanced from each other.

The Arts Committee set out four criteria: organisations had to have been established for more than two years, work only with people with mental health problems, work with professional artists, and have creativity and mental health as their sole focus. In total in 2020, the Programme awarded one-off unrestricted grants of £8,000 each to 38 individual creative mental health organisations across the UK with annual turnovers lower than £30,000, and one-off unrestricted grants of £12,000 each to a further 48 creative mental health organisations with annual turnovers greater than £30,000.

Support for global majority artists working in creative mental health has been a specific focus for the Baring Foundation across this programme. In 2021 and 2022, grants were made through two open calls aimed at arts organisations serving Global Majority communities, following the publication of a research report called Creatively Minded and Ethnically Diverse. In 2021, grants were made to 26 organisations and, in 2022, an additional 11, specifically Global Majority-led, organisations received funding for projects with grants totalling £527,000.

In July 2024, 32 grants were awarded to organisations seeking to engage more men in creative mental health, totalling £1.4 million. This last grants round received a significantly high number of applications (193). A decision was therefore made to extend the original £1 million budget by a further £400,000 in order to fund as many as possible. Funding all applicants would have cost £9 million, nine times the funding originally available.

Projects funded through these three open rounds have worked or are working with children and young people; adults in prison and on probation; adults in secure psychiatric settings/ recently discharged; with adults who are or have been addicted or have experienced homelessness/ are (or are at risk of being) homeless; refugees and asylum seekers; caregivers; in schools; in theatres and museums; in arts spaces and galleries; across age groups and generations in a variety of community settings and places; in festivals, conferences and events; and online. Projects have also focused on ways to support artists' mental health, including good practice, training and professional development, and clinical supervision.

Each project provides an evaluation of its work to the Foundation. Projects have also produced reports, training guides, good practice, podcasts, videos and films, and other materials and resources.

Art forms that have been supported or are being supported include dance, theatre-making and performance, life stories, music and singing, creative fiction and creative non-fiction writing, photography, film, audio, and video, creative technology, and a wide range of other creative activities and skilled crafts. The most commonly supported art forms are 'combined arts' (45.1% of survey respondents) visual arts (43.9%) and music (35.4%).

Invited applications

Forty per cent of grants have been made as a result of invited applications. The Director identifies potential activities or organisations through knowledge of the field, discussion of situation or opportunity, but all invitations must be approved by the Chair before a proposal is considered. They enable activities which the open rounds may not, or to respond to urgent need or opportunity. These grants are intended

to have a 'strategic element', often to test models, develop key organisations or networks, or to create good practice resources.

Invited grants have also been used to ensure a more equal distribution across the four nations of the UK. In 2021, the Baring Foundation funded one organisation based and working in Scotland for two projects related to the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival. In 2024, the Foundation also partnered with Museums Galleries Scotland, giving matched funding of £83,500 for Creative Minds, a programme to engage people with mental health problems creatively in museums and galleries in Scotland. The Northern Ireland Mental Health Arts Festival was one of the organisations that, in 2020, received an £8,000 unrestricted grant. The Foundation has gone on to further fund the Festival for three years from 2022, with additional funding for specific projects related to the Festival granted in 2022 and 2023. In 2022, a grant of £30,000 was made to Belfast Exposed towards the costs of an international conference on therapeutic photography.

In 2021, the Baring Foundation funded the UK-wide National Centre for Creative Health (£62,100 for two years) and the Greater London Authority Culture and Creative Industries Unit (£125,000 for three years) alongside 27 England-based arts and mental health organisations. In 2022, a further 19 organisations in England received grants. In 2023, 13 England-based arts organisations received grant funding for projects, another organisation received unrestricted funding of £12,000, and Greater Manchester NHS Integrated Care received £100,000 over two years to develop, network, test and learn from projects for Global Majority creative practitioners engaging people with mental health problems. In May 2024, the Foundation and Arts Council England jointly funded a symposium in Manchester on mental health and creativity for children and young people.

Funding partnerships in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales

The Foundation developed partnerships with national funding bodies in the three devolved nations of the UK, and through these, Arts Council of Wales, Creative Scotland, Arts Council Northern Ireland and Museums and Galleries Scotland have each developed joint grant programmes with the Foundation.

In Wales, the partnership centred on the Arts and Minds programme, with an initial three-year grant of £100,000 p.a. to Arts Council Wales, which matched this money for phase 1 (2021-2024). The programme distributed funds through the seven Welsh Regional University Health Boards. In 2024, the Foundation gave £114,333 to Arts Council Wales for the first year of phase 2 of Arts And Minds. A total of 15 grants have been made by Arts Council Wales through the Arts and Minds partnership.

The Foundation has also developed a partnership with Creative Scotland. In 2022, Creative Scotland received £100,000 to match fund its programme of work on arts and mental health, which included 13 grants made to individual projects in Scotland in 2023. In 2024, Creative Scotland received a further £100,000 towards the costs of its arts and mental health partnership with the Foundation.

In April 2025, six projects in Scotland received Creative Minds funding through the joint partnership between the Foundation and Museums Galleries Scotland. There are also about a dozen further grants in the pipeline from Museums and Galleries Scotland.

In 2023, Baring announced a grant of £300,000 over three years to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, to match fund an arts and mental health programme. An open grants round will take place in Summer 2025 as part of this joint programme, making circa 25 grants.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND PUBLICATIONS

Eleven *Creatively Minded* reports have been published, including a directory of creative mental health organisations. Podcasts and a webinar have also been shared. The reports demonstrate the range of specific areas covered, and the commitment to diversity and inclusion with the field:

- *Creatively Minded and in Recovery*
- *Creatively Minded at the Theatre*
- *Creatively Minded Men*
- *Creatively Minded and Refugees*
- *Creatively Minded at the Museum*
- *Creatively Minded: The Directory*
- *Creatively Minded and Heritage*
- *Creatively Minded and the NHS*
- *Creatively Minded and Ethnically Diverse*
- *Creatively Minded and Young*
- *Creatively Minded: initial mapping study*

Reports are typically written or edited by David Cutler and Harriet Lowe, often with contributions from invited writers including grantees. The publications illustrate the inter-personal knowledge-sharing carried out by the Foundation team, who are praised by many for joining up people and practices, and for making good practice visible to others.

The Foundation also commissions research or good practice resources from others, including *Performing Anxiety* (with Mental Health Foundation Scotland) and *Arts and creativity for people with a severe mental illness*.

NETWORKING AND CONVENING

The Foundation has also brought together grantees for knowledge sharing and networking events, both in person and online.

Photo courtesy of Outside
Edge Theatre Company.



4. Impact: observations

IN THIS SECTION WE SET OUT OBSERVATIONS BASED ON REVIEW OF REPORTS, RESPONSES TO THE ONLINE SURVEY AND THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE (MSC) STORIES AND REFLECTIONS.

Observations are clustered in the following areas:

- strong progress in supporting activity and the people in the field;
- diversifying the field;
- building confidence;
- enabling growth towards sustainability;
- modelling trust and flexibility.

STRONG PROGRESS IN SUPPORTING ACTIVITY AND THE PEOPLE IN THE FIELD

In 2020, the Baring Foundation assessed the field of arts and mental health as being at a relatively early phase of development. Despite a surprising number of specialist arts and mental health organisations doing challenging and valuable work, there was a lack of connection between organisations, lots of variation in ways of working, and many fragile micro-organisations of different organisational structures – partnerships, CICs, charities – across different scales. Much work was done by part-time staff, many of whom had experienced mental ill health in some way. This combination of opportunity and need was a major driver in the Foundation choosing to focus its Arts programme on arts and mental health.

The most commonly chosen description of the impact by respondents to the online survey is in keeping with the tenor of stakeholder interviews and reflections in and on the Most Significant Change (MSC) stories: *“It has begun to make a difference but there’s a lot more to do.”*

“The funding has been critical to giving strong foundations for this project, enabling us to plan and deliver it over a few years without constantly using resource to apply for funding. It has helped us to try and test different delivery models and develop a stronger relationship with our key partners – we have been able to include costs for their work on the project and although small this has also helped them. The funding has helped us to develop a trusting partnership.”

Survey comment

We can see strong progress central to the key aim of the programme to develop the field of arts and mental health, with indicators typical of a maturing field across three common aspects of any developing field of organisations with a shared purpose or market.²

SPREADING NORMS AND GOOD PRACTICE

One hundred and seventy-seven different organisations have been supported through the Programme, reflecting the Foundation’s expanding knowledge of the extent of the sector. (In 2020, it estimated there were around 100 established organisations focussing solely on bringing professional artists together with people experiencing mental health issues.) The extent to which this has been important in helping sustain the field, at a time of shrinking funds and increased competition in the wake of the Covid pandemic, and rising costs since, should not be under-estimated.

² The framing of this analysis draws on the work of Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell on organisational fields. We return to it in Section 5.

The unrestricted funding provided in 2020 and 2021 is consistently described as a lifeline for smaller organisations especially, for all that in some cases it has also underpinned subsequent growth. It enabled continuity for people with mental health problems, as well as for artists and teams delivering the work in communities and health settings. This meant some could shift to online delivery during the pandemic and be ready to build up activity again after the lockdowns came to an end.

“3 years of funding meant it was possible to develop something really meaningful with artists and participants; begin to embed this within the NHS. The 3 years also meant flexibility, being able to try some things out, and have something tangible to share and with which to (try and) convince clinical staff.”

Survey comment

Professionalisation, developing networks, training and development initiatives have spread skills and approaches across a highly dispersed and fragmented workforce, many of whom also work in adjacent areas of socially engaged arts practice. A number of projects – as seen in the MSC stories from North East Museums and Wales Arts Health and Wellbeing Network (WAHWN) for example – have identified and shared ways of supporting practitioners, so that the practice encourages good mental health for all involved. This has included adapting partnerships and projects to ensure support and supervision for artists working in mental health settings.

Training for artists and facilitators is a common theme to funded activity, sometimes combined with support and supervision from mental health professionals. For example, Company Chameleon artists had supervision from 42nd Street as well as training, with a 42nd Street staff member also attending every workshop to speak with school pupils there and then and refer on any concerns.

This reflects the importance of activity tackling the realities of working in arts and mental health settings and with people with mental health problems. Some of the ‘norms’ even of socially-engaged arts practice may not

apply. The Foundation’s team was commonly praised for showing the flexibility this required, as well as for supporting projects which put appropriate structures and support in place. Working with people with mental health problems means, for instance, acknowledging that attendance might be sporadic, but also that stop-start activity could be unsettling. Groups’ sizes will vary from one week to the next. The avoidance of pre-specified outcomes and reporting metrics can be seen as especially suitable to the field.

This is arguably even more the case when potentially excluded and under-represented communities have been the focus of projects, as described by Sandra Griffiths in her MSC story for The Red Earth Collective.

“The change that ...really stands out for me comes out of our work with artists and mental health service users in secure care. When you have a mental health difficulty and are separated from the world in a secure setting, your mental illness can completely define you and overwhelm your sense of who you are. Based on our experiences, it was clear that many service users often grapple with feelings of ‘otherness’ which limits their view of what they could do, and which makes them feel disconnected from ‘normal’ life, communities and interactions.”

Sandra Griffiths, The Red Earth Collective, MSC story

DEVELOPING EXPECTATIONS AND BOUNDARIES

There is testimony and evidence that policy makers within health, culture and local government settings are increasingly accepting of the value of arts for mental health, and some signs of this filtering through to policy level. National networks are developing strong clear voices which are both advocating for the sector and creating frameworks, networks, events such as conferences, and institutions or organisations, to share and informally encourage adherence to a set of standards relating to arts and mental health, albeit sometimes in a broader context of health and well-being.

The role of arts and creativity is very much seen by stakeholders in the context of an increased awareness of mental health as a societal issue, and of particular crises in young people's mental health, in marginalised communities, and male suicide. There is a strong sense from stakeholders that some of the stigma around mental health has reduced, and this provides a new and larger opportunity for arts and mental health. However, the stigma still needs challenging and mental health needs still to be discussed more, especially in some communities and at the intersections of marginalised groups such as those facing addiction, class or ethnicity based exclusion or restrictions, and gendered approaches to mental health.

“It's clear now what I should expect from the organisation, who can do this work, and who might not – I don't think it's for everyone. We have a staff well-being group that has helped share learning – and generate profile for the work – across venues and teams. The great thing is we've been able to see how we can embed skills across the workforce without diminishing the skills in the community team. I've been in the Communities Team eight or nine years now and nothing has felt like this. I've felt really valued and have passed that on to others through the podcasts and talks I've done. I've really felt that this might be the place where I need to be. Hearing my voice through this project has allowed me to own it for maybe the first time in my career. That puts me in a better position but also the organisation. NEMs has new commitments with five themes – one of which is well-being, which is positive.”

Clara Shields, North East Museums (MSC story)

The need for evidence and data continues to be identified, although 64% of survey respondents felt the Programme had broadened or deepened their understanding of arts and mental health practice. The importance to some of being part of an informal cohort was clear from some of the MSC stories and survey

comments, although some had found it harder to engage or stay engaged with network events and online meetings.

SHARING OF MODELS

As any sector matures, common models of organisational design or programme delivery tend to emerge from a wide and varied range in the earliest stages. By supporting organisations through core funding, the Programme has helped stabilise many organisations, and some have grown, often on the model of charitable companies, utilising a mix of grant funding and income from commissioners including the health sector. At the same time the Programme has invested strategically in a small number of national initiatives such as the Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance (CHWA) to enable and raise standards across the sector.

The programme has also supported testing and development of innovative models of practice. These have included Community Music Wales' peer-led model which draws on a Finnish model of music co-creation, Kazzum Arts' work with young migrant and refugee men, and Raw Material Music and Media's work which led to the creation of the Artists' Represent Recovery Network. In some cases, such as Greater Manchester i-THRIVE's evaluation framework, funding enabled roll-out of models to new or wider audiences.

The Programme is consistently felt to have had a positive impact through thematically-conceived knowledge-sharing of best practices and emerging models. This has been achieved through publications alongside support of conferences and symposia, and by the sharing of information by the team, especially by the Director, which was noted regularly by interviewees and story sharers.

Potentially especially significant is the model for sustainable practice in creativity and mental health developed by the Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance, with support from the Programme.³ This sets out what funders, practitioners, commissioners, researchers, and infrastructure organisations should do to ensure creativity and culture can support mental health. Elements include co-producing, building local ecologies, modelling good practice, and supporting practitioners.

³ *From surviving to thriving: Building a model for sustainable practice in creativity and mental health*, Victoria Hume and Minoti Parikh, CHWA 2022, cdn.baringfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/BF_From-surviving-to-thriving_WEB-2.pdf.

“The publications, events, networks, and introductions to other organisations and individuals were hugely helpful in carrying out the work, supporting it, and sharing what was done.”

Survey comment

DIVERSIFYING THE FIELD

The Programme was designed to reflect the Foundation’s commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and human rights, and has evolved to do this in specific ways that have made tangible differences in complex contexts across a range of areas. Most notably, this has been achieved through open call grant schemes targeted at organisations working with Global Majority artists and communities, or with men.

Global majority artists and communities

Thirty-seven grants to arts organisations totalling almost £1.5 million over two rounds were specifically intended to improve artist training and introduction into the sector for global majority creatives who often face barriers to entering the workforce.

Across the whole portfolio (including open and invited rounds over five years), sixty-four per cent of all respondents to the online survey, and 80.5% of respondents funded in the themed open grant rounds in 2021 and 2022, felt that their project had helped them be able to reach more diverse audience or participants, and 68% said they had trained or supported artists to work in arts and mental health. 53.5% said support had helped them diversify their offer.

87.7% felt the programme had reflected commitment to diversity well, with 53.4% of respondents saying it did that really well. (No respondent felt it had reflected it badly, although 10% felt they did not know, which may suggest an opportunity to underline or highlight the Foundation’s commitments and work in this area.)

The open calls in 2021 and 2022 also highlighted the small number of global majority-led organisations working in the field, and the relatively small size and fragility of many of them. A significant proportion of projects funded were wholly or partially

focussed on training and developing a more diverse workforce. These included Arts for Health Milton Keynes’s work to diversify the professional artist delivery team to better serve the needs of global majority communities, and Akademi South Asian Dance’s Feet First project, which trained South Asian dancers to deliver work with young people with mental health problems.

Reports suggest these projects were successful in upskilling creatives new to working in mental health contexts. They also reveal the complexity of the process, which must range from core freelance skills such as budgeting, making tax returns and so on, to the nuances of working with people experiencing mental health challenges.

It was noted by some interviewees though that, although timely and beneficial, the focus on global majority creatives and communities was necessarily limited in scale in relation to the ongoing lack of diversity in the cultural workforce, and the over-representation of some communities as patients in the mental health system:

“The most significant change was the number of global majority artists we worked with on the project. The starting point for the project was Cara knowing about Baring Foundation’s funding round, aimed at addressing the lack of practitioners from global majority backgrounds in Arts and Creative Health, and being aware of the lack of diversity in the artists’ pool in South Yorkshire.

One of Maya’s key missions is to support the arts and cultural sector to be more inclusive. They employ a predominantly global majority team of industry professionals in their work. Their reach, in call outs, is a very different, much broader and wider, network of global majority artists compared with predominantly white arts organisations. Dynamic Flights was also a chance for Maya to work for the first time in mental health arts (creative health), so there were many layers of arts development in this project.”

**Suzanne Gorman and Cara McAleese,
Maya Productions**

Projects such as Raw Material Music and Media and Tamasha's training and development programmes show the importance of training, mentoring and skills support for global majority artists wanting to enter the workforce. Peer support and supervision and mentoring by others working in mental health settings were important, as were basic freelance skills.

The projects funded also illustrate and respond to the intersectional nature of many of the challenges faced by global majority communities. Company of Others, for instance, developed a two-year programme for women with experience of seeking asylum. Others had a focus on global majority young people.

The way in which the calls for applications framed work was felt by some to narrow the gate in a way that was unhelpful:

“Supporting diversity through positive actions for underrepresented groups is vital. However, in significantly diverse communities, projects like ours—which effectively reflect and serve the whole community’s diversity without focusing exclusively on a specific underrepresented group—can often be excluded from funding opportunities designed for those targeted groups.”

Survey comment

The need for greater co-production with marginalised communities and those with lived experience of mental ill-health was a theme in comments and reflections on the stories, illustrating one conundrum in this area. If a very small organisation is from and of a diverse community, in its design and being, to what extent do its processes need to mimic or make visible co-creation models that are – arguably – essentially designed for white arts organisations seeking to work with global majority communities rather than community-owned?

Men with mental health problems

In 2024, the Foundation published a research report, *Creatively Minded and Men*, and then ran a funding round focussed on organisations

working on involving men in arts mental health activity. This is a good example of the Programme identifying a potential issue to be addressed, conducting research to see what data is available and what it suggests, and then bringing practitioners into the conversation (in this case through the commissioned essays in the publication and an online survey).

The work was informed by a sense that men were under-represented in the workforce, as they tend to be in the arts workforce more broadly, especially lower down in organisational hierarchies, and as they tend to be in the caring professions. There was little evidence around levels of participation in arts and mental health activity by gender, although evaluation of the Thriving Communities social prescribing funding programme found men much less likely to take up opportunities including creative activity (24% compared to 71% of women). NHS data suggests men are also half as likely as women to take up talking therapy.⁴

The 32 grants to organisations focussing on men's mental health, which totalled £1.4 million, concentrated on the arts offer, rather than workforce development as seen in the ethnicity-focussed grants. These projects supported a wide range of activities and art forms. They are likely to lead to innovations and experiments to follow up rather than transforming anticipated patterns of participation. (Further research might bring those patterns into sharper focus.) Some projects address how engagement in activities can be encouraged by greater visibility of male role-models in the work. Community Music Wales, for instance, are working on a peer-led approach, in which men facing mental health problems are trained to lead their peers in music-based activities.

The activities relating to men and arts and mental health also show how the Foundation is willing to set an agenda and challenge potential applicants to respond to what it sees as a need. When surveyed, organisations in the Foundation's network tended to report that although there were fewer men attending, addressing this under-representation was not a priority.

⁴ digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/nhs-talking-therapies-for-anxiety-and-depression-annual-reports/2023-24

“It’s still early days, but the most significant change is the shift to democratising our delivery by applying the Kukunori model. ... The Kukunori model is a radical departure for us as an organisation. It’s very exciting, but also quite nervy handing over the delivery to people who we know have their own mental health vulnerabilities. It’s crucial we get the right balance – we need to loosen up the delivery without loosening up the ethics.”

Hannah Jenkins, Community Music Wales

BUILDING CONFIDENCE

A strong theme from the interviews, survey, and Most Significant Change stories (MSC) and reflections, is that the Programme has been extremely beneficial in building the confidence of practitioners and leaders in organisations, and consequently of some of the networks in the sector.

Fifty-two per cent of survey respondents said the support they had received had made them more confident. Confidence was noted as a strong theme in many of the MSC stories. Elements of this confidence includes the funding giving people and their work more status, both within their organisations and externally in their networks and with partners. This kind of endorsement is a common halo effect of competitive grant funding. The Foundation’s support signals the quality of the work being done in this specialist field. People noted this had opened doors to other funders and to ‘higher level’ discussions as well as ‘impressing’ and convincing the NHS and clinicians to become involved, especially as this represented ‘extra’ money coming in for the benefit of NHS patients, rather than being seen as taken from acute services.

For organisations given funding that was not specific to project delivery this was in itself taken as a big vote of confidence in their work or their model. Several of the MSC stories such as those from Soundcastle (which received unrestricted or core funding), and Belfast Exposed and 42nd Street (which both received funding to deliver a conference or symposium), suggest that in turn this enabled change and growth. For some this was a result of how such funding allowed time for reflection and renewal.

“Sometimes you’re like a headless chicken, wondering if you are still doing what you mean to, but because we’d had some time to think we knew what we were about.”

Joy Hart, Hive Bradford (MSC story)

Being introduced by the Director to relevant people and organisations or invited to speak or write, gave visibility to good practice. This in turn built confidence leading to higher levels of agency. Being featured in one of Baring’s publications was highlighted by several people as a boost to confidence that also supported access to the ‘top tables’ and strategic conversations.

The Programme supported several significant conferences and symposia, which as well as spreading models, ideas and good practice, were felt to have increased the confidence and visibility of organisations involved. Belfast Exposed, for example, held a conference on therapeutic photography that they felt:

“...really changed our energy and our flow... It gave us confidence, and it gives us a lot of confidence that we are useful for people and relevant to funders, which is bringing in new money.”

Belfast Exposed (MSC story)

Organisational confidence is just one aspect of the positive impact identified. Central to many project reports and stories is the increased self-assurance in participants or users as a result of taking place in creative activity. Similarly, confidence is a key attribute of successful practice in this field (alongside other factors), and the development programmes supported often identify increased confidence as a central achievement:

“It’s really increased confidence amongst artists who often face barriers getting into a health sector where global majority people are under-represented as professionals but over-represented as service users.”

Tamasha (MSC story)

Tamasha describe one artist as an example:

“ One of our participants is an NHS mental health nurse. When she applied to us, she described herself as being mental health nurse first, before she was an artist. Now she’s building her artistic practice so she can use her skills in social prescribing models of activities rather than just clinical ones. She’s now got the confidence to acknowledge herself as an artist and someone who can sit between the bridge of creative well-being. She’s already running sessions with Creative Health Camden and their groups. ”

Tamasha (MSC story)

Increased confidence is described in all parts of the field: users or participants, practitioners, organisations, and finally in funders and commissioners. We heard several times that Directors of Public Health are increasingly recognising the value of community cultural assets and activities, although neither that recognition nor social prescribing is yet to regularly result in more funding. The MSC stories also reflect this:

“ We have a commissioner in Manchester, and he calls anything that isn’t directly therapeutic work ‘fluffy and nice to have’, and he’s so open about it, it makes us all laugh. Because we did the Symposium nationally, and because it had a bit more status, some of those people came to it and we made it really easy for people to hear the national arguments. That very commissioner came to our board meeting recently and said that fluffy stuff does seem to work. He did actually say that – so very slowly attitudes are changing. The funding and commissions need to come next of course. ”

Simone Spray, 42nd Street (MSC story)

ENABLING GROWTH TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

The Programme has supported a large amount of activity, which has helped many people with their mental health, and enabled practitioners and organisations to develop. There is some evidence that this has led to growth in individual organisations and in support for the field. Organisations describe how core funding has allowed them to stabilise and then grow or ‘right-size’ their organisation in ways that allow them to create sustainable rather than over-extended working practices with their teams. This has also improved the sustainability of ongoing provision, which is noted in several MSC stories as beneficial to people’s mental health, especially in contrast to the damaging ‘stop-start’ provision which gaps in funding can create.

The Programme is seen by those supported as having positively contributed to some of the key factors in the sustainability of organisations and practices. Three-quarters (74.7%) of survey respondents said they had increased their networks. Just under half (49.3%) had worked with new partners. Many of the grants made have supported new models of engaging people with mental health challenges, or new ways of supporting practitioners. Almost all involve some level of partnership working, often with NHS, public health or other commissioners. Stakeholders generally felt that the case to commissioners was increasingly accepted.

68.3% of respondents to the survey agreed or agreed strongly that support had helped with their sustainability, but more than a quarter (26.3%) neither agreed nor disagreed, which illustrates the ongoing challenge. The positive impact must be kept in context: the environment for creative organisations remains highly challenging. This is summed up in this quotation from Matt Steinberg of Outside Edge Theatre Company’s MSC story (see next page).

Rachael Perrin of Soundcastle, where turnover has grown from £50,000 a year to £350,000 since receiving unrestricted funding in 2020, commented on this in her MSC story (see next page).

“We are really concerned about our own sustainability as a charity. This isn't only about income, although that is a serious factor. It's also that we are a very small team of 3. We all hold and deliver many different roles – everyone's doing 3 or 4 jobs at once, and we feel like we're firefighting with no time to breathe or for professional development.

Our limited capacity to continue on in this manner makes our organisation vulnerable. The people we work with are vulnerable and have become more vulnerable as community and other support has been lost. Levels of need have risen. Demand has risen. Costs have risen. Our income has plateaued.”

Outside Edge Theatre Company (MSC story)

“It's certainly confidence building when someone gives you core funding, when they see the core is worth investing in. We know the programs are valuable, and it feels less surprising when people support them, because we can see that. I think having that vote of confidence mattered a lot, and then we were able to invest a lot in the team, get the Board of Trustees established and stabilised so we could then grow.”

Rachael Perrin of Soundcastle (MSC story)

Finally, it is worth noting that for some organisations for whom mental health is not the sole focus of their work, and who perhaps are in receipt of regular funding from an arts council, health funding is often seen as a strategic opportunity to develop longer term sustainability as part of a strategy based on diversifying income streams.

MODELLING TRUST AND FLEXIBILITY AS A FUNDER

The quotation from Emma Drew at Robin Hood Health (above right) is typical of comments shared by grantees on their experiences of working with the Baring Foundation team, whose work models trust, flexibility and generous sharing of networks and knowledge.

“They helped us reflect on our bid, challenged our thinking, helped us re-focus on how we would get buy-in from NHS partners and the long-term impact if we did. Then they treated us as adults and let the project evolve.

They have provided the equipment and the machinery – not just in the form of funding, but also building confidence, legitimacy, tools and evidence... Whenever something good is happening, they are always there...”

Emma Drew, Robin Hood Health (MSC story)

This approach is deeply relational, rooted in the perspective of the Director on the field, beginning with the initial design of the programme, and maintained as knowledge grows over the lifetime of the focus, as was the case in the field of creative aging previously. It is a relational approach informed by curiosity as well as a position on what is needed, as seen in the thematically-focussed open calls and the publications. As one story sharer commented: *“At their core they're incredibly inquisitive.”*

The relational approach is built on application and reporting processes which were commonly felt to be helpful and proportionate. Only 3% of survey respondents did not agree application guidelines were clear, while 49% strongly agreed, and 39% agreed. (It should be acknowledged respondents were successful applicants.) Some felt there was a lack of clarity about when and where funding calls might come, although when calls were made the guidelines were clear.

Some also felt that this emergent approach created a lack of continuity if an organisation was not part of the ongoing conversation with the Foundation or were not highlighted in their knowledge sharing. Invited grantees tended to be even more positive than others, with some questioning how you get invited. (We discuss the limits of the relational approach in Section 6.)

As projects were being developed, flexibility was crucial as organisations found – sometimes to their surprise, oftentimes not – that approaches needed to be adapted, plans changed and even targets shifted because of the realities of working with people with mental health problems. Prescriptive approaches to project delivery from funders

fit poorly with the principles of co-production with people with lived experience of mental health problems, including practitioners, so this approach was warmly welcomed by interviewees and survey respondents.

In terms of reporting, the vast majority of people praise the straightforwardness of the reporting processes. 87.3% of survey respondents agreed application and reporting processes were straightforward and proportionate, although 6% strongly disagreed. Most welcomed the opportunity to provide a narrative report or their own evaluations rather than answer set questions. A minority, however, felt this made it less clear for them.

It was also apparent from the Committee and Board papers we reviewed as part of our evaluation how the reporting on each completed project informed learning, reflection, and design of the next steps or strategic invitations.

“I’ve been doing funding applications and managing funded projects for 20 years and this work with Baring is the easiest I’ve known. Everything with Baring is simple, straightforward. We’ve had so much space to try things and shift things. There’s no wasted time. David’s so honest and makes clear what’s important, so we don’t have to blow everything up to make it sound good. Having direct access to David and Harriet makes such a difference, as does knowing we’re part of something much bigger. Once this current project is finished, we hope to share what we’ve learned through one of Baring’s blog posts or an event.”

Dr Tracy Breathnach, WAHWN (MSC story)

The Foundation were commonly described as agile, flexible, personable – even maverick – but with helpful gravitas. It was welcomed how they made space for exploration of ideas but in a rigorous setting, without “tying everything up in paperwork”. The role played by the Director in brokering conversations and sharing learning and intelligence or connecting national networks to each other and to innovative local activity is highly valued.

Several survey respondents and MSC stories note how much they valued the flexibility shown as projects developed. For example, the MSC story shared by Andrew Eaton-Lewis of the Mental Health Foundation Scotland describes what seems to be a typical iterative process:

“Baring were flexible and approachable. Our ideas for Performing Anxiety changed along the way. At the beginning the plan was to cover all art forms, but we quickly realised there are big differences in what’s needed in music, or in visual arts. We asked Baring to agree to our focusing on performance, which they did. Baring may question the changes – you have to be able to justify it, and they may suggest alternatives – but I have never felt that my creativity isn’t valued or that I’m not trusted. And as a result of their funding and supporting this project we’ve now got all these Performing Anxiety materials to share.”

Andrew Eaton-Lewis of the Mental Health Foundation Scotland

The Programme has not just been about grants, and the online survey showed that advice from staff and publications were especially useful, although all activities were found useful by a majority of respondents.

Table 1: Usefulness of different elements of the process (from online survey)

TYPE OF ACTIVITY	SOMEWHAT USEFUL	VERY USEFUL
Advice/support from staff	19.48%	58.44%
Publications	26.67%	54.67%
Gatherings of grantees	26.03%	35.62%
Blogs on website	45.07%	32.39%
Online portal	39.13%	23.19%

NOTES FROM REFLECTIONS ON THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE (MSC) STORIES

As part of the MSC process, the evaluation team facilitated four roundtables (held under the Chatham House Rule) with stakeholders including sectoral experts, frontline organisations, and national funders. In each discussion, the group considered a selection of stories and identified themes and implications. This section shares some points which informed our own analysis.

Confidence working in/with the Mental Health System

- Investment built confidence, which in turn enabled further growth and development.
- Work is often reliant on individual champions within health systems and the challenges of connecting with these systems, even with good people and work.
- Projects acknowledge (and need to be able to acknowledge) the reality of working with people with mental health problems: fluctuating availability, high dropout rates, and constraints from settings.
- Practitioners need clear pathways, training, and support to work in clinical settings, and practitioners' own mental health safety must be considered.

Evidence, evaluation and frameworks

- Evaluation helps build partnerships, shared language, and purpose.
- Strong evidence and data are key to securing investment: targeted evidence is needed to highlight exclusion (e.g. asylum seekers) and justify specific funding.

Flexibility in funding

- The ability to adapt projects as they develop allows organisations to adapt and respond to participants' needs: the Foundation's relational and straightforward approach enabled this
- The Foundation plays a valuable role in building political support alongside other funders, beyond grant-making. Its track record in arts funding gives it gravitas to potentially influence policy.

Capacity building and sustainability

- Capacity is built through methods including events, funding and practitioner development.
- The Foundation could help organisations secure funding or explore sustainability models (e.g. endowments).
- Sustainability spans practice, organisations, ecosystems, and relationships, especially within local systems, and collaboration with health structures.
- Long-term core funding is critical, not just project funding, especially for small charities. It enables growth, reflection, and leadership succession.
- Barriers relating to class, ethnicity, or geography, should identified and addressed.
- The Foundation could deepen support for existing grantees to move beyond stop-start funding.

Conferences, publications and networking

- Conferences help connect sectors as well as practitioners, though some felt attendance has declined since Covid.
- The publications are informative, though practical use depends on time and resources.
- Networking (especially online) complements publications and maintains momentum.

Photo courtesy of Raw
Material Music & Media.



5. Insights and challenges

IN THIS SECTION WE SET OUT SOME KEY INSIGHTS AND CHALLENGES WE SEE AS EMERGING FROM THE IMPACT SO FAR.

These are clustered in four areas:

1. A rapidly developing field still feels fragile and precarious;
2. Potential priorities: settings, locations, or people?
3. Partnerships, collaborations, and frameworks as leverage points;
4. The power and limits of the relational.

A RAPIDLY DEVELOPING FIELD, BUT STILL FRAGILE AND PRECARIOUS

The most commonly chosen phrase by those responding to the online survey to sum up the difference made by the Programme was “It has begun to make a difference but there’s a lot more to do” (32.9% of respondents). A further 28.8% selected “It’s made some positive difference.”

“ [The grant] contributed to what sustainable practices in our organisation and our artistic work SHOULD look like, but sustainable for who/what becomes the question – delivering impactful mental health services to people who need it, Definitely. Enabling/fostering support for the artists delivering it YES. However this area of work is struggling on cost per unit logics despite outstanding outcomes and in a harsher economy sustaining our practices towards/with artists and programme delivery hasn’t been sustainable without project work overarching the activity – and there is less of this around. ”

Survey comment

Fifty-three per cent of respondents felt the state of the field was best described as “People and organisations working in arts and mental health are doing good work but under-supported and unrecognised”. (This was by far the most commonly chosen phrase.) These statistics reflect both the achievements of the Programme and those working in the field and the challenges they face, and are consistent with the Most Significant Change (MSC) stories, roundtable reflections, and stakeholder interviews.

As the field of arts and mental health grows and becomes more influential, it remains fragile and precarious. It is affected by lack of funding, by complex and ever-changing systems, by its own organisational changes and evolutions. (Where does such work sit in the business model of non-specialist organisations, for example: as an earning opportunity or as a core offer supporting the human right to access to the arts and creativity?)

The professionalisation and mainstreaming of arts and mental health work we see in the projects supported by the Programme offers some responses to this fragility but brings further challenges. Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell suggest that in the face of uncertainty such as changing markets or technology, organisations within a field tend to adopt similar structures and behaviours, as noted in Section 4. Formal or informal ‘standards’ emerge. Networks and representative bodies come together to set expectations, argue for investment, and to train others – either explicitly through training courses, development schemes or accreditation, or implicitly by example and sharing of best practice.

Such developments are welcome in that they increase visibility, effectiveness, inclusion, and build resilience. However, they may also lead to homogenisation, reduce innovation, and cause mission drift. There is a risk that consolidation and the drive for sustainability result in fewer, larger, players with greater influence, with smaller organisations being squeezed out. Resources can become concentrated rather than distributed equitably across the UK and different communities. The challenge lies in how to maintain diversity and experimentation while building a resilient, aligned, field that can attract support and investment for ongoing delivery and development.

We suggest the key at this point in time is to attempt to maintain diversity and innovative approaches whilst sustaining exemplar organisations and networks best-placed to develop the cross-sector partnerships and evidence base needed to sustain the field.

The Foundation is clearly seen as a trusted broker capable of navigating diverse and sometimes competing interests across the field. Supporting the development of shared agendas while allowing space for a plurality of approaches is essential. There is arguably a need for a shift from a relational, emergent approach to one with greater elements of stated strategy and timeline.

Sustainability in this field is unlikely to emerge solely from innovation: it requires further work on the three areas set out in Section 4: spreading norms and good practice, developing expectations and boundaries; and sharing of models.

It also depends on systemic alignment: on the ability of actors, organisations, and funders to coordinate while respecting difference.

“The field feels more complicated now—dispersed and diverse—but this brings the risk of spreading things too thinly.”

Survey comment

This suggests that the Foundation should further refine its focus in the field of arts and mental health, making some choices around where it can achieve greatest impact without damaging the diversity of approaches in the field.

POTENTIAL PRIORITIES: SETTINGS, LOCATIONS, OR PEOPLE?

One way to think about influencing the field or system which currently generates both growth and precarity for those working in it is by considering whether the focus should be primarily or exclusively on settings (health system, hospitals, community et al), locations (places and their planning structures or geographies e.g. London, Greater Manchester or Leek) or people (e.g. groups of users such as men or global majority women, practitioners, people working in organisations).

Should the focus lie more on well-being and emotional health in the general population, or people with acute needs, facing more severe mental health problems and hospitalisation? Should the emphasis be on developing models of working in community settings, often with people experiencing less severe mental health issues, or in hospital or other settings where health conditions are acute, and the potential difficulties and need for supportive practices for arts workers correspondingly greater? Would a more geographically-informed approach working with NHS and Public Health structures, whatever they might look like in future, best build on work with the devolved nations and city Mayors, especially as devolution is deepened in England via combined authorities and devolution deals? Or would an approach which focusses on the groups of people involved – the patients, participants, practitioners, organisational leaders, policy makers and infrastructure organisations – lead to more change in the long-term?

The reality is that all of these intersect. The need is shaped not only by who is served but also by where and how services are delivered. Settings are shaped by those that animate them.

This ambiguity was reflected in responses to the survey. While there was support for the potential themes suggested, the priorities identified suggest a strong interest in widening access and deepening practice based on people and their relationships, supporting specialist arts and mental organisations, and working with the mental health system.

Table 2: What should the Programme focus on next? (from online survey)

SUGGESTED FUTURE FOCUS	AVERAGE RATING (OUT OF 10)
Work for/by/with young people	8.05
Work for/by/with global majority communities	7.69
Supporting specialist arts and mental health organisations	7.43
Partnerships with NHS, social prescribing and health sector	7.11
Supporting mental health of artists and practitioners	7.09
Work for/by/with men	6.74
Sustainability of key organisations	6.66
Improving standards	5.74
Broader definitions of creative health	4.24
Supporting non-specialist arts organisations to work with mental health issues	3.69

While being investment or commission-ready is important, Andy Watson of Geese Theatre also stresses the importance of relationships in his MSC story:

“Good quality arts projects are not transactional, they are relational. You can't just 'buy' in the arts to 'do a job' if you want to create meaningful work. Our work is nuanced and layered: it's deep and meaningful. It is not about providing 'entertainment' or giving a group of prisoners something to simply occupy their time. The transactional commissioning model runs counter to the way in which we want to work as it diminishes the process, and we are increasingly trying to find alternative models.”

Andy Watson, Geese Theatre (MSC story)

The key consideration, it seems to us, is which mix of investment could maximise the knowledge, practice and impact on mental health. Our evaluation suggests that focussing on people and their work has the greatest potential for more sustainable diversity of practice, despite elements of fragility in the field. This could include 'direct' work with people facing mental health challenges, as has been the case so far, training of and support

for artists, and also what might be called infrastructure work through frameworks, partnerships and collaborations.

One other advantage of focussing on people and their work is that people are (if cared for appropriately) also a 'renewable resource' within the field. They develop, move on to new jobs, progress into more senior roles, share skills and otherwise contribute to the field and its ongoing development.

This would be in broad keeping with the views of those responding to our survey and interviews, where respondents emphasised the importance of:

- expanding networks and improving training and support for artists;
- reaching more diverse participants and audiences, particularly underrepresented groups;
- supporting specialist organisations already embedded in these areas of work;
- enhancing the system and collective understanding of mental health practice in the arts through more effective (and more effectively used) evidence and data.

PARTNERSHIPS, COLLABORATIONS AND FRAMEWORKS AS LEVERAGE POINTS

As we write there are many moving parts in the policy landscape. These underline the importance of partnerships, collaborations and frameworks that can act as leverage points for growth in the future.

In March 2025, the government announced the reorganisation or abolition of NHS England in its current form. Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) will also be overhauled and have been tasked with reducing running costs by 50% within 2025-2026. This is predicted to make the collaboration that enables commissioning of arts and mental health activity (and much else, of course) more difficult. The Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance had structured much of its work in England around people working with ICBs which may be useful but will also have to adapt if ICBs have less power and influence in future. Meanwhile there will be new or redesigned systems for creative health infrastructure bodies and funders to work with in England.

“If I had a magic wand I would put Wes Streeting⁵ and all the ICB chairs in a room to learn about this, and then I would require all ICBs to have a Creative Health strategy that supports quality and inclusion.”

Survey comment

Reorganisation of local and regional systems will create new ways of connecting with local government in England. Combined authorities and new county level authorities are central to the government's plans for devolution of funding in health and local government. Networks which connect people working in creative health in devolved settings such as the Mayoral Creative Health Network could be especially helpful. This network includes representatives from Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the Greater London Authority who have been supported to develop

frameworks for commissioning and delivery such as Thriving Through Culture in London. The Foundation should consider deepening its engagement here to maximise influence and collaboration. It is clear that developing the work of such partnerships takes time, which requires investment.

The Arts and Humanities Research Council's (AHRC) *Creative Communities* programme, particularly its recent paper⁶ on creative health in Scotland's devolved context, offers timely insights into how local creative policy ecosystems can be strengthened across the UK. The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Creative Health references mental health and aligns with wider developments across the UK, where creativity and the arts are being formally recognised in policy frameworks. In Scotland, the draft Human Rights Bill includes a proposed right to access the arts. Wales's draft Mental Health Strategy explicitly references creativity as part of a broader mental health and well-being offer.

There are two interlocking refrains within the interviews and stories we heard during our research: “The evidence is there, the case is beginning to be accepted” and “We need better use of evidence and data”. This might be a contradiction or a paradox: in many ways both statements seem true. To have a field that delivers high quality arts and mental health and gives voice to people with mental health challenges, the field needs to be more deliberate in how it communicates learning and impact. This includes distilling what works, developing common language, and engaging strategically with policymakers, funders, and health leaders.

The Foundation can help by supporting partnerships, collaborations and frameworks which bring people together in co-designing sustainable ways of commissioning, delivering and evidencing positive creative experiences. The package may include persuasive events such as conferences, and publications, as well as strategy and partnership development.

⁵ At the time of this report Wes Streeting MP was Secretary of State for Health.

⁶ AHRC Creative Communities Scotland Devolution Provocation Paper May 2025, Helen Apsley and Kay Shaw. Available at: creativecommons.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/AHRC-Creative-Communities-Scotland-Devolution-Policy-Provocation-Paper-May-2025.pdf.

THE POWER AND LIMITS OF THE RELATIONAL

The Baring Foundation already works well in many of the ways associated with good relational funding. It works hard to design and iterate processes which are clear, proportionate and enable funding to be focussed on the chosen need. This is generally appreciated even when the boundaries such as focussing on attracting men to activities or focussing solely on arts and mental health necessarily exclude some potential applicants. Grantees and partners value their contact with the team, with site visits welcomed as mutual learning opportunities rather than the ‘personal monitoring’ or ‘royal visit’ syndromes sometimes experienced with other funders. The knowledge sharing, connecting, and supportive challenge of the Director when developing ideas or events is generally seen as highly positive. The willingness to be active in areas other funders may shy away from, such as mental health and addiction, is also welcome and impactful.

A minority, however, describe an awareness of the power dynamic with a funder which can be uncomfortable where it raises questions around transparency and control: what one story sharer described as “*moments I think they thought we weren’t doing it in what they thought was ‘the right way’, and we all had to hold our nerve a bit.*”

One area where the power dynamics of funding relationships become most visible is in the Foundation’s use of invited applications. While this supports strategic alignment and has undoubtedly helped some key national institutions and networks grow, it can also contribute to a perception of exclusivity. (The invited grants also tend to be larger than those given through open calls.) Some stakeholders felt a lack of clarity around how such invitations are issued, raising concerns about perceptions of fairness and transparency.

The Programme could consider how to share its thinking around invitations – either setting out the rationale for them (in general terms) or opening up some invitations to more than one organisation. Conferences, for instance, have tended to be supported through invited applications, but could be done in response to limited calls for proposals or by inviting organisations to collaborate on events.

This issue is important to consider because of the centrality of the Foundation team. 34% of survey respondents said they first heard about funding opportunities directly from Baring staff or board members. While this proactive engagement shows how connected those people are, it also illustrates the ongoing challenge of reaching those beyond existing networks. That “we don’t know who we don’t know” is a recurring issue in grant making for funders who are as concerned with equality and diversity as the Baring Foundation. The evidence of the men’s and global majority funding rounds is that such opportunities serve a secondary purpose of broadening networks and expanding awareness of who is working on the field.

The Foundation’s size can present challenges in relation to the scale and profile of some of its grantees, and the power dynamic between them and the Foundation. Some reports suggest it can be difficult to form meaningful relations with large organisations for whom the funding is relatively insignificant, unless there is much time spent on alignment of values. To some grantees who might describe themselves as grassroots organisations, Baring Foundation is a large funder, with gravitas, and the relationships reflect that. To others, it may carry gravitas and endorsement value, and be welcome support, but is not financially or strategically significant enough to change their directions or ways of working.

Given the nature of the sector, with many small to medium-sized organisations, it seems logical to concentrate the Foundation’s efforts in this area where the relational approach can be most effective, investing in a mix of active small to medium-sized organisations developing the workforce and new approaches to working with people with mental health problems, alongside organisations and networks considered crucial to the development of the field.

Succession planning is another slight concern for some stakeholders. The Director’s deep knowledge and visible presence is a valuable strength, but some people shared concerns about continuity should he leave. While most find his expertise and passion energising and generous, some find it intimidating. The openness of the team’s blogs mitigates this, offering a transparent, conversational record of how thinking is evolving. Committee and Board

papers reviewed also demonstrate a healthy culture of challenge and refinement. It is clear the commitment to this field is not simply a personal one, but an organisational one which we believe should continue. The Foundation board may wish to consider this when they make succession plans.

It would not be beneficial, in our opinion, for the Baring Foundation to design tighter, more outputs- and outcomes-based grants programmes. Alignment of values and purpose is critical, especially if providing unrestricted funding, but to this can be added timing – how does this purpose and activity build the field now? That would allow investment to connect to the leverage points referenced earlier, in a way that was more transparent and thus potentially welcoming to new partners. The creation of a Community of Practice for shared learning and reflective practice could help the Programme continue to be both strategically focussed and open in its learning. This should include providing funding for time and travel to allow grantees to take part.



Photo courtesy of B Arts,
Stoke-on-Trent.

6. The future: barriers and enablers

IN THIS SECTION WE CONSIDER WHAT OUR ANALYSIS SUGGESTS ARE BARRIERS AND ENABLERS TO POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT IN THE FIELD OF ARTS AND MENTAL HEALTH.

When considering actions in a highly complex system such as arts and mental health, it is helpful to consider where the Baring Foundation might have most leverage in boosting those factors which promote positive development ('enablers'), and removing, reducing or coping with those which hinder

it ('barriers'). Table 3 (below) summarises learning from this evaluation about barriers and enablers in relation to key themes of this report. These correspond closely to the aims of the Programme and the desire to build a strong field of activity.

Table 3: What should the Programme focus on next? (from online survey)

AREA	BARRIERS	ENABLERS
Transparency and flexibility as a funder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Onerous reporting mechanisms and inflexibility of some other funders ▪ Over-specification of programme outcomes ▪ Building trust takes time ▪ Lack of connectivity and partnership with funders in adjacent sectors (eg asylum, criminal justice) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Baring Foundation's open, relational, and adaptive approach ▪ Straightforward applications process and proportionate reporting ▪ Trust and willingness to allow changes in projects ▪ National partnerships enable reach into ecosystem ▪ A range of grant mechanisms
Activity and people in the field	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Precarity of freelance and grassroots workers ▪ Lack of understanding between health and arts practitioners ▪ In-built challenges of working with people with complex mental health and other needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Training, mentoring, and skills support for artists and staff. Confidence-building through supportive funding and capacity-building grants ▪ Good support for practitioners working in or moving into formal health contexts ▪ Peer support and supervision ▪ Development opportunities for under-represented groups
Knowledge-sharing and good practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of time restricts participation in networking and knowledge-sharing ▪ Lack of shared evaluation/evidence frameworks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Conferences and events create community, connection, and peer learning ▪ Publications share knowledge, models, impact and good practice ▪ Baring Foundation modelling and leadership of knowledge-sharing via cohort of grantees

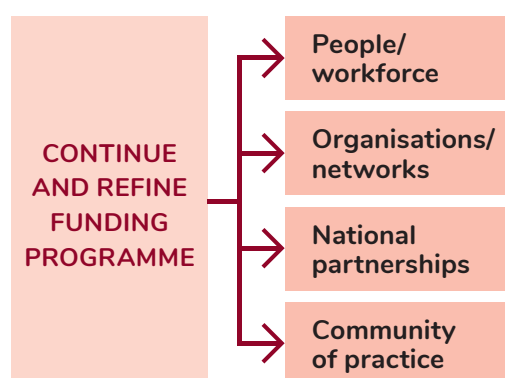
AREA	BARRIERS	ENABLERS
Diversifying the field	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ongoing stigma around in mental health in certain communities and demographics ▪ Social and structural barriers for some participants and practitioners ▪ Tokenism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inclusive and culturally appropriate methods and offers ▪ Peer-support, training and development for diverse practitioners ▪ Programmes addressing diverse communities and specific needs (eg addiction)
Enabling growth towards sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of core funding or consistent long-term commissions limits continuity and long-term development ▪ Constant changes in NHS create complexity ▪ Resource scarcity leads to burn-out ▪ Stop-start funding bad for organisations and service users ▪ Fragmentation of sector ▪ Risk of burn-out in individuals ▪ Short-termism and novelty funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Unrestricted funding at crucial points supports pivotal organisational development ▪ Strategic partnerships (with health, communities, etc) enable innovation ▪ Visibility and advocacy support future investment and leadership transitions ▪ Place-based and ecosystem-based approaches ▪ Funding to adapt to changes

7. The Future: recommendations

IN THIS SECTION WE SET OUT FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON OUR ANALYSIS OF THE ONGOING OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPING THE FIELD.

These recommendations aim to suggest a direction of travel which:

- refines the funding model of the programme, building on the strong delivery so far;
- supports workforce development as central to the field;
- supports key organisations that have potential to help develop the field;
- enables the Foundation to work strategically with other partners in the field;
- builds on learning from the Programme so far, and spreads it more effectively through the growing network of people involved in the field.



RECOMMENDATION 1

Continue to focus the arts programme on arts and mental health for at least five more years from 2025 to further mature the field.

HOW:

Maintain the 60:40 balance of open call grants programmes: occasional strategic invited applications and partnerships with national funders across the UK. Thematically-tight outcome-flexible criteria should be continued, with an ongoing explicit focus on diversity and inclusion.

We recommend grants made directly by the Programme should normally be **either unrestricted funding** to support organisations in their mission (having established alignment with the Programme's values and thematic focus and the organisation's potential to further develop the field), **or targeted** to encourage

specific developments in the field, maintaining flexibility and avoiding over-specification of outputs.

A **public position statement** outlining principles, strategy, and funding approach(es) **should be shared**, including as much advance notice of and information about open calls and future areas of interest as is possible.

In terms of activity, the **focus on aspects of inclusion should be maintained**, and we recommend a greater focus on young people, either within previous areas (eg young global majority people or young men) or more generally. Inequalities in provision should also be considered.

WHY:

The Programme is making a difference, but the field is still developing and dispersed. The Foundation can have a lasting impact by continuing its work with the field. Unrestricted funding would be highly sought after but could target and support evolutionary growth for valuable organisations. The crisis in young people's mental health and health inequalities were consistently suggested as areas where investment in arts and mental health provision would be beneficial.

POTENTIAL IMPACT:

Clarity and transparency of purpose and process, with a clear ongoing commitment to a vital field of arts and social activity will build confidence for those working in arts and mental health, in terms of professional and personal development and in influencing and accessing wider funding and other support and opportunities.

RECOMMENDATION 2**Target investment on developing a sustainable, inclusive arts and mental health workforce.****HOW:**

Provide grants (by invitation or open call) **to organisations and networks best-placed to build on achievements** so far in areas such as diversity, inclusion, workforce development and support including training for working in clinical settings, well-being strategies, supervision and fair conditions for practitioners.

Support organisations and networks developing frameworks for professional practice and development.

WHY:

At a time of uncertainty in systems and place-based working, people – their skills, knowledge, experience and networks – are the continuity. Further developing, over the full 10 years of the Programme, the current and next generation of people working in this space could make a significant difference.

POTENTIAL IMPACT:

Enables organisations of different scales to stabilise or grow while developing, applying and learning from, models which are sustainable for them, practitioners and participants.

RECOMMENDATION 3**Invest in a small number of sustainable, diverse and inclusive organisations that can help develop the field of arts and mental health.****HOW:**

Identify (by analysis, invitation or open call) **organisations and networks best-placed** at that time to **innovate and develop culturally inclusive** new models and frameworks that support the field to work with people with mental health problems and develop the cross-sector partnerships and evidence base to sustain this activity.

This should include key specialist organisations, national infrastructure networks and partnerships with the NHS/mental health system.

WHY:

Organisations and networks need funding to survive, and to maintain standards ethically, and more purely project-based funding risks exacerbating precarity and burnout at a time of high stress in the field.

POTENTIAL IMPACT:

Enables organisations of different scales to stabilise or grow while developing models which are sustainable for them, practitioners and participants, and potentially offer more learning for others.

RECOMMENDATION 4**Develop a new round of national funder partnerships.****HOW:**

Work with arts councils and others who can **effectively manage devolved grants schemes** in line with the aims of the Programme, requiring match funding, with Foundation investment at similar levels to recent years.

We recommend such partnerships and their priorities are developed in a co-ordinated strategic way that also **encourages collaboration between partners**. (Partners could include other organisations with relevant ‘footprints’ such as other trusts.)

WHY:

Partnerships with national funders provide the kind of UK-wide reach which could be very difficult otherwise to ensure with the Foundation’s small team. It also brings additional funding into the field.

POTENTIAL IMPACT:

Investment into all four nations of the UK, in the context of strategic relationships with key players which can also influence policies across and between the four nations.

RECOMMENDATION 5**Develop a Community of Practice and associated programme of knowledge sharing to disseminate learning and good practice.****HOW:**

Convene a **peer learning Community of Practice** (meeting online and in person, with appropriate support for travel and participation costs) to disseminate the learning so far and emerging good practice.

Collaborate with researchers, networks and health partners to synthesise learning in key areas of (to begin with) evidence and data, including evaluation frameworks that value both qualitative and quantitative data.

Make **digested learning, templates and toolkits** accessible, building on the strong track record of Creatively Minded publications.

WHY:

The Programme has helped create a wide range of tools – training programmes, evaluation frameworks, frameworks for health and well-being etc – that would benefit from being brought together and made more accessible to the field.

POTENTIAL IMPACT:

A long-term, evolving structure for field-wide collaboration and knowledge-sharing would help both embed and extend the learning and exemplars from the Programme, influencing practitioners, funders and others.

Appendix one: Interviewees

THANKS TO THE STAKEHOLDERS, STORY SHARERS AND SURVEY RESPONDENTS FOR THEIR INPUT, AND TO THOSE WHO TOOK PART IN REFLECTION ROUNDTABLES ON THE STORIES.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWEES

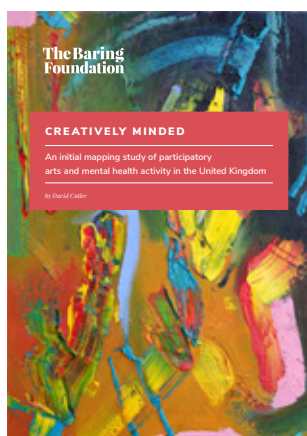
Vicki Amedume, Committee Chair, Baring Foundation
 Dan Allen, Arts Council Wales
 Lorraine Calderwood, Arts Council Northern Ireland
 Alexandra Coulter, National Centre for Creative Health
 David Cutler, Baring Foundation
 Lise Hansen, Thrive LDN
 Sabra Khan, Baring Foundation Adviser
 Clare Lovett, Greater London Authority, Culture & Creative Industries Unit
 Harriet Lowe, Baring Foundation
 Julie McCarthy, NHS Greater Manchester Integrated Care
 Daniel Regan, Baring Foundation Adviser
 Gillian Simonson, Museums Galleries Scotland
 Kim Simpson, Creative Scotland
 Hollie Smith-Charles, Arts Council England

MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE STORY SHARERS

Banu Adam, Arts 2 Heal
 Harris Albar, Tamasha
 Dr Tracy Breathnach, WAWHN
 Sam Broadbent, Company Chameleon
 Angela Daniel, Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust
 Emma Drew, Robin Hood Health
 Andrew Eaton-Lewis, Mental Health Foundation Scotland
 Alex Evans, Kazzum Arts
 Joy Hart, Hive Bradford
 Suzanne Gorman, Maya Productions
 Sandra Griffiths, The Red Earth Collective
 Victoria Hume, Culture, Health & Wellbeing Alliance
 Hannah Jenkins, Community Music Wales
 Cara McAleese, Maya Productions
 Rachel Nelken, Raw Material Music And Media
 Rachael Perrin, Soundcastle
 Dierdre Robb, Belfast Exposed
 Clara Shield, North East Museums
 Valerie Synmoie, Tamasha
 Simone Spray, 42nd Street
 Matt Steinberg, Outside Edge Theatre Company

Selected Baring Foundation resources

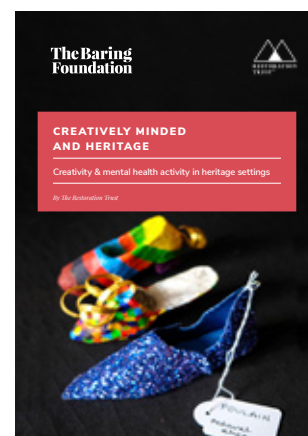
All resources can be found on our website www.baringfoundation.org.uk



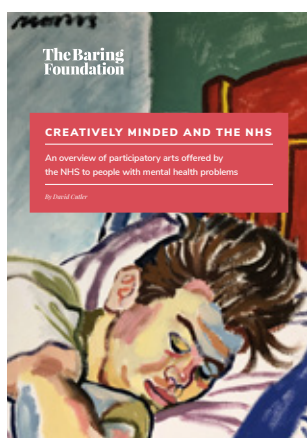
Creatively minded
David Cutler
2020



Creatively minded
and young
Harriet Lowe
2020



Creatively minded
and heritage
The Restoration Trust
2021



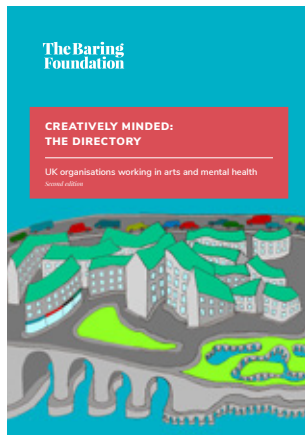
Creatively minded
and the NHS
David Cutler
2021



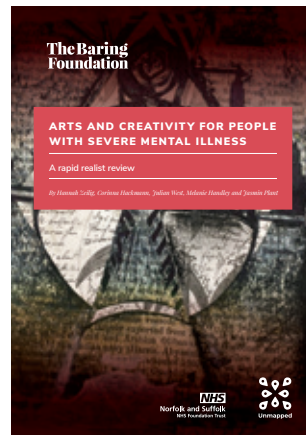
Creatively minded
and ethnically diverse
Compiled by
The Baring Foundation
2021



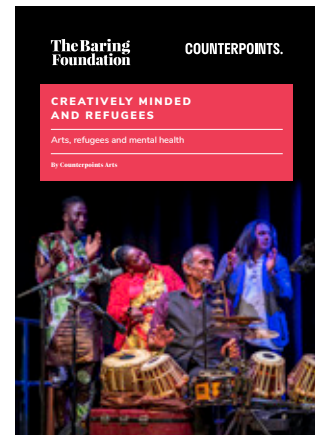
Creatively minded
at the museum
David Cutler
2022



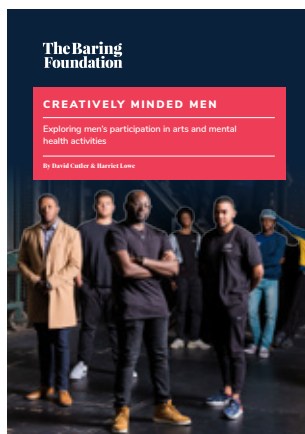
**Creatively minded:
the directory**
The Baring Foundation
2022



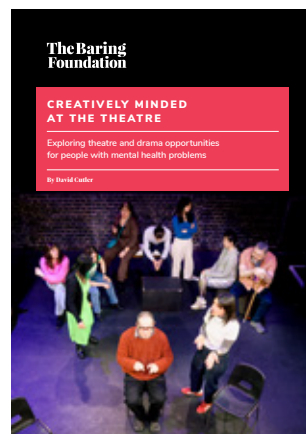
**Arts and creativity for people
with severe mental illness**
H. Zeilig, C. Hackmann,
J. West, M. Handley & J. Plant
2022



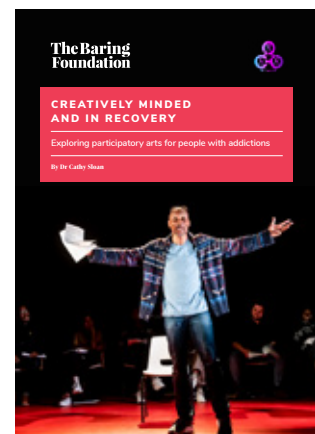
**Creatively minded
and refugees**
Counterpoints Arts
2023



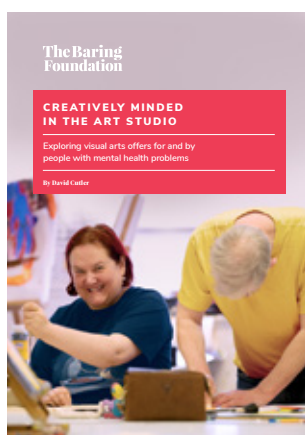
Creatively minded men
David Cutler
2024



**Creatively minded
at the theatre**
David Cutler
2024



**Creatively minded
and in recovery**
Dr Cathy Sloan
2024



**Creatively minded
in the art studio**
David Cutler
2025

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