

- A partnership of public health researchers across the five universities in North East England
- Working with policy makers and practice partners to improve health and wellbeing and tackle inequalities
- A founding member of the NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR)

Mobilising arts and creativity to improve health and wellbeing

There is growing interest in the potential of arts and creativity to improve people's health and wellbeing, particularly those facing significant inequalities. This research study was part of an evaluation of Well Newcastle Gateshead and explored how engaging in arts and creative activities affected the communities involved.

The aim of Well Newcastle Gateshead (WNG) is to engage communities in arts and cultural activities as a catalyst for wellbeing to improve the health of the communities in Newcastle Inner West, Byker, Felling and Chopwell. To achieve this, the Well Newcastle Gateshead Arts Fund was formed with the intention of supporting communities to identify and develop local assets and to build sustainable relationships between artists, and community, voluntary and health organisations.

The study was undertaken by researchers from Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, based at Newcastle and Northumbria Universities in collaboration with Blue Stone Consortium, Newcastle City Council and Gateshead Council. We aimed to explore the pathways to impact of arts-based interventions on health and wellbeing.

Using ethnographic methods, we conducted in-depth analysis of three case studies on community projects funded by WNG over a period of eight months. During this time, researchers observed and interviewed local organisation and community members who took part in the selected projects. Here, we focus on the main findings from the case studies.

The projects offered diverse artistic and creative activities for people living in three of Well Newcastle Gateshead's target communities.

Project one was based at a community garden and was delivered in partnership with a community artist. The project

worked with children and their families through creative and exploratory outdoor activities.

Project two involved a partnership between two local organisations and was aimed at tackling social isolation among vulnerable women living in the community through immersion in nature.

Project three aimed to address social isolation among adults where project staff and residents collaborated on the creation of artistic work.

Key findings

- The projects created communal spaces where qualities such as kindness, care and reciprocity were highlighted. This space helped participants to form a sense of connection with themselves (in the sense of self-awareness), with project staff, with other resident participants and with broader society.
- Taking an organic approach that recognises the diverse motivations of participants for taking part and addresses interpersonal dynamics, strengthens commitment to the project.
- Product (work of art/craft i.e., a song) and process (creating the art/craft, i.e., producing the song) in artistic and creative engagements work together to deepen the effects that involvement has on the people who engaged with the projects.
- A holistic approach recognising context, where staff took into account the lives of participants beyond the project - encompassing their health issues, relationships and responsibilities - enhanced a mutual sense of connection and commitment.
- There were limits to the extent to which project staff could support and address the complex issues facing project participants.

Policy relevance and implications

- Reflecting on different understandings of arts and creativity, and the potential pathways to impact would help the planners and implementers of arts-based initiatives to gain clarity on who to involve in projects, at which stage, what outcomes to aim for and the best approach to assess impact.
- Allowing planners and implementers the time and space to develop well-considered project proposals may give them an opportunity to think about how to respond to community priorities, the pathways of delivery (who to involve, how to involve them etc.), their impact and ways to assess that impact creatively.
- Thoughtfully drafted arts and creativity-based activities that are rooted in communities and organically grow with the community have the potential to generate positive impacts. These positive impacts could be harnessed to prompt whole system transformations through linking them with supporting initiatives that address health inequalities.

“It's, you're going out, and you're learning something, and you're getting fed, and you bring something home, and you get given resources to do with and it's just great.” Participant

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

This qualitative research comprised of interviews and observations to consider the impact of activities supported by the Well Newcastle Gateshead (WNG) Arts Fund.

Guided by the research question: *“What are the pathways to impact of arts-based interventions on health and wellbeing?”*, the research involved in-depth case studies carried out with three WNG projects and focused on the themes of school-readiness, adult mental health and isolation.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

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Making willow lanterns in the woods. Photo credit: Bethan Maddox