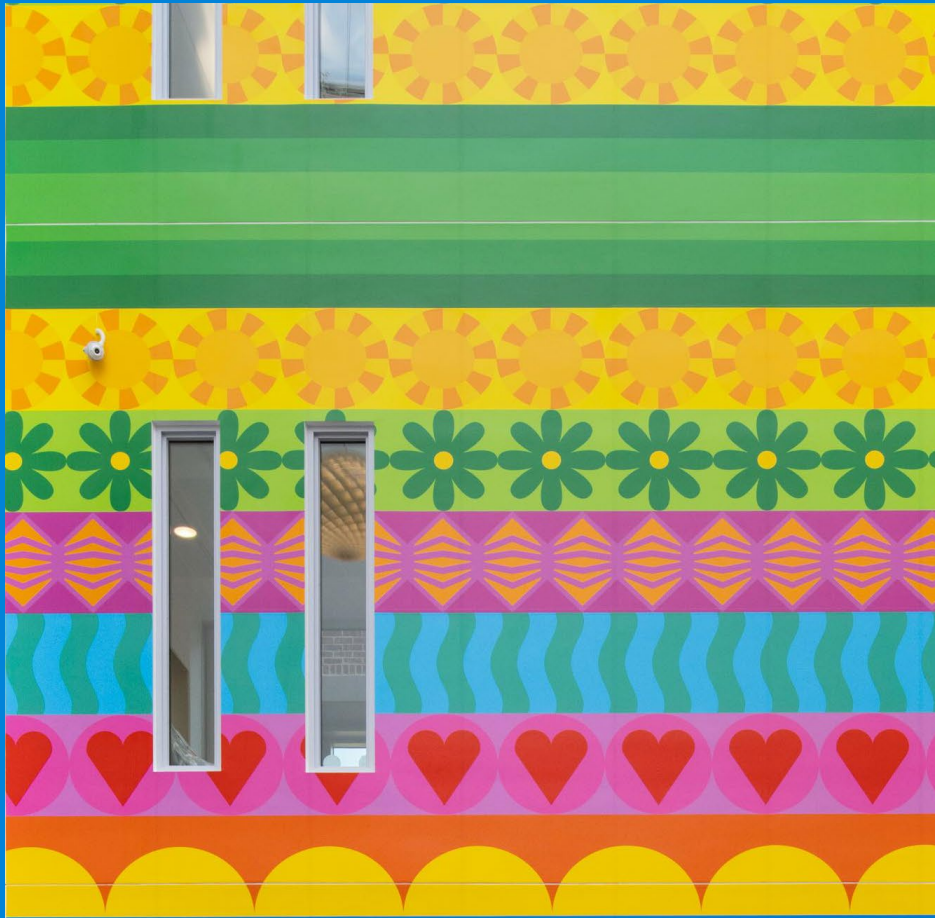


June 2026



HOPE FOR A BETTER TOMORROW.



UK Arts & Health: The Time is Now

UK Parliament
Roundtable

The roundtable was organised by the **Jameel Arts & Health Lab** in collaboration with the **World Health Organization** Regional Office for Europe, and the **National Centre for Creative Health**.

Supported by **Arts Council England**

Roundtable Date:

Monday, 20 April 2026

Roundtable Location:

Boothroyd Room, House of Commons
UK Parliament

Roundtable Co-Chairs:**Dr. Simon Opher MBE MP**

Labour MP for Stroud; Co-Chair of the APPG on Creative Health

John Slinger MP

Member of Parliament for Rugby

Alexandra Coulter

Director, National Centre for Creative Health

Stephen Stapleton

Founding Co-Director, Jameel Arts & Health Lab

Brief Contributors:**Prof. Daisy Fancourt**

Prof. of Psychobiology & Epidemiology, University College London

Dr. Nils Fietje

Technical Officer, BCI Unit, WHO Regional Office for Europe

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Chief Medical Officer, Scottish Government

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Medical Doctor and Public Health Registrar

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Designed & Published by:

Executive Summary

At a time of accelerating global interest in the health benefits of the arts, there is growing recognition that creativity, culture, and artistic engagement are not peripheral to health and well-being, but central to it. Momentum is building internationally, reflected in increasing attention from the World Health Organization, major medical journals including The Lancet, policymakers, clinicians, researchers, and artists themselves.

The United Kingdom is uniquely positioned to lead this field. With a strong history of arts and health practice, internationally recognised research, and established partnerships across healthcare, cultural, academic, and community sectors, the UK has become a global reference point for demonstrating the impact of the arts to health and well-being. Evidence increasingly demonstrates that arts and cultural engagement can deliver significant health economic benefits, including long-term savings across wider public systems, reduced demand on overstretched services, lower rates of chronic illness and social isolation, and improved health outcomes in the communities that need it most.

Against this backdrop, the roundtable brought together policymakers, healthcare and cultural leaders, researchers, doctors, people with lived experience and artists to explore how the arts can play a more central role in advancing health and well-being across the United Kingdom and beyond.

This post-event policy brief outlines the key insights and actionable recommendations emerging from the roundtable.

The Strategic Opportunity

The UK health system is at an inflection point. Rising demand driven by chronic illness, mental health challenges, and an ageing population is placing sustained pressure on the NHS. At the same time, there is a policy shift away from reactive, hospital-based care toward prevention, early intervention, and community-based support. This shift is no longer just a clinical need but an economic one. With 2.8 million people currently inactive due to long-term sickness, the annual cost of ill-health to the UK economy has reached £212 billion.

Delivering on this requires new approaches that maximise the potential of the wider determinants of health, **which shape up to 80% of health outcomes.**

Research has proven that creative health interventions are a scalable resource. As Daisy Fancourt argues in her book *Art Cure*, arts engagement is a key and credible component of prevention across the life course rather than a peripheral intervention.

Regular arts engagement delivers measurable health benefits, including:

- Reduced systemic inflammation and improved cardiovascular health.
- Mitigated mental health risks, specifically reducing the risk of depression.
- Slower biological ageing, supporting the healthy ageing agenda.

Despite this, the arts remain marginal across health policy and practice. **The opportunity now is to transition arts and health from the margins to the mainstream.** By embedding arts and culture into the NHS 10-Year Plan, and aligning with the government's 80% Employment Ambition, the UK can move toward a systemic model that connects the health of the nation to its economic productivity.

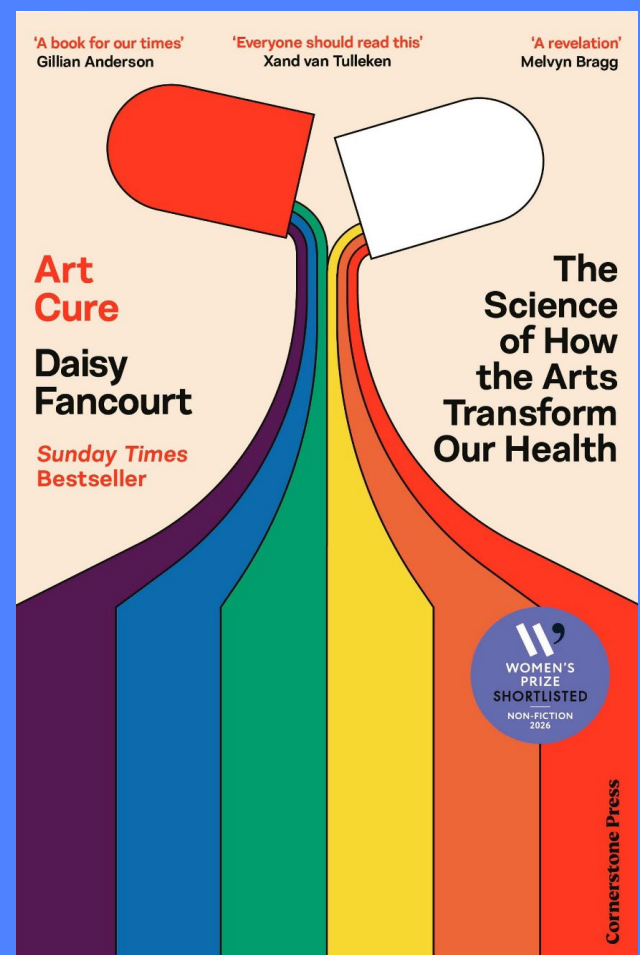
Art Cure by Daisy Fancourt

The roundtable keynote was given by Professor Daisy Fancourt, whose bestselling new book, *Art Cure: The Science of How the Arts Transforms our Health*, represents an explosion of public interest in creative health.

Drawing on neuroscience, epidemiology, immunology, and behavioural science, Fancourt made the case for a cross-sector and strategic approach to improving population health through the arts.

Key takeaways from Prof. Fancourt's keynote included:

- Arts engagement reduces symptoms of depression and anxiety with effect sizes comparable to medication or therapy, reducing pressure on overstretched mental health services.
- Music and movement decrease pain and stress through measurable physiological changes, offering a cost-effective tool for managing chronic conditions.
- Regular cultural attendance correlates with lower risk of loneliness, frailty, and mortality, reducing downstream social care and emergency admission costs.
- Social prescribing schemes incorporating the arts now operate in over 40 countries. The UK is well placed to build on this momentum.



Evidence-Based Public Health Policy



The movement to integrate the arts into UK public health is backed by a decade of policy recommendations backed by evidence. The [2017 APPG Creative Health report](#) first established the evidence base, showing that the arts improve recovery and long-term health. This was validated globally by a [2019 World Health Organization \(WHO\) review](#) of 3,000 studies, which confirmed that arts interventions deliver measurable clinical and preventative benefits.

The National Centre for Creative Health (NCCH) has since translated these findings into UK policy. However, the [2023 Creative Health Review](#) highlighted that while the evidence is clear, there is a need for cross-government leadership to embed creative health in policy. Current efforts are hindered by fragmented funding, inconsistent referral pathways, and unequal access across different regions.

This sequence of reports demonstrates that the value of the arts is already proven. The opportunity now is to act on the evidence and realise the enormous potential of the arts to improve the nation's health, support economic growth and drive employment.

Recommendations for Action

1 Convene a Joint Select Committee Inquiry into Creative Health

- While evidence for the impact of arts and health is strong, scaling and sustainable funding remain underexplored. A deeper investigation is needed into why systemic change has not yet embedded creative health at scale across the UK.
 - A joint inquiry between the Culture, Media and Sport and the Health and Social Care select committees would provide the opportunity to explore these issues and reflect on the policy levers needed to effect change.
-

2 Deliver a Joint National Framework for Action for Creative Health

- There is an urgent need for a Joint National Framework for Action on Creative Health between DCMS, DHSC, and the devolved nations to embed arts and health at all levels of health and care systems, recognise the creative sector as a core partner and provider, and enable standardisation and scaling across all four nations.
 - Establish national metrics to track cultural engagement as a health behaviour and its contribution to prevention.
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3 Embed Creative Health in Clinical Training Pathways

- Integrate the evidence base for Creative Health into undergraduate, postgraduate, and continuing professional education across all health and social care professions, as a core component of curriculum, training, and professional standards.
 - Prioritising this early ensures that future professionals regard Creative Health as fundamental knowledge, rather than an add-on addressed through post-qualification updates or retrofitted learning for the existing workforce.
-

4 Harness Creative Health to Build the Economic Wealth of the Nation

- The UK is a world leader in both cultural and health exports, and there is real potential to strengthen its position at the forefront of global Creative Health by embedding it as an explicit priority within the growth strategies of the Creative and Health Industries – driving joined-up action across government departments and the wider sector.
- The Creative Industries are a core growth accelerator for the UK economy. Fundamental to their continued success is a healthy workforce. It is therefore imperative that government and the Creative Industries Council support growth through good jobs that enable healthy, long careers in the creative arts as a central pillar of the national economic strategy.

Selected Visual References

shared during the roundtable



Song and Soft Embrace (2022), photographed by Ioana Ofelia at a Cultural Centre in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Courtesy of Ioana Ofelia for Cluj Cultural Centre

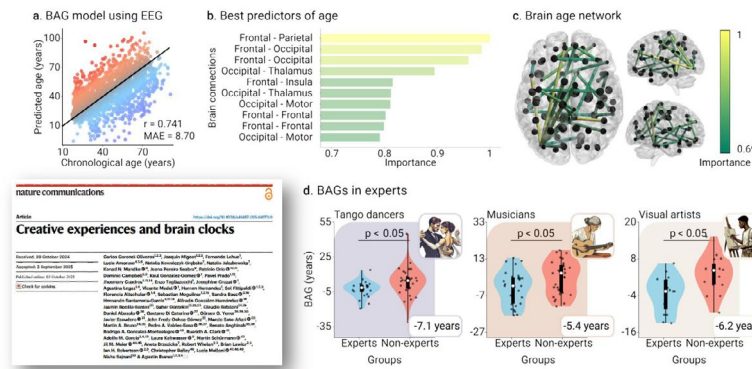


Image of NHS Psychiatric Unit presented by Hospital Rooms to demonstrate "UK Mental health wards are unsafe and in a state of disrepair".



Art intervention in the secure mental health unit of The Hellingly Centre, Hailsham, East Sussex. © Tim Shaw for Hospital Rooms

Molecular epidemiology: brain clocks



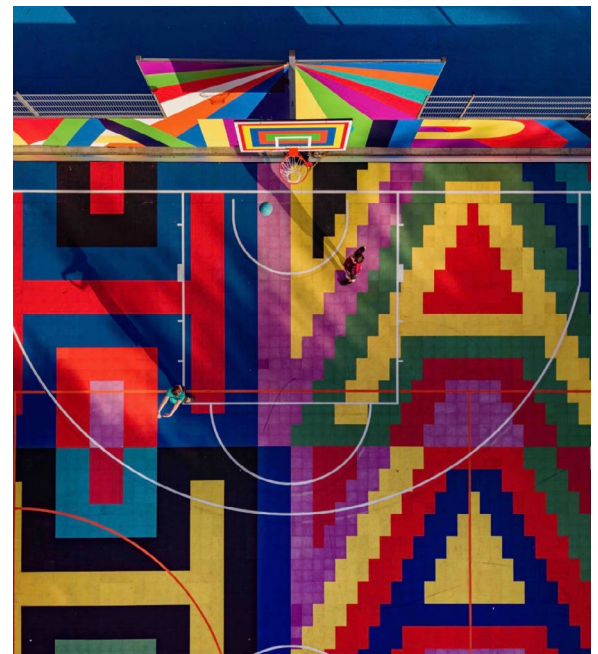
Coronel-Oliveros et al. 2025 Nature Communications



An immersive performance at Liverpool Lighthouse, inspired by the Arts for the Blues project to tackle depression, low mood, and anxiety. © Professor Vicky Karkou, Edge Hill University, UK



Rosetta Life uses dance, film, and storytelling to support people living with chronic and terminal illnesses. © Foteini Christopoulou



NHS staff with Poetry Pharmacy which were distributed to GP practice and A&E department in Greater Manchester. © Poetry Pharmacy

HA HA HAPPY (2026). A permanent public artwork by Lakwena Maciver, created for the basketball courts at Happy Mount Park, Morecambe. © Lakwena Maciver

Key Insights

1. Cultural Engagement as a Health Behaviour

- A fundamental shift is needed to recognise creative engagement and participation as a core health behaviour, on a par with physical activity, with lack of participation posing comparable risks to a sedentary lifestyle.
- Policy makers and commissioners should consider creative health activities as core health behaviours required to achieve the ambition of increased Healthy Life Expectancy.
- Participation and engagement in the arts happens across the creative industries, and evidence shows differential impacts from different practices, e.g. dance for Parkinson's, singing for maternal mental health.
- Academics must build frameworks for metrics for success, to quantify exposure in individual population levels to achieve '5 a day' methodology to support embedding, however this should not delay action now.

- National Chief Medical Officers should acknowledge creativity and creative participation as health improving behaviour and work within respective departments to embed this in all relevant policies

“**Cultural engagement is the only UN-recognised right that we do not routinely monitor and yet when measured in practice, engagement remains low—only around 1 in 20 adults report participating in arts activity on a given day.**”

Prof. Daisy Fancourt,
Professor of Psychobiology & Epidemiology,
University College London

CASE STUDY 1. MELODIES FOR MUMS UK Research Driving Global Impact

- Breathe Arts Health Research developed Breathe Melodies for Mums, a 10-week singing programme supporting maternal mental health and postnatal recovery.
- The programme is based on the Music and Motherhood study by the Royal College of Music and Imperial College London.
- Clinical evidence shows the intervention reduces symptoms of postnatal depression by 35% in six weeks and 40% by week ten.
- Delivered online and in person, the programme has supported more than 1,000 mothers and birthing people through multilingual group singing.
- The initiative has been recognised internationally, receiving a UN Impact Award.
- Further research with King's College London and University College London supported the development of a scalable training model.
- Partnerships with the WHO have enabled delivery across seven countries in Europe and Asia.



Image: Breathe Melodies for Mums by Breathe Arts Health Research. © Felipe Pagani

2. UK is a Global Leader in Arts and Health

- The UK is an established global leader in arts and health, particularly in social prescribing and culturally based health interventions, with growing international recognition from health systems and policy institutions.
- UK models and evidence are increasingly being adapted internationally, generating demand for UK expertise in research, implementation, training, and system design.
- UK Leadership in arts and health creates emerging economic value through knowledge export, professional services, and international partnerships, strengthening the UK's position in a fast-growing global "creative health" field.
- The opportunity is to move from evidence of pilots to system-wide implementation and leadership. Until now, projects and initiatives are led by individuals and there is little proof of sustainable and systemic shifts in practice once an individual moves on.
- The cultural sector needs to collaborate more effectively (both across organisations and within specific disciplines) to build and use strong evidence about what works. This evidence should not sit separately from practice; it should be embedded into training programmes, professional standards, and career pathways so that practitioners routinely apply it in their work.

“
The world is looking to the UK for leadership. WHO Europe stands ready to support, to learn, and to showcase to its membership: this is what good public health looks like.”

Dr. Nils Fietje,
Technical Officer, WHO Europe

CASE STUDY 2. HOSPITAL ROOMS Reimagining Mental Health Environments

- Hospital Rooms integrates arts and creativity into mental health infrastructure through co-produced therapeutic environments.
- Over 250 artists have collaborated with patients and clinicians to transform clinical wards into museum-quality spaces that support dignity, recovery, and wellbeing.
- The charity has transformed 6% of England's mental health estate, highlighting both impact and the scale of unmet need across remaining wards.
- Hospital Rooms has developed a National Framework to support scalable implementation of arts interventions across the NHS.
- The framework is evidence-based, clinically scrutinised, and aligned with national quality standards.
- A peer-reviewed PICU evaluation found a 220% increase in patients willing to recommend the ward, doubled feelings of involvement in care, and an 88% rise in comfort ratings – with no disruption to clinical care.

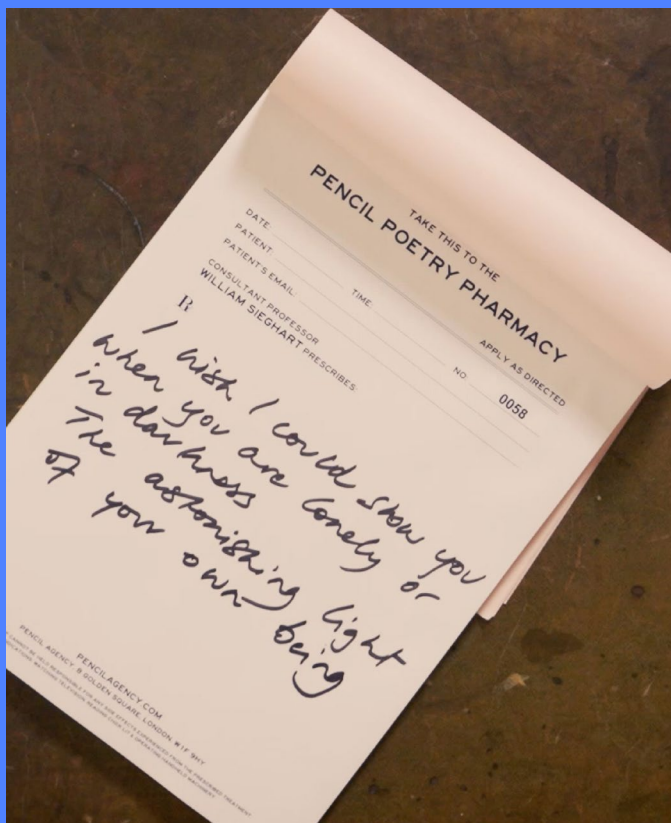


Courtesy of Hospital Rooms

3. Arts as a Health Economic Asset

- Arts engagement delivers substantial economic and wellbeing value in the UK, estimated at £8–15 billion annually.
- Arts and health interventions demonstrate strong returns on investment, with evidence of up to £8.56 in social value for every £1 spent.
- Arts programs for NHS staff can save up to £3.5m a year by reducing staff stress, burnout, sickness absence, and staff turnover, generating direct system savings and improved workforce productivity.
- Improved mental wellbeing and reduced stress associated with arts participation are linked to better functional capacity, suggesting downstream productivity gains through increased workforce participation and reduced absenteeism. For example, regular participation is associated with around a 50% reduction in risk of chronic pain.
- More broadly, arts engagement contributes to improved population health, stronger social connection, and reduced demand on health and care services.
- The UK is also emerging as a leader in exporting arts-and-health expertise as part of its wider creative industries offer, which contributes over £100 billion annually to the UK economy and represents a major export sector.
- Creative Health interventions have been shown to be effective in community settings, workplaces, and clinical settings.

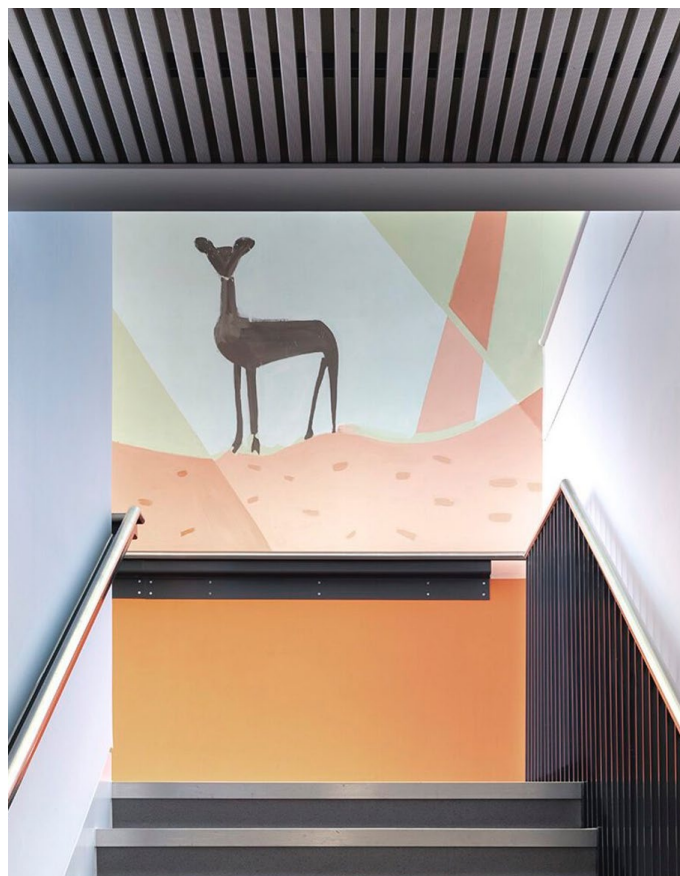
CASE STUDY 3. POETRY PHARMACY Scaling Arts on Prescription



- Poetry on Prescription uses poetry as an arts and health intervention to support emotional wellbeing, stress reduction, and mental health.
- The programme builds on The Poetry Pharmacy anthology series by William Sieghart, which connects readers to poems through emotional experience.
- Ode Poetry CIC delivers live poetry events, NHS partnerships, and QR-enabled poem resources for patients and healthcare staff.
- Collaborations include Mind, Hospital Rooms, and Greater Manchester Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust.
- The programme is being expanded across schools, GP surgeries, and hospitals in Greater Manchester.
- In partnership with Microsoft, Ode Poetry CIC has developed a free AI-supported platform that connects users to poems based on mood and emotional need.
- The model demonstrates the potential of arts-based social prescribing and creative technology to support mental wellbeing at scale.

4. The Translation Challenge: Bridging Two Systems

- A major barrier to implementation is the cultural gap between health and arts institutions. The NHS is target-driven, hierarchical, and risk-averse, while the creative sector is more relational, flexible, and exploratory.
- Co-design and co-production with marginalised communities is essential – successful programmes cannot simply be parachuted in. They must be co-created with patients and local populations to truly amplify the voices of those living with illness or trauma, while embedding an intersectional lens that recognises and dismantles the overlapping barriers to access they face.
- Bridging this requires intermediaries, shared frameworks, and co-production models to support collaboration without losing the qualities that make arts interventions effective.
- Art and health (Creative Health) should be embedded across the health system, not siloed, including hospital design, health communication, and the NHS long-term plan.



Mural by Susie Hamilton commissioned by Hospital Rooms for Springfield Hospital.

CASE STUDY 4. ROSETTA LIFE Arts in Rehabilitation and Recovery

- Rosetta Life uses dance, film, and storytelling to support people living with chronic, life-altering, and terminal illnesses, with programmes co-designed with participants to build confidence, reduce anxiety, and reduce stigma around illness and disability.
- Stroke and Brain Odysseys is a 12-week creative rehabilitation programme evidenced to improve cognition, mobility, speech, and quality of life – addressing the physical, emotional, psychological, and social impacts of stroke and brain injury.
- Delivered across four NHS Trusts in London, the programme is now scaling to four new UK regions in line with NHS neighbourhood health and prevention priorities.
- As a partner in SHAPER – the world's largest study into arts and health scalability, supported by a £2.5m Wellcome Trust award – Rosetta Life's work is underpinned by rigorous independent research and a national network of lived-experience ambassadors supporting community-based rehabilitation and social connection.

CASE STUDY 5. MORTAL FOOLS Arts for Youth Mental Health Prevention

- Mortal Fools uses arts participation and co-creation to support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.
- Its award-winning digital programme, MELVA, is an early intervention and prevention tool for adolescent mental health.
- The programme uses animation, film, gaming, and storytelling to build emotional regulation and self-management skills.
- MELVA is delivered through trained primary school teachers as part of PSHE education.
- Supported by the North East Combined Authority, the programme is used across around 100 schools and seven local authorities.
- Approximately 10,000 children have participated in the programme.
- Evaluation data found that 93% of children increased mental health knowledge and 99% improved self-management capabilities.

Voices from the Roundtable



“The first mistake I made when I became a surgeon was thinking it was all about maths. Surgery taught me that it is about creativity. Creativity is inherent in all of us, and when you embrace it, you realise the impact you can have on patients and lives around you ... and over the past decade, I have embraced the arts in clinical care.”

Dr. Zubir Ahmed

Former Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Health and Social Care; Labour MP for Glasgow



“To maximise impact and avoid wasted resources, the four UK nations must stop duplicating efforts, synergise their policies, and ensure national strategies effectively empower local frontline delivery.”

Manira Ahmad

Chief Officer, Public Health Scotland



“Arts prescribing is no longer a fringe idea; the urgent next step is to officially embed it into mainstream NHS preventative strategies and clinical treatment plans.”

Dr. Simon Opher MBE

Labour MP for Stroud; Co-Chair, All Party Parliamentary Group on Creative Health



“Artists have always intuitively understood what science is now proving, that art is a powerful tool for processing emotion, building hope, and healing.”

Lakwena Maciver

Artist



“In the last year I haven't been able to play my guitar (due to Parkinson's disease), I've been using Ai - this has told me we are in a moment of profound creative tension, but also opportunity. Music has saved my life. Ai has saved my song writing. How can we scale this.”

Sam Smith

Musician and Director at Freuds; Arts for Parkinson's Advocate

Voices from the Roundtable



“1.3 million people in the UK are currently unable to work due to mental health conditions—yet we know prevention saves NHS resources. Creative health has a proven role in supporting recovery and building resilience; the question is no longer whether it works, but whether governments are prepared to act systematically and invest.”

Dame Caroline Dinenage DBE
Conservative MP for Gosport; Chair, Culture Select Committee; Co-Chair APPG on Creative Health



“Art is a tonic. In a time when we spend a lot of time talking about technology, this is about our humanity. Art and artists are at the centre of that humanity. ... It’s all about how we become healthier and happier human beings.”

Dr. Darren Henley CBE
CEO, Arts Council England



“I wish I had access to creative arts programmes decades ago in my recovery. The arts don’t just offer joy – they restore confidence, rebuild community and give you purpose again. These interventions should be part of recovery pathways from the very beginning, not something people stumble across years later.”

Jen Chandler
Brain Odysseys Ambassador



“The culture of the health service is very top-down, performance managed, not much scope for doing your own thing. Arts culture is highly permissive. I’m worried about the culture of the health service dominating arts culture. ... We talk different languages. – How can we build the relationship between Art & Health culture?”

Prof. Martin Marshall CBE
Chair of the Nuffield Trust (and NCCH)



“As a musician, I’ve experienced the physical and mental benefits of the creative arts. They build skills, strengthen communities, bring joy and support the economy. However, as a politician I’ve learned evidence alone isn’t enough. We need a cultural shift that treats the arts as essential for all, backed by funding and long-term support.

John Slinger
Labour MP for Rugby

Appendix

Jameel Arts & Health Lab

The Jameel Arts & Health Lab is a global initiative leveraging scientific evidence, artist-led advocacy, and a global 'Healing Arts' campaign to drive the integration of the arts in clinical and public health across 193 UN member states. The Lab was co-founded in 2023 by WHO Regional Office for Europe, NYU Steinhardt, Community Jameel and CULTURUNNERS.

jameelartshealthlab.org

The WHO Regional Office for Europe

The World Health Organization (WHO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations created in 1948 with the primary responsibility for international health matters and public health. The WHO Regional Office for Europe is one of six regional offices throughout the world, each with its own programme geared to the particular health conditions of the countries it serves.

who.int

The National Centre for Creative Health (NCCH)

The National Centre for Creative Health's mission is to advance good practice and research, inform policy and promote collaboration, helping foster the conditions for creative health to be integral to health and social care and wider systems. The NCCH provides the secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Creative Health and is a partner on the UKRI funded research programme: Mobilising Community Assets to Tackle Health Inequalities. With ACE and The Baring Foundation, the NCCH is delivering the Creative Health Leads in Systems programme across England.

ncch.org.uk

Roundtable Speakers

Dr. Zubir Ahmed

Former Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Health and Social Care; Labour MP for Glasgow

Manira Ahmad

Chief Officer, Public Health Scotland

Dr. Shahnoor Minhas Amin

Medical Doctor and Public Health Registrar

Jen Chandler

Brain Odysseys Ambassador

Alexandra Coulter

Director, National Centre for Creative Health

Kiz Crosbie

Artistic Director and CEO, Mortal Fools

Nader Diab

Head of Programmes, Community Jameel

Dame Caroline Dinéage DBE MP

Conservative MP for Gosport; Chair, Culture Select Committee; Co-Chair APPG on Creative Health

Prof. Daisy Fancourt

Professor of Psychobiology & Epidemiology, UCL and Steering Committee Chair, Jameel Arts & Health Lab

Dr. Nils Fietje

Technical Officer, BCI Unit, WHO Regional Office for Europe and Co-Director, Jameel Arts & Health Lab

Dr. Darren Henley CBE

CEO, Arts Council England

Suzie Hamilton

Artist, Hospital Rooms

Lucinda Jarrett

Creative Director, Rossetta Life

Lakwena Maciver

Artist

Prof. Martin Marshall CBE

Chair of the Nuffield Trust & National Centre for Creative Health

Dr. Simon Opher MP

Labour MP for Stroud; Co-Chair, All Party Parliamentary Group on Creative Health

Tim A. Shaw MBE & Niamh White MBE

Founders, Hospital Rooms

William Sieghart CBE

Founder, Poetry Pharmacy

John Slinger MP

Labour MP for Rugby

Prof. Sir Gregor Smith

Chief Medical Officer, Scottish Government

Sam Smith

Singer-Songwriter & Arts for Parkinson's Advocate

Stephen A. Stapleton

Founding Co-Director, Jameel Arts & Health Lab

Dr. Justin Varney-Bennett

Director Public Health South-West
Creative Health Lead DHSC

Appendix

Selected Resources

Art Cure: The Science of How the Arts Transforms Our Health (2026)

Dr. Daisy Fancourt's book looking at the role arts play in supporting our 'health'.

[View Research via UCL](#)

"Arts and Cultural Engagement Linked to Slower Pace of Biological Ageing" (2026)

The Guardian, University College London researchers

[Read Article](#)

Visualising relationships between the arts and health: A Photo Essay (2025)

Stapleton *et al.*, *The Lancet*

[View Abstract](#)

Creative experiences and brain clocks (2025)

Coronel-Oliveros *et al.*, *Nature Communications*

[View Study](#)

Creative Health Review (2023)

Evidence, policy and practice review for creative health in the UK.

[View Review](#)

WHO Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report 67 (2019)

Fancourt, D. & Finn, S.

The definitive meta-analysis of over 3,000 studies on the role of the arts in improving health.

[Download Full Report \(PDF\)](#)

Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing Inquiry Report (2017)

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing

[Download Full Report \(PDF\)](#)



Image courtesy of Rosetta Life