

artists practising well

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There is growing reliable research evidence which supports the claim that the arts are positive for our health and wellbeing. With a clear emphasis on benefits to participants, research reports and good practice guides help with planning and delivery of arts initiatives. This raises a question about how creative practitioners are supported to deliver this work.

Research Questions

- What is the current state of affective support for artists working in health and wellbeing contexts?
- What kinds of affective support could be most useful for creative practitioners working in arts for health and wellbeing?
- Is there a common understanding of what good practitioner support looks like in participatory arts for/in health and wellbeing?

Research Ambitions

- To gather the support experiences of practitioners: what they receive now, what they do for themselves and what they would like in the future.
- To seek organisational perspectives about affective support and explore what other factors may be in play when researching support for artists, including the impact of the gig economy and contract set up.
- To draw attention to what might be in the longer term landscape for arts for health, and within that focus on what artists need in order to do their best work.

Affective support can be used to both protect the wellbeing of creative practitioners and contribute to the best quality provision for participants. The report has been prepared with a wide readership in mind: creative practitioners, arts commissioners and organisational leaders, funders and policy makers.

This 3 month research project contributes to the field of cultural leadership. Balancing academic rigour and pragmatism in terms of time constraints led to a research design of a literature review, online survey for practitioners and series of semi structured interviews with individuals from policy, funding, cultural leadership and delivery.

The Literature Review maps the current context of arts in health and wellbeing in current academic research and practitioner guidance. It looks at other factors including work management, the gig economy, practitioner wellbeing and reflective practice. The practice of 'artist as leader', and working in non arts contexts are also explored.

The data and comments from the online survey is discussed under five headings:

- The territory
- Employment status
- The vocabulary of support
- Models of support
- The support conversation

The Territory explores intentions and motivations, finding that creative practitioners want to work as artists. Organisational leaders are clear that the work is firmly situated within art and artistic experience.

Employment status shows there is support across all types of employment, but it was inconsistent; with some feeling supported only some of the time or not at all. Whatever the employment status, creative practitioners need to be able to access affective support, either through provision from the commissioner, or through a surcharge paid on top of artists fees.

The Vocabulary of Support reflects upon the terms used by survey respondents. Establishing common understanding of support terms would aid future conversations between creative practitioners and commissioners.

Models of support explores the gap between what was offered and what respondents would like, and a re-active approach to support provision from some commissioners. A 'menu of support' could facilitate dialogue between practitioner and commissioner about support options, subject to personal preference and context of work.

The Support Conversation explores what practitioners need to do their best work, and where the responsibility for support sits. Co-production, with joint responsibility, would ensure the best work.

The landscape of affective support for creative practitioners is mixed, with some receiving good support, while others aren't getting enough or any. There are many affective support activities from which to draw up a support menu, which when combined with co-production, joint responsibility and shared dialogue will strengthen practice in arts for health and wellbeing. Given its potential for growth, this approach is both common sense and forward thinking.

The report recommends:

Conversation

Creative Practitioners and Commissioners have equal responsibility to initiate conversations about affective support, reaching agreement about what support is being provided and by whom, at what time and in what form. The Support discussion needs to be on the agenda for all stakeholders as early as possible in the project inception process.

Co-production

Artists need to be at the table in arts for health and wellbeing organisations, for project development discussions and when funding decisions, bids and policies are made and strategies explored, developed and written.

Funding

Affective support needs to be funded in both freelance and employed working. This could be either through provision offered and paid for via the commissioner, or it being recognised as a legitimate cost included in budgets and tenders submitted by artists for health and wellbeing work. Funders and Commissioners should recognise that these 'overheads' are necessary.

Leadership

Leadership development programmes need to view creative practitioners as artist leaders, supporting their skill development in acting as sector representatives. Further, programmes should work to ensure all leaders, and their teams, understand the importance of support and options available.

Peer to Peer Learning

Supporting Peer networks which recognise different levels of experience, in addition to work in specific sector contexts - for example Hospitals, Care Homes and Social Prescribing - would help practitioners to build self supporting structures for the work they do. Funders need to recognise the complexity and offer appropriate budget support.

Recognition

Creative Practitioners working in Health and Wellbeing contexts want to work as artists, and need to have their work acknowledged and valued.

Support Menu and Vocabulary

Developing a support menu, and a common understanding of the different types and models of affective support and reflective practice, will aid those already working in health and wellbeing contexts, and those interested in developing this work in the future. The support menu can be used to facilitate productive discussions between creative practitioners, organisations, funders and policy makers about support relevant to context, duration and nature of the work; as well as individual preferences.