

Be Creative Be Well

Arts, wellbeing and local communities
An evaluation



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ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND



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The report at a glance

An executive summary

What is it for?

Policy makers and academics are taking renewed interest in how people feel about themselves and their neighbours. For example, there is ongoing work into how to measure wellbeing and represent this in official statistics and debate continues on the factors that contribute to – and jeopardise – community cohesion. In many areas, local communities themselves are making clear their desire to be involved in opening up opportunities for a fuller life.

There is a growing body of evidence that creativity and the arts can make a significant difference to people's health and wellbeing – and also to how they feel about, and interact with, their neighbours. This report tells the story of Be Creative Be Well, one of the most ambitious grassroots arts and health programmes ever delivered in the UK. Written by independent evaluators, the report aims to:

- explore the range and depth of benefits potentially associated with artists working in close collaboration with local communities
- share new learning about factors that help – and hinder – successful collaboration of this kind

- contribute to the growing dialogue between arts and health professionals
- offer recommendations on how to ensure that the commissioning process is most likely to give rise to work that will result in a sustainable legacy

Who is it for?

The report will be of particular interest to:

- agencies at regional and local levels concerned with improving the health and wellbeing of disadvantaged communities and reducing health inequalities, such as public health departments, health and wellbeing boards, local authorities, mental health trusts and clinical commissioning groups
- agencies at national level that have an interest in empowering local communities and promoting community cohesion, such as Arts Council England, the Department of Health, the Department for Communities and Local Government, Public Health England and the National Mental Health Development Unit
- community arts practitioners and other artists who are interested in working with local communities
- public health professionals and GP practices interested in developing innovative ways of engaging and working with local people

Where did it come from?

In July 2007, the Big Lottery Fund announced that it was giving just under £9.5 million to finance a new four-year health and mental wellbeing programme called Well London. The successful application had come from the Well London Alliance, a group of agencies from different sectors across the capital that shared a vision of ‘a world city of engaged local people and groups with the skills and confidence to improve their own physical health and mental wellbeing’.

The Well London programme included 14 projects. Some focused on support for community engagement and capacity building while others were based around five themes: culture and tradition, healthy eating, mental health and wellbeing, open spaces and physical activity. The culture and tradition theme was delivered through Be Creative Be Well, an ambitious programme developed by Arts Council England. However, creativity in the Well London programme was not confined to Be Creative Be Well – creative approaches were embedded throughout.

In 2010, Arts Council England commissioned an independent team to carry out an evaluation of Be Creative Be Well. This report describes the team’s findings.

What is the key learning?

Be Creative Be Well was a wide-ranging innovative programme that, at its most effective, was shaped by local conditions and local people. Even when projects involved comparatively few residents, there were individual breakthroughs – people who were inspired to try new things, change jobs, refresh their outlook on life and gain useful creative skills. In nearly all the projects visited, there was a new sense of possibility evident in the neighbourhood – a hint of what could be.

This report analyses the achievements of Be Creative Be Well by combining evidence-based research into 'ways to wellbeing', developed by the new economics foundation, with published evidence of typical outcomes from good participatory arts practice. This gave the authors a robust framework for assessing how successful the programme was in encouraging behavioural change into healthier lifestyle choices and what particular contribution creativity and the arts had made to this process.

The experiences, challenges and achievements of the programme also reveal a great deal about how to make an arts intervention successful and sustainable. The following emerged as key learning points:

Defining the community

Do

Commissioners Aim to select a self-defining community

Artists Where possible, build on existing community resources

Don't

Commissioners Set up projects across split sites

Selecting the artist

Do

Commissioners Ensure that artist teams have skills in community development as well as their specific practice

Don't

Artists Set up an opposition between quality of artistic product and deep engagement with the community – the best projects seem to combine the two

Preparing the ground

Do

Commissioners Ensure that artist teams are briefed as fully as possible on how decisions are made locally, or outside of the community, and who holds the power

Commissioners/artists Make practical acknowledgement of the fact that it takes time to develop relationships and trust, and to establish what kind of activities local people would like to see and support

Artists Pay careful attention to finding a venue that local people will be happy to attend

Don't

Commissioners/artists Assume statistical demographic information will provide a clear picture of the communities involved

Commissioners/artists Raise unrealistic expectations of the project among local people

Demystifying the artistic process

Do

Artists Begin by exploring participants' thoughts and feelings about their community and environment and focus on building on these

Artists Reflect on the questions: 'What difference do I hope to make?' and 'Why do I think what I'm planning to do will make that difference?'

Don't

Artists Set out an agenda of 'we are going to make art'

Working with local structures

Do

Commissioners/artists Make every effort to enlist the active support of local organisations – the 'familiar face on the estate' is often an invaluable aid to marketing the project

Commissioners/artists Think through the role that project partners are expected to play and use that analysis to identify the most appropriate partners

Artists Form mutually respectful and productive relationships with representatives of the local authority and other major agencies

Don't

Artists Try to set up activities without the support of local organisations, programme sponsors or project partners

Collaborative programming

Do

Commissioners/artists Make every effort to create good conditions for collaboration and joint working

Commissioners/artists Aim to develop opportunities for active and equal partnership

Artists Be clear about your own contribution to the collaborative work – including the nature of the energy you bring – and be explicit about your aspirations for joint working

Don't

Commissioners/artists Underestimate the challenges of bringing together very different discourses and approaches

Building levels of engagement

Do

Artists In recruiting to the project, find good reasons for people to step out of their comfort zone on a cold night

Artists Prioritise face-to-face encounters with local people and use 'ambassadors' where you can

Don't

Artists Give in to the temptation of relying on conventional promotional approaches like flyers, posters and newsletters – they are rarely effective for community arts projects

Using evaluation

Do

Commissioners Structure programmes in such a way that projects are allowed to set their own tempo and find their own sense of direction and purpose

Artists Take opportunities to turn evaluation into a creative learning activity that has the potential to enhance your practice as well as the specific project

Don't

Commissioners/artists Over-consult local people so that gaining feedback gets in the way of developing the work

Leaving a legacy

Do

Commissioners Give priority to working with artists to identify how initiatives can be embedded systematically

Artists Throughout the project, build on opportunities to pass on skills – including fundraising and advocacy skills

Don't

Commissioners/artists Leave thinking about legacy until the last few months of the project

This summary has been produced by Creative Hertfordshire to promote the benefits of culture on wellbeing across the county.

See <http://www.creativehertfordshire.com/resources/culture-and-health> for more.

