

# The Baring Foundation

## CREATIVELY MINDED MEN

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Exploring men's participation in arts and mental health activities

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By David Cutler & Harriet Lowe



# CREATIVELY MINDED MEN: EXPLORING MEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ARTS AND MENTAL HEALTH ACTIVITIES

## 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*, available on our website. Since 2020, the Foundation has focused its Arts programme on creative opportunities for people with mental health problems.

## About the author

David Cutler is the Director of the Baring Foundation and leads its Arts programme. He has written several reports on arts and mental health including *Creatively Minded* and *Creatively Minded at the Museum*.

## A note on the use of language

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

We use the term 'men' to mean anyone identifying as a man. The term gender is used throughout this report.

We want to use the term the arts in the broadest way possible, including all art forms and with no distinction as to their relative value. Often we use the term creativity or creative practitioner in the hope that it will not be off-putting. Furthermore, we are especially interested in participatory arts, by which we mean where a trained artist uses that training to facilitate the creativity of a member of the public who hasn't had that training themselves. This is also sometimes called 'community arts'. There is more about participatory arts in *The Restless Art* by François Matarasso.

## Acknowledgements

The Baring Foundation would like to thank all the contributors to this report.

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

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## Foreword

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**BY ROB BERKELEY MBE**

**Rob Berkeley is Vice Chair of the Baring Foundation and Director of BLKOUT\_UK, an arts/media collective of Black Queer Men.**

When the chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on issues affecting men and boys appeared on the Today Programme on the launch of the group's latest 'inquiry' and pitched the idea of a 'minister for men', the issue quickly became drawn into the territory of culture warfare. *"The first thing to say about the idea of appointing a minister for men, as suggested last week by Tory MP Nick Fletcher and taken rather seriously by many, is that it is insulting."* was the response from Observer columnist, Martha Gill. Conceding that men have problems, she argued that such an appointment would be an affront because *"men are still on top in most important respects."* So far, so zero-sum. The trend for policy innovation to be delivered in soundbite form, and identities weaponised to undermine rather than establish the possibility of transversal solidarity combined with the result that broader discussion of evidence on men and boys needs and experiences is likely to have been more muted than hoped for by many of those working with men to improve mental health and wellbeing.

Fortunately, the independence of the Baring Foundation and its mission *to enable civil society to work with people experiencing discrimination and disadvantage*, mean that its focus remains on the insights and experiences shared by those at the margins and those working to support them, rather than the optics of political convenience. As an organisation, we would, in any case, be poor soldiers to recruit to a polarised/-ising battle, given our core values of collaboration, openness and

respect, creativity, learning, and civil society voice. We seek to engage with changemakers and support them in their efforts delivering social intervention that *protects and advances human rights and promotes inclusion*. The diversity of the organisations that receive support strengthens opportunities for learning and ongoing innovation. As demonstrated in this report, we do not seek or expect unanimity in view or action, nor do we require reduction of complex and contested ideas to a limited number of characters. Our aim is to increase opportunities for solidarity and inspiration that extends the impact of practice.

Our continuing exploration of effective civil society action on mental health and the arts turned to these questions about men's access to opportunities and services to create space for reflective and open sharing of insights from those leading change. It is a testament to the esteemed qualities of the organisations who were able to make time to respond to our call for insights that they have done so in such a thoughtful and engaging manner. Olufemi O Taiwo names the hope that I see represented by the ideas and commitment shown in this report as *pragmatic utopianism*. He notes: *This is a demanding approach. It asks that we swim upstream, that we be accountable and responsive to people who are not yet in the room, and that we build the kind of rooms in which we can sit together, rather than seek to navigate more gracefully the rooms history has built for us."*

Thanks for joining the conversation.

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# Summary

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## SHOULD MORE BE DONE TO ENCOURAGE MEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ARTS AND MENTAL HEALTH ACTIVITIES?

The Baring Foundation has published this report to explore the question whether more should be done to encourage men's participation in arts and mental health activities. In common with our other reports, it starts with an introduction looking at the landscape and what research can tell us, and then a series of opinion pieces and case studies are offered from around Britain, with different perspectives including art forms and communities. Finally, we try to draw some lessons from this material in our own reflections.

As with all our funding, we are primarily concerned with someone's right to access culture and to be creative regardless of their gender or health status. We are aware that other funders and arts and health organisations will also be concerned about the therapeutic effects of creativity on mental health problems.

There is little reliable evidence as to the relative levels of participation by men and women in arts and mental health activities and this needs more research. If there are differential levels of participation, the reasons are not clear, although many would suggest that there is good practice to draw on. Some of this good practice can be found in the seven opinion pieces and 11 case studies we have commissioned.

There is, however, a considerable body of evidence about the mental health problems of men, including their health seeking behaviour.

It is also very likely that there are fewer men than women working in arts and mental health (something shared with numerous 'caring' lines of work), although the impact this might have on male participation in projects has not been researched.

It is clearly the case that some men enjoy arts activities in men-only settings and a number of the case studies in this report are of men-only arts projects. The Men's or Community Shed movement in the UK has 1,100 sheds, which tend to be men-only or majority men and provide creative opportunities in, for example, metalwork and woodwork. Other projects successfully include men and women and do not seem to put off either gender.

Throughout this report we are concerned with intersectionality: that men with mental health problems can be found everywhere, including for instance among racialised minority communities and among refugees. It would seem that cultural issues can be important in securing participation.

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“As with all our funding, we are primarily concerned with someone's right to access culture and to be creative regardless of their gender or health status.”

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Much is not clear about men's participation in arts and mental health projects. It does not seem to have attracted the interest of funders or researchers. Nor is there an obvious consensus on whether there is a specific need to do more to include men. However, concern that men with mental health problems be given attractive opportunities to participate in the arts certainly should not be seen as a vote in favour of the patriarchy, but rather a vote for us all being able to express ourselves through the arts, whoever we are.



The Men's Music for Wellbeing Programme, photo courtesy of Arc Stockport (see page 38).

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# Introduction

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## WHY WE WROTE THIS REPORT

The Baring Foundation is an independent human rights funder, including of the arts in the UK. Since 2020, we have been supporting creative opportunities for people experiencing mental health problems. We do this as we see it as the right of everyone to be creative and to access culture, while acknowledging that this may also bring many benefits including therapeutic ones. Our programme has evolved over the last four years, giving hundreds of grants, working across art forms and across the UK, and taking a special interest in greater racial equity in creativity and mental health, as well as the needs of artists working in this area. Our interests are dynamic and evolve as we learn more about the field.

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“As part of our approach to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, we observed that the arts and mental health workforce is mainly comprised of women.”

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As part of our approach to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, we observed that the arts and mental health workforce is mainly comprised of women (as we had noticed that it is mainly White<sup>1</sup>). We were less clear about levels of participation by men in creative mental health opportunities. Was it roughly equal to that of women? This has proved hard to estimate. In contrast, there is a considerable body of evidence about the differential mental health needs and help-seeking behaviour of men and women. Finally, we surveyed some of the organisations working in field about these issues and whether or not they felt there was a need to do more to attract men's participation in arts and health projects.

Our initial research revealed a lack of evidence in a number of these areas and a lack of consensus about the significance of what appeared to be happening in the field. Therefore, we decided, as we have in other areas, to bring together what data we could find, ask informed writers to give us their views, and bring together a number of case studies of work with men in the field. As regards the latter, we have mainly looked at men-only creative projects, but also asked for examples of activities where men had been successfully included in open groups.

So, we put together this report both to educate ourselves but also to shine a light on an issue which we felt has not been addressed to any great extent in the past.

## STRUCTURE OF THIS REPORT

This introduction looks at the landscape of male participation in creative opportunities, covering:

- men's mental health;
- men's participation in the arts, especially targeted work for people with mental health problems;
- men's participation in the arts and mental health workforce;
- views from the field.

The report goes on to include seven opinion pieces from people interested in this issue and 11 case studies of work taking place across Britain.

Finally based on this limited and unsystematic, but insightful, set of voices and activities we attempt to draw some conclusions (see page 72).

<sup>1</sup> *Creatively Minded and Ethnically Diverse*, The Baring Foundation, 2021. Available at: [baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/creatively-minded-and-ethnically-diverse](https://baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/creatively-minded-and-ethnically-diverse).

## WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT MEN'S MENTAL HEALTH?

The primary reason why the Baring Foundation funds creative opportunities for people with mental health problems is our belief that culture is a human right, which is a matter of access and equity. However, the therapeutic benefits of creativity should not be disregarded and are key to many participants and funders. As far as we are aware, there is only one specific study on the effects of creativity on men's mental health (with only 41 participants)<sup>2</sup>, but there are a growing number of studies on the impact of creativity on the lives of people with mental health problems.<sup>3</sup>

However, there is a relatively strong evidence base about the mental health of men. Given that this is not a report on this topic *per se*, and the author would not be qualified to write about it, what follows is the briefest of tasters.

At the very broadest level, it does not make sense to consider whether or not there is a greater need for support for mental health problems by men or by women, given the range of different mental health problems that exist and their various gendered biases.<sup>4</sup> However, there is much debate in this area.<sup>5</sup> Common Mental Disorders are considerably higher among women. However, mental health statistics are often dependent on patients reporting ill health to clinical services, so it may well be that men are often more reluctant to seek help and therefore less likely to have a diagnosis.

There may also be important drivers of mental ill health that are gender specific such as domestic violence. However, Adverse Childhood Experiences affect boys and girls.<sup>6</sup>

There is also much discussion as to how damaging traditional gender stereotypes may be for men's mental health.<sup>7</sup>

There are differences between genders in terms of the prevalence of different mental health problems, such as higher rates of eating disorders among women, especially girls, and a higher suicide rate for men (75% of the 6,000 per year) which is one of the more reliable statistics. (Suicide is of course not a mental health problem in itself, but highly associated with depression and Bipolar Spectrum Disorder.) Homelessness, imprisonment and alcohol and drug addiction, all associated with mental ill health, are higher amongst men.

Men's willingness to engage with mental health services and to talk about mental health is improving,<sup>8</sup> although men are still less likely to access talking therapies (36% of uptake<sup>9</sup>).

Racial disparities are of particular importance when it comes to mental health treatment, so that is, of course, also true for men, for instance young Black men.<sup>10</sup>

An interesting example of attempting to look at men's health as a public health issue at the city level has been undertaken in Leeds which has directly influenced some arts provision.<sup>11</sup> Finally Mind has tracked over a ten-year period on a self-report basis men's experience of, and attitude to mental health, showing some improvement in help-seeking behaviour which is to be welcomed.<sup>12</sup>

Given this complexity, this report simply argues that the mental health problems of men and women are equally deserving of attention and support.

**2** Shane O'Donnell, Maria Lohan, John L Oliffe, David Grant, Noel Richardson, Karen Galway, Men's mental health and the arts: perceived benefits and dynamics of engagement, *Health Promotion International*, Volume 38, Issue 4, August 2023, daad092, [doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daad092](https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daad092).

**3** Daisy Fancourt and Saoirse Finn, *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review*, WHO, 2019. Available at: [iris.who.int/handle/10665/329834](https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/329834).

**4** [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/statistics/men-women-statistics](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/statistics/men-women-statistics)

**5** See, for example: [www.menshealthforum.org.uk/key-data-mental-health](http://www.menshealthforum.org.uk/key-data-mental-health).

**6** See, for example: [mft.nhs.uk/rmch/services/camhs/young-people/adverse-childhood-experiences-aces-and-attachment](http://mft.nhs.uk/rmch/services/camhs/young-people/adverse-childhood-experiences-aces-and-attachment).

**7** Simon Rice et al., Gender norms and the mental health of boys and young men, *The Lancet Public Health* 6: 8 August 2021. [doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(21\)00138-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(21)00138-9).

**8** *Get it off your chest: Men's mental health 10 years on*, Mind, 2020. Available at: [www.mind.org.uk/media/6771/get-it-off-your-chest\\_a4\\_final.pdf](http://www.mind.org.uk/media/6771/get-it-off-your-chest_a4_final.pdf).

**9** See: [www.menshealthforum.org.uk/key-data-mental-health](http://www.menshealthforum.org.uk/key-data-mental-health).

**10** [www.mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/equality-and-human-rights/young-black-men](http://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/equality-and-human-rights/young-black-men)

**11** Professor Alan White et al, *The State of Men's Health in Leeds*, 2016. Available at: [www.alanwhitemenshealth.co.uk/downloads/Leeds\\_Mens\\_Health\\_Main%20Report\\_2016.pdf](http://www.alanwhitemenshealth.co.uk/downloads/Leeds_Mens_Health_Main%20Report_2016.pdf).

**12** *Get it off your chest: Men's mental health 10 years on*, Mind, 2020. Available at: [www.mind.org.uk/media/6771/get-it-off-your-chest\\_a4\\_final.pdf](http://www.mind.org.uk/media/6771/get-it-off-your-chest_a4_final.pdf).



## WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT MEN'S PARTICIPATION IN CREATIVITY FOR MENTAL HEALTH?

Not nearly as much as we need to know.

The largest survey of participation in the arts – ‘Taking Part’ – run by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, probably doesn't help us a great deal here. These surveys, the most recent being 2019/20, tend to show a consistent disparity of around 6% more women than men reporting being engaged in the arts.<sup>13</sup> However, its definition of “taking part” – being a performer or audience member three times in the last year at any art event – is a long way from what we are referring to, with a typical arts and mental health activity perhaps comprising six to eight workshops over a term, for the sake of argument, so a much more intense form of engagement.

There don't appear to be good surveys of the relative participation of men and women in participatory art activities. Perhaps these are just too hard to define. It is certainly the case that older men are less likely to take part in creative ageing than women.<sup>14</sup> When we were funding in the field of creative ageing (2010-2019), we commissioned Ed Watts at Manchester's Whitworth Gallery to investigate ways to improve the involvement of men in creative ageing.<sup>15</sup>

The evaluation of the Thriving Communities social prescribing funding programme, which included creative amongst other leisure activities,<sup>16</sup> found that men were much less likely (24%) than women (71%) to take up these opportunities and research is ongoing as to why this might be. And our own survey described below showed that almost half of the responding arts organisations did feel that men were under-represented (and of course slightly more than half did not!).

## WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT MEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE ARTS AND MENTAL HEALTH WORKFORCE?

There are a whole series of problems in trying to come to an exact and authoritative view on this question, but it would be safe to assert that most people involved in the sector would say that the great majority working in this field are female.

There is no precise definition of people working in the arts and mental health workforce. We have used workforce here to mean participatory artists, creatives and people working in cultural institutions such as museums who work with people living with mental health problems, occasionally exclusively, but more often in a portfolio career.

This author has met hundreds of such people and the great majority have been women. Victoria Hume in her opinion piece in this report (see page 26) states that 87% of respondents to Culture, Health & Wellbeing Alliance surveys are women. She also notes that fields described as caring such as nursing and creative arts therapies are also predominately female, while Arts Council England statistics indicate the broader cultural field is more representative along gender lines.

If, for the moment, we accept that women do significantly outnumber men, then there will be many views about why this is the case. Could it be that caring is a gendered behaviour and more female? Or is it because it is an underpaid and undervalued sector and women are willing to make that commitment but men haven't made that choice? It could be that fields that are strongly occupied by people from a particular group start to become less attractive to people from outside that group. Certainly, this should not mean in any way that the women working in the arts and mental health field should be anything other than fully appreciated for their work.

**13** Arts - Taking Part Survey 2019/20, GOV.UK, [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taking-part-201920-arts/arts-taking-part-survey-201920](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taking-part-201920-arts/arts-taking-part-survey-201920).

**14** *Celebrating Age: Programme Evaluation*, Imogen Blood Associates, 2023. Available at: [baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/celebrating-age-programme-evaluation](http://baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/celebrating-age-programme-evaluation).

**15** *A handbook for cultural engagement with older men*, Ed Watts, 2023. [baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/a-handbook-for-cultural-engagement-with-older-men](http://baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/a-handbook-for-cultural-engagement-with-older-men).

**16** Evaluation of the Thriving Communities Fund, 2022. Available at: [socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/resources/thriving-communities-impact](http://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/resources/thriving-communities-impact).

It does raise questions though about the implications of having a workforce that is not representative of society more generally. Does that matter or not? There is a strong view that it does when it comes to class and race, but perhaps gender is different in this respect? The question does merit examination.

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“ Given this complexity, this report simply argues that the mental health problems of men and women are equally deserving of attention and support. ”

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### VIEWS FROM THE FIELD ON THE IMPORTANCE OF INCREASED PARTICIPATION BY MEN IN CREATIVE MENTAL HEALTH

In informal conversations with artists working with people with mental health problems, it has often been said to us that men's participation either tends to be lower or much lower than for women. This clearly varies, however, and some people said that numbers tended to be higher for men for certain art forms (for instance photography is popular among men) or locations, such as forensic psychiatric wards (but this applies to a very small percentage of people with mental health problems).

As we could not find any published evidence on this issue, we ran a short survey using our e-newsletter and grantee portfolio. We confined the survey to arts organisations running arts and mental health programmes. We received 59 responses which felt like a good return, though certainly not statistically valid or scientific. Along with quantitative data, we received a lot of useful commentary and feedback. The results were surprising.

Only a minority of respondents (23.3%) felt that men's inclusion in arts and mental health was a problem, with twice as many disagreeing (55%), which certainly doesn't reflect the conversations that we have had on this issue.

However, a higher number, 47%, considered that men were under-represented. These small numbers can be over analysed, but the logic of this is that some people do not see under-representation of men as a problem, while acknowledging there are fewer men attending. Only slightly fewer thought men were equally represented (31.7%) and 6.7% thought men over-represented, meaning that 38.4% thought that men were equally or over-represented.

There is a lot of detailed and interesting feedback in our survey. It also reads as if the level of concern and interest in the subject is higher than the raw numbers might suggest. Although not systematic, here are some of the points raised by the feedback:

- there is a stigma to joining arts projects among some men and it can be seen as feminine or not 'tough';
- attendance by men is quite art form dependent with music and in particular photography being more popular;
- it is also setting dependent, with work on closed psychiatric wards – which is rare – tending to involve more men. Social Material CIC also reports this in a sheltered housing scheme.
- there may be cultural issues in running mixed groups with Arts 2 Heal in Blackburn (which we fund) saying it is hard to run these with some South Asian communities;
- work with addiction services such as drug and alcohol recovery is much more likely to attract men;
- very occasionally groups can become 'dominated by men'. And some groups may need to be women only.

It is not straightforward to interpret a fairly small survey, but we can draw the conclusion that a minority of the respondents thought that men's participation is a problem while around half thought that participation is lower, but that either isn't significant enough to worry about or perhaps that it is inevitable in the arts and 'the natural order of things'.

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## OP-EDS

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Photo courtesy of the  
North Tyneside Art Studio.

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# Unlocking creative potential

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## MEN, MENTAL HEALTH AND PARTICIPATORY ARTS

BY BANU ADAM

Banu is the founder and Director of Arts 2 Heal,  
an arts and mental health charity based in Blackburn.



Photo courtesy of Arts 2 Heal.

In the heart of the culturally diverse landscape of **Blackburn**, driven by the belief that creativity possesses the profound ability to heal and nurture mental wellbeing, in 2016 Arts 2 Heal, an art-based mental health charity, embarked on a task to address the unique challenges faced by individuals within this community. The particular focus: to unlock the creative potential of those who have been historically underrepresented.

In the vibrant South Asian communities of Blackburn, a complex interplay of cultural norms, gender expectations, and mental health

stigma has been shaping the participation of men in community-based art activities. This multifaceted issue calls for a careful analysis, as it not only reflects broader societal challenges but also holds the potential for profound change and healing.

The challenges faced by men in these communities when it comes to participating in art-based activities for mental health are rooted in deep-seated cultural norms and expectations. Art, in many cases, is still perceived as a traditionally feminine pursuit, which creates hesitancy among males to

openly engage in such activities. While South Asian women are beginning to receive support and encouragement to seek help for their mental health, men grapple with societal pressures that discourage them from displaying vulnerability or seeking help.

A recently completed Arts 2 Heal project 'Canvas Community' has been hugely instructive for us. During the initial phase of the project, taster sessions targeting specific men's groups yielded promising results. Men enthusiastically participated, and feedback was overwhelmingly positive. However, as we moved to the second phase of the project, where men could enrol in our 'learner to leader' course, we encountered a 100% refusal rate. This sudden shift was perplexing, and it prompted deeper conversations to uncover the reasons behind this reluctance.

The data and insights gathered revealed the multi-layered nature of the challenges discussed above. These findings compelled us to consider innovative strategies to overcome these barriers and make the benefits of art-based interventions accessible to all members of the community.

## UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES

### Stigma surrounding mental health

#### Challenge:

Mental health stigma is a formidable obstacle that stands in the way of many individuals seeking help or participating in activities that can alleviate their struggles. In the context of South Asian communities, this stigma takes on a unique and pronounced form. It often manifests as a double-edged sword, affecting both men and women differently.

However, men in these communities often bear the brunt of this stigma more intensely. The expectation of stoicism and emotional restraint is deeply ingrained, making it difficult for them to openly express their mental health concerns. The belief that seeking help for mental health is a sign of weakness adds another layer of hesitation.

#### Solution:

To address this issue, workshops designed to simultaneously explore art and mental health can serve as a bridge. These workshops provide a safe and non-threatening space for men to express their emotions, fears, and struggles through creative means. The act of creating art becomes a vehicle for discussing mental health, and gradually wears away the stigma.

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“The act of creating art becomes a vehicle for discussing mental health, and gradually wears away the stigma.”

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### Time constraints

#### Challenge:

Life is often a balancing act for individuals with work and family responsibilities. These demands can make regular participation in art-based activities a challenging commitment, particularly for men who are often expected to shoulder the role of providers.

#### Solution:

Flexibility in scheduling is key. Offering workshops at various times and on different days can help accommodate the diverse schedules of participants. Additionally, providing shorter, more focused sessions can make it easier for men to commit to the programme without feeling overwhelmed by the time requirement.

### Lack of male role models

#### Challenge:

The importance of role models and mentors cannot be overstated, especially when it comes to encouraging participation in activities perceived as unconventional or sensitive. The men we surveyed expressed a desire for male facilitators or mentors, highlighting the scarcity of male role models in this context. Having someone they can relate to and who understands their specific challenges and cultural context can significantly boost their comfort and willingness to engage.

**Solution:**

Recruiting male community champions is a practical approach. These champions can serve as advocates and role models within the community. They can share their own experiences with art-based interventions for mental health, breaking down stigma and misconceptions.

**Prioritising other responsibilities****Challenge:**

Some men expressed that they feel they should prioritise their work, family, or other responsibilities over engaging in art-based activities, even if they recognise the potential mental health benefits.

The perception that art is a leisure activity rather than a legitimate form of self-care can deter men from participating. The societal expectation that men should focus on being providers and protectors can reinforce this perception.

**Solution:**

Promoting the mental health benefits of creative engagement is crucial. Demonstrating how art can be a valuable tool for managing stress, improving mood, and enhancing overall wellbeing can help participants see it as a worthwhile investment in their mental health. Furthermore, educating individuals on the long-term benefits that extend to family, community, and the broader community bonds would encourage individuals to engage in these art-based interventions with greater enthusiasm.

**Cultural sensitivity****Challenge:**

Cultural norms and expectations play a significant role in shaping the participation of men in art-based activities, particularly in South Asian communities. One of the most complex challenges is the cultural sensitivity surrounding the mixing of genders in classes. This issue is compounded by practices such as face coverings among many Muslim women and the unfamiliarity and taboo surrounding openly mixing with unrelated members of the opposite gender.

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“ Cultural norms and expectations play a significant role in shaping the participation of men in art-based activities, particularly in South Asian communities. ”

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**Solution:**

Respecting cultural norms and traditions is paramount. While it might not be feasible to have mixed-gender classes in some instances, there are alternative ways to create inclusive spaces. Exploring options like separate classes for men and women or providing opportunities for mixed-gender activities with clear guidelines can help navigate this challenge.

**IT IS WORTH NOTING:**

Art 2 Heal hosted a pilot kite-making workshop, designed and led by some of the men from the first phase of our Community Canvas project. During the workshop we saw an interesting shift in traditional gender roles. The men took charge and led with authority and enthusiasm, while the women participants were happy to follow their instructions. This dynamic worked well, challenging typical gender stereotypes. It showed that when we break away from these stereotypes, it creates an environment where everyone, regardless of gender, can contribute their skills and creativity freely.

To ensure that our future projects can bridge the gender gap in participation, we propose a set of targeted strategies:

**1. Male-specific workshops**

Create workshops specifically tailored to address the needs and interests of male participants. These workshops should not only focus on art but also provide a platform for discussing mental health openly. The goal is to create a safe and inclusive space where men can engage in creative activities while addressing their mental health concerns.

**2. Male champions and role models**

Identify and recruit male community champions who can act as advocates and ambassadors within the community. These champions should



Photo courtesy of Arts 2 Heal.

share their own experiences with art-based interventions for mental health and encourage other men to participate.

### 3. Outreach and promotion:

Tailor promotional efforts to specifically target and engage male members of the community. Utilise channels and communication styles that resonate with men, emphasising the potential benefits of art-based interventions for mental health.

### 4. Flexibility in schedule

Offer flexible scheduling options to accommodate the time constraints of male participants. This might include evening or weekend workshops to ensure that individuals with busy work or family schedules can still participate.

### 5. Community engagement

Collaborate with local community leaders and organisations to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers preventing male attendance. Seek their input on how to improve male engagement and integrate their perspectives into project planning.

### 6. Cultural sensitivity

Be mindful of cultural norms and expectations that might influence male participation. Adapt the project approach to be culturally sensitive and inclusive, exploring alternative methods for creating environments where both men and women can comfortably participate together.

As we reflect on the journey of 'Canvas Community' and the challenges and opportunities it presented, it becomes clear that there is a pressing need for more projects like this. The demand for creative outlets that address mental health issues and provide a safe space for self-expression is evident.

The impact of such projects extends beyond the individual participants. It ripples through families, communities, and society at large, promoting mental wellbeing, breaking down stigma, and fostering a sense of unity and understanding among diverse groups.

In conclusion, the journey of 'Canvas Community' highlighted for us the complexities of engaging men with mental health problems in creative activities within South Asian communities. While challenges exist, they are not insurmountable. Through targeted strategies, cultural sensitivity, and a commitment to inclusivity, we can unlock the creative potential of men and provide them with the support and resources they need to navigate their mental health journey.

The canvas of healing is vast, and it knows no gender boundaries. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that everyone, regardless of their gender, has the opportunity to paint their own path to mental wellbeing through the transformative power of art.

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# Men's Sheds

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## A SUCCESSFUL MODEL FOR MEN'S ENGAGEMENT IN CREATIVITY FOR WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

BY CHARLIE BETHEL

Charlie is the Chief Executive Officer of the UK Men's Sheds Association, an organisation that primarily supports the wellbeing and health of men.



Photo courtesy of the UK Men's Sheds Association.

Initially developed in Australia, Men's Sheds were established as a bespoke, focussed solution to resolving many social issues that they were seeing with isolated men, mental health and suicide rates amongst men. Whilst the spread of Men's Sheds has predominantly been seen across English speaking countries such as New Zealand, Canada, Ireland and the UK, many more Sheds are now being seen in Japan, Spain, Latvia and many other places.

The concept is simple and is basically about providing a safe space for men to make stuff. This works on many levels and we often use this analogy:

*"If you put twelve men in a room and ask them to talk about their feelings, six will leave and the other six will try to find the corners of the room. If, however, you put a broken lawnmower in the room and ask the same twelve men to fix it; after two hours they will know each other very*



*well indeed, what ails them, how they take their tea, the names of their children and you might even get a fixed lawnmower.”*

The concept is that men will talk shoulder to shoulder, where they might shrink away from talking face to face about what is worrying them. This non-invasive approach has some remarkable results and research has shown huge declines in loneliness, anxiety and depression after people have joined a Shed and 39% of Sheds believe they may have saved a Shedder from dying by suicide. Many join a Shed to work on their own projects in isolation; 97% will say that they have made new friends since joining a Shed.

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“I had on a number of occasions contemplated suicide as I felt, having been very active and outgoing before my wife became ill, that I had no future to look forward to. I was also in constant pain and suicide seemed to be a way to stop all that. She [a social prescriber] took me to the Shed. This was the first time I had left the house in more than 14 months. That became a defining moment in my realising that there was a possible future and I soon began to enjoy those two hours on a Friday.”

**Participant**

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Many Sheddors say that just talking is the form of support they appreciate most about attending; however, many Sheds consider how they support members' wellbeing and have taken action. For example, some make mental health first aid courses or suicide awareness training available; some have a member appointed as a welfare officer (or pastoral worker, health & wellbeing lead, 'health buddy', etc), or host talks on health-related issues.

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“Members of our shed say that they find talking and company the best support.”

**2023 UKMSA Health & Wellbeing Survey**

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“We have a welfare officer as part of the committee whose job is to contact any Sheddors who we have not seen recently and to offer any support needed.”

**2023 UKMSA Health & Wellbeing Survey**

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It is not just the community that is making an impact, however; the act of turning a piece of wood, making a bird box, or carving a frieze for a church not only provides a distraction from their challenges in life but also provides great self-esteem and satisfaction in creating. Those who engage in community projects also find it rewarding to help others.

The range of activities vary from fixing furniture and wood turning to 3D printing and painting. Sheds provide a space for people to flourish and allow their creativity to express itself in many different forms. Sheds are also led by their members' interests, whether that is ceramics, painting or making musical instruments; they are creating flourishing communities.

Whilst Sheds have common characteristics, they all differ and have a level of autonomy that allows them to decide their direction and future. Many Sheds in the UK include women; we, however, keep the Men in our title to champion men's health and we believe this is important in marketing to men to recruit them. The need for gender specific shed sessions are so important as it encourages a safe environment for both men and women; it is about the availability of opportunity and choice. Domestic abuse is often raised as a reason why some men choose to only attend a men-only session, and the same has been said by some women; others say that it is so they can be themselves. We are acutely aware of the power of these sessions and that equally others thrive in sessions that are mixed.

There is a need to support men's health and to be part of the solution of improving wellbeing and saving lives cannot have a price put upon it.



Photos courtesy of the UK Men's Sheds Association.

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“ There is a need to support men’s health and to be part of the solution of improving wellbeing and saving lives cannot have a price put upon it. ”

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The lessons from our work in supporting men are:

- to actively promote activities for men;
- create safe environments for them;
- provide a meaningful purpose, and a space for them to grow and gain confidence.

Many attendees of Sheds will go on to engage and volunteer in other groups.

With over 1,100 Men’s Sheds across the United Kingdom, we believe that the Men’s Shed movement is transforming lives. Sheds are not the only solution to increasing male engagement in creativity for mental health, but it is certainly a model worth looking at.

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## Black Men's Consortium

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A RARE EXAMPLE OF A CREATIVE PROJECT SUPPORTING  
THE MENTAL HEALTH OF MEN AND BOYS OF COLOUR

BY TONY CEALY

Tony is a drama facilitator, theatre practitioner, arts activist and creative producer. He founded and runs the Black Men's Consortium, an intergenerational user-led arts project based in Brixton.



Photo courtesy of the Black Men's Consortium.

Although members of my family have been affected by serious mental illness, I only personally became interested when I was commissioned to run a 12-week drama project for middle aged black men at risk of suicide. After the funding for this group concluded I was left with a group of vulnerable men with ongoing mental health needs, so we continued to meet and formed the Black Men's Consortium. We survive off grants and intermittent funding from the Local Authority's Public Health Department.

The Black Men's Consortium offers significant opportunities for the men involved to contribute to the content of the work and to experience solidarity and support from other black and brown men. The group is very mixed both culturally and in terms of socio-economic status. There is also a range of knowledge around mental health and mental illness among the participants, so they benefit from each other as well as the creative work of the group.



Photo courtesy of the Black Men's Consortium.

Specifically, the group offers some healing for individuals through sharing experiences of racism and microaggressions with men who have similar experiences.

Our project offers the men opportunities to explore other art forms and to express themselves artistically. In this way they can get a new or varied perspective on their lives. For example, one member of the group was in recovery from addictions and had spent a number of years in prison. He remained with us for a year, during which we learned that he had a considerable talent painting characterful portraits of the other members of the group. There were exhibited at our performances and he received a lot of praise for and acknowledgement of his talent, as well as selling many of his portraits.

However, groups like mine do not have the same degree of organisational scaffolding as statutory health services. Leaders are unlikely to have psychological training and may not be knowledgeable and experienced in safeguarding. This kind of work also requires abilities around conflict management, and you need more than one person to keep a project like this running.

In between funding streams my project relies on volunteers and peers to keep it going, which can also present its own challenges. There are always risks working with vulnerable people which statutory services go to great lengths and expense to mitigate against. In creative projects we just have ourselves, including our skills, talents and experience and those that support us, who may or may not be knowledgeable in this field. Most of my creative work in my career has been done with

vulnerable people and I have been lucky to have people in the group who work in mental health services and provide quality peer support.

The greatest challenge working with a group in the community, where members' mental health might range from good to a diagnosis of serious illness or personality disorder, is managing the difficult behaviour of individuals and sometimes the dynamics of the group.

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“ In creative projects we just have ourselves, including our skills, talents and experience and those that support us, who may or may not be knowledgeable in this field. ”

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I have been lucky to have access to the support of professionals who are trained and experienced in group dynamics and psychotherapy, which has helped to develop strategies to bring difficulties back for the group to struggle and ultimately resolve. I believe this is one of the places where growth occurs in the group.

For example, we had one group member who had previously been street homeless and constantly spoke about wanting to end his life and his resentment towards the health professionals who were trying to help him. Through the project, he was able to articulate his experiences of abuse as a young child and see them enacted by the other men, alongside a consistent weekly group of peers. He also produced a series of photographs of places where he had been sleeping rough and had them developed and framed. At Black Men's Consortium performances he would sell the photographs to members of the audience and talk about the places he had slept. He no longer talks about suicide and is engaging with the mental health team who are supporting him. He has become a peer leader in the group.

Currently, I can't think of any other person or service in London doing similar work, especially with men/boys of colour.

As a freelance arts practitioner, I have over a decade volunteered my time and practice to support community groups that provide support to young people, their parents and

their grandparents. I believe it is crucial for groups to be able to have a regular space to convene in in order to carry out their work.

Many community groups suffer from lack of funds to hire places and places on a regular basis and that is one of the reasons I don't see good practice within the community.

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“ I believe it is crucial for groups to be able to have a regular space to convene in in order to carry out their work. ”

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Education and raising awareness are important aspects to explore within communities in order to build resilience against the injustices black and brown people face on a daily basis.

I belong to three other London based community organisations that are unfunded but provide vital, important support for parents and carers in the community faced in health inequality and racial justice issues: 100 Black Men of London, Manhood Academy Global and Black Child Agenda.

# The role of the studio in providing art for mental health support for men

BY MICHAEL CUNLIFFE

Michael is the creative lead at North Tyneside Art Studio (NTAS), an arts for mental health charity in the North East of England.



Photo courtesy of the North Tyneside Art Studio.

The question of men's participation feels particularly relevant to our work at NTAS, a visual arts for mental health service in North Tyneside that has been working with people experiencing mental health issues in a dedicated studio space since 1991 and now receives over 100 clinical referrals for support each year.

As an organisation, we aim for long-term impact in people's lives, meaning that we tend to support people over years, rather than weeks

or months if needed and this longer-term interaction provides valuable insights into the development of art as a life-long tool for supporting mental health.

The disparity in men and women that we see in our work is as stark as elsewhere in the sector. Only 30% of referrals to our service are for men, even lower than the rate cited in the National Academy of Social Prescribing 2022 evidence summary, which placed male participation at 40% or lower,<sup>17</sup> and the NHS

<sup>17</sup> *Who is and who isn't being referred for social prescribing? Evidence summary*, National Academy for Social Prescribing, 2022. Available at: [socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/read-the-evidence/who-is-and-isn-t-being-referred-to-social-prescribing](https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/read-the-evidence/who-is-and-isn-t-being-referred-to-social-prescribing).

statistic that only 36% of people seeking professional help for their mental health are men.<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, when we look at our population based on how long they have been working with us, the percentage of men remains static for the first 12 months, before rising slightly to 38% after that point. This means that although fewer men are referred to us, they stay engaged at the same rate, or longer than women do.

At our NTAS II project, a public access space in a local shopping centre, participation is not dependent on social prescribing, or any other referral mechanism, but the male participation rate is also approximately 30%. This suggests that the barrier of seeking professional help for mental health issues is not the sole issue at play in our work.

It could be argued that this 70/30 split is a societal issue and beyond the scope of our projects to address, but with suicide being the leading cause of death for men under 50, I believe that we need to examine how our work could support more men with their mental health.

The idea of needing to ‘man up’ in the face of adversity is something that seems to be buried deep in the male experience and I have found it to be a common issue when working with men. It is not simply the idea that they should ignore or shrug off an issue, but that through sheer force of will, any issue can and should be overcome and if this does not happen, it is a sign of weakness.

By contrast, the creative problem solving inherent to making art requires flexibility, patience and a willingness to view failures as part of a longer process of growth. Rather than simply being told to allow themselves to be vulnerable, or talking through their emotional issues, when this is already an unfamiliar approach, engaging with art gives men an opportunity to see different ways of regulating and assessing their emotions. It is my experience that engagement with the arts not only improves the mental health of men, but also makes them more willing to engage

with other forms of support such as talking therapies. A mixed environment seems to be highly beneficial to this process and as such, I do not believe that men-only projects are the best way to increase support for men.

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“Engaging with art gives men an opportunity to see different ways of regulating and assessing their emotions...”

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With this potential benefit at stake, we must return to the question of why men are not engaging with arts for health projects at the same rate as women. It could be argued that art is simply a more feminine pursuit. Dr Kate McMillan’s 2020 report into gender disparity in the arts reports that women make up 66% of those studying art at GCSE, 75% at A Level, 66% of undergraduates and 65% of postgraduates<sup>19</sup>. It was also noted by panellists at this year’s Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance conference that practitioners within the arts and health sector are overwhelmingly female.

However, despite the smaller percentage of men studying art, the dominant figures in both historical and contemporary art are men. The 2023 Art Basel Global Art Market report shows that 61% of works purchased were by male artists<sup>20</sup> and the National Museum for Women in the Arts reports that only 13.7% of living artists represented in US galleries are women and that men occupy the majority of high-level positions in our art and cultural institutions<sup>21</sup>.

While historic and patriarchal bias could account for this male dominance, it seems too convenient to suggest that art is a male dominated, feminine pursuit. After all, the archetype of the artist is overwhelmingly masculine and almost expected to turn his back on family and friends and place lovers in the role of ‘muse’ to be used as needed in pursuit of his art, creating work alone in his studio to prove that his personal vision or skill is greater than that of his peers.

<sup>18</sup> See: [digital.nhs.uk/news/2021/new-statistics-released-on-talking-therapies-in-england](https://digital.nhs.uk/news/2021/new-statistics-released-on-talking-therapies-in-england).

<sup>19</sup> *Representation of women artists*, Charlotte Bonham-Carter, Freelands Foundation, 2021. Available at: Freelands Foundation - Representation of Women Artists in the UK

<sup>20</sup> The survey of global collecting 2023, Dr Clare McAndrew, Art Basel & UBS, 2023. Available at: [theartmarket.artbasel.com](https://theartmarket.artbasel.com).

<sup>21</sup> See: [nmwa.org/support/advocacy](https://nmwa.org/support/advocacy).



Photo courtesy of the North Tyneside Art Studio.



When we consider gendered archetypes of creativity, we see the feminine archetype of the artist as an enabler of communal and collaborative creation. The sewing circle and knit and natter are spaces that enable socialising and storytelling to run alongside, or become part of the process of art making. This approach places the focus on the quality of the work, rather than the name or status of the creator. Within the arts sector we often see this approach separated from the high status of fine art by categorisation as participatory, cooperative, or community-based art, with an associated reduction in recognition and financial support.

When we view the arts and health sector in terms of these archetypes it is easy to see how much of our work aligns with this 'feminine' approach. We aim to bring people together to reduce social isolation, promote atmospheres that allow for shared experiences and collaborative learning and place a higher value on textile and craft-based work than is seen in the fine art sector.

With the masculine archetype predicated on ego, isolation and obsessive dedication, clearly it will not be beneficial to try and use this as a template to increase male participation in mental health projects. If instead we look to projects where male participation is already higher, with 'men in sheds' being an obvious template, we can see how their structure aligns with the 'feminine' approach to creativity described above. These projects provide shared working spaces that support collaborative and peer-based learning, with a high value on 'craft' and problem solving rather than a competitive ranking of skill.

One of the most common barriers I have found in working with people at NTAS is the commonly held belief that art is not 'for them', closely followed by anxiety over creating something that is of a professional quality, even in their very first session. These issues seem to be particularly strong for men from working class backgrounds where the pursuit of personal expression and image making have been discouraged from an early age and there is a need to prove that they are highly skilled.

I have found that a little bit of art history is an invaluable tool for helping to engage these men, by explaining how prior to our current understanding of how art is made (i.e. the masculine archetype), being an artist was a trade.

When we reframe art in the context of a time when image making was placed alongside the making of furniture and jewellery as a craft that needed to be learned and manufactured, with workshops of masters, journeymen and apprentices, it becomes clear that the 'feminine' creative archetype is in fact the way that art was created by both men and women. The atelier is just a shed with different materials and new members should expect to learn the ropes when they begin, be supported by older members and compare their own work with others in an expectation of improvement rather than unworthiness.

If this solution is staring at us from our history, why is it not being used more often? I believe it is one of the weaknesses of our sector that we are tied so heavily to the wider structures of 'art and culture' where institutions are built around the post-atelier idea of the masculine archetype, showcasing the 'best' artists and elevating their creations and lives above those of the ordinary and everyday.

To engage more men in the benefits of art for their mental health, we may need a more radical consideration of our own perceptions of art. Rather than attempting to create a more masculine environment through men-only projects or more 'manly' art forms, we should instead consider how we describe and teach the creative process and explore whether the common image of artist as masculine maverick should be considered the aberration, with the supportive, participatory approach being the norm.

While we are unlikely to be able to create this shift within the wider world of arts and culture, our position as outsiders within that world gives us the opportunity to challenge, disrupt and reframe the experiences of the people we engage with and I believe that is an opportunity that we should explore.

# Gender in creative health: an underexplored topic

BY VICTORIA HUME

Victoria is the Executive Director of the Culture, Health & Wellbeing Alliance (CHWA), a membership organisation for the creative health sector in England.

Most of CHWA's (approximately) 6,000 members are practitioners – people delivering work in creative organisations, as freelancers, in museums, galleries, libraries, hospitals, community settings and so on.

Two years ago, on International Women's Day, I wrote a blog about the gender balance in creative health. I said then that there is much to celebrate about the fact that creative health is not just dominated by women in terms of numbers, but also more often than not *led* by women – a position I stand by.<sup>22</sup> But whilst those of us used to this work are very familiar with its gender balance, it remains quite noticeable to those outside it. If you take an average across all our surveys of our membership, events and recruitment, women make up 87% of respondents. This is quite similar to NHS figures for nurses and health visitors<sup>23</sup>, but dissimilar to the cultural sector, where women make up around half the workforce<sup>24</sup>. It is clear too that in terms of leadership, women are in a stronger position in creative health than the broader cultural sector.<sup>25</sup> Looking again at our membership, while the numbers of people identifying as non-binary, trans and genderfluid has increased slightly over the last three years, there is no consistent rise in the numbers of people identifying as male. The exception

to the gender balance rule is (perhaps not surprisingly) in our stakeholder group of national organisations, *arguably* better funded and higher status than much of our membership in more precarious work.

I have worked in creative health since the late 1990s and it has always been this way. I have also worked in the medical humanities in South Africa – a related cross-disciplinary academic field – and the gender balance was much the same. Colleagues in the creative arts therapies tell me it is familiar in that space, too. We are very accustomed to understanding the 'caring professions' as female dominated. But I would suggest too that cross-disciplinary work is attractive to anyone frustrated by gender norms; there is a relationship between binary thinking and rigid professional and philosophical siloes.

Whatever the cause though, gender is imbalanced in creative health. This matters for a range of reasons, but one is perhaps the implications in terms of men's health – and particularly men impacted by intersecting inequalities.

At this point I have to be careful. Creative health overall is still a young field – and within it, gender is an underexplored topic. Most of what I am able to bring is speculation and

<sup>22</sup> 'Some thoughts on International Women's Day', Victoria Hume/CHWA. Available at: [culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/news/blog/directors-blog-some-thoughts-international-womens-day](https://culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/news/blog/directors-blog-some-thoughts-international-womens-day).

<sup>23</sup> 'NHS celebrates the vital role hundreds of thousands of women have played in the pandemic', NHS England, 8 March 2021. Available at: [www.england.nhs.uk/2021/03/nhs-celebrates-the-vital-role-hundreds-of-thousands-of-women-have-played-in-the-pandemic](https://www.england.nhs.uk/2021/03/nhs-celebrates-the-vital-role-hundreds-of-thousands-of-women-have-played-in-the-pandemic).

<sup>24</sup> Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: A Data Report, 2020-2021, Arts Council England, June 2022. Available at: [www.artscouncil.org.uk/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-data-report-2020-2021](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-data-report-2020-2021).

<sup>25</sup> 'UK report reveals 'disgraceful' gender inequality in the arts', The Guardian, 13 January 2021. Available at: [www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/jan/13/uk-report-reveals-disgraceful-gender-inequality-in-the-arts](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/jan/13/uk-report-reveals-disgraceful-gender-inequality-in-the-arts).

inference. I can offer the *partial* figures above on the people *delivering* the work; but even this is really just our membership, which itself is determined by who feels they can benefit from CHWA, who feels comfortable affiliating with CHWA.

Crucially, moreover, we have almost no evidence on the gender balance in *participants* in this work. The large-scale scoping review of arts and health conducted by Fancourt et al. for the World Health Organization in 2019<sup>26</sup> points to Men's Sheds as a case study (pp.23-24), but looks at gender mainly in relation to the arts' impact on health equity for LGBTQ+ groups (p.20). A recent vision paper on culture, health and wellbeing by Robyn Dowlen<sup>27</sup> identifies representation gaps in the research, noting that "most participants represented in our Culture on Referral review were older white women (aged 50+) with mild-to-moderate stress, depression or anxiety". A review of arts and ageing in 2016 (Milligan et al.) similarly points to a 'blind spot' in the research when it comes to men<sup>28</sup>. But the research is not the sector. And the sector lacks the kind of serious infrastructure which would allow us to understand better who is attracted to and participating in this work.

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“The sector lacks the kind of serious infrastructure which would allow us to understand better who is attracted to and participating in this work.”

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One piece of context we might use is the research relating to men's health-seeking behaviours. A 2022 review by Mursa et al.<sup>29</sup>

looked at men's "internal barriers" to seeking health care – the words the review uses are "fear", "embarrassment", "masculinity", "weakness", "vulnerability", "denial". In the last few years there has been an undeniable surge in campaigning to tackle these internal barriers and describe an idea of maleness and masculinity that is more nuanced, multifarious, vulnerable and open. And indeed, Mind's research on men's mental health from 2019 described real improvements – with men almost three times more likely to see a therapist if they're worried, compared to 2009. But at the same time as these improvements are happening, external pressures – which can arguably be boiled down to increasing inequalities – have increased, and suicidality in men has shockingly increased more than twofold in this same ten-year period. Mind includes social prescribing in its recommendations to tackle this<sup>30</sup>. It is crucial then that social prescribing – including creative practice – is providing a space for men. Milligan et al's review of similar gendered interventions for older men's health says that they might "enable older men to share their health concerns and experiences in a supportive environment that is not viewed by participants as being part of the wider health-care system".

At CHWA we're only just starting to think these issues through so I am wary of falling back onto clichés about who's taking part and who feels comfortable with creative work, whether it's participatory or not. These will only reinforce any gender divides that already exist. But there's no question that we should be exploring this area of imbalance to understand more about what's happening in creative health and who is and isn't being supported by this work.

<sup>26</sup> *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review.* Daisy Fancourt & Saoirse Finn / World Health Organization, 2023. Available at: [www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/sites/default/files/9789289054553-eng.pdf](http://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/sites/default/files/9789289054553-eng.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> *Vision paper: Culture, Health and Wellbeing*, Robyn Dowlen/Centre for Cultural Value, 2023. Available at: [www.culturehive.co.uk/CVlresources/culture-health-and-wellbeing/#overview](http://www.culturehive.co.uk/CVlresources/culture-health-and-wellbeing/#overview).

<sup>28</sup> Older men and social activity: a scoping review of Men's Sheds and other gendered interventions, Milligan et al, *Ageing & Society* 36, 2016. Available at: [www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/S0144686X14001524](http://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/S0144686X14001524).

<sup>29</sup> Men's help-seeking and engagement with general practice: An integrative review. Mursa, R et al, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 78, 1938–1953, 2022. Available at: [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jan.15240](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jan.15240).

<sup>30</sup> *Get it off your chest: a report on men's mental health*, Mind, 2020. Available at: [www.mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/reports-and-guides/get-it-off-your-chest-a-report-on-men-s-mental-health](http://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/reports-and-guides/get-it-off-your-chest-a-report-on-men-s-mental-health).

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# Lightpost Theatre

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## CREATING A SAFE SPACE TO STRENGTHEN MENTAL HEALTH RESILIENCE WITHIN YOUNG BLACK MEN

BY CJ LLOYD WEBLEY

CJ is a writer, theatremaker, and mental health advocate and Lead Artist at the Lightpost Theatre Company, a theatre company for young black men established by the Birmingham Rep.



Lightpost Theatre Company, photo © Kris Askey.

As a writer, theatremaker, and mental health advocate, my role as Lead Artist for Lightpost Theatre Company was a pivotal experience. The project was part of a broader three-year initiative, Shifting the Dial, dedicated to bolstering the mental wellbeing of young Black men.

Over three years, Lightpost Theatre engaged with a remarkable 150 participants, offering avenues for acting, facilitation, and various performance opportunities. Depending on

the scale of our productions, we welcomed a diverse group of 15 to 20 participants each week.

### OUR APPROACH

Each session began with an informal group check-in, ensuring everyone felt at ease in the space and with one another. Welcoming new participants was a priority, seamlessly integrating them into the group dynamic. By providing context about the purpose and our

shared journey, we created an atmosphere conducive for each participant to gradually open up and find their voice.

Creating a safe space for these young men to express themselves was paramount. It became the cornerstone of our approach.

One of the most striking challenges we encountered was the diverse backgrounds of the participants, ranging from upper-middle class to those from more economically challenged environments. Engaging with this spectrum required a delicate touch, demanding a nuanced blend of encouragement, empathy, and emotional intelligence. For many, this marked their first time sharing a space with peers who shared their experiences as Black men. Together, we delved into the cultural connotations of growing up in our society, transforming these explorations into powerful creative work.

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“ One of the most striking challenges we encountered was the diverse backgrounds of the participants, ranging from upper-middle class to those from more economically challenged environments. ... For many, this marked their first time sharing a space with peers who shared their experiences as Black men ”

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What struck me was how some individuals, perhaps due to their age or upbringing, had not directly experienced racism. This led them to feel excluded or isolated from their peers, leading to a noticeable impact on their mental wellbeing. Others revealed that due to their current circumstances or the environments they grew up in, they felt unsafe in their community. Lightpost Theatre sessions emerged as a sanctuary, where they could shed their inhibitions and be themselves.

Through the arts, we were not only nurturing creativity but also fostering resilience and forging connections. This project is a testament to the transformative potential of providing spaces where individuals, regardless of background, can find their voice and embrace who they are.

## OUR IMPACT

My involvement with Lightpost Theatre Company illuminated the profound impact of creative engagement on the mental wellbeing of young individuals from diverse backgrounds. It went beyond mere performances; it was about forging genuine connections. Through theatre, we created a space where participants felt not only heard and valued, but also deeply understood. This approach provided more than just an outlet for expression; it offered a profound sense of purpose and belonging that transcended the confines of the stage.

## WHAT WE LEARNED

Similar to many other organisations, Lightpost Theatre Company grappled with the common challenge of securing sustainable funding. This was crucial in ensuring that the vital support and lifeline we extended to these groups could endure. Without steadfast financial backing, the sustainability of our initiatives hung in the balance, potentially leaving the very individuals we aimed to assist without a crucial resource.

Recognising that accessibility was a fundamental concern, we were resolute in our commitment to dismantling barriers. Some participants faced hurdles like financial constraints or limited transport options. In response, we sought solutions to ensure that every individual, regardless of their circumstances, could participate fully. No one should be left behind or excluded from the transformative power of the arts.

Bearing witness to the profound transformations in the lives of these young individuals was deeply gratifying. Yet, translating these personal narratives into quantifiable data for potential funders and policymakers presented a complex challenge. Each story stood as a testament to the impact, but finding the right metrics and language to effectively communicate this impact remained an ongoing endeavour.

“ Bearing witness to the profound transformations in the lives of these young individuals was deeply gratifying. Yet, translating these personal narratives into quantifiable data for potential funders and policymakers presented a complex challenge. ”

The landscape for participatory arts organisations is both competitive and dynamic. Adapting to changing circumstances emerged as a crucial facet of survival and growth. We recognised the imperative to remain flexible and innovative, ensuring that our programmes stayed relevant and impactful in an ever-evolving field.

Upholding the principle that all voices deserved to be heard and valued was foundational. We comprehended the significance of representing the diversity within our community. This meant actively seeking out and elevating underrepresented voices, cultivating an environment where everyone felt a sense of ownership and agency in their creative pursuits.

In supporting participatory arts organisations, we were not simply backing entities, but investing in the individuals who discovered

empowerment, healing, and personal growth through creative expression. It was about affording opportunities for these individuals to thrive, both creatively and personally, in a manner that resonated profoundly and effectually transformed lives.

One of the prominent hurdles faced is the inconsistency inherent in many participatory projects. They often run for a finite period, only to be discontinued due to funding constraints or lack of access to spaces. This dynamic presents a genuine challenge for young Black men who are accustomed to opportunities and resources being limited. It's particularly damaging to their self-esteem when they grow comfortable in a space or routine, only to have it abruptly taken away. This cycle fosters a sense of distrust and disengagement, as they question the value of wholehearted commitment when the endeavour is destined to conclude after a few short weeks.

A notable strength lies in the fact that participatory projects are typically spearheaded by socially conscious individuals and artists who genuinely care about the participants they engage with. It is more than a mere checkbox exercise. These projects serve as vital conduits for the arts to reach individuals, especially those who might never otherwise have the

Lightpost Theatre Company, photo © Kris Askey.



chance to interact with theatre. They provide a platform to inspire and pave new pathways towards future employment and aspirations.

However, a significant challenge arises when a project concludes. The facilitator, having formed close bonds with the participants, experiences a rather abrupt transition. Even though the project itself has wrapped up, participants often continue to seek support and resources, despite the project coordinator no longer being remunerated for this role. This situation is particularly pronounced with Black men, as it takes time to build trust and foster openness. The sudden end of the project leaves a lingering question: what comes next? Encouraging a group to establish bonds through regular interactions and open discussions, only to leave them without a sustainable continuation plan, feels inherently unfair.

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In the realm of participatory projects, it is imperative to address these challenges head-on while continuing to harness the strengths that make these initiatives so impactful. By establishing sustainable frameworks and recognising the long-lasting impact of these engagements, we can ensure that the benefits extend well beyond the project's conclusion.

The Shifting the Dial partnership is a shining example of best practices. It facilitated the coming together of organisations with distinct areas of expertise and specialised interests. This collaborative effort recognised that when addressing complex issues like the mental health of young Black men, a deliberate and calculated approach is essential.

This initiative required us to delve into the intricacies of the individuals we were serving. It emphasised the need for intentional efforts, understanding that a one-size-fits-all approach simply wouldn't suffice. We took the time to identify and direct participants to spaces and resources that were most relevant to their unique needs. This meant going beyond the traditional arts-based work that Lightpost Theatre Company was known for.

Each case was meticulously examined, leading to customised solutions that benefitted all parties involved. For instance, if a participant expressed reluctance about being on stage, we didn't push them into a role they weren't comfortable with nor did we turn them away. Instead, we provided opportunities for them to shadow other departments, such as marketing or costume design, or on occasion signposted them to one of our project partners. This approach ensured that every individual felt valued and had a role that resonated with their strengths and interests.

Despite the challenges, there is still hope. The commitment of socially conscious leaders, like myself, exemplifies the potential for positive change. Dedication to fostering inclusivity and providing safe spaces for expression is the cornerstone of these initiatives. Yet, it is imperative that we collectively address the need for sustained funding and accessibility, ensuring that these opportunities continue to flourish.

In the end, our investment in participatory arts organisations is an investment in the potential and wellbeing of individuals, a commitment to their personal and creative growth. These initiatives have the power to transform lives, providing a sanctuary for self-expression and a platform for building meaningful connections. As we move forward, let us not only celebrate the strengths of these endeavours but also actively work to overcome their inherent challenges, ensuring that the transformative power of the arts continues to reach those who need it most.

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# First, Connect: Musicking Toward Mental Health

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BY MARK ROBINSON

Mark is the founder of Thinking Practice through which he works as a writer, researcher, facilitator, strategist and coach.



Infant Hercules in Stockton. Photo by Ian Allcock at EnA Photography and courtesy of Mike McGrother.

I like to imagine my female ancestors were among the inventors of me-moing. This was the peculiarly female sign-language-meets-lip-reading used by women working in the cotton mills in Lancashire (brought to wider visibility by Les Dawson's Cissy and Ada). They were not going to let the noise of the looms stop them communicating as they worked, even as it deafened them. How did my mancestors escape the industrial noise revolutionising their newly urban lives? Angling, the practice of companionable silence. Or they took their

'Free & Easy' singing (and other raised voices) into the invention of the social club. These were a different kind of refuge, a safe space for sharing-while-doing-something-else.

These are of course gender and class stereotypes, and I parody slightly. But the academic research suggests truth within them. I want here to explore what men might need from arts activity to support their mental health, using a local male voice choir and its leader as an example. It starts with connection.



Research repeatedly confirms that men are more reluctant than women to ask for help in regard to how they feel or act, stress, disability, depression or family problems.<sup>31</sup> Men have often internalised versions of masculinity that demand stoicism and silence, emotion expressed rarely outside eruptions of anger or sublimated into sporting aggression.

The silence grows when we consider the cultures of work men have worked in or inherited even after the actual industries may have disappeared. Research suggests that men working in male-dominated industries such as manufacturing are more likely to experience depression<sup>32</sup>. If you are brought up in a work culture not rooted in discourse, in meetings, emails or conversation, talk is not the natural element it may appear if you are. This may mean you are not drawn to expressing your feelings, or to talking therapies should you become unwell.

The results of these patterns are clear. Three times as many men as women die by suicide<sup>33</sup>, with men in their forties having the highest suicide rates in the UK. Yet NHS Digital figures in 2021 suggest only 36% of referrals to NHS talking therapies are for men. Men clearly do not talk in the same way as women, then, and it costs us.

This parallels, to some degree, figures around arts participation. The Taking Part Survey has consistently found men less likely to engage with the arts – by 6% in 2019/20. Research into arts engagement shows that those who engage tend to have higher levels of wellbeing and

social connectedness. (Although, conversely, the highly engaged ‘cultural omnivores’ are more likely to suffer from depression<sup>34</sup>.)

Connections between loneliness/connectedness and mental health are well established. Loneliness is roughly equally common across genders, but more common amongst LGBTQ+ people<sup>35</sup>, people from minoritized ethnic backgrounds<sup>36</sup> and disabled people. Whilst ONS data suggests almost half of people feel lonely at times<sup>37</sup>, research for disability charity Sense found that 61% of disabled people were chronically lonely.<sup>38</sup>

So, what is the opposite of a lonely, silent man? Perhaps a choir of men singing.

Mike McGrother is the leader of the Wildcats of Kilkenny, a band legendary in Teesside for their ability to get a crowd on its feet. The rather shy man that Mike is off-stage becomes a violin-shredding, mass-singalong-coordinating whirlwind before a crowd. He is also the driving force behind Infant Hercules, a men’s choir in Stockton-on-Tees. (The choir takes its name from William Gladstone’s 1862 description of Teesside at the birth of the iron and steel industries.)

Infant Hercules is part of Blind Tiger – a programme that reimagines social clubs, pubs and village halls as hubs for creative and community connection. From the singing – and the sharing of stories within familiar settings of pubs and social clubs – flow conversations. Men share vulnerabilities and stories that restrictive models of masculinity hide. Many have shared the importance of this, and it has inspired members to be part of a spin-off project,

**31** Men, masculinity, and the contexts of help seeking. Addis, M. E., & Mahalik, J. R. *American Psychologist*, 58(1), 5–14, 2003. [doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.58.1.5](https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.58.1.5).

**32** Men, Work, and Mental Health: A Systematic Review of Depression in Male-dominated Industries and Occupations, Ann M. Roche et al, *Safety and Health at Work* Volume 7, Issue 4, December 2016. [doi.org/10.1016/j.shaw.2016.04.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shaw.2016.04.005)

**33** *Suicides in England and Wales: 2021 registrations*. Office of National Statistics. Available at: [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/suicidesintheunitedkingdom/2021registrations](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/suicidesintheunitedkingdom/2021registrations).

**34** *Arts engagement trends in the United Kingdom and their mental and social wellbeing implications: HEartS Survey*, Urszula Tymoszuk, Neta Spiro, Rosie Perkins, Adele Mason-Bertrand, Kate Gee, Aaron Williamson, March 12, 2021. [doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0246078](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0246078).

**35** *The LGBTQ+ Lockdown Wellbeing Report*, LGBT Hero, 2020. Available at: [www.lgbthero.org.uk/the-lgbtq-lockdown-wellbeing-report](https://www.lgbthero.org.uk/the-lgbtq-lockdown-wellbeing-report).

**36** *Barriers to belonging: An exploration of loneliness among people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds*, British Red Cross and Co-op, 2019. Available at: [www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/barriers-to-belonging](https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/barriers-to-belonging).

**37** ‘Loneliness: What characteristics and circumstances are associated with feeling lonely?’, Office for National Statistics, London: 2018. Available at: [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/lonelinesswhatcharacteristicsandcircumstancesareassociatedwithfeelinglonely/2018-04-10](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/lonelinesswhatcharacteristicsandcircumstancesareassociatedwithfeelinglonely/2018-04-10).

**38** ‘Fear of mental health crisis as loneliness rises dramatically amongst disabled people’, Sense, 2021. Available at: [www.sense.org.uk/media/latest-press-releases/loneliness-rises-dramatically-among-disabled-people](https://www.sense.org.uk/media/latest-press-releases/loneliness-rises-dramatically-among-disabled-people).



Infant Hercules in Stockton. Photo by Ian Allcock at EnA Photography and courtesy of Mike McGrother.

The Pals Programme, in which men share skills together in the community. Partnerships with The Samaritans have also developed.

What is it that means a choir can do what health promotion may not? Mike roots it in his artistic process:

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“ I create contexts that enable men to connect. I think that to an extent the consequent reflection on mental health tends to happen better by stealth – be that passive observation of others, a confidence to be a part of something – and to feel able to articulate without judgement, or even definitive answers, can help. ”

**Mike McGrother**

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Mike does not describe what he does as music, he thinks of it as ‘musicking’, turning music into a verb. This is a term – “the term I live by”, Mike says – taken from the writer Christopher Small, who argued that “music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do.”<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the same can be said of mental health – it is not a state, but an activity. This might be especially true for men who frame their thinking within activity, within doing and making. Musicking can, therefore, perhaps be attractive to men because it is a *doing therapy* rather than a *talking therapy*.

For Mike, musicking is improvisation and connection: “I tend not to over analyse what is about to happen – I make it is natural as the singing at a football match.” This spontaneity within a jointly created structure such as a choir means that musicking encourages men to work on mental health whilst doing other things, and to go deep as trust grows.

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“ It seems as if singing is a really good way of enabling self-reflection and – again – a realisation that we are all connected. If – as I tend to think – at the root of many mental health issues is disconnection and isolation – then the physical ‘body’ of being in a choir and the content of the songs combined provide powerful narratives – of others and ourselves.

So singing ‘Everybody Hurts’ by REM is a reflection not just on others – but of the self. There is also something about none of us being ‘experts’ with answers that enable the lads to talk more – there are few closed questions when they get talking... more ‘well this is how I dealt with x, y, z’. ”

**Mike McGrother**

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This method sits with the scant research into men, the arts and mental health. One recent study of men from lower socio-economic backgrounds in Northern Ireland has strong echoes of what I have seen with Infant Hercules.<sup>40</sup>

Being connected is the start: before anything else, musicking – or *arting* or *healthing*, one might say – starts with connection. It is not the only thing, but it is the first thing to consider.

Research shows that men are more likely to ask for help when they feel they will be able to return the favour at some point. This requires a connection, implies a relationship. Mental health support, for men, is connected to peer-relationships, both negatively (‘how do I look asking for help?’) and positively (I’ve been useful, and we’ve done this other thing while talking.’). Flexibility and spontaneity boost connection.

<sup>39</sup> *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, Christopher Small, Wesleyan University Press, 1998.

<sup>40</sup> Men’s mental health and the arts: perceived benefits and dynamics of engagement, Shane O’Donnell, Maria Lohan, John L Oliffe, David Grant, Noel Richardson, Karen Galway, *Health Promotion International*, Volume 38, Issue 4, August 2023. [doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daad092](https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/daad092).

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“ Research shows that men are more likely to ask for help when they feel they will be able to return the favour at some point. ”

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So does humour. One participant in the Northern Ireland research puts it exactly as I might expect to hear it in Stockton: “*we talk rubbish but the rubbish helps*”. Mike has involved Infant Hercules in staged shows exploring his own heritage and mental health and sees this as having connection-building benefits alongside artistic ones:

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“ Telling my own story is to an extent a tool that allows others to tell their story. I don’t do it to gain sympathy – more to provide levels of connection – be that through tears or laughter... I do think humour is a missing aspect of ‘therapy’ and a wonderful tool to bring about connection. ”

**Mike McGrother**

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In work I have done around non-hierarchical models of leadership I suggested that leaders should do three things: connect, collaborate and multiply the voices of others. Connect is the key verb for involving men in *arting* for mental health. Collaboration on active, valuable tasks – creative or altruistic exchange – should also be built in, rather than rooting mental health in what may seem to some men as simply talking. Talking sits alongside. Finally, building a sense of peer network – pals, mates, friends – through which run support and understanding needs to be explicitly designed in.

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## CASE STUDIES

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Men Who Make in Brighton. Photo by Phoebe Wingrove and courtesy of Fabrica.

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# Arc (Arts for Recovery in the Community)

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## MEN'S MUSIC FOR WELLBEING

BY JACQUI WOOD

Jacqui is the CEO of Arc, Stockport.



The Men's Music for Wellbeing Programme, photo courtesy of Arc Stockport.

Arts for Recovery in the Community (Arc) is an arts and mental health charity which has been working in **Stockport and across Greater Manchester** since the mid-1990s. Our programmes span the full spectrum of mental health: the core adult and young people's Arts for Wellbeing programmes are referrals-based, but our work includes mental health wards at the acute end, as well as a preventative approach to wellbeing, engaging hundreds of people in our studios and gallery in an iconic Stockport heritage and cultural venue, Hat Works.

At Arc, the majority of our adult service users are women. We recognise that this is disproportionate and doesn't reflect the mental health needs of men in Stockport. According to Stockport's most recent Joint Strategic Needs Assessment statistics, out of a total 39,800 people with depression on medical records, 37% of mental health issues are being experienced by men. However, we see that men are less likely to seek help for their mental health, with only a third of men in crisis accessing support. The pandemic and rising cost of living has led to an increase in mental ill health and isolation in men but in 2022-23 our demographic monitoring showed that only 18% of our participants were male.

## OUR APPROACH

Over the past 18 months, we have consulted with men accessing Arc and joined a local Men's Mental Health network – a group of services also experiencing low male engagement, with a shared aim to reduce the barriers to mental health services for men in Stockport. Men were not asking for support, and were less likely to attend community-based programmes until things became very serious due to stigma around mental health and reticence to engage with talking and group therapy services which made them feel uncomfortable.

In response, we designed a pilot project exclusively for men, using song-writing and music-making. We made a short film showing the impact of the pilot,<sup>41</sup> which led to a successful bid to a local fund to support a year's worth of work to develop the **Men's Music for Wellbeing** programme.

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“One of the great things about music is that there is a place for everyone in a musical ensemble. We don't focus on demanding repertoire or strive for perfection. Instead, we chat, listen to each other, share our own interests, and find common ground.”

**Participant**

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Men's Music for Wellbeing uses music as a vehicle to help men connect, relax and improve their mental health. It is facilitated by an experienced musician with the support of Arc's Wellbeing Support Worker. The Support Worker ensures the participants receive the emotional and advocacy support that we know from experience is needed. They are also responsible for promoting the programme, meeting each participant who is referred, connecting with support services across Stockport to reach men who are struggling, and evaluating the impact of the work on participants at regular points, using a range of qualitative and quantitative tools.

In the sessions, participants explore music-making styles and techniques, from song-writing to digital production. Writing songs collaboratively leads to discussion, encouraging a social connection through the activity that might otherwise seem awkward. In order to write a song, with lyrics and music, the group has to talk and negotiate. There is a very clear, structured musical process in place rather than talking about their 'problems'. The outcome is a sense of achievement and with that, a growth in confidence. It feels positive, it makes them smile, laugh and feel good because they have created something tangible together. And it's fun.

Participants report that they wouldn't have been able to do this alone. The group has its own unique power and control; every song is different and created from scratch, not to a formula, and is based on what they want to express about their experience. The men naturally form friendships and for many this is the first time they have felt able to connect with other men. The skill of the experienced musician/facilitator, Phill Howley, is in engaging men with varying levels of musical knowledge and experience so that everyone feels included.

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“Music is often enjoyed in a solitary and isolated manner, but our music sessions encourage participants to engage with the communal aspect of the art form. Regardless of experience, everyone can benefit from sharing in the joy of creating and performing music with others who have a similar passion. The real power of this approach lies in the space we create for people to come together and connect over their shared interest in music.”

**Phill Howley, facilitator**

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We call it a *music* rather than a therapeutic project, and deliberately choose images of men playing music to promote it. Each session focusses on music but there is also the opportunity to talk with the Wellbeing

<sup>41</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEabnf-ezKw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEabnf-ezKw)

Support Worker, as well as each other, to reflect on progress and how they are feeling. The sessions take place within Arc's setting, which is both the arts and mental health. With artwork on the walls, alongside testimonies and case studies, nothing is hidden and it feels normal to talk about mental health struggles or to find support from others with similar experiences.

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“ Operating in a men-only context provides a unique space for vulnerability. Participants have shared that at first, they were worried about being judged, but as the weeks progressed, they started to bond with other participants and realised their opinions were valid and valued. ”

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This is a safe, supportive and inherently creative environment, perfect for different styles of music, writing, producing, performing.

Men's Music for Wellbeing offers a structured programme, focussed delivery with clear outputs, in a communal space where men can be open, share, discuss, and have a brew. They can collaborate and appreciate what each person brings, producing professional-standard work of which they can be genuinely proud.

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“ When I first came in I didn't speak, I don't think I opened my mouth. This week I've written a song and I've stood up in front of people I don't know and I've actually sang this song... I couldn't have even imagined me ever doing anything like that but it's inspired me. These guys have given me the confidence, it's amazing, I've come a long way, even I can see that. ”

**Participant**

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Photos courtesy of Arc Stockport.

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“ I've been a musician for a long time, but I'm on medication for depression and anxiety and I really miss playing in front of people. I've never been part of a men's mental health group but this is something you have to do together so it helps with your socialising. I was asked to record the music on my software and that was a thrill, made me feel appreciated, there's somebody who's interested in what I'm doing. And the good feeling carries on after the session, I look forward to coming back. ”

**Participant**

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# Artlink Edinburgh

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BY JAN-BERT VAN DEN BERG

Jan-Bert is the Director of Artlink Edinburgh.



Photo courtesy of Artlink Edinburgh.

Artlink's work in community mental health was established in 1992. Initially supported by the Mental Illness Specific Grant which provided ring fenced funding from the Scottish Government to local authorities to help them develop community care services. From modest beginnings the work has grown to support two distinct programmes of creative involvement and community participation in Edinburgh and West Lothian, supporting 63 individuals with mental health problems of which 65% are men. Central to our approach are the interests and experiences of the people we meet, they determine the creative direction of

the work which has seen us respond creatively to interests in bird watching, wood carving, walking, beekeeping and many other interests.

## OUR APPROACH

The person-led approach of the programme allows us to engage with most people who get in touch or are referred to us. Often initial conversations reveal a range of interests and ambitions that can be built upon; creative prompts can as easily come from an interest in bird watching as they can from responsibility in caring. We have found that this approach is successful in retaining ongoing involvement in our programme and especially works well for men.

“The creative processes in our studio are such that people feel encouraged to try and learn new skills. This has often surprised individuals and created collaborative practice based on interests and not just on what might be the gender norm for men.”

To illustrate this, one of our participants had been a long-time carer for his wife who had dementia and died before lockdown. During his caring responsibilities and after his wife's death he found himself increasingly becoming more isolated and experiencing mental ill health. We encouraged him, regardless of how he was feeling, to come along to our studio sessions and get involved, chat to other people, and share with us what interests him. This opened up his passions for birdwatching, woodcarving and working with people. Over time he found a place to engage and continue to be part of the social and creative environment of our studio and activities.

Two young men who have spent most of their adolescent and adult lives being part of mental health services together – this is how their

friendship evolved over the years. Both come from the same area where their friends and family support network is and where they find the safety and support to live. Creatively, they both have a keen interest in music and fashion. Recently they have become immersed in hand printed fabrics, clothing design and embroidery which has resulted in them creating items of clothing that were showcased in a music performance by another participant on the project. The creative processes in our studio are such that people feel encouraged to try and learn new skills. This has often surprised individuals and created collaborative practice based on interests and not just on what might be the gender norm for men.

Some participants are ever present and rely heavily on the social support that the activities give them. But occasionally individuals can become unwell again and their mental health deteriorates so much that it is impossible for them to engage on a consistent level. They will have periods of unwellness and have had to look after their own mental health at home or in hospital. This has meant that months and, in some cases years, can pass before someone can get themselves back into the studio. We have learned that you have to leave the door open and keep in contact as best you can.

Photo courtesy of Artlink Edinburgh.





Photo courtesy of Artlink Edinburgh.

It is important for individuals to know that they can return to a safe space which respects where they are coming from and gives them the space to develop their interests when they are well enough.

For all of those involved it leads to positive outcomes in terms of reinforcing and building new skills, in benefitting from peer support where the focus is on collaboratively achieving specific creative outcomes and collectively presenting the wealth of talent.

Lack of participation tends to be an issue if individual interests and experiences are not being catered for. Rather than have a very set and rigid programme of activity, we adopt a process whereby the skills, interests and experiences of the individual are listened to and become the hook by which individuals continue to be involved.

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“ Rather than have a very set and rigid programme of activity, we adopt a process whereby the skills, interests and experiences of the individual are listened to and become the hook by which individuals continue to be involved. ”

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There are always opportunities for those skills and interests to cross over with other individuals in the studio or through contact with the wider community. For example, an interest in angling opened up an opportunity for us to work in partnership with a local angling association to illustrate and design a booklet for fly tying and fishing on local rivers and lochs around Edinburgh.

### WHAT WE'VE LEARNT

The experience of supporting creative involvement tailored to individual interests and identity allows us to build on and expand creative and cultural involvement by making natural connections to others who share experiences and interests without becoming gender specific. For example, in 2015 an interest in wildlife at our community allotment led to a partnership with the Scottish Beekeepers Association. Over the next year this led us to designing and creating a display for their yearly pavilion at the Royal Highland Show. Through this period of making we engaged in marquetry design, furniture making, ceramics, banner and poster design, and clothing design worn specifically for the event.

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## Art & Soul

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**BY BETSEY LEWIS-HOLMES**

*Betsey is the Development Director of Art & Soul.*



**Art & Soul exhibition, 2019. Photo courtesy of Art & Soul.**

Art & Soul was set up as a constituted organisation in 1998, as a collaboration with many mental health day centres across **South-West London**. For many years Art & Soul was based at Orleans House Gallery in Twickenham where Art & Soul workshops were held on a regular basis. From 2006 workshops took place in the award-winning Coach House Education Centre, with regular exhibitions taking place at the nearby Stables Gallery. In 2017, Art & Soul registered as a charitable organisation and began using the Exchange Arts Centre, Twickenham and various other venues across South-West London.

Art & Soul runs regular visual arts workshops for people experiencing mental health challenges of all ages and regularly works in partnership with NHS agencies and other voluntary services. Art & Soul stages large exhibitions at least every two years, which celebrate the positive benefits of art for mental health and bring together artists experiencing mental health challenges in the wider community of South-West London. Art & Soul has a large supportive community – some of whom have been part of the network since 1998 and continue to show artwork. We have around 350 people in our network who are based in one of the five South-West

London boroughs we operate in, all of whom experience mental health challenges. Around 150 of these identify as male. Prior to Covid, our workshops were around 50:50 male:female.

## OUR APPROACH

Men's participation in creative mental health projects is really important to us at Art & Soul as we are aware that men can be less likely to seek support for their mental health, yet are very likely to have severe, ongoing mental health needs. Projects like Art & Soul are effective at improving mental health and emotional wellbeing for mild to moderate conditions, and for relieving symptoms of ongoing mental health conditions.

“There are different barriers for men, if you're having mental health difficulties, you wouldn't want your peer group to know. [...] On the whole, women talk to women. Men don't talk about what's going on.”

**Participant**

Art & Soul has always actively included men in the programme and running of the organisation. Our inclusive practice has effectively engaged men in workshops, gallery visits and exhibitions and also in the committee and management of Art & Soul through a co-chair model developed at the inception of the organisation. This is done through the following:

### Sense of community

As one male participant said, the time spent 'chatting with others, getting tea, taking breaks' was 'just as important' as engaging with artwork. They found that when they first joined it was 'some time before they noticed the gender balance in the room' because of the warm welcome. Facilitating good community during workshops and ensuring that basic needs are met has practically involved offering refreshments as part of a session lasting three hours.

“I had absolutely no expectation about the balance between men and women.”

“There is no positive reason to have men-only groups.”

**Participants**

Art & Soul is a diverse space, reaching a wide range of ages (18 to late 70s), with accommodations made for people with learning difficulties, recovery after accidents or health conditions, e.g. stroke or dementia, that has impacted on mental health. 'This is amazing – this is for everyone' related one participant who was 'surprised by the big age range and range of skills' when they first joined.

### Selection of creative projects

Art & Soul workshops focus on 'process' rather than creating artwork that focuses on traditional fine art techniques. Practitioners select art projects and materials which can be open to all genders and abilities. It is important to have a range of ways activities can be extended for the range of skills and abilities in the room which range from wariness and sometimes cynicism ('I've never been good at art – always told I was awful at art') to those older adults like George who went to art school or Alan who was an architect earlier in his life. Then there are those who, like Trevor, Vinod or Alan B, have suffered strokes and have limited mobility, and have come to art making since becoming unwell.

“Three words to describe Art & Soul: “safety, love, recovery”; “socialising, escapism and painting.”

**Participant**

Some men we have spoken to mention they expected to be 'taught to paint' when coming to workshops and would have liked more technical information. From our conversations it seems that men would benefit from a more targeted 'art school' type approach with some focus on certain media or techniques.

Practitioners have developed a myriad of ‘ways in’ to the blank page. For those who were unsure, a few steps were given as preliminary instruction, sometimes relying on something quite technical or task-based at the beginning. Practitioners have said that some technical information is helpful for those wary of art making, which often includes men.

One participant talked about ‘men’s stubbornness’ about talking about mental health or spirituality. However, they always ‘gave things a go’ and found painting ‘relaxing’ once they started. Art & Soul has undertaken projects e.g. Time to Change which focused on sharing opinions about mental health experiences and raising awareness with the general public. These projects were popular with some of the men who participated but were also quite challenging.

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“ Men’s engagement with mental health? Men don’t engage with mental health. ”

**Participant**

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## Professionalism

We know that taking part in regular high-quality exhibitions helps raise confidence and empower Art & Soul participants. One of the men we spoke to said his main expectation of Art & Soul was ‘exposure and to help sell my artwork’. We have consistently high numbers of men exhibit artwork with Art & Soul. In our last large-scale exhibition at the Stables Gallery, 58% (80 of the 137 artists represented) were men. Holding workshops in a professional and well-known arts venue, with a gallery next door, improved engagement with the exhibition. It has always been important to provide high quality artist materials, professional mounting and framing of participant work and exhibitions professionally installed by a Curator. For those who entered Art & Soul feeling unsure or wary, the exhibition demonstrated that Art & Soul took its participants’ artwork seriously. It was not just ‘a little bit of drawing’ as one participant said, it was a way to raise yourself up by seeing your artwork professionally

exhibited. Taking participants seriously as artists is one of the ways Art & Soul continues to attract men to take part in our exhibitions.

## Organisational direction

Art & Soul has always worked collaboratively, consulting participants on the running of the organisation. Committee meetings were held in the workshop space, where all participants were invited to share views and help steer the direction of the group. Committee members were invited from partner mental health organisations including: Footsteps, Richmond Borough Mind, The Vineyard Project, Sutton Mental Health Foundation, Lakeside Pottery and Together as One.

Many of these organisations support those with ongoing moderate-severe mental health issues, and provided opportunities for men to be referred to Art & Soul. Art & Soul was a development of a previous constituted organisation called We Can Draw and its partnerships with mental health organisations throughout South-West London gave it a reputation as a ‘safe space’ which welcomed collaboration while also having the arts expertise contributed by Orleans House Gallery.

Art & Soul has offered opportunities for personal development and participation beyond the regular workshops. In 2011 Art & Soul participants worked collaboratively with the exhibitions team at Orleans House to co-produce the Wellcome Trust supported ‘Madge Gill: Medium & Visionary’ exhibition about outsider art, taking part in artwork selection, archive visits and curating. Many Art & Soul participants have become volunteers at Orleans House Gallery. Art & Soul helps support the development of its participants – some of whom have become Co-Chairs, Committee and Board members, as well as workshop and exhibition assistants.

## WHAT WE’VE LEARNT

Art & Soul’s inclusive approach continues to attract men with mental health needs by having a strong sense of community, selecting art projects that appeal to all, holding high-quality professional exhibitions and involving men at all stages of organisational direction. We are aware that specific challenges exist around attracting and retaining men in our programme and continue to work to improve



Art & Soul exhibition, 2018. Photo courtesy of Art & Soul.

men's engagement. Ultimately, projects like Art & Soul could help challenge some of the stigma and cultural conditioning around men's mental health by helping to begin conversations, and providing a supportive environment to open up. These projects could bridge the gap between low uptake of mental health services by men and also help prevent mild and moderate conditions from becoming more severe. More men need services at this level, yet there are clearly barriers to men accessing help.

“Having a diagnosis is challenging. You can be patronised. Mental health organisations can see you as your diagnosis. Art & Soul doesn't do that. Arts organisations don't.”

**Participant**

We know that quite a few of our male participants do not use email and we keep in touch through phone, text and post. This meant

that during Covid online activities were engaging more women than men. There were a few men receiving packs of art materials and activities, but not engaging online. Now, while the number of men engaging is on the rise, it is not back to the 50% it was pre-Covid.

### WHAT'S NEXT?

Art & Soul would like to have more gender diversity within our programme, practitioner team and Board. We know that exhibitions particularly attract participation from men and its important post-Covid to build in as many exhibiting opportunities and volunteering roles that provide positive opportunities for men who are struggling with their ongoing mental health issues.

We would like to have a more permanent public facing space and are discussing a closer partnership with St Mary's University (who run the Exchange Arts Centre) as we know that men engage better in-person and having a space they can 'drop in' to and ask about what's on.

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## Cloth Cat Leads

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**BY JOE KENT**

**Joe is the Business Development Coordinator at Cloth Cat Leeds.**



Cloth Cat's Repair & Recycle group, photo courtesy of Cloth Cat Leeds.

Established in 1999, Cloth Cat's mission is to harness the power of music to create community, build potential and transform people's mental health and wellbeing.

We work in disadvantaged areas of Leeds to improve confidence and social connections through a range of creative music projects:

- Man About Town  
(for men at risk of suicide)
- Beat The Blues  
(patients in NHS mental health facilities)
- Repair & Recycle  
(unemployed people repairing musical equipment to donate to people in need)
- Get Your Act Together  
(learning for young people)
- Open Mic Night  
(inclusive weekly session for all).

Research shows that around two thirds of staff in the Third Sector are female. One impression is that many creative services work with more women than men, including community based or health and wellbeing type provision. This is a non-evidenced observation, but perhaps women are more proactive about their creativity, self-care and health and wellbeing? Conversely, service statistics show that crisis services such as gambling, substance use and non-family homelessness services have very high proportions of men using them.

Since around 2015 changing societal attitudes (including parity of esteem for mental health) have incrementally developed a focus on men's work, particularly through suicide prevention services and prior to that, armed forces charities targeting men by default. This resonates with the findings of research carried out in Leeds:



“ Across nearly all causes of death, men in Leeds are more likely than women to die at a younger age. The majority of men’s health problems are preventable and are related to their lifestyle or their social conditions. ”

“ The freedom boys have to develop language about emotions, feelings and relationships is often more restricted than for girls, and can affect how they manage emotional and mental health problems throughout their lives. ”

**Report: The State of Men’s Health in Leeds.**<sup>42</sup>

## OUR APPROACH

Our core and thematic focus is music. We have two main projects that attract mostly men: one targeted, **Man About Town**, and another open to all, **Repair & Recycle**.

Naming and focusing services is important. Notable local successes include: Men in Sheds, Andy’s Man Club, West Leeds Men’s Network, Manbassadors and our own project Man About Town. As with every community activity and group, it takes time to build up credibility and trust. Many people feel excluded or let down by life and cannot afford another emotional investment in something that will close down, disappear or reject them.

Relationships between facilitators and participants are important. We have an established pool of freelance delivery staff; most have many years’ experience in playing music and facilitating music-making sessions. They tend not to teach music in a formal way, and many are self-taught musicians who bring the personality and enthusiasm of a performer playing to a tough crowd into the sessions to get people involved. They also use patience and kindness and recognise how everyone’s relationship to music is important to them. The

approach is to focus on the positive aspects of the musical task and creating involvement and joy; not upon fixing people or problems.

Crossing the threshold for the first time is the biggest challenge. We operate from venues that are curated not to judge, located in the right areas so that people feel they can be invisible and blend in, especially at the beginning of their relationship with us.

We worked with people who never switched their heating on long before the cost-of-living crisis was a headline, who are cold for half of the year and miss meals every day all year round. It is difficult to be creative and enjoy yourself with these pressures. People feel they have failed in life and are ashamed to receive charity which is why one of our successful projects has integrated food into the activities without the stigma. An optional group meal is integrated into some of our sessions and often is the first meal most have eaten that day. This reduces stress, improves mood and enables opportunities for co-operation, learning, creativity and enjoyment. Choice and decision making are also core elements of our groups.

## WHAT WE’VE LEARNT

- Research on men’s health tells us they are top of the ‘high harm’ league tables and feature at the bottom of ‘pro-active/self-care’ initiatives (The State of Men’s Health in Leeds).
- The entry point for mental health work is creating a trusted environment through activities that appeal to men. Typical gateways are music, sport and practical activities, appealing and co-produced.
- Just because the target group is men, it doesn’t mean solutions need to be single gendered (including facilitators).
- After building trust it can be a short step to problem sharing, but patience is needed – conversations should develop organically and not be forced.
- Integrate food naturally into activities without stigma.

<sup>42</sup> White, A and Seims, A and Newton, R (2016) The State of Men’s Health in Leeds - Main Report. Project Report. Leeds Beckett University and Leeds City Council, Leeds. DOI: 978-1-907240-63-8 eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/2735.

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# Community Links Engagement & Recovery Service

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## MEN'S TALK

BY STUART HAWKES

Stuart is Community Engagement Lead  
at Community Links Engagement & Recovery Service.



A Men's Talk production, photo courtesy of CLEAR.

Community Links Engagement and Recovery Service (CLEAR) is a group-based recovery-focussed wellbeing service for individuals with mental health needs. Commissioned by Kirklees Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) since 2013, CLEAR works with adults across **Kirklees, West Yorkshire**.

Established in 2018, following a pilot project, Men's Talk is CLEAR's creative advocacy project for men who have experienced mental health issues. We use applied theatre and film

making to enable the men to gain confidence, develop new skills and create original material, with the aim of reducing stigma, encouraging men to talk about their mental health, and enabling change.

In our experience, men's participation in creativity can be an issue for a few reasons.

- Working class men are an under-represented group both as makers and consumers of the arts.

- Working class men rarely see themselves represented in theatre, their voices and their stories are rarely heard.
- Their experience is often limited to school drama – most of the men involved in Men’s Talk had never been to the theatre.
- Theatre and the arts are not considered masculine activities.
- For men suffering with anxiety and depression, the idea of performing can be triggering.
- Lack of visibility for the work and limited opportunities to share practice.

## OUR APPROACH

Kirklees Suicide Audit had identified that although suicide rates for men in Kirklees were high, men were not engaging with existing provision. It was decided that a new, creative approach should be tried.

Applicants were invited to pitch an innovative strategy for engaging men. Stuart Hawkes, with a background in applied theatre, secured the post with the idea of ‘Men’s Talk’ – a participatory theatre project for men.

The work was initially targeted towards men who were already engaged at some level with a third sector mental health provider or attending existing men’s provision.

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“I’m learning something new and trying to get a message out to other men in our situation.”

**Participant**

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Attendance at groups prior to the project’s launch enabled the worker to make relationships with service users and in doing so involve the men in the design of the project and how it was marketed. These considerations proved to be important:

## Identifying blocks and barriers

Going to new places and meeting new people can be particularly challenging. As men signed up for the project, they agreed to travel together or to meet our volunteer at the bus station and walk through the town together.

## Providing clear tangible, beneficial outcomes

The men wanted to know why they should take part and how it would help their mental health. They were all familiar with the NHS tool – the Five Ways to Wellbeing – that supports the idea that connecting with other people, being more active, taking notice, learning something new and giving back combine to help to achieve good mental wellbeing.

This provided the project with a tangible framework. Men would: make new friends, be physically active throughout the workshop process, explore their thoughts, feelings and experiences and share them with each other, learn new skills and have new experiences and, in producing a piece of theatre, reduce the stigma that men feel and signpost available support.

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“Being involved in Men’s Talk: I feel that I have accomplished something. When people ask me what I’m doing, I’ve got something to talk about, I tell people I’m part of this mental health group, that is forward facing – it gives me social worth, it gives me a sense of value and achievement.”

**Participant**

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## Co-production

Co-production has remained central to the success of the project and began with one of the groups designing marketing materials for the project. The group agreed to be models for the silhouettes that they had suggested should be used. They posed for photos together and laughed a lot. They agreed colours, fonts and what key information should be included and the words we should use.

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“This journey I’ve been on with Men’s Talk ... it’s given me so much, so many wonderful moments and memories that I can take with me into the future.”

**Participant**

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## Texted reminders

Sending a reminder the day before sessions became routine over the first six weeks of the project, as well as an occasional well done/ check-in, in between sessions.

Men's Talk sits within a wellness-based service with a focus on recovery. These themes provide the parameters for the work, providing us with a strong sense of purpose and a clear identity, which is very important to the men.

## IMPACT

Men's Talk is now in its fifth year. Having developed from a pilot project, in year one it was funded through short term grants before finally becoming part of the commissioned CLEAR service.

The current cohort has just completed a thirteen-date tour and has recently been making in-roads into the national conference circuit.

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“I have never seen as many managers at one time pay so much attention and put down their phones and close laptops, such was the impact that Men's Talk had when they performed at Kirklees Councils Social Care senior managers meeting.

They certainly stirred thoughts in many, some from a work perspective and others on a personal level. It is this that provides the value in what the group offer and the impact that they achieve in raising awareness of mental health and particularly that of men.”

**Tony Bacon Partnership Commissioning Manager  
Mental Health, Kirklees Council**

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“The performances delivered through Men's Talk can deliver mental health awareness in a way which is a different to typical delivery of public health messages. Men's Talk is a great example of how being creative can support positive wellbeing.”

**Rebecca Elliott, Public Health Manager,  
Public Mental Health & Suicide Prevention,  
Kirklees Council**

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## WHAT WE'VE LEARNT AND WHAT'S NEXT?

The project's longevity has enabled us to co-produce programmes and projects with the men as their knowledge and skills increase. We know that men will engage with creative activities if you involve them in their design. They need to have a clear purpose, lead to tangible benefits and be here for the long term.

Men's Talk has benefitted from operating within a mental health organisation both in terms of accessing men but also in providing support to participants and workers outside of sessions. We would recommend working in partnership with mental health providers.

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“It's kind of like a new-found life.”

**Participant**

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Men's Talk are keen to share their stories on the national conference circuit – the All Party Parliamentary Group on Suicide would make a pretty good audience!

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# Fabrica

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## MEN IN SHEDS & MEN WHO MAKE

BY CLARE HANKINSON

Clare is co-Director at Fabrica.



Men Who Make in Brighton. Photo by Phoebe Wingrove and courtesy of Fabrica.

Fabrica is a visual arts organisation based in **Brighton**. We believe everyone should have access to art and creativity, striving to reflect and serve our local community.

We are based in a beautiful former church and also work across several communities in our city and wider area to connect people to art, recognising the potential of creativity to support wellbeing.

### OUR APPROACH

Fabrica delivers two men's mental health programmes: **Men in Sheds** and **Men Who Make**, both of which aim to engage men and those identifying as men with low mental health and those at risk of suicide.

Nationally, males are three times more likely to die by suicide than females. Suicide is the biggest killer in men under 50. In Brighton and Hove the suicide rate is historically higher than national and regional rates, and is currently 36% higher than England as a whole. Male deaths constitute 69% of suicides in our city.

Men are less likely to talk about their mental health, which reduces opportunities to offer preventative action. Our projects develop trusted and meaningful relationships, opening conversations as well as supporting wider quality of life.

Men are also, statistically, less likely to engage in our wider creative programmes. These projects give us new ways to rebalance our

relationship with male audiences and connect them to opportunities to enjoy arts and culture and expand their own creative worlds.

Men in Sheds and Men Who Make aim to improve mental health and wellbeing among men who may be vulnerable because of their life circumstances, but who may not wish to access conventional support. Activities provide structure and companionship without emphasis on discussion of mental wellbeing. This approach can be described as ‘shoulder to shoulder’ rather than ‘face to face’. We offer a preventative approach where men with shared lived experience of mental health challenges connect over interest and common ground rather than their condition, and in doing so, find a network of support, community and resilience.

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“Activities provide structure and companionship without emphasis on discussion of mental wellbeing.”

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## Men in Sheds

Men in Sheds Kemptown was launched in 2017 and currently opens two days per week. We annually work with about 15-25 individuals (our ‘Shedders’).

Originally commissioned by Brighton & Hove Public Health, our Shed is now part of UOK,<sup>43</sup> a city-wide mental health referral network. Positioning the men’s shed as part of the citywide suicide prevention and mental health strategies gives recognition and awareness of the need for creative male-oriented offers which prevent and support mental health conditions.

Men in Sheds is best suited to individuals who may be at risk of a decline in mental health, or people who are coming out of a more critical situation and are now looking to reconnect and build positive, constructive opportunities in their lives.

Being run by an arts organisation means we can diversify what happens at the Shed, which includes self-led creative activities, artist-led workshops and outings.

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“[I joined] to fill my time and my week, otherwise I’d be sitting at home on my own staring at four walls... a practical and physical outlet was ideal.”

“To be able to come to the shed and work and help others gives me a great deal of satisfaction. I feel a sense of worth and love the way all the men work together.”

### Men in Sheds participants

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We also connect people to our wider offer and local creative opportunities. Our Shedders have worked on exhibitions, assisted with workshops and also been part of artist-led creative projects.

Over the years we’ve seen Shedders grow in confidence and learn skills from our facilitator. One Shedder has mentored a new participant, telling us that this gives him more motivation and, in his words, *“a reason to wake up in the morning”*.

The Shed is vastly oversubscribed and we have run a waiting list since 2019 and we have been acutely aware of the increasing referrals from mental health workers.

In 2020 we designed an associated project, Men Who Make, aiming to reduce demand for the Shed and create other routes and opportunities for men to engage with art.

## Men Who Make

Men Who Make offers creative courses that run weekly sessions over four to six weeks. We offer a supportive, creative group setting for eight to 12 individuals to make social connections, learn new skills, share knowledge and build confidence.

Courses focus on various arts and craft processes, including printmaking, stone carving, woodwork, alternative photography, textiles, ceramics and more.

We deliver courses across the city in venues and green spaces and are currently carrying out consultations to develop and explore interest in delivery in different regional settings.



Men Who Make in Brighton. Photo by Phoebe Wingrove and courtesy of Fabrica.

“What I particularly liked was being amongst everyone, listening and being absorbed in what I was doing, being a part of it.”

**Men Who Make participant**

We clearly put on our marketing that it is a mental health project and find we reach more men with higher levels of need in terms of mental health.

Both projects are designed in ongoing consultation with participants and with different partnerships, serving groups including men who are homeless men, ex-military, and refugees, broadening our network as well as our delivery.

Initially, participants aren't usually very open about their circumstances or mental health. But over time people tend to open up in their own way. We do see the impact of poor mental health on participants, especially during and

following the pandemic. Our facilitators are then well positioned to offer a trusted and appropriate referral or recommendation.

### WHAT WE'VE LEARNT

Specifically saying something is 'for men' has been important in recruiting particular participants. Communicating this also leads to reactions from those who feel men are not 'deserving' or 'in need'. Some feel uncomfortable about spaces which feel exclusive to others. We are driven by the data and aim of this work – to prevent mental ill health and suicide in men – it is important to share those statistics and have open, complex conversations which challenge our own assumptions.

We can see the potential of Men Who Make being very transferable and adaptable to new settings. We are currently exploring delivering it regionally.

**Fabrica is based in Brighton, East Sussex**  
[fabrica.org.uk/men-in-sheds](https://fabrica.org.uk/men-in-sheds)  
[fabrica.org.uk/men-who-make](https://fabrica.org.uk/men-who-make)

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## Our Room

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BY KATE GOODRICH

Kate is Head of Creative at Our Room.



'Consumed' at the Royal Exchange. Photo by Kate Goodrich.

Our Room (formerly known as 'The Men's Room') is a creative community based in Manchester for male, trans and non-binary people who sex work. Creativity is at the heart of all we do, and we believe it has the power to transform people's lives. Through playfulness, challenge and creative adventures, we offer people a safe and welcoming space in which to try new things and become inspired.

Our artistic vision 'Playing with Fire' is an exciting and ambitious co-produced strategy. We work in collaboration with some of the best arts organisations in Greater Manchester to showcase two public-facing art events a year.

Our participants identify as male, non-binary and as trans women and trans men. All of our participants experience (or have experienced) poor mental health. The mental health issues and diagnoses are complex and multiple, but many people who attend talk about issues of gender and sexual identity (and rejection) as being key underlying mental health issues.

Doing art and being part of a creative collective community helps build resilience, escape and camaraderie, giving vital space from personal challenges and creating a new space for something different and absorbing.



“Doing art and being part of a creative collective community helps build resilience, escape and camaraderie, giving vital space from personal challenges and creating a new space for something different and absorbing.”

## OUR APPROACH

We are lucky that Our Room has a specific creative mission. We were set up in order to be able to offer creative practices as the very central core of our existence. All of our staff members whether ‘creative’ or ‘support worker’ are involved in the creative sessions and delivery. We know that when people contact us for support, the creative work is always offered and celebrated by our whole staff team.

Our long-term artistic strategy ‘Playing With Fire’ was co-produced with participants in 2021 as part of a creative R & D project which saw us bringing in artists from a variety of disciplines. Many of the artists we worked with had experiences in common with our group, whether that was poor mental health, experience of racism, being care leavers, experiencing social prejudices and rejection connected to being trans, gay or non-binary, or having experienced homelessness and addictions. These artists were pivotal in being empathetic co-designers of future work with the group.

Our Playing With Fire strategy (PWF) acknowledges that ‘fire’ has many attributes and connotations. Fire can be risky, transformational, hypnotic, beautiful, welcoming, and challenging. Our work deliberately offers a variety of creative projects, from film-making residencies in the great outdoors, to street theatre and pyrotechnic spectacles; immersive performance incorporating dance, spoken word and music; visual arts to photographic explorations and exhibitions.

We appreciate that not every activity will appeal to everyone, and in addition we recognise that participants’ lives are frequently in turmoil – with people dipping in and out of what is offered. We structure our work to allow



Rehearsal for ‘Consumed’. Photo by Len Grant.

for this, mixing relaxing arts activities alongside performance project work shown in places such as: HOME, Contact and the Royal Exchange.

We believe that our arts offer must encompass three areas: increasing access to cultural venues, doing arts activities and being a performer in those cultural venues. Our participants are not only *consumers* of culture – but *makers* of culture and being able to ‘give something back’ is such a vital component in creating good mental health for all of us.

We recently completed a project with the renowned dance company, Company Chameleon, which was performed as part of the Royal Exchange’s ‘The Den’ festival. Dance is frequently an art form that has us all (staff, volunteers, participants) quivering in our boots. It can be uncomfortable and exposing. It can also be beautiful and give a voice to difficult stories in a way that spoken word cannot. Kevin Edward Turner is Co-Artistic Director of Company Chameleon and had been popular at our taster workshops. Kevin had listened to the stories people were telling about their relationships and how these could be all consuming. He was also very open about his own mental health diagnosis and stay in a psychiatric hospital. Following these workshops, he suggested a dance project to explore these relationship issues to be called ‘Consumed’. We knew a dance project would

be risky, and suspected overall numbers would be low but wanted to push ourselves. Over the ten weeks we worked with a total of 13 participants, although the performance itself involved just two participants. It isn't uncommon that numbers are lower in the performance as the build-up and rehearsals can cause pressure and stress. We worked with others to stay involved, but not perform if this felt too exposing. The performances were incredible and deeply moving,

## IMPACT

We evaluate our work using 'The Most Significant Change' methodology and the following extracts have been taken, with permission, from one of the participants:

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“Performing for me is very therapeutic... it helps my mental health; it calms my mind. It also opens doors to other possibilities. We are artists and creators. I would love to do it again. Everyone was so amazing. It was breath-taking.”

**Participant**

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## OUR LEARNING AND WHAT'S NEXT?

- It is good to challenge ourselves, reflecting that our bodies could do more than we had given them credit for...
- High staff and volunteer ratios were invaluable – both in supporting people getting to the session and participating in the final piece.
- Sex work is increasingly organised online, posing challenges for promoting our creative and support services. In 2024-5 we will focus on doing creative outreach work in the Gay Village in Manchester promoting our new organisational name 'Our Room' to boost our reach and bring more people through our doors for further creative adventures!

# Radiate Arts

BY PAM BELLINGHAM

Pam is Managing Director at Radiate Arts.



Veterans' photography group, photo courtesy of Radiate Arts.

Radiate Arts CIC is a social enterprise that specialises in delivering creative workshops and experiences to people living with mental health problems, to create positive change in their lives. Established in **Chester** in April 2017, we have now expanded our services across the **North West**. In 2020, we established Clywedog Creative Hub in **Powys, Mid Wales**.

We are currently a partner organisation in a collaboration of Armed Forces veteran support organisations in Wales, funded by The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust Veterans' Places, Pathways and People programme.

Our part in this programme delivers creative and outdoor activities to veterans experiencing post-traumatic stress, isolation, and poor mental health, providing them with the opportunity to learn new artistic skills,

to develop self-worth, and relax amongst their peers in a safe environment. Our creative courses with veterans are mixed gender, although the male to female ratio is 4:1 – 80% male.

Involving peer mentors, workshop leaders and volunteers with lived experience is key to an improved sense of hope, empowerment, and social inclusion for those accessing our creative workshops. It is this connection that benefits interpersonal relationships and contributes to a sense of positive culture and belonging. Trusting someone who has overcome similar experiences can provide a living example of hope to those currently facing challenges.

Radiate Arts is continuing to deliver mindful and supportive creative experiences for veterans in Cheshire and Wales.

### Radiate Arts: Joe's story

Joe Wilson, formerly a Royal Marine, has attended our creative workshops and retreats for four years. In that time, he has achieved a distinction at Aberystwyth Art College and a first-class BA(Hons) degree in ceramics at Carmarthen School of Art. Joe is now a sculptural ceramicist and visual artist, leading creative workshops for veterans with Radiate Arts.

“ I first came to Radiate Arts through a veterans' charity called Change Step about four years ago when I joined a photography and hill walking course. The effect of that one meeting was quite incredible. First, I managed to mix with other veterans in a safe environment and secondly it was great to get out for a walk as well, a proper walk with like-minded people. Walking or any kind of activity like that is a really good way of opening up so you tend to talk, and you tend to enjoy each other's company. ”

Joe recently attended our residential as a representative of Radiate Arts, sharing his experience with newcomers.

“ It's so lovely when people finish a residential, and they don't want it to finish, if that makes sense. I can remember when I first came along, if anything was more than one night or two nights it would be too much for me because it felt almost like an entrapment. So, I wouldn't have volunteered for it if it wasn't for Change Step. This first step can never be underestimated because it means travelling, it means meeting new people, being in different venues and situations, under pressure at times with deadlines. I was becoming more confident, and this is life changing. And now I'm coming in as a helper with Radiate Arts, not only am I passionate about veterans but I think I get where they're coming from and it's a very fine balance between being supportive but also giving space. ”

“ Now I'm delivering a sculpture course which has been co-designed and led by the veterans who are taking part. Having fun, making things that are good quality is important because this is about people showing what they make to their friends and family and being proud of it. I'm going to be using all my skills that I've built up over the years so we can produce something that everybody will find quite interesting and rewarding. ”

“ It's about the safe environment. I don't necessarily want to go into Tesco's and talk to somebody about my military career and I don't particularly want to go in there and talk about things that are personal, so if you're in a safe environment, i.e. with other veterans, male or female, and you trust each other, these things can be very constructive, where you kind of 'get' each other. So, once you've got over the initial guarded responses and when people start to realise that you're all in the same boat, it's the time then to open up. Of course, we are all reactive to our surroundings and the beauty of things which should be accentuated by veterans because to some degree if you've seen some horrible things, the beautiful things will stand out even brighter. ”

“ The mindfulness benefits of art are wrapped in the bringing of people together, in a project which takes your attention enough to stop you thinking too much, but also has enough in it to occupy yourself. With the stone carvings workshops that Radiate Arts delivers, it's absolutely brilliant the effect that stone carving has on everyone, it's just very important how that works for positive mental health. It works mindfully, which a lot of art does. Once you taste it, once you look at your sculpture, once you start sketching and realise that your sketches are quite similar to your sculpture, then you see the process of making art, and you think about how you can formulate your work and how it becomes applicable. ”



## Radiate Arts: Poem by BR

I said,  
Dark and silence,  
worrying but sad,  
One big system,  
that said we are all crazy.  
Aggression, guilt, sadness,  
self-harming cry for help.  
Losing purpose in life,

all because the system let you down.  
Once a soldier always a veteran,  
Once a number always a number.  
Take some medication, that's what the  
doctor prescribed.  
I said aggression, guilt, sadness, for what?  
All the words I said,  
I meant mental health in veterans.

Photo (right) courtesy of Joe Wilson.

Photo (this page) by a veteran's photography course participant.

# Re-Live

BY KARIN DIAMOND

Karin is co-founder of and Artistic Director at Re-Live.



Graham's story: 'Stretcher-Bearer Stan' from Re-Live's 'Coming Home' comic. Art by Mike Donaldson.

Re-Live is a charity based in **Wales** co-creating Life Story Arts projects with older people, families affected by dementia, veterans and families living with complex trauma and people at the end of life.

Over the last 17 years, we have developed a creative 'Life Story' methodology, which invites groups of people to explore and express their lived experiences through theatre, comic making, singing and music.

Life Story Arts can help support participants' mental health and wellbeing, reduce isolation and loneliness, and help us shape new stories about ourselves and the world around us.

## OUR APPROACH

Reflecting on our creative work with men has been an interesting challenge, as our Life Story projects are gender-inclusive, with a 60:40 split between women and men.

Inviting participants to share lived experiences within a creative group illuminates our individuality whilst building deep connections with each other. The process can have a positive impact on reducing gender stereotypes.

Some men we have worked alongside have viewed arts participation as 'not for them' or 'risky', leading to unfamiliar emotional territory.

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“It cuts through outward appearances and delves into our common humanity with all its frailties and joys.”

**Participant**

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To counterbalance hidden concerns, we invite participants to build a group agreement, which ensures the group holds collaborative power, avoids assumptions, and establishes supportive, respectful boundaries around choice and confidentiality, with no expectation to share more than you want to.

For some men, being in a majority female group can build emotional safety and sharing deeply held stories becomes possible. On the other hand, for a few men we have worked alongside, it felt overwhelming to be in the minority.

Long-term projects have worked particularly well with older men who have required a slower process to build trust and connection within a group setting. A participant in our creative ageing group, The Company of Elders, has co-created Life Story theatre with Re-Live for over a decade, but it was only in our most recent performance, Constellations, in 2022, that he felt ready to creatively explore a story he had been holding inside for over 50 years.

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“Being in Re-Live with trusted friends allowed me to tell my story and sensitively share it with an audience. I found healing and comfort.”

**Participant**

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One new member of our Company of Elders was 84-year-old Michael, who joined the group to build new social connections. Michael revealed to the group that he would sometimes join us as Michael and sometimes as Michelle. Over several sessions, Michael and Michelle gained the confidence to express and share their gender identities with the group through music, movement and the spoken word. Being seen and heard without judgement had a transformative effect on their mental health in what would turn out to be the final months of their life.

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“Michael clearly felt very safe and accepted by the group to be able to talk so openly. I am very grateful to you all for gaining his trust and making his last few months so fulfilling.”

**Michael and Michelle's sister**

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Our work with veterans living with complex mental health problems and their families has connected us to more men than women. In this area of our work, the challenge has been involving more women in our creative groups, which we continue to address.

We recently completed a Veterans' Life Story comic, Coming Home, with three men and one woman sharing their mental health stories alongside professional comic artists.

One member of the group, Graham, had been searching for ways to process and express deeply held trauma from his military service in Northern Ireland in the mid-1970s. The comic-making process enabled Graham to finally move beyond the fragmented memories of that traumatic event and develop a linear version of his story to fit the form of sequential comic panels.

Through externalising his story and sharing it with readers, Graham found a new sense of acceptance of himself, leading to a significant reduction in suicidal ideation. Graham's mental health journey was impacted by the lack of a definition for his mental health condition. After many years of exploring his mental health with counsellors, he was correctly diagnosed with Moral Injury. The Coming Home comic provided Graham with the space to explore Moral Injury creatively and begin the process of moral recovery.

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“When you go into counselling, you're really storytelling, but to one person. But when the comic is produced, it's validity. That story you've been telling has gone on to create its own life, and how people listen to it negatively or positively, doesn't matter because that story is out there.”

**Graham, veteran participant**

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For many of our male veterans, being with other men who have served in the Armed Forces in a creative group reaffirms that this is a space they have co-ownership of and can express often deeply held experiences within. We are mindful that for some men we have worked alongside, it can take time to trust other men to be sensitive about deeply emotional experiences from their service history.

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“Support groups have never been on my radar due to my wariness of them. I’ve always had difficulty sharing personal memories, especially with strangers. With Re-Live, I felt I could open up about many things from my military career.”

**Robbie, a veteran participant**

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For some men, and women, we have worked alongside, the creative Life Story work is the start of a deeper process of reflection that goes beyond the limits of our work and requires clinical support. We collaborate with health and social care professionals, therapists, and third-sector organisations to support participants in further processing discoveries made within the creative process and accessing any additional needs.



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# Restoke

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## UP MEN

BY CLARE REYNOLDS

Clare is the Director of Restoke.



The MAN UP project, photo courtesy of Restoke.

Restoke is an arts organisation which puts the people of Stoke-on-Trent at the heart of creative adventures. We make performances, plan events and run workshops alongside people who may not usually meet, forming new bonds of friendship, understanding and solidarity in the city.

In 2017, we embarked on a new performance project, MAN UP,<sup>44</sup> aimed solely at men and on the themes of masculinity and mental health. After an initial call-out we had over 170 men get in touch, interested in sharing their stories,

finding out more or getting involved in the show. From these connections we held lots of one-to-one chats and then group sessions where we began to explore the themes through creative writing, movement and singing. Twenty-one men committed to being part of the final show, some of them sharing their stories as part of the performance.

Clearly, creating a male specific project and environment worked in attracting men into a creative project, but it was the explicit provocation to discuss masculinity and mental

<sup>44</sup> The full MAN UP evaluation available here: [www.restoke.org.uk/reports](http://www.restoke.org.uk/reports).

health which was the main pull for people to get involved. Still, the group quickly felt the benefits of getting out of their comfort zone to share stories, dance and sing together:

“To see barriers and stigmas broken down so quickly and effectively within such a short space of time is something we should all learn from.”

“I have rarely felt so present, so connected, and humble. The feeling of humanity and the bonding is incredible. I danced!”

#### Participants

The performance of MAN UP took place in Goldenhill Working Men’s Club to sold-out audiences in August 2018. The show also had a huge impact on audiences, to see stories of masculinity and mental health shared so honestly:

“Man Up is a beautiful gift of a show. Full of fury & fragility, challenging expectations & building resilience. An urgent reminder of the breadth of experience of masculinity.”

“The show left me trembling with joy, laughter, tears, hope, to have seen such vulnerability become strength, the isolated gathered. Inspirational, essential, the kind of show every man needs to see.”

#### Audience members

The main feedback after the show was the urgency to continue the conversation and involve more men. So we gathered the existing company and new-comers to talk about the legacy of the work – and the Up Men programme was born! The programme was initially funded by National Lottery Reaching Communities<sup>45</sup> and for the past five years, despite the hurdles of the pandemic, men have gathered to sing, write and try out new creative activities:

Photo courtesy of Restoke.



<sup>45</sup> Year 1 & Year 2 evaluation reports available here: [www.restoke.org.uk/reports](http://www.restoke.org.uk/reports).

“I joined the writing group during lockdown. I was alerted to the group’s activities by a beer mat in a Stoke pub and left it around at home until I thought it could be a good idea as a creative outlet during difficult times.

I am not normally attracted to creative events with or without men. The writing group appealed as a really important outlet for concerns and worries as well as trying to make other people laugh or realise that they are not alone.

By being a group of men I felt less inhibited in my writing and that it was easier to connect with folks over a difficult medium, Zoom or similar. In general men are not good at expressing emotions. I felt that the medium of writing reduced that inhibition and was therapeutic. ”

#### Participant

In 2022, Adrian Ball, an original participant in MAN UP, stepped into the role of programme coordinator, working with a steering group of men to organise monthly workshops in different artforms of interest to the group. We have found certain workshops have been more successful than others, such as comedy improv, ceramics, and outdoor activities. We have tried a combination of weekly workshops, monthly workshops, and one-off weekenders and we are still reflecting on which format has the biggest impact.

Some attendees throughout the MAN UP and Up Men projects have reflected on their relationships with men. Having felt like they didn’t fit masculine stereotypes and having not engaged with groups of men before, they have through these projects made new connections and challenged their own views:



Photo courtesy of Restoke.

“I’ve often eyed men with suspicion, and, as I’m not into sport, not macho, nor into drinking ten pints in the pub, thought I’d have nothing in common. But I always knew this was a false belief, and so, coming to Up Men has helped me bond with men, and understand that men can be creative, have feelings and can support other men in ways that women can’t. It’s liberating, and perhaps can help me in my relationship with my own son. ”

#### Participant

In October 2023 we celebrated five years of the Up Men Programme with a weekend of workshops and performances. These included comedy improv, therapeutic art, dance, singing, a triple bill of performances, an open mic night with live music and an art exhibition. This weekend brought together a mix of men who were involved in MAN UP, participants in the Up Men programme and new people who were finding out about the programme for the first time.

#### WHAT’S NEXT?

The Up Men programme will continue, with an aim to encourage men out of their comfort zone, take up creative activities for their wellbeing, and seek out new experiences in the arts.

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# RTProjects

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**BY BEANO FLUDE**

**Beano is the co-founder of RTProjects.**



Photo courtesy of Beano at RTProjects.

RTProjects is an independent suicide intervention charity based in **Durham**, founded in 2007 by people with lived experience of poor mental health and suicide. Our ethos is “Supporting, Connecting, Enabling”. We use the arts to support people towards recovery.

Participants take part in group workshops and receive one-to-one guidance, thereby learning to express themselves through a range of creative activities, including music, painting, poetry, sculpture, stained glass, printmaking, film making, photography and more.

Alongside creative activities participants receive non time-limited one-to-one

emotional support. They are introduced to evidence-based self-help strategies, and offered practical support, such as housing and welfare advice, specifically tailored to meet their needs.

We provide both mixed gender and single gender groups.

My view is that the lower number of men than women who engage in creative mental health projects is connected more to the ‘mental health’ aspect rather than the aspect of creativity. Men are less likely to access psychological therapies than women: only 36% of referrals to NHS talking therapies

are for men. Women are twice as likely to be diagnosed with anxiety as men and yet three quarters of suicides are men.

## OUR APPROACH

RTProjects directly promotes our 'Men's Shed' as a 'men only' space run by men. We also find some men appear to need an 'excuse' to attend a group. We sometimes engage men by asking for their help, maybe to volunteer or to help others. They are more likely to come along to help others than for their own mental health.

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“ I worked in a factory for years, I didn't even like it, but since I've left I miss the banter. The Shed is like the good bits of me job. ”

**Participant**

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We promote activities which we have found men to be interested in. Woodcarving, printmaking, photography, woodworking and restoration seem to attract men to our groups. The invitation is to 'get involved in' rather than 'attend sessions'.

We have noticed that there is a general difference in the type of creative activities that men and women prefer. Women tend to do 2-D work painting such as drawing etc, whereas men are more likely to get involved in 3-D work, such as sculpture and wood carving, as well as etching which involves using the etching press machine. Activities involving building things are more popular in our men's group. Some creative activities we provide have a more balanced gender engagement such as music, poetry, painting. We have also noticed more of a focus on 'product' with men and 'process' with women.

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“ Where can you gan now for a bit banter with yer marras? There's nay pits nay more nay factories, we din-nit even have any decent pubs nay more! I come here for a bit banter with the lads! ”

**Participant**

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Photo courtesy of Beano at RTProjects.

## OUR IMPACT

Our mission is to reduce suicide; therefore our main measure of success is the number of lives lost to suicide. We have not lost one life to suicide, yet the people we work with are at high risk. To achieve our aims, we work with people to reduce their anxiety and provide appropriate support. It is important to stress that our focus is on mental health and that we 'use' art to achieve our aims in very specific ways, rather than running an art group which will invariably improve mental health.

We have so far been guided by NCVO Charities Evaluation Service for our Monitoring and Evaluation strategy. We use a monitoring framework which sets aims, objectives, outputs and outcomes for each project ensuring they contribute towards our broader aims. We are currently implementing Theory of Change principles into our evaluation framework, incorporating a Logical Framework analysis or Outcomes mapping where appropriate. We believe this will help us to communicate more clearly the problem, the causes of the problem and what we need do to address issues.

## WHAT WE'VE LEARNT

We have learned that there is a desperate need for 'men-only' spaces. Even though over three quarters of suicides are by men, there remains a huge focus on activities for women.

Feedback from our male participants suggests that men feel marginalised or worse, victimised. They struggle with how they fit in. Some feel that they tread on eggshells, not knowing what to say or what not to say for fear of judgement or retribution. This compounds feelings of isolation and loneliness. Men's spaces where men can be free to 'be themselves' are vital for men's mental health and wellbeing.

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“Don't get me wrong, I like the company of women, but in here I don't have to think before I say anything, in case I get wrong. I just get laughed at instead!”

**Participant**

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We would recommend not falling into the trap of 'reverse sexism' and to treat men and their mental wellbeing as fully and sensitively as a 'women-only' group would expect. Men are in greater danger and in many ways in greater need than women of mental health services:

- over three quarters of suicides are men;
- men are three times more likely to become alcohol dependent;
- men are more likely to use and die from illegal drugs;

- 73% of adults who 'go missing' are men;
- 87% of rough sleepers are men;
- men are almost twice as likely to be the victims of violent crime;
- men are nearly 50% more likely than women to be detained and treated compulsorily as psychiatric inpatients;
- men have measurably lower access to the social support of friends, relatives and community.

Yet support services for women outnumber those for men.

We have found resistance to offering exclusively male activities but no such resistance for women-only activities.

### WHAT'S NEXT?

We would like to challenge attitudes around men's mental health needs. We would like to see a levelling up of available services. We would like to promote positivity about what it is to be a man in today's world.

Most of all we would like to be able to fund our offer to men on a long-term basis. The problem is huge and it isn't going away, yet our Men's Shed is the most difficult aspect of our provision to fund. It is in a permanently precarious position despite being so vital in the battle against suicide.



Photo courtesy of Beano at RTProjects, Durham.

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## Some reflections

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Photo courtesy of Artlink Edinburgh.

### THE WIDER CONTEXT

There were occasional conversations during the course of this research where to raise the possibility of increased support for men's participation seemed to be heard as support for the patriarchy. We very much hope that is not the implication that is drawn. We strongly support women's rights and the many campaigns that are still important worldwide, including through our funding. Most of our funding actually goes to work supporting women, often through women-led organisations and has done so for a long time.

The evidence offered in the introductory section shows the differential needs of men when it comes to mental health services and at least the strong possibility that the offer made by arts organisations is not equally attractive to men in some cases as to women.

### INTERSECTIONALITY

Possibly the most important point that comes through in the opinion pieces and case studies in this report should come as no surprise to anyone. Men are complex with many aspects to their identity, which of course applies to all of us. Firstly we are talking about men who have mental health problems, but these men then have many other aspects to their lives.

A number of the case studies focus on projects engaging men from racialised minorities, who may experience differential and perhaps poorer services from mental health services. Their own communities may also have particular views about mental health. This can be seen, for instance, in the opinion pieces by Banu Adam (page 12), Tony Cealy (page 19) and CJ Lloyd Webley (page 28). The importance of cultural competence has been underlined by Banu



Adams in her opinion piece (page 12). There are also other issues such as class (e.g. CLEAR in Kirklees, see page 50), sex work (Our Room, see page 56) or being a veteran (Radiate Arts, see page 59). Age is also a significant part of someone's identity and Lightpost Theatre Company in Birmingham worked with young Black men. Work can be intergenerational such as the Black Men's Consortium in Brixton, London (page 19).

And this kind of work is always local, so it is sex work in the context of Manchester or being a young Black Man in Birmingham.

## **INCLUSION AND MEN-ONLY SPACES: NOT INCLUSION VERSUS MEN-ONLY SPACES**

This report deliberately includes a number of examples of men-only projects (seven of them), as well as projects that are inclusive of men and women (four of these). It seems to us that there is a room and need for both. It has been strongly argued that some cultures would need single-gender provision for both groups if they were to be culturally sensitive. It has also been stated that there are many who are going to feel more comfortable in groups that are single gender (and this has been recognised for a long time for women's groups).

## **SOME PRACTICAL ADVICE**

Sometimes when we are commissioning guidance we are warned off 'how-to guides'. We understand that in some situations this can be too simplistic but also that arts organisations need concrete suggestions on how to do better. Banu Adams in her piece has some clear advice which seems to be supported by other case studies. Some of it would also apply as good practice in community arts more generally. It bears repeating:

### **1. Male-specific workshops**

Create workshops specifically tailored to address the needs and interests of male participants. These workshops should not only focus on art but also provide a platform for discussing mental health openly. The goal is to create a safe and inclusive space where men can engage in creative activities while addressing their mental health concerns.

### **2. Male champions and role models**

Identify and recruit male community champions who can act as advocates and ambassadors within the community. These champions should share their own experiences with art-based interventions for mental health and encourage other men to participate.

### **3. Outreach and promotion**

Tailor promotional efforts to specifically target and engage male members of the community. Utilise channels and communication styles that resonate with men, emphasising the potential benefits of art-based interventions for mental health.

### **4. Flexibility in schedule**

Offer flexible scheduling options to accommodate the time constraints of male participants. This might include evening or weekend workshops to ensure that individuals with busy work or family schedules can still participate.

### **5. Community engagement**

Collaborate with local community leaders and organisations to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers preventing male attendance. Seek their input on how to improve male engagement and integrate their perspectives into project planning.

### **6. Cultural sensitivity**

Be mindful of cultural norms and expectations that might influence male participation. Adapt the project approach to be culturally sensitive and inclusive, exploring alternative methods for creating environments where both men and women can comfortably participate together.

## **ART FORMS**

In some of our work we have been told that some art forms might be more attractive to some men. Men's (or Community) Shedders often engage in metalworking or woodworking, which can either be strictly practical when mending something or can be a creative exercise.

But there are probably no limits to the use of art forms for men's engagement. Our Room alone offers spoken word, street theatre, filmmaking and dance (page 56). North Tyneside Art Studio is an arts studio with the full range of visual



Participant at Art & Soul exhibition, photo courtesy of Art & Soul.

arts, including a kiln (page 22). Arc in Stockport runs a Men's Music for Mental Health project (page 38) and Cloth Cat in Leeds is also a music organisation (page 48).

### WE DON'T HAVE TO CALL IT 'ART'

There is some evidence that the word 'art' can be off putting, and a number of organisations including the national Arts Councils will tend to talk about creativity. This may be even more true for men than for the population overall.

The Men's Sheds movement is clearly a major asset to arts and mental health. It does include membership for women and doesn't require a 'referral' via a social prescription, but its relevance and reach are very clear with over 1,100 sheds operating across the UK. That's an awful lot of woodworking and metalworking (among other activities), with a lot of creativity and quiet happiness ensuing. It is interesting that a small number of arts organisations have adopted this model, such as ACAVA in London, RTPProjects in Durham (page 68) and Fabrica in Brighton (page 53).

And Mark Robinson (page 32) writes about the importance of informal arts and Mike McGrother's 'musicking'.

### EXHIBITING

As with other areas of creativity and mental health that we have investigated, there are numerous benefits to exhibiting work if that is the aim of participants. Obviously, it can be a source of pride and self-confidence for participants and offer a goal to aspire to. It can validate an aspiration to be seen as an artist. In this context it can also break down stereotypes about men's involvement in creative activities and reduce stigma around mental ill health.

Exhibiting work or creating performances was important in almost all the projects we have included in this report, but is especially noticeable in the case studies by Art & Soul, Our Room, Re-Stoke and Re-Live.

### DO WE NEED MORE MALE ARTISTS IN ARTS AND MENTAL HEALTH?

This is certainly what Banu Adams believes and she address it head-on saying:

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“The importance of male role models and mentors cannot be overstated.”

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And she emphasises that these should be drawn from relevant communities.

This issue did not come up explicitly a lot in our discussions or in many of the articles in this report. However, much of the work featured is in fact delivered by male artists.

This topic feels sensitive as it might be seen to imply that male artists should be taking work from women currently working in this sector. But perhaps we just need more artists. Or that any rebalancing should take place over a period of time. And we don't have conclusive evidence that more male artists would be helpful here, but it is certainly an argument that is made around representation in other areas such as racial equity. Are there different dynamics at play when it comes to gender and representation? Views are likely to differ, but it is a topic that deserves more reflection and questioning.

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## Conclusion

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Photo courtesy of Restoke/Up Men.

Taking part in the arts can be seen as ‘feminine’, but the arts workforce is around half and half men and women and, in the Government’s ‘Taking Part’ survey, men only lag 6% behind women when it comes to the most general level of cultural participation. However, it feels to us that creative health is more unbalanced, certainly in terms of the workforce and probably in terms of participation (though good data is hard to come by).

This may be due to differences in help-seeking behaviour by men and because ‘caring’ work is less masculine in popular perception. We just can’t know yet for sure and the firmest conclusion from this report must be that this is a curiously under-researched area and much more needs to be done, for instance in establishing rates of participation in arts and mental health between men and women and then disaggregating these, for example, for

racialised minorities. It is clear that fewer male artists work in this area and research as to why this is the case, and what the implications of that might be, would also be of interest.

It is also clear that some men wish to take part in men-only activities and find fellowship and support there, as well as creativity and purpose. This is true of other sections of society too. There are also examples of arts organisations that have created balanced and harmonious groups for men and women.

The key ingredients for success probably need more examination, but taking a person-centred approach, which takes account of intersectionality, is always going to be at the heart of success.

The arts and mental health sector runs on a shoe-string and there is certainly a huge need for more funding for both approaches.

For the Baring Foundation, as CJ Lloyd Webley writes in his opinion piece:

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“ Upholding the principle that all voices deserve to be heard and valued (is) foundational. ”

**CJ Lloyd Webley**

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# The disappearing men

## A POEM BY MARK ROBINSON

Mark's poem appears in a new anthology,  
*Masculinity: An Anthology of Modern Voices*,  
edited by Rick Dove, Aaron Kent and Stuart McPherson  
(Broken Sleep Books) and  
in Mark's own new collection of poetry,  
*The Infinite Town*, published by Smokestack Books.

The disappearing men  
are folding themselves  
into the corners of their silences.  
They gaze from clifftops,  
while others watch them,  
contemplating the sea's due care.  
They hold their breath.

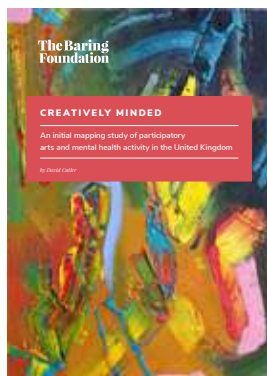
They are in the middle of  
the flyover, seemingly stuck,  
but not really, not really, they just  
bide their time, do not look into  
the lorries, want the driver's  
catastrophe to be random.

In the shadow of the questions  
that never came, the broken branches  
the dog walkers will find, they lay  
down their burdens, they weigh  
down those things that must  
be weighed down before they are lost.

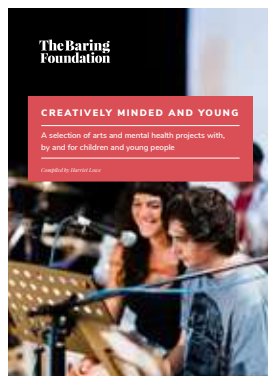
They head gracefully towards  
the shush of the splash, somewhere  
quiet, where the moment is whole.  
They dream their way onto the tracks,  
walk the parallel lines which meet  
only at the vanishing point.

You could easily miss them,  
not suppose they were ever there,  
be unsure what it was you saw,  
not believe the size of the crowds  
that welcome them as they arrive,  
as they disappear.

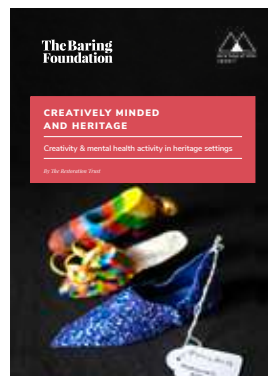
# Resources



**Creatively minded**  
David Cutler  
2020



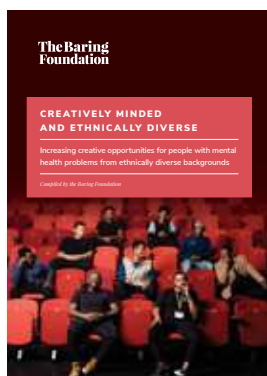
**Creatively minded and young**  
Harriet Lowe  
2020



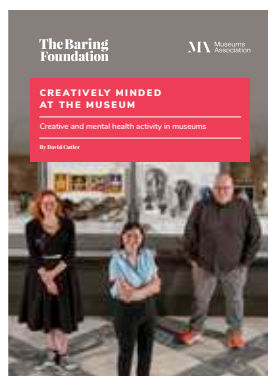
**Creatively minded and heritage**  
The Restoration Trust  
2021



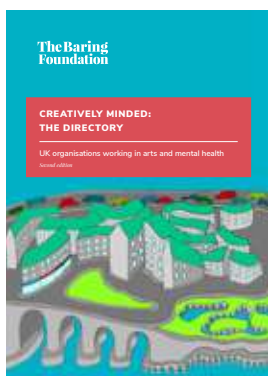
**Creatively minded and the NHS**  
David Cutler  
2021



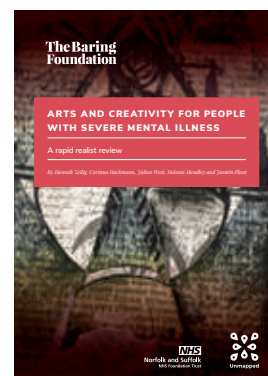
**Creatively minded and ethnically diverse**  
Compiled by  
The Baring Foundation  
2021



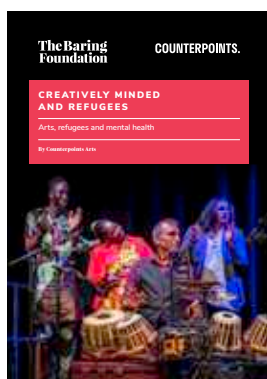
**Creatively minded at the museum**  
David Cutler  
2022



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



**Arts and creativity for people with severe mental illness**  
Hannah Zeilig, Corinna Hackmann, Julian West, Melanie Handley and Jasmin Plant  
2022



**Creatively minded and refugees**  
Counterpoints Arts  
2023

All resources can be found on our website  
[www.baringfoundation.org.uk](http://www.baringfoundation.org.uk)



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