



Creativity is not an additional extra, it is essential for being well and staying well

Mah Rana, Co-Director, Lived Experience Network, Leadership and Strategy Roundtable

1.1 What is Creative Health?

We define creative health as creative approaches and activities which have benefits for our health and wellbeing. Activities can include visual and performing arts, crafts, film, literature, cooking and creative activities in nature, such as gardening; approaches may involve creative and innovative ways to approach health and care services, co-production, education and workforce development. Creative health can be applied in homes, communities, cultural institutions and heritage sites or healthcare settings. It can contribute to prevention of ill health, promotion of healthy behaviours, management of long term conditions, and treatment and recovery across the life course.

We consider health in its holistic sense, as a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing. Wellbeing, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO) definition, encompasses quality of life and the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose. Creative health is proven to have benefits for physical and mental health conditions, as well as improving general wellbeing and reducing loneliness and isolation in individuals. It also acts as a vital component of place and community-based approaches to population health, interacting with the social determinants of health and influencing the environments in which people live, grow, work, and age.

Creative health offers a different approach to health and wellbeing - one that mobilises creative, cultural and community assets to support people to live well for longer. Embedding creative health across health, social care and wider systems has benefits for individuals, communities and public services, ultimately leading to a healthier population and more prosperous society.

Who is creative health for?

Creative health applies across the life course, including during the early years, in schools, to support working-age adults and as an important component of healthy ageing. This review also considers the role of creative health in end of life care and bereavement.

Creative health should be available and accessible to everyone. However, there are disparities in engagement with culture both geographically and across a socioeconomic gradient, and some people and communities face barriers to access. To ensure creative health does not reinforce health inequalities it is vital that these barriers are overcome. This will be explored in more detail in Section 3.2, Health Inequalities. There can be a perception that engagement in arts and culture is an elite activity. The benefits of creative health can be experienced by engaging or participating in a whole range of creative activity, from crafting activities, cooking or gardening in one's own home, to community-based participatory visual or performing arts, or attendance at cultural events or festivals. The most innovative approaches often

Primary Prevention

Creative health can:



Build social capital, social cohesion and improve wellbeing



Influence and interact with the social determinants of health to improve the conditions in which people live, grow, work and age



Ensure equitable access to creative opportunities for all

Secondary and Tertiary Prevention

Creative health can prevent, manage or treat specific conditions:



- Singing for breathing programmes ease symptoms of COPD, asthma and long-covid
- Dance and movement can prevent falls and support people to recover from stroke and brain injury
- Gardening can modify risk factors for conditions such as cancer, cardiovascular disease and musculoskeletal conditions
- Music-making can slow cognitive decline, and improve wellbeing for people living with dementia

Creative health is a holistic and person-centred approach:



By prioritising what matters most to individuals, creative health can improve the quality of life for people living with complex or long term conditions.

Creative health activities provide a sense of meaning and purpose that can empower people to self-manage their conditions.

For example, creative health activities have been shown to increase the ability to self-manage chronic pain, resulting in improved wellbeing and reductions in the use of high-strength painkillers.

Across the life course

Creative health supports individual health and wellbeing across the life course:

Creative health helps to provide every child with the best start in life, promoting parent-child bonding, facilitating engagement with perinatal services and supporting parental mental health.

Creative engagement in schools equips children with life skills such as confidence, resilience and teamwork, improves future outcomes and supports mental health and wellbeing.

Into adulthood, creative health supports mental health and wellbeing. Creative engagement can prevent or relieve symptoms of common mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety. Arts therapies can alleviate symptoms of severe mental illness.

Group-based creative activities increase social connection and reduce loneliness and isolation, with benefits to health and wellbeing.

In care homes, creative engagement improves health and wellbeing of residents and can reduce the need for medication. It can also improve the health and wellbeing of the workforce.





There are so many ways we can nurture and grow creative health, it has to be part of our toolkit. The NHS has a role to play in this, working with partner organisations and local communities for the benefit of people as well as health and care services”

Tracey Bleakley, Chief Executive of NHS Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board, participant in Leadership and Strategy Roundtable

arise from grassroots activity, reflecting the cultural practices of different communities. This can help to instil a sense of ownership of a creative initiative, reduce stigma, improve knowledge and awareness, build social and organisational connections and promote health.

People can experience creative health independently in their homes, schools and communities, but they may also be directed to creative and cultural activities and opportunities as part of a targeted intervention to address a specific health or social issue. This could take place in a healthcare setting, or patients may be directed to a community-based activity via social prescribing. Creative health may also be used as part of community-based or place-based activities linked to placemaking, regeneration or community-building. Many examples will be provided throughout this report. In acute healthcare settings, hospital arts programmes both improve the environments in which patients receive care and provide participatory creative activities. These services are also increasingly broadening their remit to support the health and wellbeing of the NHS workforce through creative health. Cultural and heritage institutions may offer health and wellbeing programmes, ranging from dementia-friendly sessions in museums, heritage and wellbeing sessions, mindfulness workshops in gallery spaces, and social events to combat loneliness and isolation^{1,2}.

Who benefits from creative health?

Creativity is an important resource for health and wellbeing. It can benefit:

- Individuals - through everyday cultural engagement and creativity, or as part of a targeted intervention to address a specific health issue

- Communities - using creativity, culture and heritage to improve the conditions in which people live and to build social connection
- Healthcare professionals, as an additional component of their professional toolkit
- Health, social care and wider systems to help them meet their targets and provide a better service
- Policymakers, as a means to tackle some of the pressing challenges we currently face

How does creative health work?

Creative health contributes to the prevention, treatment, management and recovery of disease. It can directly impact the health and wellbeing outcomes of individuals, and also works as part of community and place-based population health approaches, which address the causes of ill health.

Whether engagement is participatory or as an audience member, access to creativity is important for our health and wellbeing. After public consultation on the topic ‘What matters to you?’ engagement in the arts and culture has been included in the Office for National Statistics Measure of National Wellbeing, and longitudinal studies using population data have observed the association between creative and cultural engagement and health benefits over time^{3,4}.

That creativity has a powerful impact on our physical, mental and emotional wellbeing is well understood by the 9.4m people who are thought to participate regularly in ‘non-formalised’ arts activities, otherwise referred to as ‘everyday creativity’ which take place in their own homes or in voluntary and amateur groups. A major motivation for their participation is enjoyment and wellbeing, leading to improved mental health⁵.

In times of crisis, people turn to creativity as a means to support their health and wellbeing. This was highlighted during the pandemic when people drew on creativity to express their fears and hopes and process feelings of grief.

Research carried out over the lockdown period, using population data, confirmed that people used the arts to cope with emotions⁷ and support their mental health⁸, and that time spent on creative hobbies was associated with increases in life satisfaction and decreases in symptoms of depression and anxiety⁹.

During the pandemic, creative activities were devised and adapted to support the most vulnerable to stay connected and engaged during prolonged periods of isolation. New partnerships were established between health and social care, community organisations and creative practitioners. The model of cross-sectoral partnership working, based on trust, that emerged from this period can be carried forward to maximise the potential of creative health beyond the pandemic¹⁰.

The benefits of creative health are far-reaching, and can not only support people through a health crisis, but can help to mitigate or prevent such a crisis, through improving both individual and community-level health and resilience. Below we outline some of the ways in which creative health operates, and the benefits it can therefore bring to individuals, communities and systems.

Creative health and major health conditions

Whilst we do not claim that creative health is a panacea, we know that creative activities can improve physical symptoms and quality of life for patients affected by some of the most prevalent health conditions. Where creative health has been incorporated into care pathways, we have also seen a reduction in the burden on the NHS, as patients have become empowered to self-manage their conditions, leading to a reduction in GP and A&E attendance and in some cases less reliance on medication.

There are many health conditions for which creative health can have significant benefits. While the examples provided below are not exhaustive, they do demonstrate how creative health can contribute to the conditions affecting a large number of people, and which place a considerable

Culture and the arts, from restriction to enhancement: Protecting mental health in the Liverpool City Region

As part of the [AHRC-funded COVID-19 Care Programme](#), researchers at the University of Liverpool examined the mental health impact of restricted access to arts and cultural activities as a result of COVID-19 as well as the successes and challenges of alternative modes of provision. They found that access to arts and culture during the pandemic was a ‘crucial lifeline’ for those who were isolated and at risk of mental health issues. Those who engaged in arts and culture frequently during lockdown had significantly higher wellbeing scores than those who engaged in arts and culture ‘never’ or ‘rarely’.

The Liverpool arts scene was found to be hugely adaptable in reaching vulnerable people, quickly pivoting to online delivery. At the onset of the pandemic, as statutory services were shutting down, arts providers proactively sought out those whom they knew to be lonely or in need, offering the very basics for survival where usual care was falling short. Several organisations recognised that there was something unique about their ‘unofficial’ position in the social care structure which enabled them to step in and fill the gap.

[The research](#) found that as one of Liverpool’s most important economic and social assets, the arts and culture sector can play a major role in improving mental health outcomes across the city region provided it is properly integrated into public health strategy. Cultural organisations were most effective in sustainably reaching vulnerable, isolated and disadvantaged populations when they worked in close collaboration with social and mental health providers⁶.

A [policy recommendation](#) from the programme is therefore that sustainable partnerships between arts and health providers should be supported. Building on successful cross-sectoral cooperation between arts and cultural organisations and regional health and social care providers will facilitate wider provision and maximise the value and reach of these services, as well as producing new opportunities for training care staff to deliver interventions. As a first step in this direction, the research team has produced a digital resource, [LivCare](#), of best practice and innovation in arts and mental health in the Liverpool City Region for use by regional stakeholders to support local coordination and scale-up.

burden on the NHS, as set out in the Government's interim Major Conditions Strategy¹¹.

There is good evidence to support the use of singing to improve respiratory conditions such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) through improving lung function and capacity, and the ability to regulate breathing patterns. Singing for Lung Health interventions, consisting of a 12-week singing programme for people with COPD have been shown to reduce healthcare utilisation, including GP visits and hospitalisation, and improve respiratory-related quality of life¹². Arts on referral schemes such as Mindsong's Breathe In Sing Out programme in Gloucestershire use singing techniques to support people with breathlessness through conditions such as COPD, asthma or anxiety. Their pilot programme saw a statistically significant increase in reported mental wellbeing scores, a 23% decline in A&E admissions and a 21% decline in GP appointments in the six months after referral compared with the six months before, with an estimated return on investment of £1.69¹³. Breathe Arts Health Research has been delivering their Breathe Sing for Lung Health programme with Guy's and St Thomas' respiratory team since 2018. This approach is for patients with a range of respiratory conditions including COPD, interstitial pulmonary fibrosis (IPF), long covid and asthma. Evaluation showed that all participants reported improvements in breathlessness levels, breath control, improved confidence over ability to manage their condition, as well as an impact on general wellbeing and reduced isolation¹⁴.

Singing for lung health is now being explored with long covid patients. The English National Opera has developed a breathing and wellbeing programme with Imperial College Healthcare specifically for people recovering from COVID-19. The programme takes place online, and post-covid clinics across the country are referring patients to the service. A randomised controlled trial of the programme found that it improved quality of life and elements of breathlessness for people recovering from COVID-19, and that patients reported improvements in symptoms¹⁵.

Creative health is used in the prevention, management and rehabilitation of cardiovascular

disease (CVD). Systematic reviews show that dance activities for older adults improve aerobic capacity, reducing the risk of CVD, whilst a cohort study based on UK population data from over 48,000 individuals found that medium-intensity dancing reduced the risk of death from CVD. Dancers were found to have a 46% lower risk of cardiovascular death, compared with those who rarely or never danced¹⁶. Low-impact dancing and singing are used in cardiac rehabilitation. Singing has been shown to improve vascular function, respiratory muscle function and quality of life for people with heart disease^{17,18}.

Creative health approaches are particularly effective in supporting patients to recover from stroke and brain injury in both hospital and community settings. Stroke affects over 113,000 people every year¹⁹. The effects of stroke can be devastating, with almost two-thirds of survivors leaving the hospital with a disability and half experiencing depression²⁰. In addition to the substantial impact stroke has on those affected and their caregivers, it can also pose a significant financial burden to health and social care services. The societal cost of stroke has been estimated to be £26 billion per year²¹. Music has been shown to have positive effects on recovery from stroke, through improvement in neural pathways and memory, as well as reductions in depression and confusion, whilst participation in arts activities can have physical, cognitive,

Creative health and long covid recovery

Cohere Arts work with East Suffolk & North Essex NHS Trust in the provision of creative health options via their Creative Space programme, which offers a mixture of in-person and online events and resources to support the recovery of patients living with long covid. Artist-led activities including singing, visual arts, creative writing and seated yoga are specially designed to stimulate cognitive function, address respiratory symptoms and reduce anxiety. Participants have reported positive impacts such as improvements in concentration and mobility, a sense of accomplishment from learning new skills, and feeling more connected to others going through similar challenges.

emotional and social benefits for stroke survivors²². Programmes which use creative activities to aid rehabilitation from stroke have been developed and delivered through partnerships between arts organisations and healthcare services. For example, Brain Odysseys is a 12-week performance programme for people living with the effects of stroke and brain injury delivered by Rosetta Life in hospital and community settings. It has been evidenced to improve mobility, cognition and self-esteem²³. The related programme Stroke Odysseys is part of the SHAPER research programme, looking at how effective arts interventions can be scaled up and embedded into clinical pathways²⁴.

With population-level improvements in life expectancy over recent decades, and improved treatment options, more people are living with conditions associated with older age, such as frailty and dementia. Creative health supports people to live well for longer as they enter older age, with associated benefits for both health and social care systems.

Dance has been shown to improve strength, mobility and balance, and therefore help to mitigate frailty and reduce falls in older adults²⁵. Dance can also be an acceptable and enjoyable form of exercise, and sessions can be adapted to be culturally appropriate, thereby engaging a wider target audience. Evaluation of Aesop's Dance to Health programme for older people found that creative dance sessions led to a reduction in falls (58%). Participants were more active (96%), experienced improved mental wellbeing (96%) and made new friends (87%)²⁶. The evaluation also identified potential annual savings to the health system of £98m.

“

Dance to Health delivered participant outcomes that the NHS wants. We were able to show that it is effective and cost-effective...and that it was scalable”

Tim Joss, Chief Executive and Founder, Aesop – Cost-effectiveness, Evidencing Value for Money and Funding Models Roundtable

There is a very strong body of evidence detailing the benefits of creative health for people living with dementia, and in preventing cognitive decline. We explore this in more detail in our section on Social Care (Section 3.4).

In addition to the physiological benefits creative activities can provide, creative health can work

Move Dance Feel - Creative health and cancer


Move Dance Feel is an award winning initiative, offering evidence-based dance experiences to women living with and beyond cancer, as well as to women supporting someone with cancer. The company works closely with cancer support centres and services to integrate dance into their care programmes, and reach those who may not otherwise have access to dance. They exist to fill a gap in cancer care, providing activity that supports the wide-ranging physical, mental and social health challenges associated with cancer diagnosis, treatment and survivorship.

Evaluation findings reveal an extremely positive change in participants' feelings of stress and anxiety - with 86% reporting an alleviating effect. Mood, wellbeing and life satisfaction are also enhanced through dancing.

“It's a psychological game-changer to come here”
– Participant

Participants regularly speak of feeling more confident as a result of taking part, and 63% reported an increase in body appreciation – specifically voicing improvements in body image perception. Energy levels are known to increase through participation, and 46% reported a clinically meaningful improvement in fatigue.

Move Dance Feel has honed a methodology specific to working with dance in this context, which places importance on social connection and creative exchange. This is reflected in their findings, as 89% of participants reported that dancing helps them to feel more connected to others. Further, 88% agreed that dancing helps them to better manage their health and wellbeing.



holistically to improve the mental health, wellbeing and quality of life for people with one or more health conditions. For example, whilst we have seen that singing for lung health can improve respiratory function, when carried out in a group setting such as a choir or singing group it can also reduce isolation and loneliness, and improve wellbeing. Creative activities including music and visual art making have been used alongside cancer treatment to relieve the side-effects of chemotherapy, reduce pain, and reduce anxiety, depression and stress²⁷. Dance, music therapy and creative writing have been shown to improve mood and help patients to manage the symptoms of cancer and the side-effects of treatment. Creative activities such as painting, dance or writing can be used with both adults and children to facilitate emotional expression, reduce fear and enhance hope, helping people to cope with cancer and reflect on their experiences²⁸. Arts on prescription outpatient programmes for people with cancer have demonstrated significant improvements in wellbeing at low cost²⁹.

Recognising these benefits, hospital arts programmes improve the environments for patients through the arts, and provide creative activities for patients within the cancer centres as part of their holistic care³⁰. Performance and interactive activities in hospital wards, including adult and children's cancer wards, have been shown to improve mood, reduce isolation, and reduce stress and anxiety³¹.

For other conditions, creative health can offer a non-medical alternative, which may be favourable to the patient. For example, it can be an important and comparatively inexpensive tool in helping people suffering with chronic pain to self-manage their symptoms and reduce the impact on NHS services. The NHS aims to cut down on the over-prescription of high-strength painkillers such as opioids, which can lead to addiction, and recommends a personalised approach, with patients given more control over how they self-manage their long term conditions³². Music and art therapies, as well as listening to music, have been shown in studies to be effective complementary treatments for chronic pain and creative approaches have been used to reduce reliance on opioids for pain relief^{33,34,35}.

There is strong evidence and numerous examples of the use of creative health to support mental health and wellbeing. Given the rising prevalence of mental health conditions, and the significant contribution that creative health can offer, mental health and wellbeing is considered a priority theme explored fully in section 3.1

Creative health as a holistic and person-centred approach

As the population ages, many people are now living with one or more of these long term conditions. It is estimated that more than a quarter of the population in England, and two-thirds of those over 65 are living with two or more chronic conditions³⁸. Multimorbidities can be complex to manage and costly for public services, in particular health and social care. People with mental health conditions are more likely to suffer with poor physical health and vice versa; long term conditions negatively impact mental health and wellbeing and quality of life. Multimorbidities affect people's ability to work and to engage socially, which can lead to isolation.

There is a tendency for healthcare services to focus on treating a specific condition. However, people with multimorbidities report a desire for a more holistic and person-centred approach³⁹, by which we mean an approach that addresses the quality of life as a whole, prioritises the things that are most important to people, and takes into account mental as well as physical wellbeing.

Creative health offers such an approach. Its benefits can be best understood through a bio-psycho-social model whereby in addition to the physical benefits described above, the psychological and social elements of health and wellbeing can be addressed through the same intervention. Furthermore, through focussing on what matters to individuals, and providing meaning and purpose through creativity, people can be empowered to self-manage their conditions⁴⁰, ultimately leading to a decreased need for polypharmacy and healthcare appointments. Where people can be supported to manage complex and long term conditions, they may also be able to continue working for longer, and the need for social care may be reduced.

Creative health and the social determinants of health

We have seen that creative health can be used effectively in the management and treatment of health conditions. It also has a vital role to play in preventing the onset of disease and creating the conditions for good health and wellbeing as part of a population health approach.

A focus on population health and prevention will be essential if we are to address the challenges facing the health and social care system, and if we are serious about reducing health inequalities. This will require a whole system approach as we know only a small percentage of our health is directly related to healthcare. In the main, ill health is caused by complex interactions between the social determinants of health (i.e. social and environmental factors such as income, employment, education and housing that influence health), as well as psychosocial factors, health behaviours and genetic predispositions. Integrated Care Systems have been established with the aim of bringing together all stakeholders across the system to contribute to health and wellbeing outcomes. This includes the NHS, local authorities and VCSE partners, who can all play an important role in creating the conditions for good health. Creative health also has much to contribute.

This report will present several examples of the role for creative health in primary prevention. For example, we will see that cultural and creative engagement can prevent the onset of common mental health disorders. Practising a musical instrument can reduce the risk of cognitive decline. Gardening can help to lower blood pressure, and change eating behaviours, influencing the risk factors for cardiovascular disease, while dance provides an opportunity for physical activity, linked to a reduction in obesity. It is therefore important to ensure equitable access to creative opportunities and assets such as museums, galleries, green spaces and community allotments, so that people can benefit from these health-promoting opportunities, without reinforcing health inequalities.

Creative health can also interact with the social determinants of health. This may include the use of creativity in schools to improve educational

outcomes (see section 3.3), improving working conditions through creative health initiatives in the workplace, and the use of creativity, culture and heritage in planning and design of the built environment to improve the conditions in which people live.

Implementing creative health in communities and places positively impacts population health and wellbeing. As we will see in section 3.2 (Health Inequalities), asset-based approaches, through

Gloucestershire Creative Health Consortium- Living Well with Chronic Pain

In line with the NHS action plan to reduce inappropriate prescribing of high-strength painkillers, patients in Gloucestershire have been referred to creative activities, such as dance and music.

Ninety-six percent of participants in [Artlift's Living Well with Chronic Pain](#) creative programme in 2022-23 reported a statistically meaningful improvement in general wellbeing and there was an average 16% increase in ability to self-manage pain. Over two years, 37% reported a decrease in GP attendance³⁶. Sessions were co-produced with researchers, pain management specialists, NHS Gloucestershire ICB chronic pain managers and people with lived experience of chronic pain as part of NHS Gloucestershire's Test and Learn Programme. Programmes include activities such as crafting, music, painting, creative writing, dance and puppet making. Patients can self refer or be referred by any professional working with people with chronic pain.

One participant who was referred to the Music Works drop-in session said:

“When I first started to experience pain, getting out of the house became more difficult and I found myself becoming isolated. Discovering the Music Works has really helped with the mental health impact of my pain, it's something that I enjoy, and it is something that I really look forward to.”

He has since gone on to volunteer with the organisation³⁷.



which communities are empowered to identify and build solutions to their own health needs are essential to addressing health inequalities. Creative and cultural programmes at place or community level can help foster a sense of social connection and cohesion. They can be used to facilitate conversations with community members about health needs, and to co-produce culturally appropriate solutions. Creativity and culture can be a central tenet of regeneration and placemaking, helping to instil a sense of pride in place.

Creative health, implemented as part of an upstream, preventative approach to health will not only keep individuals healthier for longer, but can contribute to a reduction in health inequalities, and the generation of a healthy and prosperous society in the long term.

1.2 Creative Health in Practice

The creative health sector

A skilled and passionate creative health workforce exists. The Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance (CHWA), the membership organisation for creative health in England, has around 6000 members and estimates at least 10,000 people work in the field⁵⁸. Similar membership organisations and networks operate in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Although awareness and demand for creative health is increasing, the sector faces challenges in sustainability and resource for the creative health workforce. The funding landscape for practitioners is precarious, and the work is often carried out on a short term, project-by-project basis. Commissioning of creative health through the NHS is limited, although, as we will set out in section 4.1 (Cost and Value), the benefits of investment in the approach are evident when implemented. Embedding creative health into health and care systems is one avenue through which the sector can be supported to expand sustainably.

Embedding creative health in systems

In 2017 the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (APPG) published the landmark report *Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing* drawing on a long history of arts and health practice and bringing together an extensive evidence base and over 1000 examples of the way in which the arts can be used to

support health and wellbeing and contribute to a health creating society⁵⁹. The report made several recommendations to realise the potential of the arts in health, many of which have seen significant progress.

The National Centre for Creative Health (NCCH) was established in 2020 as a strategic body to advance good practice, promote collaboration, coordinate and disseminate research and inform policy and delivery. In partnership with NHS England and Arts Council England (ACE), targeted work has taken place in Integrated Care System (ICS) Creative Health Hubs to explore models for integrating care at systems level. Based on this work, a toolkit that will support the adoption of creative health in other ICSs has been developed⁶⁰. A UK-wide network of Creative Health Champions, convened by NCCH, shares learning and good practice. The ACE-funded NCCH Creative Health Associates programme places an associate into each NHS region in England, hosted by an Integrated Care Board, to further investigate how creative health can be integrated into health and care systems.

There is a growing awareness among clinicians and healthcare professionals, exemplified by special interest groups in creative health for GPs, supported by the Royal College of General Practitioners, pharmacists and within the Royal Society for Public Health. Creative health is being more widely incorporated into clinical education, nurturing a new generation of clinicians with a focus on person-centred care, and an awareness of the power of creativity to draw on in their practice (see Section 4).

Increasingly, systems are recognising the value of creative health. Dedicated creative health strategies are emerging across combined authorities, ICSs, NHS trusts and local authorities. Systems advanced in creative health have established robust infrastructure, supported by effective partnerships and strong leadership across all levels of the system. How they have achieved this will be addressed in more detail in Section 4.2 (Leadership and Strategy).

Creative health in the NHS

There are various routes through which patients can be directed to creative health through the NHS.

Creative health can support personalised care, a key component of the NHS Long Term Plan described

by NHS England as ‘a whole population approach to supporting people of all ages and their carers to manage their physical and mental health and wellbeing, build community resilience, and make informed decisions and choices when their health changes’⁶¹. Personalised care provides people with choice and control over the care they receive, based on the outcomes that are important to them. It is particularly relevant for people with long term and complex mental or physical health conditions, and those who are traditionally underserved by NHS services, as it allows the person to self-manage their conditions and improve their quality of life through activities that align with their interests and needs.

Given the demonstrable benefits of creative health for people with long term conditions and mental health conditions, creative health can be an important strand of personalised care, widening the options available to patients, and supporting the NHS to meet its targets. It presents an opportunity to establish new equitable and sustainable models of working with the VCSE to ensure consistency in provision, while allowing for innovation.

Social prescribing is an important aspect of personalised care, providing a targeted approach for people who require additional support to access community-based services. Social prescribing recognises that around 20% of GP appointments are for non-medical reasons and people may have their social needs better met in a community setting. The Long Term Plan set a target for 900,000 people to access social prescribing by 2023/24, which has already been exceeded. In support of this target, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) invested an initial £5m to establish the National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP) to further advance its use, and has since committed additional funds to continue the expansion of the programme⁶². A further £5.77m has been allocated to seven NHS test-and-learn sites aimed at preventing and tackling mental ill health through green social prescribing, linking patients to activities in nature and green spaces⁶³.

Creative health is one of the four pillars of social prescribing, and this is an important route through which people can be connected to creative activities. There is a large body of evidence to show that taking

part in art, exercise, music, creative and expressive activities, including through social prescribing, can lead to benefits in relation to social interaction, decreased stress, adoption of healthy behaviours and improved outcomes in skills and employment⁶⁴. As we will see in section 4.1 (Cost and Value), the evidence for the cost-effectiveness of social prescribing continues to build⁶⁵. Longstanding arts on prescription programmes have shown good social return on investment (SROI), and have led to savings in the NHS through decreases in healthcare utilisation. For example, Artlift, a participatory arts service referred to by GP services in Gloucestershire reported a 37% reduction in consultations, relating to a 27% reduction in overall spending – a total reduction in NHS costs per patient of £576⁶⁶. An evidence summary produced for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) on the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing found that arts-based social prescribing programmes have shown SROIs of between £1.09 and £2.90 for every £1 spent⁶⁷.

The ongoing success of social prescribing as a non-medical approach to patient care relies upon community provision. NASP’s Thriving Communities programme provided funding for 36 community projects in areas most likely to need additional support in the aftermath of COVID-19. Forty percent of the activities were linked to arts and culture. The programme was found to improve pathways to community-based support and reached communities experiencing health inequalities and who are less likely to access services⁶⁸.

Lived experience and co-production

The involvement of people with lived experience, and co-creation of work that meets people’s needs and preferences are important elements of creative health practice, as set out in the Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance Creative Health Quality Framework⁸². The Lived Experience Network (LENs) is a network of people who believe in the benefits of creative and cultural engagement to individual and collective wellbeing. The LENs advocates for the value that creative and cultural engagement brings to health and wellbeing and works to ensure that the voices of those with lived experience remain at the heart of the arts, health and wellbeing movement⁸³.

Creative Health in Hospitals

Creative health has a long history within acute care and hospital settings. This may be in the form of hospital design, creating environments which promote healing and provide a sense of calm, warmth and joy. It can be through the installation of paintings or sculpture to generate a sense of place and character and spark conversations and connections. Participatory activities or live performances that take place in hospital wards have been found to improve wellbeing and health outcomes. The WHO scoping review *'What is the evidence of the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing?'* summarises evidence for the benefits of the arts in acute care settings, including reductions in anxiety, pain and blood pressure and an increase in mood and compliance with medical procedures in both children and adults⁶⁹. Reviews have found visual arts in paediatric hospitals to be an important resource enhancing the wellbeing of children and families both through improving the hospital environment and stimulating communication⁷⁰. Dance and movement has been used effectively in hospitals to promote physical activity and movement in older adults⁷¹, and aid recovery from brain injury⁷².

These benefits are put into practice in hospitals across the country. For example, University College London Hospital's Arts and Heritage Team facilitate dance, music and arts activities across paediatric, cancer and neuro-rehabilitation centres⁷³. Over 80 NHS trusts in England have arts programmes. The National Arts in Hospitals Network (NAHN) is a national membership organisation of NHS managers and professional leads who are involved in the delivery of arts, heritage and design services across NHS trusts, established to share best practice and offer peer support for its membership.

In hospital settings creative activities can be carried out by artists in residence or through partnerships with local arts organisations. For example, Liverpool Philharmonic have been working with NHS trusts across Cheshire and Merseyside since 2008, engaging 18,000 people in their Music in Health programme. Participants reported that the programme improved their mood, confidence and self-esteem, supported everyday living, and reduced

anxiety⁷⁴. Hospitals may also utilise outdoor space to facilitate meaningful and creative engagement combined with the health and wellbeing benefits of nature for staff and patients. For example, Springbank Pavillion is based in Leazes Park, one of Newcastle upon Tyne's largest central green spaces and on the doorstep of the Royal Victoria Infirmary and Great North Children's Hospital. In 2022 it opened as a centre for creative practice in nature, aiming particularly to engage with NHS trust staff, patients and visitors, but also open to the wider community⁷⁵. Hospital arts programmes can offer links to the wider community and creative activities to support recovery and rehabilitation post-discharge. Fresh Arts on Referral at North Bristol NHS Trust is an example of a social prescribing programme within an acute hospital setting, through which patients with cancer, chronic pain or chronic breathlessness are offered 6-week programmes of creative activities to support them to self-manage long term health conditions⁷⁶.

Creative health and workforce wellbeing in the NHS

Creative health within acute settings not only positively impacts patients, but also improves the ward environment for staff, and arts-based activities have been shown to have benefits for staff wellbeing. There is developing evidence for the use of the arts to improve the health and wellbeing of healthcare professionals⁷⁷. The concept of 'mutual recovery' proposes that creative practice in healthcare settings improves the mental health and wellbeing of both carers and the cared for. It suggests that the arts can break down social barriers, provide new ways of expressing and understanding experiences and emotions and can help to rebuild identities and communities, particularly when working with mental health⁷⁸.

The COVID-19 pandemic took a significant toll on staff. Hospital arts teams responded by developing new initiatives specifically targeting the workforce. For example, in University Hospitals of Derby and Burton NHS Foundation Trust new staff clubs were set up including craft, singing, photography and drawing, with the aim of providing a positive distraction from working life, to improve wellbeing,

and to boost morale. Clubs are open to all and cut across specialisms and hierarchies providing opportunities for peer support and connection. Clubs have been set up in partnership with the hospital wellbeing team, which both enriches the support available to staff and provides a clear route to additional support and therapy for those who need it, ensuring the arts clubs are a safe space for people to share their experiences. Artworks produced by participants are displayed throughout the trust sites and the staff choir has performed in Lichfield Cathedral in a concert to celebrate the power of music and art to heal.


Such staff wellbeing programmes have been developed across several trusts. For example, in Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust, Lime Arts ran a series of online arts workshops, Create.Connect.Unwind, throughout the pandemic, culminating in a Creativity and Wellbeing Festival at Manchester Royal Infirmary⁷⁹. Workshops continue to be offered to staff returning from long term sick leave or with high levels of stress or anxiety. A study by the Open University with North Tees and Hartlepool NHS Trust introduced a pilot creative writing programme for NHS frontline workers in response to the mental health impact of COVID-19. All participants felt the sessions reduced their stress levels and work is underway to expand the programme⁸⁰.

The 2022 NHS staff survey finds that the mental health and wellbeing of staff continues to suffer, with 43% experiencing work-related stress and 34% reporting burnout, partly as a result of staff shortages⁸¹. This subsequently leads to further challenges in recruitment and retention. In this context hospital arts programmes and creative health activities in hospital settings not only improve outcomes for patients and families but can also provide an important resource for workforce wellbeing, supporting the NHS with staff retention and productivity.

“

We know that we have a major ongoing problem with burnout, and with recruitment and retention in the NHS. But we also know that the pandemic showed that there is a potential for the arts to support recovery and wellbeing, and it has really opened the door for us to support our NHS staff”

Laura Waters, - Head of Arts, Air Arts, University Hospitals of Derby and Burton NHS Foundation Trust, Workforce Development and Wellbeing Roundtable



The importance of co-production, and engaging those with lived experience of services in design and development from an early stage is increasingly recognised by the NHS and forms part of statutory guidance for working in partnership with places and communities⁸⁴. NCCH 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 the heart, the Huddles bring together patients, participants, clinicians, artists and managers⁸⁵.

1.3 Towards a Creative Health Strategy

A key recommendation from the 2017 APPG on Arts Health and Wellbeing Inquiry Report ‘Creative Health’ was the establishment of a cross-government strategy to support the delivery of health and wellbeing through the arts and culture. Despite significant developments in creative health in recent years, this recommendation has not come to fruition. Now, more than ever, with the demands placed on our health and social care systems, we need to consider a whole system approach to health and wellbeing. This must take into account the social determinants of health and act upstream to keep people living well for longer, whilst providing high-quality person-centred care for people with a health condition. Creative health will be an integral part of such a system.

In this report, we therefore set out how creative health can address some of the challenges we currently face, and how its impact can be amplified by a coordinated, supportive approach across all government departments.

A 21st-century approach to health and wellbeing

Facing the joint impacts of the pandemic and cost of living crisis, our health and social care system is under pressure, with hospital waiting times at record highs and capacity in social care dangerously low. The population is ageing, and more people are living with multiple long term conditions, meaning these pressures are unlikely to ease if action is not taken. We face a crisis in mental health, with rates of mental ill health in children and young people worryingly high. Health inequalities are among the worst in

Europe and the gap is widening, with life expectancy falling in some of the poorest areas of the country.

These issues must be addressed as a matter of social justice but there are also broader implications for the economy, through increased costs to the health and welfare system and a loss in productivity with people unable to work through ill health. There is a need for innovative approaches that can both address these immediate challenges, and create the conditions to build a prosperous society focussed on health and wellbeing in the long term.

The solutions are complex and responsibility does not lie with one government department alone. A healthy and economically flourishing society requires an approach to health and wellbeing that is fit for the 21st Century. Creative health offers us a way to think anew – to recognise the role of creativity and culture in upstream, preventative approaches to health and wellbeing, to emphasise the voices of lived experience and communities, and enable co-designed solutions to best meet need. Acknowledging the potential of creative health to improve quality of life and health outcomes and embedding this into systems, will improve the health of the population.

A cross-departmental approach

Informed and positive leadership from government is required to achieve this. A cross-departmental approach to creative health will model the cross-sectoral work required for creative health to flourish and legitimise and enable this way of working at all levels of the system.

There are clear benefits that creative health can bring to the attainment of national ambitions, across health and social care, levelling up, education, criminal justice and employment. Collaboration between the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) is key in facilitating creative health, but other government departments have an important role to play in ensuring its success. Only by developing a shared language and goals can we create the conditions for creative health to really thrive, and, in doing so, amplify its benefits.

In addition to proposing a cross-governmental strategy on creative health, coordinated and monitored at the very centre of government and

fully resourced by HM Treasury, we have set out where individual departments can benefit from creative health, and the opportunities and levers within their remit to support and spread creative health across the country.

The issues covered by this report are all complex and require a joined-up approach from government and society. We propose that developing shared target outcomes and accountabilities across government departments as part of a dedicated Creative Health Strategy will identify where policies can be aligned and resources best diverted to ensure the greatest impact. We highlight the importance of whole system approaches, and the establishment of structures which facilitate cooperation and sustainable partnerships. Where this has been put into practice, there has been a demonstrable impact on health outcomes and key system targets. Modelling such an approach at national level will ensure these outcomes are achieved more widely.

Devolution offers further opportunities to integrate creative health across a combined authority region, in a way that mobilises existing assets and meets local priorities. We therefore also propose that all current and future Metro Mayors consider how their devolved powers in areas such as skills, employment and transport can support creative health to thrive in their region, in doing so improving both population health and economic prosperity.

The policy context for creative health

Many policy drivers that can support the greater integration of creative health are already in place. Creative health is consistent with the direction of travel in recent policy towards an integrated and person-centred approach to health and social care, with an emphasis on prevention.

Person-centred care is a key element of many of the themes addressed in this review. Within the NHS, the Comprehensive Model on Personalised Care aims to provide people with greater choice and control over the way their care is planned⁸⁶. Cross-departmental investment in social prescribing indicates a role for non-clinical approaches, and a recognition of the benefits of working with communities to improve health and wellbeing.

Further integration within Primary Care Networks has been recommended, through the development of multi-disciplinary teams that will support people to access the care they need in the community, provide greater patient choice through personalised care and tackle health inequalities⁸⁷. Person-centred approaches are also central to reforms intended to tackle pressing challenges in social care and an important aspect of end of life care^{88,89}.

Levelling up aims to address inequalities with a focus on productivity, with specific targets linked to healthy life expectancy, wellbeing and pride of place – all areas where creative health can contribute. Culture has an important role to play. Changes have already been made in the way funding for arts and culture is distributed, with additional funding allocated to historically culturally underserved places.

Arts Council England (ACE) has embedded creative health into its Delivery Plan through the Creative Health and Wellbeing plan, which sets out how it will work within health and social care, and promote collaboration between organisations and practitioners in the creative health sector⁹⁰. The plan aims to connect people with communities through creativity, ‘particularly in places where culture is limited and health inequalities are present’. Other arm’s length bodies including Historic England and Natural England have explored their role in supporting health and wellbeing^{91,92}. The impact of creativity on health and wellbeing has been further acknowledged in

Devolved Nations

This report makes recommendations to the UK Government for a cross-departmental strategy on creative health. With many of the policy areas devolved to the Governments of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the recommendations have a focus on the current policy context in England. However, we hope the recommendations and the content of the report will be useful and relevant in all four nations. Throughout the Review, we have drawn on best practice examples from across the UK, highlighting where the Government can take inspiration from existing policies and initiatives.



the Creative Industries Sector Vision, which sets an objective for 2030 that creative activities contribute to improved wellbeing, help to strengthen local communities, and promote pride in place⁹³. The vision commits to enhancing direct links between the creative industries and the health service.

Schools are an important setting to support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. Mental health education in schools is a compulsory part of the curriculum, and Department for Education (DfE) grants are available for state schools to train a mental health lead. The NHS Long Term Plan commits to increased support for children and young people's mental health through collaboration between DHSC, DfE, NHS England and OHID. Its commitments include additional support for children and young people to access mental health support through school or college-based Mental Health Support Teams, which can link to NHS services. We show in this Review how creativity can support these initiatives.

Whilst these cross-sectoral drivers align with creative health, there are also barriers to progress. Resources for public health have been cut in real terms, and recommendations to increase the ICS budget allocated for prevention have not been taken up⁹⁴. Public funding for the arts decreased by 21% between 2009/10 and 2019/20⁹⁵. In education, funding for creative subjects in higher education has been reduced significantly and opportunities for pupils to engage with creativity in schools and higher education courses are increasingly limited. Sufficient funding has not been made available to meet the objectives set out in the levelling up agenda or proposed reforms in social care.

A cross-governmental approach to creative health will help to ensure that policies are aligned to maximise the potential of creative health.

Maximising the potential of creative health

Creative health relies not only on cross-sectoral partnerships, but also on sustainable relationships between stakeholders at different levels of the system, with communities and the voice of lived experience at the centre. Where sufficient infrastructure exists to allow such partnerships to thrive, we see positive outcomes that benefit individuals, communities and systems. Innovative

work is emerging from the grassroots, with communities drawing on the power of creativity to create solutions that meet their health and wellbeing needs, facilitated by local authorities and healthcare systems where needed.

In this report, we show what is possible when the right conditions are in place for creative health to flourish. These examples are the exception rather than the rule. Creative health is not universally available, and successful initiatives are often the result of the longstanding commitment of passionate groups and individuals rather than sustainable structures within systems. We ask policymakers to imagine how much more could be achieved if creative health was supported from the top down. By fully embedding creative health into health, social care and wider systems, we can improve the health of the population and support the Government to meet its targets, across all departments.

1.4 A Vision for Creative Health

Our ambition is for creative health to be integral to health, social care and wider systems, including education. Creativity will be recognised by the general public, healthcare professionals and policymakers as a resource to support health and wellbeing across the life course, and its benefits will be accessible to all.

Central to this vision will be the development of person-centred and community-led approaches, informed by lived experience, which will mobilise existing creative, cultural and community assets in order to best meet local need and reduce inequalities.

A sustainable and supportive infrastructure for creative health, including opportunities for training and development, will further the expansion of the creative health workforce, whose skills and expertise can be integrated into health and social care systems to complement existing provision, and reduce pressures on the system.

Creative health will be fundamental to a 21st-century approach to health and social care, contributing to better outcomes for individuals, communities, public services and systems.