

Healing Arts

↪ Scotland

15–19 June 2026

Creating Well

Scottish Borders

Creative Health Research Report

NHS Borders' Clinical Strategy 2025 - 2030 sets out a clear ambition to improve population health, reduce inequalities, and shift towards prevention and community-based care, using a life course approach to health improvement.¹ This approach recognises that health outcomes are shaped across key life stages—from early years through to end of life—and that interventions should address both clinical need and wider determinants of health.

Within this context, the arts and creativity are increasingly recognised as evidence-based contributors to health and wellbeing, with growing international evidence demonstrating their role in prevention, treatment and long-term health outcomes.² **Daisy Fancourt's** (Professor of Psychobiology & Epidemiology and Head of the Social Biobehavioural Research Group at UCL) **2026 book 'Art Cure'** synthesises decades of interdisciplinary research, positioning arts engagement as a **"fifth pillar of health" alongside exercise, nutrition, sleep and nature.**³ Professor Fancourt's work is referenced as a key source throughout this report.

Healing Arts Scotland is part of a global movement designed to embed the arts into public health and community wellbeing. This report aims to raise awareness of the evidence base, the impact that the arts can have and the local opportunities - for prevention and health promotion purposes but also for more person-centred care.

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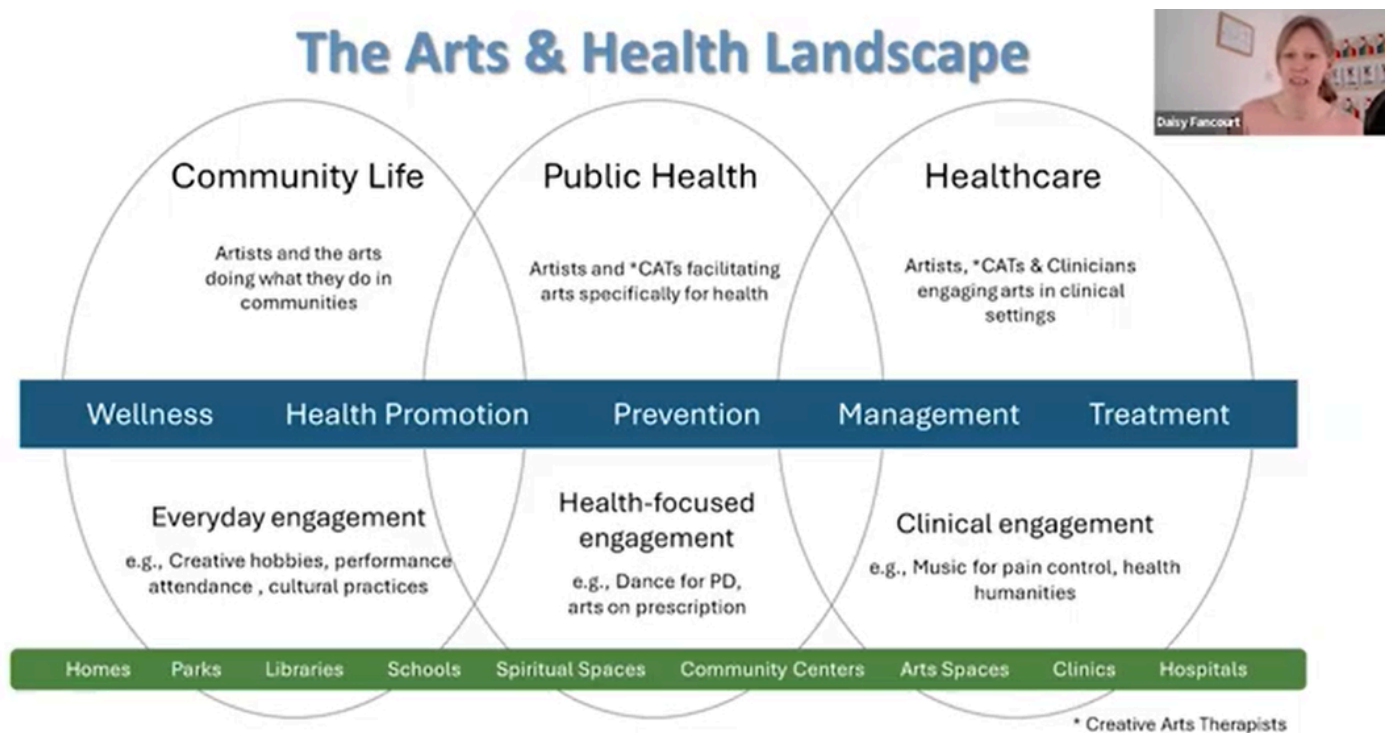
The role of arts in improving health and wellbeing

Over the last decade, the World Health Organisation has promoted the beneficial impact of the arts in improving health and wellbeing. Results from over 3000 studies identified a major role for the arts in the prevention of ill health, promotion of health, and management and treatment of illness across the lifespan. Evidence shows that engagement with the arts can help to:

- prevent ill health, including enhancing well-being and mental health
- reduce the risk of age-related mental and physical decline
- help people with mild-severe mental illness and trauma manage and recover from symptoms
- improve experience and outcomes of people with acute conditions in hospital
- support mental health and physical functioning for people with chronic conditions
- provide valuable social and emotional support in palliative care and bereavement.

At a time when health and care budgets are under extreme pressure, it is difficult to envisage any real shift from the medical model to one that invests in creative health. However, recent work by Frontier Economics and the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport^[13] provides a pioneering approach to 'monetising' the value of the health and wellbeing impacts of the arts, culture and heritage in order to enhance the ability to make more informed decisions about resource allocation. What we know from this approach is that the associated gains to the UK economy from improved health, wellbeing and productivity linked to arts engagement are estimated to be £8bn a year. For each of the health improvements above, there are knock-on effects in terms of reductions in demand for healthcare.

It is however, not so simple as just introducing some random arts interventions and hoping for some improvements. As Professor Fancourt sets out in her slide below, there are a range of areas of impact which require different approaches and different interventions. In terms of prevention and health promotion the arts can improve wellbeing, encourage healthy lifestyles and help to manage long-term conditions, reducing pressure on healthcare services. At the management and treatment end of the spectrum in clinical settings, arts therapies and programmes improve patient care, augment the benefits of standard treatments and support recovery. To ensure that we maximise the benefits for the people of the Scottish Borders, it's important that we collaborate across sectors to develop a cohesive framework that spans this spectrum. While not a comprehensive picture, the arts activities featured in this report indicate that we have many local strengths to build from, across each of the life stages in the Clinical Strategy.



Starting Well

From the very start of life, the arts play a vital role in our development and overall wellbeing, which is supported by a wealth of global evidence.

We know that babies can respond to sound as early as 19 weeks into pregnancy. It is sound and music during the early weeks and months of life that underpin the interactions and bonding process between baby and caregiver.

We know that the musical nature of these interactions supports maternal nurturing behaviours, increases emotional bonding and helps the caregiver to manage baby's arousal levels, all of which support healthy growth.

Evidence shows that arts-based interventions promote the mental health and wellbeing of both the adult and the infant. Early mental health interventions support babies and their important adult, foster a lifelong ability to process complex emotions, be more resourceful and resilient in later life.

Arts can lay the foundation for good mental health and wellbeing throughout life

Supporting children and families at the earliest stages of life aligns directly with NHS Borders' priority to **improve outcomes in early years and reduce inequalities from the outset**.¹ There is strong evidence that arts-based engagement—particularly music—plays a critical role in early development and attachment.

Fancourt highlights that exposure to music during pregnancy and infancy supports **neurodevelopment, emotional regulation and bonding**, contributing to the “architectural development” of the brain.³ Neurobiological studies show that auditory stimulation strengthens pathways linked to communication and emotional processing, with effects observed from early gestation and infancy.³

Evidence also demonstrates that music-based interventions support **maternal mental health**, reduce anxiety and depression, and strengthen caregiver–infant attachment.⁴ This is particularly relevant given that perinatal mental health conditions affect a significant proportion of women and are associated with long-term impacts for both mother and child.⁵

The WHO (2019) scoping review found strong evidence that arts engagement supports **caregiving relationships, child development and early emotional wellbeing**, contributing to long-term health trajectories.² Early interventions that improve attachment and emotional regulation are associated with increased resilience, better mental health outcomes and reduced inequalities later in life.

Within hospital the arts also have a crucial role to play, for example **stress management for premature babies in intensive care**. Music Therapy can not only effectively improve preterm infant's heart rate, stable respiratory rate and improve oxygen saturation, it can also help them to feed better, so they are able to maintain weight and leave hospital sooner. In addition, music therapy also plays a role in reducing maternal anxiety.

Implication for Clinical Strategy:

Embedding arts-based approaches within maternal, perinatal and early years pathways supports **primary prevention**, strengthens family relationships, and contributes to reducing health inequalities at population level.



Playing with Music

Arts Therapies

Project Description

'Playing with Music' is a time-limited weekly group for children aged 3-5 and their parent/carers, co-facilitated by a music therapist and another professional. Each session includes an interactive music session followed by an informal time to play and chat.

Project Context

Music is fun. Play is essential. Music helps promote wellbeing and development. Musical interaction can help support good attachment and resilience. The overall aims of the 'Playing with Music' groups are to promote the importance of music and play, to promote interaction and communication, to promote wellbeing and resilience, to create a safe and compassionate group environment (for peer support and networking), and to offer practical ideas for musical play (to make this a sustainable intervention). At the end of each project, families are provided with online resources to support them to continue to use musical activities at home with their child.

Project Impact

Each group is attended by a small number of families who, over the course of the weeks, connect and form a group together. It is a joy to witness many moments of play, connection and development. Children and their caregivers grow in confidence which leads to increased interaction and communication. There is a lot of play, a lot of fun, a lot of laughter. These groups are therapeutic interventions. The balance of structure and freedom, the attention to detail, the ability to improvise, the ability to meet different children at different places within the same activity, the minute by minute decision of how to unfold activities within the session, the ways of bringing children back into interaction by coming alongside them and creating spaces where they are drawn to taking part are all part of the skills that therapists bring to this work. It is often the unseen elements of the session that enable the development seen in the children and caregivers attending.

Growing Well

We are familiar with the way in which nursery rhymes and action songs play an important role in the development of language and communication in the first years of life.

In fact, engagement in all of the arts can support a child's cognitive, physical, emotional and social development during these formative years. Play and creativity form a central role in how we learn, about ourselves, about others and the world around us.

Through an educational lens, engagement in the arts is linked to higher academic achievement and the development of important transferable life skills.

The arts can transform young people's lives by acting as a powerful tool for emotional expression, confidence-building, and social connection.

Research shows us that engagement in creative activity can improve self-esteem and confidence and can help young people manage strong emotions and find a safe, empowering outlet to share their experiences.

In this way, the arts really matter in helping children and young people to grow well

The NHS Borders Clinical Strategy highlights the importance of supporting children and young people to **achieve their full potential**, with a focus on prevention, resilience and wellbeing.¹ Arts engagement is a key mechanism for supporting these outcomes.

Fancourt's work demonstrates that participation in the arts enhances **cognitive development, language acquisition and emotional intelligence**, with creative activity supporting brain plasticity and executive functioning.³ Engagement in arts-based learning is also associated with improved educational attainment and transferable life skills.

The WHO review identifies that arts engagement during childhood can **promote health behaviours, support social development and prevent the onset of mental ill-health**, particularly when embedded within education and community settings.²

There is also strong evidence for the mental health benefits of creative engagement. Arts-based interventions have been shown to **improve self-esteem, reduce anxiety and depression, and provide a safe means for emotional expression** among young people.⁶ These benefits are particularly important in the context of rising mental health challenges among children and adolescents.

Fancourt's epidemiological research further demonstrates that the benefits of arts engagement are **independent of socioeconomic factors**, indicating potential to reduce health inequalities when access is universal.⁷

Implication for Clinical Strategy:

Developing creative opportunities within schools, youth services and communities supports **early prevention, emotional wellbeing and resilience**, aligning with strategic priorities around children and young people.



Borders Youth Theatre

Performance | Community Arts

Project Description

Borders Youth Theatre aims to build self confidence among young people across the Borders through open (non auditioned) access to drama, through workshops and projects. The aim of the theatre group is to respond to young peoples physical and mental health needs by complete accessibility and inclusion, providing a safe space for young people to thrive and discover themselves.

Project Context

The youth theatre aims to serve young people (from ages 8 to 25) across the entire Scottish Borders region

Project Impact

We consistently receive feedback from participants emphasising our value in providing a safe inclusive and "family" environment, building confidence in all aspects of drama from performance to direction and technical. Here is a selection of comments from **Junior participants from their Easter 2026 project:**

- *I enjoyed meeting the new people*
- *I am better at listening and I enjoyed acting in the show*
- *I am more confident*
- *I feel more confident and at peace with the world*

and from **Senior participants from their Feb 2026 Senior project:**

- *BYT has been the best thing in my life for almost 10 years. I will never be able to express my true gratitude for the experiences I've had here. I would be a different person - much less happy and funny.*
- *"Like a mirror no matter what you look like you will always be accepted at BYT"*
- *Everyone is different at BYT but we all fit in*

and some general comments from **parents:**

- *It really was amazing for him, to be himself and develop his skills.*
- *My son always learns a lot from these projects but also had a great time, made new friends, had to be disciplined and dedicated and learnt important acting skills.*
- *BYT is the best part of our son's life at the moment out with family things, we are hugely grateful to BYT, they offer a creative, supportive atmosphere where our son can go and be confident to approach leaders about his concerns, always being treated with respect and as an individual.*
- *I feel she has found a group that is inclusive and accepting of people the way they are*
- *If my son had not found BYT his life would have been awful, socially excluded*
- *It has been a life-line for... many children whose interests and talents and social/emotional needs are not able to be recognised or developed in other environments*



Eat, Sleep, Ride – Let's Get Crafty

Community Arts

Project Description

Eat Sleep Ride is a Scottish charity delivering creative, nature-based and equine-assisted programmes from an off-grid, solar-powered rural site in East Berwickshire. The spring and summer programme includes free community sessions with partners including Jag Arts, Into the Wild CIC, the Young Rewilders, and Gaia Sound, alongside ticketed wellness sessions through July and August featuring yoga, sound bath, terrarium making, and sauna. The Easter programme provided opportunities for connection, sharing stories, and being creative together.

Project Context

We are based in a rural, dispersed community on the Scottish-English border — an area with limited transport and significant isolation. Our work is aimed at vulnerable young people, families, facing barriers including poverty, trauma, addiction, and justice involvement. The programme is free, accessible, and inclusive — welcoming families, people with disabilities, and neurodivergent individuals — while also supporting local businesses and providers to reach new audiences and offer their work in a community setting.

Project Impact

Across all parts of the project, the consistent evidence is the same: people leave with skills, relationships, and a sense of belonging. The yurt creates a warm, informal space where young people and families can settle quickly and engage in a way that feels safe and natural.

Staff observations include:

- Young people engaging at their own pace, especially those who would usually struggle in more structured settings
- Increased calm and focus through drawing and hands-on creative activity
- Natural social interaction, with young people playing and connecting without pressure
- A shared experience across generations.

One parent shared: *"I loved having an activity I could do with all five of my grandchildren together. Everyone enjoyed the art, playing with each other, and it was such a happy day."*

Living Well

Arts engagement can support our health throughout our adult lives.

Regular participation in arts activities, such as singing or going to an art gallery, can slow biological ageing. Surprisingly, the results also show that the deceleration benefits of art are equal to or greater than the biological benefits gained from weekly physical exercise.

Studies show that people who engage in the arts are more likely to lead healthier lives, including eating healthily and staying physically active, irrespective of socioeconomic status.

All of these factors contribute to our health by reducing stress, lowering inflammation and decreasing the risk of cardiovascular disease.

Arts activities undertaken in groups are effective in fostering co-operation, social inclusion and a sense of belonging within communities, all of which support good mental health and play a part in reducing health inequalities.

Participation in the arts can enhance many aspects of subjective well-being, helping us to have a sense of meaning, mastery and purpose.

Engagement in the arts can contribute significantly to our ability to live well

The Clinical Strategy emphasises a shift toward **health promotion, self-management and prevention of long-term conditions**.¹ In this context, arts engagement can be considered a key **health-promoting behaviour**.

A recent UCL study demonstrated that regular arts participation is associated with a **slower pace of biological ageing**, measured through DNA biomarkers.⁸ Individuals engaging in arts activities weekly showed significantly slower ageing, with benefits comparable to or greater than those associated with physical activity.⁹

Fancourt's synthesis further shows that arts engagement contributes to **reduced stress, improved immune response, lower cardiovascular risk and better mental health outcomes**, underpinned by measurable changes in biological systems such as cortisol regulation and inflammation.⁷

For adults, looking at artwork and listening to music prior to surgery reduces stress levels – **reducing the need for anti-anxiety medications, sedatives and pain medications like opioids**. The arts have been shown to be more effective for peri-operative anxiety than anti-anxiety medications, just cheaper and without side effects.

In addition, arts participation is associated with greater likelihood of engaging in **other health-promoting behaviours**, including physical activity and healthy lifestyles, regardless of socioeconomic status.⁷

Crucially, group-based arts activities foster **social inclusion, belonging and community cohesion**, which are key determinants of health and central to reducing inequalities.² These factors align strongly with the Clinical Strategy's emphasis on **community-based care and preventative approaches**.

Implication for Clinical Strategy:

Integrating creative health within community services and self-management pathways can support **population wellbeing, reduce demand on services, and address wider determinants of health**.



Live Borders Arts & Creativity

Performance | Exhibition | Community Arts

Project Description

We create opportunities for people to engage in arts and cultural events in our venues, from the visual, film, dance and theatre. To help foster a stronger sense of community, understanding and belonging through the arts, that will help benefit their physical, mental and overall well-being. To create a robust programme of events that will challenge, engage and inspire our mixed audience.

Project context

Our live events are for new and existing audiences; through our programming we aim to develop performances and themes that will encourage engagement from all our community. Our workshops are being developed to highlight the social and well-being benefits that attending creative events can bring. Alongside offering a chance to engage with professional artists, to see themselves in a creative frame and take ownership of their work that can help build confidence and social resilience. Examples of recent events include **Untold Stories: Tales from the Town** a theatre project based in Heart of Hawick, that used local history stories to inspire stage performances, giving participants the chance to write and act out imagined and real tales from Hawick's heritage. "We hope to reflect Hawick's culture, history and heritage through a series of short plays and monologues based around the imagined stories of real people and real buildings in the town." Warm-up activities designed to build practical skills, confidence, and artistic vision made up the start of the project before working towards the final showcase of short performances — written, directed, and performed by the participants. **'heART nights'** is a visual art program that offers adults opportunities to explore a range of creative techniques, including printmaking, soft pastels, collage and painting delivered by a practising artist in a relaxed social environment to promote well-being through connection and community links.

Project impact

Our various projects all have the participants well-being at their core, with the intention of developing, encouraging and fostering through good, meaningful practice. Feedback from sessions mention the social elements of reducing isolation and fostering social interaction. Participants highlighted the value of connecting with others in a relaxed, welcoming setting:

- *"What a good way to meet people."*
- *"Everyone was really friendly and there was no pressure."*
- *"I feel better just getting out of the house"*

This indicates that the projects are successfully embedding creativity as a meaningful and sustainable part of participants' everyday lives.



Art With Caroline - Chirside Development Group

Community Arts

Project Description

Art classes that enable people to come, join two groups and practice and enjoy various mediums and projects. These are gentle, relaxing and sociable Art classes where people have a chat and a cuppa, unwind and make friends and learn.

Project Context

The classes are held at Chirside Community Centre, in a light and friendly environment, for people from Chirside and the surrounding villages. Materials are provided if people do not have their own. The classes are open to ages from 13 years to 95 plus. Easy access to the room and all abilities welcome.

Project Impact

The art classes have been run by Caroline for over 15 years. Some people who attend are terminally ill, or have mental health problems and find the peace and company they need. Also home schooled children can attend with a parent. There are referrals to the art classes from Social Services. As an added bonus to wellbeing, there is an annual tombola to raise money for a charity that the group chooses - Guide Dogs, Heart Foundation, Borders General Hospital wards, etc. There is also an extended social aspect to the group as they also enjoy a Christmas party together and outdoor get together with food each year and bring their partners / husbands or wives – this allows for wider social connections and friendships to be made.



The Actor's Studio aka Borders Improv

Community Arts | Arts Education | Workshop

Project Description

Keep calm and ...improvise. The Actor's Studio (also known as Borders Improv) is an adult improvisation class for a fun, drop-in, 'no experience needed' and no prep required. The project aims to improve your confidence, your voice, and creative skills in a relaxed and supportive environment. Improvisation can be highly therapeutic. All humans must play - based on the work of Viola Spolin:

"Play touches and stimulates vitality, awakening the whole person - mind, body, intelligence and creativity, spontaneity and intuition."

— Viola Spolin, author of *Improvisation for the Theater*.

Project Context

Adults 16+

Project Impact

Improved wellbeing, a 'switch off' from stressors, confidence building, no lines to learn as it's improv - ideal for older people, those with ASN/Dyslexia, those with memory problems or those just looking to be creative and try out acting skills within the safety of a workshop.

Improvisation is increasingly recognised as a powerful, non-traditional therapeutic tool that can foster mental health by encouraging spontaneity, collaboration, and a "yes, and" mindset. While distinct from formal therapy, it is highly therapeutic in managing anxiety, building confidence, and processing emotions. With Director/Tutor Clare Prenton.

'It's the most fun I've ever had with my clothes on!' (ANONYMOUS PARTICIPANT).



Greener Peebles

Community Gardening | Arts and Craft Skill Shares

Project Description

Gardening is known to be therapeutic, we run a thriving intergenerational community garden which has been highly praised for our activities which support wellbeing. Our main activity is weekly gardening sessions on Tuesdays and Fridays, volunteers join us for gardening, horticulture and biodiversity tasks. In addition to community gardening, we offer a monthly skill share session on a variety of topics. Recently, gardening, crafting with natural items and artwork have been popular, and inspiring for our organisation to see the benefits which offering these activities have on our volunteers and beneficiaries.

Project Context

The garden is located in Peebles, Scottish Borders, and is open to anyone who wants to come along and take part.

Project Impact

Quote from natural craft workshop participant: *"That was honestly the best day I've had in a very long time after a prolonged period of stress and ill-health. I felt calm, connected and proud having learned a new skill. The coiled baskets workshop was wonderful and the positive benefits have extended beyond the day itself as I've been continuing the craft at home and now sharing with friends. It's brought me a lot of pleasure. What a wonderful, creative and relaxed way to spend time in our beautiful community garden."*

Since participating in community garden activities, I feel...

- More involved in something meaningful in my community – 91%
- More connected to the natural environment – 89%
- More supported to try new activities – 88%
- I have more opportunities to learn new skills – 87%
- Harvests improve my access to fresh food – 83%
- I have more opportunities to be physically active – 80%

Survey Data, collated February 2026.



At Birkhill House

Community Arts | Arts Education

Project Description

Through a mixture of creative workshops and events, animal assisted activities and horticultural opportunities, At Birkhill House CIC aims to improve mental and wellbeing in the Scottish Borders. The combination of our renovated crafting workshop spaces, natural dye garden, Fleece & Fibre Hub, outdoor learning area and paddocks offers a holistic experience rich in therapeutic benefit.

Project Context

Activities at Birkhill House are suitable for all ages and abilities. The environment is a part of the offering and for that reason we rarely lead activities on an outreach basis.

Project Impact

Natural dye garden programme 2022-23, designed with the Scottish Borders Rape Crisis Centre

Over half of participants reported that they felt less isolated, three quarters felt less stressed and anxious and 100 per cent said they felt more confident because of time spent working on the project at Birkhill. The group still meets once a month on their own steam to do creative projects together.

Makers Group (skills development, community building and breaking down social isolation).

Comment from one participant: *"I am certain that the boost to my confidence from attending the Maker's Group has spilled over into other areas of my life. It has helped me create and hold boundaries in my personal life, something that I previously struggled with, and which has helped improve my quality of life and overall wellbeing."*

One-to-one wellbeing sessions

Feedback from the parent of a young person: *"Birkhill House has made a profound difference to my young person, who is diagnosed with Autism and has a variety of additional needs. It is no exaggeration to say that this service has been the single most important activity in recovery from depression and self-harm; supporting his social inclusion, developing anxiety management strategies, encouraging gentle exposure to real life opportunities and nurturing a natural talent for animal care and interest in craft skills."*



BIRCHWOOD - Borders in Recovery

Arts and Health practice | Community Arts

Project Description

Birchwood is the Borders in Recovery Creative Health project, delivered within a lived experience recovery community. Birchwood works alongside local partners and community organisations to widen access to arts and wellbeing activities for people who may face barriers to participation. A key aspect is creating welcoming peer spaces where creativity becomes a shared experience with the emphasis on participation, self-expression and wellbeing rather than artistic achievement.

Project Context

Birchwood is aimed at adults aged 16+ across the Scottish Borders who may be experiencing poor mental health, substance use issues, trauma, social isolation, neurodivergence, involvement with justice services. Many participants have experienced stigma, exclusion or difficulty accessing traditional services. Birchwood was developed in response to the growing need for non-clinical, community-based wellbeing opportunities that support emotional expression, connection and personal growth through creativity.

Project Impact

Birchwood has helped participants improve confidence, reduce isolation and develop healthier ways of expressing emotions and managing wellbeing. Participants have reported that creative activities have helped them feel calmer, more connected and more hopeful about the future. The project has also created opportunities for peer connection and belonging, with many participants describing the space as somewhere they feel accepted, safe and able to be themselves without judgement.

Feedback from participants highlights the emotional and social value of the project:

- *“Borders in Recovery means so much to me and my recovery from lifelong mental ill health and alcohol use. This fills me with hope. Hope is the foundation stone of life.”*
- *“You’s have been my saviour... seeing some of yous at the groups has helped me move forward and conquer most of my social anxiety.”*
- *“The sense of community here is amazing and uplifting. So proud to be part of this amazing organisation.”*

The project continues to demonstrate how community wellbeing approaches can strengthen mental health, encourage positive community participation and support long-term recovery journeys.



Artbeat Studios

Community Arts | Service Provider

Project Description

Our principle charitable aims are to improve health and wellbeing through art and creative activities. We support adults from all walks of life to feel good about themselves, be proud of what they've created and find long lasting friendships.

Project Context

We are a registered charity. Artbeat Studios is established to promote the health and wellbeing of those in the community who are socially excluded by reason of physical or learning disability, mental illness, age, poverty or other condition of need. We operate out of Artbeat Studios in Hawick four days a week and provide two-hour sessions for a variety of art and craft activities.

Project Impact

Artbeat Studios has been operational and open for its charitable activities for 25 years, adapting and evolving within the community and wider community. We provide Border wide services as well as support and take part in many other local community events and activities.

An Equality Impact Statement produced 10 years ago produced a Tree of Life that hangs in the studios. Case Studies, feedback questionnaires and powerful testaments revealed that Artbeat is a safe space, stimulating, positive and happy, enabling people to gain confidence and grow socially. It has literally saved lives.

As part of the 25-year celebrations in 2026, a new Tree of Life is being created that is both commemorative as well forward looking as Artbeat Studios has never been needed more in an ever-changing world.



Inspiring Life Festival

Performance | Exhibition | Receptive Art | Arts and Health Practice | Community Arts

Project Description

Inspiring Life Festival is a series of events where health, well-being, mental health awareness, peer support, and the healing power of the Arts come together. We provide workshops, performances, a sound healing chamber, music, dance, community art, story-telling, film, and theatre. On our final day there is a cafe, information stalls, peer support (trained professionals present), and a free performance/sharing in the theatre.

Project Context

Our project coincides with Mental Health Awareness Week, our aim is to reach out to those who are struggling with their mental health and would like to seek activities to improve their wellbeing. In a safe, structured environment, no one should feel out of their depth. We offer conversation, information, signposting, and through our work we challenge stigma. The Inspiring Life Festival mainly takes place in the Eastgate Theatre. For several years we have worked in this location which has already gained a Creating Hope Award. The Eastgate is a place of safety and inclusivity.

Project Impact

It is our hope that we reach out to marginalised groups in our community and reduce social isolation: we work with Nomad Beat (Music for All, Memory Lane Music, drumming), we are offered participation and information from See Me, Andy's Man Club, Borders Recovery Cafe, Grief Cafe. With support from The Eastgate, and all the facilitators of activity workshops (dance led by Sara Boles, Movement for All led by Alex Saunders, performances of plays and film) we can attract over 300 participants during the week. The therapeutic effect of the Arts and participation in activity workshops undoubtedly promotes, self-confidence, physical and mental well-being, inclusion and relaxation. Activities that are good for the soul.....





MEN DONT TALK - a play inspired by men's health and the Scottish Men's Shed movement

Performance | Arts and Health practice | Receptive art

Project Description

Conversations with men in a Borders Men's Shed turned into a professional play which toured nationally with Genesis Productions. Real life experiences inspired three fictional characters in a fictional shed. The project was initially funded by Inspiring Life - The Evie Douglas Memorial Fund and later Duns Play Fest and Creative Scotland.

Project Context

In 2020, Eastgate Theatre Peebles tasked director and writer Clare Prenton to go into her local Men's Shed and talk to a group of men about what the shed means to them. Over 4 x 2 hr sessions, 8hrs worth of spirited and sometimes emotional conversation emerged. During lockdown the play was completed and by 2021 it was performed as a rehearsed reading, script in hand at Eastgate Theatre. In 2022 it was developed by Duns Play Festival in the Scottish Borders. And by 2023 filmed in the shed to attract a producer.

Project Impact

The play deals gently with issues around wellbeing, PTSD, prostate health and suicide prevention using humour and gentle poignancy found in the Peebles & District Men's Shed. The play was well received across Scotland and has had a wide reaching impact. The work was praised in a motion to the Scottish Parliament on the importance of funding Men's Sheds. The play was performed at the Scottish Parliament in September 2024 and then toured 16 venues across Scotland from Hawick to Orkney in partnership with The Scottish Men's Sheds Association, The Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival and Mull Theatre.



HOLDING ON (formerly known as ANDYS MAN CLUB PLAY)

Performance | Arts and Health practice | Receptive art

Project Description

‘Holding On’ is a sister project to Men Don’t Talk and the work of local director and writer Clare Prenton. This production is much more explicitly about suicide prevention and was initially funded by Inspiring Life - The Evie Douglas Memorial Fund and later Duns Play Fest and Creative Scotland. Holding On is a six man musical about the lived experiences of six men who attend an Andy’s Man Club.

Project Context

Conversations on a Monday night with men from Andy’s Man Club, Galashiels, inspired a fictional Andy’s Man Club. Andy’s Man Club is a suicide prevention charity, offering free peer-to-peer support groups across the UK. Holding On charts the origin story of the charity and the need for connection. Beginning life at Duns Play Fest in 2024, it has undergone several developments and is ready for the stage. The musical had a £40k development process at Heart of Hawick / funded by Creative Scotland in 2025 and is currently seeking partners for a UK tour. Suicide Prevention Scotland has had involvement with the development.

Project Impact

Holding On has been described as ‘powerful’ and ‘commercial’. By bringing a fictional Andy’s Man Club to the stage, Holding On is helping to end stigma surrounding men’s mental health and encourage men to realise that it’s ok to talk, helping them through the power of conversation.



Health in Harmony Choir

Arts and Health Practice | Community Arts

Project Description

The Health in Harmony Choir was set up in 2017 for staff in the Health and Social Care Partnership, meeting weekly to practice and performing 2-3 times a year – including at the Scottish Parliament building for the 75th birthday celebrations for the NHS.

Project Context

The context for setting up the choir was in relation to staff wellbeing and the recognition of concerns around high levels of stress and anxiety and the potential for burnout. It is aimed at all staff in the partnership organisations, both current and retired.

Project Impact

An evaluation carried out in 2022 revealed that choir attendees rated the choir at 4.70 out of 5 for supporting their wellbeing, with friendship and connection being by far the most common wellbeing benefit identified, followed by distraction, reducing stress and a sense of community. Comments from members about the impact of the choir on their health and wellbeing included the following:

- *“Singing is a great stress reliever”*
- *“Hearing our music after we practice is a delight. It calms me from thinking of all the pressures of work and life”*
- *“Takes my mind off all the other stress going on in my life”*
- *“It really gives me an endorphin rush, even after a long day of work, its well with going and feeling so great afterwards”*
- *“By enabling members of all musical abilities and occupations to become one voice, and giving joy to others, sometimes moving them to tears, gives me a sense of worth and purpose”*
- *“It is my ‘me time’ – a couple of hours in the week when I forget about work and family stresses.”*
- *“Being part of something and feeling like I belong!”*
- *“All round brilliant for both physical and mental health and well-being”*



'How to let laughter light up your life' - Live Borders Arts & Creativity and Heart of Hawick

Arts and Health | Performance | Community Arts

Project Description

'How to let laughter light up your life' was a free workshop with the Scottish comedian Jojo Sutherland at Heart of Hawick as part of the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival, where participants learned the skills to find the funny in whatever challenges they are facing.

Project Context

Social prescribing people onto comedy courses has become a popular creative wellbeing option to support mental health, confidence and social interaction in recent years. This can include stand-up performances and workshops designed to connect lonely, isolated, and vulnerable individuals with their communities. This taster session was designed to introduce people to the basic tools to understand how humour can be used to explore and talk about bad experiences. Participants were guided through a series of group exercises, then encouraged to stand on the stage and talk for just a minute try out what they had learned.

Project Impact

Quotes from participants:

"The reason I signed up for the event was to push myself out of my comfort zone and tackle anxiety head on. My experience far exceeded any expectations; I found the evening very informative and engaging."

"Standing in front of strangers was terrifying, but on reflection it has made me think if I can sign up for that, negotiate the doubts, fear, make an absolute fool of myself and come out of the other side unscathed, I'm capable of trying more new things without taking myself too seriously!"

"I feel that it really showed that everybody has got it the confidence to do something when somebody believes that they can do it. Being able to get up and speak in front of people is very satisfying, when you do it, you feel really proud of yourself and really pleased. "



The Well Good Art Sessions

Arts and Health Practice | Community Arts

Project Description

For the last three years Transform Arts has delivered courses (The Well Good Art Sessions) independently and in partnership with Health in Mind. These courses have covered printmaking, painting, drawing, mosaic and more, teaching people techniques using good quality artists materials as well as offering a safe and supported space for those who need it in order to take part.

Project Context

The Well Good Art Sessions have mainly been in Galashiels but also other towns in the Borders as taster sessions. The sessions have been aimed at people (adults) who are seeing more ways to improve their mental health and wellbeing. They are very open and welcoming to all.

Project Impact

Increased social confidence and enjoyment in the company of others. Learning new skills, increased hope and ambition, increased ability to cope with and overcome challenges and the unexpected, people moving on in their life or trying new things, people better able to self manage their mental health, bridging between our group and the wider arts community involving more people in the arts who may not otherwise so they can benefit.



Hope & Ponies (pictured); Of Time and Place – Two Destination Language

Performance | Exhibition | Community Arts

Project Description

HOPE & PONIES is a touring installation of banners with messages of hope. Visitors can watch a film about the artists' experiences of hope, read a curated selection of books on solutions to some of the sociopolitical issues facing our society, and sit with the artists to talk and make more banners, including contributing their own designs and texts. OF TIME AND PLACE visits people in rural communities, to discover their ideas about home: what has brought them to live where they do, and how they perceive the place they call home. Their stories -- of love, work, homes shaped with deliberation and care, the accidents which can shape life -- become video portraits, shared at the end of our stay in a community event with food and drink: a celebration of the place and its people.

Project Context

HOPE & PONIES works with visitors to the galleries and libraries in which it is programmed, usually because the programmer feels an affinity with the idea of a factory of hope! OF TIME AND PLACE visits settlements where a resident invites us to work in their community, building a picture of the nation's diverse rural identities.

Project Impact

These projects offer space for conversation in which people can share (often, but not always, difficult) experiences and utilise creative practices to express themselves. Participants have reported increased confidence in themselves and how interesting they are to others; increased optimism about their ability to deal with and even influence large-scale problems in the world; strengthened pride in themselves and their communities. Participants often report that they have spoken about something important to them for the first time, or the first time outside their families, and that they value that opportunity.



Remembering Together: Covid 19 memorial

Community Arts

Project Description

Remembering Together is the Scottish Borders' covid memorial, co-created by Two Destination Language with people from across the region. Participants shared what mattered to them about the pandemic: memories, changes, aspirations; people, landscapes, feelings. They chose the form of a new tartan design to represent a regional identity, created with colours and pattern in which various different kinds of significance were seen by participants.

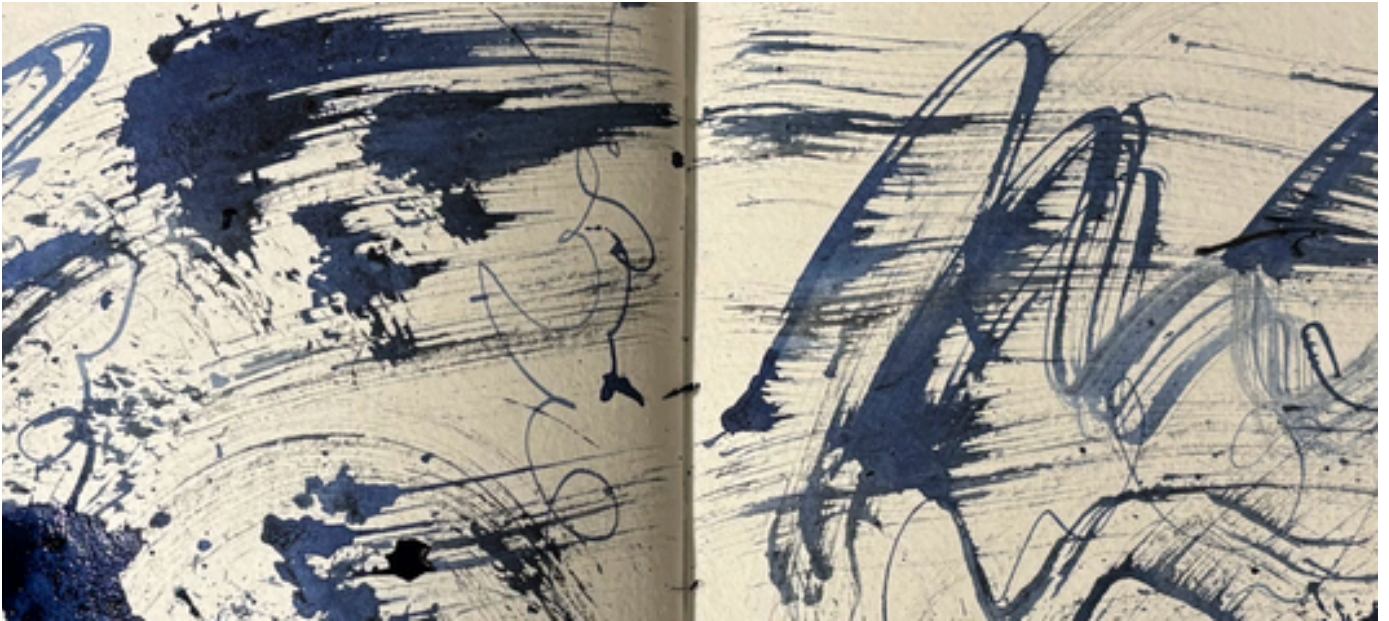
Project Context

Remembering Together was a Scotland-wide project co-creating memorials which honoured the people we lost, marked what had been lost and changed in our lives, and preserved the best of what we learned and created together during the Covid pandemic. Two Destination Language led the project in the Borders, working with a steering group including representatives of Borders Care Voice, NHS Borders, Borders Community Action and local creatives.

Project Impact

Emotionally, people shared loss and grief, while others spoke of hope and new-forged community. Some participants noted they were speaking for the first time about experiences they had not felt able to share even with close friends or family. The challenges of isolation came up often, not just for those living alone but also for those who gave birth or experienced other milestones they couldn't share. Guilt was also a frequent topic, as people wished they had been able to do more.

Woven for the first time in spring 2024, pieces of the new tartan were distributed to community spaces of all kinds across the Borders. These are lasting markers of the full range of events and emotions which people experienced, set in the places and events where communities gather.



Vicky Inam Community Wellbeing

Arts Therapies | Community Arts

Project Description

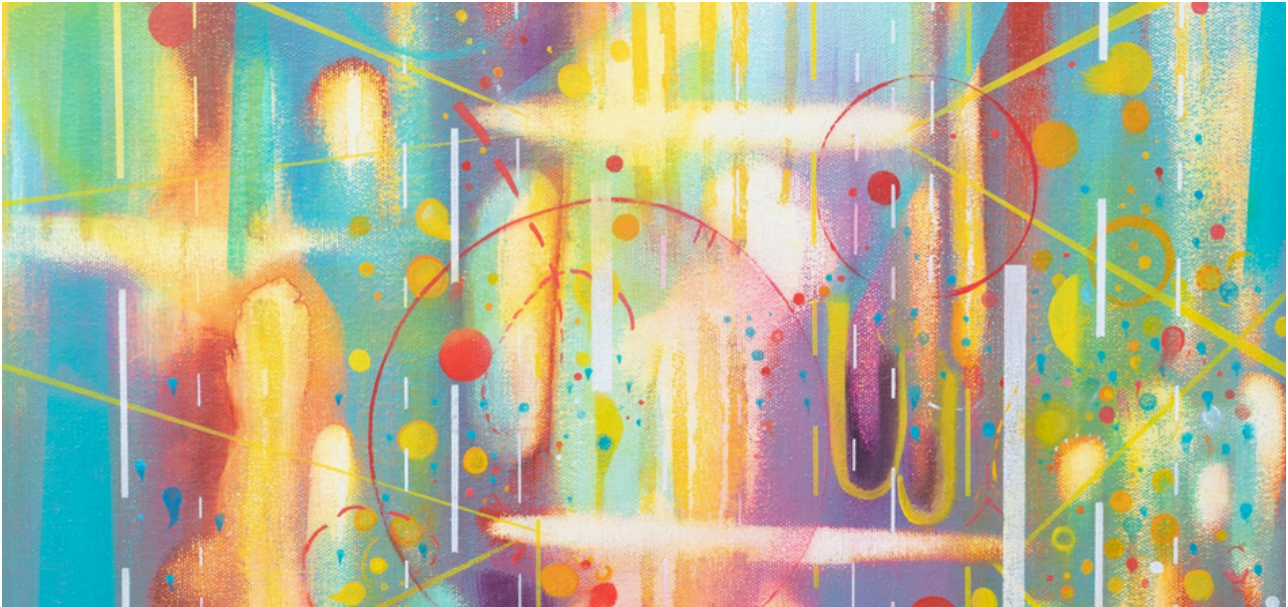
Vicky is a Hawick-based HCPC registered drama therapist offering community-based creative wellbeing workshops and sessions in collaboration with third sector organisations and directly within the community. Her practice combines mindfulness meditation, storytelling, arts & crafts and reflective processes to create spaces where people can slow down, reconnect with themselves. Also facilitates, wellbeing sessions for asylum-experienced, refugee and migrant women, as well as drama workshops for young people and online workshops, creating accessible creative wellbeing spaces for people joining from across the UK and internationally.

Project Context

The work recognises that many people are living with the ongoing stress of our times: the cost of living crisis, rising social isolation, and wider experiences of change and uncertainty shaped by global events. This includes people with mental health or neurodivergent diagnoses, those in clinical treatment, people navigating the asylum system and family separation, and those who are simply finding life increasingly difficult to manage.

Project Impact

Feedback consistently highlights that the workshops provide a welcoming, flexible and non-judgemental creative space that supports participants to feel calmer, less stressed and less alone. Sessions are valued as gentle, accessible opportunities for mindfulness, self-expression and reflection, helping people feel more grounded and in touch with themselves. The atmosphere encourages deep listening and self-discovery, leading to reported improvements in wellbeing, confidence, resilience and connection with others.



Art Psychotherapy in the NHS Borders Community Rehabilitation Team

Arts Therapies

Project Description

Art psychotherapy is provided within the NHS Borders Community Rehabilitation Team, a multidisciplinary service that works collaboratively to support adults with severe mental health conditions to live as independently as possible.

Project Context

Art psychotherapy is a form of psychotherapy that uses art making as the main way to communicate and explore experiences. Sessions may include both art making and talking and can help people express thoughts and feelings that are hard to put into words. Within mental health rehabilitation, art psychotherapy supports people living with long-term and complex mental health conditions, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Some people are referred to explore specific issues, while others benefit from being alongside another person and forming a relationship through art making together. Art psychotherapy can be particularly helpful when working with trauma, as it allows difficult experiences to be expressed visually. No artistic skill is needed, and people can keep their artwork when sessions end, which can support self-confidence.

Project Impact

Having art psychotherapy within the Community Rehabilitation Team allows people who may struggle to engage with services to access weekly, creative therapeutic support. It has helped individuals build independence, confidence, self-esteem, resilience, and reduce isolation through a supportive therapeutic relationship. Art psychotherapy also helps people develop skills they can use beyond the therapy space, supporting their personal goals and recovery. Increasing a person's resilience through safe, creative psychotherapy can mean that engaging in new and fulfilling aspects of life are more possible.

Ageing Well

The importance of creativity and engaging with the arts does not diminish as we grow older. On the contrary, arts participation provides a vital opportunity for us to live a full and flourishing life and to stay connected with our community.

Whether through a dance class, a visiting choir to a care home, or a trip to the theatre, the arts can support our social connections, cognitive function and physical well-being, all of which can help to combat frailty and loneliness.

Over recent years, there has also been increasing evidence of the way in which the arts can support people who are living with dementia and their carers. For example, music can support well-being by reducing agitation and distress and therefore lessen the need for medication. Playlists of meaningful music can provide a soundtrack to our lives, helping us to stay connected to the uniqueness of we are and to the people and places who have shaped our lives.

As we age, the arts have an essential role to play in maintaining and promoting our health and wellbeing

NHS Borders prioritises supporting people to **age well, maintain independence and reduce frailty**, with a focus on community-based support.¹ Arts engagement is an important contributor to these outcomes.

Fancourt highlights that long-term engagement in the arts supports **cognitive resilience and brain health**, helping to protect against age-related cognitive decline and dementia.³

There is strong evidence that arts-based interventions can improve outcomes for people living with dementia. Studies show that music, visual arts and dance can **reduce agitation, improve mood, enhance cognitive function and increase social interaction**, and may reduce reliance on medication.¹⁰

Engagement in creative activity also supports **social connection and reduces loneliness**, both of which are key risk factors for poor health outcomes in older adults.³ Participation in arts and cultural activities has been linked to reduced risk of **frailty and social isolation**, contributing to healthier ageing trajectories.

Implication for Clinical Strategy:

Developing arts-based interventions within community and care settings supports **healthy ageing, dementia care and prevention of frailty**, aligning with strategic priorities to shift care closer to home.



Dragonfly Productions – The Memory Jar

Community Arts | Arts Education | Workshop

Project Description

The Memory Jar is a warm, imaginative drama workshop programme for retired people living in all residential settings, theatres, libraries, community groups and social programmes, creating original theatre from real lived experience and memoir.

Led by an experienced facilitator and writer, each project begins with music to spark conversation, memory, and connection. From these conversations, an actor/writer creates original monologues and short scenes rooted in real lived experience, with participants recognised throughout as co-creators of the work.

As the weeks progress, a professional creative team — a writer and two actors — join the process, allowing participants to see their memories transformed into drama. The process culminates in a relaxed, celebratory sharing of scripts read *script in hand* for friends, relatives, and invited guests, followed by tea and biscuits and informal discussion.

Project Context

Adults 55+, residential settings, nursing homes, or arts centres.

Project Impact

Improved wellbeing, creativity, confidence building, being 'seen'. Flexible commitment level for participants depending on capacity and ability to join in. Chats about their past become stories written by a professional playwright, then acted out by professional actors.

Quotes:

- *"How you remembered everything I said and created something out of it is incredible..."* Anne, a retired nurse and participant, Peebles
- *"It was fantastic, well done for creating such amazing, emotional and funny pieces from the memories of our tenants. They loved it."* Teresa - Riverside Flats - Eildon Housing, Peebles
- *"Still very grateful to you for all you put in to the amazing drama workshops in the Spring... We really, really enjoyed the time you spent with us."* Gemma, Peebles Nursing Home



Musical Memories

Singing Together | Community Arts

Project Description

A group of volunteer musicians and singers provide the opportunity for people with dementia, along with their carers, to come together to share music and singing. The group has been running for three years and uses sets of words to songs that are well known and loved. Requests from participants for new songs is encouraged and this makes it much more personal for them. Often the songs spark memories of past times and can lead to group reminiscences. Singing together is known to be good for mental health. Physically singing supports good breathing.

Project Context

The aim of the group was to tackle isolation for both the person with dementia and the carer. The group meets at Langlee Community Centre twice a month on Friday mornings. The centre has good disabled access and refreshment is provided part way through. As the sessions are free to those coming along cost is no barrier to attendance.

Project Impact

Since the sessions began in 2023 the number of volunteers and participants has increased and the aim of tackling social isolation has been achieved. Carers with longer experience pass on hints and tips in a relaxed atmosphere. New friendships have been created with shared transport to the venue. One lady made her way to Langlee on the bus for her first session which she enjoyed so much she wanted to come again. This led her husband to join us and he now brings his ukulele and helps form part of the resident 'band'.

Research in 2025 captured feedback from the group. One carer reported that his mum came alive in the sessions. There are carers who continue to attend even though their loved one is in residential care. They find it supportive to continue access to the singing.

Some songs have proved to be especially useful. The repeated use of some songs helps the participants to feel grounded. Participants react to songs in different ways but one song prompts one man to react to the rhythm of a tune, even though he rarely sings any words.



Dovecot Singers

Arts Therapies | Arts and Health Practice | Community Arts

Project Description

Dovecot Singers is a weekly, free to attend dementia inclusive singing group for those with a diagnosis of dementia or other life-limiting condition. The group is led by a Health and Care Professions Council regulated Music Therapist.

Project Context

This group is for people living with dementia or other life-limiting conditions (e.g. Parkinson's Disease, Cancer, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) or those who are socially isolated. The group meets weekly at Dovecot Court in Peebles and is open to residents and the general public, including family members and carers. It is one of only two dementia inclusive singing groups in the Scottish Borders (as listed on Luminare Scotland's Dementia Inclusive Singing Network website). The group focuses on relaxation, breathing and vocal exercises to help maintain a strong voice, reduce anxiety, build confidence and encourage social interaction.

Project Impact

- Mental stimulation
- Physical activity (gentle warm-up exercises)
- Social interaction to combat isolation
- Memory stimulation and reminiscing
- Stress reduction and relaxation



Taiji Qigong Meditation: Qigong in the Borders

Arts and Health Practice

Project Description

Qigong is a form of body work and meditation training through gentle flowing movements. The movements, while looking simple and soft, also function as a deep workout for the whole body without sweating and straining. Patterns of rhythmic flowing movements, and tuning-in to the body, opens up space for full, deep breathing which leads the mind into a quiet, calm place. Qigong helps protect the body against the worst effects of ageing. It profoundly helps stressed people find inner calm, gentle relief. The emphasis on easy, smooth, deep breathing is particularly supportive to people who suffer from asthma or COPD.

Project Context

The classes are available to people of any age who want to improve their balance, flexibility, strength and mental clarity. Kelso, Smailholm and Ettrick Bridge areas.

Project Impact

Regular attendees see a big improvement in their flexibility, scope of movement and general balance. Many report enjoying more calmness and clarity of mind, better mood patterns and sleep quality. Meeting weekly with other people, to enjoy practicing together is a wonderful way to maintain social contact and feel supported.



Music Therapy pilot at DME (Dept of Medicine for the Elderly wards)

Arts Therapies

Project Description

This was an opportunity to bring music therapy into an acute medical ward in the Borders General Hospital. By introducing a creative modality such as music making and listening, the broad aims were to - provide specialist music therapy interventions alongside patients, families and carers, to support healthcare staff in incorporating music in their practice, to promote staff wellbeing and to enhance the environment and patient experience

Project Context

The project was aimed primarily at patients in acute medical wards for older adults. Initially this included two separate wards, 12 and 14. Much of the work involved bringing music to people's bedsides, playing alongside and involving fellow patients. Picture a 6-bed bay with little opportunity for privacy and where people become withdrawn, isolated and deconditioned. At other times I saw people in side rooms for 1:1 work, this could be musical play, listening to music or talking. In ward 12 we had a weekly open group when any patient on the ward was welcome to come along, with family members, too.

Project Impact

Music and song helped to stimulate interaction and establish an improved sense of self and wellbeing, People expressed feeling valued and useful. Families commented on improved mood and presentation. Staff said the atmosphere in the ward was more welcoming, fun and sociable when music was present. Music and song provided a way for people to feel engaged with each other, reducing isolation, agitation and distress. Music Therapy became embedded in the Multi-Disciplinary Team and collaborative work with other health professionals supported psychological and physical preparation for discharge.

Quote from staff member - "There has also been a real change in the feel of the ward on Tuesdays and Fridays with a definite reduction in the feeling of stress, both among patients and staff. This is in part due to having music on the ward, which is lovely for the staff, as well as seeing the joy that it brings to patients, but also because the music therapist spends time with patients which then alleviates some of the pressure from the nursing staff"

Care Around Dying

Creativity is a profoundly important part of what it is to be human and therefore access to the arts is essential at the end of our life.

When words are not enough, the use of expressive arts can allow people and families to express feelings of grief, identity, and love.

Arts participation has been linked to lower levels of fatigue and improved well-being for people who are receiving palliative care.

The arts also play an important role in supporting the well-being of staff in healthcare contexts. Arts used in the context of therapy can help to alleviate physical symptoms and decrease pain, as well as assisting with troubled breathing and regulating heart rate.

From a spiritual perspective, having access to arts-based interventions can provide comfort and meaning at the end of life. Similarly, artwork, memory boxes, and physical mementos can give bereaved families cherished, tangible reminders of their loved ones.

Integration of creative practices plays an essential part in care around dying

The Clinical Strategy emphasises the importance of **person-centred, compassionate care**, particularly at the end of life.¹ Creative health approaches are increasingly recognised as supporting this aim.

Arts-based interventions in palliative care have been shown to improve **quality of life, reduce fatigue and support emotional and psychological wellbeing**.¹¹ Creative expression enables individuals to process complex emotions and maintain identity when verbal communication may be limited.

Evidence also suggests that arts therapies can contribute to **symptom management**, including reduced pain, improved breathing and enhanced physiological regulation.¹¹ Fancourt's work further highlights the role of arts engagement in reducing stress and supporting coping during serious illness.¹²

Creative practices such as music, storytelling and artwork also support **legacy-building and bereavement**, providing meaningful connections for families.

The WHO review confirms that the arts have a role in **supporting end-of-life care**, contributing to holistic, person-centred approaches.²

Implication for Clinical Strategy:

Integrating arts into palliative care supports **dignity, compassion and holistic wellbeing**, enhancing both patient and family experience in line with high-quality end-of-life care.

References

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APPENDIX

Thank you to all of the groups and organisations that contributed to this report.

In order of appearance:

Arts Therapies Service – [NHS Borders](#)

Borders Youth Theatre - [Borders Youth Theatre - About Us](#)

Eat Sleep Ride - [Eat Sleep Ride](#)

Live Borders Arts Development Team - [Arts Development - Enjoy Great Days - Live Borders UK](#)

Art With Caroline – Chirnside Development Group - [Home](#) | [Chirnside C C](#)

The Actor’s Studio aka Borders Improv – [The Actor’s Studio Facebook page](#)

Greener Peebles - [Greener Peebles](#)

At Birkhill House - [At Birkhill House CIC](#)

Borders in Recovery - [Borders in Recovery — Peer-Led Recovery Community in the Scottish Borders](#)

Artbeat Studios - [Facebook](#)

Inspiring Life Festival - [Inspiring Life – Evie Douglas Memorial Fund](#)

Men Don’t Talk, Holding On and The Memory Jar - [Clare Prenton Theatre Director](#) | [Shakespeare Directors](#) | [UK](#)

Health in Harmony Choir - [Health in Harmony](#)

Well Good Art Sessions - [Sustainable Art and Craft](#) | [TransformArtsCIC](#) | [Selkirk](#)

Two Destination Language - [Two Destination Language](#)

Vicky Inam Community Wellbeing - [Vicky Inam](#)

Musical Memories - Rdmcollin@yahoo.co.uk

Dovecot Singers - [Facebook](#)

Qigong in the Borders - [Facebook](#)