

# The value of creative health: Perspectives from people with lived experience<sup>1</sup>

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Research briefing, No. 2, November 2023

## Introduction:

This briefing provides important evidence of perspectives from People with Lived Experience about the value of creative health approaches in improving health and wellbeing and what is needed to enable people to live well in their communities.

Creative health approaches refers to the use of non-medical community-based provisions including art and creative activities (including singing, drama, visual arts and crafts) as well as sports, outdoor & nature-based activities and use of community facilities.

The evidence in this briefing derives from collaborative research funded by the UKRI-AHRC Mobilising Community Assets programme with partners and community members across West Yorkshire that explored what it means to mobilise community assets in response to health inequalities. A participatory action inquiry approach was adopted involving the active engagement of stakeholder organisations and people in communities working together to explore possibilities for evolving creative health systems and approaches to enable people across West Yorkshire to live well.

A total of 76 people with lived experience and 80 professionals from 67 different statutory and third sector organisations were involved in the project. The perspectives in this briefing are derived largely from workshops and inquiry groups with people with lived experience. The project was undertaken between November 2022 and July 2023.

## Why is this briefing important?

Over 50% of cases presented at GP surgeries are the result of social rather than medical conditions. There is mounting evidence that people are not finding effective solutions to improve health and well-being through NHS provisions and instead are turning to community-based 'creative' provision which are low cost and more immediately accessible. Within a context of over stretched resources across the Health Sector including long waiting lists, there is a clear rationale for support and wide-spread adoption of creative health approaches which offer a more appropriate and cost-effective alternative to medical provision.

This briefing therefore provides importance evidence from people with lived experience about the value of these approaches, what makes a difference and perspectives from experience about how community-based creative provision can be sustained to enable all people in communities to live well.

## How creativity helps improve health and wellbeing

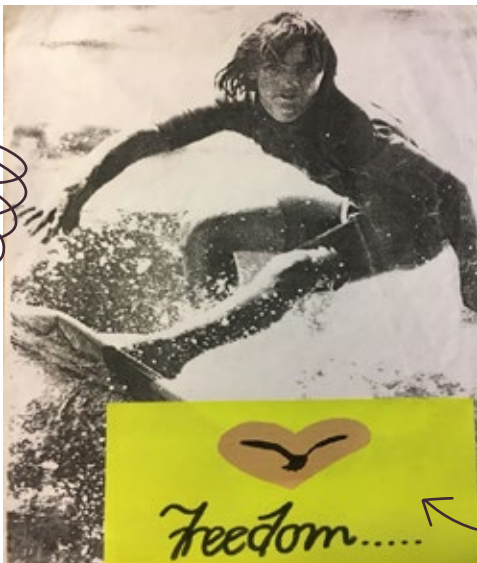
- Building relationships, friendships and connections (with others and the world around ourselves).
- Increasing confidence, self-belief/self-worth/ self-acceptance and ability to express yourself in different ways... makes it easier to share thoughts and communicate.
- Giving you a goal, purpose and commitment.
- Being understood as you are... developing a better understanding of self.
- Giving you space to be yourself and not be judged and to not be OK.
- Giving you a reason to leave the house.
- Provides the tools to help reduce stress, anxiety, depression and destructive behaviours, clear your mind and relax – help to move forward.
- Helps us express feelings, process thoughts and find solutions to difficult problems.
- Creating new opportunities e.g. volunteering, new career paths, artistic activities.
- Singing and dancing improves breathing and fitness.
- Focus, clarity, confidence, finding myself, my voice, my identity, freedom to be me.
- Creativity and conversation together helps aid critical thinking.
- Learning new skills, literacy, painting ... sense of creating something. Having fun!



Being creative can help us to express our feelings, process thoughts and find solutions to difficult problems

I make time for me, form friendships, try something new, improves my confidence

Gives you the freedom to be yourself and not be judged



"This is a picture of freedom because that's what it's given me. Its an amazing space that empowers us all and it's the safest place I've ever been in. It's changed my life and brought me so many things that I am really grateful for."

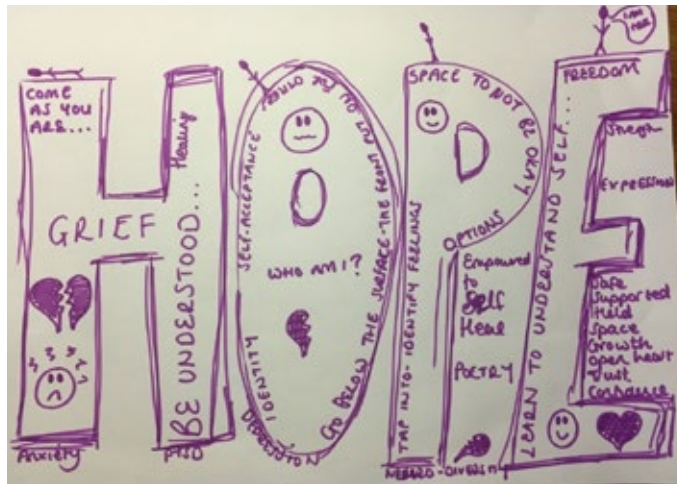
Helped me to find my voice and listen to it to discover my identity

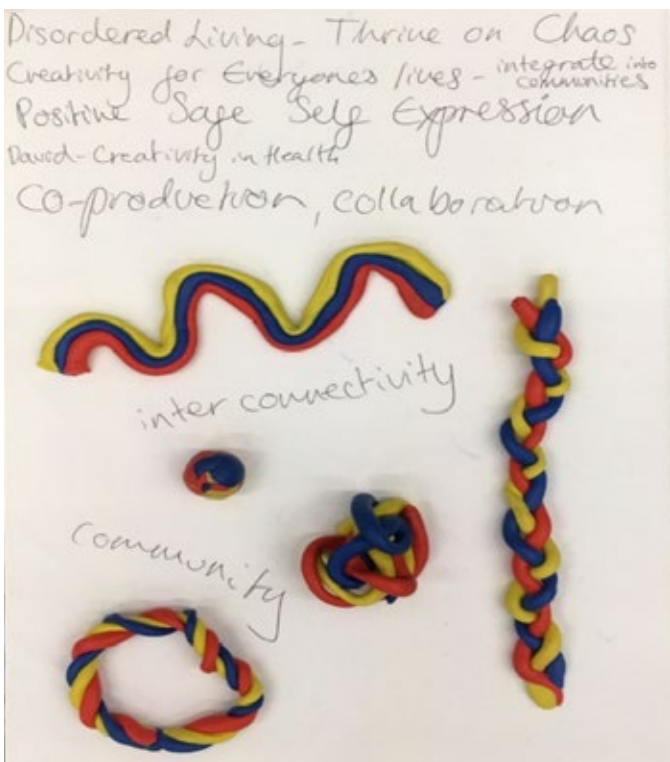
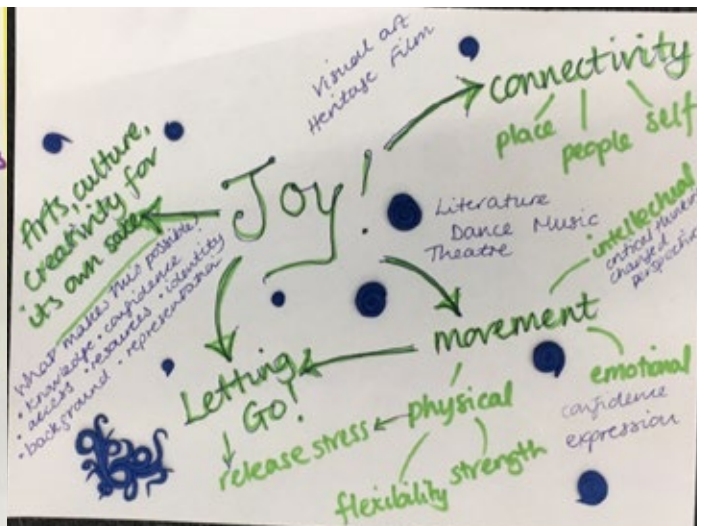
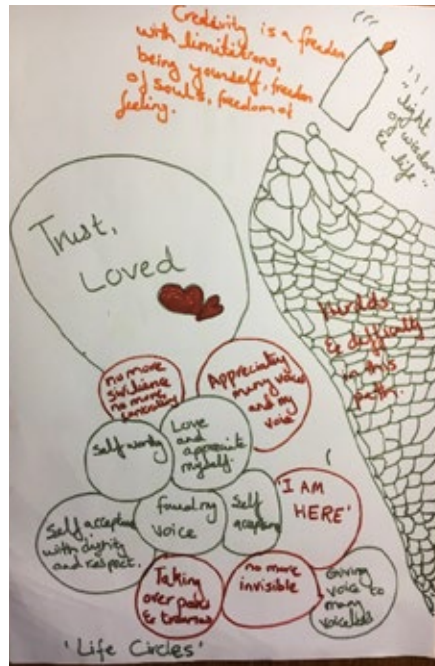
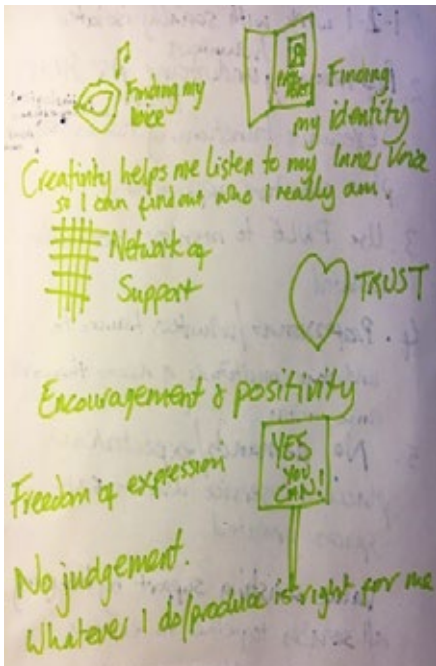
Dealing with grief, trauma and anxiety

The power to self-heal - Identity & acceptance. Being understood

Being held and supported in a safe space

Freedom Strength Expression





- 1) The Facilitator believing in you building the trust  
 2)
- makes you realise your ambitions
  - Learn literacy skills
  - sense of direction is clearer.
  - feel of value, respect & wholeness.
  - positivity leads to more participation & to say 'yes'
  - more comfortable with exposure
  - more Adventurous
  - Increased opportunity to Education when you have little or no Education
  - Ability to recognise & step away from negative situations
  - Make better & safe choices
  - Be able to say 'NO'
  - Increased Mental clarity + self awareness
  - To know what real love is, & TRUST!!!

## What makes a difference in creative health provision?

"Knowing about things and being able to access it .. where activities are free "

### Awareness and accessibility

- Being referred to something you didn't know about
- Accessing art facilities in the area
- Having activities that are free
- Outreach/mobile services - Taking services to people
- Having support (family support worker) with confidence to attend

"Liberated by experimenting, painting for the first time, trying new things"

### Activities

- Wide range of creative activities offered,
- Recognising the importance of creativity and its place in a holistic wellbeing cycle
- Fun, playfulness, use of imagination

"A shared safe space to take time out and be expressive"

### Welcoming, safe and enabling space

- Feeling welcome and safe in a space/small groups - Having people to talk to
- Appropriate relaxing environment, feeling safe enough to engage
- Time out from the world, space to breath and slow down and focus on me
- Local, inclusive spaces where people can be open to learn and interact together
- Safe space to be vulnerable and expressive, explore creativity & to thrive
- Acceptance without judgement and being understood

"Opportunity for self-discovery"

### Identity and purpose

- Opportunity for self-discovery
- Finding 'my tribe' of playful people - connection of souls
- Community and belonging
- Meaning and purpose - having a goal, feeling valued

"Feeling of safety and respect within the group"

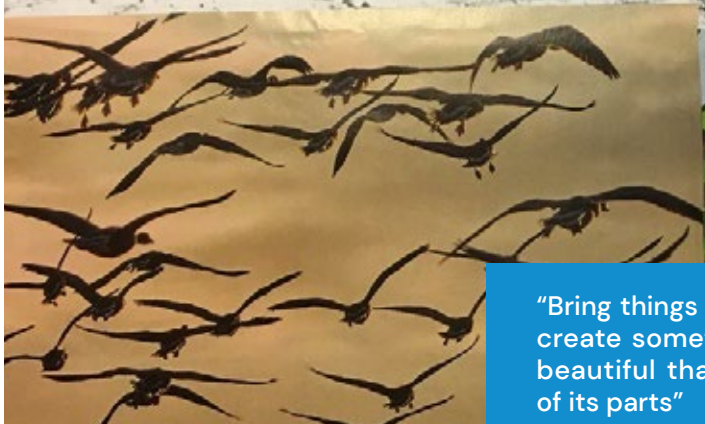
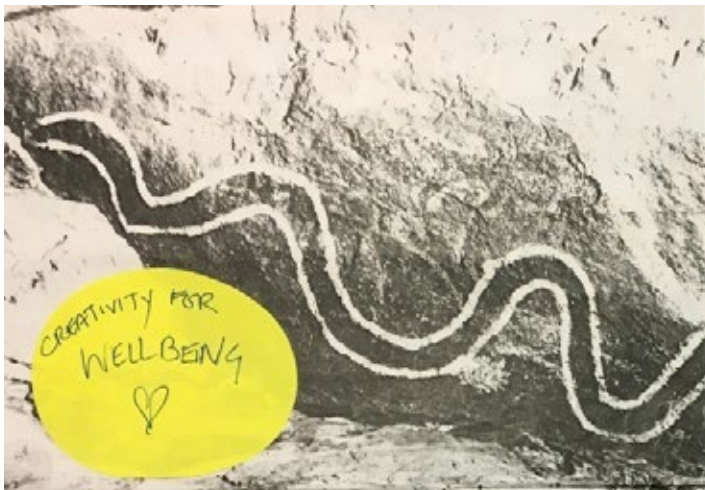
### Relationships and support

- Building trusting relationships with facilitators, peers and other creative people
- Peer support networks- social support and encouragement.
- Befriending, mentoring and buddying schemes
- Helping each other
- Access to resources
- Connectivity between NHS and voluntary, community and cultural providers

"Not being pressured about when and how we participate - it's ok not to be ok"

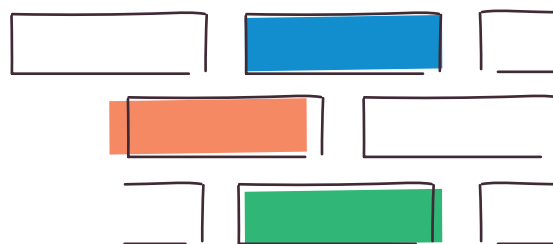
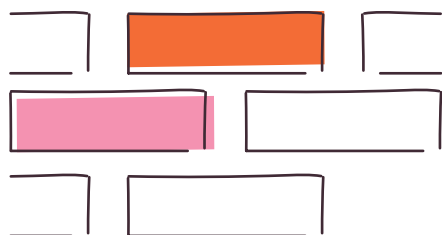
### Ethos

- Putting people and process before outcomes
- Valuing all contributions and getting positive feedback
- Focus not on mental health
- Not time limited, continuity and longevity, valuing maintenance
- Robust inclusion policies and building trust - Trust in group leader



## Factors affecting people accessing creative/community-based activities

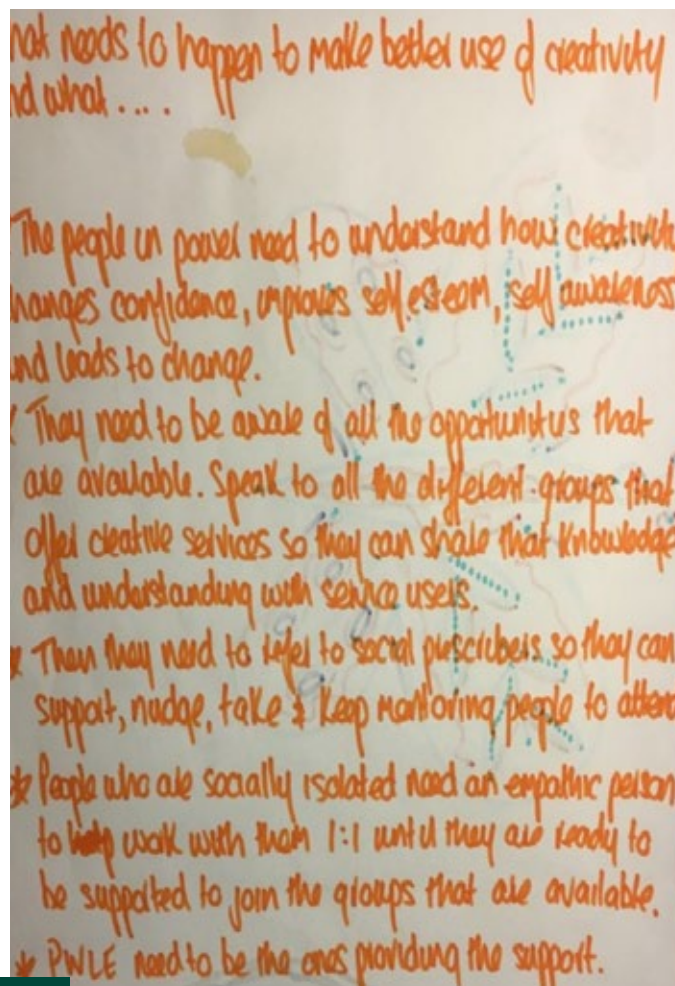
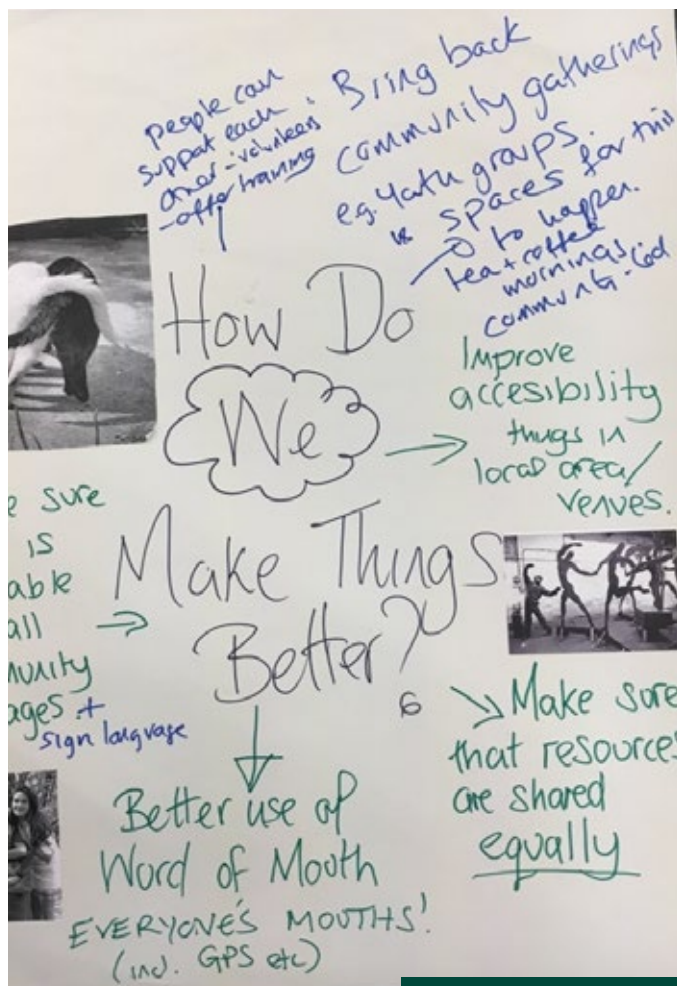
- Lack of knowledge and awareness from both service users and health professionals about what is available.
- Lack of “ambassadors” in communities – limited word of mouth experiences “Needs more advertising so people are aware of what’s happening”.
- NHS professionals not trained to appreciate the value of creative activities.
- Language can be a barrier– and culture matters – Limited diversity in organisations, lack of cultural/religious/fairth knowledge, neurodiverse–friendly approaches.
- Lack of equal/fair access for all groups, ethnic minority groups – some areas not having appropriate spaces or infrastructure.
- Opportunities to try creative activities without previous experience and commitments.
- Anxiety about people from different cultures and backgrounds coming together who wouldn’t otherwise.
- Criteria or eligibility for services (dictated by funding) – people not “fitting” a particular group or not being “ill” enough to be eligible.
- Timescales in health system – to get an appointment and referral processes.
- Limited resources and funding – short-term projects running out – sporadic provision doesn’t work.
- Lack of confidence and self-esteem, feeling like we don’t have a right to engage.
- Fear of the unknown, not knowing what to expect, anxiety, cultural expectations and irrational beliefs, not knowing anyone – social isolation and stigma.
- Lack of encouragement and support to attend.
- Lack of trust in public services – Poorly devised programmes/therapy.



- Attitude and environment is not always appropriate, lack of sensitivity in approaches, spaces for people with disabilities often not available.
- Can’t get to locations– limited affordable and reliable transport.
- Funding is a constant burden on voluntary sector organisations.
- Time and energy – work and home caring commitments / domestic violence.
- Arts and creativity regarded as “nice to have”, not valuing creativity in society.
- Depression/anxiety/trauma/fear of large groups – makes it difficult to get out there.
- Prior perception of what creativity is! Restricted experience of arts and culture / negative associations from school experiences.
- We compartmentalise age groups and prevent the exchange of ideas, experiences, knowledge, skills, institutions don’t naturally bring people together.
- Need better understanding of how creativity can improve wellbeing.
- Closure of local amenities (sports, fitness centres, playing grounds, libraries).
- Living alone and not socialising, not making friendships, undermines confidence and blocks creativity.
- Not being able to see a way out.
- I am trying to get into adult dialectical behavioural therapy but to do this you have to have severe symptoms. But because I am not so much of a danger to other people, I have to fight to get that therapy that would be helpful to me.

Starting as a service user, I moved from London to Halifax not knowing anyone. I couldn’t leave the house – proper anxiety. I got pregnant and talked to my GP. My son was getting racism. My GP said that I need to do coping strategies but talking to someone on the other side of the phone was not helping me. I got referred to perinatal mental health and asked questions that made me feel worse. I got a family support worker and started to mix with other parents and hear other people’s life stories – made me see people going through things worse than me. Now part of an organisation, talking about building resilience. When I started getting out I realised there were other people from down south. The organisation I worked with now, we do a lot of stuff where everyone comes together. I’ve realised that I can speak out about mental health now.





"Creativity is a vehicle for human connection"

"Everyone is a work in progress and needs to be valued"

"The human connection matters"

"Stop doing things that make people worse"

**How can we mobilise community assets to provide a space for people to get together and share experiences with creativity?**

Provide funding to help community organisations to engage and connect.

Make good use of community centres, schools and church halls.

Websites where stuff can be hosted electronically.

Use a council building that's doing nowt.

Dedicated organisation to 'glue' groups together.

Discounts for hire of art studios for people on benefits/ low incomes.

Better outreach services - Services going out to people and accessing groups.

Mobile activity bus?

Using an asset-based approach.

We need to get communities to work together.

Food is important. Community garden where people talk and make a meal together.

Secure and safe places for ethnic women and vulnerable groups.

# How can we make creative provision in communities a sustainable option for all?



Creativity is part of wellbeing – it is how you join up with society. Should be something that is in everybody's lives, not something you squeeze into your life for one hour a week.

We need to understand the value of meetings. If we want to stay fit we have to go to a gym regularly. The same applies to groups – we need to value maintenance and people being able to use that for as long as it matters to them.

I met [worker] 7 years ago and I now work for them. I know how important that longevity is. If we have a two week gap in funding it causes a massive dip.

I feel that if you have years and years of trauma, a six month programme is not going to change that. Need to build coping strategies and that takes time.

I am coming out of isolation, and I feel like longevity and funding is so important for mental health. You feel like you are in a cage of trauma and finally the door is open for you to take that flight. And finally, the bird feels the wind between the wings but the cage door is closed because the funding is only for 3 weeks. I don't understand why there is a limitation of a number of weeks in the healing process of past traumas for 40 or 50 years. It needs to stop. Someone has to be an ice breaker and break with the axe of love, life and kindness but when you try to do this, the axe is taken away from you. You start loving that life but all of a sudden it is taken away from you.





All West Yorkshire boroughs to work together

Need a variety of provisions

Young people need a voice

Work on cross-sector partnerships, there's so much good work but no partnerships

Adjust timings!! Not all service users can make a 9am start!!

\*  
Befriending, volunteers – buddy system

\*  
1-2-1 work with socially isolated to build confidence to attend groups

Improve information and referral pathways

Funded projects across multiple creative organisations (singing/dance/drama/visual art etc.)

It's not a one thing that fixes it all – we need to be able to be comfortable in our group so that we can talk about things that are not working. We are not perfect. It takes input from everybody. So lets give everybody a voice.

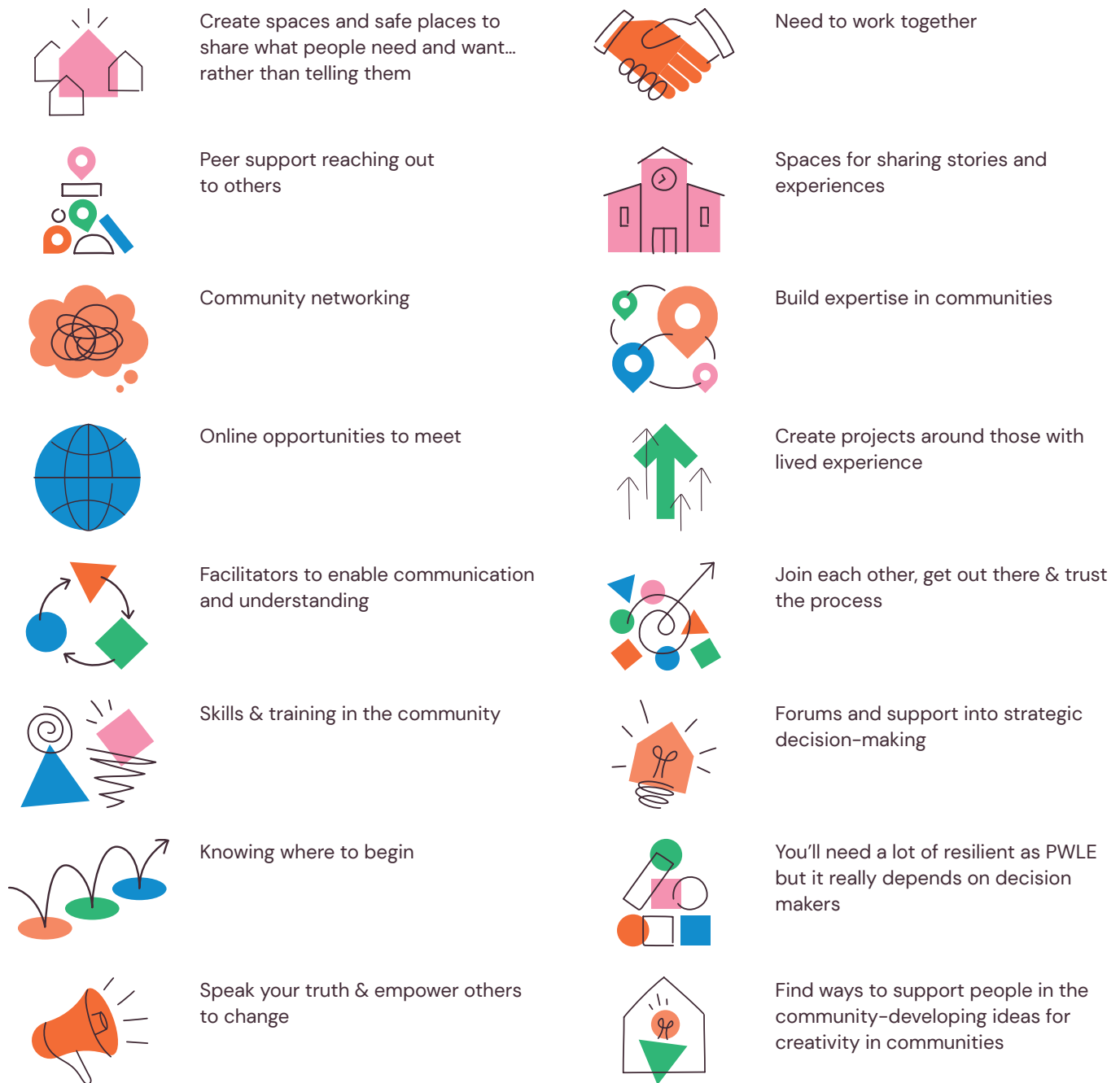
We need to build trust. So many people have had bad experiences through NHS and other services. You have to feel safe enough when you turn up and then you need to feel safe enough to engage.

Being inclusive. Ensuring accessible language

Asset based approach

We need to remember the neurodiverse in everything we plan. My daughter was failed by the system and it took a suicide attempt to get support from CAMHS but they did not have people with the skills to support her.

## How can people with lived experience & community members help develop creativity and support in communities to improve health & wellbeing?



### Key messages about what needs to change

People with lived experience and community members worked together with community organisations to reflect on learning and explore implications for what needs to change.

1. Change funding “metrics” – it should be about the journey and the impact on people.
2. Improve communication/visibility about what’s available and how creativity can help.
3. Work together in funding consortiums, developing coherent local strategies.
4. Mentoring/buddying for PWLE and socially isolated people.
5. Improved connectivity with primary care and across sectors.



6. Develop a network of “champions” and a centralised database of offerings.
7. Ensure equality and diversity in provision using appropriate/sensitive language
8. Longevity and continuity of funding – support needs to be sustainable.
9. Ensuring safe spaces in all neighbourhoods for all groups to seek support.

### About the project

Creating Change involves using a collaborative action inquiry approach working with stakeholder organisations and people with lived experience to explore how to evolve effective and meaningful creative health approaches across West Yorkshire. Rooted in stories from people with lived experience of community-based creative health approaches and the challenges encountered in practice by partner organisations, the project has co-generated in-depth learning about challenges and potential of sustaining creative health provision.

Research team: Barry Percy-Smith, Rowan Bailey, Nic Stenberg, Claire Booth-Kurpnieks, Deborah Munt, David McQuillan, Phil Walters, Liz Towns-Andrews.

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