

ARTS NETWORK

"COMING HERE HAS CHANGED MY LIFE"



Converge Evaluation and Research Team

insight through experience



CONVERGE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION TEAM
YORK ST. JOHN UNIVERSITY

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Executive Summary

The Converge Evaluation and Research Team was commissioned by the Igen Trust to evaluate the Arts Network, a project in South London providing arts opportunities to local people with severe and enduring mental health problems.

The Converge Research and Evaluation Team is a group of people with lived experience of mental health difficulties who have received training in research methods at York St. John University.

The aim of the evaluation was to gather the views and perceptions of the participants of the Arts Network. We interviewed 13 members over a two-day period in October 2018 in order to gather their perceptions. We created a questionnaire to be distributed among all members, and received 22 completed copies.

Core themes

Analysis of the interviews led us to extract six core themes: *No pressure; Progression; A community; Learning new things; Time; and Place.*

No pressure: In our interviews there was considerable reference to the Arts Network as being 'safe' and 'calm', and a place which put 'no pressure' upon its members and which is 'encouraging' towards them. Care is taken to support new members and those who struggle to attend sessions.

There is choice and privacy around disclosure of mental health problems. Arts Network is a socially safe place where art provides a pressure free, calming, focus and distraction from outside worries and difficulties.

Our questionnaire provided evidence that members value the peer social relationships they have at Arts Network extremely highly. However, for many members this applied only while in the studio itself – they did not report meeting or communicating with other members at outside of sessions.



Progression: Many members spoke of changes in their lives since they started attending Arts Network. This includes reduced isolation, increased confidence, pride in their work and beneficial changes in their mental health.

Some members found initially joining Arts Network very daunting, and while some long-standing members still find getting to the studio a challenge, many described finding that it gets easier to attend over time. Others described settling in very fast.

Whilst some members had ambitions to progress, for example, to co-facilitate and lead sessions, others described a desire to *“keep it as a hobby.”* Our questionnaire asked members about their experience of art and their confidence in their artistic ability before and after joining Arts Network. Analysis demonstrated that the improvement in experience and confidence was highly significant ($p < 0.001$).

In their interviews, many members described improvements in how they perceive their mental health since joining Arts Network. Our questionnaire supported this finding (figure 1), with half of all respondents (eleven members) reporting their mental health was ‘much better’ since joining Arts Network, and nine said ‘a bit better’. None said their mental health had got worse.

A community: Another common thread through the interviews was how members experience being part of a community built on respect, peer support, sensitivity, kindness, encouragement and support. Several members describe Arts Network as being ‘a family’.

In both our interview and questionnaire, almost all members expressed how important the staff of the Arts Network are to their good experience of the project: As one member put it, staff go *“above and beyond”* supporting members with a wide variety of problems, well beyond art. Some members raised the suggestion of having a dedicated staff member for supporting members’ mental health.

Learning new things: Members talked about the range of courses available to them and the opportunities to try new things – it’s like *“an adventure,”* and *“there’s always something new and interesting”* to try.

Some talked about *“taking home”* activities from the Arts Network to do in their own time away from the workshop. This could be viewed as the development of a new coping strategy. Our questionnaire demonstrated a highly statistically significant increase in self-reported practising of art at home among members ($p < 0.001$).

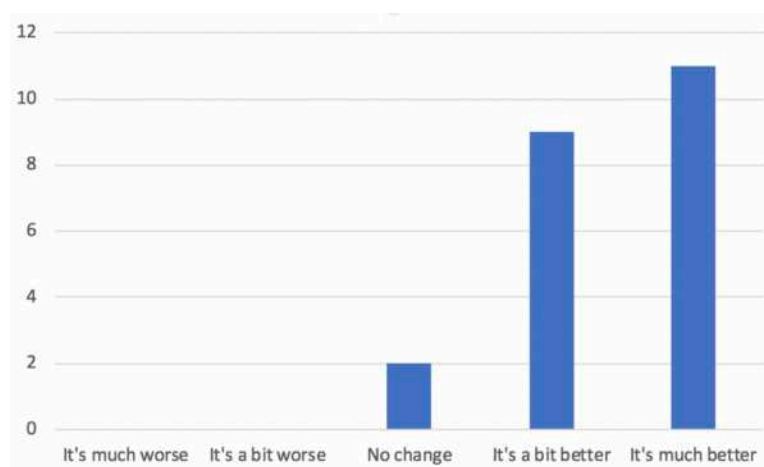


Figure 1: Self-reported change in mental health since attending Arts Network

Time: *“I wish I could do it every day,”* and *“it would be nice to be able to come here more often”* were repeated comments. The generous flexibility about when members can attend offered by Arts Network, and the patience of the staff in this respect is also highly valued.

Arts Network (place): *“I feel very fortunate to have this place”* was a common phrase. Many members reported a feeling of gratitude that they had ‘found’ the Arts Network, and wished they had discovered it sooner.

Self-reported use of NHS services

Our questionnaire asked members to report if there had been any changes in their use of NHS services since attending Arts Network. Among those who had them, over half reported seeing their care-coordinator, support worker, therapist, psychologist or drop-in service ‘less’ or ‘much less’.

There was no clear pattern around seeing their GP, with most reporting ‘no change’. Among those reporting having a psychiatrist, over three-quarters reported needing them ‘less’ or ‘much less’.

The biggest impact seems to be in terms of acute care. Roughly two-thirds of respondents said they attended Accident and Emergency departments ‘less’ or ‘much less’, and none reported increases. This pattern was repeated in self-reported use of crisis and home treatment teams and in-patient mental healthcare.



Staff interview

Two members of staff were interviewed. They talked about how their role was to try and get around and speak to all of the members in the work room, observing whether they might like extra support or if they just want to be *“immersed in what they’re doing and don’t necessarily want to be chatting”*. They also described the transformation they see in members over time.

Personal reflections

In the main report we offer our brief personal reflections on our visit to Arts Network. We hope these will provide valuable insights.

Suggestions for future development

1. **Explore NHS funding:** It was striking how clearly members reported positive changes to their mental health which they attributed specifically to attending Arts Network. It was also clear that they believe their use of NHS services has decreased since attending, especially acute services. Can this report be used as evidence to get funding to expand Arts Network to include more service users from the local NHS mental health trust?
2. **Explore possible community partnerships:** We propose exploring the possibility of creating local partnerships. This might include connecting with local colleges and universities or third sector charities to offer new courses and progression opportunities for members and offer work placements for college and university students.
3. **Find opportunities for progression:** We suggested possible pathways for members to develop their skills, follow their ambitions or access arts-based voluntary or paid opportunities outside of Arts Network.



4. **Increasing the range of courses:** Both members and staff talked of a desire to increase the range of courses and opportunities on offer at Arts Network. We made some suggestions, including digital art, photography, creative writing and a book group.
5. **Consider increasing the opening hours and available days:** Many members stated that they would like it if Arts Network could offer them more sessions each week, including in the evening and at the weekend. Doing this would considerably increase the number of members who could attend. Can funding be found for opening on more days and for more sessions?
6. **Considering the provision of specific mental health support:** Many members expressed a wish that Arts Network had specific mental health support available to them. It is also clear that currently Arts Network staff do a lot of ad hoc work which could be considered as mental health support. However, the provision of more a more formal mental health support offering at Arts Network might draw the focus of the organisation away from art and in that sense is a strategic decision.
7. **Welcoming new members:** Capacity to involve new members was considered. This could be increased by getting money to increase the number of days and/or hours for which Arts Network is open. Existing members could be trained to mentor new members. Anxiety which new members might have about travelling could be ameliorated by a taxi budget or arranging a buddy to travel with them. Small 'new member only' groups could be established.
8. **Entrepreneurial opportunities:** Opportunities for attracting income is clearly important to Arts Network. We suggested increasing the number of 'Open Studios', seeking opportunities to exhibit in local places such as cafés. Online opportunities could be considered, as well as craft fairs and markets.





Conclusion

This evaluation gathered the views and perceptions of participants of the Arts Network. The project seems to be highly valued by its members, who enthused about how lucky they feel to be part of it.

For members, the Arts Network is a safe, respectful and calm place, which puts no unwanted pressure on them.

Many members spoke of changes in their lives since they started attending Arts Network, frequently a reduction of the experience of being isolated from the community. They spoke of increasing confidence and pride in their achievements, with self-reported improvements in experience and confidence after joining Arts Network reaching statistical significance.

Many members described that attending Arts Network lead to improvements in their mental health. They also clearly reported a reduction in their self-reported use of NHS resources.

A community built on respect, peer support and kindness, encouragement and support from Arts Network staff and members was another common thread through our interviews. Many members described examples of staff 'going above and beyond' to support them.

Many members enthused about the range of courses on offer, and the pleasure they got from learning new things.

Members often said they would like to come more often, and some described how they valued the flexibility of attendance at difficult times, where they were encouraged to come more often. Statements like *"I feel very fortunate to have this place"* were very common.

In conclusion, Arts Network seems to play an important role in its members' quality of life and expanding this provision would enable the organisation to build on its considerable achievements and develop some of the progression opportunities we mention in our recommendations.

Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | 1 |
| CONTENTS | 7 |
| INTRODUCTION | 8 |
| NO PRESSURE: THE ARTS NETWORK AS A SAFE PLACE | 10 |
| PROGRESSION: “I NEVER DREAMED I WOULD BE ABLE TO DO THAT” | 15 |
| A COMMUNITY: “IT’S FRIENDS BUT ALSO KIND OF... LIKE AN EXTENDED FAMILY” | 22 |
| LEARNING NEW THINGS: “THERE’S ALWAYS SOMETHING NEW AND INTERESTING” | 26 |
| TIME: “I WISH I COULD DO IT EVERY DAY” | 28 |
| ARTS NETWORK: “I FEEL VERY FORTUNATE TO HAVE THIS PLACE” | 29 |
| SELF-REPORTED USE OF NHS SERVICES | 31 |
| STAFF INTERVIEW | 33 |
| OUR PERSONAL REFLECTIONS | 35 |
| SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT | 37 |
| 1. EXPLORE GETTING NHS FUNDING | 37 |
| 2. EXPLORE POSSIBLE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS | 37 |
| 3. FIND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROGRESSION | 38 |
| 4. INCREASING THE RANGE OF COURSES | 38 |
| 5. INCREASE OPENING HOURS AND AVAILABLE DAYS | 39 |
| 6. CONSIDERING THE PROVISION OF SPECIFIC MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT | 39 |
| 7. WELCOMING NEW MEMBERS | 39 |
| 8. ENTREPRENEURIAL OPPORTUNITIES | 40 |
| SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS | 41 |

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Introduction

The Converge Evaluation and Research Team was commissioned by the Igen Trust to evaluate the Arts Network, a project in South London providing arts opportunities to local people with mental health problems.

About the Converge Evaluation and Research Team (CERT): *Insight through Experience*

The Converge Research and Evaluation Team is a group of people with lived experience of mental health difficulties who have received training in research methods at York St. John University.

Supported by University academics, CERT is able to offer bespoke evaluation of mental health services or community projects, using research techniques including interviews, questionnaires and focus groups. Using inventive approaches, the team specialise in finding ways to support people who find it hard to express themselves to take part in evaluations. CERT is part of Converge, a partnership between York St John University and Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Trust delivering educational opportunities to adults who use mental health services in York and the surrounding area. More details can be found here: www.yorks.ac.uk/converge



About the Arts Network

The Arts Network was born out of a pilot project set-up by the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust in 1996. When that project was decommissioned in 2012, its users were left with little or no support. Mo Saunders, the now CEO, was determined that this vital work should continue and Arts Network was established as a company in 2012, and became a charity in 2014.

Arts Network uses creative practice to support people with severe mental illness: these individuals experience a substantial disability because of their health. Many of our members experience difficulties in their activities of daily living, sustaining relationships, and undertaking work.

As a user-led organisation, we respond to the need of members and are continually developing creatively to respond to their needs. The activities are delivered in a supported, friendly and non-clinical environment, where members attend to create, connect and have fun, rather than be assessed.

All our members are actively encouraged to contribute to the running of the organisation. This includes co-facilitating workshops, mentoring new members, assisting at exhibitions, volunteering and taking up positions on our Board of Trustees.

Once people leave Arts Network, they have the option to become an Associate Member. This means if they feel they are becoming unwell they can access the Charity without needing to be referred back through mental health services. Our experience of this way of working shows it has kept past members in work and training, reduced need for input from mental health services, and prevented hospital admissions.

About this evaluation

The aim of the evaluation was to gather the views and perceptions of the participants of the Arts Network. We will use the term 'members' although the term 'artists' is also used by the project. We interviewed 13 members over a two-day period in October 2018 in order to gather their perceptions. Each interview was recorded and later transcribed in order to analyse responses. We had the advantage of interviewing inside the Arts Network building that this enabled us to draw on some of the members' art work in order to stimulate discussion. We also created a questionnaire to be distributed among all members, and 22 completed it.

Analysis of the interviews led us to extract six core themes: *No pressure; Progression; A community; Learning new things; Time and Place*. We also report on interviews with two members of staff and offer our own personal reflections on our visit.



No Pressure: The Arts Network as a safe place

From our interviews and questionnaire, it became clear that the no pressure environment at Arts Network emerged as an important theme. Arts Network can be summarised as a project which places no heavy demands on its participants; where there is choice and privacy around disclosure of mental health problems; where a supportive social environment has been created; and where art is a calming focus and distraction from outside worries.

In our interviews there was considerable reference to the Arts Network being 'safe' (17 mentions), a place that is 'calm' (8 mentions), and especially, that it is a place where there is 'no pressure' (21 mentions). This feeling of safety is captured beautifully by one interviewee:

"...it's the, having the space, you know, that exists, where you can go, where you can feel safe, or, it's kind of like a sort of sanctuary."

Members frequently described feeling 'encouraged' rather than pressured; the word 'encourage' was mentioned 15 times. It is striking that words such as 'safe(ity)', 'calm' and 'no pressure' were used so frequently across all interviewees:

"There's a calmness at the Network and it can be nice to be with others. You link with others when you're doing something together."



No pressure on members: *“Being in a little bubble”*

A key characteristic of the Arts Network seems to be that members do not feel under pressure to complete art projects within set time limits. One person put it this way:

“I didn’t feel pressure... everyone was friendly, everyone was welcoming, they didn’t pressure me to do anything, create a bit of art there and then. It was just ‘take your time’. I think my first course was jewelry course and it was just easy, there wasn’t no pressure.”

One member described how they could *“shut the world off”* when at Arts Network:

“I can shut the world off, and then, this is my time, and out there at the moment doesn’t exist. In here this is just me and I put the bones away, everything is away. it’s just Arts Network and I can do what I want.”

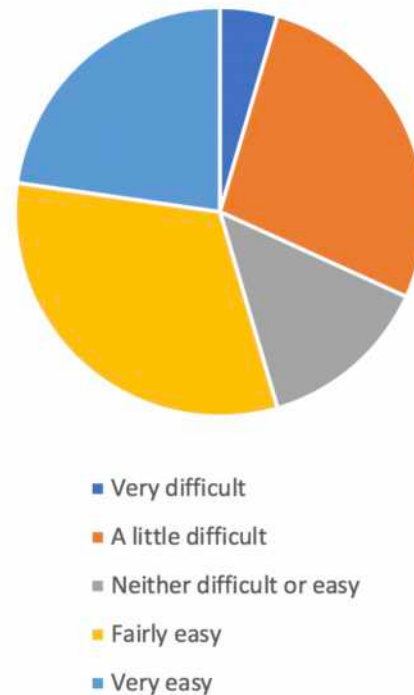


Figure 2: Ease of settling into Arts Network

A couple of interviewees told us they appreciated that the Arts Network was not a clinical environment, mentioning, for example, that staff do not check up on whether they take their medication.

Figure two shows how easy members found settling into Arts Network to be. This questionnaire data reflects our interview findings: Whilst many settled in straight away, others described how at first, physically getting to and attending Arts Network was very anxiety provoking, but that the no-pressure environment created by the staff helped them manage this:

“They made me feel comfortable straight off the bat, I didn’t feel anxious... I just felt settled, I felt ok with it, I didn’t feel pressure.”

Some members described how the staff at Arts Network helped them manage their anxieties about getting to sessions:

“If I can’t come [to Arts Network] I usually get in touch with the staff. They check on how you are doing when you aren’t well. You can come in just for a chat in private or have a cup of tea. You don’t have to join in... until you are ready.”

Choice and privacy: *“People respect that you need to be quiet”*

Interviewees spoke about being able to make a choice whether they spoke about their problems or whether they interact with other members:

“At Arts Network, if you come in not feeling comfortable, people understand that you don’t want to be bothered or talked to. People respect that you need to be quiet.”

There was an awareness that members attending can be mentally fragile:

“There’s a variety of people with a variety of problems. They can be fragile here sometimes, but it is safe.”

It was intriguing that a number of the members talked about the emergence of a ‘safe word’ that could be employed to stop a conversation if someone feels uncomfortable about it: The word is ‘cats’. As one person explained to us:

“We have a safe word, because, you know, we talk about all sorts of things. The conversation will go...sometimes the conversation gets a bit lewd, or too dark and despairing, and then somebody will mention cats, and someone will say ‘cats are nice aren’t they?’ So as soon as we hear ‘cats are nice’, it’s ok! right, let’s change the subject, the mood’s getting a bit...”



Supportive social environment: Working with others, accepted by others

Social interactions are central in creating a safe place for everybody. Over time – and the ongoing consistency of the project seems very important to members – people make “good friendships”, they learn about others, and are able to know when they are in distress. One person spoke of being unconditionally accepted at Arts Network despite being (in their words) “odd”:

“People thought I was strange. I’d do odd things, like tapping the table. Here I can sort beads into colours and no one thinks it odd. No one stares. It makes me feel human. I’ve been able to make friends.”

There was an awareness amongst some people that responsibility for others was important: “You’re taught to be responsible.” Part of this responsibility is respecting confidentiality, there is a written rule that: “What’s said in here, stays in here. It doesn’t go outside.”

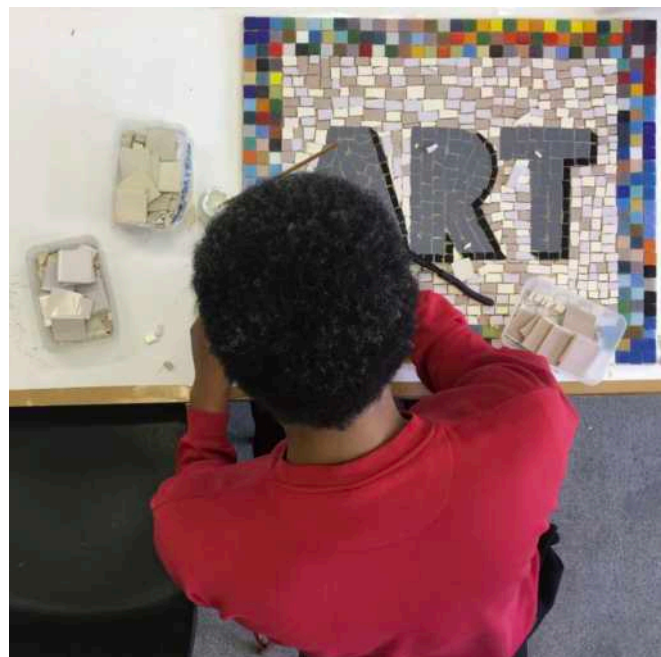
However, it seems that sometimes, some members do not always experience a respectful environment. On being asked about what they would like to change at Arts Network, one responded:

“More respect for people. Acceptance of people feeling fragile. Some people are crude or rude and very loud. Some staff are like this too. They should ask if you feel safe and then help you, give advice.”

Several interviewees described the informal mutual support members offer each other:

“[When] you are having an off day, you don’t have to explain yourself. Everyone looks out for everyone.”

In our questionnaire we asked about members relationships with each other (figure 3). Almost all respondents seem to really value their relationships with their peers whilst physically in the Arts Network studio, answering either ‘important’ or ‘extremely important’ to questions asking about the importance of a mutual experience of mental health difficulty; sharing advice and supporting each other; and looking out for one another when unwell. Interestingly however, members were less enthusiastic about meeting other members and/or communicating with them outside of the project in their own time, with half responding either ‘neither’ or ‘not important’ to those questions.



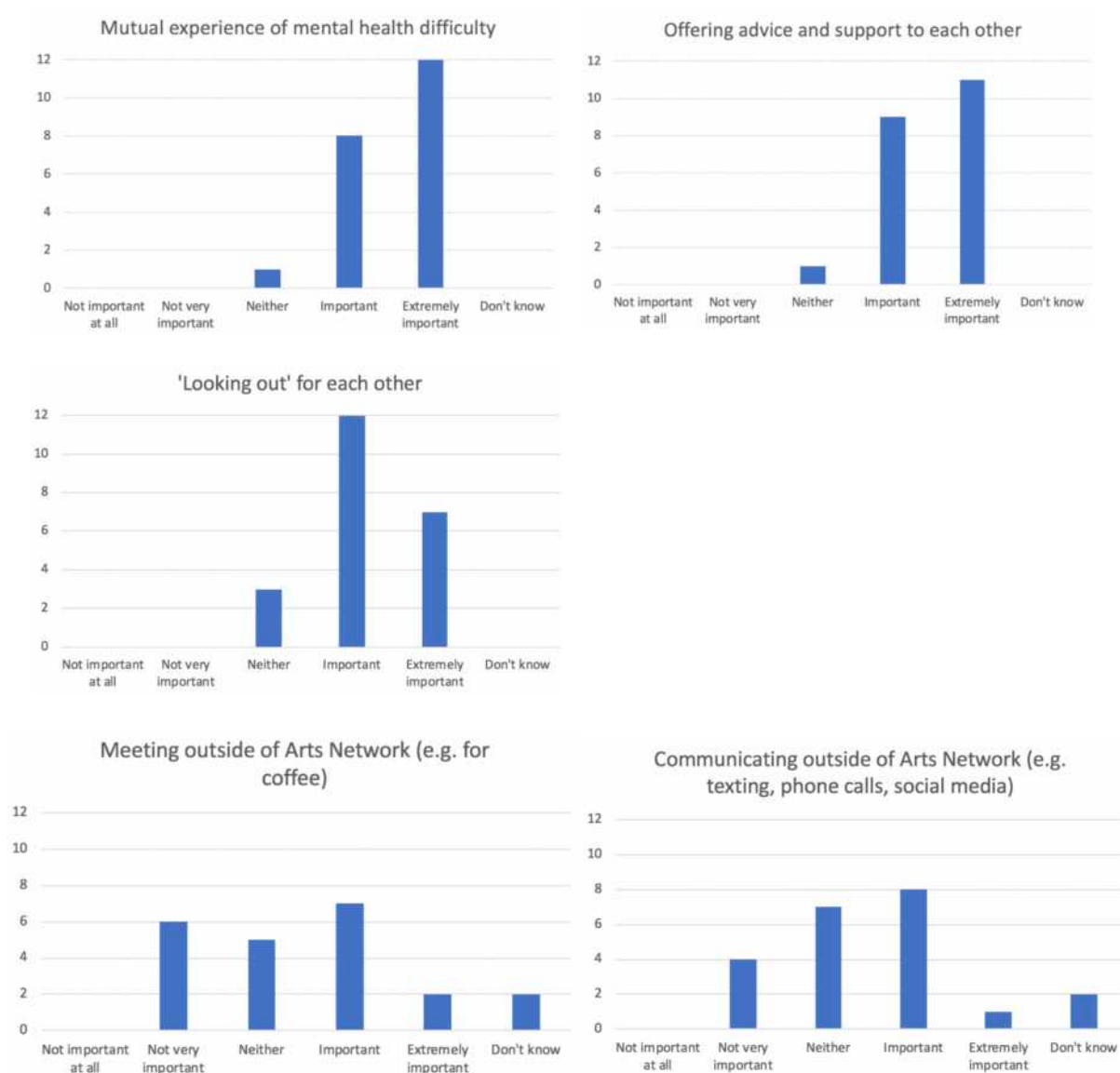


Figure 3: Importance of different types of relationship among Arts Network members

The role of art as a calming focus and distraction

Producing art seems to play an important part in creating the sense of safety described by members. As one person put it, “...when I am doing art it makes me calm”. For one interviewee working with clay is expressive, de-stressing, relaxing and positive: ‘bubble’ where she felt safe from the outside world.

“Being able to let yourself go. Letting the world go, letting outside involvement go. Being in a little bubble by yourself. When I do clay, people say I am in a little world of my own world. It is de-stressing, relaxing, something positive, it’s expressive, it’s all good”

For one interviewee, the sense of freedom from art making is “like throwing leaves up in to the air when you are kids.”

Progression: “I never dreamed I would be able to do that”

Many interviewees spoke of changes in their lives since they started attending Arts Network. Often, they described being socially isolated before joining, and talked of how challenging they had found taking the initial steps in becoming a member of Arts Network, and how for some, this is an on-going difficulty. Almost all interviewees and questionnaire respondents explained how the project had increased their confidence in many parts of their lives, and described a great feeling of pride in their achievements. Some members talked about progression in terms of co-facilitating and/or leading workshops, exhibiting work, selling work, becoming a Trustee of the Arts Network or even having their own studio. Often, members went further and attributed improvements in their own mental health directly to the Arts Network.

“[Joining Arts Network] was my first step on the road to recovery and my rehabilitation from hospital... I have come a long, long way.”

Joining Arts Network: “I know I really have to push myself to come”

It seems many members found getting to the Arts Network for the first time extremely anxiety provoking:

“I tend to be very anxious doing new things. Meeting new people...all doubts, negative thoughts.”

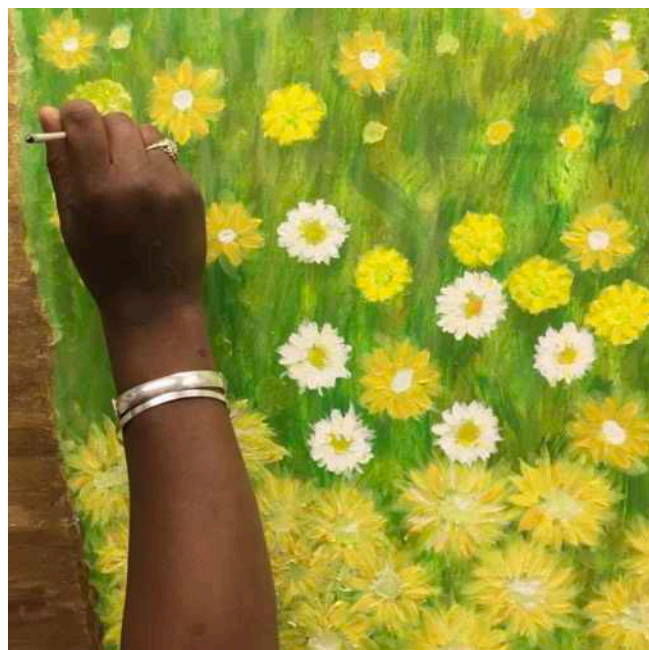
“First of all, I was very sporadic in coming, getting used to coming out was hard.”

As described above, many interviewees described how the staff and other members made them feel welcome and comfortable:

“It was very daunting, but everybody was so welcoming”

Several members talked about their experience of actually getting to the Arts Network from home: “*Travelling is a challenge, but it makes it a focus.*”. Difficulties leaving the house and using public transport were discussed:

“There’s times I’ve not been able to come in [to Arts Network] or leave the house because of my mental health... I have to really push myself to come.”



Some members continued to explain how coming to Arts Network had helped overcome any anxiety they had experienced with using public transport

“[I had] anxiety, bad panic disorder with transport. Since being here [Arts Network], I’m better with transport.”

Another common theme was that, for some members, simply getting to the Arts Network remains an achievement, even if they have been attending for some time:

“Just coming here and sitting with people, and then going home, it’s like, I’ve actually achieved something, you know, it’s just being somewhere else and getting out the house, which is really important, and, you know, a lot of us go through that thing where they can’t leave the house, either for anxiety or whatever, so to be able to make it here is an achievement sometimes in itself.”

Another member described how their memory of first coming to Arts Network makes them keen to support new members when they join:

“When new people come, I really do feel for them, because I remember what I was like so, always to make a point of talking to them.”



Isolation: *“Coming here gives me a reason to go out”*

Many members described how isolated their lives were before they started attending the Arts Network. would be without the Arts Network:

“Without [Arts Network] I wouldn’t be socialising... I’d be on my own. I’d be isolated”

“[Arts Network has helped me] to get my life back after 17 years in my house.”

“I wasn’t mixing with anyone. I was just totally isolated.”

One member described how Arts Network is the only place they go each week:

“I only come here, apart from seeing my care coordinator or hospital appointments.”

Increase in confidence and pride: *“Having it on the wall here is so important”*

Our questionnaire asked members about changes in their experience in art and their confidence in their artistic ability since joining Arts Network, shown in figure 4. Analysis of the data showed that both changes were highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Members felt more artistically experienced, and more confident about their artistic ability after attending Arts Network. Many interviewees and questionnaire respondents were emphatic about the increase in confidence and pride in their ability they attribute to attending Arts Network:

“I know one chap, who recently joined us, he wasn’t talking at all, and now he’s like the life and soul of the party!”

“I feel like I’ve progressed... opened up a bit... Arts Network has been the most positive thing in my life.”

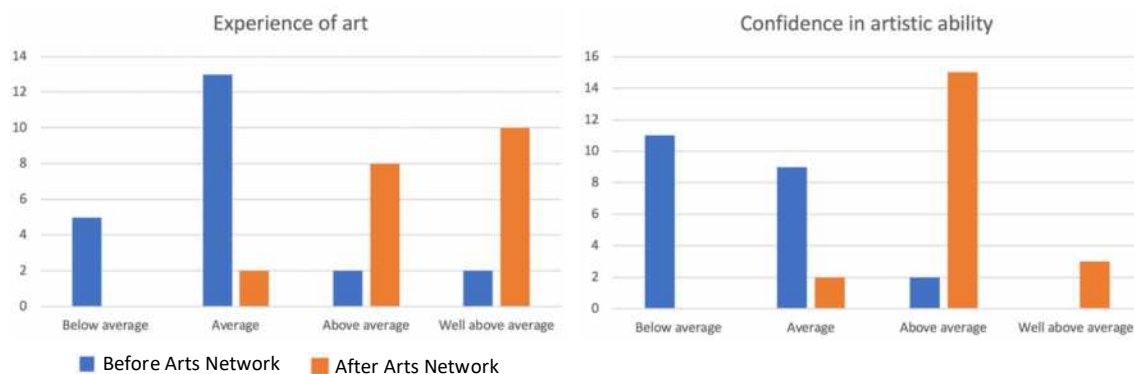


Figure 4: Experience of art and confidence in artistic ability before and after joining Arts Network

“I feel more confident being at the project and that leads to increased confidence in other aspects of my life. The Network is like an intermediate space between bad mental health and being able to be more confident”

“Coming here has changed my life... I no longer languish in my house. I create art that I am proud of even when it is not great, and I feel safe and listened to... I also have fun and laugh with other members.”

Interestingly, several members compared the feeling of pride they got from Arts Network with the sort of pride you experience as a child:

“It’s nice to accomplish something. It’s a nice feeling. A feeling of satisfaction, it’s like being a kid.”

“Proud, yeah! It’s like being in school again, it’s nice.”

Some members talked about their feelings of pride when their work is exhibited, and even sold:

“It was amazing when I had my first piece of art on the wall... I never expected anything like that would happen”

“They did sell a painting of mine, which I really did feel good about, it made me feel good because I didn’t expect it... so that was kind of nice.”



Desire to progress further

Some members talked about progression in terms of facilitating and/or leading workshops, exhibiting work, selling work, becoming a Trustee of the Arts Network or even having their own studio.

“[I would like to] go on to co-facilitate more, and progress into being a lead facilitator... for my art to improve so I could hold my own solo exhibition”

“I hope to run a printing workshop for members and also to facilitate writing creative workshops and also have a personal studio that I will spend many hours making things and art.”

“I now facilitate workshops about making mosaics. I never dreamed I would be able to do that.”

This desire to progress, however, is not universal – interestingly, when interviewees were asked about whether they would want to progress their art in future, some members expressed not wanting to take it further:

“Keep it as a hobby. Keep it as it is. I’d be too anxious to go further.”

“I’m happy to stay as I am at the present... I’ll stay where I am.”

For many members, it seems that building the courage to go on the trips out seems to be an indicator of changes in their overall confidence:

“It was... nearly two years before I actually started going out on the day trips to exhibitions”

“When I started going out on trips and doing that, I was starting to socialise with people, and that meant I started to socialise with my family again... I think everybody here feels that.”



Changes in self-reported mental health: *“The Arts Network has given me back my life”*

It is clear that members strongly believe Arts Network is beneficial for their mental health. Our questionnaire directly asked members whether they had experienced any changes in their mental health since attending Arts Network. The results were clear: Half of respondents (11 members) reported their mental health was *“much better”*, 9 said *“a bit better”* and 2 reported *“no change”* (figure 1). None reported it getting worse. Two members described this change:

“[Arts Network helped me] discover colour again, instead of everything dark.”

“Arts Network has shown me how to smile again, laugh and have fun. It’s a brilliant project I found myself again and am now in a brighter, happier place.”

Comments such as these were frequent:

“I’ve not been back into hospital for ten years now... that’s because of this place”

“I used to have five or six panic attacks a day, now it’s perhaps two to three a month”

“Pushing me to come here even when I don’t feel well has helped my mental health”

“I always feel happier and less anxious afterwards.”

Several members described how Arts Network helped them cope better with interpersonal difficulties. For example, one member described a situation they had been in where they found an interaction with another member to be *“aggressive and confrontational”*, but with support from Arts Network staff they now feel:

“Able to handle these situations by myself and in most cases work with ‘difficult individuals’ and understand their experiences and prevent the relationship becoming difficult.”



Changes in identity

Some of the interviewees described how these improvements in their abilities and confidence since joining Arts Network have led to them experiencing a change in identity, crediting creating art as a significant force in this change:

“We can join the wider community. We meet people but it’s about art, not about mental health.”

“It’s [art] what gives my life meaning. I grow my own identity and accept what I can’t change. I get my own sense of direction. A mix of life, meaning and morals.”

Interestingly, however, when asked directly if they felt they were artists, most members said ‘no’: *“I’m not an artist! I’m a Leo!”*





A community: “It’s friends but also kind of... like an extended family”

A community built on respect for one another, peer support, kindness, encouragement and support from Arts Network staff and members was another common thread through our interviews. Members described how they are “*different, but together.*” Frequently, members commented that the staff “*go above and beyond,*” however, some members wished that there could be a greater provision of specific mental health support at Arts Network.

‘Community’ seems to be paramount at Arts Network. It was mentioned 12 times in the interviews:

“It’s like a community here. Everyone is on the same level, empathic, understanding. It’s completely comfortable.”

“We work as a community, I’ve made some very good friends here”

Many people described how the Arts Network makes them “*feel normal,*” “*human,*” “*not alone*” and safe:

“The environment of Arts Network has helped me to trust people.”

“The camaraderie and socialising [helped me realise] that I am not alone... my experience is that Arts Network has got it right in making me and the rest of the members feel human.”

Consideration: “*There’s a respect for one another’s differences*”

Respect seems to be very important to members. As three members put it:

“Respect is a big part of the community. If you’re not as good as some others, it doesn’t matter. We understand, we look after each other.”

“There’s a respect for one another’s differences.... There’s a kind of shared understanding of the fact that we all have problems, and they kind of overlap, our experiences overlap one another’s... So, there’s a kind of empathy... There’s an understanding... they get it... that’s really one of the best things about here, that there’s people you can talk to, and share your deepest, darkest things.”

“Everyone looks out for everyone.”



However, one member reported that this is not always the case:

“[There should be] more respect for people. Acceptance for people feeling fragile... Some people are crude or rude or very loud. Some staff are like this too. They should ask if you feel safe and then help you.”



Members also talked about how they are sensitive to each other's emotional state:

“If you come in not feeling comfortable, people understand that you don't want to be bothered or talked to. People respect that you need to be quiet.”

“There's a lot of sharing... sharing the problems we have outside, in terms of benefits assessments, our mental health, not coping, not sleeping, anxiety... one of the good things is that there's people here who are going through the same thing as you, and that you can talk about them...”

A diverse group

Many members described how Arts Network draws together a diverse group of people “*separate, but together.*”

“We're all kind of... all different but similar... all different sizes, all different colours... but we come together, to share this space”

“Because it's like a family, different people from all walks of life, you might not have met in the outside world, but you come in here and you are just accepted. If you are having an off day, you don't have to explain yourself. Everyone looks out for everyone.”

Some members highlighted a challenge from being a group of people with mental health problems – that there is often someone unwell:

“There's always somebody going through crisis... and that's hard at times, because it's people you care about... I don't know how I can talk about this without starting to cry. It's really hard sometimes. It's people you really care about and you can see them, particularly with the PIP assessments, you know... there's always somebody here... going through that and you just watch people go downhill.”

Staff: *“The people that work here, they go above and beyond”*

In general, the members talked extremely positively about the staff at Arts Network:

“They’re great... they’d go the extra mile for you. They work so hard. They’re here all day, every day. Constantly doing things for and with us”

“The staff are brilliant, I’ve got to be honest. There have been occasions I’ve gone in and not felt well. I’ve gone in and had a chat, I’ve been able to talk it through.”

Many members talked about staff supporting them with a wide variety of problems, well beyond art, for example, family problems, housing issues, bereavement and cancer. They also helped by writing supporting letters to help members with benefits claims.

The supportive atmosphere extends to days when members cannot attend due to illness or other circumstances,

“If you don’t come in, they will contact you to make sure you are ok. If you don’t come for a bit, it can be a bit overwhelming. But they will just ask you to come in for a cup of tea”.

Our questionnaire asked members for feedback about the Arts Network staff. Responses were overwhelmingly positive, with almost all members rating the staff as *“very good”* in the following areas:

- Are they easy to talk to?
- Do they understand mental illness well?
- Are they good teachers?
- Are they patient?
- Are they helpful?
- Are they welcoming?

Specific mental health provision

It is clear from the interviews that Arts Network staff do a lot of would could be considered to be ad hoc mental health support for the members. However, several members spoke of how they felt there should be a mental health professional of some sort to provide psychological support for them, mentioning that there had been one in the past:

“One of the staff was trained in mental health. Her special understanding helped people, but she isn’t here now. There are people here who miss the special understanding she could offer... They talk to me, but it’s not like talking to someone with proper understanding.”

One member commented that they would like Arts Network to *“provide different wellbeing strategies.”*

Learning new things: *“There’s always something new and interesting”*

The joy of learning new things was another common theme which emerged from our interviews and questionnaire. In addition to trying different courses at Arts Network, many members reported taking their interests home with them and creating art in their own time.



Members frequently talked excitedly about the wide ranging choice of courses available to them, for example:

“There’s always something new and interesting.”

“You do different things that you haven’t done before and I like that.”

“Every term you get a chance to try something different... there’s always something that piques your interest or sparks your interest.”

Pleasure from learning new things was also frequently mentioned, for example: *“I like trying new things”* and *“when I do things, I remember the skills, even with a bad memory”*. One member explained how:

“To come somewhere where I could learn a new skill and be around like-minded people, and feel normal, that’s a big incentive to me.”

One member described their experience of Arts Network as:

“A really good adventure for me... I wouldn’t get the opportunity to do that anywhere else.”

They expanded, explaining how since attending Arts Network:

“I have started to notice details in things a lot more, more aware... with art you can be a complete beginner and still accomplish things... It makes you notice things differently.”

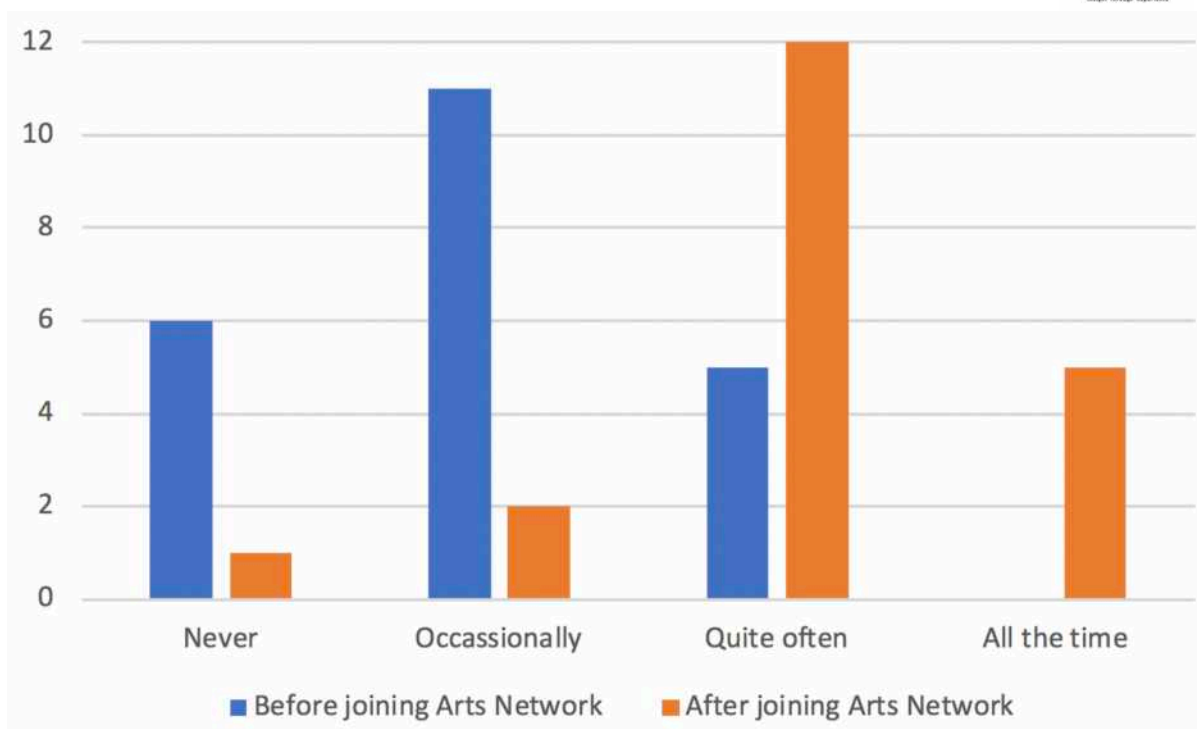


Figure 5: 'How often do you practise art at home?' Before and after joining Arts Network

Practising art at home

Practising art at home could be seen as the development of a coping strategy. For some members, the increased confidence from attending Arts Network meant they eagerly engaged in artistic activity independently at home:

“I do stuff at home, I take it from here... it was because of the experiences I had here that I had the faith to go and try that at home.”

Our questionnaire asked members about whether they practised art at home, shown in figure 5. There a marked difference in the before and after responses, with many members moving from creating art at home ‘occasionally’ to ‘quite often’. This change in engaging in art at home from before joining Arts Network to after was highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

Figure 5: How often do you practise art at home?

Time: *"I wish I could do it every day"*

Frequency of attendance was discussed by several members, using words like *"loyal member"*, *"commitment to attend"*, and saying things such as *"I wish I could do it every day,"* and *"it would be nice to be able to come here more often."* Many members expressed a desire to attend more often.

The generous flexibility about when members can attend offered by Arts Network, and the patience of the staff in this respect is also highly valued:

"There are times when we're in crisis and not coping... Mo will say 'come whenever you want' just so we're not at home on our own."

"They [Arts Network staff] said just come in on the days you can, I won't tie you to times... when you feel you've had enough it's fine for you to go home, that's not a problem... Mo said to me... 'if you continue coming to project sessions, you'll start to feel better, but you need... to make that commitment to come' so I did, and I did start to feel better. I was very anxious around people... Mo and her staff just encouraged me to keep on coming... it was nearly two years before I actually started going out on the day trips..."

More sessions

Many members expressed a wish that they could attend more sessions than they currently go to:

"[I] would love to visit Arts Network more than twice a week... maybe even on Saturday and Sunday!"





Arts Network: *“I feel very fortunate to have this place”*

Many members described a feeling of gratitude that they had ‘found’ the Arts Network, and how it is preferable to other mental health services they have experienced:

“I feel very fortunate to have this place... I know there’s a lot of people missing out and I feel so fortunate.”

“I never knew there was a place like this before... for many years while I was suffering that there was places I could go and be supported and not have to pay for, and not have to worry about being financially out of pocket... A lot of places, they can’t afford to let the people stay.”

“I love it here. It has changed my life. It has saved my life. I think it is an amazing place.”

“[I’m] so happy to be creating art again.... I am so grateful for being referred to this service.”

“I have been coming here and it really has been a lifesaver for me, it gives my nan who is my carer some needed rest while I attend.”

Suggestions for improvements

Both the questionnaire and interviews asked members if they had any suggestions for improvements to Arts Network. Most frequently members asked for more equipment, in particular a kiln, and a greater variety of more specialist and advanced courses.

In terms of physical improvements to the venue, some members asked for provision of a 'time out' space:

“A quiet room with beanbags and cushions to chill out in and take time out.”

Others suggested changes to the toilet facility, the flooring and access to the upstairs space.

Another member said there should be a permanent gallery for the members work in a public area.



Self-reported use of NHS services

In our questionnaire, we asked members about their use of NHS services, shown in figure 6.

Among the respondents who reported having a care coordinator, over half reported needing to see them either 'less' or 'much less' since attending Arts Network, with just one answering 'more'. A similar pattern appeared in responses about seeing a support worker, therapist, psychologist and drop-in services.

When asked about needing to see a psychiatrist, over three-quarters of members reported needing them 'less' or 'much less', with just one reporting 'need much more'.

Results about attending GP appointments were less clear, with the majority reporting 'no change'. This might be because people see their GP for a variety of reasons beyond their mental health.

In terms of unplanned emergency care, the responses show that attending Arts Network led to big reductions in self-reported use of acute services. Roughly two thirds of members reporting attending Accident and Emergency departments 'less' or 'much less', and none reporting increases. The pattern was similar for use of crisis and home treatment services and the use of in-patient mental healthcare.

This is clear evidence that attending Arts Network may be reducing the amount of health resources its members are using.



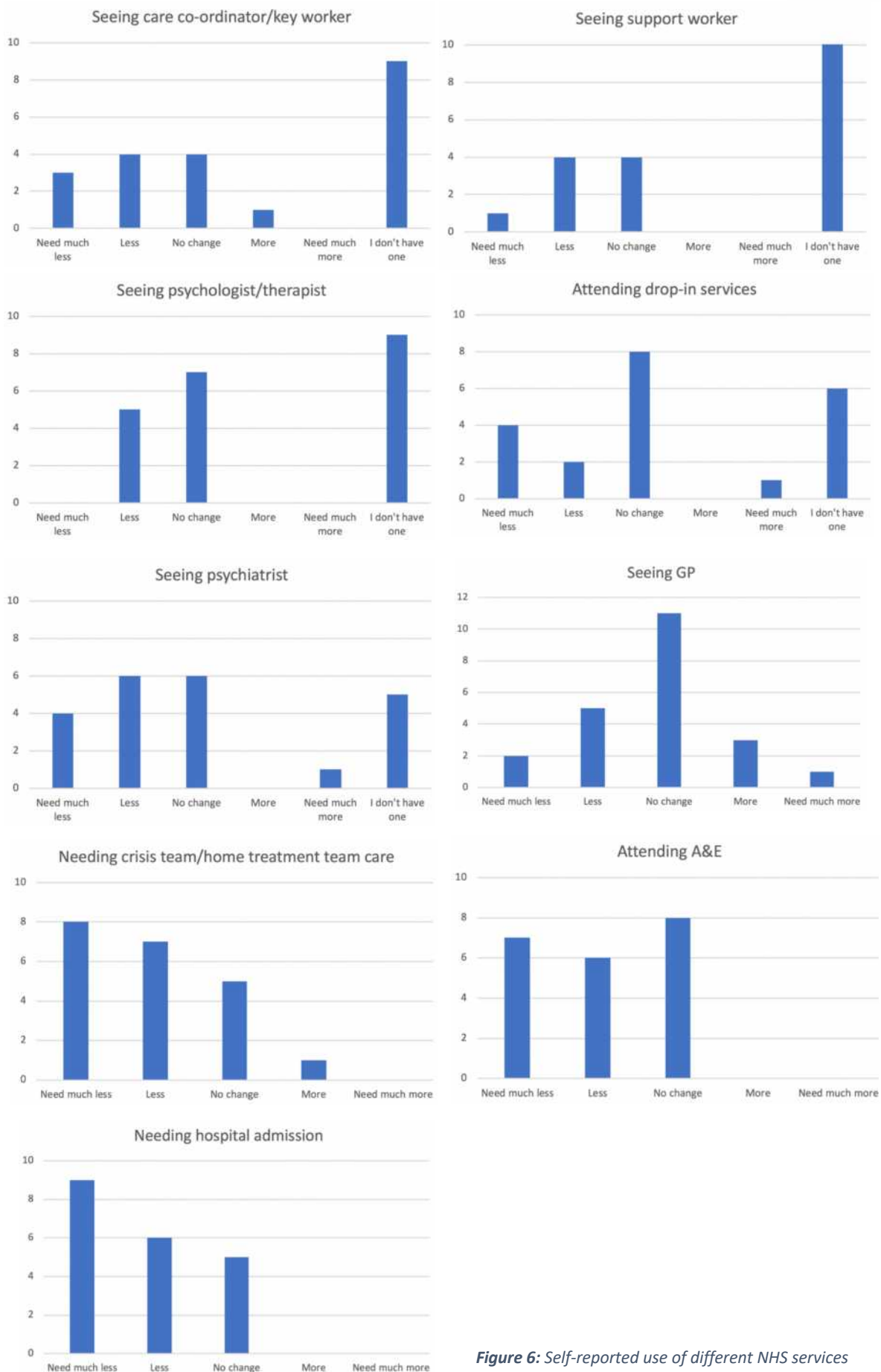


Figure 6: Self-reported use of different NHS services

Staff interview

Two staff members were interviewed about their experience of Arts Network. They described how they tried to create a calm and respectful atmosphere, encouraging conversation among members. This can be *“challenging on some days”* but also *“wonderful, most days it’s wonderful”*.

“We are a place where you can come and switch off. You can come here and do something mindful... be in a place where you feel safe... sometimes people just want to come and have a chat with other people, sit and not do much... all they need to do is get out of their houses and see people... being here you know everyone has mental health support needs, you just come in and it’s an even playing field... you can be yourself... it’s not about focusing on those issues.”

They talked about how their role was to try and get around and speak to all of the members in the work room, observing whether they just want to be

“Immersed in what they’re doing and don’t necessarily want to be chatting”.

Staff members also described the transformation they see in members:

“There is definitely a transformation when people do exhibit their work... we do notice... someone will hate a painting, and then when you frame it, they’re like ‘I did that!’ ... ‘wow, you’ve put it on the wall!’... they are also like, really grateful.”

“I remembered the person’s face when we put it [embroidered shoe] up... it is a really nice moment when you see someone be proud of their work.”



We asked about how they managed the situation of a member becoming distressed while at Arts Network:

“We try to keep it to the staff to support members... for some members it is a lot of pressure to have someone go into crisis... generally one of us would take the person out of the work room and talk to them”.

They also observed how some members have bonded together:

“We’ve got a few clusters of people who have sort of taken on the roles of their own family unit... That’s what this place means for a lot of people... There’s a sense of community.”

The staff members talked about how having direct contact with and knowing the person who had referred the member made it much easier for them to support the member if they are having difficulties:

“We did have someone that became quite unwell recently and it took a while to get hold of their CPN... I’m not even sure if they had been discharged back to the GP.”

Finally, we asked the staff members what they wished Arts Network could have. Responses included further courses, especially Creative Writing, and resources, such as a kiln and a lift to make the upper floor accessible. Also mentioned was a taxi budget to help people attend who couldn’t get there by public transport, and a minibus to make trips out easier.



Our personal reflections

Given the fact that most members of the Converge and Evaluation Team have lived experience of mental ill health, we decided there would be benefit in sharing our impression of the Arts Network. It needs to be emphasised that these views are personal; they are based on the questions, “*what was your impression of the Arts Network?*” and “*would you go there?*”

“I viewed the project as a good start but found it safe but a bit constrictive. For example, the hats were of a high standard and would be inviting the fashion industry in to promote the project. It needed to offer more than just art.”

“Entering the studio from the busy London street outside felt a bit like walking into a church, calm and safe. The members were so enthusiastic about the project, and thankful that it exists. It feels a shame that it’s not available to more people.”

“I felt it had a positive, friendly approach, where support is easily available. Sometimes they give more support than they are supposed to because people need it. It would be great if there was someone there to help members with money and housing. I think it’s a shame it’s not open seven days a week so it could cater for more people.”



“I wouldn’t be someone who was trying to become a member of the Arts Network. I don’t enjoy producing art or trying crafts, I’ve had experience of art-based activities. I do have a few crafts that I enjoy but I like to work in a quiet atmosphere at my own pace. I accept that the activities at Arts Network seem to be of a higher level but I get the positive effect I saw at the project, from exercise and being outside. ”



“While we were doing the evaluation, I felt that the atmosphere at the project was lively, a good number of members, with plenty of talking and joking, all really positive. The loudness is something I would find difficult to manage if I was a member. That sort of atmosphere feels like it is closing in round me. When that’s happening, I try to find somewhere, to escape to, a quiet place. With the way I feel about taking part in organised arts or craft activities, I think that I wouldn’t be very open to challenging myself to try to manage better through experience.”

“Although I probably wouldn’t go to a centre that primarily focuses on the visual arts, I appreciated the relaxed and friendly atmosphere and the warm reception of staff and members. ”

“I really enjoyed my time at Arts Network and was inspired by how passionately many of its members feel about its positive impact on their lives – as well as the high quality of the work on display. I liked that you could sit around a big table as a group to work, but that there was also space to work individually and be reflective and I think I would definitely enjoy going there. ”

Suggestions for future development

This section offers ideas we had about opportunities and changes which might be made at Arts Network.

1. Explore getting NHS funding

It was striking how clearly members reported positive changes to their mental health which they attributed specifically to attending Arts Network. It was also clear that they believe their use of NHS services has decreased since attending, especially acute services.

- Can this report be used as evidence to get funding to expand the service to include more service users from the local NHS mental health trust?

2. Explore possible community partnerships

We wondered whether the possibility of creating local partnerships has been explored? This might include connecting with local colleges, universities or third sector charities.

- Are there local art colleges and universities which might be willing to explore an exchange relationship? This might include, for example, allowing use of more specialist arts equipment or access to courses for Arts Network members in exchange for their students getting work placements or voluntary opportunities at Arts Network. This would also mean members could access specialist equipment through the college rather than Arts Network needing to buy it.
- Are there local drama or music colleges which might be willing to offer music and drama courses for Arts Network members in exchange for their students getting work placements or voluntary opportunities at Arts Network?
- Are there other local third sector organisations which Arts Network could create links with to support members with non-art related needs, for example, housing and benefits, for example, monthly visits from someone from Citizen's Advice?



- Can Arts Network link with other community groups to provide interaction between members and their community, perhaps offering use of their studio and equipment, for example children’s sessions, or sessions for elderly people. Alternatively, members could take their skills out into the community to offer sessions elsewhere.
- Are there opportunities to create public art such as murals?

3. Find opportunities for progression

We considered exploring opportunities for members to develop their skills and follow their ambitions.

- Could a training pathway be created for members to develop mentoring skills to support new members as they join?
- Could a more formal training pathway be created for members to start teaching or support the teaching of courses in which they have particular skill?
- Are there art-based courses at local colleges/adult education which members could be supported to access?
- Can there be a more systematic way in which members be supported access arts-based voluntary or paid opportunities outside of Arts Network, for example, at museums or galleries?

4. Increasing the range of courses

Both members and staff talked of a desire to increase the range of courses and opportunities on offer at Arts Network.

- As mentioned above, there could be the possibility of expanding into performing arts (drama and music based) via local colleges.
- More specialist courses, such as jewellery making and silk screen printing.
- Some members talked about enjoying a project where they made YouTube videos. The possibility of getting specialist computer technology for digital arts such as graphic design, Photoshop and film making might be explored.



- A photography course might be a good way of getting people out into the community.
- A local college might be able to support a creative writing course.
- A simple weekly book group where members all read the same book and talk about it might be something enjoyable and easy to start.

5. Increase opening hours and available days

Many members stated that they would like it if Arts Network was open for more sessions in the week, including evening and weekend sessions. Doing this would considerably increase the number of members who could attend.

- Can funding be found for opening on more days and for more sessions?

6. Considering the provision of specific mental health support

Many members expressed a wish that Arts Network had specialist counsellors available to them. It is also clear that currently Arts Network staff do a lot of ad hoc work which could be considered as counselling in their day-to-day interactions with members. The provision of more a more formal counselling offer at Arts Network might draw the focus of the organisation away from art and in that sense is a strategic decision. Alternatively:

- Links could be made with other local counselling services for members who would benefit from it.
- There might be trainee counsellors at local colleges looking for work experience who could offer their time for free.

7. Welcoming new members

We were unclear about the capacity for taking on more new members. We admired the ‘we just pull up another chair’ attitude to new people joining the project, however this clearly can’t go on indefinitely. We also admired that members can attend for as long as they wish, and would definitely not advocate changing that policy. However:

- Are there ways people can be helped to move on from the project into new paid or voluntary roles outside, or to become teachers/mentors to new members?
- Can funding be accessed to increase the number of days/hours in which Arts Network is open? This would create room for many new members.

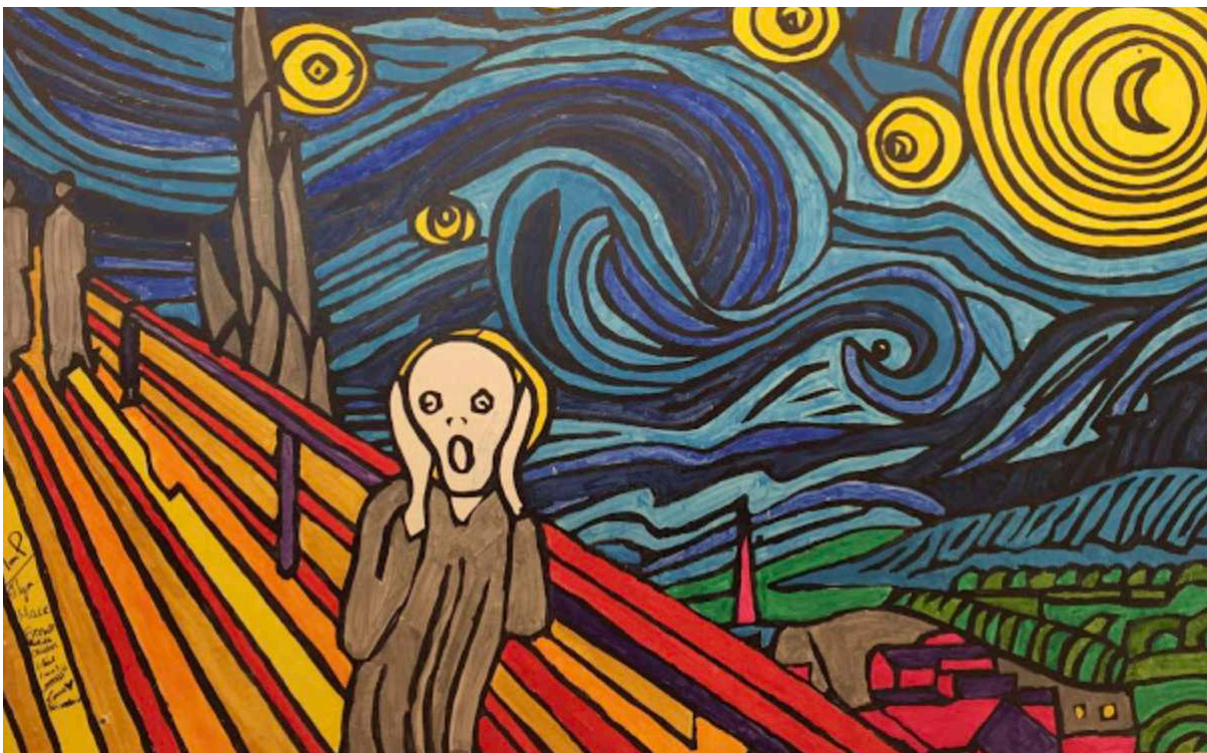
Many members which we interviewed talked about how difficult they had found the initial steps of joining Arts Network to be. A particular barrier seemed to be anxiety about actually getting to the studio.

- Can existing members be trained to mentor new members?
- Is there a possibility of providing taxis for new members, or arranging a buddy to travel with them?
- Is there a way small 'new member only' groups could be established? This might increase new members confidence before joining groups with more established members.

8. Entrepreneurial opportunities

Opportunities for attracting income is clearly important to Arts Network. These are some ideas we had:

- Increasing the number of 'Open Studio' events to raise the project's profile locally.
- Seeking new ways of displaying work locally, for example, seeking a café or bar which would be willing to have exhibitions.
- Online opportunities, for example, creating work to order, or advertising pieces for sale.
- Are there local craft fairs/Christmas fairs for which work could be created specifically for sale?
- Possibility of a permanent gallery?





Summary and conclusions

This evaluation gathered the views and perceptions of participants of the Arts Network. In total 13 members and two members of staff were interviewed during our visit to their Lewisham building in October 2018. This was followed with a questionnaire, which was completed by 22 members.

The project seems to be highly valued by its members, who enthused about how lucky they feel to be part of it. During interview analysis, we extracted six core themes: *'no pressure'*, *'progression'*, *'a community'*, *'learning new things'*, *'time'* and *'place.'*

For members, the Arts Network is a safe, respectful and calm place, which puts no unwanted pressure on them. Some described it as *"being in a little bubble,"* and said *"I can shut the world off... it's just Arts Network and I can do what I want."*

Members seem to value the support of their peers whilst in the studio, but do not always want to continue this relationship in the outside world.

Many members spoke of changes in their lives since they started attending Arts Network, frequently a reduction of the experience of being isolated from the community. They spoke of increasing confidence and pride in their achievements *"proud, yeah! It's like being in school again!"*

Changes in mental health were attributed to Arts Network *“I’ve not been back into hospital for ten years now... that’s because of this place.”* Our questionnaire gave evidence of considerable self-reported reductions in use of NHS services, in particular, acute care.

A community built on respect, peer support and kindness, encouragement and support from Arts Network staff and members was another common thread through our interviews. Many members described examples of staff ‘going above and beyond’ to support them.

Many members enthused about the range of courses on offer, and the pleasure they got from learning new things *“there’s always something that piques your interest.”* This seems to lead to growing confidence in other aspects of members’ lives.

Members often said they would like to come more often, and some described how they valued the flexibility of attendance at difficult times, where they were encouraged to come more often. Statements like *“I feel very fortunate to have this place”* were very common.

The staff described how they tried to create a calm and respectful atmosphere, and the transformation they see in members over time.

We made suggestions for future developments:

- 1) Explore getting NHS funding
- 2) Explore possible community partnerships
- 3) Find opportunities for progression
- 4) Increasing the range of courses
- 5) Increase opening hours and available days
- 6) Considering the provision of specific mental health support
- 7) Welcoming new members
- 8) Entrepreneurial opportunities

In conclusion, Arts Network seems to play an important role in its members quality of life, and expanding this provision is a worthy cause.

