

MK Arts for Health Arts on Prescription: Evaluation Summary

Background to the project

MK Arts for Health is an arts charity established in 2004 whose mission is to improve health and wellbeing through creativity. Its Arts on Prescription project makes arts activities available on referral for adults with mild to moderate mental health conditions with the aim of having a range of benefits for participants' health and wellbeing.

Good mental health is fundamental to a person's quality of life. 1 in 4 British adults will experience a mental health problem in any one year.¹ There is evidence to show that arts participation can improve levels of empowerment, mental health and social inclusion.² (Secker,2007).

The first year of the Arts on Prescription project was evaluated by Willis Newson for MK Arts for Health. The full evaluation report presents both quantitative and qualitative data and analysis in support of its findings.

Impacts on participants

Between July 2011 and August 2012, 104 sessions were delivered. 78 individual participants attended during this time. An average of 8 people attended each session. The youngest was 16 and the oldest 68.

The evaluation suggests that introducing these participants to art skills and techniques as part of a group and in a safe and sympathetic environment helped to build self-esteem, increase confidence and contribute to improved relationships with others.

The reported impacts of these changes included an enhanced sense of personal and mental wellbeing; greater confidence and ability in relation to social integration; and an increased desire to engage in outside activities, including work, volunteering and an ongoing engagement with art.

The findings suggest that these are achieved because, through the course, participants engaged with art as a therapeutic tool: seeing it as a 'different' kind of therapy, one which changed their perspectives on their life and mental health, and one which encouraged active and self-directed change.

¹ Singleton N., Bumpstead R., O'Brien M., Lee A., Meltzer H. (2001). *Psychiatric morbidity among adults living in private households, 2000*. HMSO, London.

² Secker J., Hacking S., Spandler H., Kent L., Shenton J., (2007). *Mental health, Social Exclusion and the Arts: developing the evidence base Final Report*. Anglia Ruskin/UCLan.

Project management recommendations

The evaluation enabled us to make the following general recommendations which may have wider application to other arts on referral projects with similar aims and objectives:

- Project aims must relate to appropriate and measurable impacts and outcomes.
- A creative approach to gathering subjective feedback from participants might cut down on 'form-filling fatigue' which can compromise evaluation results.
- There are benefits to be gained from less focus on numbers of referrals and more on quality of engagement and long term relationship. Clear information needs to be given to referrers to ensure that referrals are appropriate.
- It may be useful to clearly differentiate between roles and responsibilities of the artist and workshop facilitators and a supporting health worker who can focus on effective and appropriate signposting and management of individual participant's needs.
- For this project, a 'Participant agreement' set out at the beginning of the course was found to be beneficial in terms of setting boundaries for behaviour and participation.
- Artists and facilitators would benefit from a structured supervision process.
- Careful consideration needs to be given as to how to approach the difficult first and last sessions of a course effectively.

Contact

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