



Arts therapy leadership activates creative resources which promote individual, team, and community growth in mental health settings

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Introduction

The arts therapies include art, dance-movement, drama and music therapy. These four creative professions use non-verbal psychological therapy to support people to make changes in their lives, which can improve both mental and physical wellbeing. The active ingredient in the arts therapies is the art form. Using play and experimentation, the person accessing arts therapies can: explore choices through artwork, trial a different version of themselves in role-play, find their voice with musical improvisation and learn to listen to their physical needs through movement.

While the arts therapies are a specialist and complex intervention¹ in clinical settings, as an allied health profession, arts therapists have a range of transferrable skills which can be activated in leadership roles to support the equally complex agenda of public health.

Alongside ensuring that the team deliver effective and timely clinical services in secondary mental health settings, my role as Head of Arts Therapies requires more to reduce local health inequalities in Bedfordshire and to focus on preventative rather than reactionary healthcare. As a leader, I modelled my creative values in action to empower the arts therapies team to do the same. Through collaborative working, we not only maximised our small arts-based resource but built capacity and confidence in other parts of the system with healthcare professionals, experts by experience and local cultural assets.

Context

Bedfordshire has a population of 670,000. As a county it is predominantly rural, with some of the most affluent communities living alongside some of the most deprived areas in the UK. For example, 43% of Luton Borough lies within the top 30% of the most multiply deprived areas in England². Additionally, there is great cultural variety across Bedfordshire, with Luton being one of the most culturally diverse parts of the UK³. These geographic and socio-economic factors pose significant challenges for healthcare delivery, but also potential opportunities for celebrating cultural diversity.

The arts therapies team in Bedfordshire and Luton delivers a county-wide service across adult mental health, specialist learning disability and community health services provided by East London NHS Foundation Trust (ELFT). Each of the four arts modalities are represented in our team. However,

the arts therapies resource is limited, with the equivalent of four whole time posts serving the entire county.

Under ELFT's Trust-wide arts therapies strategy, clinical interventions are provided across a broad range of services, both inpatient and community, to a varied adult population (figure 1). Locally, we have also included support for NHS staff, both clinical and non-clinical, as an essential part of this arts-based strategy.

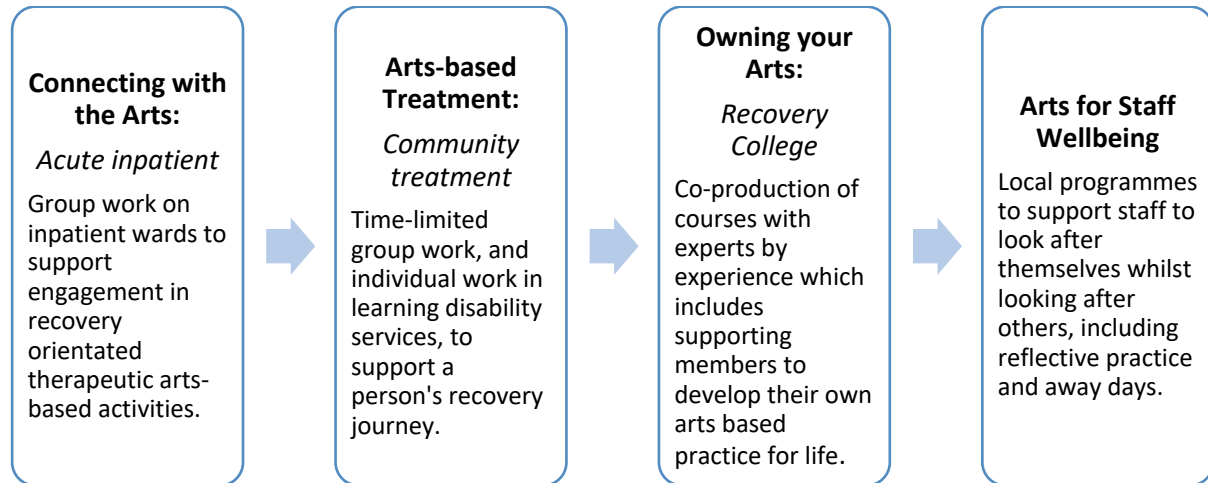


Figure 1: Arts Therapies Service provision in Bedfordshire & Luton, ELFT

This system-wide vision recognises “the benefits that the arts can bring to health and wellbeing”⁴ as a recovery tool and in promoting psychological resilience beyond NHS service use. In parallel, our team has sought to provide continuity of care across mental health services so that people can access the arts at any stage of their recovery. To achieve this level of impact several factors drive our work, these are:

- Collaborative working maximises the use of our arts therapies resource which includes transdisciplinary inpatient working and coaching experts by experience to deliver their own recovery college courses.
- Building capacity and confidence in other parts of the system through using arts-based interventions with a strengths-focussed recovery approach for staff, service users and the public creates better outcomes for everyone.
- Clinical service delivery built on quality improvement principles enables a nimble response when providing county-wide services, increasing equity and accessibility, meeting demand in a timely and context sensitive manner. This includes piloting novel interventions in wider teams and introducing group-based delivery in learning disability services.

Arts Therapies working across traditional healthcare barriers

My leadership style is participative, I know that I cannot implement large-scale transformation without my team being active change agents. As a quiet leader⁵, listening is essential, in my silence I can hear opportunities for future collaborations and lean-in to difficult conversations, averting potential resistance. To successfully deliver the arts therapies strategy, in line with ELFT's public health priorities, I have prioritised the following:

1. Developing clinical leadership in the arts therapies team

Each member of the team has unique skills and valuable experience, together our creative voice can empower others. Building individual confidence and competence involves working across levels of capability through coaching and supervision, given as part of my leadership role. This included investment in talent through supporting autonomous professional practice and academic development which benefits the team and wider arts therapies. Creative experimentation through solution-focussed learning and working with uncertainty models authentic leadership for the team.

2. Strengthening the current clinical service provision through evidence-based practice

Communication, both verbal and non-verbal, lies at the heart of the arts therapies. Similarly, communication within an organisation is essential in understanding the multifaceted role of the allied health professions.

In our team, we began by holding our service accountable, through producing quarterly reports which included contact data with service users and staff, outcome measures and experience data. This enabled us to meet key targets and to celebrate successes. Additionally, we reduced barriers to accessing the arts therapies through strengthening referral pathways and widening participation across different client groups.

Each arts-based intervention is underpinned by quality improvement methodology, fostering a growth-orientated team culture. Increased visibility for the arts therapies has confirmed our role as valid contributors to multi-disciplinary mental healthcare.

3. Adopting a flexible approach to arts-based interventions to engage a range of stakeholders

Employing our therapeutic and arts-based skills flexibly enables the arts therapies to operate beyond the traditional confines of the clinical therapy room. The arts work across many levels. For example, we can facilitate challenging conversations through metaphor or role play. We can enable diverse groups of professionals and service users to each find a voice and feel heard through creative play. These skills not only provide psychological safety when exploring complex or controversial issues but foster more holistic solutions to issues of organisational change.

Some examples of specific work programmes that the arts therapies team have collaborated on are:

- Service Design

A transdisciplinary steering group was set up, to develop a radical vision of barrier-free healthcare, for people with persistent physical symptoms and functional syndromes. This necessitated engagement across organisational levels, from borough director to service user. Additionally, we reached across geographic and traditional service barriers to include primary care and other provider organisations across the whole of Bedford Luton Milton Keynes (BLMK) Sustainability and Transformation Partnership (STP).

An art therapist used a model of visual mapping (figure 2), which enabled all voices to be heard, to distil the strengths in the current system and identify areas for improvement. Through this process discussion of complex areas such as discriminatory language and the psychological impact on clinicians of this work were explored. Visual system mapping accelerated the journey towards personalised care for this client group, through recognition of the strengths in the system and collaboratively designing a better vision.

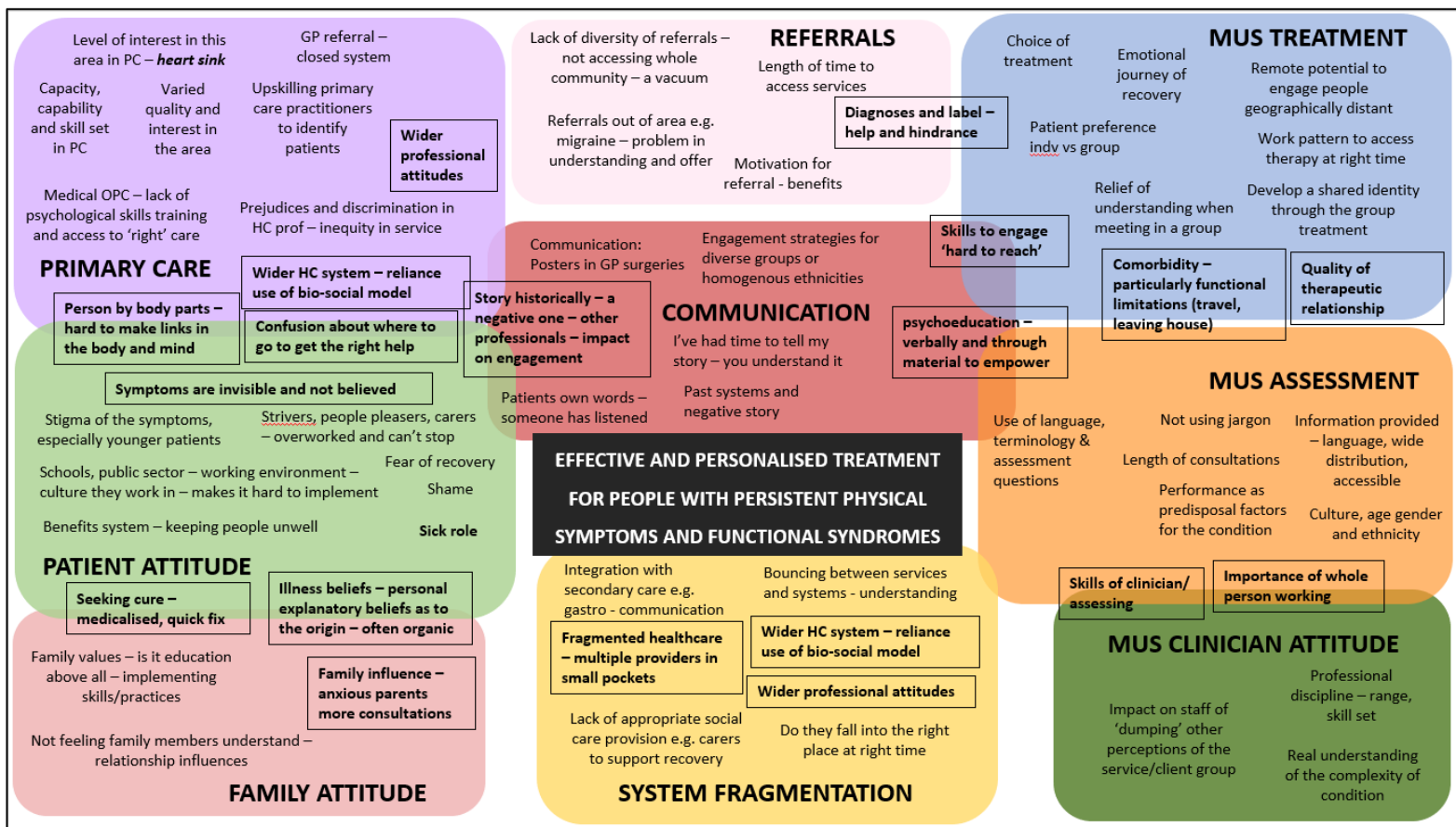


Figure 2: Thematic map of the barriers and facilitators in service access and use (please note MUS stands for Medically Unexplained Symptoms, this is one term used to describe people who experience persistent physical symptoms and functional syndromes such as Fibromyalgia, Chronic Fatigue or some Musculoskeletal conditions)

- Staff Support

It is widely known that staff experience is an antecedent to patient experience in healthcare. Teams which are well structured in organisations with a supportive culture, not only achieve higher staff retention and fewer sickness absences but demonstrate reduced patient mortality and readmission rates with increased patient satisfaction⁶.

The arts therapies draw on this evidence when caring for the person in the professional. We recognise the emotional impact of caring work in mental health services. We offer a multi-intervention approach which includes: structured debriefing after critical incidents; contracted arts-based team reflective practice; and during the pandemic tri-weekly creative breakout sessions. Using the arts enables difficult conversations to occur without blame and facilitates a team's own recovery resources through creative expression.

- Strengths-focussed Psychological Support

People with a learning disability face a range of complexities when seeking support for their physical and mental health. There is a greater likelihood of comorbid diagnoses⁷ and communication challenges, alongside referrals originating from support staff not the person themselves⁸.

We developed a 4-session arts therapies assessment group⁹ to activate service users' personal resources, support them to advocate for their needs and to make an informed choice about accessing psychological therapy. For some, this is all they needed, others enter non-verbal psychological therapy with a greater awareness and motivation to change. In parallel we engage the person's support team to maximise therapeutic success and understanding.

- Recovery College

The arts therapies wing of the recovery college has seen co-production partnerships between experts by experience, that is, people with lived experience of mental health conditions and arts therapists, grow in unprecedented ways. Following a successful pilot programme with dramatherapy¹⁰, psychoeducational courses are now part of our routine practice. Group members have produced a recovery-focussed book, delivered training within the Trust and presented at national conferences alongside arts therapists. In partnership, the arts therapies and experts by experience have supported local community resources to reduce stigma around mental health, widen access and foster inclusive public environments which promote life-long recovery.

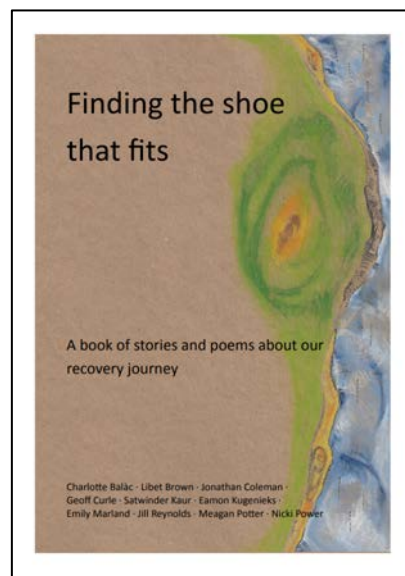


Figure 3: 'Finding the Shoe that Fits' a book about recovery made by experts with experience

Measuring success

There is no single measure of change which can accurately capture the range of interventions which we offer and continue to develop as a team. However, we use triangulation of data from a range of sources to help us build a picture of effectiveness, to identify where the arts therapies add value and to point towards future areas for development. We collect formal outcome measures, experience data and improvement suggestions from service users, staff and carers. Here are some selected outcomes from those who have accessed the arts therapies:

- Arts Therapies Team

As well as providing direct clinical intervention, members of the team have been supported to write academic papers¹¹ building the evidence base for arts therapies and to develop leadership skills, for example, becoming a quality improvement coach.

- People who use mental health services

One person who attended an inpatient group said:

“Do you see how connected people seem now...before the group everyone seemed so isolated and tired...that was such a therapeutic experience”.

Another person, who attended a recovery college course said:

“Gives you self-confidence to just sing and... to go and speak to people with similar health issues”.

A person with a learning disability who attended individual therapy said:

“I was quite poorly with anxiety and depression... as my therapy progressed, I started to feel better in myself, and...I’ve really enjoyed ...my [arts] therapy sessions. They’ve really helped me a lot....I have the tools to help me keep the work up”.

- Staff in ELFT Services across Bedfordshire & Luton

During the first national lockdown in 2020 the arts therapies team provided arts-based break spaces for 108 staff per month (March to July inclusive). This was a 200% increase in staff support provision. One staff member said they appreciated:

“Having time away from direct clinical responsibility to share ...and reconnect”.

- Wider Community in Bedfordshire

We have created sustainable partnerships with cultural organisations such as the Higgins Museum, The Place Theatre in Bedford and The Hat Factory in Luton. This has enabled people who face stigma to access these cultural settings as equal citizens, and staff beyond mental health care have benefited from mental health first aid workshops.

Following a film showcase, which was co-produced with young people from CAMHS services (another pilot project we supported), a member of the public who had been in the audience said:

“It was a very unique and special experience ...exceedingly informative and deeply moving...immensely powerful voices, speaking and singing of strength and redemption, of emergence and new beginnings. Thank you ...for convincing us that a better day is always possible”.

Key learning points

- Creativity is an essential tool in service transformation. The creative process familiar to arts therapists, combined with therapeutic skills of engagement and group facilitation, make us ideal collaborators in complex change programmes.
- Just as arts therapies provide a space apart from everyday life for service users to make changes possible in their lives, this capacity can be harnessed to support staff wellbeing and team building.
- The value of systems approaches in the design and delivery of mental healthcare cannot be underestimated. Interdisciplinary work enables professions with limited resources to reach

further and maximise impact. Inclusive mental health services place the lived experience of the people accessing services firmly at the core of practice. Together, we can draw on a range of expertise and build a board skill base to strengthen our whole community's mental health approach.

- True co-production requires professionals to be led by our experts by experience. This takes time and involves learning for all. In any developing therapeutic programme, allied health professionals need to be mindful of the time and energy involved in genuinely collaborative and inclusive working.
- The arts are a vehicle to access the creative potential in the everyday. There is some need for caution when implementing arts-based interventions as part of change programmes. The potential uses of creativity are boundless, this poses a risk that we may over-stretch. Pacing and good project planning can mitigate this risk.

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