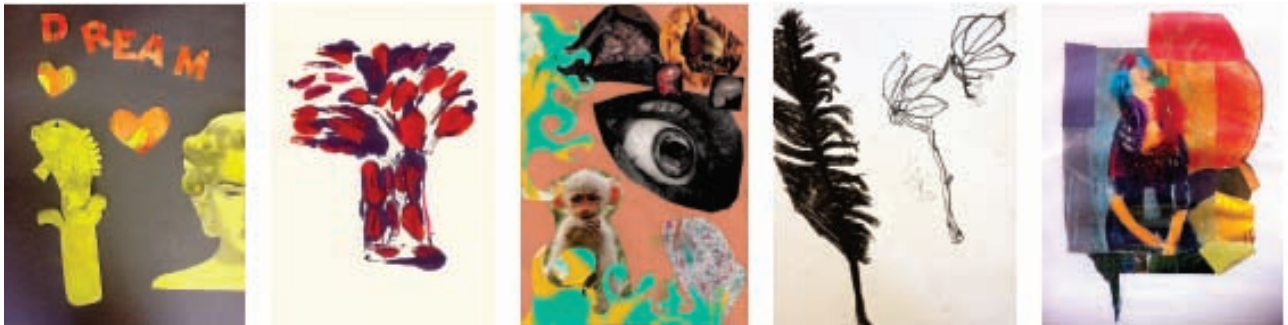




NETWORKS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



*Creativity “does provide opportunity for our service users to think outside of their situation and link with community and be part of that community, [so] identity is not in mental health in the sense of illness “.. []..” Having artists invest in them as individuals long term, is validating for them and challenges their previous experiences of others abandoning them or not caring. This is very important for the women’s sense of self and recovery and adds to our philosophy of care”. **Teign Ward***

*“A creative approach is really important in terms of providing an outlet for that creativity and an artist/community artist has been really beneficial. There will be continuing needs for our client...[.]”. **Rethink***

*“Creativity is a key way that helps women get out of their circumstances that other things can’t, it’s accessible to everyone, it’s a way to get out of one’s self and your situation – it’s a door everyone can walk through, everyone can always find something creative in them, can achieve. It’s about discovering and healing in yourself and then you can deal with other things better”. **One25***

*“It’s different ... It gets them doing things off the wing. The benefits of someone coming in from outside, getting a touch of reality. They see us every day. So, providing a bit of the outside world. If you had a space it could be women from all over the prison – there are quite a few people who aren’t doing education who could benefit ...[.]. Especially someone with self-harming behaviour, with anxiety. **HMP Eastwood Park***

*“It is such a good model, it’s so important to offer clients different ways for understanding themselves, finding an identity, find that sense of self which they lose through mental health and drugs. There is a need.” **Bristol Drugs Project***

Summary:

Networks, a Creativity Works project based in Bristol, integrated professional artists within five different settings; Teign Ward (a women’s medium secure unit), HMP Eastwood Park (mother & baby unit), One25 (reaches out to women trapped in street sex work), Rethink (women affected by mental illness), and Bristol Drugs Project. Partner settings engaged actively with the process by placing a support worker alongside the Networks artist, supporting spaces of informed understanding and safety alongside new ideas and skills.

Cultural partners Arnolfini and Light Box enabled connections to the city’s culture.

The artist-facilitators delivered two sets of parallel arts courses of eight weeks to over 50 vulnerable women involved with the criminal justice system or facing mental health issues. The socially engaged artists’ facilitation and contemporary community arts practice provided creative projects and opportunities tailored around participants’ interests.

The project aimed for the creative process to improve the women’s wellbeing and sense of self, enhance their skills and confidence and increase their engagement through a developed sense of community. A

series of digital studios was central to each course, creating connections and communication between the groups and the city's culture, through the women's artwork.

The project supported participants to learn informally (non-accredited) through creative processes facilitated by professional socially engaged artists, with the support of health professionals in the context of small groups and peer support. Personalised learning was directed through participants developing their own project and interests. Where the participants identified a direction, the artist supported them to develop skills through introducing stimuli in the form of materials, new techniques and cultural references. This flexible approach to facilitating learning, responding to the participants' starting-point, enabled the women to explore and become more aware of their capabilities at their own pace. The social context and the 'making' of the women alongside the artists and the health professionals created the safe environment for the women to increasingly take the initiative and have their achievements recognised.

"Its offered additional opportunities for our service users outside of their regular planned activities and structure. The value is having external facilitators, something that is owned by them and the facilitator, not owned by mental health services, the trust". **Teign Ward**

It takes the "being done to", "we are the professionals, you are the service user" away – which our women experience all so much so that everyone is all together". **One25**

"It encourages us to take a step to provide something for its own sake, like learning a new skill or interest that the women can take into recovery, [...] so I can see a place for bringing something skills based in." **BDP**

"It has directly fed into our key aims around audience development.. it's really made me think about how to introduce exhibitions to diverse groups [...] It's made us think about the whole idea about people feeling welcome in this building, which we are working on but still needs a lot of work." **Arnolfini**

Summary findings:

- The Networks course successfully motivated a difficult to reach client group who often lack confidence to attend regularly, despite obstacles such as chaotic lifestyles and mental health issues. 35 out of 53 (66%) of the women attended the course regularly (over 60% of the course).
- In Phase1 of the project, 13 of 21 (43%) were core attendees, whilst in Phase 2, it was 22 out of 32 women (68%). Both courses attracted an additional 24 women to the first session, who decided not to continue.
- Relationships established in Phase1 sustained the women in pursuing their aspirations further. 11 women from Phase 1 went on to attend the course in Phase 2. This is a retention rate of 85%.
- Across both Networks courses, participants' initial aspirations centred on improving their mental wellbeing. Their main goals were to feel more positive about themselves/be more optimistic about their future. In Phase1 the women also wanted learn more about themselves/express themselves better through creativity, whilst in Phase2 they wanted to feel more part of a group or community.
- The Networks course main impact was enabling the women to feeling part of a community. It met participants' wellbeing aspirations, but also increased their broader skills and aspirations:
- 19 out of 23 (83%) of respondents reported that they now felt part of a group/community or more positive about being around other people after experiencing the Networks course;
- 17 (74%) felt participating in creative activities helped them learn about themselves or express themselves better;
- 61% felt as a result of the course that they were: developing skills and abilities, more interested in learning and trying new things and more positive about themselves.
- The Networks course meant the women became engaged with other activities within the community and raised their aspirations:
- 13 out of 18 respondents (72%) said that since attending the Networks course they were more active in mental and physical wellbeing activities;
- 11 (61%) said that they were more active in arts and cultural activities. 10 women (55%) had aspirations to go on and do another course, including two women who aim to go onto arts foundation.

"The work each woman did on the course has lifted spirits and allowed her to feel assertive and happy and comfortable with herself. Many talked about or referred to her history with more confidence at recognising how to handle difficult emotions by working and being involved in the group of like minded and supportive

women." **Bristol Drugs Project**

*"The joy and satisfaction of producing something solid she was pleased with, and others praised, was immense, and challenged her sense of being worthless. She wanted everyone, including friends and family, to see what she had achieved" **One25***

*"The course has given the participants a real sense of validation and pride. There has been a palpable atmosphere of relaxed engagement and a belief that they can learn new skills and successfully achieve good results." **One25***

*"Several participants were initially very doubtful they would get anything out of the classes: "All right, I'll give it a go," and some at first needed support to attend, but their increased awareness and security was shown in more independence and effort to attend; more confident and reasoned choices, more ambition, and a growing capacity for non-destructive self-criticism, with less fear of failure." **One25***

*"[Participant X] thrived on goal setting and was prolific in her output. She discovered a love of collage and 3D work as well as managing anxiety through use of her sketchbook; "I don't know what I would have done without this group, I really love it." **Bristol Drugs Project***

*"[Participant X], like most of the participants, was unused to making choices in her life (or felt she'd made bad ones). She constantly asked for instructions from the "expert," but was gently encouraged to make up her own mind, having been given some basic info about materials etc. She took a risk on a "mad" idea, and it worked! This mixture of learning from others and then selecting/putting ideas into practice as an independent, creative person, really built up her confidence. **One25***

Conclusion:

- The Networks project identified that there is need to support women offenders, ex-offenders and service users who have mental health needs, or who are living chaotic lives and who are disadvantaged or marginalised in the community, more holistically.
- It was identified with Community Learning teams that there is a need for the Networks approach to support those that are not ready to access mainstream education or community learning services, and who need extra support before they are ready to do so.
- In the context of the Criminal Justice System it was identified by HMP Eastwood Park that those women prisoners who need extra support because of mental health needs would benefit from the Networks approach. Probation services identified clients who would benefit from regular respite from their chaotic lives as a means to support their personal development.
- Networks evidenced that creative opportunities can meet this need through enabling participants to achieve an improved sense of wellbeing and personal development, but most importantly to increase their aspirations.
- Creative opportunities, when delivered by professional socially engaged artists, enable individuals to pursue their own interests, from whatever their starting point, and self-direct these in a safe, relaxed environment which supports a wide range of skills development.
- A professional socially engaged artist also brings specific skills by linking isolated individuals to community and culture. The community arts approach has a crucial role to play in crossing the boundary between wellbeing and education.
- The 'gateway' (or informal learning) approach is an effective way to engage individuals with both their potential, and further activities in the community.
- Artist-facilitators bring specific skills by linking individuals to communities and culture.
- There is place for digital technologies at the heart of participatory work, in terms of supporting a sense of community, communication, quality of artwork presentation and IT skills.
- The group context and peer support shows that small groups are an effective means to support individuals in feeling part of a community, reducing isolation and increasing their engagement in broader community activities.
- It is evident that a partnership approach between artists and health professionals combines different approaches to individual and group development.
- Partnership working between and across agencies is essential for the integration of further opportunities for service users, which allows an emphasis on individual need. Partnerships are vital for sustainability, both with referring community partners and with artistic/cultural organisations;

- Without the type of investment and resource that Networks has afforded, service partners are limited in exploring alternative and innovative approaches to supporting service users. This limits the capacity of services to fully provide for the needs of individuals;
- This project was only 11 months. Without the opportunities afforded by longer term projects than this, there isn't sufficient time to integrate these validated ways of working into settings and enable users to experience progress in a sustained and managed way towards recovering their sense of self.
- The quality of these creative interventions and the significant impact they can have relies on consistency and long-term relationship building. Where time allows, this is the relationship between artist and participant, but also in a wider context Creativity Works is keen to develop partnerships with appropriate settings.
- It is important to recognise the value of creativity as a catalyst. Where participants exhibit complex needs, the re-building of aspiration and development of confidence and self-esteem forms a solid base on which other issues in their lives can be addressed. The wider implications of creative intervention can be farther reaching and longer lasting. There was significant impact on Networks' participants' ability to try new things and feel part of a group (77%, see pg.13). The new found skills of creativity may develop new and wider interests, which break cycles of behaviour and open new opportunities.
- The long-term value of Networks and any similar project, may not be realised until several months or years after the end of the workshop sessions. Only through prolonged developmental work with community settings and supported groups can these be fully evaluated and understood. A range of evaluation techniques are required, in order to gain a full insight into the wider impact of creative interventions. Finding new methods for communication and information sharing, by way of the **Re|source** was a critical strand of this project, which Creativity Works will be developing as a community development tool for future use.

"The collaboration with Creativity Works is quite inspiring, having a whole project, carrying out it and then evaluating it at the end". **BDP**

"It's essential to have experienced artists who can work with marginalised groups –the communication skills - it's all about engagement, without that, if you can't engage the person you fall at the first hurdle, they are two skills – to have the ability to be creative in their own right but to have the skills to engage marginalised groups – if you are missing one of those elements then that's no good. It needs to be accessible to people...[.] It's something Creativity Works does well – find artists that have those abilities". **One25**

"Partnership working... That we're able to provide this opportunity for service users, to work together with people that are passionate about individuals that are often very stigmatised, this is very encouraging. This makes our work easier." **Teign Ward**

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NETWORKS



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