

Creative Health Policy Guidance

Summary

Creative health is increasingly being accepted into mainstream health practices, in the NHS and elsewhere. It is an approach by which people are recommended programmes of creative activity as a treatment for certain mental and physical health concerns. Recommending patients to such programmes is usually referred to as social prescribing, and there are 3500 social prescription link workers already working in NHS GP surgeries. These link workers adopt a holistic, person-specific approach to connecting patients with the right creative health programmes. An NHS report into overprescription identified social prescription as a major tool in reducing the amount of people dependent on medication. It also suggested that whilst medicine often resolves symptoms, creative health is more likely to tackle the underlying causes of many conditions.

Just as the NHS have moved toward creative approaches to healthcare, so have Arts Council England moved toward healthcare applications for creativity. In a 2022 report, they promise to 'promote creative health as a fundamental part of living well, for individual lives, in communities, and globally'. The Arts Council in Wales have already signed a memorandum of understanding with the Welsh NHS Confederation, confirming that creative health will be integrated into Welsh healthcare systems. Already, they have organised projects with outside bodies like the Welsh National Opera. These successes in Wales provide excellent evidence for policy briefs on creative health, and there are many statements from governmental bodies suggesting that creative health will be important in the coming years. Now is then an excellent time to start developing a network of fellow stakeholders and policy makers, so that you can exert influence on the relevant policies that are sure to develop.

Key Points

Benefits physical and mental health.

Provides purpose, community, expression and self-empowerment. Various benefits also to physical health: Singing can help with COPD, asthma, long COVID; music can slow cognitive decline; dance helps with mobility.

Preventative, helps reduce surgery, hospitalisation, and drug prescription.

Early intervention prevents expensive procedures and prescriptions, as well as lightening the strain on NHS services.

Challenges

Access to the arts is unequal. These inequalities may be reiterated as health inequalities.

Any work undertaken in this field must take note of current efforts from bodies like the DCMS toward equality in arts access.

Requires joined up approach across sectors and scales

Integrated Care Systems are already in place to help with this. Likewise, several charities and membership organisations connect stakeholders.

Mechanisms by which creativity benefits health are varied and complex.

Often, a person-specific approach is required. This aligns, though, with the NHS' long-term plan. Moreover, 3500 social-prescribing link workers already work in UK GP surgeries.

Creative health success with NHS Wales

In 2018, Arts Council Wales (ACW) and the Welsh NHS Confederation signed a Memorandum of Understanding committing to the introduction of an Arts and Health Coordinator in each of Wales' regional health boards. Jointly funded by ACW and their respective NHS board, these coordinators are given powers to arrange creative health interventions working with partners across the healthcare and creative sectors. Projects have included collaboration with the Welsh National Opera on singing and breathing techniques to support long-COVID recovery; the integration of parent-child artistic collaboration into child psychology practice; and 'Dance to health' groups that aid in fall-prevention for vulnerable adults.

A 'successful and relatively low-cost intervention in stimulating and supporting the role of the arts in achieving positive health and wellbeing outcomes'.

- [Evaluation of the Arts and Health Coordinator Capacity Building Programme.](#)

Combined Authorities: Greater Manchester

In 2022, the Greater Manchester Integrated Care Partnership published its Creative Health Strategy, which was then integrated into the GM Joint Forward Plan for 2023-2028. The integration of the strategy makes creative health a priority across all local government bodies, the regional ICS, as well as the 35 organisations in Greater Manchester's cultural portfolio. Like in Wales, a grassroots

approach is advocated – with neighbourhoods of 30-50,000 overseen by their own locality board. Priorities include ensuring that clinicians have access to information about creative health best-practices; working alongside higher education to generate research on creative health impact; and delivering creative health interventions 'from gestation to a good death'.

Important Bodies

Department of Health and Social Care

Department for Culture, Media and Sport

Arts Council England

Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Arts Council of Wales

Office for Health Improvement and Disparities

Part of the DHSC. Publish lots of research and useful statistics on health in general and have a particular focus on improving the equality of health access and outcomes.

NHS England (The NHS Commissioning Board)

Previously responsible for the NHS in England. Recently dissolved into the DHSC.

NHS Scotland

NHS Wales

Health and Social Care (HSC) Northern Ireland

Government healthcare provision in Northern Ireland. Is structured differently from the NHS in that medical and social care are under the same organisation.

Care Quality Commission

Independent regulator of health and social care in England. Publishes reports on the state and quality of care services, responses to surveys of people accessing NHS services, and other useful findings.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

Public body providing national guidance and advice on improving health and social care.

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Creative Health

Launched on 26 November 2024 to take over from the APPG on Arts, Health, and Wellbeing, formed in 2014.

The National Lottery Community Fund

Awards money to community projects across the UK. Often involved in funding creative health initiatives.

The National Academy for Social Prescribing

Charity championing social prescribing in the UK. Publish lots of research on all aspects of social prescribing, including particularly useful evidence reviews. Connect lots of academics and practitioners, and already do impactful policy work. Also great for keeping track of movement in the field.

National Centre for Creative Health

A smaller charity, but focussed on creative health. Are currently working toward establishing a national infrastructure for creative health delivery. Support 68 'Creative Health Champions' in senior roles at 30 of 42 ICSs.

Centre for Cultural Value

Research group based at the University of Leeds, focussed on translating cultural research into policy influence. Has lots of useful resources for evidence-based cultural policy work.

Lived Experience Network

Aim to support co-production in social care by amplifying the voices of those with lived experience working in social care. Do not publish material, but instead organise events and conferences, provide training and advice services.

Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance

Free-to-join membership organisation for creative health in England with over 7,000 members. Has a memorandum of understanding with the National Centre for Creative Health and Lived Experience Network. Lists of funding opportunities, collections of research and evidence, lots of useful toolkits.

Useful Documents

Arts Council England, ‘Creative Health and Wellbeing Plan’

Offers a history of ACE’s work on health and wellbeing, and highlights the role of health and wellbeing in their 2020-30 ‘Let’s Create’ strategy.

Adult Social Care Committee, ‘A “gloriously ordinary life”: spotlight on adult social care’

A comprehensive summary of the state of adult social care in the UK, including extant government policy. Covers challenges and proposes changes for a ‘progressive, visible, fairer and kinder system’. Will be useful in identifying where policy interventions can be targeted.

Centre for Cultural Value, ‘Vision Paper: Culture, health and wellbeing’

Overview of research on culture, health and wellbeing. Summarises international academic work on the field.

Department of Health and Social Care, ‘Good for you, good for us, good for everybody: A plan to reduce overprescribing to make patient care better and safer, support the NHS, and reduce carbon emissions’

Summarises causes and consequences of the overprescription of drugs for both patient (physical and mental detriment) and healthcare provider (increased hospital visits, cost, strain). Suggests alternatives to medicine be considered, including social prescribing.

Music for Dementia and UK Music, ‘Power of Music’

Summarises results of a series of roundtables, surveys, and workshops on the relationship between music and wellbeing. Provides case studies for what has worked, as well as practical, evidence-based proposals.

NHS England, ‘Next Steps for Integrating Primary Care: Fuller Stocktake Report’

Comprehensive report on current capabilities, challenges, successes of primary care, which includes recommendations.

World Health Organisation, ‘What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing’

Synthesises 3000+ studies published worldwide on the impact of arts on health and wellbeing. Summarises an enormous evidence base.

Rhys Lawrence, *Government and Music Policy Guidance* (University of Southampton, 27/10/2025), [<https://doi.org/10.5258/SOTON/P1248>].