

Building on the Evidence: Qualitative Research on the impact of Arts in Mental Health Care.



Artist Martin Donlin, Photo Nigel Noyes

Key findings and recommendations

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Building on the Evidence: Qualitative Research on the impact of Arts in Mental Health Care.

In 2005, researchers at the University of the West of England, in collaboration with Avon and Wiltshire Partnership Mental Health NHS Trust, conducted a two year project funded by the Estates and Facilities Division of the Department of Health. This project used qualitative methods to explore participants' experiences of commissioned and participatory arts in mental healthcare settings. The research identified specific benefits of arts in these settings and pinpointed aspects of arts that are viewed by service users and staff as enhancing care. The research also explored the challenges facing those seeking to enhance mental healthcare settings using arts based approaches, identifying prerequisites for the successful delivery of arts projects in these settings.

Summary of key findings

Four pathways were identified through which arts enhanced mental healthcare environments:

- 1) Artworks helped to create modern, 'fit for purpose' environments, adding brightness, ambience, space and identity,
- 2) Artworks enhanced valued aspects of healthcare environments, using carefully chosen materials and evoking popular themes such as nature and locality.
- 3) Artworks minimised negative associations such as institutionalisation and stigma by introducing colour, light and shape and by reinforcing aspects such as privacy and relaxation.
- 4) Arts provided a range of opportunities for service users and staff, including recreation, stimulation, and alternatives to TV. For service users, participation in arts offered the opportunity to reengage with identities other than that of 'patient'.

Most respondents were strongly supportive of the arts, although not every commission was universally liked and some commissions evoked strong feelings. Negative reactions to artworks were more likely to occur when staff and service users felt they lacked control or involvement in the process of change.

Background

There is a growing recognition of the role of arts in enhancing healthcare environments. While a growing body of research has examined clinical and behavioural effects of arts, few studies have examined service users' and staff experiences of the arts in depth. Understanding these perspectives is important to the development of policy and practice. Hence the focus of the study was on subjective responses to the arts as well as on the process and project management issues that can influence successful outcomes in mental healthcare settings.

The study investigated a three year arts project, 'Moving On', which was supported through the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). The arts project included 36 integrated commissions and participatory arts in 16 new mental healthcare units.

Over 60 service users and staff took part in the research, which took place across four adult facilities including a rehabilitation unit, medium secure services, an older adult acute ward and a large campus-style hospital catering for a range of service users. Hence the scope of the project offered an opportunity to explore the role of arts in a number of different contexts and with a wide range of service users and staff. The findings are relevant to the successful delivery of future arts projects and environmental improvement programmes in mental healthcare and other settings.

Study Aims

The study aimed:

- To explore the subjective impact of the arts programme on service users and staff
- To explore experiences of involvement and ownership in relation to the project
- To identify the contribution of arts based interventions in the management of transitions to new buildings and services
- To identify implications and develop models of best practice

Study Methods

A number of different qualitative methods were used including documentary analysis, interviews and focus groups.

Over 400 documents generated by the arts project over a period of four years up until August 2006 were analysed. The analysis tracked the development of the project from the production of the original strategy to the final outcome, focusing on stakeholder views, identifying key issues and challenges that arose and the responses to these.

In-depth interviews (55) and three focus groups took place between March 2006 and May 2007. The interviews were with service users (26), staff (18), carers (3) and other stakeholders and artists (8). The interviews focused on participants' views and responses to the artwork, their feelings about the care environment and their experiences of participation in the arts project.

Findings

As well as identifying a wide range of stakeholder views and pinpointing key challenges facing the project, the documentary analysis revealed the influence of financial, policy and other agendas on the project.

Notions of 'modernisation' and 'participation' were both important. The former was expressed through the goals of quality, durability and value. Participation was evident in the requirement that artists consult with stakeholders about their commissions.

A key challenge was balancing these notions. At times there was a tension between 'prestige' and 'authenticity'. Hence some stakeholders argued for greater emphasis to be placed on 'service user art'. On the other hand, others thought that commissioning art from high calibre, external artists was a useful way of redressing problems such as stigma in the new environments.



Stained glass by Stuart Low, Photo Paul Highnam

Positive impacts of the arts

The accounts revealed four different pathways through which the arts enhanced the environment and wellbeing.

1. The artworks helped to create a pleasant, 'up to date' feel by adding brightness, ambience and space:

Yea its lovely I mean its quite unusual I think all the sculptures and artwork around the place are unusual ...it just gives a feel of being a bit more modern ...

(Stakeholder 05)

2. The artworks reinforced valued aspects of the environment such as nature and locality. While the new settings offered limited opportunities to wander freely in woodlands, careful landscaping and choice of materials mitigated this:

Oh with seating as well....it looks like well all natural wood or whatever but I think that'sit looks great, kind of handmade... a bit more sort of home-grown as it were.

(Stakeholder 06)

3. The artworks helped to minimise problematic associations such as stigma and institutionalisation. They did this by reinforcing aspects such as privacy and creating a sense of beauty:

So I think they will look beautiful, actually... they will take that sort of stark, slightly clinical building edge off completely

(Service user 13)

4. Finally, the artworks created new opportunities, encouraging recreation and identity and offering alternatives to TV.

Diverse responses to the arts

Most respondents supported the arts strategy, but some commissions evoked strong reactions. These diverse responses were difficult to attribute to specific characteristics of the artworks. Rather, they seemed to be mediated by particular experiences and contexts.

A key issue was control. Changes in the environment may have reduced the sense of control experienced by some staff. For service users, access to the opportunities afforded by the artworks was contingent upon routine ward management practices such as rules governing access to outdoor spaces.

Another issue was identity. The artworks enabled some service users to engage with identities other than 'patient', reinforcing positive responses.

I: Sounds like this one's had the most impact on you?

R: Yes, because I could relate to it...If I had the opportunity, if I was to do anything like that, it would have been something abstract, along those lines.

(Service user 02)



Tree of Light by Kate Munro. Photo Nigel Noyes

Finally, responses were mediated by environmental features that may be difficult to address through visual arts. Hence participants commented on the importance of the aural environment, identifying sounds they liked and disliked. They also noted some challenges, such as traffic noise in the new settings.

Service User Participation

Service users were involved at every level of the project. Participation in arts processes was almost universally rewarding for service users, who enjoyed having the opportunity to work with professional artists and valued the feeling of having made a visible contribution to the environment. Artists responded positively, including service users at different levels to ensure that their contributions were meaningful.



Textile workshop by artist June Heap

Service users also participated in the strategic level of decision making. While being able to influence decisions was a positive experience, the relatively formal, professional culture of meetings and discussions often made participation challenging. Service users sometimes felt disadvantaged in these processes.

Conclusions

The findings demonstrate the value of arts in healthcare settings, highlighting specific issues within mental healthcare environments. Four pathways through which the arts can enhance these environments were identified: creating modern, 'fit for purpose' environments; reinforcing positive aspects; diminishing negative aspects; and providing a range of opportunities for service users and staff.

The study to some extent reinforces previous findings that identify particular aesthetic characteristics as supportive in healthcare settings. These include references to nature and locality; the use of colour, light and shape to create non institutional imagery; and the avoidance of specific references that might evoke negative associations and memories. However, the study also highlights the contingency of responses to artworks in healthcare settings, particularly in mental healthcare. Responses to artworks in these settings are influenced by a complex interplay of forces. Policy and practice needs to be guided by sensitivity to these local issues as well as by universal guidelines.

The research reveals some of the challenges of introducing changes such as environmental enhancement in mental healthcare settings. Some of these are influenced by national discourse and policy. Effective leadership, management and partnership working are needed to negotiate these as well as clarity with key stakeholders about expectations, responsibilities and agendas.

Finally, the study highlights the need to ensure that arts strategies offer meaningful opportunities for participation by service users. In this study service users gained real benefit from participation in creative processes facilitated by skilled and sensitive artists.

The study indicates areas for future research. A range of art forms, not just visual arts, may contribute to environmental enhancement, for example, in helping to address challenging aural aspects. Arts may also have a role to play in supporting consultation. In this study, service users seemed more ready to engage with arts based methods than with conventional approaches. Hence arts based approaches may be useful when seeking to engage service users who find traditional forms of consultation difficult.

Checklist for good practice

In September 2007 the project findings were discussed with service users, staff, artists and stakeholders at a conference which also involved participants from arts projects in other parts of the country. The feedback gathered from this exercise was disseminated to a wide range of partners including all the research participants. The good practice checklist below has been developed from the project findings and includes the feedback elicited during this iterative consultation process.

Project Vision

- Make sure there is a clear vision for the project.
- Make sure there are clear aims and objectives for a scheme.
- Address what is meant by 'art', for example whether this means permanent or temporary fixtures; artist led or user led processes; or a combination of these.
- Ensure sufficient time is spent making sure the project aims and objectives are understood by all parties.
- Identify sources of funding for the project, ensuring all partners have a clear understanding early on of the scope of activity covered by funding.
- Be realistic about what can be achieved.
- Acknowledge that not everybody will like every artwork.

Project Management

- Ensure high level project leadership for the project in order to facilitate progress, open doors, troubleshoot and lever funds.
- Involve individuals and organisations with knowledge and experience of arts management.
- Ensure that each group has a code of practice, a clear remit, defined membership, and delineated authority from the start.
- Where possible, link schemes to existing projects, services and structures.
- Ensure that project managers are aware of the roles, skills, expertise and authority of key people in the organisation.
- Ensure that existing staff, e.g. art therapists and occupational therapy staff, are involved in the development of the project.
- Ensure that creative processes are informed by service users, artists and makers from the outset. Try to avoid preconceptions of work before these groups have been involved.

Partnership working

- Ensure key partners, including funding organisations and the organisation's Estates Department are involved from an early stage so that timescales support project goals and key responsibilities are understood.
- Consider longer term implications, e.g. ensure that responsibility for maintenance and repair of artworks is 'owned' by relevant partners.
- Involve staff to ensure commitment e.g. to supporting artists, maintaining artwork, eliciting feedback.
- Be realistic about the impact of the project on day to day experiences and workloads of staff.
- Ensure artists are allowed sufficient time, support and training to understand the organisational context and respond to requirements, e.g. data protection, working with vulnerable people, consultation with stakeholders.
- Recognise that service users may also be artists; ensure commissioning processes are accessible to all.

Evidence based approach

- Ensure that artworks reflect current evidence, e.g. nature images, non institutional colours and use of light
- Avoid preconceived notions of appropriate artworks, allowing local considerations to influence design features.
- Ensure that project evaluation with a clear framework and methods that involves all stakeholders is in place at the start.
- Involve external evaluators and 'critical friends' to identify emergent issues; support the project's development; and contribute to dissemination.

Service User Participation

- Provide genuine opportunities for service users to participate in creative processes.
- Ensure service users are able to participate in other aspects of the project, including strategic level decision making.
- Clearly define the role of service user representatives on committees and groups.
- Allow sufficient time for discussion so that service user voices can be heard.
- Ensure that involved service users are supported, since formal procedures as well as professional language and cultures can be intimidating.