

**November 2015**

## **Arts on Prescription: Arts-based social prescribing for better mental wellbeing**

With a growing [body of research](#) evidencing the positive role of the arts in promoting mental wellbeing, it makes sense that public health and third sector arts groups join up. Here are three such partnerships where arts activities have been prescribed to individuals experiencing mental health issues. Each partnership faced their own challenges - from reaching isolated, rural communities, to finding evaluation methods suited to participants as well as Commissioners' needs, to ensuring strong referral mechanisms for individuals experiencing problems too severe for the services on offer – but found creative solutions.

### **Key Outcomes of Arts on Prescription**

- Increased treatment options available to those experiencing mental wellbeing issues
- Reduced reliance on antidepressant or tranquiliser medications
- Reduced amount of GP contact time devoted to people experiencing mental wellbeing issues
- Increased self-esteem and confidence amongst participants and improved quality of life
- Increased transferable skills for participants, including employability skills
- Increased participation in arts and cultural activities<sup>1</sup>

### **Colour your Life: Taking a countywide approach and drawing on local assets**

[Colour your Life](#) is a social prescribing service on offer across County Durham. Commissioned by the Public Health Team in Durham County Council, it is delivered by a consortium of seven third sector organisations managed by Fiona Mawson, of [Pioneering Care Partnership \(PCP\)](#). The consortium members are organised into four main hubs, two smaller satellites as well as outreach courses delivered at community venues, ensuring access across Durham County.

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<sup>1</sup> From a 2009 report by Creative Alternatives, available at <http://www.artsforhealth.org/resources/CA%20Report%202009.pdf>

The Consortium's offer, aimed at improving the mental health and wellbeing of the people of Durham, ranges from arts and learning on prescription, to ecotherapy, and supported volunteering. Clients are also encouraged to use timebanking – to deposit time to help others and to withdraw time when help is needed - and have access to an Enablement Fund (financed by another Council funding stream). This fund supports clients by providing a personalised budget and all applications are reviewed based on measurable health benefits. Key to this is flexibility. Fiona explains that participants are empowered by an open process, so “we have no boundaries on what applications we look at”. When PCP's clients are able to choose for themselves what will best help them on the path to mental wellbeing, better results are observed. “The outcomes we see are a growth in confidence, being able to cope and wanting to give back”, Fiona concludes.



Art created by client. Photograph provided by Colour your Life.

Public Health previously funded Arts on Prescription provision as well as other education and learning activities for several years before Colour your Life was developed. Both these strands were “such a success, and there was so much strong evidence” that Public Health decided to draw them together under a wider social prescribing service. Arts on Prescription within the wider Colour your Life scheme is key, says Catherine Richardson, Public Mental Health Lead, Durham County Council. When participants are consulted as to their preferred activities, artistic pursuits are always mentioned: “It’s what the community wants. The activities are very much led by what the people accessing them would want to learn.” Artist Sue Warlock comments that, “some people think art is just a benign form of something to do... a leisure activity... but for me it’s actually a way of transporting people, and I see that in my classes everyday. I see people so often come into my classes quite stressed, but after 15 or 20 minutes of painting and being creative, you can actually physically see

them relax, and for that couple of hours they are actually transported somewhere... to a much more positive place.”<sup>2</sup>

Consortium members receive referrals from a variety of organisations including GPs, the Probation Service, Domestic Violence Advisors, Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) groups and Job Centre Plus. Individuals can also self-refer. Those who are referred receive ten weeks on the programme on a fully funded basis. After this, they can join a membership scheme and pay a weekly donation to continue on the programme, or they may be signposted to other opportunities in the community such as further learning, physical activities or the nationwide [Reading Well Books on Prescription scheme](#). Clients can also enter Colour your Life’s supported volunteering programme.

Whereas Public Health’s offer is often focused on deprived communities, Colour your Life is offered countywide. “Mental health affects us all,” explains Fiona, “for that reason we take a population approach. It’s about improving everybody’s mental health.” Indeed, Colour your Life’s approach has a strong focus on prevention, aiming to promote emotional resilience countywide.

When it comes to reaching the isolated, rural communities of County Durham, the Consortium has tailored its service accordingly. For example, if a client cannot access the Hub activities, the Enablement Fund can be used to pay for one to one tutor sessions at clients’ homes. Yet rural communities also bring their own opportunities. One client, who owned sheep, was able to supply raw materials for a felt-making workshop. Equine therapy has been another new possibility offered by the rural location. Indeed, this supports an [asset-based approach to improving health and wellbeing](#), the essence of which is to draw on the individual resources of each community.

Colour your Life evidences the impact of its intervention whilst ensuring its evaluation methods suit participants. Evaluation methods combine a quantitative and qualitative approach: data on, for example, demographics and referral routes help to monitor that an equitable service is on offer across the county. A survey-based measurement tool captures social and health outcomes whilst focus groups help to ensure that the service is based on community need. Individual case studies monitor progress as well as telling a story. The Public Mental Health Lead explains, “the evidence base for our social prescribing service is so strong and so consistent that rather than getting everybody to evaluate continuously, we ask for one cohort per year.” Her confidence is backed up by the views of a participant regarding the impact of the scheme on her wellbeing: “It’s made me a happier person. My depression isn’t as bad. I’m not as scared of doing new things and meeting new people. It has changed my life.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> From a short film made by Colour your Life, available at <http://colouryourlife.org.uk/comments/>

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## Start in Salford: High quality art and work experience opportunities in the creative sector

[Start in Salford](#), an Arts and Wellbeing charity, has been in operation for over 22 years. It developed and launched its 'Inspiring Minds' Arts on Prescription scheme in 2006. The scheme, which was commissioned by Salford's Primary Care Trust, works with people with enduring mental health issues as well as those with anxiety and depression. Around five years ago, the contract was moved over to the Salford Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), which continues to commission Start in Salford.



Participants with their artwork. Photograph provided by Start in Salford.

Start in Salford supports people facing mental health challenges back into the community through developing self-confidence and building resilience through arts activity and training. As people gain arts skills they can access genuine work experience at Start Creative, Start's trading arm and this prepares them for work in the creative sector. The scheme offers training in woodwork, creative writing, music, drawing, painting, photography and also includes horticulture. Says Commissioner Judd Skelton, "Start in Salford carries no stigma for participants. It feels like something that people *like* to be referred to."

Participants work alongside artists in their studios, and have the chance to complete accredited courses in visual arts. They can access mentorship and employment skills training if they wish to explore arts and crafts in a professional capacity, and have the opportunity to take part in group commissions and exhibitions. Says one participant, "it's literally led to me now having the career I've always wanted, and just being happier in a way that I could never have imagined."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Participant quoted in a short film made by Start in Salford, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wbyVL0MrOy0>

When people are referred to the scheme via a range of professionals including GPs Mental Health Teams and employment officers they are firstly needs assessed and then allocated a six month intervention. Judd comments on the choice of intervention that Start in Salford offer, “they’ve got a broad menu for people and that’s key. It means that the service is really person-centred.”

Follow-up support is also available. Explains Bernadette Conlon, Chief Executive Officer at Start in Salford, “If participants need further support after the first six months, they can stay on the Arts on Prescription programme for anything up to two years.” Alternative pathways for participants completing the Arts on Prescription scheme include referral to other schemes run by Start in Salford (for example, volunteering, leisure activities, an [Over Fifty Project](#), professional training and mentorship and employability skills). The flexible pathways are an important element of the programme for Judd. The route that each participant follows does not depend on whether she/he has primary or a secondary mental health needs diagnosis, but rather, he explains, “referrals are tailored to each person and what they need.”

Artists working for Start in Salford are artists first and foremost and are encouraged to maintain and develop their artistic skills, which enhances the service being delivered to people in their creative sessions. Resident artists work in high quality, well-equipped studios, and take part in Start in Salford’s exhibition programme. Says Bernadette, “I take my artists firstly because they are good artists and they can engage with people.” Selected artists receive basic mental health training on site. They are also supported to complete the Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector (PTLLS) course.

Start in Salford uses various methods of data collection and evaluation. These include the [WEMWBS wellbeing scale](#), a tool for assessing positive mental health, and case studies, which are submitted as part of a wider quarterly report for the CCG. Start in Salford has found work by New Economics Foundation on [Five Ways to Wellbeing](#) useful. These are a set of evidence-based actions, drawn from high quality research on mental wellbeing and capital, which can promote people’s wellbeing. Start in Salford has also developed its own light, user-friendly approach to the Social Return on Investment (SROI) model.

SROI is a variant of Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) which attaches a monetary value to an intervention by assessing cost-savings of outcomes. Explains Bernadette, “the SROI model has helped us to identify the savings the CCG can make by investing in us.” This includes savings from reductions in GP referrals and to employers in terms of reductions in numbers of working days lost. Increasing the evidence base in this way can be crucial to third sector organisations winning commissioning opportunities. Indeed, supporting its members to demonstrate and quantify their social value is a [key aim of Salford City Partnership](#) where Start in Salford’s [Statement on Social Value](#) has been held up as good practice.

## **Creative Alternatives: strong referral pathways and developing a sense of community**

[Creative Alternatives](#) is an Arts on Prescription programme which was established in 2006, following a successful funding bid to Invest to Save, a central government fund which encouraged innovation in public service delivery. Following three years of pilot programming, the service has been sustained through regular funding from Sefton Council's Public Health department and the council's Arts and Cultural Services. "The founders were really keen to get arts for health out into the community," explains Karen Lauke, Programme Leader of Creative Alternatives, Sefton.



Participants creating artwork. Photograph provided by Creative Alternatives.

With the drive to set up an Integrated Wellness Service in Sefton it is anticipated that the core programme of the Creative Alternatives – twenty weeks covering a range of hands-on arts workshops, from textiles to painting, to creative writing, ceramics and photography - will be going out for tender in April 2016. Creative Alternatives has just set up a similar programme of activity in the borough of St. Helens. Funded by St. Helens Council's Public Health Department and is part of the [Cultural Hubs - Arts In Libraries](#) Programme.

The programme supports better mental health by enabling people to engage in creative activities that offer opportunities for fun, socialising, skills development and playful expression in a safe and non-judgemental environment. It focuses on people with mild to moderate mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. The core programme in Sefton involves twenty weekly sessions of arts activities, set up as four blocks of five weeks, with regular breaks. Each session involves two artists to ensure there is adequate safety and support for participants.

## Key Findings

- 73% clients reported improved mood and wellbeing
- 75% clients reported increased confidence
- 59% clients reported improved levels of physical activity
- 62% clients reported improved social engagement<sup>5</sup>

Creative Alternatives receive referrals from GPs, Mersey Care, Citizens Advice and Jobcentre Plus as well as from other mental health services such as Access Sefton and Inclusion Matters. People can also self-refer, and roughly half of participants come through this route. In Sefton, Creative Alternatives' Referrals Officer has a telephone conversation with potential participants in the first instance in order to check that the latter are likely to benefit from the scheme. It is not always possible to fully assess everyone's needs via telephone, and therefore all potential participants are also invited in for a taster session led by the Referrals Officer and the Creativity and Health Worker. Where the problems an individual is experiencing are very severe staff discuss options with the individual and signpost them to alternative provision.

When participants finish on Creative Alternatives' core programme, they are signposted to other services in the community if necessary, and/or they can join Go with the Flow. This is a drop-in arts workshop open to the public and led by one of Creative Alternatives' artists as well as a volunteer. It is paid for by those who attend. Creative Alternatives also supports monthly outings for current and ex-participants, who are kept in touch with via a newsletter, twitter and Facebook. Karen explains: "People who were involved with Creative Alternatives from previous years are always invited to attend to encourage social inclusion. It means there's a sense of community within Creative Alternatives, and it feels really nice to have current and previous clients socialising together." Some participants have also gone on to produce work as independent artists and have exhibited in art exhibitions.

Creative Alternatives uses WEMWBS to evaluate change for participants at the beginning, middle and end of the programme. This staggered approach helps to paint a full picture of the individual's progress. Artists also note their own observations on participants' progress in weekly diaries. This data is backed up by SROI research, as well as interviews with individuals that have completed the programme. These interviews speak for themselves. Said one participant, "I am finding confidence to speak to strangers, to have opinions, and to find a little courage to face my fears. I am becoming more involved again and less withdrawn." Another's words sum up the importance of arts for mental wellbeing: "I like doing art because it helps me express something which is beyond words. Because it relieves me. I don't have words for

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<sup>5</sup> From Creative Alternatives' October 2012 SROI analysis, available at [http://www.creativealternatives.org.uk/files/316694510\\_CA\\_economic\\_analysis\\_October2012.pdf](http://www.creativealternatives.org.uk/files/316694510_CA_economic_analysis_October2012.pdf)

everything I feel but I can express my feelings through drawing or mark making. I always feel better afterwards.”



Participants creating art. Photograph provided by Creative Alternatives.

### **Find out more**

For more information and resources on Cultural Commissioning visit <http://www.ncvo.org/CCProg>

Photographs courtesy of Creative Alternatives, Colour your Life and Start in Salford.

Text by Joanna Allan.