

How trusts' cultural work improves communities' wellbeing

We have all heard about the positive impact of art and cultural activity on health and wellbeing – it can enhance recovery by reducing anxiety, work preventively by increasing our confidence and stimulating our memory, and improve our quality of life and sense of community by bringing people together. With this increased awareness comes the question of what these activities are and what trusts are doing locally to facilitate them.

While there are many ways in which trusts contribute to improving communities' wellbeing simply by having accessible cultural activities, offering valuable social interaction and a safe place for a cuppa, trusts undertake specific arts and cultural programmes that target people's health and wellbeing.

In Flintshire, Aura Leisure & Libraries instigated a programme for residents who, through a combination of new places, new people and inspiring opportunities, were encouraged to learn about themselves, their responses to situations and their place in the community. The programme focused on the visitor experience and enabling people to feel relaxed and comfortable within a museum environment. Local residents participated in museum-led heritage activities, from rag rug making to working in the heritage garden. The original group of residents enjoyed themselves so much during this programme that they developed a leaflet for other visitors. This leaflet is now available at the Greenfield Valley Museum, and highlights how a visit to a museum can improve and protect (mental) wellbeing. It encourages the visitor to notice and be present, to connect with the space and themselves, and to learn about and from the community and its culture and history.

Being present in a cultural environment can make you feel more relaxed and reduce anxiety, but can also increase confidence and support personal development. This is exactly what charitable trust Vision Redbridge had in mind when developing and hosting their Final Party project.

The Final Party project is delivered using the library as a trusted, relaxed space to discuss a health and wellbeing issue often seen as taboo within society.

The programme is based around collaboration and co-production with the local community, end of life specialists, arts organisations, individuals, universities and public health teams. It was devised to remove fear and barriers to talking about death and dying, while at the same time ensuring that the programme appeals to a wide audience from the London Borough of Redbridge's diverse communities. Programme strands have included death cafes, art installations, performances, debates, workshops, a film commission, book displays and a Mexican day of the dead arts festival. The project has engaged over 4,000 participants with a further 120,000 people experiencing the various arts installations on display across Redbridge libraries.

While people in Flintshire and Redbridge attended the activities on their own initiative, arts and cultural activities can also be recommended through social prescribing – referrals to non-medical, community or social activities by GPs and other health care professionals.

Fife Cultural Trust has been working with social prescribing programmes since 2012. Their wide and varied offer includes classes such as painting, reading, creative writing, and meditation. The trust has evaluated this service which primarily seeks to engage people with poor mental health. The programme filled over 70% of the available classes, indicating its popularity, with people reporting that the creative classes have helped them to socialise more, increase their self-confidence, and have taught them breathing techniques that can be used as an everyday coping mechanism. Or in the words of one attendant:

"I have turned myself around, no longer suffering from stress, changed job & have a better outlook, some tools for coping and I wish to continue monthly to help me stay relaxed"

What all trusts have in common is that they want their cultural activities to be diverse, mindful and inclusive of their communities. By having something on offer for everyone, they seek to remove barriers for people to participate and make the arts and culture, with all their positive effects, accessible to everyone.