Towards an inclusive arts-based mental health service
We know that engaging in arts and creative activity has a positive impact on mental health. However, mental health services commission very little arts activity.

Creative interventions and arts engagement can improve mood, confidence and self-esteem.

Of those young people who are seen by current mental health services, around 1 in 2 will have a mental health problem during the course of their lives. Around 1 in 20 will be admitted to hospital at some stage. More young people than ever are seeking help from mental health services. The system transformation that is taking place within mental health services presents an opportunity for arts and cultural providers with NHS children’s mental health services to establish partnerships that are based on shared values and a commitment to improving outcomes. GM i-THRIVE’s Arts, Culture and Mental Health Programme as part of their national system transformation programme there is promising evidence that arts engagement can support wellbeing in young people. The Arts and Mental Health Programme is delivering a range of arts-based mental health approaches that arts professionals often lacked with the expertise of all partners so that we could:

- increase NHs teams’ knowledge about the concept of wellbeing using games, discussion and this group created artworks which they could take home with them.
- develop and agree formal service level agreements and procedures acceptable to all parties.
- develop a process for partnering with arts organisations to develop arts-led interventions for young people seeking mental health support.
- identify what works well, as well as challenges and solutions.

The project worked with arts organisations, the expertise of all partners so that we could:

- increase NHs teams’ knowledge about the concept of wellbeing using games, discussion and this group created artworks which they could take home with them.
- develop and agree formal service level agreements and procedures acceptable to all parties.
- develop a process for partnering with arts organisations to develop arts-led interventions for young people seeking mental health support.
- identify what works well, as well as challenges and solutions.

The project worked with arts organisations, the expertise of all partners so that we could:

- increase NHs teams’ knowledge about the concept of wellbeing using games, discussion and this group created artworks which they could take home with them.
- develop and agree formal service level agreements and procedures acceptable to all parties.
- develop a process for partnering with arts organisations to develop arts-led interventions for young people seeking mental health support.
- identify what works well, as well as challenges and solutions.

The project worked with arts organisations, the expertise of all partners so that we could:

- increase NHs teams’ knowledge about the concept of wellbeing using games, discussion and this group created artworks which they could take home with them.
- develop and agree formal service level agreements and procedures acceptable to all parties.
- develop a process for partnering with arts organisations to develop arts-led interventions for young people seeking mental health support.
- identify what works well, as well as challenges and solutions.

The project worked with arts organisations, the expertise of all partners so that we could:

- increase NHs teams’ knowledge about the concept of wellbeing using games, discussion and this group created artworks which they could take home with them.
- develop and agree formal service level agreements and procedures acceptable to all parties.
- develop a process for partnering with arts organisations to develop arts-led interventions for young people seeking mental health support.
- identify what works well, as well as challenges and solutions.

The project worked with arts organisations, the expertise of all partners so that we could:

- increase NHs teams’ knowledge about the concept of wellbeing using games, discussion and this group created artworks which they could take home with them.
- develop and agree formal service level agreements and procedures acceptable to all parties.
- develop a process for partnering with arts organisations to develop arts-led interventions for young people seeking mental health support.
- identify what works well, as well as challenges and solutions.
What we achieved

We wanted to test the feasibility of partnerships between clinical services and arts and creative partners and whether this could result in improved mental wellbeing outcomes for young people.

Unusually for a mental health project structured around groupwork, there was very little drop out and most attended regularly. Participants were overwhelmingly positive about their experience and staff received letters and messages from them detailing how much they had enjoyed and valued the sessions.

All delivery partners including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service and Healthy Young Minds, reported that they observed positive change in participants. They also indicated that they would like to see a creative offer expanded in their services.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service and Healthy Young Minds similarly persisted in their efforts to complete the project working within restrictions. Staff made enormous efforts in very difficult circumstances and their actions demonstrated the value placed on these creative interventions.

There were several redesigns and stop-start implementations of each project in response to the unfolding Covid-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, three of the four cultural providers were able to successfully engage young people albeit in small numbers. Whilst the project was able to evidence increases in wellbeing across time, the number of participants was not statistically significant and so evidence-based conclusions could not be drawn.

Learning from the projects has informed the wider GM i-THRIVE Arts, Culture and Mental Health programme, including the development and delivery of workforce training.

What we learned

• Preparation and relationships are key, as are clearly defined roles
• A considerable lead in time is necessary to incorporate the training needs of partners and to define roles and responsibilities
• Regular debriefs between partners facilitates reflection and the improvement of services
• Responsibility for follow ups and check-ins with participants should be clearly defined
• Language is key. The words “art” and “group” can put off some young people
• Social anxiety and other difficulties can have considerable impact on a young person’s ability to engage with creative activity. Key work can support a young person through this process
• Cash flow is a vital part of project planning and can be a barrier to commissioning. Many large NHS bodies work to much longer payment schedules than small arts organisations and this should be factored in from the outset.

A fuller implementation story of these proof of concepts is available from Manchester i-THRIVE.

The Evaluation Kit

GM i-THRIVE has further tested the evaluation kit with wider system partners, and begun to roll out a training programme on its use. Over 50 organisations have now requested their kit and this work continues.

The national lead for THRIVE transformation, The Anna Freud Centre, is working with GM i-THRIVE to support the uptake of the Evaluation Kit. Further national CYP mental health organisations have also expressed interest in its use. The team is working across health and social care, the cultural sector and with colleagues in GM and nationwide to continue to share and build on this learning.

The learning from this project has informed a series of training, eLearning and workshop events on implementing arts-based options in children’s services, delivered to the GM workforce via the i-THRIVE Academy.

The Evaluation Kit

GM i-THRIVE has further tested the evaluation kit with wider system partners, and begun to roll out a training programme on its use. Over 50 organisations have now requested their kit and this work continues.

The national lead for THRIVE transformation, The Anna Freud Centre, is working with GM i-THRIVE to support the uptake of the Evaluation Kit. Further national CYP mental health organisations have also expressed interest in its use. The team is working across health and social care, the cultural sector and with colleagues in GM and nationwide to continue to share and build on this learning.

The learning from this project has informed a series of training, eLearning and workshop events on implementing arts-based options in children’s services, delivered to the GM workforce via the i-THRIVE Academy.

The Evaluation Kit

GM i-THRIVE has further tested the evaluation kit with wider system partners, and begun to roll out a training programme on its use. Over 50 organisations have now requested their kit and this work continues.

The national lead for THRIVE transformation, The Anna Freud Centre, is working with GM i-THRIVE to support the uptake of the Evaluation Kit. Further national CYP mental health organisations have also expressed interest in its use. The team is working across health and social care, the cultural sector and with colleagues in GM and nationwide to continue to share and build on this learning.

The learning from this project has informed a series of training, eLearning and workshop events on implementing arts-based options in children’s services, delivered to the GM workforce via the i-THRIVE Academy.
Great Place GM

Great Place GM was a 3 year action research programme led by Greater Manchester Combined Authority and part of the national Great Place scheme funded by National Lottery Heritage Fund and Arts Council England.

Its aim was to demonstrate the powerful role of culture and its contribution to place-based issues. This was achieved through the development of imaginative partnerships and innovative ways of working across geographical and thematic boundaries including health and wellbeing, ageing well, place shaping and diversity and inclusion.

GM Culture: Bringing life to GM and GM to life

Image credits: Front page and page 4 © Ernie Chamberlain, page 5 ‘Online exhibition’ and ‘Painted creature’ and back page by Arc