



Report on the Creative Health Associates Programme



SING YOUR SONG

Contents

Introduction	4
Summary of the programme	6
Programme in numbers	8
External evaluation	10
How Creative Health roles can support the health and care system	12
What next?	14
The NCCH Team	15



Creative Health Illustrations: © David Shrigley

Introduction

The National Centre for Creative Health (NCCH) has been working to embed creative health approaches across the UK’s health and care systems. This report shares key insights from the Creative Health Associates programme which ran from July 2023 to the end of March 2025. It draws on findings from the external evaluation and the final report to Arts Council England (ACE), offering a clear picture of how creative health roles are shaping practice, policy, and partnerships.

Dr Darren Henley, CBE

Chief Executive
Arts Council England

There is an ever-increasing body of evidence that creative activities and cultural experiences have a positive impact on our health and well-being. Report after report, study after study are showing the powerful force that connecting with artists and taking part in cultural activities can have in preventing, treating and recovering from ill-health. As our health and care systems deal with growing demands on their services – creative health can be part of the solution.

It was against this background that Arts Council England invested in the creation of the Creative Health Associates’ programme. For the past two years, this trailblazing project has shown what happens when you place dedicated advocates for creative health in Integrated Care Boards in each of England’s seven NHS regions.

The Associates have helped broaden the chances for people to design and take part in creative activities that support their health, forged links that have shaped the development of services, and highlighted practical ways that creativity can reduce isolation and strengthen communities. They have connected 1500 people working across the health, care and academic sectors, delivered 60 in person, hybrid and online events that have reached more than 2700 people, and built bridges between creative and health professionals and organisations.

At the heart of this work is the belief that good health is about more than medicine alone; it is also about meaning, belonging and imagination. This report reveals how creative health roles in our health and care systems can encourage us to think more deeply about how arts and culture can help improve individual wellbeing and drive transformation in our health and care systems. Helping us all to lead not just longer lives, but healthier, richer and more fulfilled ones.

Alexandra Coulter

Director
National Centre for Creative Health

The Creative Health Associates programme has provided us with invaluable insights for delivering our mission to foster the conditions for creative health to be integral to health and care and wider systems. The Associates developed relationships across the systems they worked with, connecting with over 1500 individuals, many of them in senior decision-making roles. This has created an informal network of influence and support which we can build on in the next phase of our work.

Health and care systems are in a continuous state of flux and the external evaluation of the Associates programme provides evidence of how Creative Health leads can contribute to positive systems innovation viewed through a systems thinking lens. They can support a creative health approach to systems change which embraces uncertainty and fluidity, using creativity and the imagination to envisage more inclusive, person-centred and co-created public services.

“**This programme has been important in demonstrating the value of Creative Health lead roles within health and care systems and progressing our particular interest at The Baring Foundation of creative mental health”**

David Cutler,
Director, The Baring Foundation

Ultimately, this programme helps us on the collective journey towards a healthy and health creating society with people living healthier and happier lives, where creative health is perceived as essential to thriving individuals and communities.

We are very grateful to our funders, Arts Council England, and to The Baring Foundation for match funding through the Huddles Programme. Their vision and commitment to our organisation and mission is highly appreciated by the Board and Staff of the NCCH. A huge thank you to our seven Associates and the ICBs that hosted them and to Jayne Howard, our Programme Manager who led the programme with great expertise and sensitivity.

Summary of the programme

The Creative Health Associates Programme was delivered by seven Creative Health Associates hosted by Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), one in each NHS region in England.

They were supported by a Creative Health Programme Manager through peer support and leadership development. These roles were designed to:

- Build bridges between arts and health sectors
- Embed creative health into strategic planning
- Support local initiatives and partnerships

East of England – Engaged stakeholders in social prescribing and health inequalities teams Improved system-level understanding of the cultural sector’s role in health.

London - Hosted high-profile events. Influenced strategy with lived experience-led creative health workshops

Midlands – Facilitated strategic outreach and connections among public health leaders. Supported strategic development and forged partnerships.

North East & Yorkshire – Contributed to ICB strategies. Promoted collaboration with the Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector.

North West – Delivered impactful Huddles. Raised the profile of grassroots and VCFSE groups in the ICB.

South East – Improved regional cohesion and strategic planning for creative health. Facilitated cross-sector networks

South West – Supported strategic development of creative health. Built strong intersectoral education and research partnerships

Region	Host ICB
East of England	Norfolk and Waveney
London	North East London
Midlands	Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin
North East & Yorkshire	North East and North Cumbria
North West	Lancashire and South Cumbria
South East	Sussex
South West	Devon

- **North West**
- Cheshire and Merseyside
 - Greater Manchester
 - Lancashire and South Cumbria

- **Midlands**
- Birmingham and Solihull
 - Black Country
 - Coventry and Warwickshire
 - Derby and Derbyshire
 - Herefordshire and Worcestershire
 - Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland
 - Lincolnshire
 - Northhamptonshire
 - Nottingham and Nottinghamshire
 - Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin
 - Staffordshire and Stoke-On-Trent

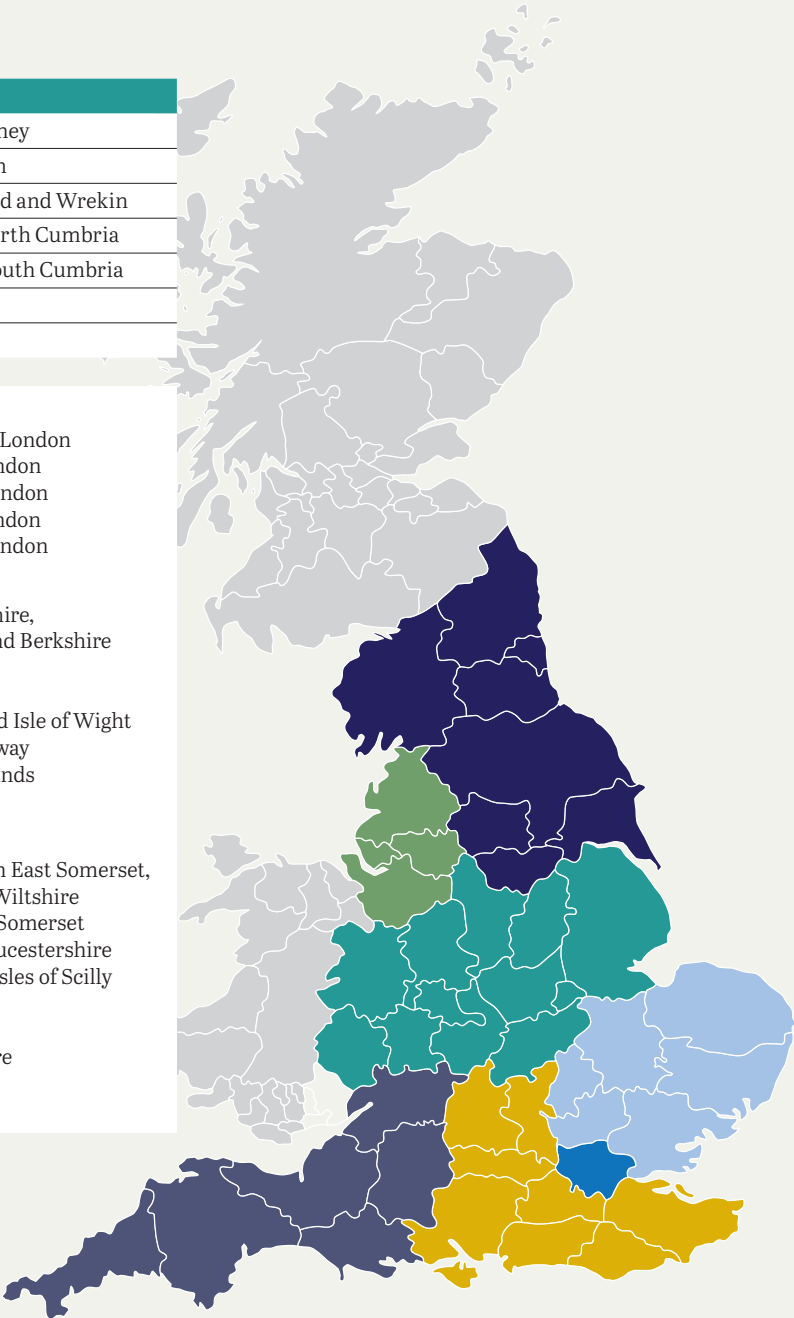
- **North East & Yorkshire**
- Humber and North Yorkshire
 - North East and North Cumbria
 - South Yorkshire
 - West Yorkshire

- **East of Englad**
- Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes
 - Cambridgeshire and Peterborough
 - Hertfordshire and West Essex
 - Mid and South Essex
 - Norfolk and Waveney
 - Suffolk and North East Essex

- **London**
- North Central London
 - North East London
 - North West London
 - South East London
 - South West London

- **South East**
- Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West
 - Frimley
 - Hampshire and Isle of Wight
 - Kent and Medway
 - Surrey Heartlands
 - Sussex

- **South West**
- Bath and North East Somerset, Swindon and Wiltshire
 - Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire
 - Cornwall and Isles of Scilly
 - Devon
 - Dorset
 - Gloucestershire
 - Somerset



Programme in numbers

60



events – 31 online; 2 hybrid; 27 in person

21

Huddles delivered – Huddles are interdisciplinary learning activities for small groups to use co-production and creativity to explore and resolve challenges in healthcare settings with creativity and lived experience at their heart

Developed links with

12



universities

Over

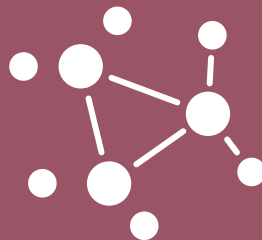
1300

people at in-person events



Connected with over

1500



individuals across health, care and academic sectors – included senior leaders in public health, population health, mental health, clinical teams

12

new resources developed – 6 printed resources; 5 films; 1 online pack

Strategies

The CHAs identified existing strategies and supported the development of new strategies to include creative health:

- East: Norfolk, Hertfordshire, Suffolk, and related Integrated Care Systems (ICS) are embedding creative health in health inequality workstreams and strategic reports.
- London: Multiple boroughs and ICBs are integrating creative health into their plans and cultural strategies.
- Midlands: Cities and counties like Birmingham, Coventry, Derby, Herefordshire, and Walsall are including creative health in public health and cultural strategies.
- North East & Yorkshire: Councils and ICSs are incorporating creative health into strategies, and dedicating it as a priority in cultural strategies.
- North West : Several councils and partnerships in North West England have integrated health and wellbeing into their key cultural strategies and plans, including Lancashire County Council, Blackpool Council, and Blackburn with Darwen’s Cultural Investment Plan.
- South East: Brighton and Hove, West Sussex, Surrey, and Hampshire councils each have public health reports or cultural strategies that prioritise creative health.
- South West: Dorset and Wiltshire feature creative health as a key part of their cultural strategies, with ICSs also developing related strategies.

“

The CHA helped us see the relevance of creativity to health outcomes—we hadn’t made that link before.”

Participant in stakeholder evaluation workshop

Overall, across England, councils and health bodies are increasingly embedding creative health into public health, cultural, and wellbeing strategies, with a strong focus on mental health, reducing health inequalities, and community engagement.

Learning programme

The CHA programme featured a co-designed learning programme that included Action Learning Sets, skills sharing, and themed development sessions. Weekly online meetings and five in-person awaydays helped build team cohesion, trust, and supported both collective and individual reflection and growth.

This approach offers a blueprint for nurturing future creative health roles: one that values inclusivity, continual learning, shared reflection, and long-term sustainability.

External evaluation

We commissioned an external evaluation of the CHA programme from Gemma Buckland and Beth Crosland to gain insights into its effectiveness, using a mixed methods, systems-thinking approach.

Evaluation methods included in-depth interviews with the core team, focus groups, a stakeholder survey, and workshops. The research was structured using the Berkana Institute's 'Two Loops' model (illustrated). The model illustrates how traditional systems decline as new, innovative practices emerge, eventually replacing the old paradigm, and describes the required elements in that change process. These changes are mapped as interconnected loops, showing a continuous cycle of renewal.

Examples of achievements of the CHA Programme grouped by the Two Loops model phases:

1. Incumbent System
 - Built credibility and visibility for creative health.
2. Naming
 - Developed accessible evidence and resources.
3. Connecting
 - Built networks and partnerships across health, arts, and public sectors.
4. Pockets of the Future
 - Integrated creative health into ICB strategies and programmes.

“Our associate has been really critical in engaging with our ICB directors and making the case for how creative health can help on some of the NHS spending platforms.”

Participant in stakeholder evaluation workshop

5. Hospicing & Composting
 - Augmented existing practices with creative health approaches.
6. Bridging
 - Acted as connectors and translators between sectors.

7. Emerging System
 - New structures and strategies beginning to form.
8. Nourishing
 - Identified infrastructure needs for sustainable growth.

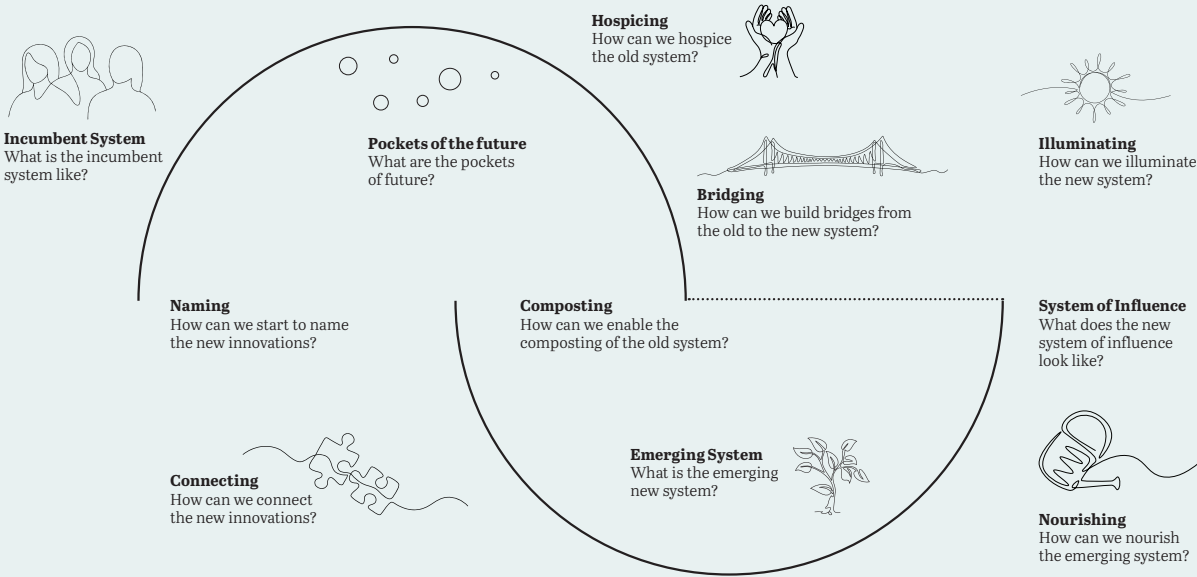
9. System of Influence
 - Platformed regional successes nationally.

10. Illuminating
 - Showcased emerging practices and regional leadership.

Key findings and learning points from the evaluation

- CHA roles are **highly impactful but challenging**; future roles need support and flexibility.
- Naming and connecting** are foundational for embedding creative health.
- Population and Public Health** are promising areas for future integration.
- Cross-sector learning and co-production** are key to transformational change.
- Leadership development and infrastructure investment** are essential for scaling.
- System stewardship** could guide governance and sustainability.

Two Loops Model



How Creative Health roles can support the health and care system

Having Creative Health lead roles in health and care systems is a strategic asset in delivering the 10 Year Health Plan for England and its ambitions for a more sustainable, inclusive and person-centred NHS.

Dedicated Creative Health roles in systems can bridge the often siloed worlds of health, care, and creative practice, making a significant contribution in the following areas:

Building networks, relationships and partnerships

With knowledge of the creative and cultural sector, as well as of the wider VCFSE sector, they are able to build networks and partnerships which:

- Enable the co-design of innovative programmes using an asset and place-based approach which will be essential to the development of a neighbourhood health service
- Facilitate the sharing of ideas, resources and expertise to integrate creative approaches into mainstream services

Knowledge exchange and evidence sharing

Drawing on research and good practice examples to show how creative health can contribute to major health priorities such as mental health, dementia care, long term conditions as well as the wellbeing of the health and care workforce.

Reducing health inequalities

Creative health promotes equity by:

- Reaching under-served populations through culturally sensitive engagement
- Designing inclusive programmes – working with communities to reflect their needs, identities and experiences
- Empowering individuals and communities to shape their own care through creative participatory methods

A dedicated Creative Health role will be able to use their knowledge and expertise to contribute to strategies to reduce health inequalities across health and care systems.

Prevention and personalised care

Creative health leadership supports preventative models of care by:

- Embedding creative interventions into social prescribing and clinical pathways
- Promoting non-clinical approaches to wellbeing
- Facilitating and supporting cross-sector partnerships which harness the strengths of the creative and cultural sector in promoting health

Co-production and Lived Experience

At its heart, creative health is participatory, centring on the lived experience of individuals and communities. A Creative Health lead could develop approaches to service re-design and patient and public engagement that make services more inclusive, responsive and person-centred.

Supporting system change and transformation

Creative Health roles in systems can help to drive transformation in health and care, encouraging others to re-think the role of arts, culture and creativity in health and wellbeing, ultimately supporting a more resilient, equitable and compassionate health service.

“The CHA’s presence has raised awareness about the importance of creative approaches in improving health and wellbeing, influencing both organisational culture and individual mindsets”

Participant in stakeholder evaluation workshop

What next?

The release of Fit for the Future: A 10-Year Health Plan for the NHS offers a robust basis for future development, and the Programme has built strong foundations, new networks, and strategic insights.

Early discussions about future developments show encouraging interest in several systems with 31 of 42 ICBs showing high or medium interest in engaging with a future programme.

The Creative Health Associates Programme has demonstrated what is possible when there is a dedicated role, focusing on integration of creative health into the wider health and care system, despite challenging circumstances, such as financial pressures, staff reductions, and organisational restructuring.

Building on this momentum, NCCH will:

- Strengthen communications with health professionals through targeted newsletters, webinars, and resources
- Support systems thinking approaches to embed creative health in strategic planning
- Continue to develop partnerships with health and care systems and support cross-sector creative health networks
- Continue to support the development of creative health leaders in health and care systems

NCCH remains committed to fostering a future where creativity is recognised as a core component of health and wellbeing — not just an add-on, but a vital part of how we care for individuals and communities.

“Loneliness, social deprivation, poverty—these are the things driving poor health, and they can't be fixed with a pill or an X-ray or a surgery. They need something different”

Participant in stakeholder evaluation workshop

The NCCH Team

Creative Health Associates

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North East & Yorkshire
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South East
Esther Watts

South West
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There is a more detailed report, including the external evaluation reports, on the NCCH website here: <https://ncch.org.uk/creative-health-associates-programme>

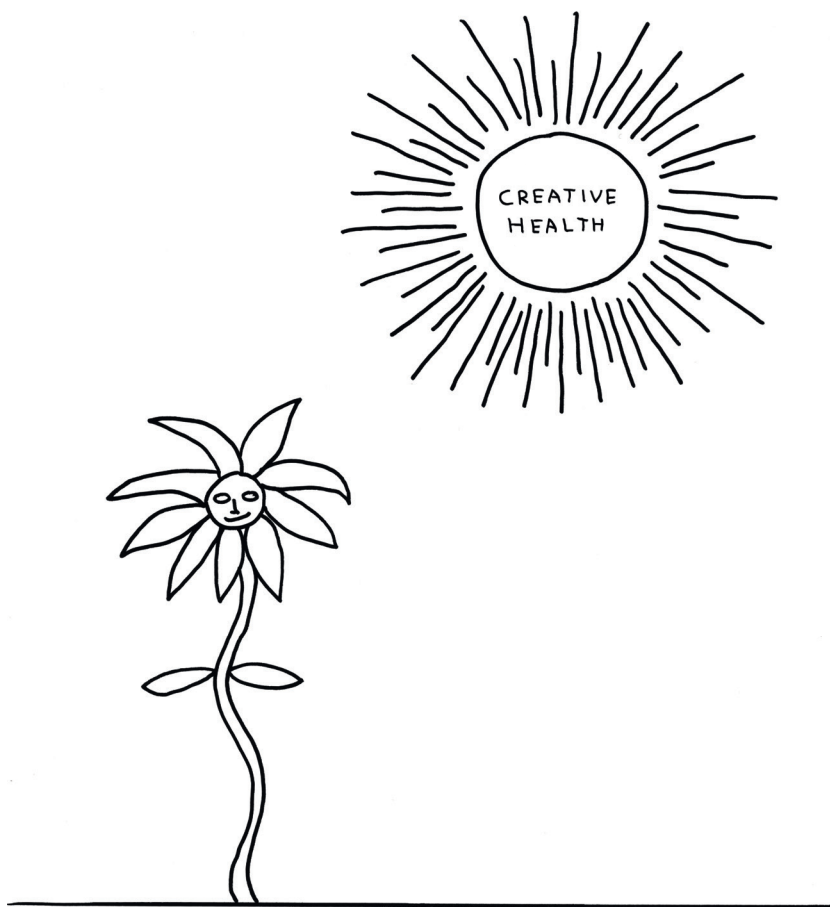
For more information on the Programme and any future developments contact jayne@ncch.org.uk

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More information about our work
can be found at www.nccch.org.uk