

The Baring Foundation

CREATIVELY MINDED AND GREEN

Exploring outdoor creative mental health in the UK

By David Cutler



CREATIVELY MINDED AND GREEN

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. This report is the latest in the 'Creatively Minded' series exploring aspects of creative mental health practice.

About the authors

David Cutler is the Director of the Baring Foundation and leads its Arts programme. He is the author of several related reports including *Creatively Minded*, *Creatively Minded Men*, *Creatively Minded at the Museum*, *Creatively Minded at the Theatre* and *Creatively Minded in the Art Studio*.

Acknowledgements

The Baring Foundation would like to thank all the organisations and creative practitioners who contributed case studies for this report.

AI (Microsoft Copilot) was used as a research tool in the compiling of this report. In particular, it was used to source international examples of outdoor creative mental health work, see page 79. Whilst the information has been checked to the best of our ability, the Baring Foundation cannot guarantee its accuracy.

This report was edited by Harriet Lowe, Communications and Research Manager at the Baring Foundation, and designed by Alex Valy.

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Summary

This is the fifteenth report in the Creatively Mind series from the Baring Foundation. Each report shines a light on an area of arts practice that offers creative opportunities to people living with mental health problems. Every report, at its heart, has a collection of current case studies from around the UK. The great majority of these so far have taken place indoors in cultural, community, or clinical settings; this report looks at work taking place outdoors and the therapeutic power of nature.

The Baring Foundation is a human rights funder and our primary interest in creative opportunities for people with mental health problems is out of a concern that creativity and access to culture is a right which everyone should enjoy. However, that does not mean that we are unaware of the positive effects that this work has on many people's mental health.

An introduction defines our terms and scope of this report, including that we are not discussing qualified creative arts therapies, but considering participatory arts where trained artists work with untrained participants in what is often called co-production. We look at reasons for combining arts, mental health and the outdoors and its long history.

Eighteen self-reported case studies are then presented from England, Wales and Scotland. They cover multiple art forms and a wide

variety of organisations taking the lead on organising the work. The case studies give both evidence and testimonies as to the impact of the work on participants. However, it should be noted that these do not represent a systematic review of the sector.

We conclude by offering some reflections based on these case studies. It is essential to value expertise and experience in all three domains of the work – the outdoors, creativity and mental health. This normally entails several local partners. The examples show the appeal of combining the outdoors with creativity and how it is possible to attract a wide variety of people living with mental health problems given careful planning. Although funding can come from a variety of funding sources, there is certainly a need for more, especially from health funders including the NHS. A simple checklist for planning a project is offered drawn from these examples.

At the end of the report is a short directory of other work that we are aware of taking place in the UK. This will certainly be an underestimate and we are more likely to know about work by arts organisations. And as a bonus we also give a few examples of projects taking place outside the UK.



Bradford City of Culture Wild Uplands project (see page 22).
Photo © Matt Radcliffe.



Fabrica's Men Who Make
project, Brighton (see page 29).
Photo © Phoebe Wingrove.

Introduction

The great majority of creative opportunities for people with mental health problems happen within a building of some sort. That is also true as regards the grants that the Baring Foundation has given and the work which we have spotlighted in our series of reports called 'Creatively Minded' (see page 80-81 for a full list).

In this report we will be redressing this by putting on our walking boots and taking some deep refreshing breaths of fresh air. Some of the work discussed here will in part take place indoors, and even occasionally online, but most of it will be outdoors and as shorthand we will be calling it 'outdoor creative mental health'.

The arts – in particular participatory arts – have been a major area for Baring Foundation funding for a long time. The Foundation funds across art forms and throughout the UK. We tend to fund with a focus on a specific theme for ten years or more as we believe change is hard won. We approach the arts through a human rights lens: while aware that participation in the arts can have many benefits, including for health and wellbeing, our primary concern is the right of everyone to be creative.

The core of this report is 18 case studies of current practice in the UK, mainly drawn from our grant holders or wider networks. Practitioners from some of these organisations were kind enough to join a virtual roundtable. Otherwise the report has drawn on desk research, including the use of AI.

This introduction defines the scope of the report, looks at different reasons someone with a mental health problem might benefit from outdoor creative mental health, and offers a lightning history of activity in this area over two millennia.

SCOPE AND DEFINITIONS

Our series of 'Creatively Minded' reports try to put a spotlight on different facets of creative mental health. They are chiefly written for arts practitioners, funders and policy makers and do not aim to be academic in style. We seek to find examples of work from across the UK and where relevant across all art forms.

Mental health problems

Mental health is a highly contested area including in the language that is used. This report uses the phrase 'mental health problem', which is commonly deployed by organisations such as Mind and the NHS in England, but we recognise that some people may prefer other terms such 'mental health issues' or 'mental distress'. While we do indeed all have mental health, this report looks beyond preventative work with the whole population, wellness or mindfulness. While valuable, more has been written about this and it is not the focus of the Baring Foundation's funding programme.

An entire book could be devoted to defining mental health problems, but currently these tend to be grouped into: psychoses (affecting around 3% of the population), of which Bipolar Spectrum Disorder is the best known; and the much more frequent Common Mental Disorders, especially anxiety and depression. Addictions, such as to drugs and alcohol, are included as mental health problems, as are conditions such as eating disorders and the poorly defined Personality Disorders.

Participatory Arts

We define these as creative activities in which a trained professional artist of any art form is sharing their training and expertise with people who do not have their training. This process is often called 'co-production'. The term community arts is also sometimes used. A much fuller description and history of participatory arts can be found in *A Restless Art* by François Matarasso.

It is important to note that the different disciplines of Creative Arts Therapy, including drama, music and visual arts, are regulated and qualified schools of training with clinical examinations and continued professional supervision. They should not be confused with participatory arts. (For more on this see Dr Val Huet's contribution to our report, *Creatively Minded in the Art Studio*.¹)

Outdoor Arts

There is no official definition of outdoor arts (and some work can take place indoors or online) but here are some of the more common (and overlapping) types of work that could be grouped under this definition.

Nature-based craft and visual arts

This includes activities like painting outdoors, eco-crafts, photography, and creating art from foraged or natural materials. These activities are often slow, meditative, and suitable for grounding someone experiencing acute anxiety or trauma.

Creative walking and movement

Combining gentle physical exercise with creative exploration. This might take the form of "photo walks", historical heritage walks perhaps including sketching, site-specific, outdoor physical theatre and dance, and even singing walks. The act of moving through space while engaging the imagination has a powerful impact on both physical and mental wellbeing. There are some examples in a recent [Baring Foundation blog](#)² by Harriet Lowe.

Horticultural and allotment arts

Projects that blend environmental conservation, gardening, and land-based art. These projects are often highly communal, offering participants a sense of responsibility, the therapeutic rhythm of the changing seasons, and the literal fruits of their labours. We are especially interested where they go beyond gardening itself to include other arts such as photography or craft.

Site-specific performance and installation

Larger-scale, participatory theatre, music, or visual installations created in public, outdoor spaces. This type of work allows

Why don't we include gardening as a creative activity?

I am not sure I have a good answer for this question, though it is common if not universal for arts funders not to make grants for gardening *per se*. (One of the previous advisers to the Baring Foundation, Kate Organ, made the very good point that if we were working in the Eighteenth Century, gardening would be considered one of the higher art forms.) Gardening is evidently creative and in a sense is painting or designing using a different sort of material – plants. And the connection between gardening and mental wellbeing is also generally understood. Perhaps one of the most expert and thought-provoking analyses of this comes from Sue Stuart-Smith in her 2020 book *The Well Gardened Mind – Rediscovering Nature in the Modern World*. Dr Stuart Smith is a practicing psychiatrist as well as committed gardener and her book combines history, neuroscience and psychotherapy. However, in this report we will follow common practice among funders and include gardening when it is combined with another art form such as sketching or writing.

participants to reclaim public spaces, assert their presence in their local communities, and work collaboratively towards a shared, public outcome.

The case studies we have included often span several of these.

THE ARGUMENT FOR OUTDOOR CREATIVITY FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

The case for this type of work will be obvious to most people reading this report, but it does have at least four aspects.

Firstly, for the Baring Foundation we are always primarily concerned with the universal right to be creative and access culture. This is essentially a matter of access and equity. Therefore it is relevant that there are people who might find outdoor art the most appealing to their creativity. There could be a number

¹ *Creatively Minded in the Art Studio*, Baring Foundation, 2025.

² baringfoundation.org.uk/blog-post/double-dose-combining-creativity-and-walking-for-mental-health

of reasons for this. Someone might be most interested in responding to nature in their art. Being outdoors may also feel more distant from a clinical setting or a more formal environment such as in a library or a museum.

This leads to the second strand of the argument for outdoor arts which can be called the inherent love of nature or 'biophilia' that most of us feel. There is a whole area of research as to why green or 'blue' (water) therapy might be especially effective.

Thirdly, a major reason for experiencing outdoors arts is the ever-expanding body of research as to the health benefits of both creativity and being an audience member. A rightly applauded synopsis of this can be found in *The Art Cure* by Professor Daisy Fancourt (2026). A major impetus of arts and health, especially in England has been the universal provision of social prescribing. Among the different types of social prescribing are both arts prescriptions and green prescriptions. Obviously these can be combined in a single activity. It is worth noting that arts and health spans all health conditions and the interest of the Baring Foundation is narrower and is directed towards people with mental health problems.

Finally, it is worth considering whether combining outdoor activity with creativity benefits mental health more than either activity alone. This is sometimes called a 'synergistic' or double dose effect. There seems to be little research here. Research so far seems to have largely focused on work with children and young people who are not necessarily experiencing mental health problems. Work has also tended to be focused on people with the more common mental health problems of anxiety and depression. However the evidence is promising as to the value of the work when looking at the population as a whole rather than more specifically at people with mental health problems.³

Green Social Prescribing

Social prescribing will be well known to most readers of this report. It emerged through pilot projects run by GPs for instance Dr Simon Opher in Gloucestershire, or the Bromley By Bow health centre in East London, over twenty years ago. It has since grown into an international movement. The current system in England is for all GP networks to employ link workers funded by the NHS. At the behest of GPs, link workers will encourage patients to take up non-medical or clinical forms of activity which will benefit their health. One of these options can be the arts. Another is a variety of outdoor activities.

These can include community gardening, walking groups, conservation volunteering and 'forest bathing'. The National Academy for Social Prescribing has had a strand of work to investigate what constitutes good practice in green prescribing and has published a [tool kit](#).⁴ This used the evidence from a four-year £5.7 million green social prescribing programme funded by the Government,

A recent systematic review by Edge Hill University and the National Academy for Social Prescribing found that nature-based interventions can help people experiencing poor mental health feel calmer, happier, and less anxious or depressed.⁵ The review included some papers involving the creative arts, the subject of our report.

THE ENTANGLED HISTORY OF NATURE, THE ARTS AND MENTAL HEALTH

An instinctive appreciation of the power of the combination of nature and the arts must be as old as humanity. This was explored for instance as regards the visual arts by Dr James Fox in his BBC TV series called *Nature and Us*.

³ 'Arts-in-nature practice improves mental health and connection with nature', UCL Institute of Education, 2023. www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/research-projects/2023/may/arts-nature-practice-improves-mental-health-and-connection-nature

⁴ Green Social Prescribing Toolkit, National Academy for Social Prescribing: socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/what-is-social-prescribing/green-social-prescribing/green-toolkit

⁵ Howarth, M., Relph, N., Fletcher, K. (2025) The Role of Nature-Based Interventions in Supporting Long-Term Conditions through Green Social Prescribing: A Systematic Review. National Academy for Social Prescribing. socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/resources/green-social-prescribing-supports-long-term-conditions-new-evidence-review

More specifically as regards mental health, in ancient Greece, the Asclepieia – sanctuaries dedicated to Asclepius, the god of healing – were intentionally built on green hillside plateaus. These sites integrated natural elements like fresh water and panoramic vistas with creative rituals, music, and performance to restore psychological harmony.

By the medieval period, monastic communities in Europe established physic and cloister gardens. These enclosed green spaces provided a quiet refuge where the sick could rest, write, paint, or pray. These early models operated under the holistic belief that the human spirit, the physical body, and the natural world were deeply intertwined.

In the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth century, the moral management movement grew up and can be seen as the origins of modern psychiatry. Starting in York, this approach included both arts and recreation and an emphasis on the restorative powers of nature. Hospitals would normally have parks surrounding them which patients and staff would use. Patients would sketch outdoors and practise traditional crafts such as basketmaking. This approach declined as asylums became the victims of their own success, with more and more patients and overcrowding leading to declining standards of welfare and recreation.

The deinstitutionalisation of psychiatric services in the late 1960s coincided with growth of the community arts movement or socially engaged arts practice. This emphasised access for people who faced exclusion in society, including people with mental health problems and also sometimes took place outside built venues and in the outdoors. A separate but relevant development was the rise of 'eco-art' or 'land art'. This included the use of natural materials and creating public art works. By the 1990s the term 'eco-therapy' came into use.

Today the growth in combining the arts, nature and mental health becomes ever more apparent. This comes from at least three directions. The NHS recognises the importance of green social prescribing that often includes an arts strand. Environmental

or heritage charities use the arts and wish to include people with mental health problems in their services. And our main focus is on arts organisations serving people with mental health problems who see nature and the outdoors as significantly strengthening their offer.

Climate anxiety – the next phase of outdoor creative mental health?

The phrase 'eco-anxiety' is over twenty years old and 'climate anxiety' has been used in the media for over five years. The first thing to note is that climate anxiety is not in itself a mental health problem. Rather, it could be described as an understandable response to the climate change emergency. However, it tends to be a description more associated with a younger generation and can co-exist with the common mental health problems of anxiety and depression. In a survey for a Bath University research project 59% of young respondents stated that they were very or extremely worried about climate change.⁶

A number of arts organisations have undertaken work about climate change, especially with young people.

More broadly outdoors creative mental health can combine with climate activism to produce creative political protest.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

The major section of this report is a curated selection of 18 self-reported case studies of work that we are aware of and some of which we fund. Using this material the report concludes with some final observations about the state of the outdoors creative mental health sector and what more needs to be done.

In addition we have included an appendix listing further examples of work in the UK and a second appendix of some work taking place overseas.

⁶ Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey. Hickman, Caroline; Marks, Elizabeth; Pihkala, Panu et al. *Lancet Planetary Health*, Vol. 5, No. 12, 31.12.2021, p. 863-873. researchportal.bath.ac.uk/en/publications/climate-anxiety-in-children-and-young-people-and-their-beliefs-ab

CASE STUDIES

Young participants in Lyth
Arts Centre's Out of the Blue
project. Photo © Claire Hughes



Amser I Siarad

BY CLARE BAILEY

Clare is CEO of Amser I Siarad.



Photo courtesy of Amser I Siarad.

ABOUT US

Amser i Siarad was established in 2002 (originally as Ynys Môn Mind) to support people experiencing mental health problems across the communities of Anglesey. As the organisation evolved, it relocated from Holyhead to Caernarfon and expanded its reach to serve both adults and young people across **Anglesey** and **Gwynedd**. Its core purpose is to improve mental health and wellbeing through accessible, community-based support. Rather than working in traditional clinical settings, Amser i Siarad delivers its services in local

community spaces, helping to reduce stigma and make support feel more approachable. Since 2006, the organisation has also championed the creative arts as a key part of its service delivery model. We are run by a small, efficient core team of three, supported by additional sessional workers.

Our core work supports people experiencing a range of mental health problems through therapeutic group sessions, confidential 1:1 support, and creative arts programmes and training.

“We’ve long championed the creative arts as a vehicle for not just supporting the mental health and wellbeing of people, but as a vehicle for tackling stigma, and presenting more realistic narratives about people who experience mental health problems.”

Clare Bailey, CEO Amser i Siarad.

ABOUT OUR PROJECT

For this case study, we focus on Synyriwm, a creative arts project developed in partnership with Amser i Siarad and Galeri Caernarfon, alongside the National Trust at Plas Newydd House and Gardens.

For the first stage of this project, we recruited in-house at Amser i Siarad by sharing the opportunity with existing service users, who then self-referred based on interest and readiness.

The project had a core group of around ten participants, aged 18 to 70+, representing a genuinely mixed cohort. This included four males and six females, with ages spanning each decade from 18 through to the 70s. All participants had lived experience of mental health problems, ranging from moderate conditions through to individuals who had required inpatient treatment.

Participants worked with five professional artists across disciplines including textiles, painting, music, film, and mixed media. Over several months, they explored creativity in relation to wellbeing in green nature and heritage spaces, producing work that culminated in two exhibitions.

Sessions took place within the outdoor green spaces of Plas Newydd, a Grade I listed landscape of 40 acres, alongside sessions at Galeri Caernarfon, itself based on the waterfront of Doc Fictoria in Caernarfon.

The project made full use of woodland walks, the rhododendron garden, Italianate terrace, arboretum, and seafront areas at Plas Newydd. These varied environments provided both inspiration and a calm, restorative setting that supported reflection, connection, and creative expression.

Partnership working was central, combining therapeutic support, artistic expertise, and access to a rich natural heritage environment to deliver a meaningful, mental health and wellbeing experience.

“Connecting people to nature and history is fundamental to the work of National Trust Cymru. This project offered a wonderful opportunity to work with others to help support these connections, making the site feel really useful to the community. Hosting the artists and participants at Plas Newydd where they could connect with nature and history to inspire new artworks was just brilliant.”

Taya Plas Newydd, National Trust Cymru

For stage two of the project beginning shortly at the time of writing, recruitment has expanded beyond in-house participants to include members of the public, widening access to the project. This phase will build on the nature-arts focus, with a particular emphasis on the co-development of a dedicated sensory garden. This new element will create an inclusive, therapeutic space shaped by participants, designed to support wellbeing through engagement with plants, textures, scents, and the natural environment.

OUR IMPACT

The impact of Synyriwm on participants’ mental health and wellbeing has been both measurable and deeply personal. Pre- and post-project wellbeing questionnaires and scales provide clear evidence of positive change.

“When I come to the workshops, I really feel fulfilled, I feel useful and that I have a purpose I feel like I fit in here. I’m not an outsider, I’m not isolated. Before the session so many thoughts were flying through my head but when I’m here creating, I can just be.”

Participant



Plas Newydd. Photo courtesy of Amser I Siarad.

Overall, 96% of participants reported that the workshops supported their mental health and wellbeing. Many described a consistent improvement in how they felt after each session, with one participant noting they “always feel better” and feel fortunate to attend. Mood improvements were also significant, with 77% reporting a brighter outlook and reduced anxiety following sessions. Participants frequently spoke about feeling more relaxed, optimistic, and inspired creatively.

The project also strengthened self-esteem (74%) and self-confidence (72%). Through engaging in a range of creative practices and sharing their work, participants developed a stronger sense of identity and belief in their abilities. One participant reflected on feeling part of a collaborative group, highlighting the importance of connection and shared experience. Additionally, 74% reported being better able to manage anxiety, often describing a physical sense of release and calm during sessions.

Qualitative observations reinforce these findings. Participants formed friendships beyond the workshops, demonstrated increased social confidence, and showed greater independence in attending sessions and engaging with new environments. Many

took creative risks, shared their work publicly, and even stepped into leadership roles, such as proposing and leading peer activities.

The project demonstrated the significant positive impact of art on mental health, providing participants with structure, purpose, and a sense of achievement. Many reported improvements in self-confidence, self-esteem, mood, and anxiety levels, highlighting the value of creative engagement as a form of wellbeing support.

Friendships and peer connections formed during the sessions, with several participants expressing a desire to return should the project receive further funding. Notably, one participant was inspired to lead a personal craft workshops at Galeri, showcasing how the project encouraged initiative and long-term creative involvement.

A strong sense of connection and belonging developed among participants. Over time, individuals who initially felt isolated began to feel more linked into their community, with growing confidence in both their creativity and themselves. This was visible in how participants opened up, collaborated more easily, and supported one another within the group.

A particularly meaningful moment was when one participant offered to design and lead an art workshop for others. This demonstrated a significant increase in confidence and self-belief, and marked a shift from participation to leadership. Others described similarly positive changes – one shared they had “got their mojo back”, while another highlighted how simply having a reason to leave the house each week had made a real difference to their wellbeing.

An unexpected impact was also felt by staff. A team member from Amser i Siarad and one from Galeri Caernarfon attended each session and both reported improvements in their own mental wellbeing. They described the project as the highlight of their week, with time spent

in nature, engaging creatively, and connecting with others providing a meaningful and restorative boost.

“Synwryiwm has been about collaboration, care, and creativity. We’ve seen how powerful it is when art is rooted in place, in people, and in wellbeing. This is just the beginning – we hope to grow the work, nurture these partnerships, and continue building a community where creativity supports mental health in lasting, meaningful ways.”

Ffion Evans, Galeri.



Artlift

BY CATH EAST

Cath is Executive Director of Artlift.



Photo courtesy of Artlift.

ABOUT US

Artlift, established in 2006 in Gloucester, was one of the UK's first Arts on Prescription providers. With universities partners, we hold the largest known body of Creative Health wellbeing data globally, contributing to influential research that has helped shape the UK's Creative Health sector.

Artlift focuses on interventions embedded in clinical pathways and co-produced projects that address health inequities. Supported by NHS Gloucestershire ICB, we deliver:

- Arts on Prescription programmes for adults experiencing mental health and chronic pain challenges.
- Creative Health workshops for NHS teams.
- Co-produced projects that tackle health inequities or explore innovative approaches to health management.
- Flourish Magazine, created with and for the cancer community.

Artlift contributes to sector development through research, consultancy, training, and through collaboration with Gloucestershire Creative Health Consortium partners.

Our small team, including multiple Experts by Experience, consists of four part-time administrative staff, 11 Artist Facilitators, ten volunteers and eight trustees,

OUR WORK

Artlift runs a 'Create Well' Arts on Prescription programme for adults living with mental health challenges. Additionally, we co-produce projects addressing under-representation in our participant base and/or health inequities. Currently, our mental health engagement projects are focused on working with men (thanks to Baring Foundation support) and with Black and Asian adults experiencing mental health challenges.

Our Create Well courses are delivered in eight community/cultural venues and online. Most people are referred via health/VCSE professionals; people can also self-refer. We take a personalised approach, offering participants 1-1 'Creative Check-ins' through which to co-produce a tailored 'Move On' plan, as well as group sessions drawing on diverse artforms. Participants unable to join groups (e.g. due to high social anxiety) can work on a tailored programme with our Creative Navigator.

Create Well participants in 2025/26, were aged 18 to 80+, 79% female, 9.6% male, 10% non-binary. 23% identified as LGBTQIA+, 9.5% as non-White British, and 67% as disabled. Over 80% were not working, most due to health, disability or caring reasons.

Participants in our health equity projects were predominantly Black British, Caribbean and African, of mixed heritage, or South Asian. Our Open Door residency and Integrated Offender Management commission projects benefited men of multiple ethnicities.

Where possible, we select venues for our mental health projects and Arts on Prescription courses where outdoor spaces can be used, e.g. Museum in the Park in Stroud.

Artist Facilitators also draw on nature for materials and inspiration, e.g:

Our '**Creative by Nature**' course comprises activities such as using leaves to impress patterns on clay bowls, loading twigs/plants with paint and splatting them onto paper.

STAR STORY...



“When I first came to Artlift after being referred, I was anxious and depressed, not sociable and very much in my shell. The idea of joining a group activity caused nervousness and hesitation. Upon attending the first session, Lisa, my Artist Facilitator, welcomed me in. The sessions were designed to be calm, free from pressure... Lisa's supportive approach played a crucial role in helping me to feel safe.

I didn't feel forced, was gently guided and kept in the moment through art and connection with nature. From that very first session, something changed. I started to feel hopeful and excited and knew I would keep coming back.

I started volunteering with Artlift two years ago as an artist assistant. It's been a mutually supportive and enriching experience. I'm now able to support others who feel like I once did. I can empathise with new participants, and I hope to encourage them.

Artlift doesn't feel like a transaction – it's run by humans, for humans.

I've learned that I'm stronger and more capable than I ever believed. My own artistic learning has broadened, and I love witnessing how people express and contain their emotions through art. It's incredibly powerful to see what people create. ”

Milly, Creative by Nature participant.

This activity really helps participants to relax, have fun, and feels less 'stressed' about having to create something 'accurate'/'perfect' as well!

Having to go and find materials encourages participants to go out more into the forest, on walks, or just in their gardens. Participants report appreciating their gardens and green surroundings more following their Artlift course, as well as less concern about the potential barrier of cost of materials, as they know they can use free/affordable items in and around their own homes. This has supported them to stay creative post-intervention.

In our ‘**Turn Your Page**’ course, vegetables are used to create dyes and effects. Participants make their own books that are full of prints, collages, and painted images or patterns. It helps people to tell their own stories in their own way, using affordable and innovative techniques. The use of cabbage water and the different effects also amaze and surprise participants impacting positively on their mental health and their joy in the simple things (i.e. vegetables!) around them.

For our ‘**Creativity with Photography**’ course, participants start by walking around the beautiful Stratford Park and Museum gardens in Stroud to mindfully observe and select pictures to take on their phones. They then use the images taken in nature to create artworks using different media and processes to create powerful images, e.g. using cyanotype photography.

OUR IMPACT

Wellbeing, anxiety & depression

Last year, over 64% of participants evidenced improvement in their mental health, and 54% in physical health.

Just under 70% of survey respondents reported improvements to their anxiety and 74% felt positive impact on depression. Other positive impacts mentioned were on: chronic pain (8.7%), confidence, PTSD, and on being in social situations.

Qualitative evaluation tells us that multiple participants experienced improvements to their mental health:

“ I do feel my wellbeing has improved and I am definitely managing my stress better. My anxiety is reduced and I am getting a much more positive outlook on life. ”

Participant

Combat loneliness and isolation

Getting better at communicating / being with others was selected by over 30% of participants who set personalised goals.

“ I feel like my anxiety levels have reduced and I am able to talk to a stranger and have made new friends. ”

“ Artlift forced me out of my house when I was really struggling with my mental health, and gave me an outlet to just be light-hearted, have a chat, and enjoy making something which brought me joy. ”

Participants

Enabling participants to sustain creative activities

85.3% of participants confirmed their intention to continue with arts activities – to stay creative at home, join another provider’s group, and/or access Artlift’s [online resources hub](#).⁷



www.artlift.org

B.ARTS

BY KATH STANWAY

Kath is Co-Artistic Director at B.ARTS.



Photo courtesy of B.ARTS.

ABOUT US

B.ARTS is a participatory arts organisation based in Stoke-On-Trent with a 40-year track record in co-creating arts projects with communities and artists. Our vision is of a society where everyone has an equal chance to take part, and by taking part can make change for the better in themselves, their place and their communities. Our artforms range from site specific theatre, carnival, lanterns, to neighbourhood festivals, spoken word, and visual and textile arts; we always try to shape work in response to the specific people and place we are in.

B.ARTS works with people with mental health problems across our general programming, but also run creative projects co-created specifically with people with experience of mental health problems (often working in partnership with mental health support organisations).

ABOUT OUR PROJECT

In September 2024 we launched a new programme – Men Who Make Things, a creative wellbeing space for men. This was launched in response to a direct need identified by our



Photos courtesy of B.ARTS.

Stoke-based communities, artist team and health partners for a creative space focussed on male mental wellbeing.

The project provides a free, weekly creative making and wellbeing space for men led by B.ARTS' Studio Artists Dan and Rich, held every Wednesday evening. The group offers a range of creative making including carpentry, metal work, prop-making alongside a space for conversation and connection.

Participants help to programme the sessions, as well as being invited to take part in collaborative projects, for example working on creating set for new productions including the children's show, *The Lost Note*, and *Punishment Acts* in partnership with Rideout and Expert Citizens, and have recently designed and made a set of bat and bird boxes to installed in the grounds of a nearby church as part of their nature connection activities.

Since September 2024, 50 men have taken part, with an average attendance of 13-15 per week.

The project has strengthened our partnerships with health practitioners/social prescribing services and opened up wider conversations about male mental wellbeing and creativity locally.

The project also enabled us to employ a dedicated counsellor for the sessions.

We have continued to partner with mental health support agencies, including: Growthpoint, Changes, Asylum-Seeker & Refugee Mental Health Support Team, GP referral and social prescribing services, as well as forming new partnerships with student mental health and wellbeing support services at Keele University and Staffordshire University, homeless support services and addiction services.

“It's not just the Wednesdays – although it's been great to meet all the guys that go – it's also all the other stuff we've done. Because we've been making things for events we've been going to them as a group too, so we went to Cheadle Lanterns to see our work in action and then on the People's Parade... I wouldn't normally go to things like that, but actually it felt good to be part of something like that.”

Participant

We have recently been working to build a shelter for another mental health group based on a local allotment – we are currently building in the workshop, with plans to assemble the shelter during a session on-location. For Pockets of Paradise, B.ARTS' urban community garden project, we have been making a compost bin, potting stations, and creative signage, using reclaimed wood and pallets.

Attendees of the Men Who Make Things project report feeling more connected, both to the other group members – and to the wider community and the cultural activity of the city. In some cases when they joined the project, they had highlighted that they felt quite isolated.

A participant who comes regularly to Men Who Make Things is also a frequent attendee at a Mental Health project which has acquired

an allotment site from the local council. It was suggested by the participant via our suggestion box that we could potentially make a shed for the group. We ran this by the group and we decided that would be a great idea. It has helped create a connection with another wellbeing operation run by a social prescriber. It shows our commitment to not only providing making opportunities for participants but also to enable participants to reach out and connect with other community initiatives and offers. This has been an empowering experience, particularly for the participant who suggested it, who has particularly precarious living conditions and displays distress that he has little agency.



Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture, led by Bradford Culture Company

BY SARA ROBINSON

Sara was Mental Health Engagement Lead for Bradford City of Culture 2025.



The Wild Uplands project. Photo © Matt Radcliffe.

ABOUT US

Bradford 2025 was the UK City of Culture – a huge year-long celebration of our city and district, covering 141 square miles.

It delivered more than 5,000 events, creative education and health programmes, investment into buildings and organisations across the local sector – and most importantly created more opportunities for Bradford people, to help lay the foundations for long-term transformation.

Bradford Culture Company is the charity which oversaw the UK City of Culture, and in 2026 is working in partnership with communities and organisations to make sure that Bradford can build on the success of last year.

OUR MENTAL HEALTH ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMME

Bradford Culture Company agreed a groundbreaking, funded partnership with Healthy Minds and **Bradford District and**

Craven Mind (BDCMind) to ensure mental health was considered and woven into Bradford 2025.

A key part of this investment was the Mental Health Engagement Programme (MHEP), which was set up to ensure people living with Severe Mental Health challenges (SMIs) could get involved.

Our programme ran from mid-August 2025 to the end of March 2026 and engaged 391 people with SMIs.

We provided free tickets to 54 different events and specially arranged trips including theatre, comedy, music, exhibitions, family events and participatory workshops. Outdoor events included festivals, film under the viaducts, [Bradford on Foot](#),⁸ artist led walks, and a sculpture trail on the Haworth moorland with [WildUplands](#).⁹

The programme also delivered week-long residencies at two local psychiatric hospitals.

26 organisations from the wider mental health sector brought or referred people, taking advantage of the wrap around care we provided, which was essential to its success. This included the offer of free transport, refreshments, specially arranged seating, a quiet space and a consistent welcoming face. Consideration of individual needs along with clear and detailed information up front, helped people feel able to get involved with Bradford 2025 City of Culture. 50% of people came back at least once.

“Living with social anxiety, depression, and psychosis; I was initially apprehensive to attend the events – especially independently. However, with such welcoming support, they became more readily accessible, and a rich rewarding experience. Thank you. I wasn’t sure about the ‘Year of Culture’ but I’m a convert and I’m glad to have been included.”

Participant

ABOUT OUR PROJECT

We’d like to focus here on our **Wild Uplands** trips, which involved taking people with SMIs, up to see the temporary sculptures set on top of Penistone Moor in Haworth. They were created by four artists from the UK, Palestine, Kuwait and Brazil.

An accompanying digital resource meant we could enthuse people before and after they came.¹⁰

Each trip lasted around 4-5 hours and began with a meet and greet cuppa at the Old Schoolroom in Haworth (where Charlotte Bronte used to teach!), before jumping in a mini-bus up to the moors. Led by an artist, we took a 1.5 mile gentle wander round the sculptures, learning about the art-works and their connection to the landscape. We took time to appreciate the natural environment, fresh air and panoramic views around us, occasionally stopping to sink into each of our senses and make some small (non-obligatory) drawings. We then travelled back to the School House for lunch, followed by a hands-on visual arts workshop inspired by the sculptures.

People were referred and usually accompanied to Wild Uplands by art therapists, occupational therapists, psychiatric hospitals, Community Mental Health Teams, Early Intervention in Psychosis Unit, The Cellar Trust, BDCMind and Bevan Healthcare who work with people seeking sanctuary.

We created risk assessments collaboratively because we were on rough terrain and wanted to manage people’s expectations and ensure their needs were met.

Over five different trips, a total of 48 adults with SMIs attended alongside 21 staff and two family members.

OUR IMPACT

We produced [12 minute film](#)¹¹ is about the focus and impact of the whole Mental Health Engagement Programme.

The Wild Uplands trips themselves were amongst the most impactful because of that

⁸ bradfordculture.co.uk/programme/bradford-on-foot

⁹ wilduplands.bradfordculture.co.uk

¹⁰ wilduplands.bradfordculture.co.uk

¹¹ bradfordculture.co.uk/about/investing-in-the-future/mental-health-programme

STAR STORIES...

An Occupational Therapist who works at the local psychiatric hospital said:

“One service user had a surge of energy after the Wild Uplands walk, which led him to do more walks and build a connection with the environment. Then he got a bike and has since been discharged. These events give us an energy and momentum to go again.”

For one participant, J, who lives in the area, the trip and the art work shifted something fundamental for him:

“That day helped me come to terms with a certain amount of trauma linked to my Bipolar in this same area. The sculptures made it a safe space. It's like seeing it anew. It went from being a dog toilet to a sculpture park. You've all given me confidence to sit with groups more and I've joined two cycling groups and re-engaged with the village in some small ways. Since then I've been into Bradford for the first time in six years and visited three galleries.”

H (44, woman), who was first brought to the Wild Uplands trip by the Art Therapist team responded to my request for feedback afterwards in an email:

“I wanted to let you know that I thoroughly enjoyed the Haworth trip on Friday. I was initially very nervous but meeting people

in the group was wonderful and getting to know/understand their needs and personalities.



This trip gave me something to look forward to as being outside in nature helps my mental health but having the cultural aspect also was incredible and stimulating. The walk was great being on top of the moors and learning about the artists who have done the sculptures was fascinating. I don't have much communication with what's happening out in the world and I'm so grateful and happy that I got the chance to see them.

The team were incredible, very understanding, patient and helpful. I don't get to go out often due to my physical and mental conditions and it felt like just the perfect day. I cried with happiness. I don't mind telling you I'm 55 days sober and clean.

Hearing that there are more happenings gives me some hope in mankind and myself that I can get out there again. I actually slept for two days straight afterwards which is a rare thing these days.”

H is now eight months sober, and despite ongoing acute physical challenges, came to three more events.

combination of being outdoors in nature, alongside iconic art simultaneously. There was something existentially reaffirming about being up on those moors with panoramic views, looking at contemporary art pieces that ask questions of who we are and why we are here.

“I think it increased people's connection to nature a lot – you can't engage with the artwork without engaging with the landscape and I think people really benefitted from this.”

Project Producer

Participants said it brought them respite and stress release, improved their mood, the opportunity to meet artists and do something different beyond the confines of the mental health context, a new way of looking at their local area, and for some it gave hope and perspective.

“Having special times like this, up here away from it all makes me feel better inside. All the cobwebs have been blown away.”

Participant



The Wild Uplands project. Photo © Matt Radcliffe.

“ It’s like being on top of the world. Naseem (artist) is so kind and knowledgeable. I love the wool art piece. It’s so bold to make it that big how does the wind not make it fly off? ”

“ Today has reduced my depression levels, cleared my mind and made me feel great. ”

“ I’ve never done anything like this – drawing something from the sculptures in my head and putting it on the page. I can focus. ”

Participants

One of the artworks explored the idea of migration with giant butterflies and another piece created giant ‘djinnns’ which are ancient, spiritual creatures still discussed in many cultures around the world. This often kick-started discussions with participants who could relate, and therefore felt included.

“ X came alive when we got to the piece, She rarely talks but it ignited something in her. I think bringing different cultures close to people here and this iconic Bronte setting means people feel seen. ”

Occupational Therapist



creativeShift

BY JULIE MATTHEWS

Julie is Director & Strategic Development Lead at creativeShift.



Outdoors at the creativeNature project. Photo © Nick Hudson / creativeShift

ABOUT US

creativeShift has been a leading force in the development of arts on referral in Bristol for 15 years. Working collaboratively with healthcare providers, arts practitioners and cultural organisations, we exist to bring the positive health impacts of art and creativity to people who are vulnerable to social isolation and physical or mental health challenges across the city, with past projects also covering South Gloucestershire and North Somerset.

We created the Bristol Creative Health Ecosystem and are the leading partner for the West of England Creative Health Network. Our team of three directors works with specialist arts facilitators who bring a range of creative experiences to groups including 'creativeNature' (outdoor workshops for men) and creativeRoots (also outdoors, for 11-15 year-olds). Our unique pathway and ongoing support encourages engagement with creativity not just in the short term but for life.



Photo © Nick Hudson / creativeShift.

We design and facilitate a number of arts on referral groups across Bristol. Groups are free and open to all, and provide a safe space – led by experienced facilitators – to develop creativity, learn new skills and meet new people. No previous arts experience is necessary and participants learn at their own pace in a supportive and friendly setting.

All our groups are designed for people with poor wellbeing, low self-esteem, low-level depression, anxiety or stress. They may be socially isolated and struggling with chronic health conditions and pain, or life challenges such as divorce, bereavement or caring responsibilities. Groups are not designed for people who are engaged with primary or secondary mental health care.

Some of our groups take place in green spaces to further promote mental health, by inviting participants – who may experience barriers to outdoor experiences – to enjoy time in nature. These settings include accessible, tranquil spaces in the city, such as a community church garden in Kingswood, and 'Homeland', a beautiful and secure site on the edge of Bristol. These spaces provide therapeutic, natural settings for workshops, and provide access to greenery, trees, wildflowers, meadows

and orchards. Sessions are often centred around a fire to promote warmth and comfort, and a supportive space for conversation and connection.

ABOUT OUR PROJECT

While we work with a broad range of people, from children and teenagers to adults and seniors, and all genders, our **creativeNature** group is for men only. During our initial funding period we delivered 36 two-hour weekly sessions, and approximately 25 men have participated in the programme. Participants are usually referred via social prescribing gateways, and we have built strong and trusted relationships with referrers who value our experience and reputation in the field. Fresh Arts, Southern Brooks and Developing Health & Independence, an addiction rehabilitation centre in Bristol have all referred participants to creativeNature.

This project invited male participants to improve their wellbeing through creativity and nature. Led by arts practitioner Sam Baum, a graphic designer and musician with experience of engaging vulnerable groups, creativeNature combined grounding exercises, talking opportunities and varied creative activities with time in nature – all proven strategies for improving mental wellbeing.

Sessions were centred around a fire, helping to establish a sense of calm contemplation and a place for supportive, open conversations about how participants were feeling each week. Encouraging participants to notice the sights, sounds and smells around them provided a connection to the senses, while creative activities were varied, including willow weaving, printmaking, photography, sculpture and bookbinding.

The rhythm of the sessions remained steady and familiar: grounding, checking in, sharing drinks, creating together. creativeNature has shown that men need spaces like this – for those who have taken part, it has been something special. A place to arrive, to breathe, to make things with their hands, and – crucially – to remember that they are not alone.

OUR IMPACT

We work with a trusted academic to evaluate and research our work, and inform best practice at creativeShift and other arts on referral providers. Our evidence demonstrates that 80% percent of participants in our groups report lower levels of stress and anxiety, and positive distraction from pain, life issues and illness. Seventy percent report a reduction in depression, 90% an increase in confidence, self-esteem, achievement and satisfaction, and 60% feel less isolated and lonely.

Our groups provide meaningful distraction from personal difficulties and physical symptoms, while also providing a place for people to come together in real life, mitigating the impact of loneliness on wellbeing. Participants build resilience and learn empowering life skills and wellbeing techniques that can aid their mental health outside of the group. Our personalised

approach and ongoing support doesn't just support people while they participate in a group but is ongoing, through signposting to follow-on groups and the chance to become a group volunteer or lead, providing personal development opportunities that build esteem and confidence.

As well as the quantitative evidence that shows our impact on participant mental health, anecdotal feedback supports our work.

“I'm more happy and more in tune, more active and more relaxed than I would normally be.”

Participant



Fabrica

BY LUCY GROENEWOUD

Lucy is Project Manager at Fabrica.



The Men Who Make project. Photo © Phoebe Wingrove.

ABOUT US

Fabrica is a Brighton-based arts charity. Based in a Grade II-listed former Regency church in the city centre, Fabrica has evolved from a contemporary visual arts venue into a civic space focused on creativity, wellbeing and community connection.

In addition to our artistic programming, Fabrica delivers year-round, artist-led programmes across Brighton and Hove, supporting people experiencing poor mental health, isolation and disadvantage. Fabrica is a strategic partner in The Living Coast UNESCO Biosphere – the only arts organisation within this network – playing

a leading role in connecting creative practice with environmental action, public engagement and place-based wellbeing.

We operate with a small team of nine part-time staff, alongside freelance artists and facilitators. Annual income is approximately £360k-£430k, drawn from a mix of earned income, public funding, trusts and foundations and individual giving.

In our 30th anniversary year, Fabrica is focused on sustaining inclusive, community-based creative programmes that support mental health, strengthen connection to place and enable people to feel part of their local environment.

OUR WORK IN GREEN SPACES

Creative mental health sits at the heart of Fabrica's work, with over 10 years' experience delivering year-round, artist-led wellbeing programmes. We provide non-clinical, preventative support that reduces isolation and builds confidence, particularly for people who may not engage with formal services. Increasingly, our work connects creativity with place and the natural environment, supporting both mental wellbeing and a deeper relationship with local landscapes.

A key strand of our work supports people who may not traditionally access mental health services, including men, refugee women, and people experiencing long-term isolation. We combine ongoing weekly provision with structured courses to provide both continuity and progression. Our Men's Creative Space runs year-round as a weekly programme providing routine and a trusted environment. Alongside this, targeted programmes such as Men Who Make and Baring Foundation funded LGBTQ+ Men Who Create offer more focused support. Participants are typically aged 31–69 and may be experiencing depression, addiction recovery or social isolation, or at risk of suicide.

Participants access our work through both self-referral and referral pathways via social prescribing teams, NHS-linked services and community organisations such as MindOut, Together Co, Voices in Exile and LGBTQ+ Switchboard. These partnerships are essential in reaching people who are often underserved or excluded from traditional provision.

Our approach is 'shoulder-to-shoulder', where people engage through shared creative activity rather than direct discussion of mental health. This reduces stigma and enables people to connect at their own pace.

“Working with my hands to create things has been surprisingly effective for my wellbeing. I left every session better than when I arrived.”

Men Who Make participant



Photo © Phoebe Wingrove

Alongside this, we work with refugee and asylum-seeking women, older adults, and low-income families, many of whom face multiple and overlapping challenges.

Programmes take place in community and outdoor settings across Brighton and Hove, including gardens, parks, allotments and coastal environments, providing calm, accessible spaces that support connection and recovery.

OUR 'MEN WHO MAKE' PROJECT

In 2024, we ran a six-week bushcraft course as part of our Men Who Make programme. Sessions took place at a Brighton & Hove City Council seniors housing site in Whitehawk, an area of high deprivation, evidencing that impactful outdoor work can take place within urban environments and be accessible to local communities.

The setting enabled us to work with both residents and external participants, creating new connections and allowing residents to experience their home environment in a different way, engaging with outdoor space in ways many had not previously experienced.

Sessions focused on practical, hands-on activities including basket weaving, stone carving and bushcraft using natural materials. The outdoor setting, centred around a shared fire pit, created a calm and informal environment where participants could engage without pressure. The side-by-side nature of working outdoors, with the fire as a focal point, was key to encouraging connection in a natural and accessible way.

OUR IMPACT

Over the six weeks of the Men Who Make bushcraft project, strong relationships developed. Participants reported feeling more relaxed, more optimistic and better able to cope with challenges. 100% of participants recorded improved wellbeing scores, with an average increase of 20%.

“Have really enjoyed the course and feeling sad that it has to finish. I have learnt new skills and that has helped improve my overall wellbeing.”

Participant

Fabrica's nature-based creative programmes as a whole deliver clear, measurable improvements in mental wellbeing, particularly for people experiencing isolation, anxiety and depression. Across our outdoor work, participants consistently report feeling calmer, more connected to others and more positive about their lives.

Using the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS), we see reliable increases across key indicators, including optimism, relaxation and feeling close to others. In one recent programme, 100% of participants recorded improved wellbeing scores, with an average increase of 20%.

Time spent in green and blue spaces is central to these outcomes, creating calm, non-clinical environments where participants feel safer, more relaxed, and more open to connection. Activities such as bushcraft, woodworking and outdoor photography provide a practical focus that supports relaxation, confidence and social connection. Outdoor environments reduce barriers to engagement, offering calm, non-clinical spaces where participants feel more comfortable connecting with others.

“It has been brilliant to get out of the house and out of my doldrums.”

Participant

Participants consistently report reduced isolation, improved mood and stronger peer relationships. For many, sessions provide a vital weekly structure and a reason to leave the house, helping rebuild routine and confidence.

“Being outside with the birdsong and the campfire has been really precious.”

Participant

Fabrica's work combining creativity, nature and peer support provides an effective, preventative approach to mental health, supporting long-term wellbeing and connection to both people and place, while contributing to reduced demand on statutory health services.



Ikon Gallery

BY REGAN MCDONALD

Regan is Public Health Research Officer at the Ikon Gallery.



What are the Odds? Ikon Creative Health installation view (2026). Photo by Tod Jones. Image courtesy Ikon.

ABOUT US

Ikon is an internationally acclaimed contemporary art gallery in Birmingham, West Midlands. An educational charity offering free entry for all, the gallery programme features artists working in a variety of media, including sound, film, photography, painting, sculpture and installation. Ikon's off-site programme develops dynamic relationships between art, artists and audiences outside the gallery. This includes social engaged work co-created by artists and community members in education, health and justice settings.

OUR PROJECT

Ikon partnered with Living Well Consortium to raise awareness of, and engagement with, topics centred on mental health and wellbeing to run the project **Green Spaces** in 2024. Birmingham-born artist Jaskirt Dhaliwal-Boora worked with community members in Erdington, a suburb of Birmingham, taking photographic portraits against the backdrop of the city's green spaces, and exploring the benefits of nature to our health.

Dhaliwal-Boora created photographic portraits of community members – Alan, Jack, Jane, Hannah, Mary, Kayleigh and Melvyn – that

were exhibited and published alongside their personal reflections of exploring their local green spaces.

Community members were signposted to the project via Living Well Consortium, a West Midlands' leading mental health consortium, which consists of over 30 Third Sector mental health organisations. Consortium members use their experience and networks to work in a cross-collaborative way, to relieve the pressure felt by the medical services, by delivering free community-based and community-oriented services that focus on prevention, wellness, recovery, and resilience.

In terms of choosing green spaces to explore, the artist, Jaskirt Dhaliwal-Boora, notes how; "We are spoilt for choice when it comes to Birmingham's well-known green areas, from Sutton Park to Moseley Bog. Yet it can be our encounters with the less celebrated spaces in our city that make life that fraction more pleasing on a daily basis – our gardens, allotments and hidden sports fields, the interventions of rewilding in urban areas like the work of Erdington Little Busters."

Jaskirt Dhaliwal-Boora is a multi-disciplinary artist with a socially engaged practice, working with local communities on global

issues. Dhaliwal-Boora received the RPS (Royal Photographic Society) Award for Social Impact 2025 in recognition of sustained excellence that highlights or contributes to demonstrable improvement in public awareness of social issues.

OUR IMPACT

As the project facilitator, it was important for Dhaliwal-Boora to be open about her own lived experience:

“This work came at a time of personal upheaval for me. In December 2023, a loved one was sectioned for a mental health crisis, and in January 2024 I had surgery on my dodgy left knee. The work aided my physical recovery, whilst mentally it got me out of my house and out of my head by being creative again and making new work with people in Erdington.”

Project facilitator

What are the Odds? Ikon Creative Health Launch, Library of Birmingham (2026). Photo by Tegen Kimbley. Image courtesy the artist.



For community member Hannah it was an opportunity to reflect in Pype Hayes Park, a space that she accessed as a child:

“From walking past the playground, down to the stream, and up to the pond, there’s a story to be told. Snowy, rainy, or sunny, it’s always a beautiful place to walk through and get away from the worries.”

Participant

Jack took the opportunity to explore a new space:

“There was stillness in the air. A gentle breeze joined me on my walk, and I was content. I’ve been to the place a couple of times, not for anything eventful, but instead to find solitude and a bit of restfulness amongst life.”

Participant

Ikon exhibited the photography and texts produced during Green Spaces in June 2026. From August 2024 to March 2025 Green Spaces toured to the grounded. Hall Green,¹² a community focused wellbeing hub founded by Living Well Consortium and funded by NHS England. From January to June 2026, it was included in the exhibition *What Are The Odds? Ikon Creative Health*, supported by Art Fund at the Library of Birmingham.¹³

Jaskirt, Alan, Jack, Jane, Hannah, Mary, Kayleigh and Melvyn have continued to follow the exhibition, advocating for greater access to green spaces in support of our physical and mental health.

In Jane’s words:

“Wide open spaces, filled with birdsong and children’s laughter... Tall trees, grass and spikey bushes with multi-coloured berries...Remembered taste of summer blackberries ripe on my tongue...The cold wind drying the tears on my cheeks, and sunshine drawing me out of the cloying mud of a difficult winter to enjoy the hopeful signs of rebirth in every leafy bud and cheerful daffodil. This place has been there to comfort and refresh me, to hide me and console me. A green oasis, breathing life and wellbeing to all who visit.”

Participant



www.ikon-gallery.org

¹² groundedcafe.co.uk/hall-green

¹³ <https://www.ikon-gallery.org/exhibition/ikon-creative-health-at-the-library-of-birmingham>

Impact Initiatives' Wild Mind
Project. Photo © Caleb Yule.



Impact Initiatives: Wild Mind Project

BY JENNIFER TULLOCH

Jennifer is Head of Children & Young People Services at Impact Initiatives.



Photo © Caleb Yule.

ABOUT US

Impact Initiatives provides a voice, hope and change for Sussex people in need: supporting them to live healthy and fulfilling lives. For over 47 years we have provided valuable services for adults, older people, children, young people, and families, demonstrating our commitment to fostering positive change and supporting those in need. Our Children, Young People and Families Services provide safe places for children and young people to live, learn and

play. Our Adults and Older People Services improve life for adults with disabilities and older people.

Our services are run by experienced and dedicated staff, and supported by volunteers where possible. Funding comes from a range of sources, including council, NHS, trusts and foundations and individual supporters.

Impact Initiatives has supported people with mental health needs across Sussex since 1978, with a strong focus on early intervention and community-based support.

OUR PROJECT

A key project is the **Wild Mind Project**, which works with young people aged 11–25 experiencing anxiety, low mood, social isolation and other emerging mental health challenges. We typically engage 60–80 participants per year through small group cohorts, with a diverse mix of genders, including young people who identify as non-binary. Many participants face additional challenges such as neurodiversity, low confidence or difficult home environments.

We primarily support young people with mild to moderate mental health needs, including those at risk of escalation, as well as some who are known to CAMHS or other services.

Participants are referred through schools, CAMHS, youth services and local community organisations, alongside some self-referrals. Our wider youth provision is based at our Young People's Centre in Brighton, where we are co-located with other local non-profit children's organisations, creating a supportive and accessible hub for young people and families.

Wild Mind takes place in outdoor settings across Brighton & Hove, including Stanmer Park and local coastal areas. These natural environments are central to the programme, providing calm, accessible spaces where young people can build confidence, develop practical conservation and heritage skills, express themselves through creative activities and improve their wellbeing through connection with nature.

We work in partnership with a range of organisations. The Wild Mind Project is supported by UOK for participants aged 18–25 and the Focus Foundation. Across our wider work, we are supported by partners and funders including the NHS, Brighton & Hove City Council, Garfield Weston Foundation and BBC Children in Need.

Our approach is preventative, inclusive and person-centred, helping young people build resilience, improve their mental health and feel more connected to their community.

OUR IMPACT

Our work supports young people to improve their mental health, build resilience and feel more connected to their community. Through

STAR STORY...



One young person joined the Wild Mind Project experiencing high levels of anxiety and low confidence. They were initially hesitant to engage and found new situations challenging. With gentle support and a welcoming group environment, they began to take part in activities and gradually built confidence. They particularly enjoyed sessions at a local agricultural college, where they were introduced to practical, hands-on skills. This setting helped them feel calm and focused, and they began to take pride in their achievements. Over time, they formed connections with others and started to think differently about their future.

After completing the programme, they enrolled in a blacksmithing course at the college, something they would never have previously considered. This marked a significant shift in both confidence and aspiration.

Another participant used their experience to create an LGBTQ+ gardening group with peers they met through the project. Drawing on the skills and confidence they had gained, they created a safe, inclusive space for others, demonstrating the lasting impact of the programme beyond our sessions.

“I'd like to learn new things and meet new people.”

Participant

the Wild Mind Project and our wider services, we see reductions in anxiety and low mood, alongside increased confidence, self-esteem and sense of purpose.

Participants often join feeling isolated or overwhelmed. By offering a supportive, non-clinical environment, we help them re-engage at their own pace. Outdoor activity is central, with many reporting that nature helps them feel calmer and better able to manage their emotions.

We measure impact through pre- and post-programme evaluations, alongside ongoing informal feedback. Young people are regularly asked what they enjoyed and what could be improved, and help shape future sessions, ensuring the programme remains responsive to their needs.

Feedback shows improved wellbeing, stronger social connections and greater confidence. Many participants build lasting friendships through the groups, reducing isolation and creating peer support beyond the programme. They also gain practical skills and a sense of achievement.

“I think this is the best activity programme that could be prescribed to young people with mental health issues. I’ve made a supportive group of friends and would encourage anyone to do it.”

Participant

Participants leave with improved coping strategies and increased readiness to engage with education, training or other support, helping prevent escalation to more acute mental health needs.

“Thank you so much for letting L attend the Stanmer Park group they have been a different child and is gutted it has finished.”

Parent



Lapidus Scotland

BY KEN COCKBURN

Ken is Creative Projects Manager at Lapidus Scotland.

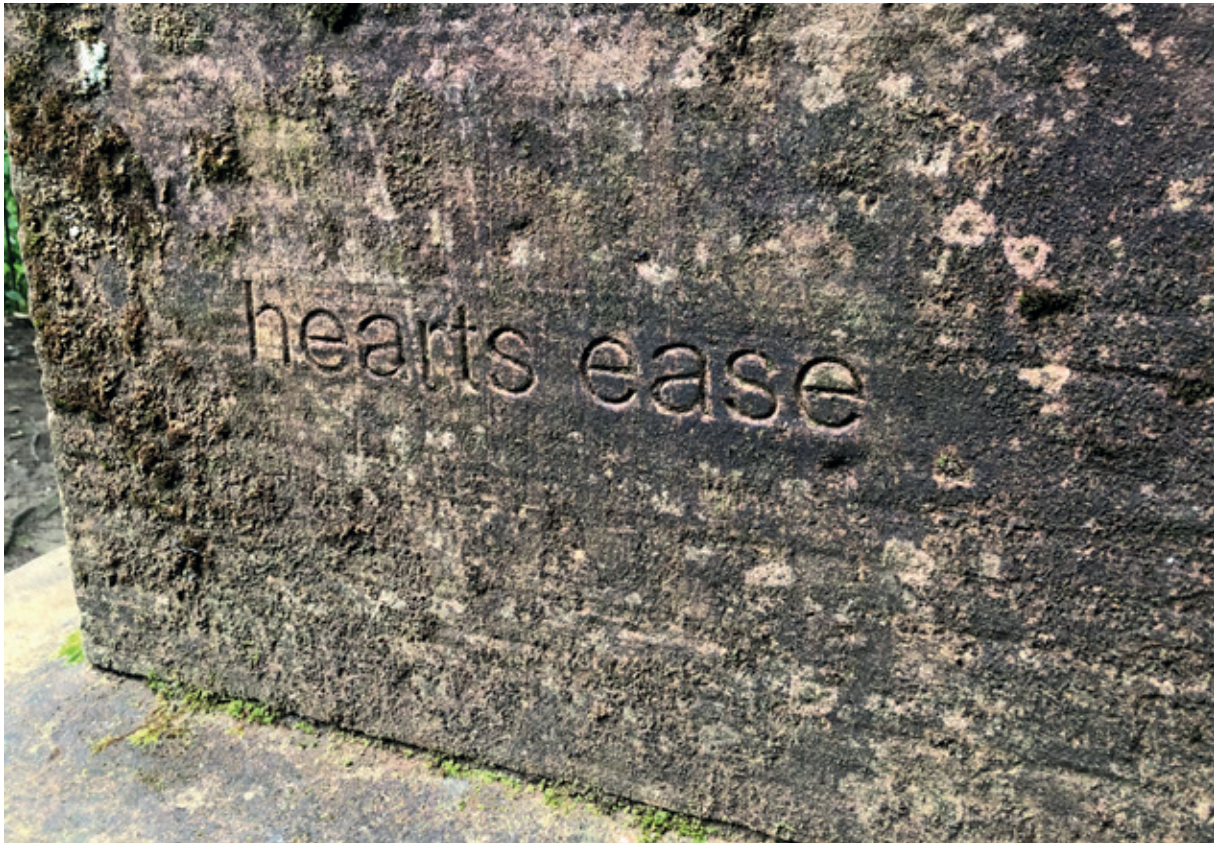


Photo © Christie Williamson. Part of a poem by Gerry Loose inscribed on Kirklee Bridge, Glasgow.

ABOUT US

Since 1996 Lapidus Scotland (LS) has explored and expanded knowledge and understanding of the value of words for wellbeing. We know from evidence-based research that reading, writing, place-awareness and storytelling are powerful tools for improving health and wellbeing, and contribute to personal and community development. We collaborate with experienced facilitators and have worked with statutory and voluntary organisations supporting people with long-term conditions including Maggie's

Centres, Glasgow Association for Mental Health and Women's Aid. From 2018 to 2023 LS received funding from Glasgow Health and Social Care Partnership to run activities for those with long-term physical and mental health conditions in Glasgow. LS is an occasional publisher, producing anthologies of work by those attending our groups. Books include *Seven Journeys* (2021) and *Steps Spark Our Words* (2023). LS is based in Glasgow and works across Scotland. We are an independently constituted voluntary organisation with links to Lapidus International.

ABOUT OUR PROJECT

In 2023-24 Lapidus facilitated group activities featuring reading and writing for wellbeing for members of Flourish House, Glasgow. Flourish House is a community organisation with around 250 members. Membership is open to people aged 16+ from the Glasgow City area who have a diagnosis of a serious mental illness (SMI) and are connected to a Community Mental Health Team. Flourish House actively encourages referrals from people in hospital, whether for long or short term and especially to support discharge planning for a return to the community.

Activities took place in Glasgow at Flourish House, the nearby Woodlands Community Garden, and in public green spaces, from Autumn 2023 to Autumn 2024. We ran four blocks each of ten sessions: Art into Writing, Mindfulness and Writing, Walking Writing Talking, and Writing the Garden, working with about 40 Flourish House members.

“We all really looked forward to coming each week. We learnt more about ourselves and each other.”

“I felt today’s class was inspiring and gave me a sense of hope... I take this creativity with me as I engage in the world and its value cannot be underestimated.”

Participants

Writing the Garden sessions, facilitated by Gerry Loose, took place mainly at Woodlands Community Garden, with some work at Flourish House itself. Sessions covered such topics as recipes, seasons, garden work, wild gardens, city gardens and public gardens in spring.

Prompted by these sessions, Flourish House members went on to redevelop their own garden, which had become neglected, and made a film about the process. (Sadly Gerry died suddenly before the project was completed, and never saw the redeveloped garden.)



Photo © Christie Williamson.

HIGHLIGHTS...



These are some notes on two Walking Writing Talking sessions.

“7th June, from Flourish House to Kelvingrove Park. Five participants, including a man who had a stroke. He had forgotten his stick so I invited him to lean on me, which he did. We made it to the Park and back very slowly, with many pauses along the way. One woman took many photographs.”

“5th July, a blind walk waking up all six senses. Three participants. We took turns leading the walk. The leader had their eyes open, the other two walked behind – eyes closed – with a hand on the leader’s left and right shoulder. We walked slowly with an awareness of all our senses. When the leader’s attention and curiosity was drawn to something, we all stopped and made ‘field notes’ of everything we could see, hear, touch, smell, taste, as well as as our thoughts and emotions. Swapping roles, we moved on, stopping again to make notes. We finished with a wander through Woodlands Garden – identifying plants, smelling (lavender, sage, mint), sometimes tasting (nasturtium, rocket, oregano), touching rough courgette leaves, stoking kale and picking daisies... When one of the walkers felt cold, we returned to Flourish House and did some writing.”

“Some of the changes we made based on things we chatted about in Gerry’s class were: growing herbs, painting the walls, a wooden bin store with green roof, new decking, taking out the strange mural and general tidy. We did a lot with the space since we first started chatting about it with Gerry.”

Staff member, Flourish House

OUR IMPACT

Mindfulness and Writing participants were asked to note their state of mind before and after the sessions.

Before they said:

Churning emotions / A little tired & weary /
My head is mushed, scrambled, not feeling
my best / Half-tired / Glad – though tense /
Stressed, bit over the place, got a lot going
on at the moment.

And after:

Peaceful compared / Feeling more energised & balanced / I really enjoyed the meditation, being in the moment / Frustrated at B—. (I’m part of the generation she was criticising.) / Better than I was / Feeling more at rest.

Christie Williamson, Walking & Writing facilitator, found the sessions stimulating and enjoyable – he felt “unusually useful”, in the sense of being able to improve people’s lives.



Lyth Arts Centre

BY CHARLOTTE MOUNTFORD

Charlotte is the Director of Lyth Arts Centre.



Photo © Claire Hughes.

ABOUT US

Lyth Arts Centre (LAC) is the UK's most northerly mainland arts centre, based in Caithness in the far North of Scotland. We present a year-round programme of live performance, contemporary visual art and participatory projects across a large, rural geography.

A core part of our work is socially-engaged practice, delivered through long-term partnerships with local communities. Our programmes are co-designed with participants

and often take place beyond traditional arts venues, responding to the specific context of rural and coastal life.

We work across Caithness, a region characterised by dispersed populations, limited transport infrastructure and significant rural inequality. These factors can contribute to social isolation and barriers to accessing cultural and wellbeing opportunities.

LAC operates with a small core team supported by freelance artists and practitioners, delivering projects that prioritise access, participation and



Photo © Claire Hughes.

creative development. Our work increasingly explores the relationship between creativity, place and wellbeing, particularly in outdoor and coastal environments.

ABOUT OUR PROJECT

Out of the Blue was a participatory arts and “blue health” education pilot working with young people in Caithness. Whilst not framed as a mental health intervention, the project responded to high levels of anxiety and depression reported among young people in the Highlands, and explored how creative engagement with coastal environments could support wellbeing.

The project worked with a small group of young participants (aged approximately 14 -18), who also acted as peer researchers. Participants were engaged through existing youth networks and LAC’s ongoing relationships with young people locally, rather than through formal referral pathways.

The programme combined outdoor activity with creative reflection. Participants took part in a series of facilitated sessions in coastal environments including beaches, saltwater baths and harbours. Activities included surfing, outdoor swimming, underwater photography, snorkelling, coastal walking and guided mindfulness. These experiences were followed by creative workshops in writing, photography, sound recording and installation-making.

The outdoor setting was central; Caithness has extensive but often underused “blue spaces” despite being a coastal region. The project

STAR STORY...



One participant joined **Out of the Blue** feeling anxious about entering the water. At the start of the project, they described fear and uncertainty around the sea, something not uncommon in coastal communities where the water is both familiar and potentially dangerous.

During a surfing session, they initially stayed at the edge, hesitant to fully engage. With encouragement from peers and facilitators, they gradually entered the water and, over time, attempted standing on the board. When they succeeded, even briefly, the sense of achievement was significant.

Later, reflecting on the experience through creative work, they described a shift from fear to pride, and from avoidance to curiosity. By the end of the project, they reported continuing to engage in outdoor swimming independently.

This experience illustrates how the combination of supported outdoor activity and creative reflection can enable meaningful personal change. It wasn’t just about learning a new skill; it was about reframing a relationship with place, building confidence and recognising personal capability.

For this participant, the sea moved from being a source of anxiety to a space of possibility.

aimed to deepen participants’ relationship with these environments and build confidence in accessing them safely.

The project was delivered in partnership with freelance artists, a university researcher, and specialist providers (including qualified lifeguards for water-based activity). Safety, both physical and emotional, was prioritised throughout.

Although the project did not specifically target people with diagnosed mental health conditions, it created a supportive, peer-led environment where participants



Photo © Claire Hughes.

could build confidence, social connection and self-expression, key factors in mental wellbeing.

The project culminated in a multi-media installation and exhibition designed and installed by the young people and presented at LAC.

OUR IMPACT

The project demonstrated strong impacts on participants' wellbeing, confidence and sense of connection, to both place and each other.

Participants reported increased confidence, new friendships and a greater willingness to try unfamiliar activities. Many described a shift in their relationship to the sea and coastal environments, moving from anxiety or disconnection to enjoyment and regular engagement.

Creative reflection played a key role in this. Through writing, sound and visual work, participants were able to process their experiences and recognise the emotional and psychological effects of time spent in blue spaces. Outcomes aligned with known

contributors to positive mental health, including social connection, physical activity, grounding and self-efficacy.

One participant noted that the project helped them *"talk to people and express my feelings freely"*, highlighting the role of creative practice in enabling communication and emotional expression.

“ [The project helped me] talk to people and express my feelings freely. ”

Participant

The final exhibition extended impact to wider audiences. Visitors reported feelings of calm, relaxation and reflection, suggesting that the immersive installation captured elements of the “blue health” experience and created space for conversations about wellbeing.

The project showed that participatory arts in outdoor coastal settings can be a powerful, accessible route into improving wellbeing, even where mental health is not the explicit focus.

Small Woods Association / Coed Lleol

BY ALISON MOORE

Alison is Social Forestry and Wellbeing Manager at Small Woods / Coed Lleol.



Photo © Small Woods Association / Coed Lleol.

ABOUT US

Small Woods Association / Coed Lleol is a national charity. We promote sustainable management of small woodlands for economic, social, health and environmental benefits. Providing education, training, research and advice to woodland owners and users, with a strong emphasis on supporting woodlands for the wellbeing of people and planet.

Our HQ is the Green Wood Centre in Coalbrooke, Ironbridge and targeted project delivery across areas of Wales and England. We also have a base for Wales in the Forestry

Hub in Machynlleth. There are currently approximately 25 paid employees, as well as a wide number of freelance Activity Leaders commissioned to offer a wide range of skills in nature.

Our Social Forestry work highlights:

- improving mental and physical health through woodland activities;
- reducing social isolation and building community;
- supporting sustainable woodland management and community engagement.



Photo © Small Woods Association / Coed Lleol.

We are a small team with big ambitions to support people and woodlands as widely as possible.

OUR PROJECT: BREAKING BARRIERS

Over the past few years, Coed Lleol through our work in Swansea, has been on a deliberate and evolving journey to make local woodlands more inclusive, representative and meaningful for the diverse communities who live around them. Rooted in the belief that access to nature is not equal and that wellbeing is deeply influenced by culture, identity and connection, this journey has brought together outdoor learning, heritage skills, food, storytelling and increasingly, art in nature.

What began as a project focused on widening access to outdoor skills has grown into a broader movement, one that places cultural diversity, creative expression and community voice at the heart of woodland engagement.

Recognising barriers and building trust

For many people from culturally diverse or marginalised backgrounds, woodlands can feel unfamiliar, inaccessible or disconnected from everyday life. Language barriers, lack of representation, cultural differences around land use and previous experiences of exclusion can all limit participation. Coed Lleol recognised that traditional outdoor programmes alone were not enough; relationship building and cultural understanding had to come first.

This learning shaped the initial **Breaking Barriers** project in 2023, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The project was designed to support adults and families from multicultural backgrounds across Swansea to engage with woodlands through practical outdoor skills, while also creating space for cultural exchange, shared learning, mental wellbeing and community connection.

Breaking Barriers evolved in close partnership with trusted community organisations: Race Council Cymru (RCC) and the Centre for African Entrepreneurship (CAE). These partnerships

ensured that sessions were shaped by the needs, values and lived experiences of participants, rather than imposed expectations.

Breaking barriers through shared experiences

The project began with taster sessions at Kilvey Hill, introducing partner organisations and community leaders to woodland activities such as foraging walks, green woodworking, fire lighting, nettle cordage, bird box making and nature connection. These sessions, built confidence among partners, enabling them to describe and promote the experience authentically to their communities.

During the summer holidays, demand from families working with Race Council Cymru was so high that sessions ran twice weekly. Children and adults alike took part in bug hunting, shelter building, fairy gardens, clay modelling, nature crafts, candle and soap making and outdoor cooking. These sessions were lively, joyous and deeply relational, with parents learning alongside children and friendships forming naturally through shared activity.

As the project moved into autumn, programmes diversified further. Walking groups explored Clyne Valley Woods, learning about local trees, plants and the area's industrial heritage. Women-only sessions at the Hillside Wildlife Corridor, led by female facilitators, focused on medicinal plants and simple herbal preparations, creating culturally sensitive spaces for learning, conversation and confidence-building.

Across all seasons, one theme consistently emerged: food. Preparing, cooking and sharing meals on the fire became central to every session. Participants spoke of how outdoor cooking reminded them of home, of family gatherings and of cultural traditions where food is a key expression of care and belonging. These very human moments often helped overcome language barriers and created deep bonds between people who might otherwise never have met.

The project ended with festive craft sessions, willow weaving at Crymlyn Bog and a celebratory event at Penllergare Woods. For one participant, basket weaving held special meaning, reconnecting her with memories of her father, who had been a basket maker. Such

moments highlighted how heritage and craft skills can bridge generations, cultures and personal histories.

From skills to stories: art in nature emerges

While Breaking Barriers focused on access and participation, it revealed something deeper: participants were not only learning skills, they were telling stories. This insight helped shape the next phase of Coed Lleol's journey: the integration of art as a tool for expression, healing and representation.

In partnership with Arts in Health (Swansea Bay University Health Board) and Swansea Print Workshop, Coed Lleol delivered a creative programme combining woodland activity with printmaking and artistic exploration. Running from April 2024 to March 2025, the project supported adults and families experiencing mental health challenges, as well as those from culturally marginalised communities.

Artists and outdoor leaders worked side-by-side in local woodlands, creating environments where participants could experiment creatively without pressure or judgement. Nature became both studio and inspiration.

For many, this was their first experience of making art outdoors. One participant, Martyn, had struggled with his mental health for many years and was referred through the mental health charity, Hafal. Despite having studied art earlier in life, the sessions helped him rediscover creativity in a new, more grounded way.

“It's helped boost my creativity and ignited that spark again... I'm trying new things, talking to people more easily, and going outside into woodland areas near me.”

Participant

Since joining the programme, Martyn has become more socially confident, started volunteering at a gallery and reestablished a sense of purpose; demonstrating how art in nature can support both recovery and growth.



Photo © Small Woods Association / Coed Lleol.

Broadening representation and belonging

Building on this success, Coed Lleol continued to expand its culturally inclusive woodland offer through funding from the Scottish Power Foundation, with programmes in 2025 and 2026 continuing to work with diverse families and youth groups across Swansea and developing to include groups such as a bespoke LGBTQ+ “Our Queer Nature” closed programme in Carmarthenshire.

Throughout the programme, a range of art in nature skills were offered, including: nature printmaking, cavestyle painting with natural pigments, clay wood spirits, straw craft, bramble cordage, nature journaling, friendship jewellery, wand making and of course, more outdoor cooking. These creative practices allow participants to express identity, emotion and story, often in ways that words cannot.

Importantly, closed and culturally specific groups ensure that participants feel safe, affirmed and represented, enabling deeper engagement and trust.

Nature connection is so valuable to supporting personal wellbeing and encouraging future generations to protect and care for the natural world. By widening the types of art and heritage skills we offer, we are reaching people who may never have felt that woodlands were for them.

Learning, legacy, and the path forward

Coed Lleol's journey has shown that inclusion in nature is not achieved through access alone, it requires listening, flexibility, partnership and a willingness to evolve. By combining woodland skills with cultural exchange, shared food, creative expression and art, Coed Lleol has begun to create spaces where people can see themselves reflected and valued. We have now expanded our framework of Activity Leaders in South Wales to include a number of artists, who have been increasingly employed across our different funded Social Forestry programmes, to bring their talents into new settings.

This work continues to shape organisational practice, influence programme design, and strengthen partnerships across health, arts and community sectors. Most importantly, it is helping to grow woodlands as places of belonging for all, where nature, culture, creativity and community can meet and connect.

“Developing community partnerships and allocating resources to aid the attendance of the participants was key to the success of these projects. Travelling to and attending the groups with familiar people from the partnership organisations allowed the participants to feel safe and comfortable coming to an unfamiliar woodland setting and allowed those with limited English to communicate with us through the attending staff. Ensuring that the partnership organisations were involved in the planning and delivery of the sessions ensured the sessions met the needs of those attending.”

Nico Jenkins, Woodland Wellbeing Project Officer



Social Material CIC

BY DANIEL BAKER-WELLS

Daniel is Artistic Director of Social Material CIC.



Queer bugs walk. Photo courtesy of Queer Nature Club.

ABOUT US

Social Material CIC is an interdisciplinary arts and social design studio: developing new models for social structures, networks and practices to hold and support positive transformation for individuals, communities and society.

We were founded in East London, when we established a new art school on site at a mental health facility for adults with high support needs. We ran the studio for 12 years, alongside a growing number of projects combining artistic practice with nature or

environmental themes. Since 2025, after an organisational review, we are now primarily focused on running Queer Nature Club.

ABOUT OUR PROJECT

Queer Nature Club is a community of people who are interested in exploring ideas of queerness in nature, encountering nature through the arts and creativity, and building an alternative network of peer-led solidarity and support. We are currently based in the South West of England (with members in Somerset, Devon and Dorset).



Herb foraging walk. Photo courtesy of Queer Nature Club.



Natural ink workshop. Photo courtesy of Queer Nature Club.

We are LGBTQIA+ led, and we are inclusive of friends, allies and anyone interested in exploring ideas that challenge colonial, patriarchal and hierarchical conceptions of nature and our place within it.

We don't publicly advertise our work as being 'mental health focused', but over 80% of our members have, or have experienced mental health challenges. We work with LGBTQIA+ and mental health support groups and charities, particularly in smaller towns and villages, where demand for the Club is higher. We also work with GP surgeries and green social prescribing, but prefer to be seen as a community rather than a service.

In 2025, we had over 500 participants, and have a growing membership of over 150.

Our activities are led by artists and poets, including Sixto-Juan Zavala, Lone Maria Rojas, LiLi K. Bright and Edward Luke Thrush, with the involvement of ecologists, naturalists and nature guides, including Jazmeen Isa-Qureshi, Connor Butler and Stephen Moss. Our events and activities are designed to be as accessible as possible, with almost all of our work in nature reserves being fully wheelchair accessible, with transport provided.

We have a 'Cultures of Reverence and Respect' document and practice, which outlines our approach to working together and with nature: respecting identities, personal boundaries, intersectional access challenges,

and respecting the living things that surround us, and the environments and ecologies that sustain us.

We work in partnership with a range of LGBTQ+ and health organisations and nature reserves, including Yeovil Diversity Project, Glastonbury Pride, Proud2Be, 2BeU, Natural England, the Wildlife Trusts, South Devon National Landscape and the National Trust.

LGBTQIA+ individuals in the Southwest of England, particularly in rural areas, experience significant challenges: particularly isolation, disconnection and loneliness as a minority. A high proportion have disabilities, neurodiversity and/or chronic health conditions, and many face everyday discrimination (homophobia & transphobia).

These challenges can often lead to, or be related to, mental health issues, including high rates of depression and anxiety (estimated to be 60-70%); and other challenges including gender dysphoria, body dysmorphia, eating disorders and bipolar.

Our approach is not to 'treat' mental health as a condition to be cured, but instead to build a positive, open, member-driven community that can reshape society and our belonging within it by challenging and reframing inherited ideas of what might be 'nature' and 'unnatural' through collaborative learning and creative practices.

Our approach is guided by queer ecological thinking: a re-visioning of natural history, biological sciences and social structures through a lens that understands queerness not as an anomaly, but integral and patterned in extraordinary ways throughout the natural world. In this way Queer Nature Club offers a radical alternative to exclusionary, oppressive systems of thought and generates new possibilities of belonging, identity, and imaginative ways of understanding oneself in society. This kind of learning and unlearning offers powerful pathways towards healing a wounded relationship with society and the world: which is at the heart of many mental health challenges.

OUR IMPACT

In our ongoing reflection and evaluations, members have talked about a new sense of belonging, discovering new passions, building new relationships, and experiencing powerful and positive re-alignment in their understanding of the world.

“I didn’t know that nature was so queer, it has really changed how I think about things. I feel like that quote: ‘nature held me close and found no fault with me’ is really true.”

Participant/member

We have had the privilege of being part of many transformative experiences: members have come out for the first time within the context of the club; others have reduced their medication or changed their approach to their health entirely; parents of trans teenagers have come to a new understanding of ‘queerness’ which has changed their own assumptions and initiated positive new journeys of learning and acceptance; many members have built new relationships for ongoing solidarity and support; and others have been inspired to get involved in conservation, activism and volunteering opportunities.



Swansea Bay UHB: Arts and Minds

BY JOHAN SKRE AND MELANIE WOTTON

Johan is Arts & Heritage Service Manager
and Melanie is Arts in Health Project Manager at Swansea Bay University Health Board.



Urdd Eisteddfod, courtesy of Swansea Bay Arts and Minds.

ABOUT US

The Arts & Heritage Team sits within the Quality and Safety Department, Nursing Directorate at Swansea Bay UHB (SBUHB), which serves a population of around 390,000 in the Swansea and Neath Port Talbot region.

SBUHB has three major hospitals providing a range of services: Morriston and Singleton in Swansea and Neath Port Talbot Hospital in Baglan, Port Talbot. In addition, community hospital and primary care resource centres provide clinical services outside the main hospitals. Mental health and learning disabilities services are provided both in hospital and community settings. Forensic

mental health services are provided to a wider community which extends across the whole of South Wales.

The Arts & Heritage Team consists of one full-time staff member, two part-time staff members and two volunteers.

ABOUT OUR PROJECT

We have completed Year 1 of Phase 2 of the Arts and Minds initiative, supported by the Baring Foundation and the Arts Council of Wales,¹⁴ which focusses on supporting the mental health of Children and Young People (CYP) in Wales.

¹⁴ arts.wales/news-jobs-opportunities/arts-and-minds-arts-programme-support-youth-mental-health-across-wales



Photos courtesy of Swansea Bay Arts and Minds.

Our approach was to build a strong partnership with colleagues in the CAMHS School In Reach Service (SIR), SBUHB, which works with over 275 primary and secondary schools plus homeschooled children in the SBUHB region, to address the need for prevention and early intervention support for mental health problems. The service is part of the broader CAMHS structure in Wales, designed to offer early, accessible mental health support to improve emotional health and wellbeing, build confidence, and help prevent escalation and referral to specialised clinics.

We also consulted with SBUHB Public Health Nutrition teams.

We identified Year 5–6 pupils with emerging mental health needs as a group who could benefit from creative approaches to support wellbeing, particularly as they transition into comprehensive school where pressures on them become more complex and attendance has dropped significantly in recent years.

We conducted a week-long consultation during the Urdd Eisteddfod for children and young people in May/June 2025, supporting daily events including live music performances, drawing, animation workshops, and created two art installations with artists, Haf Weighon and Dewi Tannatt Lloyd.

Central to the installations was the question :

“Beth dwi angen i lwyddo?” / “What do I need to succeed?”.

Over 1,300 children and young people contributed to these installations which explored their connection to home, family, friends, community and the planet, and how different determinants such as food, sleep, nature, friends and physical activity ranked in shaping their mental health.

Working with School In Reach services, we then identified schools in need of support, predominantly from deprived areas of SBUHB, and piloted a referral pathway for children to access a series of holistic Nature/Arts/Food based workshop sessions, which took place in a local, vibrant community hub with its own garden and kitchen.

The sessions were designed to support young people develop healthier life habits and improved mental wellbeing through creative engagement with determinants like nutrition, physical activity, nature connection, food systems and growing or making healthy food.

Our main outcome measures were:

- Improving confidence
- Improving connections with peers
- Improving connections to the community

We commissioned Jessie Kidd, an experienced environmental/food educator, and artist chef, Niamh Convery, through an Open Call, to design innovative, rich project content and to test a project model which encouraged the children to engage, gain confidence and thrive.

We also worked with creative consultant and evaluator, Justine Wheatley, and incorporated the Arts Council of Wales's project evaluation framework together with Most Significant Change measures, aligning with School In Reach evaluation methods such as "Magic moments" and "Glimmers", which captures small but meaningful steps of progress for the participants.

An eight-week pilot was delivered at Cwtsh Craigfelen, a community hub and garden at Craigfelen Primary School. School In Reach staff and teachers from Craigfelen and Glais Primary Schools near Swansea identified nine participants aged 10–11 years from these two schools in the cluster – they were accompanied by teachers and Learning Support Assistants.

The programme used seasonal food, cooking and nature-based art as tools for reflection, confidence-building and connection and self expression. Each child kept a sketchbook to record recipes, food memories and artwork, with material later compiled into a shared reflective book. Sessions began with a communal breakfast and gentle check-in in a safe space, followed by creative cooking or nature-based activities. Pupils prepared seasonal dishes using produce from the community garden and took part in art activities such as leaf printing, still-life drawing and recipe storytelling.

“Finally, a soup I like.”

“I never liked vegetables, but this raw kale is yummy.”

Pupils

Physical activity and play were built into each session to support regulation and teamwork, building trust and strengthening group dynamics. Each session ended with a calming reflective ritual, where the group created a mandala of natural materials and shared thoughts, memories and ideas for future sessions, ensuring pupils' voices shaped the programme.

OUR REFLECTIONS AND FINDINGS

School In Reach teams worked with our artists on safeguarding and a reflective process after each session which included the following measures for the participants:

- Increased confidence
- Improved peer relationships
- Preparing for secondary school with support in their community, familiar faces.
- Safeguarding check in

They reported that all 10 participants showed improved confidence, improved peer relationships and interaction, improved emotional regulation and improved outlook for the transition to secondary school.

We began new sessions with a new cohort in February 2026, with the addition of three pupils from Birchgrove, another local school.

The programme shows significant outcomes for the children and young people and is a replicable and scalable model that strikes a good balance of impact, safeguarding, quality of output, quality improvement, education learning new skills and integration with children and young people's wider health/social care.

We are looking forward to Year 2 of the programme, building on our existing work, training new artists to work with this model, and including new schools in the programme.

“This morning was creative and well organised, promoting relaxation and connection through art and cooking. We really enjoyed breakfast. Jessie made sure everyone felt valued and supported and was quick to acknowledge individual 'quirks'. Safeguarding was clearly prioritised, and the environment felt safe and well supervised. My pupils are eager for future sessions. It is also a really useful tool for transitioning to comprehensive school. Thank you so much – we had a wonderful time.”

Claud, Support Teacher at Glais Primary School

Well-City Salisbury

BY ZOE PRICHARD

Zoe is Well-City Salisbury's Project Coordinator.



Taking part in a creative activity outside during Wild Art: Exploring Nature in Art with Wiltshire Wildlife Trust and James Aldridge.

ABOUT US

Well-City Salisbury is a partnership project between four local charities, Wessex Archaeology, Wiltshire Creative, ArtCare at Salisbury District Hospital and Wiltshire Wildlife Trust.

The project is led by Wessex Archaeology, a trusted archaeology and heritage service provider and educational charity based in Salisbury, Wiltshire.

The partnership brings together expertise from culture, heritage, arts and nature to support community wellbeing. Staff from each partner organisation work alongside the Project Co-ordinator to deliver the project.

Together we work with local artists and experts to use the arts and creativity to support adults and young adults in Salisbury and surrounding area (SP1 – SP5 postcodes) to improve mental health and wellbeing, build confidence, and reduce loneliness and social isolation.



Enjoying the view over Wiltshire Wildlife Trusts Nature Reserve at Coombe Basset.



A participant's sketchbook.

Well-City Salisbury is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund until March 2028, with £368,135 awarded in November 2025.

Well-City Salisbury (W-CS) is a project about connection, connection to the arts, to heritage, to the landscape, to the community and to each other.

At the heart of the project are our free 10-week creative courses, which explore a wide range of creative techniques and draw on the unique strengths of each partner organisation.

Our courses are designed for people with low to medium mental health needs including anxiety, depression, low mood, stress and social isolation. Participants are often looking to improve their mental and emotional wellbeing, connect with others, explore new creative skills, or learn about local heritage and culture.

Each course is different, covering a variety of topics and creative skills and delivered with local artists. Sessions take place in a mix of safe settings both inside and outside including partner venues, artist studios, cultural sites, and green and blue spaces.

Outdoor elements have included guided walks through the urban and natural landscape, visits to local heritage sites, and in nearby nature reserves.

Courses are limited to a maximum of 12 spaces to help create a supportive and inclusive environment. Each project year we deliver 8 free 10-week courses.

The project primarily uses a model where participants are referred onto a course by their GP practice, support organisation, or community group. However, we also welcome self-referrals.

Courses and referral forms are available on our website, where you can also sign up to our mailing list for updates and new opportunities.

In our third year of delivery, evaluation data showed the mean age of participants was 52, with 73% identifying as disabled. A total of 191 participants accessed the project between 2021 and 2024.

Alongside our core project partners, we also collaborate with guest delivery partners from the local community, expanding the range of opportunities and strengthening local engagement.

STAR STORY...



One project that stands out is from **Wild Art: Wanders in Nature** delivered by Wiltshire Wildlife Trust and artist James Aldridge.

Over the 10-week course, one participant described how combining art with time in nature supported them in ways previous groups had not. Having taken part in a veterans' programme before, they shared that this experience took them "one stage further", offering a deeper sense of calm, focus, and personal growth.

This course became a vital coping tool when their partner experienced a health crisis. While spending time in hospital, the participant used their course sketchbook to draw and collage natural materials. This provided a grounding focus, helped manage stress and offered a shared activity during a difficult time.

The impact extended beyond individual wellbeing. At home, the participant shared creative nature-based activities learnt throughout the course with family members, including their grandchild. This included hands-on, curiosity-led learning such as dissecting an owl pellet, creating opportunities for connection, learning, and enjoyment across generations.

This journey demonstrates how access to green spaces and creative outdoor activities can reduce anxiety and foster meaningful connections. It also highlights the value of skill sharing, as participants carry knowledge beyond the sessions, enriching family life and supporting wider community wellbeing.

OUR IMPACT

We work with external evaluators to assess the impact of the Well-City programme on participants, artists and partner organisations. Alongside this, we also gather regular feedback from participants to understand how taking part in the programme might affect their mental health and wellbeing.

Qualitative feedback consistently highlights improvements in emotional wellbeing, resilience, social connection and engagement with the community. Participants often report a strong sense of achievement, increased confidence and greater optimism about the future after completing a course.

We have also seen wider positive outcomes. Participants tell us they feel more connected to others, are more likely to engage with arts, culture and heritage activities, and feel more confident exploring their local community. Some have gone on to volunteer locally, return to employment or training, and report needing fewer GP visits or less medication to support their mental health.

The project also has a positive impact on the artists and staff involved, helping build skills and understanding around creative health practice.

Overall, participants report feeling happier, more connected and experiencing improved wellbeing as a result of being part of the Well-City Salisbury project and community.

Well Image

BY VANESSA MILES

Vanessa is Director and Founder of Well Image CIC.



Photo by James, see Star Story.

ABOUT US

Well Image CIC was set up as a response to the pandemic. Based in Exeter, we have supported over 250 adults across Devon who self-diagnose as having poor mental health.

Recent data from NHS England and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) indicates that Devon faces higher-than-average challenges in several key mental health indicators (self harm, serious mental illness, suicide, service effectiveness) compared to the rest of England.

OUR WORK

At Well Image we use creative photography projects as a catalyst to help people: engage with nature, enhance creativity, become more present, connect socially and increase activity. These aims are closely aligned to the NHS's 5 Ways to Wellbeing.

Most of our courses are run in small online groups connecting people who are particularly isolated. We can support people anywhere.

We are predominantly dependent on grant funding, have one full-time facilitator, the founder and director Vanessa Miles, three directors, and a freelance marketing officer.

We support adults who are in great need. They are isolated because they find it difficult to leave their homes due to long term health conditions, disability, anxiety or may have experienced a life changing event or recent diagnosis. We are working particularly with those who live in coastal and rural areas. Many are on very low incomes.

The majority of our photography courses are run in small, supportive online groups. Through photography, participants take one step at a time (in their locality), to engage with nature outdoors wherever they live and whatever access to nature they have.

Their images are uploaded to the facilitator and form part of the content of the session so people are encouraged to speak about their experiences. The space enables strong peer-to-peer support.

This format allows people to 'dip their toe in the water' which particularly appeals to the 90% of participants who attend who report anxiety, and can also enable those who are neurodiverse. 80% of participants are women. Given men are less likely to seek mental health support, we have run a successful all male group and aim to continue this work.

We have worked with a host of organisations across the South West whose aims align with our values. These include: Active Devon, Age UK, Devon Partnership NHS Trust, The Russell Clinic, Torbay Community Development Trust and PLUSS Devon.

Currently we are working in collaboration with Step One Charity on a two year project, supporting 80 people who have poor mental health aged 25-65 living in Torbay, Devon. This will result in the opportunity for participants to display their work in one of the two exhibitions we will host in 2027 in Torbay.

There is a significant demand for our services, including from doctors and social prescribers but this is reliant on funding.

STAR STORY...



James' journey: finding presence through the lens

After leaving the army and experiencing the breakdown of his marriage, James found himself in an unexpected and difficult situation, eventually being diagnosed with PTSD. Struggling with the transition to civilian life and finding it hard to even leave his home, he worked with a support worker to find a hobby that could provide much-needed structure and focus.

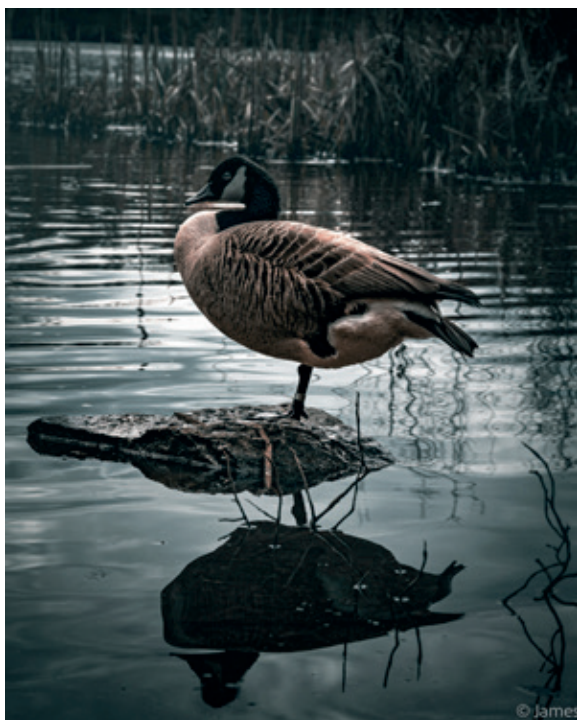
Although he had no prior experience, James discovered creative photography through a course which Well Image ran in collaboration with DRLC (part of Devon Partnership NHS Trust). For James, photography became a vital tool for mindfulness, enabling him to become more present in the moment, taking one step at a time to go outdoors and engage with nature. This grounded him so that he was no longer preoccupied with the past or the future.

The project gave him a renewed sense of purpose, providing an "excuse" to explore nature and see the world through a different lens, literally and figuratively. Whether he's capturing the play of light and shadow or the quiet details of his surroundings, photography has given James a sense of freedom and a reason to face each day with creativity and hope.

You can see James' photos on pages 58 and 60.

OUR IMPACT

Our qualitative impact has always been strong. Many participants tell us our courses have been life-changing. Course retention is high: 90% of those attending the first session stay the course. Our feedback demonstrates the course is much more than an art class, serving as a therapeutic intervention that disrupts negative mental patterns and fosters social reintegration.



Photos by James, see Star Story, page 59.

Testimonial feedback is organised by key themes below:

Mental “circuit breaking” and regulation:

Provides a practical “circuit breaker” or “tool” participants can reach for when they feel overwhelmed. Shifts the internal narrative from self-doubt and negativity toward identifying “good things” and positive details in the immediate environment.

Mindfulness:

Facilitates a state of “flow” where anxiety disappears because the individual is fully immersed in the present. Encourages participants to notice light, shadows, reflections, and weather elements, connecting them more deeply to their physical surroundings. Participants were able to “filter” for positives, training a “different eye” to see beauty in things previously ignored.

Motivation:

Overcoming barriers to leaving the house: provides a concrete “task” that overrides hesitation and anxiety associated with going out. Offers reasons to explore, transforming

a simple walk into an “exciting” mission to find specific images. Replaces internal distress with an external focus, making challenging environments feel safer and more manageable.

Self-image and personal growth:

Participants report feeling “more interesting” to themselves and others, directly improving their self-image. Builds confidence and a belief that participants “can achieve things”. Plants a “positive seed” encouraging further learning, exploration, and creative ambition.

Social connection:

Provides a “social crutch” or conversation starter, making it easier to engage with others. Fosters a sense of community where participants learn from one another’s subjective viewpoints. Acts as a bridge to further social inclusion, leading participants to join local clubs, attend walking groups, and pursue further education.

Participants report that the camera helps them transform a passive walk into an active recovery tool that lifts mood, silences anxiety, and reconnects the individual with the world and themselves.



West Kent Mind

BY JULIE NEVILLE

Julie is Community Wellbeing and Creative Services Manager at West Kent Mind.



Wilder Wellbeing, photo © www.johnknightphotography.co.uk.

ABOUT US

West Kent Mind is a local mental health charity affiliated with Mind. It was established to provide community-based support for people experiencing mental health challenges, aiming to promote wellbeing, independence, and recovery.

The organisation is based in Sevenoaks, Kent, and primarily serves the West Kent area, including Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Malling, and Tunbridge Wells.

Its services include counselling, wellbeing programmes, peer support, and early intervention services. West Kent Mind works in partnership with local authorities and the NHS.

The charity operates with a modest budget funded through grants, contracts, and donations. It employs a mix of paid staff and volunteers, delivering services across the County.



OUR PROJECT

Wilder Wellbeing is a free, nature-based group intervention that combines gentle outdoor activity, mindfulness, and social connection to improve mental health and wellbeing. It ran for 24 weeks between September 2025 and March 2026 at Sevenoaks Nature Reserve and the nearby Bradbourne Lakes, providing a calm, restorative environment.

The programme is designed to:

- improve mental wellbeing and resilience;
- reduce stress, loneliness, and isolation;
- help people reconnect with nature;
- build social connections and peer support.

It specifically targets people experiencing low wellbeing, mental or physical health challenges, or social isolation.

Sessions are gentle, inclusive, and group-based, typically including:

- guided nature walks;
- mindfulness and relaxation techniques;
- opportunities to notice and learn about wildlife;
- creative or reflective activities;
- informal group discussion and connection.

Activities are designed to be accessible and low pressure, with a focus on enjoying nature rather than physical performance.

Wilder Wellbeing is delivered in a small supportive group of up to 12 participants. The group was open to people of all genders and ages but in this case approximately 75% were female.

Participants were able to self-refer via the West Kent Mind website.

The programme is facilitated by trained staff including a practitioner from our partner Kent Wildlife Trust, alongside a Wellbeing Worker and volunteer from West Kent Mind.

The programme is based on evidence that:

- spending time in nature improves mental and physical health;
- social connection and gentle activity support wellbeing;
- nature-based interventions can complement traditional mental health support.

STAR STORY...



A story of a wonderful Autumn morning

On a crisp autumn morning at Bradbourne Lakes, the group gathered to reconnect with nature and themselves. They began by introducing themselves and sharing favourite natural places, before forming a circle to release stress through gentle movement and breathing exercises.

Each participant then explored a small “sit spot”, observing details closely and recording thoughts or sketches, later sharing reflections under a sunlit oak tree.

Louise (Kent Wildlife Trust practitioner) used the season of autumn to illustrate themes of letting go and renewal, explaining how trees conserve energy by shedding leaves and recycling nutrients. The group connected physically with trees and learned about beneficial airborne compounds released by them, which can support human health. They also explored the idea of trees communicating through underground networks.

Sensory experiences continued with essential oils from cedar, Douglas fir, palo santo, and hinoki. Participants were encouraged to create a “nature table” at home and began collecting items.

By the lakeside, they wrote haiku poems, later sharing them over herbal tea. The session ended with reflections on nature’s calming effects and a poem celebrating stillness and connection.

OUR IMPACT

The programme has had a clearly positive impact on participants’ mental health and wellbeing. Many individuals began the group feeling anxious, low, or uncertain, with some describing feeling “lost” or overwhelmed. However, the welcoming and supportive environment quickly helped people feel safe and included.

Participants consistently reported enjoying the activities, particularly those involving mindfulness, creativity, and time spent in



Wilder Wellbeing, photo © www.johnknightphotography.co.uk.

nature. Activities such as walking, nature art, photography, and breathing exercises were highlighted as calming and enjoyable, helping individuals to step outside their comfort zones and discover new interests. While not every activity suited everyone, there was strong overall satisfaction with the variety offered.

Social connection emerged as a key benefit. Attendees valued forming friendships, feeling part of a group, and having a regular space to share experiences. Many noted improvements in managing anxiety through mindfulness techniques and simply being outdoors. For some, the programme was described as “life-changing”, fostering a greater sense of presence and connection.

The 24-week duration was especially important, allowing relationships to develop, routines to form, and participants to experience seasonal change. Overall, the group provided stability, purpose and enjoyment, and all participants said they would recommend it to others.

Overall participation: 11 and of these, nine completed both start and end metrics.

Change in wellbeing: improved (positive change) for eight participants.

Key observations:

- The vast majority of participants showed improved mental wellbeing.
- Several participants had substantial gains.
- Only one participant experienced a decline.

The programme had a strong positive impact on wellbeing, with most participants showing measurable improvement in SWEMWBS scores.



The Whitworth

BY FRANCINE HAYFRON

Francine is Cultural Park Keeper at The Whitworth.



GROW Volunteers' installation for the Manchester flower show. Photo © David Oates Photography.

ABOUT US

The Whitworth was established in 1889 for 'the perpetual gratification of the people of Manchester'. This founding mission is still at the heart of what we do today.

Our internationally renowned exhibitions programme combines academic scholarship, lived experience and local and global interconnections. Exhibitions are developed from our own collections, exceptional loans from international collections and through

developing new work with world-leading artists. Our yearly programme is developed through our specialism for co-producing research with artists and constituents including academics.

The Whitworth sits right on the border of some of the most diverse, complex, and economically deprived wards in Manchester: Moss Side, Longsight, Ardwick and Rusholme. These hyperlocal audiences remain a priority, alongside a focus on increasing engagement



The Alex Bernstein Garden at The Whitworth.
Photo © Michael Pollard.

with Global Majority audiences, people with neurodiversity and (dis)ability needs, and international and tourist audiences.

ABOUT OUR PROJECT

The **Natural and Cultural Health Service** programme is an innovative approach developed by The Whitworth, that aims to improve the health and wellbeing of a participant, using the natural environment as a health asset. Launched in 2019, working alongside partners that hold expertise in green and health and wellbeing, we have developed an accessible programme that promotes physical and mental wellbeing.

This programme is aimed to engage individuals with nature and the outdoors in order to improve their physical and mental wellbeing.

The programme is divided into three key areas:

1. Green Wellbeing
2. Physical Wellbeing
3. Arts for Good Health

Activities aimed at adult audiences include Horticultural Wellbeing sessions (GROW), Meditation in Nature, and Nature For Health, delivered by Recovery Pathways service, part of Greater Manchester Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust (GMMH).

STAR STORY...



Client A self-referred to the programme due to an interest in gardening. Living in supported housing without access to outdoor space, he initially appeared quiet and lacked confidence, often seeking reassurance when completing tasks. He also experiences health issues affecting his mobility, meaning he works at a slower pace.

Since joining in 2017, he has shown strong commitment, missing only one session. Over time, his confidence has grown, and he now actively participates in activities. He particularly values creating container gardens to take home, enabling him to engage in gardening despite not having his own outdoor space.

The programme has provided structure and routine, giving him a regular reason to leave his home and engage socially. This has positively impacted his wellbeing and sense of purpose. He reflects:

“I have really enjoyed coming to the sessions here at the gallery, it really is a nice place, and the people are so friendly. I have a routine now where I come and sit in the garden before the sessions start and just take it all in. I've learnt how to grow things and being outside seems to make me feel much better.”

Towards the end of 2025, the gallery also launched Commoning Ground, a two-year programme that tackles local health inequalities through creativity, connection and care. Grounded in the gallery's existing Natural and Cultural Health Service programme (NCHS), the project strengthens long-term, community-rooted partnerships, particularly amongst ethnically diverse and socioeconomically disadvantaged populations. Working with three different partner organisations, the project is co-creating new health and wellbeing activities tailored to the specific needs and capacities of their communities, drawing on their own networks, insights, and lived realities. The NCHS programme engages with a diverse

range of people ranging from those who may be experiencing difficulties with their mental health to individuals seeking ways to improve their physical and mental wellbeing. We encourage referrals from services and self-referrals from individuals. Alongside Recovery Pathways, our partners include The Sea Within, Wide Awake Mindfulness, Silent Spaces, Portraits of Recovery, Yellow Bird Age-Friendly Moss Side and the Black Health Agency for Equality.

All activities take place within Whitworth Park and the gallery's green spaces including the Art Garden and the Alex Bernstein Garden. In 2021, The Whitworth, supporting the Friends of Whitworth Park, developed an area within the park creating the Whitworth Park Community Garden, which is now home to the GROW and Commoning Ground projects, as well as being open to the public.

OUR IMPACT

The Natural and Cultural Health Service programme demonstrates how nature-based and creative interventions can deliver meaningful improvements in health and wellbeing for individuals experiencing mental health challenges, long-term illness, or high

levels of stress. Through activities such as horticulture, meditation in nature, and arts-based sessions, participants benefit from reduced anxiety, improved mood, and increased emotional resilience.

The programme provides a supportive, non-clinical environment where individuals can rebuild confidence, develop new skills, and establish a sense of purpose. Group activities foster social connection, helping to reduce isolation and strengthen community ties. For those recovering from long-term illness, gentle outdoor engagement supports physical rehabilitation while also enhancing psychological wellbeing.

Participants also gain practical tools, such as mindfulness techniques and creative expression, that enable them to better manage stress in their daily lives. By encouraging ongoing connection with nature as a personal health resource, the programme supports sustained wellbeing beyond participation. Most importantly, its inclusive and community-led approach, particularly through initiatives like Commoning Ground, ensures that activities are culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of diverse and underserved populations, contributing to the reduction of local health inequalities.

WOW ‘Wales One World’ Choir

BY TRACY PALLANT

Tracy is Project Manager at WOW ‘Wales One World’ Choir.



Ayoub and Hlehle at Llangorse lake. Photo © Amy Peckham.

ABOUT US

For 10 years, WOW ‘Wales One World’ Choir has welcomed people seeking sanctuary, developing innovative, cutting-edge approaches combining the expertise and lived experience of our group members. 80% of our main leadership team have lived experience of the asylum process and co-facilitate our music and dance sessions.

We are an embedded community project. We deliver free weekly music sessions at Oasis, a community centre in Cardiff that supports people as they integrate in Wales.

As well as our core music sessions, we have our WOW Singing Mamas project, supporting perinatal maternal health for women seeking sanctuary, and our Wellbeing Singing Walks.

ABOUT OUR PROJECT

The choir is able to break down linguistic and cultural barriers and enable people who arrive here from other parts of the world to share and add to the culture, community and unity of Wales.

Evidence shows that people who have been displaced and trying to settle in a new country will feel more isolated and more likely to suffer with mental and physical health conditions. Our Wellbeing Singing Walks project funded by the Arts Council of Wales encourages the wellbeing of those most isolated.

Spending time in the natural environment is known to benefit mental health and wellbeing. By combining supported walking with group singing, the project offers a unique and culturally sensitive approach to improving wellbeing through connection to self, others and nature.

Our health partner Cardiff Mind brings a mental health perspective grounded in lived experience, trauma-informed practice and community engagement, and our nature partner, Ramblers Cymru, believes that by working alongside communities to engage with their local path network and green spaces, together we can create sustainable walking opportunities for all.

Four choir members with lived experience of the asylum process have been trained as Lowland Walk leaders with Ramblers

Cymru and climber and mountaineer, Andy Cummings and his organisation, Manzoku. This project has contributed to realising their potential as wellbeing and cultural leaders in their community.

Our Wellbeing Singing Walks have taken us far and wide from Bute Park in Cardiff to the Wye Valley, the Glamorgan Heritage Coast and Bath Skyline, sharing songs in different languages. We also write our own songs and share food from different cultures.

With referrals from Oasis and Cardiff Mind, up to 17 people come on each Singing Walk. We have women-only walks, family days, walks for LGBTQIA+ sanctuary seekers and community events, bringing people together who wouldn't normally meet for a day filled with laughter sunshine and song.

The act of singing creates healing and a sense of wellbeing, stimulating the vagus nerve. Getting outdoors, responding, connecting to nature enhances this healing.

A singing walk at Porthkerry Park. Photo © Amy Peckham.





Singing walk at The Knap near Barry.
Photo © Amy Peckham.

Wellbeing Singing Walks have demonstrated how empowering it is for participants and walk leaders to feel they can protect and have a say in their local environment.

Our community do not have access to funds for leisure activities, and at the same time they can feel unwelcome in traditionally white-led opportunities. We could see that people from diverse backgrounds who are new to the country weren't getting out into the countryside, getting exercise to help their health and wellbeing often because of fear. To go out, guided by someone qualified who

is trusted to not only lead you on a walk, but has walked in your shoes, is very powerful and reassuring. You're getting exercise, you're in the open air in green spaces. It allows the pressure to dissipate and for people to be themselves again.

OUR IMPACT

The project builds confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of connection. It also helps with the integration process leading to reduced stress and isolation.

“During the Singing Walks you are sharing a lot of things, you are sharing your culture, your language, you are sharing songs from your background. There is a connection between ourselves and nature.

You are breathing fresh air, you are not thinking about problems you are just looking at the shapes of trees and stuff around you and, asking yourself questions about the nature in front of you, you are not asking questions about your asylum claim or about your problems.”

Ayoub, WOW Choir Singing Walk leader

One of the members of our Singing Walk told me his story about walking from far away to the UK, just walking, and the trauma from that walk that he had experienced. He felt that our Wellbeing Singing Walk took the trauma and changed it into something good, somewhere he is safe.



Young participant at Lyth
Arts Centre's Out of the
Blue project. See page 42.
Photo © Claire Hughes



Fertile ground: reflections on outdoor creative mental health

The *Creatively Minded* series of reports does not aspire to be a systematic review of an area of creative practice but we would like to conclude with a few thoughts based in part on this limited set of case studies. What surely is unarguable is how powerful this combination is – the benefits of being outdoors and in nature with the joy of the creativity – for people experiencing mental health problems.

A TRIANGULAR RELATIONSHIP: NATURE, CREATIVITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

There are three aspects to this work and each requires attention: respect for nature and the outdoors, understanding of mental health problems; and the use of the arts. Each of these is a separate area of expertise and for a project to work well each needs to be present and valued. It also means that three different types of funding might be potential sources of support. The three legs to the stool can make the work stable but perhaps more complex than is initially obvious.

All this implies – and can be seen in many of the case studies – that for this area to flourish there needs to be collaboration between local organisations in the three sectors. Frequently where we fund, arts organisations take the lead. However, around green creative mental health, it is much more varied, as exemplified by the work of Wessex Archaeology in the heritage field (page 55), Impact Initiatives in social welfare (page 36), West Kent Mind and Amser I Siarad in mental health (pages 64 and 12), Swansea Bay Health Board in the NHS (page 52) or the Small Woods Association in the environment sector (page 45). The relevance of social prescribing is obvious in a number of case studies, for instance Artlift (page 16), which can claim to be a pioneer of the social prescribing movement.

This is primarily an issue for neighbourhoods but there might be a role too for some national organisations such as Mind, the National Trust and the four Arts Councils to promote this work more widely. It certainly has a clear relevance for the National Academy for Social Prescribing.

EQUITY – LEAVE NO ONE OUT

There has been a concern that people from an ethnic minority background might feel less comfortable using outdoor spaces. This has been recognised by organisations such as English Heritage, National Parks and the National Trust. In our case studies it was an area of focus for Coed Lleol (Small Woods Association), as well as for Artlift. There are now a number of organisations working to promote access to the outdoors. Here are a few examples.

- **Black Girls Hike:** a popular nationwide group that provides a safe, empowering space for Black women to explore the outdoors and the British countryside.
- **Peaks of Colour:** a Peak District-based, People of Colour-only nature and healing club. They focus on radical self-care, rest, and nature therapy.
- **Black2Nature:** founded by environmental activist Dr Mya-Rose Craig, this charity runs nature camps and trips into the countryside for Visibly Minority Ethnic (VME) children and families.
- **Muslim Hikers:** an inclusive and highly active hiking community that organises countryside and trail walks across the UK, ensuring that faith-friendly considerations (like prayer spaces) are met.
- **Steppers UK:** an outdoors organisation dedicated to promoting diversity outdoors and helping ethnic minorities build positive relationships with nature.

The case study from Social Material (page 49) is a reminder that this is a broader issue than solely one of racial equity. In other areas we have been concerned at the lack of men being involved but this may be less true in outdoor arts. creativeShift (page 26) has a outdoor men's creative project. The Wales One World choir is concerned with people seeking sanctuary (page 68). Most case studies showcase projects engaging adults, but some have worked or work with young people like the Lyth Arts Centre (page 42) or Impact Initiatives (page 36). Projects need to question if sufficient attention has been paid to sensory and mobility disabilities.

NATURE AS THE SUBJECT

In the great majority of cases, nature itself becomes the focus of the creative act. This often brings with it the use of natural materials, such as wood, leaves and flowers. The act of searching, for instance for twigs, needs particular attention. Then using leaves to be impressed into clay pots again causes the artists to appreciate the natural world in a way

that is much less to the fore in other forms of creative mental health. There are many examples in the case studies.

GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD

As stated, this is not a systematic study. Our small number of case studies does seem to suggest a concentration of examples in Wales which might be due to funding opportunities. It was surprising not to find examples of work from Northern Ireland. The case studies remind us that outdoor spaces are to be found in cities as well as in the countryside (like Lyth in Caithness). Perhaps they are even more precious in the most densely populated cities of Manchester, Birmingham or Glasgow.

DIVERSITY OF ART FORMS

There is a tendency for visual arts such as sketching and photography, storytelling and crafts to be used in the outdoors and the salience of these is obvious. But this is not always the case. A food artist is integral to Swansea Bay University Health Board project (with the memorable quote, 'finally

Wilder Wellbeing, West Kent Mind. See page 61. Photo © www.johnknightphotography.co.uk.



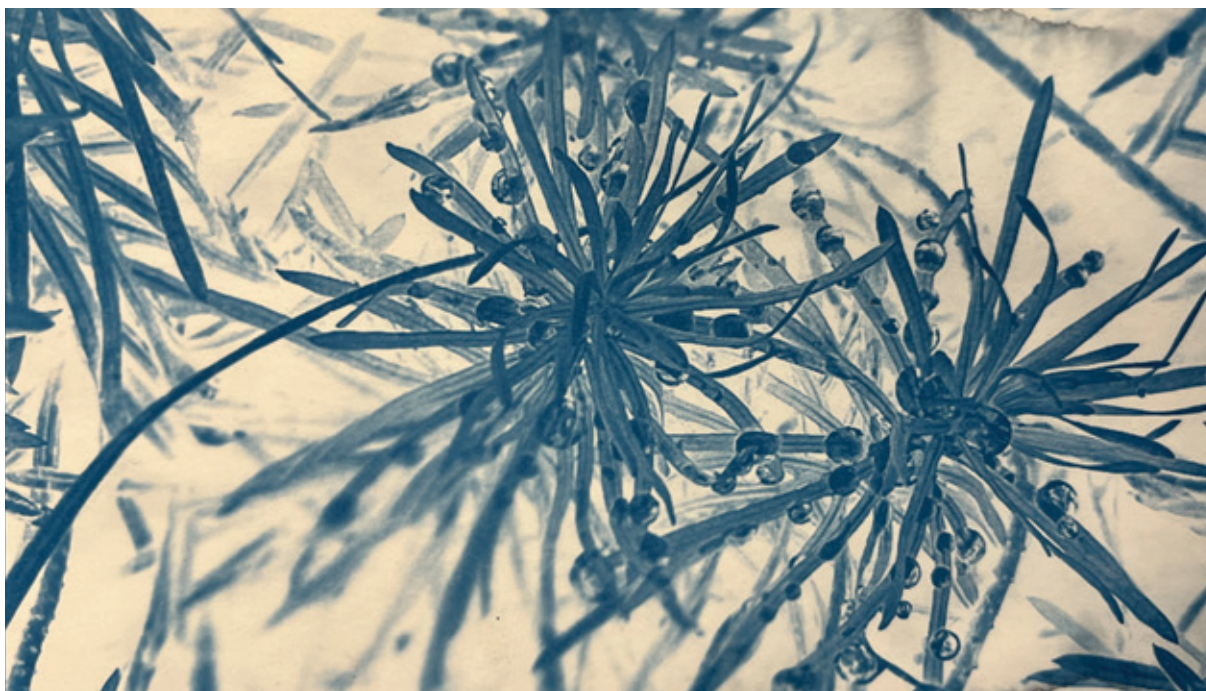


Photo courtesy of Artlift, page 16.

a soup I like'). The Wales One World Choir includes singing (of course) and dancing. Lyth has Arts Centre's 'Out of the Blue' project included installation making. And yes, let's include blacksmithing (Impact Initiatives, page 36).

NOT JUST OUTDOORS

While unsurprisingly most activity in this area takes place outdoors, this is not always the case. Well Image CIC for example runs online sessions, used in a thought-provoking way as an introduction to taking the next step into outdoor activities for people who find this a challenge (page 58). Making may take place in indoors in a studio, for instance with pottery following an outdoors session. The product of outdoor creative mental health may eventually be exhibited indoors (see Ikon Gallery, for example, page 32).

PROFILE

It seems to us that recently there has been greater public awareness about the benefits of creative mental health. This has partly come from publicity around some important scientific studies but also from good practice examples in the media such as Hospital Rooms and Infant Hercules in Tyneside (which has also sung outdoors whilst walking on the Cleveland

Arts Council Wales

In 2020, Arts Council of Wales and Natural Resources Wales established 'Creative Nature', a Memorandum of Understanding, aimed at cultivating the relationship between the arts and the natural environment and supporting the environmental and cultural wellbeing of Wales. This partnership led to the creation of a dedicated 'nature' strand within the Arts Council of Wales Arts, Health and Wellbeing National Lottery funding programme. The strand has supported innovative partnerships between nature, culture, and health organisations that test new ideas using nature-based arts activities to support health and wellbeing. Projects promote and explore the wellbeing benefits of stronger connections to nature and gather evidence that demonstrates the impact of integrating nature into arts and health work. Natural Resources Wales invested £75,000 a year in the ACW's Arts, Health and wellbeing lottery fund for an initial period, which ACW have maintained at the same level. Since 2021, over £450,000 has been invested in arts, health and nature projects.

It is also relevant that social and climate justice is one of the six key themes of the operated by ACW, as is sustainability.

Way).¹⁵ In turn, outdoor creative mental health also needs to be championed by celebrities like Monty Don (himself a mental health advocate) and programmes such as Country File, Spring Watch and All in the Mind.

GOOD PRACTICE ON THE GROUND

These case studies show the value of thinking in a very practical way about how to recruit to an initiative, tackling barriers such as transport, costs and culture and providing supported inclusive group activities with expertise from all three sectors. We hope that you will pick up new ideas and practical tips. To the right are some essential considerations we have noticed – you will see more.

THE FUTURE FOR GREEN CREATIVE MENTAL HEALTH

Arts and health is on the rise throughout the UK and internationally, though we need to see more financial support for this work by health funders especially the NHS. Green creative mental health is certainly at home in social prescribing, though again this doesn't come with funding. Further research would be helpful on the effect of combining creative mental health with the outdoors. This should further strengthen a call to action. As elsewhere in creative mental health, work outdoors needs to move from the niche to the mainstream, but this is most certainly fertile ground for further growth.

Outdoor creative mental health checklist

- Reach out to local partners not in your sector.
- Check what is already on offer – could you add to this?
- Is your group targeted (e.g. for a racialised community) or more general. Develop publicity accordingly.
- Ensure you have expertise across all three domains – outdoors activity, mental health problems and creativity.
- Leadership and responsibility – who will take charge of the activity and how are they supported?
- Logistics, especially as barriers, are always key, e.g. what transport can be offered to make an event accessible?
- How can group members take leadership roles or more generally contribute as volunteers?
- Share a risk assessment with partners.
- Think hard about the social aspect of the initiative – how can everyone feel part of the group. Participants often feel that they wish to help and make a contribution.
- What is being done for the wellbeing of everyone involved, both participants and facilitators? Do facilitators receive sufficient support and reflective space?
- How will it be evaluated, especially as a funder requirement.
- Let local media know what you are doing.

15 Infant Hercules appeared on the BBC's Big Night of Musicals and on the flagship The One Show in Spring 2026. Hospital Rooms also appeared on The One Show in October 2025.

Participants taking in the view at Blackmoor Copse on a warm summer day as part of the Well-City Salisbury course Wild Art: Exploring Nature in Art with Wiltshire Wildlife Trust and artist James Aldridge. See page 55.



UK organisations offering outdoor creative mental health

This list includes organisations which we have come into contact with or made contact with us. We know it won't be comprehensive and we are very sorry if we missed you.

Please do email us on baring.foundation@ing.com and we will include you in our next full Creatively Minded Directory.

Organisations that work with children and young people are highlighted in red.

UK-WIDE / MULTI-COUNTRY

Look Again – mindful photography
Small Woods Association / Coed Lleol
Waterloo Uncovered
[Wilderness Foundation](#)

ENGLAND

Art Branches, *Suffolk*
Artlift, *Gloucestershire*
B.ARTS, *Staffordshire*
Bradford City of Culture 2025
BrightSparks, *Leicester*
Chilli Studios, *Newcastle-upon-Tyne*
Compass Community Arts, *Eastbourne*
creativeShift, *Bristol*
[Dandelion Time](#), *Kent*
[Dose of Nature](#), *South West London / Surrey*
[Green Light Trust](#), *Suffolk*
Fabrica, *East Sussex*
Forest Farm Peace Garden, *Essex*
Fotonow CIC, *Devon*
Impact Initiatives, *East Sussex*
Infant Hercules men's choir, *County Durham*
MindFood, *London*
[Museum of London Archaeology / Thames Discovery](#)
Restoration Trust, *Norfolk*

[Royal Albert Memorial Museum \(RAMM\)](#), *Devon*

RT Projects, *County Durham*
S2R Create Space, *West Yorkshire*
Serge Hill Project CIC, *Hertfordshire*
Sheffield Environmental Movement
Significant Seams, *Devon*
Social Material, *South West England*
South Downs National Park Green Prescribing
Space2, *Leeds*
Swansea Bay University Health Board
Sydenham Garden, *London*
The Line, *London*
The People's Walking Choir, *West Midlands*
The Plot, *Brighton*
The Whitworth
Walking 4 Hope, *Nottinghamshire*
Well City *Salisbury*
Well Image, *Devon*
West Kent Mind
Wise Ram Theatre, *London*
Wild Art *Cornwall*
Woodcrafters, *Devon*

NORTHERN IRELAND

Belfast Exposed
Mid Ulster Agewell

SCOTLAND

Art Angel, *Dundee*
Brock Garden, *West Lothian*
Cumbernauld Living Landscape, *North Lanarkshire*
Lapidus Scotland, *Glasgow*
Lyth Arts Centre, *Highlands*
Tonic Arts, *Edinburgh*

WALES*

Amser I Siarad, *North West Wales*

Art and Soul Tribe, *Flintshire*

Breathe Creative

CARN, *Gwynedd*

Outside Lives, *Denbighshire/Flintshire*

The Fathom Trust, *Flintshire*

Urban Vertical CIC, *Cardiff/Barry*

WOW One World Choir

* The Arts Council of Wales has a 'nature' strand in its Arts, Health and Wellbeing Lottery funding programme, with a new round opening in July 2026.

International organisations offering outdoor creative mental health

There are a number of examples of projects outside the UK, particularly in Europe, the Far East and the Pacific region. Social prescribing in Europe seems to be one driver of activity; in other parts of the world, local culture and traditional art forms play an important role. Here are just a few of the more relevant projects.

FRANCE

Art sur ordonnance (Art on Prescription) (Montpellier): developed by the MO.CO. Contemporary Art Museum in Montpellier in partnership with the local university hospital, this initiative takes patients out of the hospital and into the museum. Small groups engage in exhibition visits, meet contemporary artists, and participate in outdoor and indoor creative workshops.

Earth and Time (Valence): The Centre Hospitalier Drôme Vivarais ran a project around the theme “Earth and Time” in partnership with local cultural institutions. Hospital patients worked with an artist/weaver to create a collective and cultural living space in the garden of the Victor Hugo Psychiatric Care Centre in Valence.

LATVIA

Arts On Prescription (Saldus): part of a wider Baltic Sea Region programme, this project is organised by the municipality of Saldus in close cooperation with local artists, craftspeople and cultural organisations such as museums. The programme focuses on adults experiencing mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, stress, or loneliness, and offers activities such as nature inspired ceramics, gastronomy culture, culture walks, sound baths, and creative design.

PORTUGAL

Manicómio (Lisbon): this is the Portugal’s first “outsider art” studio, acting both as a physical hub and a creative design agency. While operating from a coworking space, the collective frequently takes its work outdoors into urban spaces and festivals, bridging the gap between artists who have struggled with mental illness and the broader commercial creative sector.

NEW ZEALAND

Pablos Art Studios (Wellington): Pablos provides free art materials, tuition, and exhibitions for those with lived experience of mental distress. They run a nature-based art programme that combines outdoor exploration (such as collecting natural flora for dyes) with emotional processing.

SOUTH KOREA

Garden Prescription Programme (Seoul): a city-wide programme promoting psychological and emotional recovery through interaction with gardens and forests. Alongside activities such as garden walks, forest yoga and barefoot walking, it also includes creative elements such as floral crafts. 10,000 participants have taken part, including many different groups from young people to police officers experiencing PTSD.

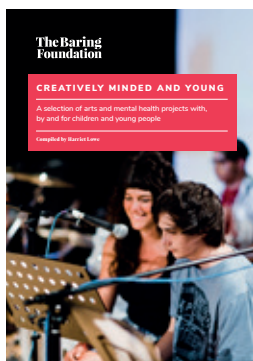
TAIWAN

Horticultural Art and Sandplay: across Taiwan, clinical and community mental health organisations use therapeutic horticulture combined with outdoor therapies. Participants build outdoor sand trays using damp earth, twigs, and leaves to symbolically represent and process their psychological state. This hands-on outdoor work supports emotional articulation and helps clients navigate complex trauma.

Other Baring Foundation resources



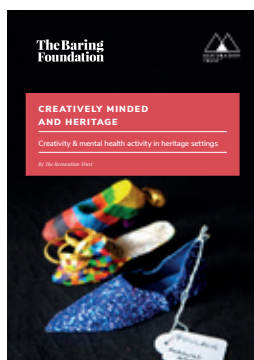
Creatively minded
David Cutler
2020



Creatively minded and young
Harriet Lowe
2020



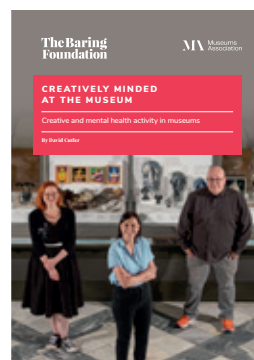
Creatively minded and ethnically diverse
Compiled by The Baring Foundation
2021



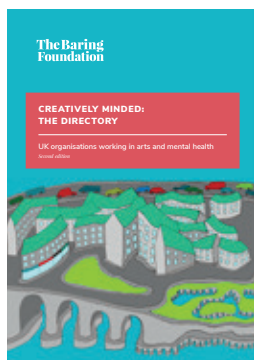
Creatively minded and heritage
The Restoration Trust
2021



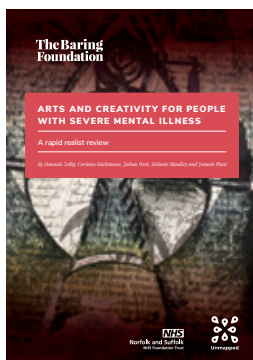
Creatively minded and the NHS
David Cutler
2021



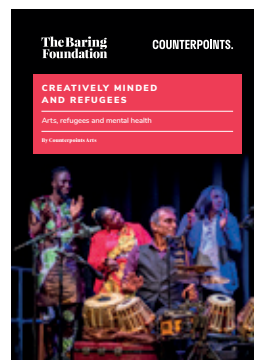
Creatively minded at the museum
David Cutler
2022



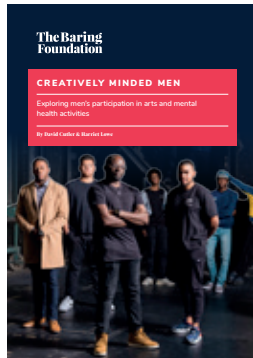
Creatively minded: the directory
The Baring Foundation
2022



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



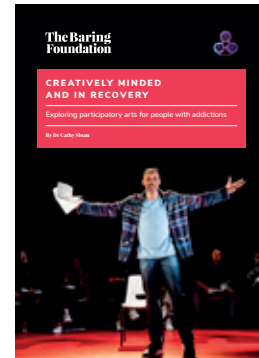
Creatively minded and refugees
Counterpoints Arts
2023



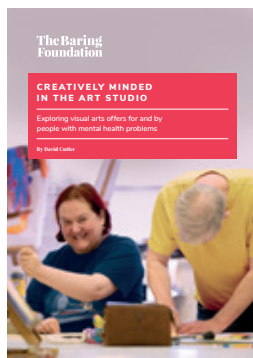
Creatively minded men
David Cutler
2024



Creatively minded
at the theatre
David Cutler
2024



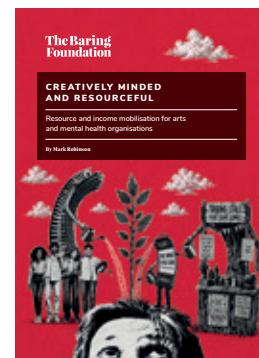
Creatively minded
and in recovery
Dr Cathy Sloan
2024



Creatively minded
in the art studio
David Cutler
2025



Creatively minded and
ethnically diverse revisited
Sabra Khan and Daniel Regan
2026



Creatively minded
and resourceful
Mark Robinson,
Thinking Practice
2026

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