

PARTICIPATORY ARTS & MENTAL HEALTH

A good
practice
resource

**MENTAL
HEALTH**
FOUNDATION

SCOTTISH
MENTAL HEALTH
ARTS FESTIVAL

**The Baring
Foundation**

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Foreword

With the Participatory Arts and Mental Health Fund, Creative Scotland set out to support innovative approaches that allow organisations to deepen and enhance their work in participatory arts and mental health, and to develop a richer understanding of the conditions and key considerations that make such work possible. What Andrew Eaton-Lewis has produced here offers exactly that insight, drawing together the voices and experiences of artists and organisations working across Scotland into something we hope will be valuable to anyone working in this field.

This resource arrives at an important moment. Creative Scotland has appointed an Arts and Health Co-ordinator who will be working with stakeholders across the sector to co-create a national arts and mental health framework for Scotland, and the insights gathered here will directly inform that process. We are enormously proud of what the funded artists and organisations have achieved, often working with the communities who needed that commitment most, and deeply grateful to all of them for sharing their experience so generously. We hope this resource does justice to that work, and that it serves the wider field well.

Stuart Cameron,
Equalities and Diversity Officer,
Creative Scotland

I am delighted to welcome this excellent new resource for people working in participatory arts projects on mental health. We could ask for no better author than Andrew Eaton-Lewis who is an expert in this field from his long work for the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival. He has previously published *Performing Anxiety* which the Baring Foundation also supported. In this new publication he has marshalled the experience of many artists working in this space under seven themes. In each we hear the voices of the artists, learn about their projects and are offered practical advice. These themes resonate strongly with what I have observed in hundreds of initiatives that we have supported since the Baring Foundation first funded in this field in 2020.

The Foundation is privileged to support these projects along with our funding partner Creative Scotland. We now have strategic partnerships with all four national Arts Councils. This resource will not only be a great value to participatory artists in Scotland, but across the UK and beyond.

David Cutler,
Director, Baring Foundation

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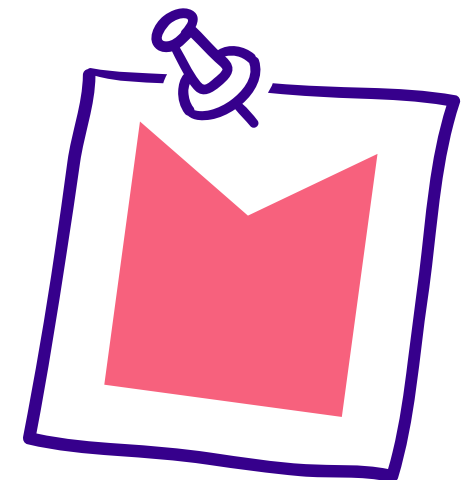
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INTRODUCTION

This resource is an attempt to answer the following question:

WHAT IS GOOD PRACTICE IN PARTICIPATORY ARTS AND MENTAL HEALTH PROJECTS?

Participatory arts and mental health projects are not new. Back in 2007, the year the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival began, the Mental Health Foundation published a report highlighting their achievements in improving people's wellbeing. The report drew on case studies including Art Angel in Dundee and Project Ability in Glasgow, both of which are still active now.

This work, the Foundation noted at the time, "evolved out of a dialogue with arts projects and service users throughout Scotland, many of whom had expressed a real concern about the lack of priority given to creative approaches within mental health settings."

The report went on to observe:

"Many projects were operating on short term funding arrangements and often, with a few notable exceptions, funded only for direct activity with participants. This created a void in relation to time provided for practitioners to reflect, share and develop practice together, with few possibilities for training and formal support structures to develop. We found that unlike other professions working within the field of mental health, arts projects were not funded or expected to require the time and space to come together and develop."



While some of these concerns will be familiar to people working on participatory arts and mental health projects even now, a lot has changed in the years since. There is now a more widespread consensus that participating in the arts has a positive influence on mental health, thanks to comprehensive studies by the World Health Organisation (a major 2019 scoping review by Daisy Fancourt and Saoirse Finn), Arts Council England (Arts, Culture and the Brain, 2022) and others. And an increasing focus on access, cultural rights, and health and wellbeing is shaping the thinking of governments and arts funding bodies.

In 2023, Creative Scotland trialled its first Participatory Arts and Mental Health Fund (PAMHF), in partnership with the Baring Foundation and the Mental Health Foundation. The fund supported 13 projects across Scotland between 2023 and 2024, in some cases for over a year. Some projects built on previous work, which provided artists and organisations with the space to learn and develop across longer periods of time.

FOR ALL KINDS OF REASONS, IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND HOW TO DO THIS WORK WELL.

Much of Creative Scotland's work continues to focus on mental health and wellbeing, in alignment with the Scottish government's mental health and wellbeing strategy and with support from the Baring Foundation, which funds creative opportunities for people with mental health problems. Creative Scotland also created a new freelance role, Arts and Health Co-ordinator, at the beginning of 2026. Creative Scotland and the Mental Health Foundation are currently working together on the development of a new arts and mental health framework.

In 2025 SMHAF piloted a new Regional Participatory Arts Fund. While this annual

fund offers more short-term support than the PAMHF, since its purpose is to support projects that can be showcased in each year's festival, it is another fund - again supported by the Baring Foundation - that is explicitly focused on supporting participatory arts and mental health projects. The fund is now set to continue until 2028.

For all kinds of reasons, it is important to understand how to do this work well, and over the past year SMHAF has been carrying out interviews and running public events asking the question, 'what does good practice look like?' This resource is a result of that work.

AN INCREASING FOCUS ON ACCESS, CULTURAL RIGHTS, AND HEALTH AND WELLBEING IS SHAPING THE THINKING OF GOVERNMENTS AND ARTS FUNDING BODIES.

Definitions

What is good practice in participatory arts and mental health projects?

It feels helpful at this point to break the question above into three distinct parts, so that we're clear about what exactly is being asked.

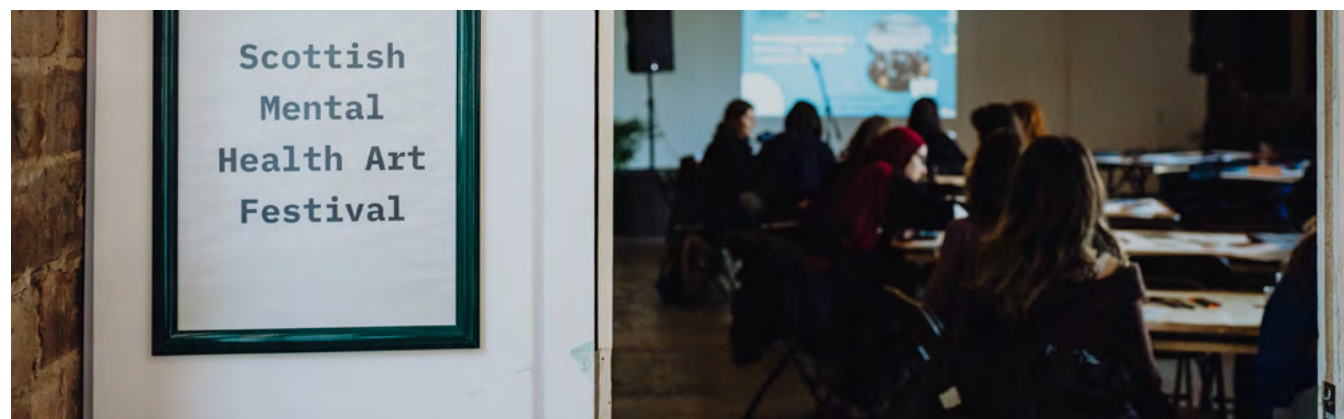
What is a participatory arts project?

A participatory arts project is generally accepted to be a project where:

- people taking part are directly involved in the creative process rather than just observing it.

- while the process is often guided by a professional artist, everyone's contribution is equally important and valued.
- accessibility is a priority, with participants often coming from communities that are marginalised or vulnerable.
- the work has social impact, for example reducing isolation, building communities, or addressing specific social issues.

The third and fourth of these are arguably not strictly essential to the definition but tend to be an important part of the purpose of these projects.



What is a participatory arts and mental health project?

Here, things get slightly more complicated. Based on the kinds of projects that have been funded in recent years, a participatory arts and mental health project could be:

- A project whose participants have a mental health diagnosis.
- A project whose participants are from marginalised groups (for example refugees and asylum seekers) and therefore more vulnerable to mental health challenges and / or less able to find support for this.
- A project that addresses mental health as a social issue.

It's possible to argue that only the first of these three actually constitutes a 'participatory arts and mental health project', and therefore restrict the definition to, for example, a project in a psychiatric hospital or a project working with service users or a support group for people diagnosed with anxiety or depression. However, both the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival and Creative Scotland tend to take a preventative approach to mental health, focusing on (as the Mental Health Foundation puts it) 'stopping people from developing mental health problems and promoting good mental health for all'.

If you take this approach, the definition can include a project working with participants who are statistically vulnerable to mental

health challenges but without a diagnosis or even self-diagnosis being a condition of entry.

This allows the inclusion of projects in communities where there is a high level of stigma around discussing mental health (some religious or rural communities, for example, or some men's groups). I have witnessed examples where the words 'mental health' are barely used at all, quite deliberately, so that people are not put off taking part by a fear of being stigmatised. Some projects prefer to use the term 'health and wellbeing' rather than 'mental health'.

This also means that, at a stretch, the definition 'participatory arts and mental health project' could include a project in which the participants do not identify as having mental health challenges, or even talk very much about their mental health, but the work is still considered to be supporting good mental health.

For funders, it is important to be clear about which of these categories applies to any particular project, because it may impact on the level of safeguarding required, the kind of work it is possible to do, and also which projects to prioritise. These differences may also impact on what is considered to be 'good practice'.

**GOOD PRACTICE
FEELS SAFE,
EASEFUL,
FLOWING,
AT TIMES
PEACEFUL,
EXHILARATING,
CALM, ALWAYS
CONNECTIVE,
RESONANT.**

This brings us to the third and final part of the question.

What is good practice?

In October 2025, the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival hosted a Participatory Arts and Mental Health Symposium at Civic House in Glasgow. The event was attended by over 50 people who have worked in participatory arts projects across Scotland. This was followed by a second, online event in March 2026, also attended by around 50 people.

At both of these events we invited everyone in the room to answer our 'what is good practice?' question in shared documents. Examining the responses, most (although not all) could be categorised across seven themes, these being:

- **TRUST**
- **TIME**
- **FLEXIBILITY**
- **COMMUNITY**
- **EQUALITY**
- **SUPPORT STRUCTURES**
- **LEGACY**

I have therefore divided this resource into sections with the titles above. Each section opens with a word map made from written responses to the question 'what does good practice look like?'. These were collected on large pieces of paper during our symposium in October 2025 and then separated out according to which theme they most obviously fitted into.

What does good practice feel like?

It feels sensible to add a disclaimer at this point. When it comes to mental health, the needs of individuals are often so different that good practice for one person is not necessarily good practice for another.

An example shared during our online event in March 2026 was that of a table covered with all kinds of different art materials. For one person, the flexibility this offers could be liberating - a gesture of trust in their creativity and ability to choose their own path. For another, the choice could be overwhelming and therefore stressful.

At our event in October 2025 it was suggested that, as well as asking what good practice looks like, we should also ask what it feels like. Here are three answers that attendees offered to that question.

"When you go home and you know you've done everything you can to make a difference in people's lives or ways of seeing the world. You see the difference in the way participants see themselves."

"Good practice feels safe, easeful, flowing, at times peaceful, exhilarating, calm, always connective, resonant."

"If you feel any emotion after a workshop that's positive it means you've put your heart into it."

All of this is subjective, of course, but there is something in the fact that, when you do this work well, you can feel it - in its impact on people, the atmosphere in the room, the sense of wellbeing it creates. This resource, then, is perhaps best described as a series of tools designed to help you to get to that place, drawing on the voices of artists who have been successfully making this work in recent years.



The photos on pages 4, 6 and 8 were taken at SMHAF's Participatory Arts and Mental Health Symposium, in October 2025, by Ingrid Muir. The photo on this page is from Waves of Hope and Faith, a SMHAF supported event in Dundee in October 2025, and was provided by Varvara Mishyna

**WHEN YOU DO
THIS WORK WELL,
YOU CAN FEEL IT
- IN ITS IMPACT
ON PEOPLE, THE
ATMOSPHERE
IN THE ROOM,
THE SENSE OF
WELLBEING IT
CREATES.**

Honesty of
intention

The capacity
for deep
listening

Learning
that we
have agency

Shared
responsibility

Trust

Good
partnerships

Trusting
relationships

Situate
projects
within the
community

Consent -
everything
is optional

Overcoming
inertia

People share as
much as they
want to

Building
confidence

Co-creating space for

- thinking
- breathing
- making
- building
- confidence
- connection
- identity

TRUST

When talking to people who have worked on participatory arts and mental health projects, 'trust' was repeatedly cited as a crucial element of the work.

What do we mean by trust? To state the obvious, participatory arts projects rely on willing participation. Sometimes you will be inviting people to express themselves creatively who have rarely had a chance to do so before. At very least, you may be inviting people to try a new and unfamiliar art form. In doing so, you are asking people to risk making themselves vulnerable. Even if someone is not disclosing or obviously drawing on personal mental health experiences, expressing yourself creatively is still an act of trust. If you are explicitly asking people to do it, that trust needs to be earned.



Walking to Connect (photo provided by Elina Bry)

Responses from participatory artists suggest several important factors to consider.

- Co-design is key**
 Ensure participants are fully involved from the beginning of project planning.
- Setting is a fundamental part of creating trust/safety**
 Meet participants in a place which already feels familiar and comfortable to them.
- Avoid asking about previous experiences or why people are there**
 Even this may require a level of disclosure that is not appropriate, particularly when working with people with complex, long-term mental health issues.
- Begin with simple tasks, then delve deeper later if appropriate**
 Allow people time to adjust their thinking and consider different ways of expressing themselves before you ask too much of them.
- Do not have specific outcomes or expectations**
 The creative output should be shaped by the needs of the participants.
- Avoid pressuring people to share their work**
 The opportunity for self-expression can be enough. As Ken Cockburn of Lapidus Scotland told us, of a writing

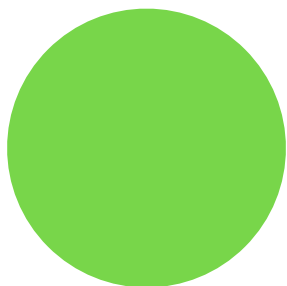
project with Glasgow Association for Mental Health, "writing can be purely for people's own benefit, therapeutic writing, if you like, that doesn't go beyond the room. And that's fine if they've been able to reflect on something in a useful way. Other pieces of writing, we might encourage people to develop and share and indeed to publish."

- Trust the process**
 Offer an invitation rather than trying to push people into anything. Some may feel inspired to join later even if they don't at first.

It is tempting to assume that the phrase 'participatory arts and mental health project' implies that participants must draw in some way on their own mental health experiences when making creative work. While this can sometimes be appropriate, and have demonstrable therapeutic value, there are all kinds of reasons why it might not, and artists need to be mindful of this. There is a risk of exploitation if participants are not ready to share personal experiences or are unaware of the implications of doing so publicly. There is a risk that the artist, in inviting any kind of disclosure, takes on a therapy role for which they are not qualified. Some of this can be offset by robust safeguarding - having a professional therapist or wellbeing practitioner in the room at all times, for example - but finding the right creative artform can also be key.

The work of choreographer Joanna Young feels like a good example of this. In 2022, Young began working with the Dixon Community, a voluntary organisation that supports older people and carers in the south of Glasgow, as part of Independent Arts Projects' wider Sensory Collective programme. The programme Joanna co-designed with Dixon Community offered, as she describes it, "movement, relaxation and wellbeing classes for people living with dementia". This work was initially funded by Culture Collective and later, as an intergenerational project in partnership with Big Noise Govanhill, by Creative Scotland's Participatory Arts and Mental Health Fund.

Before starting the project, Joanna spent months observing Dixon Community day care events, "being around for the day, watching the activities that were already happening, getting to know participants, and trying to find out what people were interested in". In particular, she recalls observing a session focused on reminiscence that, while enjoyable for some, could be painful for others either because it brought back bad memories or because it drew attention to things they were unable to remember. And so she chose to focus on activities that were about "being present in a moment together, here and now".



"I think there's something special about coming together, to move together and relax and dance together. I learned so much over that time in terms of building a relationship and trust with participants, going from drop-in sessions to being able to do quite deep work, like the poems and the film we made which I felt were really artistically rich."

Joanna Young, choreographer

Consistency

Consistency, as film-maker Elina Bry notes, can be important when building trust. Bry has worked extensively with people recovering from addiction in Inverclyde, through the organisation Your Voice. This work began as a Culture Collective funded project in 2022, and continued in 2023 and 2024 with new funding from Creative Scotland's Participatory Arts and Mental Health Fund.

In the first stage, Elina worked with participants for three months, walking outdoors with a group of people in recovery and supporting them to film what they saw along the way. She describes the process as "researching through your body and through just being together".

"It's really important to have consistency. It's great to have different artists coming and doing things, but what people in recovery really need is someone they can talk to and just know that, okay, this person is always there. It's important for people to have someone they can trust."

Elina Bry, filmmaker

While Bry emphasises that she had no specific end goal in mind ("We work with people who are extremely fragile, so you can't. It's just so unpredictable what will happen"), the result was an award-winning short film called *Walking to Connect* which was screened at the Alchemy Film Festival and later the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival.

It was clear that the work needed to continue, Bry says. "It was really good for everyone who was part of it, for their mental health and routine, and I think the routine was the most important part of it. And even though three months feels like a long time in some people's lives, actually when you're in recovery three months is nothing. It's just the beginning. You can't just say, well I'm gone now. I've been part of your life for three months, and then that's it, it's really traumatic for some people."

There is a paradox here. Once an artist has built a strong relationship of trust with participants, it can then make participants more vulnerable when the artist has to move on to other things, either because funding ends or because of other work commitments.

A crucial part of the work for Bry, therefore, has been to pass on her skills and techniques to Martita Dunn, Recovery Development Officer for Your Voice, who she worked with on the project. "I have trained Martita to give workshops herself when she's with different groups," explains Bry. "She's been using my zine making prompts and storyboarding prompts with different groups that she works with." Her experiences suggest that, in an ideal world, transition time should be planned into project budgets from the beginning.

"We have to be really careful about how we navigate this, to create a system for when (the work) is not happening, or when an artist is not there. Before, we were just proving how this is working. But now we can say we need a little bit more time to create a space that I can extract myself from."

Elina Bry, filmmaker

Time

Time to develop trust
and relationships

High quality
projects

Lunch!

Time in nature

Time and space
for practitioners
to reflect

No parachuting

Slow

Measure
impact /
success

All hail the
snails!



No them
and us

Realistic and
deliverable

Need to
understand
the people

Care and caring -
not patronising as
time takes time

An ability to exist
outside of a vacuum
where those working
together can join forces

Room to meander,
explore, take time

Less repetition

TIME (longer term
funding) - to build trust,
consult on project plan,
experiment and develop

Advocacy on behalf
of artists about the
value of sustainable
practice

Without
defined
end point

Value creativity
for creativity's
sake - because the
processing time is so
valuable in itself

Having mental
health support
as an artist -
supervision and
support

Longevity
of process

TIME

"You cannot rush trust. I think holding space for people and giving them time to open up at their own pace is key."

Symposium attendee

Almost everyone we spoke to said the opportunity to work with participants for an extended period of time can be crucial to the success of a project. Of 12 projects we studied that were supported by Creative Scotland's Participatory Arts and Mental Health Fund, half took place over the course of one year. The shortest lasted six months, the longest lasted 15 months.

This is partly just about the time it takes to build trust. As an artist beginning a project, you may be a stranger to the people you're planning to work with. They may need time to get to know you before willingly participating in any creative activity you're proposing. But an extended period of time is also what makes it possible to do the kind of deeply

collaborative, co-designing work referred to in the previous chapter.

For Charlotte Mountford, director of Lyth Arts Centre in Wick, working across an extended period of time has meant "the difference between doing a nice series of workshops that are good for everyone's wellbeing versus quite in depth participatory, engaged work". As an example, Mountford cites the centre's MAP: Men's Art Project, funded by the Baring Foundation, which began in 2024 in collaboration with the Caithness Men's Group and the Friday Men's Group in Wick and was designed as a three year project.

Lyth Arts Centre has increasingly focused on participatory arts and mental health in recent years. In response to a reported steep decline in the local community's mental health since the Covid-19 lockdown, the venue has worked with mental health support services, community centres, community development trusts, youth clubs and others. But when working with these groups, Lyth Arts found that women were much more likely to take part in activities than men.

MAP: Men's Art Project was created to address this. The project set out to bring together participatory artists, local men, and men's support groups to develop a social prescription style programme of "creative interventions for male participants with mental health problems" through "a menu of activities, inviting participants

to create their own programme to reflect their own experiences, interests and at the level of engagement with which they are comfortable". In other words, identifying what men want and need in the first place, in dialogue with them, was a key part of the design process.



Sensory workshops at Dixon Community in Glasgow. Photo by Erika Stevenson.

“That has been a real exercise in time, I think, bringing an artist into a group with quite severe mental health challenges. The kind of flexibility that’s needed, you just can’t go in with a plan. The first three months, if I’m being totally honest, have to be totally about relationships, building responsiveness, working out the dynamics sometimes of these groups, between staff and support workers as well as participants.”

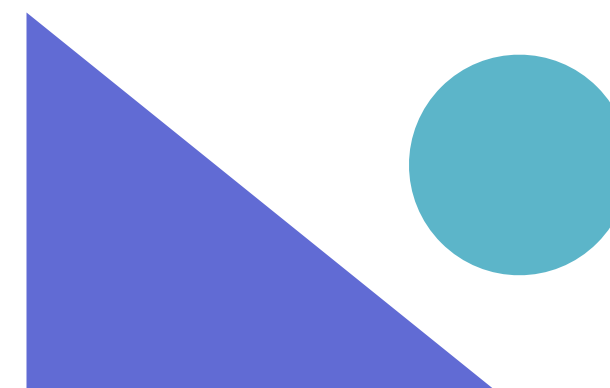
Charlotte Mountford, director, Lyth Arts Centre

In a “dream world”, Mountford added, “I’d love for these programmes to be three years long, to really support artists and support partners and participants.” The Sensory Collective, set up by Edinburgh-based company Independent Arts Projects (IAP), has effectively reached this landmark already. It began in 2021 as a Culture Collective funded programme to create sensory art projects in Glasgow with people with Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC), people with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD) and people with Dementia. With the original Culture Collective funding, IAP’s Nina Doherty says, “we were given the gift of time” in a programme lasting 22 months.

“The kind of co-designing work that is led by participants as well as the artists can feel quite daunting at the start, because you’re thinking, ‘we don’t really know what it is’. (At first) it can feel a bit wrong to be like ‘we don’t know exactly what we’re doing, we should have planned this all perfectly’ but actually the method is more about doing that part together, and that results in a more meaningful experience for people, and what are we doing this for if not for participants to have a really meaningful experience? Funds are normally about ‘what are you going to do, how do you want to do it, what’s going to be the outcome?’ We’re in a kind of culture of having to prove to the funders that we did something really good, so let’s show them a thing. But if you’re bringing people in as active participants, you’re valuing them as people with ideas but also creating something that makes them feel good.”

Nina Doherty, producer

One Sensory Collective project, working with older people at Dixon Community in Glasgow, later evolved into an intergenerational project funded by Creative Scotland’s Participatory Arts and Mental Health Fund, bringing together people from Dixon Community and young people from Big Noise Govanhill; the Dixon Community work later secured new funding from the Glasgow Wellbeing Fund. This continued support, Doherty says, has helped reinforce the bond of trust that her team worked hard to develop.



“Through the various different funding streams we’ve used to continue this project at different times, we’ve now been there since 2022. Although I don’t attend the workshops very often, whenever I do, they’re like, ‘oh, it’s you, you were at the beach that day,’ so they feel like you’re embedded a bit more and they trust you a bit more.”

Nina Doherty, producer

Meanwhile, the broader Sensory Collective project recently secured new funding from Culture Collective to work with another group of artists.



Joanna Young, left, at work. Photo by Erika Stevenson.

The limitations of funding, of course, mean that most projects won't have this kind of shelf life. How, then, do you make the best use of the time you have? Feedback from interviewees suggests several things are key:

■ **Keep your activities as regular as possible**

If sessions are always on the same day, at the same time, for example, this will help with engagement. As Ken Cockburn of Lapidus Scotland put it, of a writing project with Glasgow Association for Mental Health, "If it was every Tuesday it just helped people remember when the session was. If people didn't turn up every week, because they weren't well that day, they at least knew they could go back the following week."

■ **Build in time for reflection**

Time and space to reflect can be just as valuable as time spent actually making things. As one artist put it, "the processing time is valuable in itself".

■ **Manage expectations**

If you are only going to be working with a group for four or five weeks, be clear and realistic from the beginning about what is likely to be achievable during that time frame, and also what won't be possible.

■ **Spend time in nature**

There is extensive evidence that opportunities to spend time outdoors, even in a local park, are good for people's wellbeing, and this has been central to many successful participatory arts and mental health projects. This can be time for reflection as much as for creating.

■ **All achievements are worth celebrating**

Sometimes the impact of a participatory arts and mental health project can be quite small, but as Caitlin Sweeney of Perth and Kinross Association of Voluntary Service put it, "we meet everyone on an individual basis", from someone who learns new skills that change their lives to someone who was too nervous to get on a bus but was willing to do so for an arts-focused day trip. "So it's just looking at how we can still enrich and enhance their life, in a supported way, and that will look different for everyone."

ALMOST EVERYONE WE SPOKE TO SAID THE OPPORTUNITY TO WORK WITH PARTICIPANTS FOR AN EXTENDED PERIOD OF TIME CAN BE CRUCIAL

Flexibility

Open
communication

Being open to
constant change

Fun

Play

Value of creativity
isn't quantitative

Opportunity
for working on
multiple activities

Attunement
to need

Relevant and relatable
to participants' lives

Multi-
disciplinary

Listening

Ability to pivot to
meet community needs

Process
over
product

Sharing what works
and what doesn't

Flexibility without
compromise or loss
of quality

Open to
change

Recognises
everyone's
creativity

Trust and flexibility
- from funders,
partners etc to adapt
practice based on
participant need

Responsive

Adaptable

FLEXIBILITY

“There are some things that people can’t easily leave at the door, so it is important not to set your expectations too strictly about how things should go, but rather be flexible enough to adapt to the needs of your participants.” Symposium attendee

When we began researching participatory arts and mental health projects for our previous resource, *Performing Anxiety*, it soon became clear that flexibility was key to the success of this kind of work. As Mariem Omari, who has developed a series of mental health focused participatory arts projects in Scotland, told us:

“When you have preconceived ideas that you’re trying to impose on people, you are setting yourself up to force through something that has not been organically conceived. And you set up a power dynamic that removes the agency of those people.”

Mariem Omari

Flexibility can mean starting a process with one artform in mind (a performance, for example) but having the freedom to switch to another (an exhibition, perhaps) depending on how people are most comfortable expressing themselves. It can mean accepting that some people may be willing to participate one day but not the next, that they may only attend a few sessions, that they may be present but not participate in any obviously active way, or that they may agree to be part of something and then later change their mind.

Artist James Leadbitter, aka the vacuum cleaner, has designed a series of participatory arts and mental health projects with young people and embeds this flexibility into his working process.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. You can walk at any point, you can pull your material at any point, often in performances or shows. On the day of the sharing, on the day of exhibition, once the exhibition is open, you can pull your work. And we’ll back you on that. I will always want to have a conversation with you – what’s going on, why that’s happening – but ultimately you’re in control. And that can be really empowering.”

James Leadbitter

If the idea of running a project in this way feels daunting, much of this uncertainty can be mitigated by clear communication and by setting boundaries and terms of engagement from the beginning of a process. Here are some pointers, gathered from attendees at our Participatory Arts and Mental Health Symposium.



A Neurodivergent Adventure by Alchemy Film and Arts

- **Meet the need rather than define the outcome**

Begin sessions with a broad but clear understanding of what you want participants to get out of the experience, rather than focusing on what you want to happen as an artist. Build from there.
- **Focus on the process rather than the end product**

Allow people to choose their process as much as possible. And allow the end product to emerge organically from that process rather than deciding in advance what it should be.
- **Understand participants’ expectations**

Examining everyone’s expectations throughout can help with co-creation. What’s most important to each person?
- **Ensure you work around people’s individual access needs**

As one artist we spoke to put it, “flexibility might mean recognising the diverse needs of a group. One person might appreciate lots of options and materials, another might find that overwhelming. It means adapting the style and form of delivery to meet the needs of the group you are working with.”
- **Consistency and clear communication are also important**

As Andy Robertson of Hot Chocolate Trust in Dundee put it, “Young people need the safety of knowing what’s happening when.”

When talking to artists who have worked on recent participatory arts and mental health projects, numerous examples emerged of flexibility in action.

Rachael Disbury and Tom Swift work for Alchemy Film and Arts, a film-focused organisation in Hawick that runs an experimental film festival and a community film-making programme, among other projects. In 2023 they were supported by Creative Scotland's Participatory Arts and Mental Health Fund to deliver a film programme with groups of disabled and neurodivergent people in the Borders, to 'explore intersections between disability and mental health'. Their Creative Scotland application referred to a "long term film project" with "celebratory communal screenings" but the project evolved when it became clear the participants had something different in mind.

Instead of a film, what emerged was a "participant-led interactive video experience" called A Neurodivergent Adventure. As Swift put it:

"In some ways it's the film, but in some ways it's packaged as a video game, depending on how we want to talk about it. They wrote the whole story, they talked about their own experiences for the different characters, for the scenarios the characters were in, and the way they wanted to show this to people."

Tom Swift, Alchemy Film and Arts

Having a mental health focus for the activity, Swift suggested, "meant that the whole process became equally valid. It does exactly what it was intended to do, which was give them a platform to talk about their issues."

"We're a film organisation so we want to get people in the cinema. But if the cinema isn't a welcoming space for everyone in the group, it challenges your own practice. Maybe we could redefine what a film is and maybe there could be an interactive quality?"

Rachael Disbury, Alchemy Film and Arts

Filmmaker Elina Bry shared an example of creating an artist residency while working with people in recovery from addiction. This was not part of the plan for her project at all, but was a response to a participant discovering that she had recently been on a residency on the Isle of Eigg.

"When I came back, one of the participants said, 'could I apply?' And I was like, well, technically, yes, but I know how hard it is, even for an artist with a track record, to get selected. So I said, let's just do a residency ourselves. And so I created an artist residency for the group at Loch Rannoch, and we just did the same thing that a group residency would do - reflection, walking outside, writing in the evening, watching films related to the topics we were talking about during the day, just sharing and giving space for people to express themselves."

Elina Bry, film-maker

This was possible, Bry explains, because the project budget was flexible enough to include unspecified 'go see' time. And the results of this improvised response to a participant's question appear to have been transformative for the whole project. When we spoke, Bry had just secured new funding to take the group on a more formal residency at Hospitalfield in Arbroath, well known for its artist residency programme. "The other one was a DIY residency," says Bry. "This time it's an actual organisation, and we're going to make a film there. Everyone is so psyched up about it because then they realise, 'we are artists in residence.' That gives value to themselves, starting on their creative journey."



Community is
the medicine

Being part of
a network

Space to think
about and share
ideas / challenges
with other artists

Intergenerational
work

Care

Ecosystem and
connecting

Non-hierarchical

Community

Local

Intergenerational
work

Community
focused

Sense of ownership
/ belonging

Building
community

Sharing skills

EG: Evaluation
/ Funding
applications /
Documenting,
film, photos

Importance of
different people
with different skills

Clear
intentions

Understanding of non-
art organisations and
their role and possible
collaboration

Joining
forces

Practical

Productive

COMMUNITY

"People often think of the community as the one that they live beside, but communities can be made up of shared identities. Communities are so much more than the place you live."

Symposium attendee

"I work in the community providing mental health support, and for me this is key. Some people are so isolated they don't have a next of kin. Creating space for people to feel a sense of purpose and belonging is so important."

Symposium attendee

The word 'community' is often cited as important in conversations about participatory arts and mental health projects. There is general agreement that understanding the needs of the community you're working with is crucial, but also that 'community' is a complex and nuanced idea. It can refer to people living in a specific geographical area, people with a shared identity (religion, ethnicity, gender etc), people with a shared interest, or any combination of the above. This is often what takes time; beware of making assumptions, for example, about what kind of creative activity will be most appealing or beneficial to the wellbeing of any given community. An LGBTQ+ group in the Hebrides will not necessarily have the same interests or outlook as an LGBTQ+ group in Edinburgh.



Here is an attempt to summarise what artists have told us is good practice when it comes to community...

■ **Embed work into existing communities**

Identify places where people are already gathering together, and what their shared interests are, instead of trying to impose something from outside. Can you enhance what is already happening, encouraging people to try something new within what is already familiar to them? As Andy Robertson of youth work charity the Hot Chocolate Trust told us: "One of things we feel grateful for is that we're kind of grounded in this wider youth work community. It means that the boundaries can be porous. So we can see somebody struggling and invite them into a project if that is helpful for them."

■ **Remember that communities aren't monoliths**

Try to avoid making assumptions about what any given community will think, or enjoy, or respond positively to, even if your assumptions are based on extensive knowledge of that community. Individuals will always surprise you.

■ **Bring different communities together where possible**

Are there barriers between different communities that can be broken down? Intergenerational work, bringing young people and older people together, can be particularly effective.

■ **Create a sense of ownership and belonging**

It's crucial for the community you're working with to feel a sense of ownership over the work. Is it being presented on their terms? Is it representing them the way they would wish to be represented?

There is, in particular, general agreement that an artist working with a community should already have a connection to that community, whether this means working in a place familiar to them as a present or past resident, or through some other form of shared identity (religion, ethnicity, gender etc). As one person put it, there should be “no parachuting”.

One recent example is Ukrainian Amateur Theatre, a Dundee-based community group for people displaced by the Ukraine war, founded by TV and theatre director Varvara Mishyna. Once the chief director of a TV company in Dnipro, Mishyna had to flee her home country when the war began in 2022.

She has now brought 25 years of media experience to working with a community bound together by trauma as much as a shared language and culture. With experience in theatre therapy, she was perhaps uniquely qualified for the job.

Ukrainian Amateur Theatre’s work includes a production of Robinson Crusoe, performed by a cast of 15 children, which found parallels between Daniel Defoe’s famous story and the experiences of people stranded in an unfamiliar place after fleeing Ukraine. This was a delicate process, rooted in theatre therapy. Two of the children Mishyna works with, she notes, have formally diagnosed mental health conditions, while many others



are living with symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress.

Mishyna’s method, she explains, “focuses on addressing trauma and reducing anxiety through a process of psychological distancing. What distinguishes it from many established approaches is that participants do not experience the process as uncomfortable or clinical. Instead, they engage in performance, creativity, and storytelling, creating something meaningful and often joyful for an audience. This creative framework allows participants to feel safe. They are not required to “open up” directly; rather, they express themselves through characters and narratives. As a result, they are often more willing to engage, and over time, this leads to a gradual release of internal tension and unresolved emotional experiences.”

In 2025 Mishyna secured funding from SMHAF’s Regional Participatory Arts Fund for a community event called Waves of Hope and Faith, which combined a theatre performance with workshops by Ukrainian artists exploring traditional Ukrainian Petrykivka painting, jewellery making and printing techniques. She describes the event as “a shared space of connection, reflection and healing”.

“The real impact of the project is not measured only in the number of performances. It is measured in the personal journeys of the participants. Many of the young people who joined the theatre group arrived with the emotional weight of war,

migration, and uncertainty about their future. Some of them barely spoke during the first rehearsals. They were shy, withdrawn, and unsure how to express themselves. For some participants, language was also a barrier, because they were adjusting to a new country and a new culture. But theatre slowly changed something. During rehearsals, we created an environment where people could experiment, play, and explore emotions without fear of judgement. And gradually we started to see transformation.

“The real impact of the project is not measured only in the number of performances. It is measured in the personal journeys of the participants.”

Varvara Mishyna

“Young people who once spoke only a few quiet words began performing long monologues. They began expressing complex emotions on stage — grief, humour, anger, hope. And sometimes those moments were incredibly moving. Because we could see that something inside them had shifted. They were no longer just observers of their own lives. They were becoming storytellers. Experiences like this show us how powerful participatory arts can be when they are approached with care, sensitivity, and patience.”

“Young people who once spoke only a few quiet words began performing long monologues. They began expressing complex emotions on stage — grief, humour, anger, hope. And sometimes those moments were incredibly moving. Because we could see that something inside them had shifted.”

Varvara Mishyna

“In terms of mental health, being involved in the theatre company offers something unique. Theatre creates a space where people can express emotions safely, often through a character rather than directly as themselves. This creates what we call psychological distance. A person can say: ‘This is not me speaking — this is my character.’ And paradoxically, that distance allows people to speak more honestly.”



Photos from Waves of Hope and Faith by Varvara Mishyna

A community of artists

There are also clear benefits from people working on participatory arts projects being part of a mutually supportive community of people doing similar work. In October 2025, the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival hosted a participatory arts and mental health symposium at Civic House in Glasgow. Its main purpose was to gather material for this resource, and we were prepared for it to be quite a small discussion group event, but demand for tickets far exceeded our expectations. On the day it became clear that the opportunity for participatory arts practitioners to gather in the same room, hear each other's stories, and share experiences and questions was in itself valuable. A subsequent online event was also popular and suggested there is an appetite for gatherings in the future that can help build a community of mutual support.

“I think being able to meet with other organisations, hear from each other and troubleshoot a bit more would be really helpful. The kind of conversations we've had have made me think more about the ethics of this work.”

Charlotte Mountford, Lyth Arts Centre

“Headspace for practitioners is kind of an under-resourced thing. I'm sure you find this across the board, in sectors where there's a kind of level of care and determination, where everyone's doing as much as they can with the little that they have, it's a luxury, that ability to get outside of ourselves, and it shouldn't be. I think we, like any community, are really proud of what we do, but we also don't want to be naive. We know we've got blind spots. We know no community is perfect. We know that we can learn a lot from other people.”

Andy Robertson, Hot Chocolate Trust



Photos of SMHAF's Participatory Arts and Mental Health Symposium by Ingrid Muir

Neurodiversity

Equality

Social
justice

Non-extractive

Holistic
approach

Accessibility

Equality of artist
and participants

Collaboration

Equitable

Intersectionality

Caters to
all learners

Community led

Remove barriers
to participation

Inclusivity

Inclusion

Equity

Equity - all people
equal value in project

EQUALITY

There is, perhaps, no more important theme in this resource than equality. As one artist we spoke to put it, "how we make our communities more equitable is fundamental to all (our) work."

While participatory arts and mental health projects often focus on addressing inequality, the way in which this is done is crucial. The 'nothing about us without us' principle - that no decisions should be made for any group without that group's direct participation and leadership - is a good starting point. This means projects being led by artists who understand the inequalities and barriers to access faced by potential participants because they have first hand experience of them.

There are multiple factors that can exclude people from taking part in the arts, both as participants and as artists. Here are some obvious ones, including selected signposting to organisations who are advocating for change as well as championing artists affected by inequalities.

■ Ableism

One in four people in the UK are classed as disabled, but there are far more ways in which disabled people can be excluded from creative activity than most non-disabled people are aware of. Wherever possible, any venue you work with should be wheelchair accessible, with disabled parking spaces nearby as well as public transport links, and access requirements with costs attached, such as BSL and captioning, should be factored into a project budget from the beginning in consultation with participants. But there are many other considerations - e.g: avoiding ableist language, not making physical contact without consent, awareness of different forms of sign language, the use of visual descriptions and introductions etc - that may require research and paid consultancy with disabled artists before a project starts. In Scotland, Birds of Paradise, Scotland's disability-led theatre company, is one source of training. (<https://www.boptheatre.co.uk/>)

■ Economic inequality

Class, education, and geography can all contribute to whether arts activity is accessible to people, even if the offer is free. It's important to meet the people you're working with wherever they feel most comfortable, and participatory arts projects increasingly take place outside of established arts venues that, despite the best of intentions, often do not feel like welcoming spaces for many people. Other factors to consider include: how much time are participants likely to have available? Is the space straightforward to get to? Is lack of childcare a factor? Do you need to provide free food? Economic inequality, of course, also impacts on who is able to work as a participatory artist. Only 16% of people in creative roles in the UK are from working class backgrounds (Policy and Evidence Centre, 2020). Working Class Creatives, an advocacy group which has created a UK-wide database of 1000 working class artists, is one of very few arts organisations in the UK dedicated to highlighting this issue. <https://www.workingclasscreativesdatabase.co.uk/aboutus>

■ Race

The arts are still a white-dominated industry, particularly in Scotland which is 93% white according to the 2022 census. Institutional racism is an ongoing problem and solutions offered are often tokenistic rather

than pushing for meaningful structural change. We Are Here Scotland (<https://www.weareherescotland.com/>), Be United (<https://be-united.org.uk/>) and Scottish BPOC Writers Network (<https://scottishbpocwritersnetwork.org/>) all advocate for more visibility, influence and leadership roles for artists of colour.

■ Neurodiversity

There is a growing awareness of the ways in which neurodivergent people are excluded from public spaces and engagement in the arts. Space for Wellbeing, described below, is an example of a project created by a group of neurodivergent artists in response to this. The organisation Neuk Collective (<https://neukcollective.co.uk/>) also brings together, supports and advocates for neurodivergent artists nationally.

■ Sex and gender

There are a wide variety of ways in which sex and gender can impact on engagement in participatory arts projects, from women being excluded from spaces dominated by men to transgender people being excluded from heteronormative spaces, and men not engaging in mental health themed projects due to stigma. In Scotland, Sanctuary Queer Arts (<https://www.sanctuaryqueerarts.com/>) advocates and provides mental health support for LGBTQ+ artists.

A recent example of a 'nothing about us without us' approach to a participatory arts and mental health project is Space for Wellbeing, a project in Forres which brought together "highly experienced artists living and working with neurodivergence and social-emotional difficulties to deliver workshops for young people who are neurodivergent and their parents/ carers that are facing barriers to inclusion".

Together a team of neurodivergent participants and artists - led by artist Kate Mackay - co-designed a "public space for wellbeing" that was built at Forres House Community Centre and open to the public throughout the 2024 Findhorn Bay Festival. In a short film documenting the project, Mackay describes the result as "public space reimagined for enhanced wellbeing and for access and inclusion".



"We questioned, why are so many public spaces inaccessible to neurodivergent people and what is the most dignified, fair and respectful way of enhancing that inclusion? So it was really important that the space was designed creatively and collaboratively with neurodivergent communities, so people were engaged from the outset."

Kate Mackay, artist

The result was described as an 'indoor oasis', with sandpits, pine cones, fabrics and textiles to soften the acoustics, ambient sound recorded on a local beach that could be listened to in the space through wireless headphones, and soft lighting. While much of this will be recognisable to anyone who has encountered an autism-friendly space, Mackay describes it as "just a space that removed the differences between people. That's what access should be, that's what inclusion should be."

In other words, a common practice of creating a space for a marginalised group (for example a single autism-friendly performance of a show that would ordinarily have loud music and bright lights) was turned on its head. Instead, that group drew on their experiences to create a space for everyone

else. A similar principle can be found in recent theatre productions designed to be performed in sign language, with captions provided for hearing audiences.

Some forms of inequality may be inevitable in participatory arts projects. There is inequality even in the idea of an experienced professional artist working with unpaid participants, which is currently standard practice in this work in order to provide the level of expertise and care that is required. And there is inequality implicit in working with vulnerable groups who are less able to advocate for themselves than those running the projects, which means that robust safeguarding rules are of utmost importance. Creative Scotland's Creating Safety resource provides safeguarding for individuals and organisations delivering artistic, cultural and creative projects for children and young people in Scotland.

Wherever inequalities exist though, participatory arts projects can do effective work in recognising and, to an extent, redressing them. In Dundee, Andy Robertson of youth work charity the Hot Chocolate Trust shared with us some examples of equality in action from the Trust's Inside-Out/Outside-In project, named because it combined supporting young people (aged 12 to 21) to "express themselves, process and explore their wellbeing and have a voice in shaping support" with practitioner-focused activity designed to test and share new ideas. One memorable one was what Robertson described as a "super doodle" combining different forms of drawing.

"You might have a young person who is really, really into art and wants to be there every day and drawing all kinds of wonderful creations. You might also have a young person who will say 'No, I can't draw.' And then the conversation becomes, 'can you draw a stick man though? And they go, yeah, I can draw a stick man. And before you know it, they've drawn a whole family of stick men and their dog and a tree. And if we frame that well, then when it comes to the end people aren't looking at their one wonky stick man, they're looking at a whole piece, and they go, 'wow, I was a part of that, we made that together.' That, for me, is what grounds or nurtures that sense of belonging and that sense of community and ownership."

Andy Robertson, Hot Chocolate Trust

**WHEREVER
INEQUALITY
EXISTS THOUGH,
PARTICIPATORY
ARTS PROJECTS
CAN DO GOOD
WORK IN
RECOGNISING
AND, TO
AN EXTENT,
RE-DRESSING IT**

Support structures

Organisational capacity

Support system

Partnership working

Peer support

How to build capacity

Support for artists to work together

Empathy

Skill building

Integrity

Facilitators being open to learn

Respect value of art in management of mental health

Supervision of artists and debriefing (like in art therapy practice)

Supervision

Curiosity

Wellbeing support for artists and participants

Being calm patient and understanding

Responsive

Resilience

Meet people where they are

Self-care

Pairing up artists for their wellbeing

Wellbeing budget

Validation - creative work has worth

SUPPORT STRUCTURES

"I think the support that you get is absolutely key. Artists can sometimes be brought in almost as a kind of replacement for social care and you can find yourself in quite vulnerable situations without the infrastructure support or signposting."

Joanna Young, choreographer

Something that came up in several interviews for this resource was the potential for a blurring of boundaries between the work of participatory artists and the work of mental health support services. For example, choreographer Joanna Young recalled an experience on a previous project where she was left alone with a large group of participants "with really different needs. If something was to happen that would have put me in a very difficult position."

Nothing like this took place, she emphasised, during her PAMHF and Culture Collective funded work with Independent Arts Projects. But as more artists work on participatory arts and mental health projects, there is an increasing need for clear and robust support structures for artists as well as participants. How do you avoid putting artists in situations they are not qualified to deal with? Is it inevitable that this will occasionally happen when working with participants with mental health issues, even if care workers are also present in the room? And if so, how do you prepare artists for that possibility? Who is there to support them? What boundaries need to be in place?

Lyth Arts Centre in Wick has increasingly been partnering with local mental health services over the past five years. Its director, Charlotte Mountford, is keenly aware that this is complex territory.

Here are some recommendations that have emerged from interviews.

Support for artists

■ Offer artists the opportunity to submit an access rider.

These were designed by and for disabled artists to ensure specific access needs are met, but some organisations are now providing templates for everyone they work with. An access rider allows you to explain what you need to do your best work and can be particularly helpful for neurodivergent artists. There are various templates available online, designed by everyone from disabled-led organisations such as Unlimited and Disability Arts Online to the Musicians' Union. However, you should also bear in mind that creating an access rider is also additional work for an artist, so it should be an offer rather than a requirement, and the onus should be on an organisation to understand and respect artists' access needs rather than on the artist to point them out. As one producer put it to us, "access should be an ongoing conversation rather than a one-off submission."

■ Set clear boundaries between the job of the artist and the job of health professionals

A participatory artist's work can enhance what health professionals are

"It's become increasingly hard in the last ten years to make the case for art without almost stepping on statutory providers' responsibilities. You feel like you sometimes have to say, we're not just doing art, we're doing good social responsibility as well. I think what's come out for us is that what we can offer is a kind of holistic support. So, with a lot of the groups we work with, we don't set up a new session outside of the usual provision. If the group meets on a Tuesday afternoon, the artist will come to that pre-existing group and that sort of sets the framework. It's a holistic offer that can hopefully improve the mental health workers skills' in using creativity, but also enhance the offer that's provided to participants."

Charlotte Mountford

doing but they should never be put in a position where they are effectively doing someone else's job for them.

■ **Create mutual support networks for artists**

Some participatory arts and mental health projects work with collectives of artists rather than individuals, which creates an accessible peer group for sharing experiences and concerns in a mutually supportive environment. There is also a clear need for forums where participatory artists can share experiences and concerns with each other, outside of the projects they are working on.

■ **Support artists to set boundaries between work time and private time**

As Charlotte Mountford of Lyth Arts Centre notes, "I remember a quote from our very first artist in residence cohort: 'It never ends.' Especially in a small rural community, you might have a contract or a commission for six months, for ten hours a week, but outside of that ten hours per week

you're still thinking about it, you still bump into people in Tesco and then, outside of that six months, you still have all those relationships and people still get in touch with you."

■ **Ensure you provide appropriate training for artists** such as Mental Health First Aid.

<https://www.smhfa.com>

■ **Provide wellbeing sessions for artists** with the opportunity to talk confidentially to an experienced wellbeing practitioner about any concerns that are coming up during the project. The Artist Wellbeing Company is experienced in this.

<https://www.artistwellbeing.co.uk>

■ **Debriefing**

Budget for a debrief session at the end of the project, so that artists have the opportunity to talk in confidence about any issues that may have come up. An additional wellbeing session at the end of the project may also be helpful in some cases.



Support for participants

■ **Clear communication**

Be clear from the beginning, using simple and accessible language, about exactly what is happening where and when, as well as what is being offered to participants and what is not.

■ **Ensure you are aware of individuals' access needs**

Everyone is different and access riders (see above) may also be appropriate for participants.

■ **Ensure that creative activity is not used as a substitute for mental health support**

As one interviewee noted, "there is a tendency for higher ups to think, oh, we'll just put an art project there and that will solve a social issue".

■ **Ongoing consent**

Ensure participants know they have a right to withdraw their creative work from the project at any point and have a clear process for allowing this to happen.

■ **Ensure there is no pressure to disclose**

While participants may choose to share personal mental health experiences as part of a creative exercise, no creative work should be dependent on this, and disclosure should always be handled with the utmost care. It is also important to recognise that a willingness to share - or even overshare - is not necessarily a sign that mental health issues have been resolved.

■ **Offer a variety of ways to 'check in'**

Checking in at the start of an activity can be helpful but be aware that verbal check-ins - asking how everyone is feeling at the start of an activity - are not always appropriate and can leave people feeling exposed. Alternatives include allowing people to communicate with hand gestures, coloured cards, or moving to a specific area of a room to signal how they are feeling.



Artists Kate Mackay (p54) and Joanna Young (p55) presenting at SMHAF's Participatory Arts and Mental Health Symposium. Photos by Ingrid Muir.



LEGACY

Something that almost all participatory arts and mental health projects have in common is that they are temporary. Some will run for longer than others but ultimately the funding will stop and the artists will move on to other work. What happens then?

Particularly if the work is themed around mental health, it is important to be mindful of the potential negative impact of a project ending. Is there a risk of participants feeling abandoned or forgotten? And what can be done to mitigate this?

'Legacy' can mean lots of different things. It can mean a piece of creative work - for example a film, a book, an album or a collection of visual art - that documents

and celebrates what has been achieved by participants. It can mean a piece of evaluation that records how the confidence and wellbeing of participants measurably improved as a result of the project.

It can also mean identifying ways for the creative work to continue in some form, even without further funding. One obvious way of doing this is to build legacy costs into a project budget from the beginning. Another is for funding bodies to focus on supporting established organisations that are more likely to be able to continue the work in some form afterwards with other support.

Some projects include training of staff or volunteers at partner organisations to continue the work, although, as one artist we spoke to noted, this is an imperfect process. "There is talk about 'empowering communities' but you can't necessarily hand (the work) over to someone else without (an artist's) experience and confidence. Some people might love

attending but wouldn't want to manage a group." So, it is also important to manage participants' expectations about what will or won't be possible when the project comes to an end, by communicating clearly and honestly and not promising anything that cannot be delivered.

There have been success stories though. Charlotte Mountford of Lyth Arts Centre cited the venue's training of domestic abuse specialists in Caithness, during its PAMHF

funded work, "on how to bring creativity into their practice, to work with service users, and they're doing it on their own now. Art and creativity is now part of the service they deliver for domestic abuse survivors, which is the legacy of this project."

Here are four projects supported by Creative Scotland's Participatory Arts and Mental Health Fund that illustrate various forms legacy planning can take.

Creative Recovery, Inverclyde

Over a period of 12 months, artists Elina Bry and Lily Lavorato worked with writer Martita Dunn, Recovery Development Officer for Your Voice in Inverclyde, to develop new creative activities supporting people in recovery from alcohol and drug dependency.

The legacy: The project's legacy included a series of short films made by participants (screened at a recovery event which also included contributions from several other artists), a film by Elina Bry called Through Touch and Sound, exploring how the five senses come back to life after becoming sober, and a 32-page Creative Recovery publication bringing together stories and drawings from the project. The project funding also covered the purchase of iPads for all participants, supporting them to build on the digital skills they had learned during the project. Elina Bry and Martita Dunn have continued to work closely together and, with new funding, have expanded the programme to include working with a recovery group in Aberdeenshire, where they are now planning to train a community artist to launch their own Creative Recovery programme. This, Bry says, wouldn't have been possible without the PAMHF support.

Create Your Wellbeing, Perth

Founded in 1972, Perth and Kinross Association of Voluntary Service Ltd (PKAVS) supports people across Perth and Kinross “to feel healthier, more connected, and more supported in their communities”, with a focus on carers, minority communities, community groups, and mental health.

Create Your Wellbeing ran for just over a year and supported an exhibition, a ‘scarecrow trail’ at the Walled Garden and Wisecraft in Perth in which people made their own scarecrows inspired by favourite music, and two festive music videos created at Christmas to bring people together at what can otherwise be a lonely time of year.

The legacy: In this case, Creative Scotland funding effectively enhanced an already existing service rather than generating a brand new piece of work. The application was up front about this, describing it as “an amalgamation of past projects to encompass a new project focused on a ‘museum’ of mental wellbeing”. But as well as the music videos the funding also supported the purchase of two new laptops plus musical instruments, costumes, paints, paint brushes, storage boxes, and letter stencils for people who required additional support with writing, all contributing to the sustainability of PKAVS’ creative work.

Sarah Oelmez of PKAVS told us that part of the appeal of the Creative Scotland fund was its recognition that “actually, existing models within services can be working really well. A lot of funders are looking for new initiatives, and that’s really hard because you find yourself trying to create something new that actually you don’t really need. We feel really confident that our model works well, but tapping into funds to be able to strengthen and try new ideas is wonderful.”

Writing With Flourish, Glasgow

Lapidus Scotland is a Glasgow-based voluntary association that facilitates reading and writing for wellbeing. It was supported by Creative Scotland to provide group activities to members of existing groups at Flourish House, Glasgow, a mental health recovery community.

The legacy: In addition to the workshops, Lapidus Scotland organised two training sessions for Flourish House staff and members interested in facilitating writing activities to enable these to continue beyond the project. Flourish House members made a podcast on the arts and mental health and a 36-page booklet was published, featuring words and images from the project, allowing them “to share our experiences of the project with a wider audience, including potential funders and project partners, other facilitators and organisations working in the field, and participants in future groups”. Lapidus Scotland says that it also developed a stronger relationship with Flourish House as a result of the project.

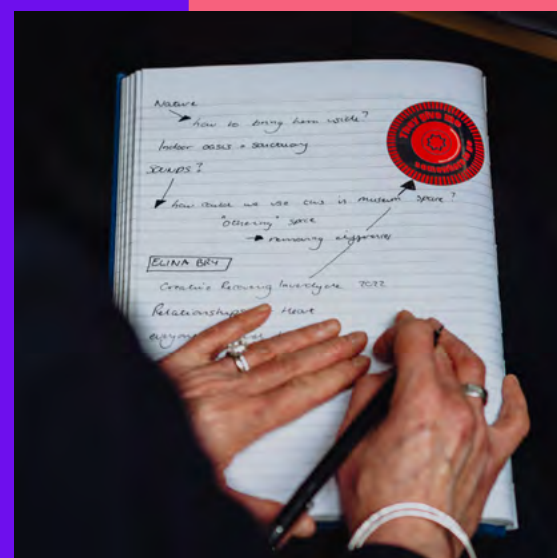
Martita Dunn and Elina Bry presenting at SMHAF's Participatory Arts and Mental Health Symposium. Photos by Ingrid Muir.



Independent Arts Projects (IAP) Sensory Workshops

This intergenerational project brought together older people at Dixon Community Govanhill and young people at Big Noise Govanhill for a series of 27 multi-sensory movement workshops themed around gardens, plus a community trip to the Hidden Gardens at Tramway and a social event.

The legacy: The most obvious legacy of this project was a deepening of an already established relationship between Independent Arts Projects, which is based in Edinburgh, and the Glasgow-based Dixon Community, as well as an expansion of IAP's evaluation process (for which IAP were supported by Creative Scotland to work with evaluation consultant Helen Kara) which helped to evidence the impact of its participatory arts work. The long-term nature of the work - building on a previous long-term project funded by Culture Collective, also working with Dixon Community - played an important role in supporting IAP's team of ten artists to develop their participatory arts skills. Joanna Young's work with Dixon Community has continued in 2025 and 2026 thanks to support from Glasgow Wellbeing Fund, and IAP has also secured further funding from Culture Collective to continue its Sensory Collective programme in 2026 with a new team of disabled and neurodivergent artists, working with "communities that are currently underserved by the arts".



Other examples we encountered of legacy included:

Creative resources for service users and carers

Designed by an artist during a participatory arts and mental health project, with creative prompts and activities that can support positive mental health. The resource was available for free after the project ended and is still in use several years later.

Small grants (£100 to £500)

Made available to participants to support them to set up their own creative enterprises, building on what they'd achieved during the project.

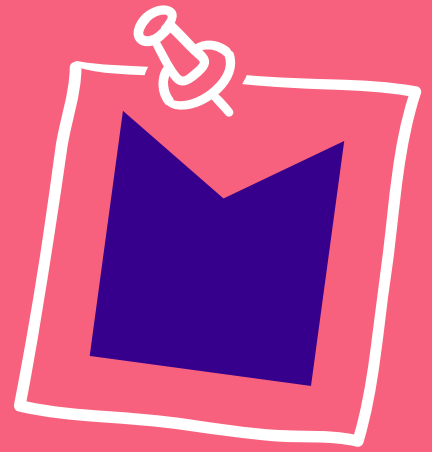
An extended evaluation process

To check in with the participants a year after the project ends, to help measure long term impact rather than immediate responses.

A transition period

in which the lead artist signposted participants to find and attend other workshops that they might not otherwise have been aware of.

Drawing on conversations with artists and organisations across Scotland, this new resource is designed to help people who want to design and deliver participatory arts and mental health projects in the most safe, supportive and nurturing way possible.



The resource was written by the Mental Health Foundation's Arts Programme Officer Andrew Eaton-Lewis, who is also part of the programming team for the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival.

We are very grateful to the Baring Foundation and Creative Scotland for supporting this publication which is also available online at **mhfestival.com**

The Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival is led by the Mental Health Foundation. For more information on supporting your own or others' mental health, go to **mentalhealth.org.uk**

