

Stratford

Integrated project for people recovering from mental distress, together with the local community.

Project partners: Springfield MIND working with Community Arts Workshop (CAW).

Project Outline: Based in a porta-cabin in the grounds of Springfield MIND, the project involved creating an emotional and creative environment within which a journey could then take place. It began by thinking about a journey through time, with participants' birthdays as milestones. From a favourite poem from childhood brought in by one participant, the group developed a 3D garden installation, involving many features and characters and using a variety of media. CAW then arranged for the installation to be featured at Stratford library for two weeks, and was successful in gaining significant press coverage for this.



The final piece - a real group creation drawing on different ideas and skills

Participants: A total of seven participants attended, of which four came to most sessions. One person attended two thirds of the sessions, and another came to half of them. One other person attended two sessions.

Making Participation Possible

Attendees commented on the relaxed atmosphere in the project and spoke of feeling comfortable to talk about issues in the group. The free and easy atmosphere was important as people did not feel pressured to do anything but could engage at their

own pace. They had clearly valued the input from the artists in creating a positive environment:

“As soon as we started I felt very comfortable as the atmosphere from both Francis and Chris was calm, relaxing and we were able to produce art on the basis of how we felt. There was no pressure, no worries and this led to me fitting in straight away.”

Benefits of Participating

The project gave participants confidence to try things, to persevere and to commit to something:

“Apart from one Tuesday when I was feeling unwell I have attended all of the art groups, which is a commitment I have never done before. I have proven to myself that I can do what I set out to do in my mind and that if you make a mistake it is not the end of the world, but a step forward to getting better.”

Participants also felt that the project offered them an opportunity to talk about problems in life in a relaxed way. This was thought to have a direct benefit in terms of mental health:

“It’s taken my mind away from domestic worries I’ve got, therefore I am relaxed.”



Using different skills at their own pace

There was clearly great enjoyment in taking part in creative activity and group members also commented on how being involved in the project had helped them to develop skills, or to find skills they didn't know they had. For example, one participant identified that she hadn't realised how dexterous she could be.

“I didn't know I could do anything like this. I'd like to do more creative writing.”

“I forgot that I can paint. I'll think about doing more stuff, I might try the Escape workshop.”

The final installation piece was exhibited at Stratford library and received positive coverage by local papers, including the Stratford Herald, Stratford Observer, Leamington Observer, Redditch Advertiser, and the Alcester Standard. This helped to meet one of the aims of the project, which was to show service users and their work in a positive light.



The launch at Stratford library was well attended, with participants at the heart of it

Continuing the Journey

Attending the group has given participants confidence to consider engaging in other activities. One participant, who the artists observed to have become very articulate and confident, now regularly travels to Leamington to be involved in South Warwickshire User Forum's Media Action Group.

The discovery of new or forgotten skills has offered possibilities to a number of participants. One member of the group is very keen to continue developing his strong creative skills by seriously exploring animation, and now feels more confident to do so:

"I have walked away from this much more confident and knowledgeable in what I can achieve."

This group member also identified that through the project he had become aware of direct payments, and was interested to explore how these might be used to help him with learning about animation, though he recognised some support would be needed to understand and access this means of funding.

Three other participants were also interested to do more creative activity and some were considering the Escape workshop in Stratford.

As well as the group member now attending SWUF meetings, another participant identified art/creativity as a means of giving voice, in order to inform service providers about issues they were facing. As a wheelchair user, she felt that being in the group helped her voice her frustrations about transport issues. Another participant identified how engaging in arts activity made a positive contribution to his well-being:

“Art has a very special place within me as it has helped me so much in dealing with the struggles of everyday life. My worries are gone and my panic attacks stopped when I engage in some form of creative work.”

Other Learning Points

Having a dedicated space at Springfield MIND was invaluable. It provided familiarity for people, who felt comfortable going there. It was also possible to leave things set up, so anyone using the centre could go and work on the project at other times if they wanted to.

Support to the group was provided by one MIND worker Lee Gammon and this was highly valued, particularly in the absence of any other staff members, despite it being based on site. The remit of MIND employees in terms of how they could engage in projects was potentially a factor in this. It was felt that wider engagement by more staff would enable them to understand the project better, and they could subsequently help to encourage more people to attend.

Group needs were not as expected from the brief/initial consultation, and CAW felt they effectively had to undertake this process again. They had expected it to be a film project, which was not appropriate with the group involved. The flexibility of the artists to adapt project ideas was important in this respect.

The group discussed a variety of ways the project could have developed, but there was not enough time to pursue these. For example the group was interested in going on trips to galleries, but this was difficult logistically (in particular the issue of volunteer drivers not being insured to lift people from wheelchairs was noted). It was concluded that access to a minibus would be useful.

In addition to the learning points identified above, CAW have noted in their final report a number of useful observations and views in relation to how such projects impact on mental health service users, and how projects need to be set up.

About the Evaluation

Data collection: carried out by CAW. No data was collected during the project. *creativityteam* met with CAW and Lee Gammon from Springfield MIND to discuss ways the final learning session could gather data. This was done through discussion in the group, led by CAW, with notes collated by Fran Goodwin. The group considered the questions:

- What did you get out of the project?
- What's the next step for you?
- What did you like/not like about it?

A meeting was then held between *creativityteam*, CAW and Lee Gammon to review the information gathered from participants.

All photographs by Community Arts Workshop