Creativity and Mental Health

Enhancing Accessibility in Creative Spaces for Individuals with Mental Health Difficulties

A research report by Annamae Burrows
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Annamae worked with Creative Lives on a Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities funded internship between May-July 2024. During this time, Annamae researched the benefits of creative engagement for individuals living with mental health difficulties and examined how local creative groups and arts charities across Glasgow promote accessibility and inclusion in their creative activities.

Introduction

Creativity and Mental Health is a research project by Creative Lives supported by the Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities. It examines the benefits of creative engagement for people living with mental health difficulties, as well as the barriers faced both by participants seeking access to creative activities and group organisers striving to enhance accessibility. The project also highlights strategies employed by local creative groups and arts charities to overcome these challenges and ensure their inclusivity and accessibility for individuals with mental health difficulties.

This project aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What benefits do creative activities offer individuals living with mental health difficulties?
2. What specific needs do individuals with mental health difficulties have within creative spaces?
3. What barriers do individuals with mental health difficulties encounter when trying to engage with creative spaces?
4. How do local creative groups enhance accessibility and inclusion for individuals with mental health difficulties, especially those from marginalised communities, within their creative activities?

To answer these research questions we contacted local creative groups across Glasgow, Scotland, that provide access to creative activities for marginalised communities and individuals experiencing mental health challenges, and invited them to be interviewed. Both individual and group interviews were conducted with creative group organisers and group members. Participants were given the choice of virtual or in-person interviews, though all groups preferred in-person. Wherever possible, visits were arranged to familiarise ourselves with each group's activities. Questions for both creative group participants and organisers encompassed topics such as participants' specific needs in creative spaces, barriers to access, the benefits of creative engagement, and how participants discovered these groups. Creative group organisers were also asked about their experiences of promoting accessibility and inclusion for

participants with mental health difficulties, and their perspectives on local policies that could further support their inclusivity efforts.

The creative groups who participated in this research supported a diverse range of vulnerable communities. Initially, this project aimed to explore creative activities among various marginalised communities. However, through conversations with these groups, it became clear that mental health difficulties were a key concern for many creative group participants. These issues, whether primary or stemming from their marginalised circumstances, were an important reason they sought out creative activities as a means to improve their mental wellbeing. Therefore, while this report touches on specific issues unique to certain groups, its main focus is on findings related to mental health and wellbeing in creative spaces.

Creativity and Mental Health

'Creativity' refers to an active process of generating something new and original by integrating cognitive processes such as imagination and critical thinking, with innovation, skills, and environmental influences [1]. Creativity often involves a departure from conventional ways of thinking to forge new and unexpected connections between seemingly unrelated concepts and apply knowledge and skills in new and innovative ways. Creative expression can take a variety of forms, including art, writing, music, and creative problem-solving [2]. However, creativity also extends beyond traditional art-making. "Everyday creativity" is defined as the ability to adapt and innovate in response to the challenges and changes of everyday situations, demonstrating resilience in daily life [3]. This broader perspective of creativity highlights its adaptive and problem-solving potential, which may be advantageous for promoting good mental health across various contexts beyond the arts.

Engaging in creative activities offers numerous benefits for maintaining good mental health. Although direct measurement of their impact is challenging due to ambiguous definitions of terms like 'mental health' and 'mental wellbeing' [4], many studies consistently indicate that creativity can positively influence several factors that contribute to overall wellbeing. For example, participating in creative arts has been linked to relaxation, stress reduction [4, 5], and emotional regulation,

often providing opportunities to process and express complex emotions in a constructive and socially beneficial manner [6, 7, 2, 8, 9, 10]. Artistic expression can also offer a more profound emotional release than verbal communication alone, allowing for deeper engagement with emotions that are commonly suppressed, such as anger [11]. Additionally, involvement in creative pursuits can improve cognitive functioning and flexibility by fostering adaptive thinking, problem-solving, and an exploration of diverse perspectives. This can greatly improve individuals' adaptability and equip them with coping skills applicable to various life situations [12, 13, 14].

Integrating creative activities into a social prescribing model—a practice where individuals can access non-clinical services to enhance wellbeing within a holistic treatment plan [15]—may provide an effective and cost-effective approach to supporting mental wellbeing. Providing a diverse array of tools, including creative outlets, empowers individuals to build resilience, navigate periods of poor mental health, and potentially facilitate recovery.

Social prescribing initiatives that include creative activities have demonstrated positive impacts on mental health by connecting individuals with a variety of community resources that promote wellbeing. Engagement in arts and cultural activities, for example, has been associated with alleviating symptoms of anxiety and depression, strengthening social connections, increasing social inclusion, and enhancing quality of life [16, 17, 18]. Additionally, access to creative activities through social prescribing approaches can help individuals manage chronic conditions and cultivate a sense of community belonging [19, 20]. Ensuring accessibility to creative activities for individuals experiencing mental health challenges can therefore aid in addressing their multifaceted needs, supporting them in building resilience, developing coping skills, and improving overall quality of life.

Given the myriad benefits associated with creativity, ensuring accessibility to creative activities for everyone, especially those at risk of experiencing poor mental health, is essential. However, it is not merely enough to provide these activities; understanding and addressing any barriers that may prevent individuals from attending, accessing, or fully benefiting from creative activities is equally important. By actively working to dismantle these barriers, creative groups can foster

environments that are inclusive and supportive, thereby maximising the potential benefits of creative engagement for individuals facing mental health challenges. This holistic approach not only enhances accessibility but also promotes equity and ensures that creative activities can truly contribute to enhancing resilience, coping skills, and overall quality of life for all participants. This report will therefore provide an overview of the challenges faced by creative group members experiencing poor mental health in accessing creative spaces, as well as strategies employed by creative groups to overcome these challenges.

Mental Health in Glasgow, Scotland

This report focuses on the city of Glasgow as a case study to explore creative groups within Scotland. To provide context, approximately 1 in 4 people in Scotland experience a mental health problem annually [21], with around 1 in 3 people expected to face such challenges within their lifetime [22]. Glasgow, one of Scotland's largest cities, mirrors these national statistics. The city also grapples with elevated suicide rates, exceeding Scotland's average [23], highlighting the critical need for targeted mental health support initiatives. Access to mental health services presents a significant concern, with long waiting times and inadequate service availability [21] exacerbating the difficulties faced by Glasgow residents seeking assistance.

Socioeconomic factors such as poverty, unemployment, and social deprivation further contribute to the prevalence of mental health difficulties in Glasgow [24]. The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), which assesses multiple dimensions of deprivation across Scotland, highlights that certain areas within Glasgow rank among the most deprived in the country. Residents of these areas often have limited access to essential resources and support systems [25].

Individuals experiencing mental health challenges are at heightened risk of experiencing a range of additional adversities, often creating a cyclical relationship of hardship. Marginalised communities in Glasgow, including refugees, are disproportionately affected by poor mental health outcomes, due to various factors such as language barriers, social isolation, and trauma from displacement [26]. Understanding these dynamics is important for tailoring effective support to meet the needs of Glasgow's diverse population.

The Benefits of Creative Group Participation for Individuals with Mental Health Difficulties

This section of the report presents an overview of the primary benefits of participating in creative groups, as described by both members with lived experience of mental health challenges and the creative group organisers who support them. While numerous benefits were highlighted, this section will focus on those most frequently cited and highly valued by creative group members.

Emotional Expression and Processing Trauma

One of the most commonly cited benefits of participating in a creative group was the opportunities this provided for emotional expression. Creative group members and organisers alike emphasised that engaging in creative activities allowed individuals to bring their private inner worlds into focus in a profoundly therapeutic manner. Many group members shared that the act of creating provides a constructive outlet for working through personal traumas. The tactile engagement with hands-on projects, without the pressure of verbal communication or explanation, effectively lowered barriers to confronting painful memories and emotions. Additionally, the experience of taking part in creative activities was described as deeply relaxing, further supporting group members in their emotional processing and trauma recovery efforts.

> *“There’s all that stuff that’s in your head that you can't get out. It can be expressed through arts and crafts. My drawings were actually about my main traumas - you know there's some traumas in the back of your head you'll never share, but arts and crafts help to bring it out.”- ACVC Hub Founder.*

“It's such an individualised, almost private thing that you do publicly. We have one man who's incredibly talented - but he's not exhibited in about five years because what he's working on at the moment is not resolved. And to anybody looking at it, it’s stunning, it’s beautiful. But it's not resolved for him yet, so he's not ready to let that go. And people's relationship with their artwork is really unique for each person. I think, if you give yourself that permission, it’s incredibly healing. And you have to be very strong to give yourself that permission.”- Elisabeth, Executive Artistic Director at Project Ability.

“Creative writing in recovery gives you an avenue to write stuff out that you’re going through. I wrote a poem and someone said it's like you’re talking about your relationship with the drugs - and for me, I was more writing about a relationship with someone else. But then maybe that's coming from my subconscious, maybe I am writing about my relationship with drugs as well.”- Chris, City Writes member.

Many members shared that engaging in creative activities within their groups provided a valuable means to externalise and cope with traumas they had experienced. Participating in the creative process, in various forms, helped them to articulate and visually represent experiences that were difficult to express verbally or publicly, and provided an opportunity for self-discovery and self-acceptance.

Individuals engaging in creative activities could explore and reconcile unresolved emotions at their own pace, encouraged by the support of other groups members and organisers. The catharsis could even occur when the creative activity was unrelated to mental health. This approach was noted to be particularly beneficial for men, as many male group members mentioned they would not consider attending formal therapy or interventions but would gladly engage in creative activities. The lower level of vulnerability associated with creative activities - where there was no pressure or expectation to speak about anything and you could silently work on a project for as long as desired - was appealing. It offered a way to inadvertently work through mental health difficulties

that many men would otherwise struggle to address. This demonstrates that while engaging in creative activities is not a replacement for formal mental health support, it can be a beneficial first step in that journey of recovery for some people.

> *“I think that everybody needs an outlet for self-expression. If you don't find a positive way for people to express themselves, it's not a vacuum and something else will fill it. I think addiction is a form of self-expression. So, if you can find positive ways to express yourself, but maintain balance, then you don't end up addicted and you'll live longer and happier. If you have trauma, then you can go into a negative cycle of addiction. So what I get from this group is the ability to express myself by doing some art.”- Jo, ACVC Hub member.*

"I go into personal experiences and how it felt being in active addiction. Like, the emotional and mental state, the state of being low, disrespecting myself, having different experiences, going through a bit of psychosis and going through really bad mental health breakdowns and emotional breakdowns. So, I've had a lot of negative experiences, but for me to make it a positive, I take the personal experiences and try to do good for other people and for them to see how dark it can get. Because the poem that I wrote that's now published in a book - the group gave me a lot of hope, because it's something that I didn't think I'd be able to do. I genuinely didn't think I'd be able to put pen to paper and express myself."- Jody, member of City Writes.

Many group members who had experienced problems with drugs or alcohol found that engaging in creative activities was a very powerful healing tool in their personal recovery, primarily due to the opportunities for self-expression. They emphasised the fundamental human need for self-expression, noting that unresolved trauma requires an outlet. Without positive avenues, this need can manifest in negative and harmful behaviours, leading to a destructive cycle. By using creativity as an alternative means of self-expression, individuals found it easier to replace harmful behaviours with positive ones. Transforming and channelling their negative experiences into something constructive was a

significant benefit. The positive and supportive environment of a creative group provided a safe place for this transformation, and seeing others with similar experiences express themselves in a non-judgemental setting was a crucial part of the healing process.

Social Connection and Building a Community

Another significant benefit of engaging in creative groups shared by many members was the sense of community they developed with fellow participants. Many noted that, while meeting new people and forming social connections could be challenging in their everyday lives, attending a creative group removed many barriers around this. They knew they already had something in common with others attending the group - a shared passion and enjoyment for the creative activity. This common ground served as an ice breaker that made social interactions less daunting and gave members the confidence to build friendships.

> *“To me, coming here means connection. I’m getting to know all the other individuals here. We’ve all got things in common.”- Jo, ACVC Hub member.*

> *“I’ve got autism and I don’t really know many people, but here you get to know people and that helps me.”- Kirsty, Reconnects Member, Project Ability.*

> *“I have definitely struggled with my social self. When I had a support worker, one of our main goals was tackling the isolation because I don't have any family up here, so it was just me on my tod not seeing anyone. It's been good to meet new people, and everyone having a shared interest helps as well.”- Bel, Reconnects Member, Project Ability.*

> *“People are looking for space, they're looking for companionship, they're looking for a peer group. When we do evaluations, what comes across really strongly is the sense of being part of a community, a community of like-minded people.”- Elisabeth, Executive Artistic Director at Project Ability.*

Participating in a creative group provides members with a sense of belonging to a positive community with interests and goals. The shared identity and the sense of being a part of something larger than themselves was especially important for individuals at risk of social isolation. It enabled them to build a social network, particularly when traditional family support systems were absent. These social benefits are crucial for mental health and overall wellbeing, particularly for those who may feel marginalised or isolated. Over time, these relationships became a valuable source of social support for many members.

> *"Connection with each other is a huge part of it. The relationships that they forge with each other, that have nothing to do with us [staff] are probably, in the long run, much more valuable."- Gabby, founder of MILK.*

> *"We really encourage peer support here. They'll help each other with the actual technical support of how to do things, but they also help each other with more mental support as well. A few weeks ago there was a new guy, who had just recently lost both legs, so now he's in a wheelchair and it's all very new for him. Whereas some of the other guys had lost their legs maybe years ago and he was telling them he's going to go into therapy - and before you knew it, one of the other guys said 'It's been a year since I lost my leg and I find this helps' and they were comparing their prosthetics and saying 'It's better if you do it this way' and sharing and saying 'When you go to therapy, just tell them everything, don't hold back'. They all jumped in on the conversation and I could see the guy was so relieved, which was really nice. And that's what makes this place work, because there's no prejudice. And pretty much everyone who comes through the door, they've got some sort of story to tell, they've had some experience or multiple experiences. So it's amazing just seeing it."- Gaynor, Pottery and Arts and Crafts Tutor, ACVC Hub.*

“It's basically socialising, talking to people, realising they're not the only one with that issue. It's getting them out and about. They don’t have to talk about their issues, it's just talking at all, it's just giving them that confidence that there are people out there in the same situation.”- ACVC Hub Founder.

“You’re meeting people. We’re not all similar - some are, but some are different - we have different stories, different art styles and things like that, but you get to know them. And there are some people here, when I look at their art, I’m like oh my god that's amazing. And that’s why I really like to go, everyone is very encouraging here, if you want to do something, they'll help you out. I just submitted four pieces for The Big Art Show.”- Project Ability Reconnects member.

Participating in a creative group helped members develop social connections and peer relationships that group organisers acknowledged could be more impactful than connections with staff. The mutual support and bonds formed among members significantly contributed to individuals’ wellbeing, fostering a sense of autonomy and empowerment. Interacting with other members who shared similar experiences could offer considerable mental and emotional support to those experiencing mental and physical health challenges.

The networks that individuals built within these creative groups became invaluable sources of information, support, advice, and comfort during difficult times. Seeing peers who had successfully navigated similar challenges motivated new members to engage with available support, as they were more likely to trust and relate to those who had first-hand experience.

Receiving empathy and acceptance from fellow group members was particularly powerful, helping to foster an inclusive and non-judgemental atmosphere. This communal support system was identified by group organisers as essential to the group’s success. The environment created a safe haven for individuals, reinforcing the group’s role in helping members navigate their challenges and enhancing the overall effectiveness of the creative group experience.

Developing a New Identity and Sense of Purpose

A further important benefit of attending a creative group shared by many members was the newfound sense of purpose and identity this provided. Many individuals had to leave behind previous employment or social roles, either due to natural transitions or physical or mental health issues that made continuing impossible. This created a profound loss for many members which was often distressing, as it meant losing not only these previous roles but also many social connections and the sense of meaning associated with them. Engaging in a creative group allowed members to develop new skills beyond their past experiences. This gave them hope and confidence as it demonstrated that they were capable of change and progress. The opportunity to create and continue to contribute within the group environment helped them recognise their value and worth, fostering a renewed sense of purpose and self-worth.

> *"It shows them that there's more to life than just talking about the military, there are other things you can talk about. And you get a lot of people who are amputees that come in, and they don't think they can do things - but then they see other people with that same disability doing things. So there might be another guy out there doing woodwork with one arm. It encourages other guys that they can do things and that there is something out there. You just do what you can with what you got."- ACVC Hub Founder.*

> *"I think before people come in here, they're not part of a team. And when you're in the forces, you're very much part of the team. So when you come here, you become part of the team, your emotional resilience really goes up a level because you're part of something again. This is a huge thing."- Gaynor, Pottery and Arts and Crafts Tutor, ACVC Hub.*

> *"For me, being here and being creative means a lot of things. It's giving me something to be a part of and there's new things happening all the time. It's almost like a job in a way - I come here and I can work on new things that I can then submit to exhibitions and things like that."- Project Ability Reconnects member.*

> *“What I like about here, is if sometimes you’re having a bad time, you can just sit there and do nothing. You know, as long as it gives you that reason to get out of the house and come here, that’s really important.” - Peter, Reconnects member at Project Ability.*

Participating in a creative group empowered members with a renewed sense of agency as they acquired new practical skills and achieved new goals. This process helped them rebuild self-esteem and develop confidence, fostering more resilient identities. Additionally, it enabled them to take on new roles within the group. Some members became instrumental in supporting newcomers by teaching craft skills or assuming leadership positions. For example, at ACVC Hub, some long-term members helped others to learn painting techniques and encouraged others to try new activities. Similarly, some members of City Writes took on facilitator roles as they progressed within the supportive environment. Engaging in a creative group allows individuals to channel their creativity and skills in a positive way that benefits them emotionally and socially.

> *“In terms of the creative side of things, in active addiction we were all very creative in finding ways to make money to get our substances. So if we could take that creativity and put it into a group and try new things, that would be positive. You’ll find that a lot of people that are in active recovery are very creative people.”- Chris, City Writes member.*

Emotional Competencies

Participating in a creative group helped members to develop essential mental and emotional competencies that are crucial for managing stress and promoting good mental health and emotional self-regulation. Many creative group members and organisers highlighted the therapeutic benefits of engaging in creative activities which helped calm the mind and provide a sense of focus. This allowed individuals to concentrate on something enjoyable, diverting attention from distressing or stressful thoughts. The intense focus on a pleasurable and tactile task often enabled members to clear their minds and be present in the moment, a rare experience for many who experienced mental ill-health.

“Being creative improves your patience, concentration and mindfulness, you’re ‘in the moment’. And with creative practice it's physical - you've got the smells, physical touch, sight, all your senses are engaged. And I think that's really grounding for people, it definitely improves people's focus, you can get in the zone. You can see people - they're concentrating, the cogs are going. And I'm talking from lived experience, I couldn't focus on anything but when I did the pottery, I focused - and you can see that with these guys.” - Gaynor, Pottery and Arts and Crafts Tutor, ACVC Hub.

“I think we realised very early on the power of the sort of mindfulness that comes from doing art or being creative. Your mind can sort of wander a bit but your hands are doing something tangible. And in particular I think it’s probably really nice for women who don’t speak fluent English to have a task that’s not affected by what level of English they speak.”- Gabby, Founder of MILK.

“Being creative takes your mind off a lot of things that you wish you could forget about forever. I remember when I was going through a really tough time, I had nothing to do - and then as soon as I started doing art, the thoughts went away. I overthink about things but it takes my mind away from everything, just the colours and everything.”- Project Ability Reconnects Member.

Some group members who had previously struggled with alcohol and/or drug issues, or those with anxiety, shared that the frantic pace of life made learning to do something slowly and patiently a difficult but rewarding skill to master, but one which helped them fully appreciate each moment. Some members also mentioned that participating in a creative group gave them a new thrill, similar to the positive feelings they had sought through their alcohol and drug use. It provided them with a fresh sense of excitement as they learned new skills and discovered new parts of themselves.

“Creative writing takes me away from my own head, it makes me feel part of an unknown society, it gives me a secret wee club, because you don’t hear about it often. You get a thrill from it, and as an addict that’s what you chase, you chase a thrill, you want something new, something exciting, something that gives you a bit of oomph and a spring in your step, like saying ‘I was able to do that!’.”- Jody, member of City Writes.

Joy and relaxation

Many group members highlighted the profound joy that participating in creative activities brought them. They described feeling pleasure, relaxation, and happiness. Engaging in their chosen creative pursuits with like-minded individuals and often doing something tactile with their hands provided a welcome reprieve from everyday stresses. This sense of lightness was often one of the few, if not the only, times they experienced such a positive emotional state. For many, the time they spent on creative activities was their only opportunity to relax and take a break from other responsibilities and worries. This was the sole time they dedicated to themselves, providing a moment of respite in their busy lives and allowing them to recharge. This helped many become more resilient and feel able to cope with challenges they faced in their lives. In this way, it was seen as a lifeline, with many stating they didn't know where they would be without it.

“I think there are loads of ways that people benefit from creativity. But I would say the main ones are confidence and joy in doing something. You’ve made something pretty at the end of it, that’s a really nice feeling, especially when you’re having a hard time and you’ve got a lot going on. I think it would be naïve to say these women are going through the asylum process and their kids might be deported, but look they made a rag rug and their life is complete! I don’t mean it like that. But I do think it’s a chance for them to switch off and do something normal and have a laugh.”- Gabby, Founder of MILK.

“It just makes me happy, I guess. It was actually just recently that I realised the only thing that makes me happy is art.”- Project Ability Reconnects member.

“We’ve all got different circumstances, and it gets you out of that environment. For myself, my mum’s got vascular dementia so it allows me to get away from that environment for two or three hours, which gives me my own time and helps me cope with that. So, for my mental health, it helps being here, doing stuff that takes attention away from that turmoil I’ve got at home and allows me to put it on the backburner until I go home and start dealing with it again.”- Daniel, ACVC Hub member.

“With art, I feel it should be open to everybody. I believe art is the best medication you can get for mental health.”- Peter, Reconnects member at Project Ability.

Barriers to Participating in Creative Groups for Individuals with Mental Health Difficulties

This section of the report outlines the primary barriers to participating in creative groups, as described by members with lived experience of mental health challenges. Additionally, it highlights the obstacles that creative group organisers face in making their spaces and activities accessible and inclusive for group members with mental health difficulties.

Barriers for Group Members with Mental Health Difficulties

Challenges Posed by Mental Health Difficulties

Many group members and organisers highlighted the additional challenges of attending a creative group faced by individuals living with mental health conditions and disabilities, due to their symptoms or specific features of their condition. For instance, symptoms associated with anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or complex PTSD were noted to potentially hinder their ability to engage fully in the creative group environment. Noisy, chaotic environments bustling with movement, frequent disruptions, and sudden changes, coupled with physically cramped spaces and distracting surroundings, including large windows that create a sense of being observed, could be particularly distressing for some. Subsequently, when the environment was not specifically tailored to accommodate these needs, it could lead to feelings of insecurity and prevent individuals from feeling sufficiently comfortable to fully relax and participate in the activities.

“Hypervigilance is a barrier. I suffer with that a lot, and a lot of the guys here do. It's basically looking at walls, looking at windows, looking at sniper spots, looking around at things like that. If it's an open space, it's more relaxing and calmer.”- Founder of ACVC Hub.

“I noticed that when it was a café, there would be people who had fled violence who really found the space to be too much. I wondered if it was just so noisy, and with people coming in and out it just felt like quite a vulnerable place to be, so it’s definitely not for everyone. And with the window, someone said to me yesterday it was like a big TV screen - I do think it does sometimes feel like a fish bowl. So, it’s not a suitable space for everything.” – Gabby, founder of MILK.

Likewise, the unpredictability of unfamiliar surroundings could pose a challenge for individuals living with mental health difficulties and disabilities. Several expressed the considerable effort required to acclimate to new physical environments, with some needing extra time to adapt. The uncertainty surrounding what to expect, the unfamiliarity of the setting, the presence of unknown individuals, and concerns about acceptance could all exacerbate distress for some individuals.

“We had one man who was autistic, and coming in the front door at Trongate to getting into the studio could take him anything from 20 to 40 minutes, just transitioning through the different spaces in the building. And then leaving it was equally as challenging, getting him to transition back through the different spaces in the building. And we had one woman who was very similar, she couldn't get out of the lift - she got into it but couldn't get out. Something about the transition of moving from one space to another was hard for her.”- Elisabeth, Executive Artistic Director at Project Ability.

Some members expressed that fluctuating physical and mental health posed challenges in consistently participating in a creative group. While they were eager to attend and be a part of the creative community, there were times when they felt unable or overwhelmed. This unpredictability made regular attendance difficult. Chronic illnesses exacerbated feelings of social isolation and frustration, limiting their ability at times to fully engage in creative and social activities. Managing both physical and mental health conditions simultaneously presented a significant barrier to participation.

> *“Alongside the mental health stuff, I've got chronic fatigue. So physically getting out can be tough. Over the pandemic, we did online stuff and that was great. I was there for all of those because I could be in my pyjamas, it was fine. And so there have been a few blocks where I've just been really unwell and getting in was too much.”- Bel, Reconnects member at Project Ability.*

Lack of Representation

Another potential barrier to participating in creative groups was a lack of representation among members or leadership. This issue was particularly significant for specific communities, such as veterans and individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds. Creative group members emphasised the importance of seeing themselves reflected in the group and feeling that their experiences were represented in leadership decisions. For members with mental health difficulties, it was especially important that their creative community and group organisers could relate to their experiences.

> *“Some veterans won't talk to you because you're a civvy. You're wasting your time until there is no barrier there. I'm not saying you have to have a military background to help veterans, but in order to start the conversation, I would say you need another veteran to at least be present. And it's not just veterans, I think that's true in life. If you want to engage with somebody, first of all you need to have that rapport, or else there really is no meaning.”- Jo, ACVC Hub member.*

“Seeing themselves in other participants definitely helps. Not feeling like the only brown person in the space or the only person who doesn’t speak fluent English.”- Gabby, Founder of MILK.

Some members shared that they had left other creative groups due to a lack of representation of people with similar experiences or backgrounds. They felt this created barriers in communication and led to frequent misunderstandings. For example, veterans emphasised the importance of having group organisers who understood their dark humour or “banter” as a way to bond over shared experiences, including mental health challenges. Sharing these experiences in a light-hearted way fostered solidarity among group members and had a therapeutic quality, especially for those who felt unable to discuss their experiences with family or others who didn’t share their background. When they couldn’t engage in this form of humour, it created tension and a sense of stigma and restrictiveness, making them feel alienated from the group.

“Be prepared for the banter, the chat is going to be quite brutal. You get nurses, you get ambulance people, you get fire service and stuff like that. Some of the topics can be very, very dark.”- Founder of ACVC Hub.
“In other groups I’ve found it quite challenging, especially groups that are run by civilians who don't understand the army. They don’t understand the banter, the dark side, you know? Whereas here Allen understands it because he’s military too. The banter is fantastic and it’s like a big family.” – Johnny, ACVC Hub member.

Transport and Parking

Transport to and from creative spaces was a consistent barrier mentioned by group members and organisers. Many members, especially those already experiencing marginalisation, found transportation to be inaccessible, significantly impacting their ability to attend creative groups regularly. For many, the cost of public transport was simply too high, and their circumstances meant that free travel was not an option.

“In a completely practical, tangible way, free bus passes would transform the lives of lots of people. They [refugees, asylum seekers] don’t get them and the buses in Glasgow are extortionate, it’s the most expensive bus travel in Europe I think. We do give bus passes when we have them, but I don’t think someone who was really financially vulnerable would take that risk, and also might not have the money in the first place. You need the £5.50 to get it back and sometimes we don’t have it.”- Gabby, Founder of MILK.

“Disabled parking in the city centre is a big issue. King Street, which is near here, used to have parking bays on both sides and they put in a cycle path - so all the parking bays got taken away, including two disabled bays. And that is really, really needed. And they put two in down here, which told us they were going to do when we raised it as an issue, but this street is a dead end and if there's any construction or filming going on in the area, the street gets used as a dumping ground so half the year, it's inaccessible. So, it's not really a solution. And it's across the city, as they try to stop traffic coming into the city - but it's also stopping disabled people from coming into the city, and people feel really strongly about it. People depend on their blue badge to get around and there's just less and less parking spaces for them. So, it's a real barrier to people accessing the space and accessing the city centre.”- Elisabeth, Executive Artistic Director at Project Ability.

This issue of inaccessible transport prevented many people from accessing the benefits of participating in a creative group. For those already living in poverty with limited access to resources, attending a creative group was simply not a priority over other basic necessities in life. Additionally, for those with access to a car, finding accessible parking posed another significant challenge. This was seen as a city-wide problem; as urban development progresses, the needs of individuals requiring disabled parking are often overlooked. Consequently, even those who could drive themselves were sometimes unable to attend the group due to lack of suitable parking. This reflected a broader issue of

many urban spaces being designed without considering the needs of disabled individuals. Moreover, transport access, pricing, and requirements for free or discounted travel often failed to consider the needs of the most vulnerable populations in the city.

A further issue related to transport was that many creative group members with mental health difficulties often found navigating public transport to be very stressful and overwhelming. As a result, even when they could afford it, for some individuals public transport might not be a viable option.

> *"We invited one of our members in a few times during Glasgow International Festival to talk to people in the gallery. He lives just outside Glasgow and I knew had a bus pass and was on a good bus route and train service. So I assumed he was getting the bus in, but he's actually been getting taxis which cost him £32 pounds each time. It turns out he doesn't like to go on the bus by himself, it's just a step too far. I've known him for 10 years but I didn't know that. Obviously, we'll reimburse his taxi fares, but I should know better than to make those kinds of assumptions. So you just learn from that, I won't assume again if I ask somebody to come in that they've going to use the bus."- Elisabeth, Executive Artistic Director at Project Ability.*

> *"I'll never do public transport, and it's mainly down to the fact that it's unpredictable with other people. When you're ex-military you've got a hyper-sensitivity and you're hypervigilant, even in an environment like this. It's because of the unpredictability of other people - the hypervigilance kicks straight in. I normally stand nearest the exits, so I assess that as soon as I walk in. So public transport is tough, it's just a no no for me."- Daniel, ACVC Hub member.*

This was a very common theme for those with mental health challenges. A lack of understanding around the difficulties some members with mental health challenges and disabilities face just travelling to and from a creative space could be a significant reason why someone chose not to attend, even when the group environment itself was accessible, friendly, and engaging. Unlike those without mental health challenges or disabilities, individuals living with these experiences had many additional obstacles to consider before they even arrived at a creative space, making their journey much more complicated and challenging. Additionally, poverty could compound the issues around mental health challenges and public transport. If someone was unable to afford taxis, did not have access to a car, was unable to drive and found public transport too overwhelming to navigate, they simply could not attend and were cut off from all the benefits of accessing a creative space. This increased the risk of further social isolation. This was very frustrating for many individuals who had a strong desire to take part in these creative communities.

Learning to Play Again

Some creative group members initially struggled to engage in creative activities due to a fear of failure or making mistakes. They found it challenging to feel confident and comfortable being beginners in a new activity and allowing themselves to experiment within new creative activities. While this is common for many people, this struggle was amplified for individuals living with mental health difficulties and grappling with low self-esteem, or individuals coming from marginalised backgrounds, especially those who had experienced poverty.

> *“If you look at kids, most kids before life gets in the way, they tend to be naturally expressive and creative and inquisitive. And life kind of knocks all that out of you. Life has a way of stopping you from expressing yourself.”- Jo, ACVC Hub member.*

“I think there’s a real fear for a lot of people, particularly if they’ve grown up in real poverty where they’ve had to work when they were young or haven’t really played as much, I think they can be a bit reticent and feel ‘I don’t know how to do this’. Because I suppose it’s a privilege of having a childhood where you were allowed to do whatever you wanted - if you’ve not had that then it can be quite a difficult thing to get your head around. The privilege of being allowed to play is something that I don’t think many people think about. Just picking up an instrument or a football or whatever and not worrying too much about whether you can do it or not. People’s value on time is different depending on what your economic circumstances are.”- Gabby, founder of MILK.

“You really can lose the joy and put this huge pressure on yourself to come up with a masterpiece, and then if it falls even slightly short, it’s like everything is rubbish.”- Bel, Reconnects member at Project Ability.

For individuals with mental health difficulties, embracing vulnerability and trying new things often required a considerable leap of faith, particularly in light of past experiences of criticism or discrimination. It was crucial for other group members and organisers to recognise this, as their hesitation to engage in activities might mistakenly be perceived as disinterest, whereas it stemmed from genuine fear and apprehension. Understanding this dynamic was essential for fostering a supportive and inclusive environment within a creative group.

Lack of Technological Literacy and Reluctance to Use Technology

Limited access to current technology, such as phones and computers, lack of computer literacy, or apprehension about using digital tools could hinder individuals with mental health difficulties and disabilities. This may result in them being unable to stay informed about creative group activities, events, classes, and workshops, and unable to use online booking systems. Some group organisers noted that medication-related memory issues could contribute to difficulties with technology, while others highlighted concerns about social media exacerbating vulnerability to misinformation among more susceptible individuals.

> *“A lot of people still have quite old technology, they don't have smartphones. So sometimes there's a real issue with some of the art exhibition opportunities, where they haven't really thought through the access to it. The Royal Scottish Academy has an annual open exhibition, which is a big deal for Scottish artists and it's completely inaccessible to somebody that has no computer literacy at all. People just don't realise, they assume that everyone in the world has a basic level of understanding and it really is not the case. Our exhibition organisers submit people's work on their behalf sometimes, because you need an email and a lot of people will not have an email.”- Elisabeth, Executive Artistic Director at Project Ability*

> *“I think a lot of people have memory issues. And again, a lot of that's because of medication for their illness. So even if you go over something 20 times, it doesn't stick. And I know that during COVID, digital division was a big issue - and everybody talked about it then but it’s not being talked about any longer. It's just like, yeah, everything's fine now. But people with learning disabilities can really struggle to communicate electronically. We’re booking for this summer term and we’ve put the booking form online and sent people the link as well as sending everybody a paper copy. And only one person out of 36 has completed the electronic booking form. As more and*

more is moving in that direction, it is going to leave a lot of people behind."- Elisabeth, Executive Artistic Director at Project Ability

Limited access to technology, along with low literacy or apprehension about digital communication, could prevent members with mental health challenges and disabilities from accessing the same opportunities as others. Many relied on staff support, but without this assistance, some individuals might be entirely excluded from participation.

Barriers for group organisers

Insecure Funding

One of the primary challenges faced by creative group organisers was navigating insecure funding. Several group organisers noted that the lack of funding security could be oppressive and hinder long-term planning. Adequate funding is crucial to making creative spaces more inclusive and accessible for individuals with mental and physical health challenges. It enables groups to secure larger premises, improve accessibility with features like lifts and disabled toilets, and hire translators to support members with language barriers. Additional funding would also allow for mental health training and regular involvement of trained professionals to better support those facing mental health difficulties. Some groups implemented small fees for their activities or for some parts of their activities in order to sustain them, but determining an appropriate fee for those already facing financial struggles posed a challenging dilemma for organisers. They had to balance financial sustainability with ensuring affordability for members, navigating a delicate balance to maintain the service while remaining accessible.

> *"For women with children, or women with mobility issues, this space is not great so it's definitely not for everyone. We wish it could be, but we just don't have the money. It would be amazing if we could have chairs that fold up and down and tables that could become miniscule and then huge. If we had infinite resources that's the kind of thing we'd do, but we don't. It would certainly be nice if it was more inclusive to people with kids and people in wheelchairs. For example, there was a lady who had a mobility device yesterday and it was fine, everybody squidged up. But there's a couple of other ladies with mobility issues and I thought if they'd all been here together, or we'd had people here with prams, then it would have been really tricky."- Gabby, Founder of MILK.*

“I think that for a space to be relaxing and for people to feel comfortable in it, you have to put some thought into that. But that costs time, money and resources that people don’t have. I just think that as services get cut, and as people have got less and less money and more and more to do, these sorts of organisations are going to really struggle to hit the note, because you need time. This project has taken years to build up with the help of so many people and it’s really hard to build a space like this.”- Gabby, Founder of MILK.

“The financial constraints on the organisation and on individuals that we work with, it has never been as hard as it is now. Reconnect is self-funded but it doesn't even wash its face, what we get in from the fees doesn't cover the costs of the programme. It’s the same across all the different programmes we run. It's a discussion we constantly have at board level, do we actually make it pay for itself? Does that make the fee too much for people and they then can't come? So that's self-defeating. We increased fees this financial year by a pound a day, so we went from £10 to £11 for a session, but to actually cover the cost we should have gone up to £15 and we just didn't feel that we could do that, it’s too high. So it’s really, really difficult.” - Elisabeth, Executive Artistic Director at Project Ability.

“It's difficult for long term planning as well. We have to plan exhibitions six or twelve months in advance, so that people know what they're working towards. But it's difficult to do that in such a shaky financial position. You have to just bury your head in the sand and go for it, but that's not a comfortable place to be.”- Elisabeth, Executive Artistic Director at Project Ability.

Writing funding applications consumes considerable time and resources that group organisers felt could otherwise be dedicated to running their group or supporting members. Many organisers also felt that funding applications were often overly focused on quantifiable metrics, which could be challenging when the impact of their work with people facing mental health challenges defies simple measurement. Group members

often expressed profound gratitude for their creative groups, citing the support, community, and numerous personal benefits they provide. However, translating these qualitative benefits into quantifiable outcomes suitable for funding applications could be challenging. It was difficult to fully convey the true essence and impactful nature of group organisers' work to funders who may not even visit their creative space before deciding whether to provide funding.

Some groups mentioned that funding could become an issue when funders and local councils redirected their support to specific new groups or communities. While these new communities were recognised as needing support, the sudden shift in priorities left previously funded groups ineligible for funding they had previously relied on and without resources. Additionally, the competitive nature of funding meant that many small groups doing similar work were vying for limited resources. It was suggested that these groups could benefit from collaborating to secure funding or specialising more distinctly from one another. However, small groups could feel pressured to offer a wide range of services to increase their chances of successfully securing funding, which hindered this. The lack of clarity and cohesion among these groups, coupled with differing approaches and aims, made collaboration challenging. Small grassroots creative groups could also feel overshadowed by larger, more established organisations and charities. There was a perception that these larger organisations received more funding but used it inefficiently, which was a source of frustration.

> *"A lot of charities get funding to interact with the public when we're doing it automatically. We want to be as self-sufficient as possible but we'll always need to have grants. It's not always a sure thing, though - we're constantly chasing to get funding for this place. Especially when you're in the middle of Glasgow, and you're up against another 7,000 charities. A lot of charities do a bit of everything, when really if you're a drop-in centre, be a drop-in centre, stop wasting money and doing other things when there are other charities around doing the same thing. And that's what I'm trying to encourage - because all I see is that we're wasting money. And then you've got bigger charities receiving millions a year and I*

could probably do 50 hubs with the amount of money they use. It feels like Tescos swallowing up all the corner shops, and the small charities seem to bicker amongst each other, because that's the way they've learned to try and get funded. If more charities work together, then they're more likely to get the funding."- Founder of ACVC Hub.

"I think most charities don't really have the capacity to be on it when it comes to linking up. We do link up with other agencies, even if it's just for a one-off, but that kind of solid partnership work needs someone whose job it is, and no one has the funding for that, not in the smaller organisations. To be able to solidify relationships between all these other organisations so we're not duplicating things and we're sharing resources. It's just so silly that we don't have that kind of tangible database that's always kept up to date, but that would be a full-time job in itself."- Gabby, Founder of MILK.

Dependence on Staff Members

A key strength of many groups was the wealth of knowledge, passion, compassion, and care that organisers brought to their interactions with group members who attended their creative spaces. This dedication made these organisations successful and encouraged individuals from various marginalised communities to return as they felt incredibly welcomed and supported and could see the heartfelt commitment of the organisers. Creative group organisers frequently went above and beyond their roles by assisting members with issues unrelated to the group's activities, such as helping them fill out forms, aiding members to secure transport, or connecting them with external support services. However, this often meant that the burden of compensating for gaps in services fell on a small number of group organisers. This situation could be a long-term strain for organisers and could lead to members becoming reliant on a few trusted individuals. If these individuals left the group or organisation, it could prevent members from returning as that bond had been lost.

“It feels impossible not to build up those relationships that are slightly more intimate, rather than just service users and service providers. And I think that’s what makes it quite successful, but also what makes it a bit of a vulnerable organisation in some ways, because it’s quite dependent on the individuals that work there. But I think that’s probably what makes it a place that a lot of the women come back to. I think what happens is we possibly try and do too much and then we get burnout. So it’s not perfect and I think that’s where boundaries could be better (laughs). But also, I think that’s why it works well. People know that about us - they know the people who work at MILK will do this extra thing if you ask them.”- Gabby, founder of MILK.

“It's about training people to work with different people. Because if you rely on one member of staff and then that staff member leaves, it’s like the end of the world and they can’t cope, it's like starting from the beginning.” – Founder of ACVC Hub.

The constant extra effort group organisers put into supporting group members, often with complex additional support needs, combined with insecure funding, could lead to burnout. Nonetheless, many organisers were determined to carry on, knowing the essential support they provided for many.

Inconsistent Engagement

Creative group organisers often acknowledged that inconsistent engagement from group members was a regular challenge, complicating long-term planning. They recognised that this inconsistency was often due to members’ mental health difficulties or personal life stresses. Some organisers mentioned the extra effort required on their part to build rapport and actively reach out to members, encouraging them to return. This added workload was necessary just to get members through the door sometimes.

“You'll get guys and girls who have come in for a couple weeks, and then they'll disappear for three or four months. But then they'll come back for a couple more weeks, and then disappear. Again, it all depends on what's going on in their life.”- Founder of ACVC Hub.

“We’ve got a core group, which has its good points and its bad points, and there are folk that dip in and out. Lots of people you need to really target them and text them if they fall off - so yeah, the trail of doing that every week because I really notice when they don’t come.” – Gabby, founder of MILK.

Despite this inconsistency, group organisers highlighted the value of arts and crafts in drawing back members who had disappeared. Having a core focus on art and creative activities provided a consistent and reliable interest area for members, regardless of what else was on offer. Organisers needed to be flexible and responsive to members’ preferences, maintaining a proactive stance to keep them engaged. This willingness to switch back to popular art-based activities was a key part of the member retention strategy and crucial to maintaining long-term engagement, especially for those who found it too overwhelming to engage with more diverse or health-focused activities.

“It’s primarily art-based, so we’ll always come back to art. We will occasionally do things like women’s health or poetry or something. But if we want people to come back, if they’ve sort of petered out with some of the more niche stuff, then we’ll always be like okay we’re doing crochet or painting or mandalas or whatever and they will come back.” – Gabby, founder of MILK.

Need for Volunteers Creating Additional Work

Volunteers at creative groups and charities were an invaluable resource, bringing a wide variety of skills, energy, fresh perspectives and benefits to creative groups. Volunteering was often essential for launching new creative spaces, and the local community involvement it demonstrated was crucial for sustainable growth. However, group organisers had to invest significant time recruiting volunteers, advertising opportunities, and developing volunteering programmes that benefited both the volunteers and the creative group. Finding volunteers with the right skills - both in terms of artistic abilities and knowledge, and the capacity to support potentially vulnerable members - was a time-consuming process. Developing and delivering training to new volunteers could also be challenging due to limited time and funding. Additionally, once volunteers were on board, organisers, already often stretched thin with running the group and supporting regular members, had the added responsibility of managing and supporting new volunteers.

> *"In the beginning when it was just me and Angela, we couldn't have done it without volunteers. Now slightly less so, but you need that community engagement. You don't want the same four people chatting to you day in day out, it's really nice to have fresh blood and those different perspectives. We've got volunteers who are 20 and ones who are 70, it's a really nice mix. Different people that come through the doors to support the project is what makes it feasible in lots of different ways. But I also think there's this concept that people volunteering makes your job easier, and it doesn't. Especially in the beginning, we could have done everything twice as fast without volunteers, but there's that ownership of a project, and confidence building, seeing yourself reflected in a project that's really important." – Gabby, Founder of MILK.*

Case studies

This section of the report presents information about the creative groups that have contributed to this research. It offers an overview of their aims, creative activities, and the strategies they have implemented to address some of the barriers discussed in the previous section. The groups featured in this report encompass a diverse spectrum, ranging from grassroots initiatives to well-established charities, all with a common aim of supporting vulnerable individuals using creativity. Each group demonstrates multiple strengths, often overlapping, and employs a range of effective approaches tailored to meet the needs of individuals who attend.

Case study 1 - ACVC Hub

ACVC Hub is a dedicated arts and crafts woodworking hub for veterans experiencing mental health challenges, and the wider veteran community. The hub aims to offer a safe, supportive environment where veterans and their families can find balance and healing through creativity. Through promoting engagement with a wide range of arts and crafts activities, ACVC Hub aims to:

- Reduce social isolation by connecting members with other veterans and a wider supportive community.
- Alleviate symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and prevent suicide among the veteran community by promoting positive mental health practices and connecting members with appropriate support services and various other charities.
- Foster learning of new skills and continued personal development, enhancing overall wellbeing and resilience.
- Raise awareness of the challenges facing veterans and their families.

The hub is run by Allen Clarke and Gaynor Etta, who both have lived experience of poor mental health and are passionate advocates for the veteran community. They believe in the transformative power of creativity for healing. The hub was founded in 2018 based on Allen's own experiences of navigating mental health challenges after his military service. Through first-hand experience of the difficulties veterans face when adjusting to civilian life and the gaps in available support for veterans, Allen created the hub as a place for veterans to come together, support each other, and engage in creative activities to enhance their mental health. Gaynor later joined him, bringing her expertise in pottery, and now serves as the arts and crafts tutor at the hub.

Based in the Govan area of Glasgow, ACVC Hub offers an extensive range of creative activities for its members. These include but are not limited to, pyrography, woodwork, painting, drawing, model building and painting sessions, needle felting, crochet, knitting, as well as clay work and pottery, provided in association with the Scottish Potters Association. Additionally, the hub also hosts various tabletop gaming events throughout the week, such as the Wargaming Reaper Club and ACVC Wargaming Fellowship. These provide opportunities for Warhammer and historic model painting sessions, gameplay, and tournaments.

The hub also organises monthly history talk sessions where members can deliver presentations on historical topics they are passionate about or knowledgeable in. These sessions can involve costumes, memorabilia, tools, weapons, and re-enactment props, creating an engaging and interactive experience. These evenings not only allow members to participate in stimulating discussions, but also provide a supportive environment to practise public speaking skills. These evenings are also supported by trustees associated with Glasgow Warhammer.

Members primarily learn about ACVC Hub through word of mouth. Many veterans first hear about the hub via existing connections with veteran community support organisations. Additionally, some members mentioned being encouraged to attend by family members.

How ACVC Hub Supports Individuals with Mental Health Difficulties

Open and inclusive approach: ACVC Hub is unique in that it offers a welcoming and engaging creative space not only for individuals with military backgrounds, but also for their carers, family members, and spouses. This inclusive approach provides multiple benefits for both veterans and their loved ones. Family members and carers can play a crucial role in supporting veterans who are living with mental health difficulties. By allowing carers and family members to participate in creative activities alongside veterans, the hub helps strengthen veterans' support networks and build deeper, more supportive relationships. Attending the hub also helps family members gain a greater understanding and awareness of the challenges veterans face. It provides them with the opportunity to meet other ex-military individuals who may share similar experiences, as well as connect with the families of these individuals. Including them is also beneficial because family members and spouses can encourage veterans in their creative activities, which subsequently increases the likelihood that veterans will continue to attend and engage with the support on offer, even when experiencing periods of heightened mental distress.

> *"It's about getting people in to distract them and also opening it up to spouses and carers. A lot of [veterans] charities won't let the carers in or the spouses, but actually spouses have to put up with us just as much as everyone else. And also, the carers and family members will interact with them and encourage it [creative activities] when they're back home if they're having a bad day." – Founder of ACVC Hub.*

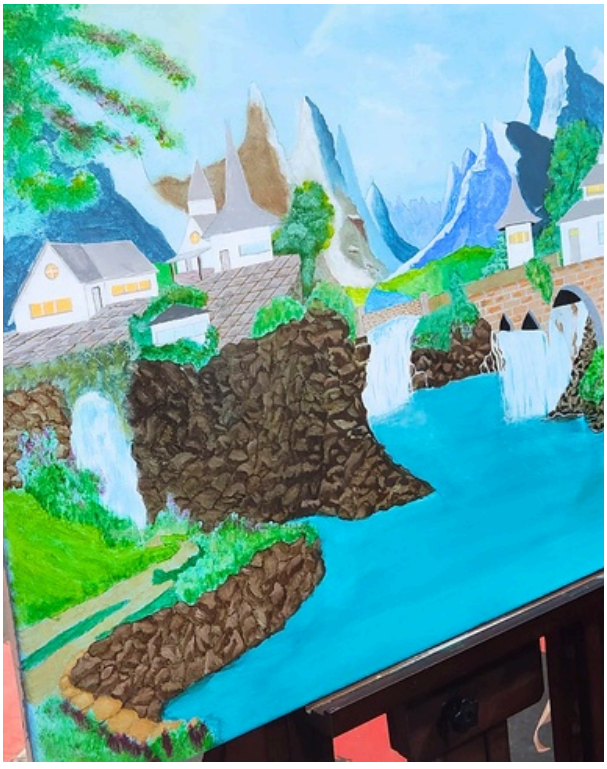
> *"It also lets your family members know where you are. My daughter, mum and sister know I'm here and what I do. It lets them know you're in a safe environment, they know where we are and they know that if anything happens we're in capable hands."- Daniel, ACVC Hub member.*

“It was my daughter who gave me a push to try to do something. I didn’t want to do other things, I was just in the house and that didn’t help. So my daughter was like why don’t you try this place and do art? She put me in touch with someone who put me in touch with Allen.”- Benny, ACVC Hub member.

“When he first came here, he'd be like, no, no, I just need to chill out. But then when his daughters were here one day he just decided to do something himself. He started making something and he found he actually quite liked it. So then he made a whole set of toadstool houses with the pottery and he's loving it. Now he comes in on his own without his daughters. So having his daughters helped him come here, he wouldn’t have done that if it wasn’t for them. So it's incredible how they help each other. And then they can take art work home as a family and talk about it, they’ve got a shared interest.”- Gaynor, Pottery and Arts and Crafts Tutor, ACVC Hub.

For carers and family members, attending the hub provides a supportive community where they can unwind and participate in therapeutic creative activities for their own wellbeing. Often forgotten, family members of veterans also experience stress and challenges as they support their loved one to adjust to civilian life, many of whom return home with additional physical and psychological support needs and mental health challenges. This inclusive environment helps carers and family members learn how to provide effective support in addition to coping with their own experiences.

Furthermore, the wider veteran community aids ex-military individuals in acclimating to civilian life. Many ACVC members discussed the difficulties of desensitising themselves after years of training and combat exposure. The hub provides a safe and friendly environment where veterans can develop new creative skills and gain confidence, while socialising with both fellow veterans and non-veterans which helps them to forge a new sense of identity and integration post-military service.



Representation: Many ACVC Hub members emphasised the importance of having group leaders with military experience who understood their challenges. ACVC Hub is led by individuals with military backgrounds who have personally navigated mental health journeys and the support services available for veterans, as well as recognising the gaps in available support. However, care is taken to prevent hierarchical structures based on members' former military ranks. Everyone is afforded equal opportunities to shape decision-making processes, fostering a culture of mutual respect. This shared experience promotes trust and connection between members and group organisers, ensuring members feel represented in decision making processes.

> *"We've got a common interest, so if anyone else wants to take part, they only have to ask for help. I tell these guys more than I tell my wife because I trust these guys, they've been there and they've done it, and it's nice to have that there as a safety net."- David, ACVC Hub member.*

> *"Here everybody's in the same boat, we're all military, so everybody knows where everybody else is coming from and that makes a big difference. But we're all the same, regardless of level, whether you're a private or a sergeant or whatever, everybody is the same here."- Benny, ACVC Hub member.*

Huge variety of activities and flexibility: Group organisers strive to offer a wide range of creative activities for members to explore. Members are encouraged to try various activities and have complete control over their participation, deciding which activities to continue with and allowed to work at their own pace. The hub also provides art kits and take-home projects for members to complete at home if desired. Additionally, the hub also hosts numerous social activities to help members build their social networks. While members may initially join for the creative activities, they can quickly become engaged in social events that boost their confidence, provide focus, and foster meaningful friendships that can form a positive support network.

Understanding members' challenges and being adaptable: Organisers recognise the mental and physical challenges that many members' face and strive to be flexible and adaptable to meet their needs. ACVC Hubs provides a welcoming and supportive atmosphere where members are free to come and go as they please, knowing the door is always open to them. Lunch is provided for members and organisers regularly support members to access transport to attend the hub. A key strength of ACVC Hub is its commitment to making activities accessible for all members.

This often involves adapting traditional methods of working and creating to support members with diverse disabilities, such as learning techniques to work with clay and create pottery using one hand, or painting without relying on sight. If certain activities are inaccessible due to a member's disability, organisers make every effort to help them find alternatives. Members are also encouraged to work at their own pace and are supported to participate at a level that feels comfortable for them.

As they develop confidence and new skills, they are gradually introduced to more challenging activities at a level that is appropriate and comfortable for them. Working in this way empowers members, helps them gain new abilities, and supports them to develop resilience.

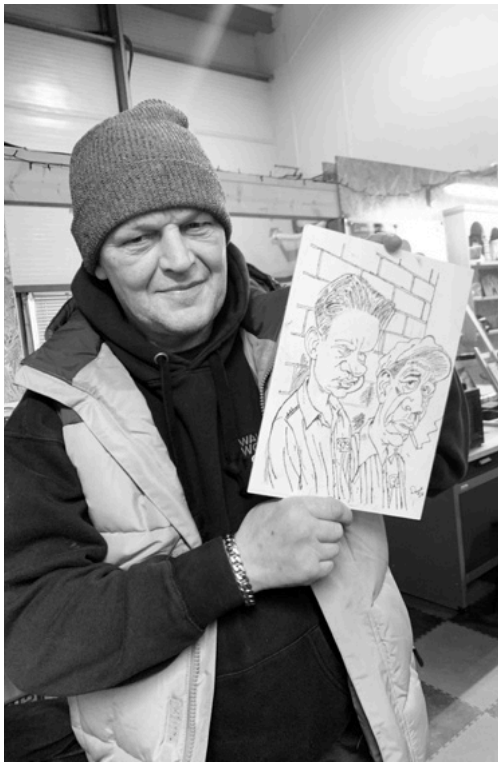
> *"There are no expectations, you do it at your own pace and we'll find simplified things or more complex things depending on the person's needs. So for example Johnny only has one arm, so, when I taught him pottery a few years ago I only used one arm for everything I showed him, that's how I taught him. Quite a few of them have got a leg missing, some of them are wheelchair users, and some have limited use of their limbs, so they need extra support in that way. We've also got people who are hard of hearing, or who've got sight loss problems in one or both eyes - so pyrography is not so suitable for them, but they can still do painting. And pottery is very physical and tactile, so they can get their hands on that. And teaching someone who can't see, that's improved me as a potter, as a tutor and as a person, because I have to explain it very differently. I even close my eyes when I'm doing my own work, because a lot of it's about the touch."- Gaynor, Pottery and Arts and Crafts Tutor, ACVC Hub.*

Linking and collaboration with other groups and charities: A further strength of ACVC Hub is its well-established partnerships. Partnering with other charities and creative groups allows each organisation to leverage the expertise of others, helping members address diverse needs and engage in a broader range of creative and supportive activities. This creates a larger network of wrap-around support for individuals, aiding those with mental health difficulties in accessing a wide range of services and preventing over-reliance on a small number of individuals. For example, ACVC Hub works with charities like Walking with the Wounded, enabling members to participate in group hiking expeditions and various outdoor activities. This is important because individuals experiencing mental health difficulties often face long waitlists for clinical support and this approach helps to provide comprehensive support and a sense of community around them in the meantime.

Thoughtfully designed creative space: ACVC Hub is a spacious, thoughtfully designed environment that offers members a sense of safety and comfort. The welcoming space features areas for relaxation, where people can watch TV, play games, areas to make tea and coffee or take a moment to themselves if they feel overwhelmed. The large communal workspaces encourage interaction and collaboration among members.

“The space here is open plan so people don't feel claustrophobic, everyone can see what everyone else is doing. When new members come in, they'll probably look around and then sit on the sofa, just relaxing, having a brew and something to eat. But then they'll start looking over their shoulder to see what other people are doing. On their second visit they might do the same, but by the third or fourth time they’re in, they get up and start doing something. Once they’re at that table, then that's it, they'll have a go at everything.” – Founder of ACVC Hub.

“You just have to look at the environment we’re in. This is a big space, it’s not enclosed, you’ve got quiet music in the background. It’s a quiet environment, unless there’s woodwork and then it’s noisy as hell! It’s just dead relaxed, there’s nobody shouting and if people do shout it’s usually because there’s hilarity and they’re having a laugh.”- David, ACVC Hub member.



Case study 2 - MILK

MILK is a grassroots social enterprise, catering company, and community space in the Southside of Glasgow. It supports women from a migrant background, including refugees and asylum seekers. Founded in 2015 by Gabby Cluness and Angela Ireland, who were inspired by their experiences of delivering ESOL teaching in South and Central America, MILK is a multifunctional community space that seeks to provide a safe and welcoming environment promoting integration and anti-racist practices within the community.

MILK also offers the space for hire to other groups and individuals who share its values, hosting a variety of local groups, classes, workshops and pop-up events. This encourages partnership working and strong links with the local community and ensures that a wide array of creative and engaging activities is always available to those supported by MILK. Given that asylum seekers are five times more likely than the general population to have mental health needs and over 61% will experience severe mental distress but receive less support than the general population, MILK aims to:

- Minimise stress, reduce isolation, and build relationships among the New Scots community.
- Provide emotional support and offer friendship to new members of the community.
- Provide practical assistance to women and children.
- Challenge stereotypes and prejudices about refugees and asylum seekers.
- Increase access to other support services across Glasgow.
- Promote anti-discriminatory and anti-racist practice in all business and other activities.

MILK originally functioned as a social enterprise café which provided English language classes and work skills training in the kitchen for women from migrant backgrounds. However, it was quickly understood that the women who engaged with this space most needed a gathering space where they could create a sense of community and social connection, rather than a work placement. The café therefore transitioned into a more informal space where women could engage increative activities, bake, socialise, or simply relax. MILK is now a full-time community space which offers a range of activities and classes, including ESOL conversation classes, an open mic night for those with mental health difficulties, free community meals, a regular women's group which provides creative and arts and crafts activities, a children's art group, a refugee cycling group, mindfulness sessions and chair yoga, herbal remedy workshops, creative writing, a conversation café and regular open advice sessions. These activities are open to the wider community, but are primarily aimed at women from migrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking backgrounds, and therefore are protected spaces for these women.

> *"The idea is that it's always something relevant to, or pleasurable for, the women who come. So, we might go for a really nice walk and pick some flowers, or we might have henna sessions or something like that." – Gabby, founder of MILK.*

People learn about MILK through various channels. Word of mouth is common, with migrant and refugee women already attending encouraging others in their communities to join them. Referrals also come from other refugee support organisations, health visitors, and local community health centres. Additionally, MILK engages in active outreach to attract new attendees.

How MILK Supports Individuals with Mental Health Difficulties

Encouraging peer support groups: MILK enables migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking women who have faced marginalisation and discrimination to build a positive sense of community. This creative space allows them to connect with each other and the local community in Glasgow. The women are supported in forming connections with others who share similar experiences, fostering a sense of belonging for those who are displaced and often fleeing violence. Activities are also tailored to the interests of the women, such as organising fundraising events for Palestine and providing sessions for advice and practical support. Attendees are encouraged to share knowledge, celebrate their cultures, and participate in cooking community meals together, enhancing the communal spirit and restoring dignity by providing a way for the women to feel they are giving back.

Cultivating a non-judgemental space for play: MILK provides a creative space that encourages experimentation and creation purely for joy and pleasure. For people who have experienced poverty or come from marginalised backgrounds, this can feel wasteful and carry high stakes. However, the mental health benefits are considerable. MILK fosters a safe atmosphere where women can experiment freely, make mistakes, and try new things without pressure to produce something useful or beautiful. This approach reintroduces play and light-heartedness into the lives of those often burdened with stress and insecurity.

> *“Some of the women loved cake making because we said make what you want and if it goes wrong, we don’t mind. Whereas when you’re cooking on a miniscule budget for your kids and you make mistakes they won’t eat it. But that kind of freedom to play is really important.” - Gabby, founder of MILK.*

> *“It’s just a very safe environment for people. Nobody ever laughs at anybody else, there are no expectations. And nobody’s going to go, ‘No we’re not putting that on the wall, it’s rubbish’. And I think that’s important.”- Gabby, founder of MILK.*

"I feel good when I come here. I can just draw and not think about anything else, all my problems can be forgotten at the door."- Women's Group Member at MILK.

Encouraging gradual progress: MILK supports women in gradually gaining confidence in creative activities by adopting a flexible responsive approach. Staff observe when certain activities may be too challenging and provide encouragement and simple, enjoyable creative activities that require minimal skill, allowing individuals to build confidence. This approach reassures women that they won't face criticism and helps them discover and develop new skills, fostering a sense of capability and progression. This also gives the women a sense of achievement when they can see the tangible results of their efforts.

"I think you just work at them, you just chip away at them. Every now and again we'll do colouring in and colouring in is something that most people will give a go even if they're sort of embarrassed to show you what they've coloured in."

“We’ll start with something really basic, then keep going and going until it’s progressed into something. We did rag rugging and some people just loved it but some others stopped coming - so we thought, OK, let’s reset. So we’ll do colouring in or pencil drawing, because that’s something most people will give a go even if they’re embarrassed to show you what they’ve coloured in. So I think you just persevere, you just keep encouraging people and try to find something that they’re good at, because most people are. It’s constantly surprising what people whip out when you least expect it.”- Gabby, founder of MILK.

"I did not think that I could do art when I was young, but now I enjoy it anyway. It makes me happy to see all the things that we make at MILK."- Women’s Group Member at MILK.

Inviting and visually appealing creative space: MILK has cultivated a warm, friendly, and inviting atmosphere. The space is bright, colourful and cosy and promotes relaxation and a strong sense of community, fostering interactions and connections among the attendees. Artwork created by attendees adorns the space, providing a reflection of their identities and reinforcing a feeling of home, safety, and belonging.

> *"I think they need ownership, that feels really important to some of them. They need a space that feels dignified and pleasurable. I went to meet someone this morning to take them to an ESOL class, and the space I picked them up from is a hostel that houses asylum speakers, and it was just so dark and dingy - whereas in here, it can be messy and a bit cold but it's always pretty. There are lots of things that we'd like to change here, but it does feel warm, metaphorically warm rather than technically, and like a home. So many institutional surroundings are unpleasant and if you're going through that asylum seeking process, when you don't have a home to retreat to, then I think spaces like this are important."- Gabby, founder of MILK.*

Emotional and practical support and understanding: MILK provides extensive practical support, including assisting with travel by providing bus tickets where possible, and dedicating considerable time to helping women with various administrative tasks such as form filling. They offer educational sessions with professionals like solicitors, teachers and health practitioners, covering topics such as immigration law, housing rights, women's health, and mental health. MILK also offers English language and IT classes to enhance digital literacy.

Beyond practical assistance, MILK provides emotional support with a compassionate approach, allowing individuals to progress at their own pace. They understand that attendees may be facing challenging circumstances that affect their participation, and strive to support community members, even if they do not qualify for specific programmes.

“If there’s someone we identify as struggling with the space when it’s busy, then we’ll say would you like to go for a walk in Queen’s park and we’ll have a chat? And I met a boy yesterday who can’t come to our groups, but somebody told me he was really struggling, so I met him and he’s hopefully going to come to our community meal. So I think we’re good at being flexible and trying to suit our sort of organisation to the needs of the individuals, within reason.”- Gabby, founder of MILK.

“I suppose it’s about putting yourself in someone else’s place. Because it would be really easy to sigh when someone is 40 minutes late, or they’ve not said please and thank you, or not made eye contact - the things that we emotively respond to. But you have to peel back and think OK, they don’t speak English, they perhaps can’t read, they’ve navigated a bus, they’ve got here, they’re worried because they don’t know anybody, and in their culture it’s rude to make eye contact. There are all these things, so it’s about trying to remember that and be as kind as you’re able to be.”- Gabby, founder of MILK.

Community network building: MILK actively builds partnerships with local creative and support organisations, and participates in activities that directly benefit the local area, aiming to offer diverse activities for regular attendees while fostering integration with the local community. This initiative challenges stereotypes about refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers, promoting familiarity and connection. By involving the local community, MILK ensures long-term support and sustainability of the space and activities for attendees. Additionally, collaborating with external local groups and individuals provides expertise in various areas that benefits attendees further.

“I think we’re really good at community network building in a grassroots way. We’ll make cakes for people’s raffles or attend community demonstrations or a litter pick. We’re good at actually doing things for the community and getting our faces seen, so people know about us and we get referred to a lot by individuals and other organisations.”- Gabby, founder of MILK.

“One of the things we did was accept at the beginning that we’re jack of all trades, master of none. So we just took advice and support from everyone, whether it was on the cooking side of things or engaging people from refugee communities. We said we don’t really know how to do this, we’re not experts, can you help us? And so many people have invested their time and support, so this has always been a very collaborative project.”- Gabby, founder of MILK.

Case study 3 - Project Ability

Project Ability is an inclusive arts studio and exhibition space based within Trongate 103, Glasgow. Dedicated to fostering a welcoming arts community, Project Ability focuses on empowering individuals with learning disabilities and mental ill-health. Since 1984, they have championed diversity within the contemporary visual arts sector, offering both the space and expertise for individuals to freely express themselves, develop confidence, and realise their potential. Through art, Project Ability strives to enhance the lives and wellbeing of people with disabilities and those experiencing mental health challenges.

Project Ability provides three core workshops tailored to diverse needs:

- Reconnect: an open studio for adults with lived experience of mental ill-health.
- Aspire: a visual arts programme for adults with learning disabilities.
- Create: an arts programme for children and young people with disabilities.

Additionally, Project Ability also hosts various projects masterclasses, and uses its gallery space and online platform to showcase the artworks created by members of their workshops. Through art, Project Ability aims to improve the lives and wellbeing of people with disabilities and experience of mental ill-health.

This case study will focus on members of the Reconnect project and their experiences. The Reconnect workshops are delivered annually in four 10-week terms, offering members access to a wide array of art materials and support from an arts tutor. Members can also use production facilities for printmaking, ceramics, painting and glass studios, and are welcomed into a community of creative individuals with similar experiences. Reconnect is a self-referred project, allowing individuals to define their own experiences without specific eligibility criteria.

Members often learn about Project Ability from their support workers, link workers, or other mental health professionals who recognise that engaging in arts and creativity may be therapeutic for them. The project then functions on a self-referral basis, with many people receiving assistance to apply.

> *"I had a support worker through CAMHS, with the Glasgow Association of Mental Health. She knew that I'd studied drama before I wanted to be a teacher, and said Project Ability was a creative space that I might enjoy. And at the time, I was super isolated, I wasn't getting out. I wasn't doing any of the stuff you need to do to have a decent quality of life."- Bel, Reconnects member at Project Ability.*

> *"I have some mental health issues like anxiety and depression, and I wasn't confident to do anything. My CBT therapist referred me here because she knew I loved art, and I was trying to find a space, somewhere where I could meet people, get to know other artists and create connections. And at first I had no motivation - I was trying to motivate myself and think just try it and see where it goes from there. So I came here for a trial week and I really enjoyed it."- Project Ability Reconnects Member.*

How Project Ability supports individuals with mental health difficulties

Allowing self-referral: Project Ability's Reconnects workshop operates on a self-referral basis, empowering individuals to define their own mental health experiences. Prospective attendees are invited to indicate any support they may require to enhance accessibility, without the need to disclose specific mental health conditions. This approach enhances inclusivity for individuals experiencing mental health difficulties, including those without formal diagnoses, granting them access to the space and necessary support without the obligation to disclose personal experiences unless they choose to do so. This policy effectively removes barriers associated with disclosure, promoting a welcoming and supportive environment for all participants.

> *"We don't define the criteria by which people choose to use the description of having lived experience of mental health. We will ask people if there is anything we need to know, and that's primarily concerning health conditions."- Elisabeth, Executive Artistic Director at Project Ability.*

> *"It's self-referred here and there's no criteria. You don't have to produce a sick note or show the medication that you're on. And I think that's great, because a lot of people don't get diagnoses but that doesn't mean they're not living with something. So, I think it takes a lot of pressure off."- Bel, Reconnects member at Project Ability.*

Thoughtfully designed creative space: Project Ability provides spacious studio spaces where individuals can work alongside their peers or work independently, fostering a serene and inviting atmosphere. To ensure the space is accessible for those with physical conditions and mobility issues, there is lift access and PAMIS changing places toilets. To accommodate the diverse needs of their attendees, the studio offers quiet areas for those who prefer to work silently when the environment feels overstimulating or overwhelming. This ensures that individuals who may face challenges in joining a creative group can feel welcomed and empowered to determine their level of engagement, freely choosing when to participate fully or step back from the group environment as necessary.

Furthermore, Project Ability strives to enhance inclusivity and accessibility by addressing potential barriers to accessing the space, such as anxiety and stress related to visiting a new place for the first time. They aim to provide additional video and printed materials to familiarise new members with the location and the studio, alleviating any stress associated with the initial visit.

> *"We're in the process of putting together new material around access information. Video information to show new people the space and how to enter, how to come in off Trongate, and some printed material around it as well, because it is a real challenge for people the first time."- Elisabeth, Executive Artistic Director at Project Ability.*

Allowing self-direction: Project Ability supports individuals with mental health difficulties by adopting a flexible approach. Members of the Reconnect workshop are encouraged to pursue their preferred projects at their own pace. Whether they wish to simply enjoy the studio atmosphere and experiment with different art materials for pleasure or progress to submitting artwork for exhibitions or solo gallery showings, they receive full support from staff. This approach ensures that individuals can engage comfortably in creative activities while also facilitating their integration into the visual arts field, with the support of staff to navigate any barriers they encounter.

> *"People work on their own doing projects, and we can give guidance if required. It might just be personal projects people are involved in, things they are making for family and friends. But we also have a full exhibition programme, so people know six or twelve months in advance that they can submit their work to it. There are opportunities for work to be exhibited in a venue outside of here, as well as Christmas shows. For some people exhibiting work and selling work is really important, for other people that's not a concern. We also try and encourage people to see what other opportunities are out there." - Elisabeth, Executive Artistic Director at Project Ability.*

“For me, coming here means I get new opportunities. There are new things happening all the time. I can work on something that I can then submit for exhibitions and things like that. When I first came here, it was just doing some art and then going away and that was it. But then there were these opportunities so it's like developing and basically progressing. I like when places do that, they don't just say you can do this and then go home. I like when they get you to develop personally or as an artist.”- Project Ability Reconnects Member.

“Something I've noticed about the students here is that rather than coming in to do a taught session, you just get on with your own stuff. And I know for a lot of people that actually opened up access for them, because there was no pressure to do anything specific. They can work on what they want, at the pace they want, and I think that works really well for some people. And they support you to go on to show your work outside if you want to, you can have this whole career going on. But if you just want to come in and do some painting because you enjoy it and have a chat, that’s OK too.”- Bel, Reconnects member at Project Ability.

“People feel they can engage or disengage as much as they’re comfortable with, there's no pressure. It's very much their space and they can use it in the way that works for them. And through evaluation we know that it helps keep people well, just knowing in your mind that you have this time and this opportunity. People that have been coming for maybe 10 years, who have an awful lot of self-awareness, who know themselves and their mental state very well, they understand how this can be a stabilising influence on them.”- Elisabeth, Executive Artistic Director at Project Ability.

Practical and emotional support to improve the accessibility of art and creativity: Project Ability supports its members in areas they may find challenging within the contemporary visual arts field. This includes helping them photograph their work for submissions and guiding them through the submission process. By offering personalised support and helping navigate potential barriers, Project Ability ensures that individuals do not miss out on opportunities, thereby making art and creativity more accessible. By providing this support they empower individuals to develop the necessary skills and confidence to independently make submissions in the future. Project Ability also provides a welcoming and friendly space where individuals are supported and encouraged to build confidence and experiment with creativity.

> *"There is an organisation in Paisley that does a lot of open call exhibitions, and over the last year we've been supporting people to submit to them. For some, it's quite straightforward - you have to photograph your work, go online and set up an account. But that can be too challenging for some people, they just don't know where to start and feel overwhelmed, so we support them through that process. For the current call out for submissions, we've held back and some people have submitted work all by themselves - and they've managed to do that because they've had that support in the past and are now able to do it with very minimal support."- Elisabeth, Executive Artistic Director at Project Ability.*

> *"They're so welcoming, they make sure you're comfortable and they encourage you. For example, one time I was working on something, but I was not motivated because I'm quite a perfectionist and my overthinking got to me. And Celine, instead of saying 'OK' and just moving on, said 'maybe you could try doing this?', she's always trying to find solutions to help me. They're so helpful and encouraging - nice and friendly as well."- Project Ability Reconnects Member.*

Involving members in decision making: Project Ability has established regular procedures for receiving feedback from workshops, and holds meetings where people can raise issues or ask questions. This approach ensures that the voices of individuals with disabilities and mental health difficulties are consistently included in decision making, reflecting their needs and preferences in the charity's activities.

> *"We do a lot of reporting and evaluation, and we try to make that as light touch as possible. We do an annual evaluation exercise across the whole organisation and that gives us a year-on-year changing picture of where people are and what they need. And that's really important to feed into what we're doing. With Reconnect, we have two meetings a year and there's no agenda, we just talk and see what people are thinking. It's an exchange of ideas and I think that's really important."- Elisabeth, Executive Artistic Director at Project Ability.*

Flexibility: Project Ability adopts a flexible approach with its Reconnect members, ensuring they can participate in creative activities regardless of any mental health challenges they may face. Their open-door policy allows people to attend when they feel able to and take breaks as needed, with the assurance that they are always welcome to return. Additionally, new members can attend with support figures to help them feel more comfortable. Project Ability accommodates individual needs, working around schedules and commitments where possible to ensure everyone feels part of a welcoming and supportive community even if they are unable to attend for periods due to mental health difficulties.

> *"For people on the Reconnect programme, just the effort it takes for people to come through the door the first time, it can be so incredibly challenging for people. So when we have groups like North West Mental Health, Glasgow Association for Mental Health or Glasgow Disability Alliance come in, that's quite a nice introduction to the space. Because then people are coming in with a group they already know, and it eases them into the space."- Elisabeth, Executive Artistic Director at Project Ability.*

“People take a couple of blocks off for life reasons and come back, it's not an issue. There's an understanding, especially when everyone's got a chronic illness of some description and you've got hospital treatments, psychiatric appointments and all of that stuff. But the nice thing is that even when those things get in the way, I've still managed to come back and I've never felt like I've been forgotten.”- Bel, Reconnect Member, Project Ability.

Case study 4 - City Writes

City Writes is a grassroots creative writing group based in Glasgow that aims to establish writing communities and workshops across the city, fostering peer support in both writing and life. The group collaborates with various organisations, including the North West Recovery Community, which assists people recovering from drug and alcohol problems.

City Writes offers a weekly mindful creative writing workshop for North West Recovery Community attendees, incorporating mindfulness, music, and writing exercises. These sessions draw inspiration from diverse artists, both historical and contemporary, providing a platform for creative expression and peer-supported discussions. Founded and led by Stephen McGuire, City Writes was created to help individuals engage with creative writing as they navigate mental health and recovery challenges.

Each session starts with a brief mindfulness exercise and a chance for members to share something positive, helping to shift the focus towards positivity. The workshop kicks off with four sessions centred around songs by famous artists that resonate with themes of drug and alcohol recovery and attendees are provided with writing prompts to help them begin their creative writing journey. After these initial sessions, participants are encouraged to apply the skills they've acquired by bringing their own song choices to explore in the workshops, using them as inspiration for their creative writing.

“The group provides an open invitation for people in recovery at all different stages. This is a recovery group, but it’s also a creative writing group.”- Stephen, Founder of City Writes.

Attendees of City Writes, facilitated through the Northwest Recovery Community, typically learn about the group through its connection with the recovery café. While participating in recovery groups, individuals are encouraged to join a session and explore creative writing.

“I was really withdrawn, I’d relapsed big time and I’d been kicked out of my mum and dad's house. And then I came here because I knew that North West Recovery Community was here, and then I got introduced to the creative writing by the volunteers from Northwest Recovery - and I went up and started on my creative journey.”- Jody, City Writes member.

How City Writes supports people with mental health difficulties

Challenging the stigma of addiction: City Writes empowers individuals to challenge stigma, particularly self-stigma, associated with alcohol and drug addiction and recovery. By highlighting renowned writers and musicians who have grappled with similar challenges, the programme encourages members to recognise their own talents and capabilities. This approach fosters confidence, restores self-worth, and dispels misconceptions that creative writing is inaccessible to them because of their recovery journey or past barriers in education.

> *"You might have someone who didn't do well at school with writing because they've had a chaotic life. I do believe that there are loads of people out there who have talent but who might be thinking 'Oh well, I didn't do that when I was at school so that door's closed now'. So it's about keeping that door open for people who have talent in their writing but they maybe just don't realise it."- Stephen, City Writes Founder.*

> *"We look at writers or musicians who can be inspiring for people in recovery. A lot of people will like a band or a musician that used a lot of drugs in their life, and you can get caught up in thinking about that part of them, but you forget that, for example, Lou Reed was a really good poet. So, you're acknowledging that if addiction was part of your life then it's who you are, but it's also who these other people were as well and they're talented, so you shouldn't think that you're not talented because you've got an alcohol or drug addiction. There are lots of talented people out there who had the same demons as you."- Stephen, City Writes Founder.*

Supporting people in recovery and beyond: City Writes integrates mindfulness and provides a relaxed environment to explore complex themes and emotions in recovery more deeply. Moreover, as people in recovery often prioritise attending recovery-focused events, City Writes initially attracts them through themes related to recovery and health. However, the programme gradually encourages participants to explore and enjoy creative writing for its own intrinsic value. This approach supports individuals in recovery to expand their self-concept beyond solely identifying as someone overcoming addiction, fostering a broader sense of identity encompassing interests and skills beyond recovery.

> *"Creative writing gives people in recovery an opportunity to express themselves, to be creative and write about what they're going through. It doesn't have to be a certain way, just whatever they're feeling at the time. It gives people a chance to put it down on paper, analyse it and go, 'right it's been a bad week, but it's finished on a positive'."- Chris, City Writes member.*

> *"It's not putting pressure on people to come in and think right, I've got two hours I need to write something. We get people who would normally just go to recovery events to come in and we have a wee chat for the first hour and maybe that's the only part they stay for. But you'll get one or two who think right, I'm going to stay for the second part as well and see what this creative writing is all about."- Chris, City Writes member.*

> *"You get people who come in for the recovery aspect but then come back for the writing aspect."- Stephen, City Writes Founder.*

Providing opportunities for growth: Participating in the City Writes programme helps people build confidence and a sense of accomplishment as they uncover and develop new skills. Several members of City Writes within the Northwest Recovery Community have advanced to co-facilitating the group. This opportunity enables individuals to develop a new sense of identity and achievement, fostering deeper involvement in creative writing and allowing them to take on leadership roles within the community.

> *"I wrote a poem on my very first day at City Writes and I didn't know I had it in me, I genuinely didn't. I was just going up to see what it was like and three weeks later I was told it was going to be published." Jody, City Writes member.*

> *"Stephen now gets me to come in and co-facilitate the group. It's good, it's growth - it's all helping me in my recovery and I've been clean for months now. It's the next step to move on, get a bit of personal growth and try new things - to step outside your comfort zone. Because normally I'd be like nah that's not for me, but if I want to progress I really need to get in there and get involved."- Chris, City Writes member.*

> *"Creative writing can give people in recovery from addiction a sense of achievement, it can make them feel like they belong and stop them being isolated as well. Because the opposite of recovery is isolation, and isolation is a really major factor in active addiction. It can help people to express their emotions a lot clearer and it gives a release. It's a powerful thing." - Jody, City Writes member.*

> *"They [people in recovery] think they've not got anything worth writing about and that nobody's going to enjoy it. But the reality is that everyone has something to write about and everyone takes different things from it. For some people who come to the group, creative writing might not be something that they're really into - but then they sit and hear the prompts and the song, and they put pen to paper and they might be surprised."- Chris, City Writes member.*

Welcoming and flexible approach: City Writes adopts a flexible approach to working with individuals in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction, meeting them at various stages of their journey and supporting their engagement in creative writing as an expressive outlet. This inclusive environment welcomes everyone, regardless of their current struggles, and maintains an open-door policy. This ensures that members feel welcome to attend whenever they can, fostering a sense of belonging that encourages them to return, no matter their circumstances. Furthermore, City Writes embraces a non-judgmental and relaxed approach. Participants are encouraged to explore the writing prompts and engage with new skills without any pressure to share their work if they prefer not to. The atmosphere fosters openness and respect, where everyone's contributions are valued, and individuals can participate at their own pace and comfort level.

> *"The welcome you get, and the fact that no matter what state you're in, even if you're still using or you're clean or on a prescription, you're welcome. This is my first port of call for any challenges I have because I always feel welcome." Jody, City Writes member.*

> *"People need to be gentle, be kind, and compassionate and show love in creative spaces [towards people in recovery], because that's one thing we've never had and that's why the welcome is so important. We need to feel welcome in order to stay. I'll come into this group and I might be really struggling with my addiction and my mental health, but the facilitators will still let me come and be part of the group. Be inclusive to everyone, everyone's experiences are different but the outcome is still the same. Addiction doesn't discriminate and creativity doesn't discriminate." Jody, City Writes Member.*

> *"The way Stephen runs this group is brilliant, because it's supportive but it's not pressurised. And that's a bit like what recovery is like, nobody could have headlocked me into recovery, I had to make that decision myself."- Chris, City Writes Member.*

Using prompts and music for inspiration: The model of City Writes helps to alleviate the fear of creating something entirely new, breaking the process down into more achievable steps for individuals who may struggle significantly with low confidence and self-doubt. Group members are able to overcome the challenges of creative writing by connecting the music to their personal experiences. The selected songs, each with strong recovery messages and mental health themes, help members address difficult topics related to mental health in recovery in an accessible and meaningful way.

> *"We use song prompts here, and the one we did today was 'Yesterday', and that's a massive song to me, it's one of my favourite Beatles songs. It's that feeling of yesterday's gone and I'm half the man I used to be. I remember hearing that song when I was 14 or 15 and that's exactly what I felt like. I'd gone from being a 9-year-old laddie full of joy and happiness and then my dad leaving and I had the weight of the world on my shoulders. So getting the opportunity to write about that helped me delve deeper into emotional issues that have gone on in my life, things that I've struggled with but that I probably wouldn't speak about."- Chris, City Writes member.*

Poetry shared by City Writes members

Tomorrow Never Knows by Jody Rawlings

“There was a time when I partied until tomorrow, going from star to star and kitchen to kitchen. It was fun until it became the norm!
I played fast and loose with the existence of my life then bang, that one tomorrow came and restored my black and white vision into a bright colourful dream.”

DEMONS by Chris Middlemass

All these thoughts racing around my head
Don’t engage or I’ll end up dead
Still these demons hammer away
Trying to get in every single day

Running hard trying to escape from this
It’s all in your head, just calm down Chris
Gunning at me, dementing we
Copying all my moves never to be free

Begging just is not my style
Logging all the shit in a new file
It will take a while to understand their plan
Stop crying you bitch, be a man

Stand up and keep on walking on
This evil will stay with you until you’re gone
Don’t get me wrong as I write this song
Daily I’ve battled this devil damn so long

Rising up now, to take back my life
Tricked me once fucker, never twice
I'm on to you and who you are
Trying to leave me with a mental scar

But I'll go it all night bar to bar
To escape you, I'm stuck like tar
The demon talks to me every single night
They don't realise with me they've picked a fight

I'm rocky, keep on knocking me down
Still I rise to take back my honest crown
What you gonna do now, when I fight back
Like Tom Clancy I'm going full out attack

This man is about to ruin you on this track
After I've executed you there is nothing I lack
Only angels do I hear now over all the crowd
Danger is gone now, I'm alone so proud

Won my battle over all of these demons
Now to live I've got all these great reasons
Thank you for the trial now I'm leaving
This devil is gone no longer in me breathing
That's it over with now, we're more than even
Scarred up from our battle won alone no legions."

Conclusions

As highlighted in this report and existing literature, engaging in creative activities and participating in a creative group offers significant benefits for individuals with mental health difficulties. Creativity provides an emotional outlet, often serving as the first step for vulnerable individuals to address and work through trauma. Regular involvement in creative pursuits helps individuals develop a more rounded sense of self and foster new positive identities based on newly acquired skills and roles within the group. Creative groups also offer a much-needed sense of belonging and community, crucial for those at greater risk of social isolation due to mental health challenges. Additionally, participating in a creative group helps individuals develop and practise pro-social emotional competencies, supporting overall mental well-being. Lastly, the joy and relaxation derived from these activities are invaluable in enhancing mental health recovery.

This report has highlighted the numerous barriers faced by individuals with mental health difficulties in attending creative groups, as well as the challenges encountered by organisers striving to make these groups accessible and inclusive. For individuals, symptoms of their conditions and the demands of living with long-term mental health issues can make regular attendance difficult. Additionally, lack of computer literacy or fears around digital communication can leave them behind as the world progresses. Creative groups often need to be responsive and person-centred to support continued participation despite these hurdles. All the groups featured in this report exemplify considerable flexibility and strengths in addressing these challenges. However, practical issues such as lack of access to suitable transport and disabled parking require targeted policy changes, as these are often beyond the capacity of creative groups to address. This reflects a broader trend of insufficient consideration for vulnerable groups in urban planning and management.

For creative group organisers, insecure funding remains a significant barrier to making creative spaces more accessible and inclusive. The emphasis on quantifiable metrics in funding applications makes it

challenging for local creative groups to demonstrate their intrinsic human value. These grassroots groups, though operating on a small scale, have a life-saving impact on the vulnerable individuals they support. Ignoring this impact would be a grave oversight.

Examining the Glasgow-based examples in this report, it is evident that many local creative groups are already doing significant work to support individuals with mental health difficulties, even at the grassroots level and with limited funding. These groups provide valuable insights into making creative spaces accessible and inclusive. Creative groups offer crucial pathways for individuals who have faced profound challenges to reintegrate into their communities, presenting a significant resource that can be leveraged through a social prescribing model of health. This approach could prove to be a more cost-effective and preventive solution for addressing mental health issues within local communities. Moreover, these initiatives empower individuals and communities to help themselves, enabling those with mental health difficulties to rebuild their lives and navigate their challenges with new resilience and dignity. Making these spaces inclusive and accessible for individuals with mental health difficulties is essential for fostering a supportive and empowering environment.

Recommendations

Based on insights gathered from each of the creative groups across Glasgow interviewed for this project, this report offers the following recommendations to improve accessibility and inclusion of creativity groups for individuals with mental health difficulties. It is important to note that groups with limited funding and resources may find it challenging to meet every recommendation, but simply being aware of these and making any changes you can towards inclusivity and accessibility is a step in the right direction.

1. Consider the space: People with mental health difficulties, especially those who have experienced trauma, can find noisy, chaotic environments with unpredictable movement and obscured areas challenging. Quiet open-plan spaces can help to reduce stress. Consulting with experts can make the space more accessible. For those with mobility issues, lift access and specialised disabled toilets may be necessary. Creating a suitable and comfortable creative space takes time and funding, but even small improvements can make a difference. Carefully considering the surroundings to maximise comfort and relaxation is essential. Providing a quiet separate space from the group for individuals to be alone for a moment if overwhelmed can make a big difference. Additionally, anxiety and stress around attending new places can deter individuals from participating. Offering a video tour of the space, allowing support figures to accompany attendees, and encouraging trial visits can help alleviate these concerns.

2. Representation: It's important for individuals to feel represented and understood within the group. Involving people with lived experience in decision-making processes is essential. If this isn't immediately feasible, seeking external expertise fosters collaboration and community support, enhancing long-term sustainability. Granting ownership through involvement in decision-making and co-designing where feasible empowers participants.

3. Partnership working: Partnership working with other charities and art groups is crucial when supporting individuals with lived experience of mental health difficulties. No single group can address every need or fill every gap. By leveraging the expertise of various charities and groups, individuals can engage with a broader array of creative and supportive activities. This approach not only prevents individuals from becoming overly dependent on a single group but also alleviates pressure on those groups. Enhanced collaboration between charities and creative groups can provide comprehensive support to individuals. Additionally, forming partnerships can strengthen funding applications, increasing the likelihood of success.

4. Providing freedom to play: Understand that individuals from different economic backgrounds, especially those who have experienced poverty, deprivation, or trauma, may not have had the privilege of the freedom to play, make mistakes, and experiment. This can lead to a reluctance to try new things, often misinterpreted as non-participation. It's crucial to foster an open atmosphere that emphasises mistakes as part of the process and reassures that perfection is not the goal.

5. Accessibility in communication: Remember that not everyone has the same level of computer or technological literacy, especially people living with disabilities or mental health challenges. Some may lack the ability to use electronic communications or online booking systems, while others may feel uncomfortable using digital methods such as email. It is important to consider each person’s needs individually and work with them to determine their preferred method of communication. Consider offering traditional paper-based communication options for sharing information about the group’s activities, opportunities, or schedule changes. This approach can also assist individuals with memory issues.

6. Remember to ask: People with mental health difficulties may find it difficult to express their needs to make a creative space more accommodating. For grassroots creative groups, it might not be feasible or appropriate to ask for details about an individual's specific mental or physical health challenges, and they should only share this information if they choose to do so. However, it's crucial to ask if there is anything needed to make the space more accessible. Everyone has unique needs, and even individuals with the same condition may require different accommodations so don't make assumptions. It's essential to ask respectfully how they can be supported, empowering them to provide as much or as little detail as they feel comfortable.

7. Be flexible: Some individuals may need someone to accompany them to feel comfortable, so be prepared to open the space to allow this to happen, even initially. Be responsive to group members' preferences - notice what truly engages them and be prepared to return to those activities when things aren't working. Some activities may be too overwhelming, or it might not be the right time for a particular plan, so flexibility is crucial to ensure members continue attending. Consider offering a mix of online and in-person activities if possible. In-person activities foster a sense of community and are irreplaceable, but during periods of acute mental ill-health, allowing online participation can maintain connection and reduce alienation, making it easier for members to return to in-person sessions. Offering take-home projects, such as art kits, also gives members something positive to focus on at their own pace. Meet people where they are - if they want to participate just for fun, let them. If others want to progress further, support that too. Everyone has different needs and wants, including physical limitations, so being flexible is essential.

8. Support with transport: Providing transportation accommodations is crucial for increasing the accessibility of creative groups for individuals with mental health difficulties. While offering free travel can be challenging with limited funding, doing so when possible can significantly ease the difficulty of attending. If free travel isn't feasible, explore alternative support options. Are there schemes or initiatives for free or discounted travel that participants might not know about? Seeking advice from external experts can help navigate these options. It's also important to offer choices and recognise that even when an individual has access to public transport, this may not be accessible to them due to the nature of their mental health difficulties. Having conversations about what transportation options are most useful for each individual ensures that their needs are met effectively.

9. Language is powerful: Language holds power; it can transform a space into one that is welcoming, supportive, and inclusive, or one that is exclusionary. Everyday conversations often include derogatory terms that can stigmatise individuals experiencing mental health difficulties, so it's crucial to be mindful of language to foster a welcoming atmosphere. Within the group, the language used matters too. Phrases like 'only two people today' or 'only one person showed up' can inadvertently diminish individuals' sense of contribution and worth. Every person's presence is invaluable, especially considering the significant challenges individuals with mental health difficulties may overcome just to attend. Acknowledging their courage and resilience is essential, regardless of the group size.

10. Encourage a culture of peer support: Promoting a culture of mutual support and knowledge sharing is important. Individuals with shared experiences can uniquely help each other navigate barriers in ways that are meaningful and tailored to their needs. Encouraging established members to mentor newcomers fosters vital social connections and provides role models within the group. The relationships formed among peers in creative groups can be profoundly therapeutic, often more so than those with group organisers. Creating a supportive environment where everyone learns from and celebrates each other's skills and contributions is key. Additionally, many individuals with mental health difficulties possess creative talents that benefit the group collectively, empowering them to share these fosters a sense of self-worth and mutual growth.

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