

Women at the HeArt

Evaluation report 2014



Report produced by:



Alison Leverett-Morris
58 Hayfield Road Oxford OX2 6TU
e: alison@almassociates.co.uk
t: 01865 554276 m: 07722 051756

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Introduction

Women at the HeArt was a Thames Valley Partnership project, funded by Arts Council England, The Monument Trust and Thames Valley Probation and building on the organisation's experience of using the arts with vulnerable groups.

The project aimed to:

- Creatively empower vulnerable women to better access a broad range of support services for themselves and their families
- Embed good creative practice into support services by seeking to improve staff development and skills base
- Provide a platform for excellent professional development for artists working with vulnerable groups

The project ran between March 2012 and February 2014 across 4 partner sites:

- Alana House, Reading: A women's community project and a one stop shop for vulnerable women, not all of whom have been involved with the criminal justice system but who have multiple needs
- The Old Fire Station, Oxford: The homeless charity, Crisis, working alongside an independent arts charity to develop partnership projects and collaborative work
- Elizabeth Fry hostel, Reading: the only female Approved Premises in the south, one of 6 in England and Wales
- InterAction, Milton Keynes: An arts organisation working to improve the life chances of people in challenging circumstances

Six artists delivered the project and offered innovative methods of intervention:

- Christine Wilkinson (visual artist)
- Dionne Freeman (visual artist)
- Carla Conte (mixed media artist)
- Clare Goodall (mosaic/mixed media artist)
- Emmy O-Shaughnessy (drama/performance artist)
- Maria Trevis-Hackemann (performance artist/communications trainer)

Christine and Dionne, who have many years experience working with vulnerable groups, provided mentoring support to Carla, Clare, Emmy and Maria (talented artists less experienced in working with vulnerable groups).

The project included:

- Participatory arts sessions involving vulnerable women
- Investment in the artists: training, mentoring and Action Learning¹
- Creative training for support staff
- Public exhibitions of work at The Old Fire Station in Oxford, InterAction in Milton Keynes and Meadowbrook College in Oxford

Judy Munday, Thames Valley Partnership Arts Officer, managed the project and offered continued guidance and support to the artists and support staff.

¹ Please see Appendix 7 for a description of Action Learning

Evaluation aims and methodology

Alison Leverett-Morris of ALM Associates was contracted to undertake an evaluation of the *Women at the HeArt project*.

The evaluation aimed to:

- Enhance the quality of project delivery by supporting the artists and project manager through a dynamic process of reflection throughout the life of the project
- Identify factors contributing to the success of the project
- Identify project impact and outcomes

The evaluator employed a range of methodologies to inform this report:

- Development of a system for the artists to capture participant impact
- Facilitation of an Action Learning Set (attended by project manager and artists)
- Observation of project sessions and events
- Informal conversations with project participants
- Interviews with support staff and host agencies
- Analysis of data obtained from the project manager, artists and project partners

About this report

This report first presents a summary of the factors considered instrumental to the project's success. For the purpose of clarity, the evaluation findings are then presented in three sections to reflect the project aims: (1) To creatively empower vulnerable women, (2) To embed good creative practice into support services, and (3) To provide professional development for artists working with vulnerable groups. In practice, of course, there was less division between project aims: each intervention and process wove together to create a project whole.

Critical success factors:

Women at the HeArt utilised arts processes to engage vulnerable women. The following factors are identified as instrumental to the project's success:

1. Understanding the complexity of needs 'underneath' displayed behaviours
2. Responding appropriately to individual and group needs
3. High quality *accessible* arts activity
4. Skilled facilitation
5. Investing in the artists
6. Investing in support staff

1. Understanding the complexity of needs 'underneath' displayed behaviours:

During project sessions, the women displayed a range of behaviours. Responses to the creative activities included: enthusiasm, getting involved, focused attention, enjoyment of the art materials, processes and equipment – as well as reluctance and nervousness. Some behaviour was challenging, controlling, manipulative, defensive or resistant. Many appeared to experience difficulty mixing with the group and/or to have a low tolerance for fellow participants. This manifested as aggression (including threats of violence), quiet withdrawal, engaging only with the artist/facilitator or a lack of eye contact and general interaction.

At a facilitated artist meeting, the artists demonstrated an understanding of observed behaviours (both positive and challenging) as an expression of human needs. The artists identified needs that the women might be expressing, including the need for: identity, validation, creativity, acceptance, fun and support.

Identity: Respect and recognition of whole person / not to be defined by negative traits, labels or 'history' / to be valued as an individual / to be noticed as an individual / to be praised individually

Validation: Space to defend, to shield and to be seen / to have a response / a reaction / that it's ok to talk a lot or very little / to be rewarded / to be praised / to share (work, praise, cake) / to help / to contribute

Creativity: Simple, clear, achievable tasks/a sense of completion / a role or purpose in the project / to move physically (experience a physical space differently) / reassurance that what they're doing/producing is 'right' / that they are 'ok' / that there is no right or wrong / a response that enables a private healing / self expression / outlet for emotions / distraction / challenge

Acceptance: To be accepted and welcomed quickly / non-judged / to fit in / to belong to a group / to be heard and listened to / to be healed / to be validated / to feel safe / to 'just be'

Fun: to have fun / to laugh / to smile / to experience new things / to play / to meet new people /

Support: encouragement / attention / to be noticed / to be attended to / to be cared for / to be believed in / to feel understood / to be 'met where you are' (including on failure/limiting beliefs etc) / a sense of control / to let go of control / routine / familiarity / consistency / certainty / to be challenged

In their approach, the artists communicated an ethos of acceptance. Some creative processes required a more directive style of facilitation. But mostly, project sessions had an spirit of 'experiencing together' – in relation to creative arts processes, life and the experience of being a woman.

At times this approach proved challenging for some of the artists. The artists' own needs and vulnerabilities were often recognized in others and/or brought into personal awareness. When required, appropriate support was provided by the project manager, the artist mentors and through the Action Learning Set.

The evaluation found that the artists' ability to recognize, accept and identify with the women's needs fostered a sense of safety for the women to engage. The artists did not seek to connect with the women's 'problems', nor did they view it as their responsibility to solve the women's problems. Rather, they aimed to create a space in which women could feel safe to experience creativity, to grow and develop. The artists' understanding of the complexity of needs 'underneath' displayed behaviours is considered a key factor in the project's success.

2. Responding appropriately to individual and group needs:

The artists understood the importance of 'meeting the women where they were' in terms of energy levels, health and wellbeing, confidence, mood, interest, expectations and life circumstances. The arts processes were offered and skilfully facilitated – giving women choice as to when, how and to what extent they felt able to engage.

As the project progressed the artists became increasingly aware of the importance of approaching each session free from expectation or assumption. A high (or low) level of engagement at one session would not necessarily mean this would be repeated at future sessions. It could not be assumed one could 'pick up where one had left off'.

Individual and group engagement levels were ever changeable - with many factors at play. Some responsibility lay with the artists (for example choice of creative activities and style/skill of facilitation). Other factors were unknown, beyond the artists' control or challenging to manage. A continuous process of balancing the needs of the individual with the needs of the group was required: ensuring an appropriate response to both.

Balancing individual and group needs was challenging for both the lead artists and the less experienced mentee artists. Ensuring an appropriate response demanded skilled facilitation. There were instances of individuals connecting strongly with one artist and displaying manipulative behaviour to obtain continuous one-to-one attention and support. There was a situation where a creative process triggered a strong emotional response in one individual, whilst the remainder of the group were enjoying the activity. There were times when resistant behaviour in one individual impacted on the whole group dynamic.

The project was rich with learning opportunities for the artists. On the whole, the artists demonstrated a high level of ability to respond appropriately to individual and group needs – and this was key to the success of the project.

Please refer to appendix 1 for an example of an artists' management of individual and group need.

3. High quality *accessible* arts activity:

As a discipline, the arts have the potential to encourage reflection, challenge and foster personal growth. The evaluation found many examples of how high quality and accessible arts processes supported the project's aim to empower vulnerable women:

Visual/performing arts collaboration:

Visual artist Dionne Freeman and performance artist Emmy O-Shaughnessy developed a highly successful collaboration of art forms. A structured 'doodling' exercise (with set time limits and individual and group working processes) diffused any concerns participants might have over artistic ability and end product. This process flowed seamlessly into a creative movement and performance activity.

The visual and performing arts processes engaged all of the women present. Many described feeling relaxed and taken 'out of themselves'. Some said it felt easier to make physical body shapes with something visual in front of them to 'copy' and respond to. Another commented that it felt safe to do the movement activities without men being present. There was an atmosphere of fun, experimentation and creative energy. The women were respectful and praising of each other's work and appeared to enjoy discussing the differences between individual's marks and movements. Participants noted how some doodles filled the page with large open strokes, whilst others were smaller and tighter - and how this was reflected in the movement exercise.

There was a spirit of sharing and the participants, project manager and artists talked together about how the doodles might reflect certain feelings. One woman said she had not drawn since she was a child. Another woman, a refugee, said her doodles were landscapes from her memories of her home country. The women had not been instructed or guided in what they create and so this was a touching example of how the arts can inspire reflection and release of emotions. Many stories were revealed and shared through still and moving images.

The arts processes and style of facilitation empowered the women. Both artists were responsive to the group's interest, mood and confidence levels. Skilfully moving on to a different activity if one did not readily engage participants. The session developed organically, which built confidence.

By the end of the session everyone present had produced drawings and paintings. Everyone had collaborated in developing movements. Everyone performed a creative piece to the rest of the group.

Dionne facilitated the creation of the visual works in a highly accessible way. The resulting pieces were impressive - and their presentation at public exhibition gave further opportunity for a sense of achievement to be felt. Likewise, Emmy had facilitated the performance work so sensitively that it appeared as if those involved were barely aware they were performing. The sense of achievement was tangible.

Please see Appendix 2 for further examples of high quality and accessible arts processes.

4. Skilled facilitation:

The project manager effectively communicated that supporting participants to develop their self-esteem and confidence was a priority for the project. A strong foundation of respect for the women underpinned the project. The artists engaged with the women with integrity,

warmth and sensitivity. The artists' own enjoyment of the creative materials and processes was clearly evident – bringing an uplifting energy and creating a sense of safety for the women to explore, try new things, make 'mistakes' and have fun.

It was not possible or appropriate for the artists to be fully aware of personal details relating to the women's circumstances. However, at all times it was necessary for the artists to be mindful of the vulnerability of the women and the complexity of their lives. It was necessary to facilitate sessions in a way that minimized the risk of the women feeling threatened, judged or inappropriately challenged.

"For these women, who have been judged incapable as mothers, and who have got it wrong, it was crucial that through this project, and the creative activities we offered, they achieve and complete something, get approval and praise – get it right. Having a clear path of achievable methods was important for these women. It took many sessions to establish success both in process as well as product before they could feel the right and the courage to invent" lead artist on Milton Keynes project, involving women from a Birth Mothers' Group, run by St Frances Trust.

The baseline of project participants was low in terms of confidence, self-belief in creative potential and how independently they could work. At times it was challenging for the artists to pitch activities appropriately. At one session, a creative performance based activity was pitched too high in terms of language and the women's ability to comprehend certain concepts. At another session, creative bodywork proved too challenging for a woman with an eating disorder. There were examples of activities (considered relaxing or playful by the artists) being too challenging for women with low levels of literacy, low levels of confidence and little or no experience of relaxation or play.

These examples highlight the level of skill and experience demanded to facilitate arts projects with vulnerable people. The evaluation found the project presented rich learning opportunities for the artists. The artists engaged with the project with a willingness to reflect, learn and develop their practice.

Through skilled facilitation, the artists helped the women to develop their self-esteem and confidence. Many women experienced a sense of achievement not felt anywhere else in their lives. Others discovered or reinforced personal strengths and capabilities.

Please refer to appendix 3 for an example of skilled project facilitation.

5. Investing in the artists:

Thames Valley Partnership's extensive experience of working with vulnerable groups was evident. The complexity of the work and the potential challenges the artists might face were recognized. A considerable investment was made in the artists, to ensure they were supported and equipped to meet those challenges, including:

- High level of ongoing support from Project Manager
- Mentoring scheme (2 experienced artists supporting 4 less experienced artists)
- Training:
 - Team building and self-awareness, led by Rebecca Cairns
 - Understanding the Criminal Justice system, led by Jill Harraway

- Resilience and skills for working with vulnerable groups, led by Pauline Gladstone
- Action Learning Set, facilitated by Alison Leverett-Morris
- Paid opportunities for the artists to collaborate, develop practice and make new work

The project was rich with opportunities for personal and professional development, reflection and learning. A focused, committed and mutually supportive creative team was established. This provided a safe platform to inspire creative thinking and enable personal and professional growth. An appropriate balance between trusting the artists/creative processes, safeguarding and ensuring professionalism was achieved.

The evaluation found that the quality of investment in the artists was instrumental to the project's success.

6. Investing in support staff:

Thames Valley Partnership has extensive experience of working in partnership with statutory and voluntary agencies. The Project Manager demonstrated a clear objective to work *with* partner agencies: to enhance and complement their work and offer a different (arts) process through which their organisational objectives could be achieved. The project invested significant time and resources into building relationships with key personnel, including:

- Planning and development meetings
- Outreach work: creative taster sessions in agencies including Compass, Probation, Refugee Resource, Orbit Housing Milton Keynes, Lifeline Oxford, St Francis Children's Society
- Staff training:
 - To enable support staff to experience the arts processes for themselves
 - Experiential learning regarding project benefits and potential outcomes
 - Deepen understanding of how the project can support and enhance their organisational objectives
 - Communicate the important role that support staff play in encouraging participants' engagement
 - Build a sense of team and collaborative working
- Ongoing liaison and communication: providing regular updates and images
- Involvement in evaluation processes (including confidential one-to-one interviews)

The evaluation found the levels and quality of engagement from support staff and partner agencies was mixed. There were examples of support staff playing a vital role in supporting the project:

- Identifying participants who might benefit from the project
- Encouraging and supporting participants to attend
- Transporting participants to the project
- Sending reminder texts to participants
- Modelling positive behaviours: joining in/willingness to try creative activities, being 'out of comfort zone'
- Sharing relevant information with the artists
- Supporting the artists in challenging situations
- Diffusing interpersonal issues between participants
- Supporting participants during sessions as required

There were examples of less effective relations with support staff and partner agencies:

- Low promotion of the project / commitment to attracting participants
- Poor communication between management and support staff resulting in a lack of 'buy-in' and understanding of the project purpose and value
- Little support/encouragement for participants to attend
- Lack of engagement with the creative processes and/or assertions of role or hierarchy (conflicting with the culture of collaboration and learning together that the artists aimed to create)
- Failure to share information that might influence artists' approach and/or choice of activity or process

The evaluation found that when communication and collaboration with support staff was effective, the quality of project delivery (and therefore participant experience) was higher. When relations between Thames Valley Partnership/the artists and host agencies were strained or support was ineffective, the quality of delivery and participant experience was reduced. With this finding, it can be understood that host agencies (and their support staff) play a critical role in the success of projects of this type.

Please see *Aim 2: Embed good creative practice into support services* (page 20) for more information.

Aim 1: Empower vulnerable women



Summary: Aim 1: Empower vulnerable women

Outcomes

Increased self esteem:

Feeling accepted, trusted, respected and valued...
Recognition of talents, skills, abilities...
Awareness of personal strengths, qualities and capabilities...
Feeling better: more positive self image...
Recognising ability to make a positive contribution: to group processes and in personal lives eg. creating and sharing personal artworks with children ...

Increased confidence:

To try new activities, use different arts materials, tools, equipment...
For self expression through words, visual arts, movement...
To engage with new people, attend different venues, interact in a group context...
To change patterns of behaviour and attitude: approach challenges differently: try new ways of being/interacting/presenting...

Sense of achievement:

Conflict resolution: working through challenging interpersonal relationships to a positive outcome
Increased resilience: moving on from 'mistakes', trying different approaches, positive solutions
Sense of completion: pride in visual and performance art works
Public exhibitions of artwork

Skilled / extensive development work by project manager to:
- Ensure venue support staff sufficiently equipped to support project: planning meetings, artist led creative training.
- Ensure vulnerable women have access: 8 x artist led outreach workshops, publicity, liaison with relevant staff and agencies.
- Ongoing feedback and planning with key agencies.

43 creative sessions delivered. Average no. of women attending:
Alana House: 3
Elizabeth Fry: 13
Milton Keynes: 6
Oxford: 6

Broad range of creative opportunities offered:

Visual arts processes: glass painting, weaving, mixed media sculpting, burnishing, wood work, painting, colouring, drawing...
Performing arts processes: singing, voice work, movement, mirroring, devising, collaborating, sharing, reflecting...
All arts processes balanced opportunities to create individual and collaborative pieces. Processes encouraged self-reflection, self awareness, conversation, connection collaboration and skills development.

Interventions

Starting point

The project was ambitious in aiming to engage vulnerable women unfamiliar with taking part in arts activities and who were not a cohesive or established group. At Elizabeth Fry women were required to attend as part of the terms of their probation. At Alana House women could choose to attend. Milton Keynes and Oxford required development work to attract participants to an unfamiliar venue and activity. To successfully engage participants, it was evident the women needed to 'be met where they were' and for the complex mix of issues and needs within each group to be recognized. Engaging the women required a response to issues such as low confidence, anxiety, limiting beliefs and feelings of failure. The artists needed to be sensitive to the breadth of needs 'underneath' displayed behaviours - which included withdrawing, resistance and threats of violence as well as more positive interaction. A constant balancing of the needs of an individual and the needs/dynamic of the group was also necessary.

Overview

As a discipline, the arts present a particular opportunity for personal challenge and growth. Women at the HeArt created a space in which women were accepted, respected and valued. In this space, arts processes were literally and metaphorically 'laid on the table' for those involved to respond to, react to and/or engage with. The distinct nature of the space was of choice and acceptance. The metaphorical buffet was laid out and women could choose what 'to eat', when 'to eat', how much 'to eat' and whether or not 'to eat'. 'Appetites' were accepted and respected.

The evaluation found the particular quality of the space created through Women at the HeArt was key to the project's success. There was no expectation for the women to achieve a particular skill, end product or learning objective. The women were trusted to 'just be' in a creative space and make choices to explore their creativity, observe or engage. This approach enabled participating women to take from the project what they personally needed. Project impacts and outcomes were varied because of this.

- The project was a space where the concerns, practicalities and stresses of everyday life were temporarily suspended. Engrossed in arts processes, many participants described being 'taken out of themselves' for a short while, having fun, feeling relaxed and feeling better.
- For many women, a safe space in which to explore high quality art materials and engage with accessible arts processes enabled skills development, increased confidence and greater recognition of personal strengths and capabilities.
- Producing and finishing artworks brought a sense of completion rarely experienced by many of the women elsewhere in their lives.
- For some women, being in a space of *genuine* acceptance brought patterns of defensive behaviour (such as manipulation, confrontation or withdrawal) into their awareness. In the project space, interpersonal conflicts were played out differently to the women's usual expectations and life experiences. Some women gained valuable experience of moving forward positively after things have gone wrong, after 'mistakes' and after conflict. This brought a deep sense of personal achievement and a glimpse at the possibility of living undefined by past history and behaviour.

The evaluation found the creation of a space, in which women felt accepted and safe to respond to the creative processes and group dynamic, was key to the project's success.

Project impacts

Fun / enjoyment / support / a 'break from life':

The evaluation found the majority of the women involved lacked both confidence and points of reference to engage with activities that might otherwise be considered to be relaxing, playful and non-threatening. It was apparent the women had few opportunities in their past and current life for fun, play and enjoyment. In this context, the growth in participants' confidence to 'let go' and have fun is a key achievement.

Participants' said:

"It feels therapeutic. You are achieving something and at the same time you don't have to think about the stuff going on in your life"

"I started the day feeling horribly stressed and tense and in my body I now feel less tense and more relaxed"

The artists' observed:

"X chose a postcard [during an evaluation exercise] which had the letter E on it. She said it stood for enjoyment, easy and encouraging which summed up the project for her"

"There was a buzz from the movement activities... the women commented that this was a good exercise... There was a sense of uplifted spirit by the end of the session... There was such an impressive level of commitment and risk taking in terms of trying something new"

Increased self esteem:

The evaluation found the majority of the women had a poor self-image and appeared to feel defined by their life circumstances, experiences and past 'mistakes'. As the project progressed, the evaluation found numerous examples of women experiencing increased self-esteem. Some findings demonstrate clear impact on self-esteem and others indicate more subtle internal change and processing.

Participants said:

"It's really good to see all these words [word weaving activity]. I can see that they do describe us, but I don't think I would have thought such good things about us before"

"I loved using the power tools. It made me feel powerful – a powerful woman!"

The artists observed:

"X is beginning to question her negativity towards herself, she came round to the idea that she is fairly creative"

"X made 2 pieces which she felt reflected herself. The first word she made [a weaving words activity] was 'kind'. And she wanted it to be displayed on the large heart".

"I was aware that X was dominating and taking charge of a word activity – I was aware of this and saw it as a positive action and a way that was helping her to regain her sense of self-esteem and reconnect with her past working life"

Increased confidence:

The vast majority of women taking part in the project had very low levels of confidence. At the start of the project some participants needed constant one-to-one support. Some lacked the confidence to even touch the arts materials, hold a pencil or use a pair of scissors. For others, low confidence showed through a fear of 'getting it wrong' or defensive behaviours. As the project developed the women's confidence grew. Increased confidence was evident in more independent working, willingness to try new materials and activities and more open and positive communication and interaction.

Participants said:

"It was pretty scary at first. I never thought I'd be able to make things like this. But I had a go and it's got easier"

"I think I've got better as the weeks have gone by. It's a shame this has to finish"

The artists observed:

"A really noticeable change in X. She's ready to do more work on her own, less needy, doesn't need so much one to one time. She's produced good work and is absorbed. She's also more willing to talk to others and is smiling"

"The baseline of this project – by that I mean the level of confidence, how creative the women believed themselves to be, how independently they could work - was extremely low. Women were fearful about 'doing it right'. Gradually, throughout the days we watched X being able to do more and more. By the end she was drawing and using coloured pencils, cutting out shapes with scissors and doing everything unaided. This was a huge and pleasant surprise to the staff. And a big lesson in tolerance and perseverance for the rest of us"

Staff member observed:

"One woman in the beginning wanted a lot of help. She was always saying 'I can't, I can't'. By third session she was doing things for herself and even helping others. She has grown so much in confidence. And for this woman the project has impacted on other areas of her life. She is now exploring a new relationship with a man. This is something she hasn't even 'opened that door to' for more than 3 years. It shows she is more willing to take risks. And risk taking takes confidence"

Sense of achievement:

It was evident that many of the women involved in the project live under a 'cloud of unfinished business'. The project included women living in a probation hostel, separated from their friends, family and children following a prison sentence, refugees, women whose children have been taken into permanent care, women who have lost secure housing due to addictions, failed or abusive relationships. Through circumstance or legalities, many of the women have little or no control over their present situation - and so have little opportunity to 'make amends' or work towards resolution. In this context, the opportunity to experience a

positive sense of completion, by finishing individual and collaborative artworks, was deeply significant. Experiencing a sense of personal achievement was a key project outcome.

Participants said:

"I'm so proud of what I've made. I can't wait to show it to my children"

"Thank you for the exhibition. It was brilliant to see my work in a proper gallery space. I feel really proud"

The artists observed:

"One participant brought every piece she made to Clare and I to show us. There was a particular expression on her face and our approval healed much more than the moment – she lit up. When showing me one piece, I asked her if she was pleased and she said she was. She said she was so pleased that she cried"

"[After a period of conflict between two participants] X and Y were very tolerant of each other this week. These sorts of episodes in this environment show how conflict can be resolved and they can move on. They can acknowledge that they got through it which is a real achievement"

Staff observation:

"These women are riddled with a sense of failure. They have lost their children. They have had their babies taken away. It is such a healing thing for them to feel a sense of achievement. Completing pieces of artwork, getting a certificate to show they fully attended the project. These things give a sense of completion that is lacking in their life"

Project outcomes

There are clear limitations in terms of resources for an evaluation of the project's impact on participants in the weeks, months and years following the project. However, the evaluation found examples of positive learning experiences that the women may benefit from in their future lives:

Resilience after 'mistakes' / getting things wrong:

Through the arts processes, many women overcame an established pattern of 'not doing' because of a fear of 'getting it wrong'. The evaluation found numerous examples of women becoming increasingly confident to 'have a go' and to accept and move on from 'mistakes'. Often, the women experienced difficulties with particular creative processes, or felt their artwork was 'going wrong'. The artists supported them to persevere, to look at their work differently, to try a different technique or approach - or to accept that a particular piece hadn't quite worked how they intended it to, to 'put it down to experience' and start afresh. The women became more resilient to challenges in process, less fearful of making mistakes and more resourceful in their approaches to overcoming difficulties.

Moving forward positively after conflict:

Two participants engaged in a volatile confrontation, involving manipulative behaviour, false accusations of bullying and actual threats of violence (during a project session). The women were

supported (by an artist and support staff) to successfully resolve the conflict. The experience of acceptance, being allowed to continue to participate in the project and moving forward positively brought profound learning for the women involved.

Many of the women's life experiences have fostered a default expectation of 'bad things' following conflict – such as violence, crime, prison, being taken into care (themselves as children), having their children taken into care... Through the project, many of the women experienced a response to their limiting beliefs and/or established patterns of behaviour that was very different to the rest of their life experience. Project experiences, brought greater self-awareness and an understanding that resolution after 'mistakes' or conflict is possible. The significance of these experiences, for these women, should not be underestimated.

Staff comment:

"The conflict between two powerful women could have got violent. Both women wanted to continue on the project. They could see that they had to resolve this to be able to stay on the project. It is so positive that they could see a way forward. It would have been easier for one or both of them to walk away, and this would be more reflective of their patterns. The fact that they didn't walk away shows how much the project meant to them. And because of the project they learnt they are able to resolve problems. They can move on. They can change their patterns. This is huge learning to take forward in life." Support staff member

Increased responsibility for personal wellbeing and motivation for positive activities:

Through the project, some women discovered, or rediscovered, a desire to be creative. Some of the women were able to articulate how engaging in creative activities made them feel. One woman said: "I am reconnecting with my own identity, it [the project] has reinforced the therapeutic qualities being creative can bring". Another said: "I just sort of lose myself when I'm making things, it takes my mind off my problems for a while" and "It's a good distraction for things that are stressing me out". A significant number of participants chose to take materials home to continue working on their pieces between sessions. One woman (whose daughter has been adopted) took materials away with her, to be able to make flowers from plastics, with her daughter on contact visits. The significance of vulnerable women proactively engaging in creative activities outside of project sessions should not be underestimated. This is evidence of the women taking greater responsibility for their personal wellbeing and of increased motivation to engage in positive activities.

Staff at St Frances Trust, Milton Keynes, reported that their members are more willing to try different activities as a result of the project. *"We have been running a drama group, and there is notably less fear and resistance amongst those women who have taken part in Women at the HeArt"*.

Confidence to lead a creative group:

One participant on the Milton Keynes project, described how being creative had helped her to heal from the trauma she had suffered. She gained confidence through the project group work. Mid-way through the project she felt confident enough to initiate and facilitate her own creative women's group at MK Women's Centre. She said she felt confident to use skills developed during this project in her own weekly group. She said she had felt encouraged by the artists' style of facilitation. Prior to the project she believed it necessary to have an: 'up-front and directive' leadership style. She said she'd discovered she could just be herself and facilitate the group in a relaxed and low-key way, more reflective of her personality. She described it as a revelation to feel it is acceptable to just be herself.

"X walked in to our service less than a year ago. She literally turned to walk straight out again saying 'I can't do this'. Her confidence was so low. This project was exactly what she needed. It has had such a positive impact. She is now running a regular arts group herself. She has been networking

locally and bringing people together, she has hired a space for her group. Much of this she has done independently. It all felt doable because of the project". Staff member

Another participant, with a professional background in theatre, developed the confidence to lead a group drama exercise on the project. She described how this reconnected her with strengths and qualities that had long been dormant.

Connecting with other services and agencies:

Some women are accessing other services and opportunities as a direct result of the project. In Milton Keynes, two organisations (St. Frances Trust and Women and Work) have connected for the first time, holding liaison meetings and opening lines of communication for referring women to each other's services. One woman, who attends the St. Frances Birth-Mother group, has attended an appointment at Women and Work and is being supported to explore work and training opportunities. In Oxford, Crisis has received referrals from Costwold House, Eating Disorder Unit.

Please refer to Appendix 4 for more participant quotes and Appendix 5 for more artist observations.

Learning points

The project space influences experience and outcome:

- Communicating genuine acceptance is an essential component to engaging vulnerable women
- Provision of a safe, creative space in which participants can observe, respond and react to presented opportunities encourages engagement and enables the possibility of deep personal learning
- A strategy of expectation (about process, activity or end result) is less effective

Awareness of how different processes and opportunities might impact:

- The value of offering opportunities that are fun, enjoyable and relaxing should not be underestimated
- There is value in artists presenting their own artwork
- Creative processes which enable a sense of completion is of significance for individuals whose life experience includes 'unfinished business'
- The specifics of a creative process have the potential to impact positively or negatively on self-esteem. For example: the process of sculpting words describing positive personal attributes offered a space for focus and reflection, which enhanced self-esteem. Processes which are beyond participants' level of understanding risk compounding feelings of low self-esteem
- There is no 'safe' activity: an emotional or challenging response can be triggered by any arts process or situation. For example, working outside (in a garden) was very challenging for some participants

Facilitation:

- The ability to read the mood and situation and move swiftly onto another activity is a key essential of successful working with vulnerable groups

- Flexibility is necessary: having a resource of different activities to hand when/if a chosen activity proves too challenging for an individual or group
- It is less effective for artists to connect with participants' 'problems'. It is more effective for artists to connect with and respond appropriately to participants' needs
- Awareness and understanding the complexity of needs is essential
- A 'needs focused' approach to facilitation can be personally challenging and bring personal vulnerabilities to the surface
- It is important to balance and respond appropriately to individual and group needs

Support for artist facilitators:

- Artists need appropriate training and support in place to ensure self-awareness, objectivity, safe-guarding and professional standards
- A team approach to facilitation is effective. Sole working is inadvisable
- It is possible that as a result of this project the less experienced artists may have unrealistically high expectations of the amount of support, paid time and professional development opportunities 'generally' included within the budgets of participatory arts contracts

Collaboration with partner agencies and support staff:

- Effective collaboration with partner agency support staff is a necessary component of project success
- Communication with support staff and agencies needs to be effective

Barriers to involvement:

- Vulnerable women need a lot of support to attend projects of this type. For example, one woman in Oxford attended only because a member of Crisis staff sent her a personal reminder/encouragement by text. Others would not have attended without prior taster/outreach sessions in venues where they feel safe and/or a member of staff collecting them/travelling with them to the project
- Lack of childcare is a barrier to accessing projects of this type for some women
- Having access to 'women only' projects is of value to vulnerable women. Many participants said they would not have attended if the project were open to men

**Aim 2:
Embed good creative practice into support services**



Summary: Aim 2: Embed good creative practice into support services by seeking to improve staff development and skills base

Outcomes:

Crisis: Project highlighted importance of considering women with children. Whilst single people are Crisis' main criteria, there is the potential to offer support for women with children within their preventative work.

Staff across all projects reported an increased understanding that arts projects are *"as much about developing self-esteem as about arts skills and activities"*

Staff at Elizabeth Fry reported how the project highlighted the complexity of their service users' needs and lives *"this was a valuable reminder to me as a professional"*

Crisis: Increased awareness of importance of targeted women's work / creating a safe space for women (in what is a male dominated environment): Crisis now run a women only arts group

New professional links and cross referrals made between participating agencies: Crisis with DV unit, Lifeline, Refugee Resource, Costwold House Eating Disorder Unit. St Frances Trust with MK Women and Work.

Staff at St Frances, MK report feeling confident, to lead arts projects themselves. Report having witnessed *"tangible evidence"* of the value of arts projects

Crisis: Old Fire Station, Oxford

Visual and performing arts project led by Dionne Freeman and Emmy O-Shaughnessy

1 x staff training session
6 x creative outreach sessions
7 x creative sessions
Planning and evaluation
Public exhibition

Milton Keynes

Visual arts: Christine Wilkinson, Dionne Freeman, Clare Goodall

1 x staff training
6 x outreach sessions
6 x project sessions
Planning + evaluation
Public exhibition

Elizabeth Fry Probation hostel, Reading

Visual arts: Christine Wilkinson, Carla Conte, Dionne Freeman.
Performing arts: Maria Trevis-Hackemann

1 x staff training
1 x creative taster session
8 x project sessions
1 x project sharing event
Planning and evaluation

Alana House, Reading

Visual arts: Christine Wilkinson.
Performing arts: Maria Trevis-Hackemann

1 x taster session... 1 x staff training
7 x project sessions

Interventions

Starting point

Effective working partnerships were already in place through past projects with some of the chosen sites. Thames Valley Partnership was instrumental in setting up Alana House, although staff changes had taken place in the meantime giving rise to the need to start from scratch in building relationships and understanding. Elizabeth Fry: Approved premises are always interested in taking on new initiatives to help support their residents but it had been many years (and change of management and staff) since the last piece of work managed by Thames Valley Partnership took place there. Initial contact at the Old Fire Station was made through existing arts links and after discussions, it was apparent that the work would sit more comfortably within the Crisis side of the organisation so relationships were developed, and meetings held with key individuals to progress the project. Milton Keynes was a mixed agency site and development work was carried out to find key partners in the location. Some of this was done through InterAction MK, the community arts organisation who hosted the workshops.

Overview

The host agencies provide different services for vulnerable women and thus the context for each project was different. Elizabeth Fry Approved Premises is a statutory service, which necessitates certain procedures and rules that are not demanded of the voluntary sector (for example participants were under obligation to attend). Crisis / Old Fire Station in Oxford provides arts services and therefore support staff had more experience and understanding of arts projects and processes. InterAction in Milton Keynes is an arts organisation, however its primary role was providing a venue to host the project. This necessitated development and outreach work to attract and engage vulnerable women from other local services. Alana House is an open access drop-in centre. A venue of this type presents different challenges. Potential participants are present in the venue, but are not obligated to engage with the project – making the cooperation and support of centre staff crucial.

The project aimed to embed good creative practice within support agencies by seeking to improve staff development and skills base. The Project Manager and artists maintained good levels of communication with support staff at all stages of the project. Staff at each of the host and participating agencies experienced a creative training session prior to project delivery. Staff were encouraged to participate in the activities and to experience and learn alongside their service users. This approach is more challenging in statutory agencies, where staff must balance certain legal responsibilities and organisational protocols.

The quality and levels of engagement from staff across the agencies was mixed. There were examples of fantastic levels of support enabling significant outcomes at participant, staff and organisational levels. There were examples of misunderstandings and reluctance to engage, resulting in low attendance and cancelled sessions. A change in personnel rectified the situation, to a positive outcome, which highlights the important role played by support staff on projects of this type.

The circumstances within each partner agency are complex. Thames Valley Partnership is respectful of the challenges that support agencies, and individual staff members, face. The evaluation findings are therefore presented thematically, for the purpose of highlighting generic issues and learning. It is not considered appropriate to present detail of successes, 'failures' or challenges particular to individual projects or agencies.

Key findings

Relationship between staff support and participant engagement:

- The quality of involvement from support staff appeared to have a direct impact on participant attendance and engagement
- Modelling positive behaviours, such as a willingness to try new creative activities, appeared to relax participants and encourage engagement
- Vulnerable women need a lot of support to engage with projects of this type
- Support is needed when the project is held in an unfamiliar venue *and* when held in a group's usual meeting place

Unfamiliar venue:

- Vulnerable women are more likely to attend a project, in an unfamiliar venue, when they have had a positive experience of the creative activity and an opportunity to meet/connect with/feel safe with the artist. Advance taster/outreach sessions in venues where the women feel safe are necessary
- Vulnerable women need ongoing support to attend
- Interventions that increase attendance levels include: members of staff collecting/driving/travelling on public transport with participants, staff sending personal encouragement/reminders by text and staff modelling positive behaviours / engaging with the arts processes themselves
- It is effective to provide a high level of support at the start of the project. Many participants progress to attending the project and engaging with project processes independently
- Holding a project in an unfamiliar venue brings both benefits and challenges:

“Where we normally meet, that’s where there is often a focus on uncertainty and their chaotic lives. A new space can mean they feel differently about themselves and can move on.”

“With such vulnerable women, there is the chance that there is too much ‘new’. Perhaps the ideal is new activity in the existing space, which can lead onto new activity in a new space”

Existing venue/usual meeting place:

- Vulnerable women are more likely to attend a project in their usual meeting place if support staff are encouraging, supportive *and* willing to participate themselves

Barriers to effective collaboration with support staff:

- Support staff face practical challenges, such as lack of time and resources, which impair the quality of support they are able to offer to externally facilitated arts projects
- The evaluation found the most significant barriers, to effective collaboration with support staff, to be (i) lack of clarity/understanding about project purpose and (ii) personal/internal barriers:

Lack of clarity about project purpose:

“After one or two sessions I observed that the project is about the whole person, about self-esteem and confidence and not just about the art activity. This is a very positive thing. But I don’t think I’d been really clear on this beforehand and this might explain why it had been so difficult to get my staff on board. I struggled to communicate to my staff what it was about. I struggled to produce flyers, for this same reason. I struggled to categorize it and to communicate it. To put on paper what it was”... Please see Appendix 6 for a continuation of this quote.

Internal barriers:

“I really struggled to get my staff to be positive about this project. They had big fears. One member of staff said: “if it involves me making anything, I’m not doing it”, another said: “there’s no way that I’m singing”. This was a real problem. If they are coming from a place of fear, then really the chance of them encouraging our users to take part is pretty slim”

- As the project progressed, the evaluation found many examples of staff overcoming their internal barriers:

“I started off thinking this wasn’t for me, I’m not arty. But I enjoyed it, it felt different. I realised the women would enjoy that focus. Stop thinking for a minute and just enjoy. Relaxing. Having fun. Taking their mind off of their issues for a short while. If I’d had the choice to opt in or out of this project I probably wouldn’t have taken part. But I’m glad that I did, for now I do see the benefits for the women”

Staff training:

- Staff training is an important vehicle through which to communicate project objectives, build relationships and encourage a sense of commitment to the project
- Experiential learning enables staff to understand the project’s potential benefits:

“We did some creative exercises and the team reflected on this and said what a nice process that was. We all realized we could stop thinking for a minute and enjoy. We then understood how valuable the project would be for the women”

- The staff training could have been better used as an opportunity to support agency staff to identify, address and overcome internal barriers to their full and effective engagement in the project:

“I would have liked the training to go deeper, to explain why the arts are relevant in our setting. I sort of understand that the purpose is beyond the making, but I don’t quite get it”
[Staff member who attended the training but not the project]

Understanding the purpose and benefits of arts projects:

- Staff with previous experience of arts projects with vulnerable groups reported that their involvement on this project reinforced their understanding of the wider benefits of engagement in the arts
- Across all of the projects, staff with no previous experience of arts projects, reported a new understanding of how the arts are effective in realising objectives such as increasing confidence and self-esteem
- The majority of these staff said their understanding of the project’s purpose developed slowly and ‘the realisation’ came late into the project
- This finding highlights that many staff do not readily make the connection between arts projects and their own organisational objectives. This is an important consideration when planning future projects and/or staff training

“This project gave us different tools to achieve our organisational objectives. It is about gaining control and empowering. This absolutely reflects our own organisational objectives”

The benefits, risks and challenges of engaging in the arts ‘alongside’ clients as equal learners and participants:

- The evaluation found projects were most successful, in terms of participant engagement, when staff also engaged in the arts processes

- Support staff highlight benefits, challenges and important considerations related to this working approach:

“During the project we had an entirely different relationship with clients: we were equals. The clients saw our vulnerabilities. They saw us learning. They saw us struggling and rising to the challenge of something new. We were absolutely on a level with them. If I screwed something I was making up, I had to start again. It’s like the point when every child, has to learn their parents are human and vulnerable. The project helped the women to have a different perspective on professionals who are such a significant part of their lives”

“It’s important that the artists understand our role. We might want to enter the spirit of the project, work alongside our clients as equals. But we have to keep our professional boundaries. There might be things going on under the surface that the artists aren’t party to. The women need clarity and consistency. It could be confusing for the women if one minute we are happily making art with them, seemingly ignoring an issue at play and then after the session ‘switching back’ into our professional role and perhaps having to deal with something quite difficult”

Development of skills / confidence to apply new skills:

- Across all projects, support staff reported an increase in their creative skills
- Many staff said the project had given them new ideas for how they could work with their clients
- Many staff reported having the confidence to lead arts activities themselves:

“I feel we can, and will, use many of the techniques the artists have shown us in our own sessions”

Benefit of external artists/providers working with support agencies:

- For vulnerable women, who access support services, their exposure to professionals often has a focus on the problems and issues in their lives. Arts projects, led by external providers, bring a different focus.
- External artists complement support services by presenting opportunities for women to develop skills and attributes that may help them resolve or better cope with their problems and issues:

“This project has helped to develop the women’s ability to mix in a different environment. Most don’t cope with change and being with people they don’t know. Usually their only exposure to others is professionals. And by professionals, I mean Social Services, which is negative for them. Being around the artists brought an entirely different experience into their lives”

Unexpected learning:

- Across all of the projects, staff said they had learnt things through the project that they hadn’t expected to:

“One resident has periods of deep depression, she withdraws, doesn’t want to engage. At the start of the project she was in that place. She was amazingly productive during the

project week. The project lifted her and staff really picked up on that. We have all learnt from this. We recognized that practical tasks could be more beneficial than talking. So now we say things like "do you want to make a cake?" or some other practical activity that can stop her plummeting. This was very significant, both for the woman herself, but also in terms of staff learning"

"Just having fun. Not everything we do has to be heavy. This project really demonstrated the importance of fun. I'm going to take that forward with me"

Project outcomes

- St Francis Trust is considering contracting one of the artists to work with their women to create work for a planned building extension
- Elizabeth Fry hostel has contracted one of the artists to deliver further sessions
- New professional links and cross referrals made between participating agencies: Crisis with DV unit, Lifeline, Refugee Resource, Costwold House Eating Disorder Unit. St Francis Trust with MK ACT.
- Women at 3 of the project venues have reported an interest in ongoing arts activities being available.
- Crisis: Project highlighted the importance of considering women with children. Whilst single people are Crisis' main criteria, there is the potential to offer support for women with children within their preventative work.
- Crisis: Increased awareness of importance of targeted women's work / creating a safe space for women (in what is a male dominated environment): Crisis now run a women only arts group

Please see appendix 6 for more staff feedback.

Recommendations

For Thames Valley Partnership to:

- Remain mindful during project planning meetings, that support staff may have misunderstood, or not fully understand, the aims and purpose of arts projects
- Be aware that without first-hand experience it can be difficult for support staff to make links between the objectives of an arts project and those of their organisation
- Be sensitive to the fact that support staff may experience personal internal barriers to engaging with an arts project and may need training and support to overcome these
- To revise the approach of the staff training to:
 - Sensitively address the issues detailed above
 - Ensure adequate reflection time
- Continue to include creative experiential learning in staff training
- Consider producing project marketing materials after the staff training: to involve staff (from a more informed position) in the process: ensure publicity 'speaks their language'
- Continue to budget for support staff development and training in arts projects

Aim 3: Provide a platform for excellent professional development for artists working with vulnerable groups



Summary: Aim 3: Provide a platform for excellent professional development for artists working with vulnerable groups

Outcomes:

- Enhanced skills in project planning and structure
- Empowering approaches in project facilitation
- Trust in self and others
- Trust in creative processes
- Valuing fun and joy

Deeper understanding of working with vulnerable groups:

- Complexity of needs / issues
- Support requirements

Increased confidence:

- Working with vulnerable groups
- To try new creative approaches
- To utilise personal vulnerability

- In personal arts practice
- In professional abilities

Self-awareness
Changed / positive self-perception
More reflective and strategic practice
Clarity of personal goals
Nourishing own arts practice
Connection to political values
Professional networks

- Support from Project Manager
- Planning / development meetings
- Artist mentoring scheme
- Training: (Team building and self-awareness, Understanding the Criminal Justice system, Resilience and skills for working with vulnerable groups)
- Facilitated Action Learning Set
- Artist making days: opportunities to collaborate, develop practice and make new work
- Social meetings and events

Public exhibitions at:
Old Fire Station and Meadowbrook College, Oxford + InterAction, MK.
Sharing event, Elizabeth Fry hostel in Reading.
Final dissemination event at Meadowbrook College.

Delivery of creative workshops for vulnerable women at:

- Old Fire Station, Oxford,
- InterAction Milton Keynes,
- Elizabeth Fry Probation hostel
- Alana House in Reading:

Total output:
4 x staff training
14 x outreach / taster sessions
29 x project sessions

Interventions and outputs

Starting point

Dionne Freeman: Visual artist: extensive experience of working with a wide range of vulnerable groups; experience of delivering artist training and informal mentoring. Interested in mentoring over a longer period and extend opportunity to current practice.

Carla Conte: Youth Worker, practicing artist/workshop leader /exhibitions/events: some experience of working with vulnerable groups, but little experience of working with vulnerable women.

Clare Goodall: Mosaic artist and tutor: Experience of working in Family Centres, wanted to develop skills in working with vulnerable women and to gain experience of working with other artists.

Emmy O-Shaughnessy: Recent graduate of Masters at Goldsmiths College in Applied Drama, Theatre in Community/Education / Social contexts: 8 years experience of working with young vulnerable people, wanted to gain experience working with older groups.

Maria Trevis-Hackemann: Performance artist (cabaret) with a background in corporate training: Some experience of working with vulnerable groups but not with vulnerable women.

Christine Wilkinson: Visual artist with extensive experience of working with vulnerable groups (since 1987). 20 years experience of delivering training for artists: not extended into artist mentor role, prior to this project.

Overview

Thames Valley Partnership's extensive experience of engaging vulnerable groups in arts processes was evident. The complexity of this project and the potential challenges the artists might face was recognized at project development stage. Significant resources were allocated to investing in the artists, to ensure they were supported and equipped to meet those challenges, including:

- High level of ongoing support from Project Manager
- Mentoring scheme (2 experienced artists supporting 4 less experienced artists)
- Training:
 - Team building and self-awareness, led by Rebecca Cairns
 - Understanding the Criminal Justice system, led by Jill Harraway
 - Resilience and skills for working with vulnerable groups, led by Pauline Gladstone
- Action Learning Set, facilitated by Alison Leverett-Morris²
- Paid opportunities for the artists to collaborate, develop practice and make new work

The investment in the artists fostered confidence and creativity. A strong team was established with the artists demonstrating a very high level of commitment to the project and to each other. From this platform, the artists were able to reflect on their personal and professional practice, challenge their thinking, develop new skills, collaborate and trial new approaches.

The project provided the opportunity for less experienced artists to gain real experience of working with vulnerable women. It is a credit to Thames Valley Partnership that the mentoring relationships were so effectively managed in the context of real and challenging circumstances. The artists were supported to develop and grow without compromising the quality of the project experience for participants.

The more experienced artists/mentors report new insights that are influencing their working practice. All of the artists have increased in confidence, skills, self-awareness and ability to work effectively with vulnerable women. For some of the artist/mentees the project has inspired life changes and new professional directions.

The artists' evaluation was a dynamic process, predominantly undertaken through Action Learning. Confidentiality is an important feature of the Action Learning process and so it is inappropriate to detail specifics of personal journeys. It is therefore challenging, in this report, to convey the profound impact of the project on each of the artists - and the personal and professional growth witnessed by the evaluator.

The evaluation found the artistic team to be of exceptional high quality. The artists' skills, talents, professionalism and openness to reflect, challenge and develop are integral to the project's success. There is considerable potential for Thames Valley Partnership to explore options for extending its services as an artist training provider and/or provider of arts training for support agencies.

² Please see Appendix 7 for a description of Action Learning

Project impacts

- Understanding the value of reflective practice
- New insights into the benefits of collaborative working
- Skills development: creative techniques, facilitation, planning, evaluation
- Creative thinking inspired by team learning and team facilitation
- Ignited passion for the arts as a vehicle for building esteem and confidence
- Safe platform to trial new creative approaches
- Reassessing practice, personal and professional goals, work options
- Experience of how assumptions (about self, participants, support staff) can influence project process and outcome
- Experience of how acceptance (of self, participants, support staff) can influence project process and outcome
- Self-awareness
- Validation of personal and professional abilities and process
- Experience of working with vulnerable women
- Experience of working in voluntary and statutory services

Project outcomes

- Increased confidence:
 - To work with vulnerable groups
 - In personal arts practice
 - In personal and professional abilities
 - To try new creative approaches
 - To accept and utilise personal vulnerability

- Deeper understanding of the complexity of working with vulnerable groups

“This project has included such a high level of planning and reflection that I’ve really developed my understanding of the complexities of working with vulnerable groups”

- Clarity of support requirements when working with vulnerable groups:

“The project environment is crucial. Without the Action Learning, the social meetings and the strong sense of team: it would have been difficult for the mentor/mentee relationship to work in such a vulnerable environment. I understand that if the environment is right, if the support is there, then it is possible for artists to safely learn and trial new approaches in a real and challenging context”

“The contact time in terms of mentoring, planning, evaluation, action learning and training was probably higher than our contact time with participants. But this has shown me how important this is when working in highly vulnerable and challenging situations”

- Awareness of personal vulnerability / recognition of ‘vulnerability’ as a strength:

“There is no ‘us and them’, vulnerability is a continuum for us all”...

"It takes strength to be aware of one's vulnerability"...

"It is a powerful thing to recognize our own vulnerability, to harness it, to use bad experiences or difficult times to fuel something new, something positive, be that an art work or a new direction in life"...

"If we are able to be vulnerable, we grow"...

"It was when I allowed myself to be most vulnerable [when facilitating], when I 'put myself out there' as an artist and as a person that I grew the most and the participants appeared most engaged"...

- Self-awareness:

"The Action Learning process has influenced how I facilitate. I'm more aware of my own needs. I question things like: Is it my need to have people say it [participants' finished artwork] is brilliant? Am I supporting participants towards a finished product because of my need to 'show what I can do'? Self-awareness is important when working with vulnerable groups"

- Changed self-perception

"Before this project I had a rigid view of myself - and my work. I saw the process before it had happened. I saw the end product before it had been produced. I'm much more open now. I see myself very differently. My whole self is included in my work and approach to work"

"As a new Mum, this project has helped me to reconnect with my confidence and abilities, to not cut off all the parts of me or see them as separate from motherhood"

- Clarity of personal goals:

"My work is more focused and I'm also now focusing on things that interest me"... "Clarity of my own goals and awareness to not absorb other people's"...

- More reflective and strategic practice:

"This project has helped me realize that in the past I've repeated [projects / approach]. I'm now challenging myself in my choices. I'm asking myself why? How is this progressing?"

"Working as a mentor required me to think about all aspects of the work in more depth, to dissect things that I wouldn't otherwise. I now apply this way of thinking in my work"

- Skills in planning and structure

"I am more skilled in 'breaking down' a big idea. Thinking it through, typing it up, having structure, intention and clarity"

"Less is more. I focus on doing less and doing it well"

- Empowering approaches in facilitation:

"Because of the Action Learning I'm using open questions, challenging questions... I'm questioning, supporting – not trying to find a solution"

"I can separate things in my mind. I don't need to solve people's problems or resolve situations for my own self-esteem. It's not my business. If I see myself as 'fixer' I am disempowering not empowering"

"I shared the 'back office' with one participant. It seemed appropriate that she understood the depth of our thought, consideration and planning with this particular participant... which helped her to find self-awareness and strength in her personal qualities"

- Trust in self and others:

"I think I've always been aware of the importance of participants trusting me and I work in a conscious way to build that trust. But I had a moment on this project where I saw this is as much about me trusting them. Trust has to be mutual"

"I value the artists' way of looking at things"

- Trust in the creative process:

"I had a toothbrush moment rather than a light bulb moment. My dentist tells me I brush my teeth too hard and to use a softer brush. The parallel with project facilitation struck me. I see that a softer approach is effective. To be more gentle and acknowledge what I already know: to trust the creative process"

"I deepened my understanding of process. This takes the pressure off the end product. But comes with a conflict as a performer. I'm hungry for more process"

- Nourishing own arts practice

"All of the pressure I was feeling was created by me. I have given myself permission to practice"

"I realize I was projecting some of my own issues onto the project. I realize that I don't have to filter out all of my creativity through workshops. It is important to nourish my own practice"

- Enhanced connection to political values:

"Since starting this project I have joined Feminism Belongs and set up workshops at Cheney School as part of International Women's Day"

"I've begun to include political comments in my public performances"

- Professional connections and networks:

"I feel more rooted, connected and networked in the local area"

- Valuing fun and joy

"This project has shown me the importance of creating opportunities for fun and joy"



Conclusion

Women at the HeArt successfully achieved its aims to: creatively empower vulnerable women, embed good creative practice into support services and provide a platform for excellent professional development for artists working with vulnerable groups.

A skilled and talented team of artists, who modelled openness to reflection, challenge and personal growth, led the project. The artists' non-judgemental approach allowed creativity to flourish. Factors identified as instrumental to the project's success include: understanding the complexity of vulnerable women's needs, responding appropriately to individual and group need, high quality *accessible* arts activity, skilled facilitation, investing in the artists and investing in support staff.

The evaluation identified the following areas of learning:

- The project space influences experience and outcome:
 - Communicating acceptance is an essential component to engaging vulnerable women
 - Provision of a safe, creative space in which participants' can observe, respond and react to presented opportunities encourages engagement and enables learning
 - A strategy of expectation (about process, activity or end result) is less effective
- The importance of being aware of how different processes might impact:
 - There is value in offering opportunities that are fun, enjoyable and relaxing
 - Creative processes which enable a sense of completion is of significance for individuals whose life experience includes 'unfinished business'
 - There is no 'safe' activity: an emotional or challenging response can be triggered by any arts process or situation
- Facilitation:
 - It is effective for artists to connect with/respond to participants' needs (rather than their 'problems')
 - Awareness and understanding the complexity of needs is essential
 - A 'needs focused' approach can be personally challenging
 - It is important to balance individual and group needs
- Support for artist facilitators:
 - Artists need appropriate training and support in place to ensure self-awareness, objectivity, safe-guarding and professional standards
 - A team approach to facilitation is effective. Sole working is inadvisable
- Collaboration with partner agencies and support staff:
 - Effective collaboration with partner agency support staff is essential
 - The most significant barriers, to engaging support staff are (i) lack of clarity/understanding about project purpose and (ii) personal/internal barriers, such as fear or lack of confidence to participate in the arts
- Barriers to involvement:
 - Vulnerable women need a lot of support to attend projects of this type
 - Lack of childcare is a barrier for some women
 - Having access to 'women only' projects is of value to vulnerable women

Through creative arts processes, Women at the HeArt enabled vulnerable women, support staff and artists to develop new skills, gain confidence and experience a deep sense of personal growth and achievement in both personal and/or professional lives.

Appendix 1:

Example of an appropriate response to individual and group need:

At Elizabeth Fry, excellent levels of participation and positive rapport between the mentee artist and participants had been achieved during the first session which explored the notion of 'assumption'. The following day, one woman displayed defensive body language during a group activity and was also vocal in her resistance. This was affecting the engagement of the group as a whole and the confidence of the artist mentee, who was leading the session.

During the coffee break, the lead artist responded to the individual's needs (rather than her behaviour). The woman responded positively. She explained how disorientated she felt by her recent arrival at the hostel. She was feeling angry at not being given a choice to participate in the creative activity at a time when she felt she had other priorities (including housing and financial issues). She told of distractions affecting her ability to concentrate (including mental health problems and medication). She expressed frustration at an earlier incident (a woman who arrived late was told by a member of staff that she could not join the session). She told the artist that the woman (who was asked to leave) had been really looking forward to the session, had "got more involved than anyone else the day before" but was having extreme difficulties in sleeping which explained her lateness. What displayed as behaviour sabotaging the group was rooted in feeling disempowered and empathetic towards a fellow participant.

It was evident that the artist met a need in the woman to be heard. A mutually respectful rapport was established. From this position, the artist was able to reduce the woman's anxiety and gently encourage awareness of how her behaviour can impact both on her own stress levels and on the group dynamic as a whole. Following this 'coffee break chat' the woman was no longer disruptive during group activities. Towards the end of the session, she made a choice to engage in a singing activity in a small group, with the mentee performance artist, in a separate room.

The significance of this woman's engagement with the creative processes, and the impact on her self-esteem and sense of achievement should not be underestimated. It took confidence to articulate her frustrations. It took self-awareness to feel empathy towards a fellow participant. It required resilience and a positive attitude to overcome a negative experience, move on and positively engage with the activities offered.

This example demonstrates how an appropriate response to both individual and group needs contributes to a successful project outcome.

This example also highlights a challenge of working within statutory services and a setting such as a probation hostel, which necessitates certain rules. Hostel staff are required to respond to behaviour (eg. lateness) and do not always have the information or means to respond to underlying need (eg. problems with medication/insomnia). The artists as 'external professionals' are uniquely positioned to engage differently with the women; which is a factor contributing to the project's success.

Appendix 2:

Examples of high quality and accessible arts processes:

Memory boxes:

Christine Wilkinson led an activity that involved women from the birth mothers group (women whose children have been adopted) creating memory boxes. The boxes could hold keepsakes of times spent with their children or thoughts, messages and memories. Women who have contact with their children could show their children the boxes on contact visits. The women who have no contact with their children, could arrange for the boxes to be held by adoption agencies, to be available if ever their children seek contact with their birth mother.

The poignancy of this activity was balanced with the sense of safety, acceptance and choice within the project space. Participants responded positively to the array of materials available, to the artists' relaxed facilitation style and the freedom to choose from many different creative activities: weaving, colouring in, glass painting... The memory box activity could have been considered too challenging or too high risk - yet the women engaged and their focus was on the materials and the making process. With choices of different activities available, it is significant that a high proportion of the group chose to make memory boxes for their children. Those women described feeling proud of the boxes they had created and they readily shared their intended purposes with the artists:

"X said she felt very pleased with the two boxes she had made for her children. She showed me these boxes and then went on to show me two smaller boxes inside, that she had decorated for locks of her children's hair"

"X told me that she has said to her children 'this is a box I made to keep memories of times that I have with you guys'. This is very significant for her as a birth mother and for the children. Her child said: 'did you make that for me Mummy?' Through the boxes, this mother was able to communicate to her children how much she values the time that they have together"

Weaving:

Clare Goodall led an activity that involved reflecting on words describing personal strengths, qualities and attributes. There was a sense of empowerment in the shared conversation. Using materials such as willow, wire, string and ribbon the words were woven into physical objects. Many women chose to connect the word they had created to a large woven heart: a process that connected personal attributes to a bigger whole and individuals to a group.

One staff member said:

"I noticed that as the women focused on weaving words like strong, kind, lovable and brave the physical act of making served almost as a positive affirmation. The physical presence of the words sparked idea after idea and positive words kept flowing. The women would look at the group piece, the big heart, and suggest more words they felt should be included. Filling a space physically with positive words about oneself makes a bold and strong statement. It's the women's low opinions of themselves that holds them back and this activity challenged those opinions. It was moving to watch my group focusing on their positive qualities, it's not something I witness that often"

The artists observed:

“X very eloquently described her process of working with her weaving, how she translated her experiences into her art and how she wove the good and bad bits of her life choosing different materials and different methods to represent these”

“X said how she and a fellow participant had struck up conversations that they probably wouldn’t have had, had they not been weaving. They described themselves to each other through the way they had woven. Both had enjoyed the simplicity of the activity, which had allowed for individual expression”.

The finished artwork (shown in the public exhibitions) fostered feelings of pride and increased self-esteem. One participant said: *“It looks really good. I don’t think I would have thought of those words to describe us, but seeing that [the heart] I suppose we’re not that bad after all”.*

Natural materials and power tools:

Carla Conte, led activities involving found natural materials such as wood and shells. The women were trusted with power tools such as an electric sander and a jig-saw as well as with chisels and a heating instrument used to ‘draw’ by burning onto wood. The women, who mostly worked outside in the garden, created many artworks including picture frames, bird boxes, paintings, knitting and mixed media drawings and sculptures. It was striking that the women demonstrated the confidence to make artworks very different to those shown as examples.

In the context of a probation hostel, offering the opportunity to work creatively with ‘dangerous’ tools communicated trust in the women. At first, some women appeared to demonstrate a need to test the trust instilled in them, revealing information that might threaten or challenge. One woman, an experienced painter and decorator, told the artist that in the terms of her probation she is only allowed to do gardening as “her probation is afraid she will mug an old lady to death if she were allowed into people’s houses”. In such circumstances it is challenging for the artists to ‘stand back’ and allow a creative process to unfold. However, the artists successfully balanced issues of safety and trust. They encouraged the women to find the confidence and skills for themselves rather than overly supervising and instructing. The project achieved a high level of engagement and a high output of artworks. Many women appeared to respond positively to the creative opportunities presented:

“It’s great that you have trusted us with these tools and doing this work because often we are not trusted or treated as real adults to have the choice as to what we want to do”

Exploring ‘assumptions’ through performance:

Maria Trevis-Hackemann led an activity on ‘assumptions’ at Elizabeth Fry probation hostel. The activity explored:

- Labels applied to and by us; to ourselves and others
- Assumptions made about us and that we make about ourselves and others
- Tools that we have to overcome prejudice and to be resilient to labels and assumptions

Maria described two people to the group: Person A had been bullied at school, had become homeless after a relationship breakdown and had been treated for depression. Person B had a university education, spoke two languages fluently and worked in Britain and Europe.

The group was invited to assess Person A and B's life potential.

The women described person A as: *"a pretty sad character...hadn't much going for her... limited by her life experiences"*. They referred to person A as a woman, yet had not been given details of gender. They referred to person B in the male gender, commenting: *"he had lots going for him...loads of potential...the world is his oyster"*.

Maria asked the group if it would help for them to know that person A and person B was the same person. This caused a sharp intake of breath. Maria then asked if it would further help to know that she herself was person A and person B. There was an initial stunned silence and then people were laughing, slapping their knee or saying 'Oh my God' to one another. The women appeared to demonstrate admiration and respect for Maria and a working rapport was established.

In small groups, the women then worked to identify the labels and assumptions they make about others and those they believe others to make about them. They explored tools used to overcome, remove or become resilient to such assumptions.

The women were engaged and appeared inspired by this activity. A connection between the artist and participants was enabled through the combination of the artist's skills as a performer and her sharing personal vulnerability. The feed back from the group was positive with lively discussion forming part of the evaluation.

Appendix 3: Example of skilled project facilitation.

At the end of the first session, one participant (Jane) threatened another participant (Sarah) with violence. This created a volatile situation – and ultimately one or both of the participants could have been withdrawn from the project by their representative support agency. However, the dynamic leading up to the threat of violence was complex and the artist was committed to resolving the situation positively for both participants.

During the session, Sarah had demanded the constant support and attention of the lead artist, unable to perform even 'basic' tasks on her own, such as using scissors or holding a pencil. The artist was consistently supportive but also communicated an approach of "Yes I'll be with you after I have dealt with person A and person B". Sarah had appeared to feel threatened when the artist engaged with or helped other members of the group. It came as a surprise, during an evaluation discussion at the end of the session, when Sarah accused Jane of bullying her throughout the session.

Further to the accusation Sarah began 'goading' Jane into hitting her. Things progressed to Jane threatening violence towards Sarah, but she left the room without making a physical attack.

It transpired that Jane had a history of anger and 'hitting'. The artist was able to engage with Jane's capacity to change – praising her choice to leave the room when provoked, explaining that she had not witnessed any bullying and did not believe the accusation simply because of her past history. With Sarah, the artist was able to respond to her very low confidence but demonstrate she would not be manipulated into 'winning' her constant attention. It was also necessary for the artist to negotiate both participants' place on the project with St. Francis support staff.

Ultimately both Sarah and Jane continued for the duration of the 6-session project. The skilled and careful facilitation of the artist played a significant part in the continued engagement of these vulnerable women.

Sarah grew in confidence. She positioned herself next to the lead artist at every session, but progressed to being able to use scissors, cut shapes, colour in, twist wire and glue and stick collage unassisted. Sarah never apologized for the accusation she made against Jane, but by the end of the project she was making her things to support her artwork. Sarah expressed pride in the work she had produced and said that the activities took her mind off of things.

Jane expressed immense pride in the memory boxes and pieces of work she had made for her children. She engaged in the meditation (led by the mentee artist) and said this reminded her that she had found meditation a useful anger management tool, many years ago.

Sarah and Jane worked at opposite ends of the table, but tolerated each other's presence. For both women it was valuable to experience that it is possible to move on after conflict. It was inappropriate to pry into personal details, but support staff said the women's default position is to expect to be judged by past actions. Their experiences on the project demonstrated that it is possible to be seen for who they are now.

Appendix 4:
Participant quotes:

Fun / enjoyment / support / a 'break from life':

"The workers see only one side of me"

"It's really good fun. I could do with this more often"

"It's good to be able to do things and chat at the same time"

"I thought this was really weird when we started. But I have really enjoyed it and I have made things for my children which I really like"

"I feel a lot more relaxed now than when I first came in"

"It's a good distraction for things that are stressing me out"

"I didn't realise that the time had passed, I was completely engrossed, I thought it was about 10 minutes"

"I feel much brighter"

"The act of doing something like this really helps being relaxed"

"Being relaxed feels really weird for me"

"You are professionals but you don't make me feel intimidated, you are not like authority, so I am relaxed"

"It takes your mind off things, it gives you a break"

"Next time the sessions should be shorter – we have been really tired because we have been using our imaginations and being creative and we have been working hard – it doesn't feel like hard work but it has been very tiring and coming from prison we are not used to it"

"I liked that I didn't have to draw- I came because I felt like there wasn't any pressure to draw"

"I liked the sessions being just women and I would like to come to future sessions"

"Its freeing it just being women- it feels really relaxing"

"I've loved working and responding to music"

"It's exciting to come here. I've enjoyed it."

"It's been good to express yourself to how you're really feeling but can't put it into words."

*"It's great, you get to have deeper conversations with just women. I wanna keep coming back."
"I feel better. It was fun-the sharing of it, something quite new. I'm normally quite bad at working in groups but today I've been better."*

"It feels safe without men"

"I felt completely engrossed and distracted from my life"

"I would have felt inhibited if men were here"

"I started the day feeling intense and stressed and I am leaving feeling relaxed"

"I'm amazed at how less awful I feel now than I did at the beginning"

"I really enjoyed myself today"

"I can show how I feel by painting – it's often easier than trying to use words"

Increased self esteem:

"It makes you feel worthwhile"

"It makes you feel good. Some of the stuff is brilliant – some is better than others – a three year old could do better than some things. [Everyone laughed] But that isn't the point – we are all where we are on our journey and it doesn't matter – it is respected"

"I've just noticed all the skill that went in today and it made me feel happy and positive and inspired"

"I enjoyed using my hands again and thinking of different ways of putting things together"

"Some stuff has been really good – I enjoyed looking at what other people made and I had time to enjoy how other people have gone about doing things"

"This project is worthwhile – it shows a lot of potential in people"

"It's nice to have encouragement from you. We don't get much encouragement – someone saying 'that's good', showing interest and showing you how to do things"

"You showed me respect and you are nice and you are genuine – it means a lot"

"I feel I have been trusted – like with the tools – treated like an adult and not like little children"

"I liked that we could ask for what we did in sessions- it made me feel respected"

"My work reflects how I would like to feel"

"I chose an image of an eye because the way I am looking at the world is changing"

"I feel less self conscious than I usually am"

"I felt like a child again- not a married woman with 4 children"

"I feel honoured to have this opportunity to work with different types of people and to experience their skills and have their encouragement. It's been amazing. It's not like everyone else we come across which doesn't mean anything– these people who have come in really mean it, they are genuine. You really mean it when you praise us and give us real encouragement. It's amazing that they have spent time with us. It makes us feel great"

"Makes you feel girly, positive and good and you can get really good jobs out of stuff like this"

"It's great that you have trusted us with these tools and doing this work because often we are not trusted or treated as real adults and to have the choice as to what we want to do"

Increased confidence:

"I never thought I would have the courage to use the jigsaw!"

"I feel like I know how to do more out of simple stuff at home- I feel more confident doing more creative stuff at home"

"I just drifted away during this session - I let myself"

"I feel like my spirit is coming back which is making me feel more confident"

"I enjoyed having a go. I always feel inadequate but out of this came light and colour"

"The movement and performing became easier the more I did"

"There was no pressure and it made me feel that I didn't need to hide away- like I usually do. That I can do things. I really can"

"I think it was fantastic and I feel more confident. It was good exercise"

"The movement parts felt friendly and I now feel more confident"

Sense of achievement:

"I was so pleased with myself last week I cried"

"I need to make more pom poms in my life!" [The joy of a simple childhood activity made X very happy]

"I felt proud that I performed in front of a group"

"For me just coming in today was an achievement"

"I stood up and performed in front of people- I never thought I could do that- I didn't even realise I was doing it"

"I am really pleased with this frame cos I want to put a picture of my kids in it. I don't see them now"

"I want to get this finished for my dad cos he thinks I never finish anything"

Appendix 5: Artists' observations:

Fun / enjoyment / support / a 'break from life':

"X was saying she was so happy to be part of this group and share things and talk to others"

"X is much calmer – less needing to be supported by artists. She is mostly focused on making memory boxes"

"X looked so much more relaxed at the end of the session. She was imaginative and very creative and I told her so, she smiled!"

"It was quite significant that the women were enthusiastic enough to travel to somewhere they were not familiar"

Increased self esteem:

"During the movement work, the women's engagement grew with each activity. [The artist] cleverly repeated each exercise to allow individual's self-belief to shine"

"All women felt proud that they had performed – they would never have guessed that they would be standing up and moving in front of others when they first came along"

"One women struggled at the beginning, but managed to let that attempt go and start again with some help in different ways to attach [objects to a wire heart] and produced a stunning result. She said she thought she couldn't do what everyone else was doing and was surprised by what she had made. She said her kids were very arty and she was keen to show them!"

"One woman had challenged what we were saying and doing... This week from the very beginning she was quick to engage and get started, and was instantly curious with materials. She still worked outside and worked independently but did interact more with the group, she seemed to enjoy it more. She finished one piece and made another. She seemed proud of her work and showed us her work more in the process and was advising others instead of asking for help and pointing out problems"

Increased confidence:

"2 women talked about their journey here and how it was a big step for them. They were agoraphobic and hadn't been out for some time and ... had a very upsetting weekend. They said they were pleased to have made it and could only have done it with the support of each other. It felt a nice gentle session... [which] encouraged gentle understanding conversations between all of us".

"During the movement work, the women's engagement and confidence grew with every activity".

"X needed encouragement to begin, but having completed two boxes successfully, she began to relax and to experiment. She is aspergic and struggles with reading facial expressions, motives and inappropriate responses. She began to bring cake and chocolate to share for each session which really shows more confidence to engage with others and to contribute and share with the group"

"X is coming across more confident each time we see her and she produces a lot of work which she likes to take home to show family members"

"I've been encouraging X in her work and to try new things and new tools and ways of working. She is showing more independence, and engaging with others in conversations. She needs a lot of reassurance. A lot of conversations are about her not being good at doing things or not feeling able. But in actual fact she is doing more things - including things which she didn't feel able to even try at the beginning"

"X (support worker) is now able to spend nearly all the time at the table with the women just working on her own pieces, rather than taking women out of the room to chat to them [for support]. The women seem far more confident to just 'be' in the group. To work on their pieces, to chat amongst themselves"

"One participant [with a career background in theatre] said she would like to initiate a drama exercise next week with the group... [the following week] X facilitated a drama exercise and managed to engage everyone in the room and get them up and participating, which was brilliant... A dynamic, if rather forceful, delivery. But very memorable and with a positive message of turning negative situations into positive ones".

"The women really grew in confidence and understanding of how to use their body to visualise images... the women enjoyed mirroring activities particularly when they were given the opportunity to perform everyday activities. Their attention to detail was fantastic".

Sense of achievement:

"X said she'd had a terrible couple of weeks, with things that had brought her down. She said she felt proud of herself making an original hanging toy that was her own invention (a bee from pompoms and laminated plastics)".

"X said to me that before today, she'd never made anything she'd been pleased with"

"I have concentrated so much that I am tired!"

"Normally I am just doing things like cleaning for other people so it's been great to do something for myself"

"It makes you feel good when you've done something"

"X said she felt very scared to come to this new group, but said she was glad she made the effort. She said she was in a bad situation and would like to talk to others in similar situations. She was very pleased with what she had made and gained a sense of achievement from coming to the sessions".

"There were two women who seemed very closed at the beginning [of a creative movement exercise]. Their arms were folded tightly across their chests and they made tiny movements. However, they started to laugh and giggle when the cloth was passed around and changed into different objects. I noticed that by the time we got to the big group exercise [when everyone in turn mimed something from their daily routine] one of these women, performed a very detailed mime of carrying out cleaning and cooking. Graceful movements precisely executed... and at the end she dropped her hands by her side and wiped tears from her eyes".

"You get the sense that many of these women live with 'loose ends' and 'unfinished business'. There is a real sense of achievement for the women in completing something fully. The sense of satisfaction at finishing their artwork seemed so deep, so strong"

"From this project the women have done something they never thought they could do"

Appendix 6: Feedback from Support Staff:

Barriers to effective collaboration with support staff:

Lack of clarity about project purpose:

"After one or two sessions I observed that the project is about the whole person, about self-esteem and confidence and not just about the art activity. This is a very positive thing. But I don't think I'd been really clear on this before hand and this might explain why it had been so difficult to get my staff on board. I struggled to communicate to my staff what it was about. I struggled to produce flyers, for this same reason. I struggled to categorize it and to communicate it. To put on paper what it was..."

...I asked TVP to produce flyers and on reflection, I think the flyers they produced really undersold what the project was. Even with the flyers, the staff viewed it purely as an arts project, and so for many they either weren't interested, or didn't see it as their job. Particularly because we hold a weekly craft activity, they didn't see the point in having another arts activity. An external person runs the craft activity and staff are not involved. They didn't see this project as any different. They didn't see why they had to be involved in this project....

...It really is a shame, because when the sessions started I saw that the artists' way of working was so valuable and so in tune with our objectives. If we had called the project a 'self-esteem or confidence building course' everyone would have been interested – staff and users. There was something completely misunderstood about the arts...

...I accept there are issues within my organisation that didn't help this project get off the ground, but as a suggestion for future projects I wonder if TVP could brand their projects differently: to focus on the outcomes not the inputs and processes. To focus on self-esteem/confidence rather than singing or art? This would better 'speak our language', our staff would engage with this. To give a comparison, we recently ran a 'Return to Work course'. This had full attendance. It actually involved quite a lot of art activity and some singing. It's interesting that none of the staff had a problem with this because it was 'sold' purely as confidence building to return to work"

Internal barriers:

"I really struggled to get my staff to be positive about this project. They had big fears. One member of staff said: "if it involves me making anything, I'm not doing it", another said: "there's no way that I'm singing". This was a real problem. If they are coming from a place of fear, then really the chance of them encouraging our users to take part is pretty slim"

"TVP need to recognise that it is a huge shift for people to make to see themselves as artists. From staff perspectives, the project was felt to be only for arty types, they really weren't getting the self-esteem element. I think they felt quite insecure about the prospect of working with professional artists"

- As the project progressed, the evaluation found many examples of staff overcoming their internal barriers:

"I started off thinking this wasn't for me, I'm not arty. But I enjoyed it, it felt different. I realised the women would enjoy that focus. Stop thinking for a minute and just enjoy. Relaxing. Having fun. Taking their mind off of their issues for a short while. If I'd had the choice to opt in or out of this project I probably wouldn't have taken part. But I'm glad that I did, for now I do see the benefits for the women"

"I would usually feel silly performing in front of others, and would avoid such situations. But the workshop was really empowering. Experiencing this myself helped me understand that the women must feel nervous about some of the activities we offer and perhaps this is why they often don't take part. I felt the benefits of doing something out of my comfort zone. I also learnt how important it is to offer opportunities that don't necessarily appeal to me personally. For there is so much to be gained"

[Artist observation]: *"One member of staff reflected on negative experiences of art at school and finished the workshop with new and refreshed comments on creative approaches and their own creative ability".*

Staff training:

"I did enjoy the training. It's rare for us to get time out like that. But afterwards, I did still feel quite nervous about being involved in the project. As it turned out, for various reasons, I wasn't involved. So I'll never really know if I'd have got over my fears"

"It was fun and creative. But we needed more than just creative making. Facilitated and structured reflection time would be beneficial. Time allocated to reflect on the process. What did we just do, what happened to us? Making more links between the creative process and the objectives of our organisation. We need to see those links. On the experience of the actual project I saw the links. I understood what was happening, what benefits were being realized beyond the actual making of art. But on a short training session, there isn't time to really experience or see that. I think this is particularly important for staff who have doubts about the benefits of arts projects or are not naturally inclined in creative activities themselves"

"I would have liked the training to go deeper, to explain why the arts are relevant in our setting. I sort of understand that the purpose is beyond the making, but I don't quite get it"
[Staff member who attended the training but not the project]

Understanding the purpose and benefits of arts projects:

"It's so calm. We never have this sort of peace and calm in the hostel. It's great to see everyone so absorbed and working well. They have produced some great things"

"I understand now that the project is about so much more than making art. I admit that before I was part of this project I didn't understand quite how significant making art could be. So few of the women have any positive experience in their lives. They are on very low incomes, have poor housing, have unhealthy people in their lives and the worst thing has happened to them: they have lost their children. To see something through to a positive conclusion is of great value. To have a positive and tangible outcome is rare for these women. The significance of the artworks they made is so much deeper than first meets the eye"

"Often we are looking for ways to help our clients express their feelings and this is the first time we've used the arts to do this. The project inspired us to be more lateral in our thinking, to think of different ways to achieve intended outcomes"

"The women in our hostel have done things wrong. They have group time to talk about what they could have done differently and what they can do differently in the future. The arts project was experiential. It is a different approach to the same objective. It's not talking, it's doing. Not just doing art but experiencing a different way of interacting, responding to challenges, picking yourself up after mistakes, trying new approaches. All these things are beneficial"

"Empowering and giving back a sense of control is so important for these women and the arts can do this very effectively. The project has brought this understanding to the forefront of my mind"

The benefits, risks and challenges of engaging in the arts 'alongside' clients as equal learners and participants:

"There is a challenge to working alongside our clients on an art project. Not least in keeping everyone safe whilst engaged in making art oneself. It's balancing that. It's very easy to become too engrossed in the artwork, and then to miss a subtle shift in the group dynamic or miss something happening. And yet, if you are too focused on the women, it doesn't feel equal. It feels like you are participating in a tokenistic way and the women would notice that"

"There is an issue of personal boundaries that comes with the artists' approach. On the whole I would say the artists got it right, but there were moments when I felt concern. One artist shared a lot from her personal life and spent a lot of time with one individual. This has implications when working with very vulnerable people and did cause some jealousy, which I had to respond to and work through with those participants. The artist responded to my concerns with openness and willingness to cooperate. I respect her for this and feel she managed the situation to a positive outcome. But this example highlights the need to have awareness that if you do share personal stories or connect with one participant more than others it could be tricky - particularly because art can bring up emotive things. With a less experienced artist I would have been more concerned"

Development of skills / confidence to apply new skills:

"Standing up and doing something different - out of my comfort zone - was good for me. [The artist] made the space feel like I could"

"How the artists use materials is really interesting and something we could think about"

"I feel we can carry on the themes and ways of working. Even though I am creative myself and regularly practice crafts and home, before this project I hadn't considered that I could use these skills as an approach for some of the issues that we have been exploring in relation to the women's lives"

"Constructing a drawing out of physical objects was great and something I will use again in the future- the women all commented on how liberating it was to create a drawing that was temporary and photographed but not able to be kept physically"

Benefit of external artists/providers working with support agencies:

“It has been so beneficial to have the artists working with our group. Being accepted is a big thing for our women. Having people from ‘the outside’ coming in to our group and showing such respect and acceptance has reinforced how important it is for our women to feel accepted for who they are and what they might have done or not done”

“It is usual for them to be surrounded by people who are unhealthy, which is why they are in the situation they are in. Lots didn’t go to school or didn’t finish school. So this positive exposure to other people is very significant. Working with the artists is huge for them – being accepted and treated like human beings. Quite simply, they just wouldn’t get to meet artists, who can show them a different way of living, of thinking, of being”

“For us, we see huge benefit in collaborating with other agencies. The project was a new offer for us to refer our clients to. X walked in to our service less than a year ago. She literally went to walk straight out again saying ‘I can’t do this’. Her confidence was so low. This project was exactly what she needed. It has had such a positive impact. She is now running a regular arts group herself. She has been networking locally and bringing people together, she has hired a space for her group. Much of this she has done independently. It all felt doable because of the project. The artists offered something very different to our usual offer. X was inspired by the artists’ way of working and developed confidence at such a speed”

“To have good quality materials and professional artists coming in, it communicates ‘you are valued, you are trusted, you are respected, you are worth it”

Unexpected learning:

- Across all of the projects, staff said they had learnt things through the project that they hadn’t expected to:

“I appreciated [the Project Manager’s] expertise in suggesting the team meeting. I wouldn’t have thought of staff training attached to a project like this, but it really added value. This was a real learning point for me. It was very useful in getting staff engaged”

“It is useful to encourage the women outdoors more. This was a piece of learning. These women are not used to being outside. The simple experience of fresh air and daylight was very beneficial”

“I learnt that you don’t need to have lots of expensive materials. I’d seen this as a barrier before. I’ve had my eyes opened to the wonderful things that can be created from everyday objects”

“One woman taught another crochet. It is great for self-esteem to have something to share and contribute. I saw this too, in X bringing cakes to share after her shift at Tesco. The project has made me think about how I can create opportunities for our women to share things with each other. Sharing seemingly small offerings appeared to boost self-esteem and change their self-identity. It seems obvious now, but this had not occurred to me before”

“It seems obvious to say that art gives a different way for expression. But I was touched by how, such vulnerable women, with such low levels of literacy and education could find an outlet for their feelings through art. I would never have thought of showing our women pictures of paintings. The Postcard exercise [when women selected images on postcards to reflect their feelings] really touched me. To see X looking at art, selecting an image and saying ‘that’s me, that’s my mind’. The image gave her a way of saying how she felt without words. And as her support worker, that image has stayed with me. I have a better understanding of her feelings”

"I confess, I didn't think our women would enjoy making art quite as much as they did. When I reminded them about the sharing event, they were really disappointed that they wouldn't be making art that day"

"For me, this project really highlighted just how complex our service users' needs and lives are. Somehow, this project really revealed this and I wasn't expecting that at all. In fact I think I was expecting the opposite. That it would be a relaxing break from the realities of life"

Appendix 7: Action Learning

Overview:

The concept of action learning was developed in the 1940's by original management thinker Reg Revens. Revens believed that for an organisation to survive, its rate of learning must be at least equal to the rate of change in its external environment.

Action Learning provides a challenging space for reflective learning and creates potential for individual and organisational development. Where organisations or people are seeking to achieve new directions, participating leaders and managers use action learning to review their established practice and develop more effective ways of working. Used well, action learning underpins improved delivery, raises morale and links the development of individuals to what works best for their beneficiaries, clients or customers.

Process summary:

A small group of people working at comparable levels of responsibility meet regularly for a contracted number of meetings (usually five or six full-day meetings, held approximately once a month). The group is called an: 'Action Learning Set'.

At each meeting:

- Every set member reports briefly on their current context, what has been happening to them, updates from previous meeting, actions undertaken etc.
- Set members decide between them who is going to present something to the group on that day (a full-day meeting would allow for 3 or more presentations).
- The presenter describes their situation/problem/issue/challenge/dilemma/ proposal.
- The set members ask questions designed to assist the presenter to come to a deeper or different understanding and so to be open to new solutions, attitudes and behaviour changes.
- The set assists the presenter to review options and decide on action.
- The set members reflect on the group process, give feedback to the presenter on what they have heard and talk about their own individual learning.
- At a future/the next set meeting, the presenter(s) report on action taken.

A set will mature and become more skilled, competent and confident with the principles and protocols of action learning. The facilitator may introduce further tools for exploration, analysis and solution generation according to need.

Sets frequently choose to become self-facilitating, beyond the initially agreed contract period – thus becoming a free/low cost and ongoing personal and professional development resource. The facilitator can build a 'handover period' into the process to support the set to run independently.

What Action Learning offers:

- Support and challenge from peers.
- The opportunity to learn from good practice and develop new ideas and different solutions.
- Development of individual listening and diagnostic skills.
- Practice and receipt of feedback from peers on their leadership and management skills.
- A safe environment to explore strengths and weaknesses.
- Insight, through the group process, into the way individuals relate in a small group which, in turn, increases understanding of work relationships.
- Focussed problem solving time which gives the opportunity for personal learning and development and insight into how others achieve different solutions.
- A group of people who are, for an agreed period of time, mentors for each other.
- Double loop learning where the individual goes beyond a single loop of identifying a problem and resolving it to the double loop where they challenge their assumptions and deepen their fundamental understanding of what might be done differently.

When is Action Learning useful?

It is appropriate to use when there is equal value to be gained by solving 'business' problems *and* developing individuals and groups for the future. It is especially useful when the talents of many different organisational functions or processes should be brought together.

- To support organisational development and organisational change.
- To evaluate practice.
- To face major challenges.
- To test out new ways of working.
- To map out ways to deal with a new situation.
- To create reflection time for learning.
- When a job or role is changing.

Action learning is not appropriate when (i) the issue to be addressed is simple or straightforward, (ii) no expertise exists within the organisation to tackle the problem or (iii) managers do not value the opinions of others or see merit in developing individuals for the future.



Thames Valley Partnership
Townhill Barn
Dorton Road
Chilton
Aylesbury
Buckinghamshire HP18 9NA
01844 202001
www.thamesvalleypartnership.org.uk
Judy Munday
judy@thamesvalleypartnership.org.uk

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