

CREATIVE ROOTS

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PROJECT REPORT

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Art washes away
from the soul the
dust of everyday life.

PABLO PICASSO

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Arts Council for Wales and G4S for the funding of this important project. I would also like to highlight the amazing support from the brilliant rehabilitation team of Mike Vigar, Caryl Watkins, and Jenni Clifford. It has also been such a pleasure and privilege working alongside the Creative Roots Team and I am so grateful that I was offered to be involved in this work and have been able to witness and evaluate the delivery of such a powerful project. Indeed, I give my deepest thanks and gratitude to the inspiring, creative, and committed men who engaged with this project and created such beautiful art and with who I had such powerful conversations. Art really can give the opportunity for meaningful connection, hope, choice, and freedom where ever it is supported.



The Creative Roots Project Team

Gareth Clark is a theatre maker whose work embraces the struggles of humanity and questions the way we live and are governed and was co-project lead for the Creative Roots project.

Dee Rogers is a co-director of Das Clarks and a professional hybrid. Their creative work focuses on difference and language and was co-project lead for the Creative Roots project.

Marega Palser is a multi-dimensional shape shifting performance-based artist.

Jo Haycock is a documentary and portrait photographer who explores the relationships that people have between themselves, others and the spaces they connect in. Storytelling photography for communities, families and social documentaries.

Marion Cheung is a multidisciplinary artist based in South Wales, with over 10 years of experience in Participatory Arts Practice specialising within Arts in Health.

Bill Chambers is a freelance artist and printmaker working in community arts and education.

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Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Creative Roots Project Team	2
Executive Summary	4
Introduction	6
Understanding Desistance & the use of Art in Prison	7
Project Approach & Design	13
Analysis of Well-Being	16
Conclusion & Recommendations for Future Practice	28
References	30
Appendix I: Pictorial Narrative Map for Residents who engaged with project	33
Appendix II: Pictorial Narrative Map for Project leads & Staff	34



Art is unquestionably one of the purest and highest elements in human happiness. It trains the mind through the eye, and the eye through the mind. As the sun colours flowers, so does art colour life.

JOHN LUBBOCK

Executive Summary



Art is about changing what we see in our everyday lives and representing it in such a way that it gives us hope.

KEHINDE WILEY

The Creative Roots Project was an arts project funded by the Arts Council for Wales and G4S and was delivered in Parc Prison from September 2022 to May 2023. Creative Roots was delivered through a multi-skilled arts team under the performance, live art and dance organisation Mr & Mrs Clark. The Creative Roots project aimed to provide a safe space for residents of Parc Prison to take time out of their daily routine to engage in a range of activities on the prison wing. Creative Roots offered an introduction to yoga style mindfulness exercises and different ways of creating art, including printmaking, fine art and painting, and photo journalism. Everyone who took part displayed their artwork in an exhibition inside and outside the prison in May 2023.

Higher Plain was responsible for measuring the impact of the project and the research aim was to explore if engaging with experiences of art practices (that the Creative Roots project offered) as well as yoga, mindfulness, had any positive influence and effect on the well-being and health of the men engaged with the project. Informal focus groups were used to explore the general experiences of the arts project but also the five themes from the [CHIME recovery model](#) for mental health to better understand the overall narratives and the well-being of the men during and following their engagement with the project. CHIME is an acronym for Connectedness, Hope and Optimism, Identity (changes to/of), Meaning (to self, mental health, others, goals), and Empowerment, Choice, and control (over one's life). Focus groups were also facilitated with the prison staff involved with the



project and the artists that led the project, and more of their experiences later.

Ultimately, the project did increase the feelings and experiences of well-being where those who engaged felt greater connectivity, hope, identity, meaning, and empowerment. It gave those involved an opportunity to take off the 'prisoner mask' and be more relaxed, more open, and creative, and in doing so the experiences and outcomes were positive and to a degree could be described as transformational.

Although this was a small-scale project in one prison it does have some useful learning and application to wider prison settings. It is likely that to support positive well-being for residents in prison, and to support their desistance and rehabilitation journey, that education provision should provide an environment that supports the development of informal discussion-based learning where people feel respected, have choice, have opportunity for creativity and expression, feel safe, and ultimately feel they are being treated as humans within a community and not just criminals and prisoners. There were also powerful experiences from engaging with and then practising yoga and mindfulness by the men who took part in the project with many explaining how they would use it to support their well-being and gaining a calmness, clarity, and control over their thoughts and emotions when within their rooms when 'banged-up.'

This project also illustrated that art projects in prison can have powerful learning for artists and that it can support their own creative development, offer greater insights into the human condition, and challenge pre-conceived ideas of what a 'prisoner' is and acts like. Practitioners that work in prison also found the Creative Roots project and the approach to delivery powerful and provided clear learning on how art can support well-being of residents in prison and how respectful, genuine, and inclusive communication and relationships are a foundation for supporting residents to feel hope, connected, and empowered to want to change and commit to personal growth.

Finally, it was also clear that projects like Creative Roots, where there is so much genuine care and commitment to residents in prison as well as being within the prison, that it is an emotional, physical, and psychological challenging environment and so those involved in such work need to focus on their own well-being and use reflective practice and peer support to effectively manage these experiences.



Learning and Recommendations for Future Practice

- 1) Art is a powerful well-being and human experience when supported inclusively and effectively and should be developed more widely in prison settings.
- 2) There should be regular provision for residents in prison to engage with informal education that offers creative spaces and opportunities that support pro-social peer and non-prison practitioner engagement, freedom of expression, choice, and the development of new experiences and skills.
- 3) Yoga and mindfulness practice can be a powerful tool for well-being, self-agency, and emotional and psychological regulation and control and could be an important element to recovery, rehabilitation, and desistance to residents in prison settings.
- 4) Human-centred relationships that focus on developing trust, respect, compassion, understanding, and genuineness should be the approach to practice for all of the workforce within prison environments.
- 5) The CHIME model is a useful framework for understanding well-being of residents in prison and could be used more extensively within prison and community settings.
- 6) Reflective Practice should be used with all practitioners that work and deliver projects within prison settings to support their own well-being and this should be practiced individually and in group contexts to offer peer support.
- 7) Training and induction for all practitioners that deliver projects within prison settings should include support for practitioner well-being.
- 8) There needs to be longer term art projects in prisons and research to explore the longer-term potential for art being a significant element for successful rehabilitation and desistance

Introduction



The world always seems brighter when you've just made something that wasn't there before.

NEIL GAIMAN

In 2021 [Mr & Mrs Clark](#) who are more recently called 'Das Clarks' comprising of a multi-skilled arts team who create innovative and provocative performance, dance, and live art ran a pilot project with residents and staff at Parc prison. The project evolved into 'Creative Roots' a unique programme that inspired those living and working in confinement to explore creative freedom. The Creative Roots Project was funded by the Arts Council for Wales and G4S and was delivered in Parc prison from September 2022 to June 2023. The Creative Roots project aimed to provide a safe space for residents of Parc prison to take time out of their daily routine to engage in a range of activities on the prison wing. Creative Roots offered an introduction to yoga style mindfulness exercises with a main project focus of supporting experiences of learning different ways of creating art. Residents had the opportunity to take part in sessions focussed on arts practices such as printmaking, fine art and painting, photo journalism, and some also created written pieces. Art was also created from some of the Parc prison staff and the artists that facilitated the project. Everyone who took part displayed their artwork in an exhibition inside Parc Prison in May 2023 where there were visitors from people that work in the Criminal Justice System and other residents from Parc Prison, as well as the men who created the art through the duration of the Creative Roots project. There was also an exhibition at the Newport Riverfront Theatre and Arts Centre where art from the residents, staff and the artists involved in the project was shown in June 2023 which was called 'Freedom and Constraints.'

Das Clarks have experience of working within prison settings and knew of the power of supporting creative engagement with those that

live in such environments and that is what inspired their on-going commitment to working in this highly rewarding but challenging space. Despite personal and professional experience of using creative arts to engage and inspire none of the Creative Roots team knew much of the academic research literature relating to the use of art within criminal justice settings and as part of the funding for the Creative Roots project the project leads knew having an independent researcher for the project was a useful approach. The role of the independent researcher from [Higher Plain](#), who has expertise of facilitating inclusive research practice with vulnerable and marginalised individuals and groups, was to support the capture of the experiences of the residents, staff, and indeed the artists from the Creative Roots team. The main focus of the project however was 'measuring' the well-being of the residents that engaged with project to understand if their well-being increased whilst engaging with art and to better understand their future needs in respect of art education. Higher Plain has captured the research impact element of the Creative Roots project in this report and as part of their work they will also support wider dissemination of the Creative Roots project and findings through a professional blog with the [National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance](#) which is due to be published in September 2023 and at their research network forum in September 2023. The Creative Roots project is also being shared at the [New Starts and Prison Arts Symposium](#) on the 28th of September 2023 at Liverpool Hope University. In autumn 2024 this work will also be shared through a peer review journal publication and other national conferences yet to be confirmed in 2024.



Understanding Desistance, Well-Being and the use of Art in Prison

There is a growing understanding of the power of art as a transformational experience that can support rehabilitation and the desistance journey of those who have offended and are resident in prison ([Atherton et al, 2022](#)) and that supporting the development of positive overall well-being is an important element of successful desistance ([Link et al, 2019](#); & [Wallace & Wang, 2020](#)).

Understanding Desistance

Desistance can be defined as a process of abstaining and ultimately stopping criminal behaviour as well as the theory base and practice understandings of “how and why people stop and refrain from offending” ([Weaver & McNeill, 2015](#), p. 95). The desistance journey is not a linear one with usually a pattern of multiple relapses into criminal activity. [Jones and Jones \(2021\)](#) highlight how there is a significant body of literature available that explores the factors that are influential in supporting desistance and there is not space to do justice to this within this report; but a brief overview is important to give context to this report and the relevance and application of the findings of the Creative Roots project in relation to desistance.

Many of those who are resident in prison have offended several times and feel that their cycle or pattern of offending is difficult to stop ([Jones and Jones, 2021](#)). The prison environment can be for many a challenging one where stigma, labelling, and discrimination from staff and the prison culture and institution are common experiences and feelings. This reality often makes it difficult to find positivity within daily life and therefore residents in prison often lack motivation to think, feel, and act positively and or engage with opportunities for personal growth and change towards desistance ([Best et al, 2021](#); [Dufour et al., 2015](#); and [Kemshall and McCartan, 2022](#)).

Best et al. (2021) argues that where the structures, culture, and staff do not support and rather suppress positive opportunities to gain positive forms of ‘capital’ then desistance is much less

likely, especially for marginalised groups who face further challenges. Kemshall and McCartan (2022) suggest that negative justice capital is present when the institution stigmatises, has discriminatory practices, doesn’t offer pro-social opportunities to develop social capital, and does not support access to rehabilitative resources and community acceptance which causes isolation. Best et al. (2021: p209) defines institutional justice capital as the ‘structures, systems, processes, and relationships within institutions that create the conditions for access to social and community capital, which in turn can nurture or hinder the development of personal skills and resources.’ This is an important distinction as it shapes successful desistance as not simply an ‘offending’ individuals responsibility, want or capacity to change but also how desistance is dependent on institutional and workforce provision of appropriate opportunity and equitable access to necessary capital opportunities to support positive desistance change. Therefore, prison environments (and other justice institutions) need to remove negative justice capital and improve opportunities and support that increases justice capital ([McCartan 2022](#); and [MoJ, 2022](#)) and develop positive values, ethos, and practice through education, training, and leadership that is aligned to supporting effective justice capital needed for desistance ([Kemshall and McCartan, 2022](#)).

Indeed, [Jones and Jones \(2021\)](#) found that desistance is best supported when there are positive opportunities for pro-social relations where positive ‘relational goods’ are available within group socialisation contexts that create an environment of mutual positive social conditioning ([Weaver & McNeill, 2015](#)). Indeed, consistent positive relationships that inspire personal and external motivations and controls are found to support desistance by creating the formation of new identities and positive adult social ties ([Shapland & Bottoms, 2011](#)). [Jones and Jones \(2021\)](#) conclude that the development of positive social capital, greater social mobility, and an alternative ‘new self’ where new pro-social relationships are built with trust, solidarity, and loyalty, are all foundational for successful desistance ([Weaver & McNeill, 2015](#)).

There are many other challenges that people on this journey face and it is common that most who are engaged with the criminal justice system also

experience poor mental health and substance use (Leach et al., 2022). Jones and Jones (2021) found this within their research and stress that the path to desistance is rocky, often fragmented, and requires an integrated approach that requires a personal transition, relational stability, as well as support at a structural societal level (Dufour et al., 2015). Indeed, Nugent and Schinkel (2016) agree and found the challenges of desistance are multi-faceted and complex and coined the phrase of the 'pains of desistance' which result in negative feelings of isolation, loneliness, and lack of hope (Jones and Jones, 2021).

Jones and Jones (2021) highlight how Dufour et al. (2015) provide a useful framework to explore three stages of desistance. In the first stage 'structural openings' such as an opportunity to study, to find employment or build personal relationships with family and life partners provide 'hooks for change.' Second, to effectively flourish and be accepted within new structural opportunities new social identities must be developed and old identities discarded or as Giordano et al. (2002) term it, a 'replacement self.' In the final stage, an individual must recognise their contribution to society and to the group(s)/community they now want to belong to. Therefore, it is important to support desistance through facilitating individuals to create a new 'map of society' and transform their identity positively and not as a 'criminal' anymore (Dufour et al., 2015 p 495).

Jones and Jones (2021) found that some literature (Giordano et al., 2002; and Kirkwood, 2023) place significance on an initial need for the individual to have an openness to change before cognitive transformation can be successful whilst others found that desistance often occurs with no intention and that people can desist simply from reacting to events and turning points which offer positive opportunities (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Vaughan, 2007). Therefore, whilst there appears to be a lack of agreement about whether the desire to desist stems from a thought-out cognitive shift or is indeed stimulated by opportunist events or tuning points, there appears to be support for the argument that the need for an opportunity to visualise or perceive a future alternative self is important to achieving desistance (Behan, 2014; King, Measham, and O'Brien, 2019; and Szifris, Fox and Bradley, 2017). Indeed, Nugent and Schinkel (2016) add that having feelings of hope were a

foundation from which all positive change could develop and therefore having strong positive recognition within the relationships that a person has is central to desistance and that this needs to be in the relationships at a personal level (micro level) but also at the community (meso level) and larger structural (macro) levels so that the person who is at risk of re-offending feels accepted and respected and can heal from often present effects of significant trauma and stigma.

McNeill (2018; 2019) develops the idea of support across the 'levels' of society further and offers a useful understanding of how to effectively support desistance and suggest it is only possible through mutual recognition and respect of the individual, the citizen, civil society, and the state. Therefore, there is a need of authentic and meaningful liberation and integration into the community for a person who is at risk of re-offending. Integration is reliant on four interconnected dimensions of rehabilitation – personal, social, judicial and moral and political. McNeill (2019) states that the personal relates to personal agency, values and beliefs that support the transformation to a new identity and self. The social dimension refers to the need for a positive and expanded social network to support the development of positive social capital. The judicial element states a need for the structural 'de-labelling' of and from the previous crime. Finally, the fourth area relates to the need for moral and political rehabilitation and societal integration at all levels of society often seen as the most difficult (adapted from Jones and Jones, 2021).

Well-being and Desistance

It is not surprising that feeling positive well-being and health is central to a person being able to desist from criminal behaviour (Link et al, 2019; & Wallace & Wang, 2020) because feeling 'healthy' and 'well' are needs for all people to be able to function well in daily life (WHO, 2021).

Well-being and accurately defining it is still subject to debate within the academic literature offering differing understandings and elements that contribute to what well-being 'is' (Simons and Baldwin, 2021; and Jardin and Roache, 2023). Due to this there is significant research in this area and the pursuit of better understanding and measuring well-being and to discuss all of this is out of the

scope of this report. However, the WHO (2021) offer a range of characteristics of what health is and state that health “is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” [Michaelson, Mahony, and Schifferes \(2012: p6\)](#) offer one of perhaps the most accepted definitions of well-being (according to Jardin and Roache, 2023) and state that: “Well-being can be understood as how people feel and how they function, both on a personal and a social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole.” The three central elements to this definition is that well-being relates to how a person feels and their emotions, how a person functions day to day and their competence and connection to others, and finally how a person evaluates and how satisfied they are with their life. Therefore, using this definition and three core elements of well-being someone who has a high level of well-being will generally feel positive and their emotions will be balanced and appropriate for the context they are experiencing, they will also believe they function well day to day and be able to engage with the activities they want to and take good care of themselves and have positive social connections, finally they will also positively evaluate their lives and feel satisfied with their life.

Despite the contention of what well-being is and how to best measure it there is a growing body of literature that suggests that positive well-being is important for a positive desistance journey and that inner well-being, focusing on the development of mindfulness and making conscious and intentional choices needs a lifelong commitment ([Guntzel & Johnson, 2020](#)).

Indeed, the need for feeling positive and having balanced and appropriate emotions for a good level of well-being and the need for positive connections to others aligns strongly to the desistance literature discussed above. Jones and Jones (2021) capture how pro-social relationships offer many opportunities for positive change through positive social conditioning and Weaver and McNeil (2015) add that such relationships can inspire personal and external motivations to be different and become as Shapland and Bottoms (2011) coined a ‘new self.’

So clearly, positive well-being is important for supporting desistance and that both need an environment where there is opportunity to feel

connected to others and form positive pro-social relationships and feel positive and balanced emotions. Weaver and McNeill (2015) offer further consideration that to achieve such pro-social relationships there is a need to do so through a foundation of building trust, solidarity, and loyalty within such relationships and that a person must feel and believe this to be present for desistance to be possible. Nugent and Schinker (2016) add a slightly different dimension and found that there needs to be ‘hope’ for people on their desistance journey and when reflecting on the elements of well-being it is not surprising that hope is also viewed as a key element for positive well-being ([Murphy, 2023](#)). Murphy (2023) found that hope is essential in supporting how people evaluate their own well-being in terms of life satisfaction, psychological well-being in relation to feeling a person is able to function and feel well and emotionally stable and appropriate, and also that hope is central to social well-being and means that higher levels of hope mean healthier social relationships that are supportive and meaningful.

It is obvious therefore that the interconnection between well-being and desistance are significant and therefore any desistance approaches and interventions should include a strong focus on increasing the well-being of people who are engaged with it.

Within a criminal justice context [Western \(2018: p60\)](#) highlights the cruel irony that “much of the agency—the will to change—compromised by precisely the physical and mental difficulties that places them at risk of incarceration in the first place. The people we ask to make the largest changes in their lives often have the least capacity to do so.” However, there are projects and approaches that can and do support the development of positive well-being within prison environments and thus in turn can support desistance and rehabilitation.

Art, Well-Being, and Desistance

It is well known of the therapeutic and positive experiences that art can provide in supporting better mental health and overall well-being. [Fancourt and Finn \(2019\)](#) completed an in-depth global scoping review of over 900 sources of literature covering over 3000 studies of the use and impact of art on well-being for the World Health Organisation and the Health Evidence Network. They found that engagement with art can potentially positively affect both mental and physical health and could be viewed as being used as both a preventative and promotion approach to stop the onset of poor mental and or physical health or as a form of management and treatment to alleviate poor mental and physical health and support recovery.

Interestingly, Fancourt and Finn (2019: p vii-viii) found that art when used as a prevention can; “affect the social determinants of health... encourage health-promoting behaviours.. (and) help to prevent ill health.” They identified in the expansive literature that not only did engagement art support overall development of social cohesion and positive social relationships but that art supported enhanced well-being and mental health and reduced the effects of trauma and was particularly useful in engaging vulnerable and marginalised groups. In relation to how art can be useful when used in a treatment approach the literature indicated that art supports recovery in people who are experiencing mental illness, those with neurodevelopmental and neurological disorders such as autism, as well as those who had experienced trauma and abuse.

Fancourt and Finn (2019: p3) capture the literature they reviewed in a ‘logic model’ captured below in Fig.1. of how experiencing the ‘components’ of art can create health and well-being responses for the person engaging with art.

It is strongly evident how the engagement with art can support significant positive outcomes that are the core elements of positive well-being and health and these such impacts are also found when exploring the literature on the use of art within criminal justice settings too. Indeed, within a prison setting art has been found to support the creation of positive social relationships on many levels. [Littman and Silva \(2020\)](#) captured an increase in the positive relationships that people

that live in prison had within their community. [Menning \(2010\)](#) also found that art can support better professional relationships between people that live in prison and the prison staff that are there to support them. The positive influence of art within prison also extended to creating stronger and more positive relationships between those that live in prison and their families ([Palidofsky, 2010](#)). As discussed previously in this report the opportunity to create and maintain positive relationships with others and have positive social connections is key to supporting positive well-being and also for supporting desistance.



Fig. 1. A logic model linking the arts with health



Art within prison settings has also been documented to support the development of positive self-esteem and self-confidence (Littman & Sliva, 2020) and so relates well to the clear need for supporting positivity within daily life for those in prison (Best et al, 2021; Dufour et al., 2015; and Kemshall and McCartan, 2022) and can be viewed as a useful opportunity to support personal growth and change towards desistance.

Through engagement with art there is also positive enhancement and development of better communication and social skills (Miles & Strauss, 2008) and of group skills (Palidofsky, 2010) and again this aligns so well to the desistance literature and the need to have opportunity and develop positive and pro-social relationships that help to form new versions of self and new non-criminal identities and ultimately positive social and community capital which are all key to successful desistance (Best et al, 2021; Jones and Jones, 2021; Kemshall and McCartan, 2022; Shapland and Bottoms, 2011; and Weaver and McNeil, 2015).

Indeed, Atherton et al (2022) found recently that their art project (called the 'Soft Touch Arts project' which was facilitated at HMP Leicester and within the community) had significant positive effects on those who engaged with it in relation to well-being and supporting the desistance journey. The project found that engagement with art triggered feelings of hope and resilience and supported the building of trust and social skills which are all agreed to be so central to desistance as discussed earlier and so important for recovery and supporting people who are about to re-enter the community from a prison environment. Another central element to the success and impact of the project was how the project was delivered by the practitioners and the intentional development of human relationships that were non-judgemental, supportive and motivational, and where 'artists' (as those that were engaged with project were called to de-label and de-stigmatise) were given the freedom to be creative and empowered and felt listened to, respected, seen, and heard; again all of which are important elements and conditions to have to better support desistance (Atherton et al, 2022; Weaver and McNeil, 2015).

Another useful consideration when discussing the potential for art as an experience to support desistance is the need for the art engagement

to have a sustained approach to be able to have longer term impact on personal change and growth and desist from criminal behaviour (Cheliotis & Jordanoska, 2016). Nugent and Schinker (2016) have pointed out that the desistance journey is not linear and is a difficult journey hence the coining of the phrase 'the pains of desistance.' It therefore makes sense that to effectively support desistance for people who have committed crime and or are at risk of doing so there must be consistent provision that provides support through the difficulty and pains within the journey of desistance or there is likely risk of relapse and returning to criminal behaviour.

Ultimately, it is obvious from the literature discussed above that art can offer powerful transformation that supports positive well-being and desistance (Atherton et al, 2022). There is perhaps even a human need to engage with art and the creativity, expression, and freedom that it can provide and that this should be available to those that live in prison too. Sparks et al (2011: p10) agree and propose that:

"For prisoners, just as for everyone else, art is first and foremost an opportunity to engage with our own humanity and with our potential for growth and development. In this sense, access to artistic expression in prison is, in some senses, as much a human rights issue as a pragmatic or instrumental one about best how to engage people in changing their lives for the better."



Project Approach & Design



“The principles of true art is not to portray, but to evoke.”

JERZY KOSINSKI

The Creative Roots project aimed to provide an important opportunity to engage with art within a prison setting and wanted to offer the men involved a chance to create, to express themselves, and to have the sense of freedom that art can provide. The hope was that such art experiences alongside elements of play and mindfulness would support better well-being for the men, even if it was for the duration of the project. The whole project was based on the foundation of principles of creating an environment where the men felt able to speak and create and ultimately be listened to, heard, and respected.

It is not surprising therefore that there was a strong need to create and develop a research design that captured the impact of the project in a similar inclusive way that supported the inclusion and voice of the men involved. In fact, it was an ethical necessity that this was achieved. The ethical considerations for the Creative Roots project were submitted through the HMPPS ethical process and were agreed through an ethics panel and went through an appropriate and robust consideration and scrutiny. The ethical guidelines used to inform this research were from the [British Society of Criminology \(2015\)](#) which are well respected and widely used within criminology research in the UK. Ultimately, the research approach ensured that there was no risk of causing harm and made sure there was clear informed consent and that all participants remained anonymous and were aware of the right to withdraw from being a participant in the research at any time. All participants where possible will be engaged with following the publication of this report and the impact, findings, and recommendations for future

practice will be shared both verbally with the men and in writing with printed copies of this report being available to them.

Criminology research has a growing commitment to more ethically supporting those that are involved in research as participants so that the research is ‘with’ participants and not simply done ‘on’ them or ‘to’ them and creates a much more ‘storytelling’ process which respects the participant and gives them the space to be listened to and heard ([Carr, et al., 2015](#); [Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016](#)). The core element of importance here is about the ethical need to share power and support real and non-tokenistic participation in prison settings where there is focus on the building of relationships, sharing an understanding of why and how the research is being done, and empowering participants to better understand their situation, lives, and reflect on how to act on such information for personal growth ([Farell et al, 2021](#)). Indeed, such approaches are often associated with transformational learning, where through the telling of their experiences participants identify their own learning, new goals, and new identities and future directions ([Zimmerman, 2013](#)). This approach therefore has been seen as a methodology that can build ‘strength’ in the participants and due to this could be coined as a ‘strength-based approach’ to research ([Dybicz, 2011](#)).

[Gordon \(2020\)](#) add further credibility to the need for a storytelling approach for this project and they assert that when working alongside vulnerable groups and communities story telling is a powerful tool for listening and supporting such groups as it builds rapport and allows people to feel comfortable.

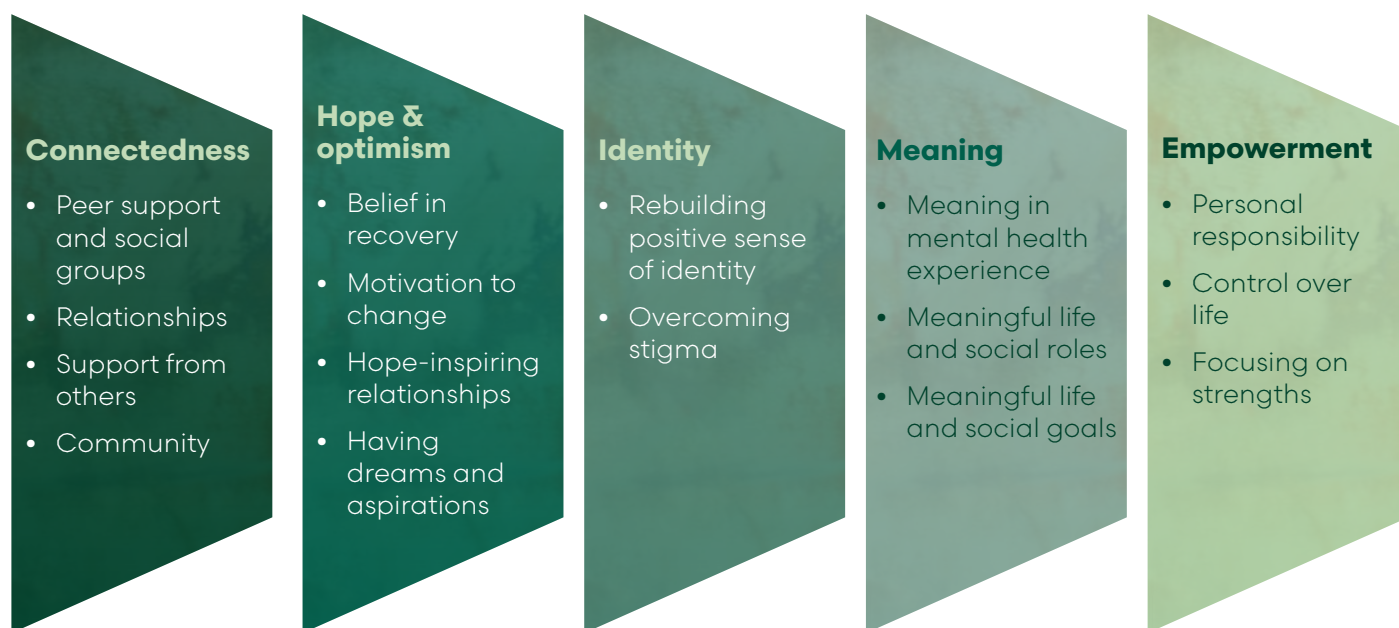
What is quite clear when reflecting on the use of storytelling as a methodology is that the process and impact of supporting a space for participants to speak and be listened to achieves significant positive experiences and development. Storytelling can support increased social opportunities, reflection that can support positive personal growth and new identities and life goals, and feelings of shared power and empowerment that all contributes in developing the ‘strength’ of that person. All of these positive changes in the person relate directly to the key elements of

what is needed to support desistance and support the transformation to new positive identities and positive life aspirations. In this sense, the approach to the research for the Creative Roots project was part of the learning experience of the project and supported the aims, purposes and outcomes of the project. It was therefore part of the desistance and well-being 'intervention' and experience.

The method for listening to the experiences of the project were through the use of informal focus groups and these were facilitated with the men who engaged with the project, the prison staff, and the Creative Roots project artists. The 'main' focus of the project was however the impact on the men who live in prison. As is often the case with such vulnerable groups they often do not have opportunity or support in having their voices to be heard and so informal focus groups are a useful method that really supports the opportunity to listen to the experiences of vulnerable people and for them to feel listened to and heard (Sim & Waterfield, 2019).

The focus groups were informally structured using the aforementioned CHIME framework as a basis to discuss well-being and how they had experienced their well-being throughout the art project. The CHIME framework was chosen due to its relatedness to important factors needed for desistance and that it had been used successfully recently by Atherton et al (2022) within a, arts project in a prison setting and so clearly 'worked well.' The components of CHIME are viewed as the key elements that every person needs to feel a whole healthy person and therefore these being present in a positive way in someone's life are essential for recovery, whether that be for mental health as first envisaged, or now as widely used, for recovery and rehabilitation from criminal activity and the experiences of being engaged within the criminal justice system. The CHIME framework developed by Leamy et al (2011) as stated earlier is acronym for Connectedness, Hope and Optimism, Identity (changes to/of), Meaning (to self, mental health, others, goals), and Empowerment, Choice, and control (over one's life) and this is captured visually below.

The CHIME framework for personal recovery





Essentially, the research aim was to explore if engaging with experiences of yoga, mindfulness, and art practices (that the Creative Roots project offered) had any positive influence and effect on the well-being and health of the men engaged with the project. Focus groups were also facilitated with the prison staff involved with the project and the artists that led the project to gain their insights and experiences and to explore their ideas and learning for future work of this kind in prison settings.

As well as using focus groups the lead researcher was also drawn to an emerging method of capturing the narratives and stories of participants that they used previously called 'Pictorial Narrative Mapping' which uses the focus group narratives to guide hand drawn art graphics of the discussions

and stories being shared within focus groups ([Lapum et al., 2015](#)). It seemed fitting that an arts project utilised an art-based method within its design and just added to the overall value and visual impact of the project and this report (as will be illustrated in the analysis section).

During the project eight focus groups were facilitated with the men who engaged with the project with 33 men who lived in prison taking part. One focus group was facilitated with prison staff comprising of four people and the focus group with Creative Roots project team had six participants.

Analysis of Well-Being and the Project



“Art is restoration: the idea is to repair the damages that are inflicted in life, to make something that is fragmented – which is what fear and anxiety do to a person – into something whole.”

LOUISE BOURGEOIS

Being treated as and feeling fully human

The conversations with the men who engaged with the project over the nine months illustrated the challenging reality of living in prison. However, these conversations also gave clear and powerful insights into the humanity that exists in prison and how, when treating those who live in prison with respect, dignity, and as fully human, it can create an environment for change and personal growth. The impact of this project must be stated with balance and caution, so as to not making too grand a claim of the outcomes for this project and to ensure that the narratives shared within this report are accurate, realistic, and trustworthy. Despite this, it is not over-stating the impact of this project to propose that it provided excellent opportunities for personal growth and greater self-respect and hope and belief that change was possible. It was clear to all involved in facilitating this project that there were overall improvements in well-being for all the participants. The narratives listened to through using the CHIME model as a reference for conversation captured this powerfully and these are discussed and illustrated below using direct quotes from the men who engaged with the Creative Roots project and using the Narrative Map graphics drawn by the narrative artist.

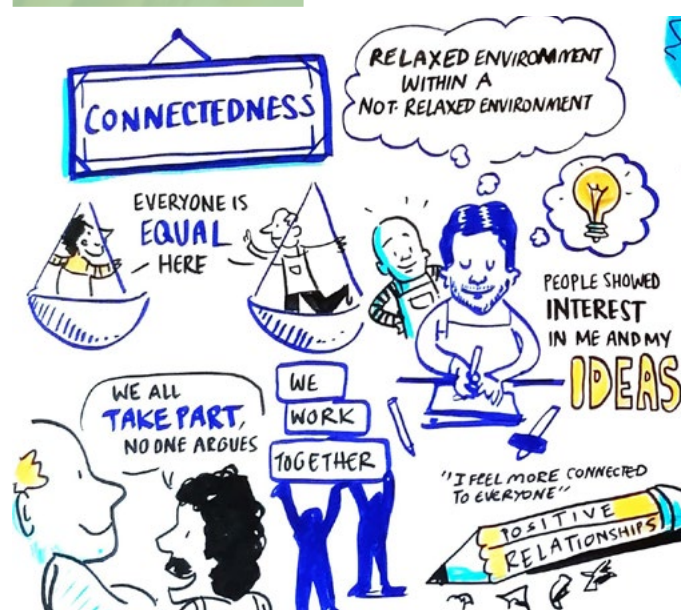
Feeling connected and sense of community

All the men who engaged with the project started to feel greater connection to each other and the artists from Creative Roots. The men during the focus groups said that the project had ‘helped me make friends & feel comfortable’ and that we are ‘all different but it’s brought us all together.’ Indeed, it was clear that positive social connections with peers and ‘being with different people that are not from here is positive’ has supported the men to build ‘positive relationships and I can be myself. I’m relaxed here.’ Almost all the men stated that they ‘feel respected here and treated as a human’ within the project and many stated they didn’t feel valued or respected in the prison most of the time.

So, clearly the experience of feeling part of a community and connected to others in meaningful and positive pro-social relationships with a shared purpose was enjoyed and appreciated. The relationships that were created were based on mutual respect, support, and a sense of equality and non-judgment, and perhaps the main theme here is that such relationships impact on the men with a feeling that they were being treated as human and not a criminal or prisoner and therefore connecting with others as a human stripped of negative stigma and labelling.

Positive relationships & I can be myself. I’m relaxed here.

I feel respected here & I feel human



Weekly Hope and Optimism

The men also spoke of increased hope and optimism during and following the project with many explaining that they had 'opened up and want to try new things' and how because they had been 'treated differently, that's given me hope, hope we can be seen and treated differently to how we normally are' and that 'I don't feel like a prisoner and I feel that I won't always be.' Behaviour change during the project was also noted with many stating that 'I just feel more optimistic for the week' and that 'it gave new meaning and hope to an otherwise quite negative world' and so 'I made sure I kept my behaviour tidy as I didn't want anyone to take this away from me.' During the exhibition in prison many of the men who had engaged talked about how since the project ended they were feeling 'Fucking buzzing this morning. I'm so happy, proud, & I feel full' about their time on it and how they were proud of what they had achieved looking at all the work in the exhibition. The project had given the men hope and optimism that they could achieve and complete a programme of activity and create art work; one person stated: 'Knowing I can and have done this when they tell you that you can't so often. Well look at me now!'

Therefore, providing opportunities for engagement with art created hope in the immediacy and within the short-term duration of the project but interestingly it also provided hope and optimism in the longer term where those who engaged knew they could achieve in the future if they were committed and there was a clear 'after-glow' effect from their participation. This has obvious implications for how informal art-based opportunities can increase positive behaviour of men who live in prison in the short term and longer term where it could be argued it not only creates hope and optimism but aspiration to learn more and as discussed earlier, aspiration for education can be a key 'hook' for change towards desistance and 'non-criminal' identities.

You treat us differently, that's given me hope, hope we can be seen & treated differently to how we normally are



Developing elements of new identities & re-engaging with vulnerability

The way that the men viewed themselves and their identity changed throughout the project. Many spoke of how they could see themselves in more a positive light and that 'I can be more myself here and I'm not just a criminal' and others clearly enjoyed being a learner and stated that 'I'm treated as a pupil and as an equal not a prisoner.' Indeed, not being seen as a criminal and almost needing to act in a certain way in prison to survive is captured well by one man who said 'I can take my mask off once I'm here. I don't have to look tough or kind of, you know, you have to be a certain way out there. You can't be vulnerable out there.' So, for many letting go of a prisoner identity in the daily life of prison was very positive and many stated how the project had supported greater freedom and that 'It's about exploring and trying new things and not feeling embarrassed or defensive. I've just let my guard down.'

Some of those that engaged also spoke passionately about developing current identities as fathers, and before the project some men felt they couldn't do much with their children but following learning about art techniques and creating their own art they could 'be a better dad now and do this with my kids. I never thought I'd do this sort of thing. It's great.'

You could see the confidence grow within the groups and some of the men really took on supporting roles to their peers and some of those felt that they could progress with a peer support role in the future as 'I've loved this, I've loved supporting people, I'd love to teach others.' So, for some, the experience of learning and supporting others in the project created an opportunity to develop and aspire to a new potential identity, of being a peer mentor and teacher. The formation of new prosocial and positive identities are closely aligned to successful desistance journeys and illustrates some of the potential of offering informal art-based projects within prison & community settings.



I can be a better dad now & do this with my kids. I never thought I'd do this sort of thing. It's great.

I can take my mask off once I'm here. I don't have to look tough or kind of, you know, you have to be a certain way out there. You can't be vulnerable out there



I'm bettering myself with this. It's become more than the art.

It's like a health pill. I feel better about myself. I feel calmer. I feel more human. I feel alive.

Developing new meaning to self, socialisation, and better mental health

The arts experiences also gave greater meaning to the people who took part and many felt that 'I'm bettering myself with this. It's become more than the art.' Some of the men expanded on this and explained that they felt they had 'been challenged to think differently' and that 'It's helped my mental health. I'm less anxious. I can calm myself down with breathing.' The support it gave to the men to feel mentally more positive was clear and one of the men stated that the project has been 'like a health pill. I feel better about myself. I feel calmer. I feel more human. I feel alive.' All the men engaged spoke of how positive it was to do something new and different and that it had ignited something in them and they were 'hungry to learn more and do other projects. It feels so good to learn and to do new things.'

Greater Choice, Control, and Freedom

The experiences over the course of the project all contributed to the men feeling they had more choice and control over their lives whilst engaging in it and that this had a positive impact on behaviour and commitment to the learning. One resident who openly talked of how anti-

establishment he was said, that 'I had choice and respect so I didn't rebel. I had control over my learning' whilst another stated 'We have choice here, I'm free to decide. I love that freedom.' There were other elements to the project that included breathing, meditation, yoga, and mindfulness and many found this really useful for self-control and that 'the breathing and calming mind stuff. I've new skills to help my mental health and anger' and another person agreed and said that 'It's helped my ADHD, slowed me down, helped my focus, my self-control.'



The breathing and calming mind stuff. I've new skills to help my mental health & anger

It's helped my ADHD, slowed me down, helped my focus, my self-control

Choice & respect so I didn't rebel. I had control over my learning

Therefore, providing educational opportunities that offer choice and freedom as well as those that have a therapeutic element can be useful in supporting those who engage to feel generally more empowered and gain greater self-agency in terms of general life experiences and those related to overall well-being and mental health.



Artist Experiences of the Project

The artist team for Creative Roots all had a variety and deep mix of expertise and creative experiences and within the team there were specific elements they all brought to the project. The team had creative teaching expertise in terms of the project in fine art, print making, photography, performance art, theatre and spoken word, as well as yoga, meditation, and mindfulness. The two co-project leads also had significant experience in managing, leading, and delivering projects with some experience of working within prison contexts. Many of the Creative Roots team had not worked within or been within a prison environment previous to the start of the project. It is important to note that across the diverse expertise and identities of the Creative Roots team there were obviously some individual and unique experiences but there were also some clear, strong, and common experiences and narratives to emerge during focus group discussions and within the project facilitation more generally.

Overall Feelings, Evaluation, and learning from the project

Many of the team had not worked within a prison environment before and so were quite nervous about entering such an environment and were worried what effects it might have on their ability and skill to teach, engage, and do the project justice. One artist said 'Initially I was quite scared and apprehensive as the environment feels so strange but I got used to it, sort of, and realised we were not part of that order and disorder but we were offering something else and we created choice, a safe space for expression and non-judgement.' Another artist agreed and stated that 'it is one of the hardest places I've ever worked and absolutely terrified me at the start and I was worried about working with residents but deeply wanted to see them as people, and I did, and it was powerful. I realise I had a lot of misconceptions and stereotypes of what people are like who live in prison and yeah, what criminals are like, but they are more than that it you create spaces for the to be more than that.'

The impact that the project had on the artists was powerful and there was a real sense and depth to their attachment to the project, the men involved, and the whole power for positive change that had been created by the project. One artist felt that 'I don't feel it's over and the men and the staff need to have it back' whilst another said 'It is clear that there is smouldering humanitarian crisis in our prisons and I can't let it go' and this clear human connectivity is captured well when one artist felt that 'boundaries blurred in some ways and it was a strength and gave power to the project, the experience, it was real, we were real' whilst another artist responded and agreed 'I don't know, I want more, and how it will evolve I'm not sure but there is more to come.'

The environment for all the artists was clearly challenging and there was a psychological and emotional toll from the project and one artist explained that 'the environment feels chaotic and so much noise, movement, thoughts, and it was intense and I worried I wouldn't cope but I did and despite all of this I have an immense amount of love for colleagues, residents, staff and boundary-less love and feelings, and this is positive in my opinion.' Another stated that 'getting close to residents and showing my own self and vulnerability was powerful and emotionally exhausting, but worth it' and another agreed and was thankful that 'there was space to debrief and reflect after each session as I was psychologically and emotionally challenged every day.'

The project was facilitated over nine months and so there was also self-acknowledgement for all of the team that they needed to detach and have a break from the intensity of creating and facilitating such a project, one artist captured the pull of the work but the need to move away when they said 'I'm ready to detach and not ready for it to be over either and although it's the end of the project in one way, this has left residue, and I have a relationship with residents and staff' whilst another explained that 'I need a break, I need to not be in that environment for a while, I can feel it still in me, I want to do more, but for now I just need to completely detach for a while, for my own health and head space.'

The impact of the project for everyone involved within the team was clear and during reflective discussion during the focus group, which was

facilitated in the Newport exhibition space, this was powerfully evident. One artist looked around at the art on the walls and some leaning up against a wall and pointed around 'These paintings, the art here, they are people, they represent more than the art' and another artist joined in 'it was an experience that goes beyond representation in the painting' and another agreed 'Yes, creativity held the space and it is why they trusted us and our expertise and this allowed for deeper conversations, all whilst doing the art. We gained their trust' the team all agreed and another added 'Our status, in the lion's den as it were, allowed us to use a needed flexible approach and it was clear we were not part of G4S or the education team, we were seen as artists asking if they wanted to engage, there was real choice in every session, and they loved and thrived with that.' The art was agreed to be the medium that unlocked the person and an artist felt that 'we focused on the art and the artist identity and not the criminal identity and it worked, you could see them relax, and be themselves' and 'So, despite their crime I love the person and I understood them and respected them, and I felt that they felt that, they felt human again.'

There was a sense in the discussion that there was an unlocking or releasing the men to feel they could trust and talk and simply be themselves devoid of a criminal identity or prisoner stigma and that this was one of the main outcomes of the project and it's process and approach. There were many points raised in relation to this but one artist seemed to capture all that was expressed when they made the conclusion that:

"The whole culture of lock them up and make it safe needs to be challenged and all people working in this space need to know that rehabilitation and supporting positive change doesn't work like that. There needs to be a change to focusing on positive opportunities that offer social interactions, trying new things, talking in groups, and being treated with respect and as a full human and not just a criminal who is a risk."

There was also a realisation and observation that many of the prison officers and some of the more senior prison staff didn't really understand and or fully support the project and it's way of working. One artist commented that 'the system is hard and it is intense and so I understand why the staff

were a bit closed off to this' and another felt that 'the whole system is about control and stopping movement and perceived risk and harm and you can see, and we've heard that a lot of the prison staff just see their role like this and that the men are perhaps not worthy or in need of opportunities like art and having fun. It worrying as how do you support rehabilitation if you don't do things like this.'

The team reflected on the exhibition in the prison and one explained how during the project and in getting the work ready for the exhibition 'we all felt a commitment to protecting their work and making sure it was not edited or censored and this was our ethical and moral obligation and this was hard at times with the safeguarding and risk management in the prison, but we did it.' Another artist agreed and said 'it's so important that the integrity of the residents' work was protected and this was an extension of the respect for them and their hard work, so they were involved in photo editing and cropping.' The discussion relating to the exhibition day was emotional and one artist shared that 'we did the exhibition and it was so powerful and you could see the impact on those that took part and their peers were all so proud of them, it just didn't feel like a prison that day, it felt like a gallery or something.'

Finally, there was one element of the project that didn't really fulfil its potential from the perspective of the Creative Roots team and that was relating to the mentoring element within the project. All of the team felt that it perhaps was not supported as well as it could have been from the prison staff but there was also a feeling that the role of mentor on-top of the already challenging environment of prison was too much for some of the mentors, especially as some were dealing with recovery from substance use and addiction and mental health challenges. One artist reflected that 'the desistance journey is complex, difficult and challenging – we had residents who are amazing and were going to be mentors and they had not taken substances for 8 weeks and then week 9 they did and it feel apart for them a bit and they couldn't be a mentor, and it just gutted them, it was upsetting.' There was general agreement that mentors needed significant support to be able to carry out their roles effectively, and safely for them and their own health and well-being. It was also discussed how 'falling down and messing up, is

part of recovery, part of rehabilitation, it's part of life and so, they shouldn't be so hard on themselves nor should the prison' and again many felt that 'we just needed more time, more time to be with them and support them.'

Reflections and narratives relating to well-being

All of the Creative Roots team believed and shared their reflections and observations of how well-being was enhanced for the men over the duration of the project and that all men in some way felt greater human connection, hope, positive developments to their identity, greater meaning in some aspects of their life and in terms of their mental health, and that all this meant that there were the 'roots' of what could be called empowerment.

Indeed, the team felt a great sense of connectedness to the men and some of the staff and could see that there were positive social connections made in the same way with the men who engaged with project. One artist reflected that 'the space became a forum for more than the art, we discussed life and aspirations and challenges, it was really quite therapeutic' whilst another found that 'there was a real sense of community throughout the project and everyone really did get on' and also that there were 'just such lovely human interactions and connections.' All of the team agreed that 'it's clear more of this is needed and education or experiences that help social connection and it is starting too late in their journey, it's needed from the beginning.'

There was also an interesting experience and narrative from one of the artists relating to gender identities and sexualities who stated that 'I think that our team, being really mixed in terms of gender, binary and post-binary, as well as the neurodivergence was interesting and I never felt that the sessions with residents were heteronormative and although there was a little 'blokeyness' it was never an issue and my identities never felt threatened.' It was also commented that a transgender-person took part in the project and never experienced discrimination whilst participating in the project despite believing and being told by prison staff that such discrimination was common place in prison. When asked why they thought this happened the response was that 'the project supported all of us to just get to know

each other as people, as humans, and this was front and centre above all other identities.'

The Creative Roots team also witnessed increased hope and optimism amongst the men who engaged with the project, where 'you could feel the buzz in the prison the days we were in and 'within' the men and the excitement they felt and their peers would pop in and say hi and showed a real interest' and that 'It was a highlight in their week for sure, something to focus on in their world.' The arts team felt the project offered a different experience to the normal, where 'prison feels a hopeless place, it eats itself and makes everything worse, this project offered a bit of light and hope to this world' and that 'we had chats about how the present is temporary and that there can be positive futures, the men opened up about getting out and living a better life.' Ultimately, though there was the understanding from the arts team that the project had 'created short term hope and optimism but now they are back with nothing or very little, it's sad, you can tell they need it' and that 'they need more opportunities, not just art, to create and maintain hope, and where are any of us if we don't have hope.'

Within the focus group with the Creative Roots team, we also discussed the idea of the identity and identities of the men who took part in the project. The team all believed and saw that the 'art was a gateway to self and it supported them to peel of their shell and armour that they wore out there to protect themselves but it also was still the criminal identity. The art meant they could not be the criminal for a few hours each week.' It was acknowledged that 'most did not become artists but everyone expanded themselves and grew in self-esteem, confidence, and this might contribute to their future life decisions and pathways' and 'the way we talked about life and how they opened up about their lives it seemed like by doing this they created new versions and narratives of their past and for some this meant that they could see new futures.' So, although the project didn't create new artists it did start something within the residents, new ideas, new experiences of possible new parts of old and future selves and all of the project team believed strongly that 'you need more positive social opportunities to build new ways, new identities, it should be core first steps not just the odd nine week add on. This isn't fluffy stuff this is the key to human-ness and it's very important for positive change and the rehabilitation to new selves.'

New meanings to self, others, and own mental health and well-being were also seen to develop with the men who engaged with project. The project took place across a number of different wings and one of the artists pointed out that 'on the hardest wing, where it felt very heavy and hopeless when we started we were told that during the project mental health was better with lower rates of self-harm and substance use. That hit hard. It made a difference to the pain they were feeling and how they dealt with it.'

The artist team also found that because 'we treated them with respect and gave opportunity of choice and a process of decision making' and so 'we worked with not on them or too them, they were partners in learning, it was a different relationship to what they are used to.' The artist team concluded that the way and approach of working with and alongside the residents was powerful to how they developed meaning within the project, meaning to how they were being treated, how they were equal partners in the process, and the effects this had were powerful and as one artist evaluated 'it may have been a short-term motivation or experience that made mental health lessen and people to feel more positive, but it was powerful, imagine if there was more of this in all prisons, what could it do for longer term mental health.'



Ultimately, everyone in the Creative Roots team felt and thought that the project was empowering and achieved this through treating people with respect, by giving people choice and the freedom to create, and by creating a non-judgemental community of learners where people could talk openly and reflect on their lives, both past and future. One artist stated that there were 'some real moments of self-reflection and openness and honesty and had life affirming and self-awareness of past mistakes and decisions' whilst another reflected that 'a human will find it where they can and sometimes this cannot be a positive choice, this project gave them a positive choice to engage and take some empowerment in their lives. They did, it worked, you could see them become more empowered and confident in their choices.' The consensus was that 'they need more opportunities like this and more time where they are treated as real people, full humans, not criminals and they can experience the possibilities of what they could become' and that 'it's not beyond projects like this to change people's lives but it needs longevity to have any chance to do this. This was so positive but it was a patch on a much bigger problem and issue.'

The prison system was often seen a blocker to such empowerment and the artists found that 'there is a real nervousness about supporting any type

of freedom like with this project where residents could move around as it's easier to rule by lock and key and make things secure but that's not rehabilitation is it' and suggested that what was needed was 'a complete rethink about what prisons should be doing to actually support rehabilitation because it currently isn't working.'

In summary, there was a cautious, balanced and weighted belief for all artists that the project achieved deep, positive and powerful experiences for the men who engaged and supported the increase of their well-being. However, there was also the strong belief that despite such powerful impact it was only a short term 'outcome' that was present for the duration of the project, and for some a short-term after the project had ended. Ultimately, the artists believe that the project gave some respite from a restrictive and demanding world where the men could feel safe and not be seen as a criminal or a prisoner and find opportunities to connect with others and just seen as a human, to be listened to, heard, and have choice, and learn new ways of being and just be creative and play; ultimately it perhaps gave everyone some hope for the future and for positive future selves. All of the artists felt and experienced the men who engaged as highly creative, capable, and willing to learn and take chances in their learning journey; it inspired all of the artists and



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impacted on their future work as an artist and on the want to continue working within this space and that more opportunities like this were a necessity within prison environments.

Prison Support Staff Experiences of the Project

The prison support staff that were involved in the focus group was not a full representation of the overall support staff involved in the project, and it also did not include any of the prison officers that were present and managing the various wings of the prison when the project was running its art sessions. Therefore, the narratives and experiences captured here are not a full reflection of the experiences of all staff involved or who supported the project in some way. The four staff members who took part in the focus group all had a strong rehabilitation focus to their role. The overarching narrative from the staff involved was that the Creative Roots project was a powerful experience for the men who engaged and offered positive development of well-being aligned to the CHIME framework and that such opportunities are needed more frequently within prison settings to support longer term health, well-being, and rehabilitation and desistance.

Overall Feelings, Evaluation, and learning from the project

The staff involved in the focus group were 'blown away by the Creative Roots team' and stated that 'you need high quality, interested, and an invested project team as the Creative Roots team were, they were so positive with us, prison officers, wing managers, and most importantly the residents.' When discussing what high quality meant for those who facilitate projects like the Creative Roots project it was offered that practitioners 'need a focus on positive relationships and strong collaboration across all involved' and that there was a need for an 'informal approach and credible 'real' practitioners' who 'showed genuine interest in residents and treated them as fully human.'

It was clear that the project had impacted on the staff involved in the focus group and they stated that 'we need more of this and more investment needed as there is not enough' and anyone can see 'it makes a huge difference, the project and the exhibition were such a success and so positive

and seeing all the smiles, happiness, and impact on people was immense.' The staff spoke about how challenging and at times depressing, working within a prison environment can be and that work like this 'makes you realise why you work in this space as it's hard but these projects make it worth it and you know you are supporting and part of positive change.' Indeed, the project was discussed as having essential experiences for supporting desistance and that 'we need more of this as it is so important for rehabilitation the opportunity to try and learn new talents' and that 'the system needs to focus more on this approach and recognise its need as core for rehabilitation.' There was strong agreement that the 'leadership and management within prisons need to see and understand this type of work more and education and training is needed to achieve this' and that 'prison staff need to buy into this more and support the residents and show interest during such projects as they should be part of the rehabilitation journey and approach too.' To achieve such learning the suggestion was that 'we need to create a community of this type of work and support staff across prison to understand the work and approach.'

Much like the evaluation and experiences of the Creative Roots team, the staff felt that the mentoring element of the project could have gone more successfully and that there was some clear learning from this. One member of staff suggested that there 'needed to be more buy-in from the prison in terms of resident mentor freedom so they felt like a mentor and were trusted in their roles' and another agreed and stated they also needed 'more support, training, staff contact and increased wider service support that helped them deal with their well-being, like for substance issues.' Another staff member reflected and stated that 'the mentors did so well and it was positive but they felt the pressure perhaps of the role and it was near Christmas, so a hard time for many, and so two out of three relapsed in their substance use and so this needs greater thought for future work.'

Finally, the staff team commented on how the project had been 'such a breath of fresh air for everyone' and that more of this was needed but that it was also a challenging time for the Creative Roots team and so it was essential to build into future work more of a 'checking in and making sure everyone is healthy and well and supporting reflective spaces for debrief and learning.'

Reflections and narratives relating to well-being

The staff team also talked passionately about how the project had created positive impact on the men involved in respect of their well-being and as with the previous focus group, to shape the discussion, the CHIME model themes were used to facilitate conversation.

Interestingly, some of the team felt that some of the men had previously struggled to form positive relationships with other residents 'due to trauma but most did with the creative roots team and each other but not so much with the prison officers but then that is more usual.' All the team commented on how the residents could 'feel a real sense of community and that there was such genuine rapport with residents and the arts team.' The power of the connections also seemed to last for some and support ongoing positive behaviour with one member of staff reflecting that 'the human connection developed over the project meant that residents remembered and felt it during and after the project and so they carried this with them and they acted differently and more positively within the prison, even with punitive measures they could discuss it and not just react negatively.'

The positivity and energy of the project also carried through to those not involved in the project and all the team agreed that 'even those outside the project within the various wings all got closer as everyone was taking about the project and it supported new friendships' suggesting that projects such as this, once heard through those who experienced it, can create aspiration and motivation to want to be engaged in future opportunities, and in this was create hope for the future even when not directly involved; of course as one member of staff pointed out, 'now we have to make sure we run more projects like this to not let people down and we must act when people feel inspired as it is rare in prison.'

One staff member joined in with the discussion and added that 'so many are so tired of being let down but this project made them start to believe and hope again.' The hope and optimism the men felt meant that they 'felt lighter, they were just more positive and they were told they were good at something, they felt valued' and 'there was such positive praise of them that they started to believe

in themselves and you could see real growth.' And as previously highlighted, the staff team all noticed that 'they behaved more appropriately during the week so they could do the project and that sounds bad in a way but they enjoyed it so much they knew they couldn't be seen to being disruptive of they might have lost their participation' and that 'the positive effects of the project and the exhibition lasted for weeks with so much discussion about it, residents were so proud and positive' illustrating that when there is hope, human connection, and positive social engagement positive behaviour change is possible within prison.

Through the engagement with the project the staff team saw behavioural changes as captured above and together with this were small changes to the men's identities and how they saw themselves. One staff member said that 'most of the people hadn't experienced art or culture before and so it really impacted on them' and another that 'these opportunities are so important for growth and being someone different, trying on a new or different self for a while' and 'they recognised they had talents and it built new ways of being, maybe not new identities, but new skills and self-belief and esteem, so important in any positive identity.' There was strong agreement across the team that 'it certainly changed people and they were proud' and everyone agreed that some of the most impactful conversations they heard or had with the men who participated were 'the conversations we had about how they could see themselves doing art with their kids, or doing music more and maybe even becoming a musician, others loved supporting their peers and realised that they could help people and maybe even teach others' and the essence of this was how they started to be able to realise and aspire to new positive identities and lives, which as discussed earlier is so central to desistance and rehabilitation.

It is not a surprise that like the men involved and the Creative Roots team, the staff involved could see the men develop new meaning to themselves, the friendships they had, and to their own well-being and mental health. One staff member believed that the men 'realised that people do care about them and this meant they had meaning and values to others, so many asked if we could say thank you to those that attended the exhibition' and that during the project 'it really gave many residents purpose and focus

and this helped for mental health and substance use too.' The staff team could see a developing understanding from the men that by being engaged in the art project and doing something positive 'it started new aspirations maybe not for art but to be a better dad or engage with positive experiences as it helped their mental health and develop deeper friendships.'

Finally, the staff team also concluded that the whole experience of the project was one that offered empowerment and that participants felt greater choice, freedom, and self-worth during the project. The believed that the man felt greater control over their immediate environment within the project but also outside the project in being able to look forward to the project and use some of the mindfulness, yoga, and breathing techniques to support their own anger, anxiety, neurodiversity and mental health experiences. One team member stated that 'you could see the changes and people becoming proud of their work, for example, one resident invited his mum to the exhibition and this was the first time he asked her to visit him in prison because before he was so ashamed of himself' whilst another commented that 'you could see and the men said that they felt trusted and respected and this was powerful, you could see that their behaviours changes, they acted more appropriately' and another joined in stating that 'the respect element was huge and that residents often stating that they felt more human.' There was a consensus in the team that 'people started to believe they could change and everyone wanted to keep going and to keep having this experience.' Towards the end of this focus group one of the team captured perhaps the whole essence and value of the Creative Roots project in that 'the whole project was humanisation' and that such opportunities are needed within a prison environment that de-humanises and disempowers people.



Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Practice



"The work of art is a scream of freedom."

CHRISTO

The Creative Roots Project was an arts project funded by the Arts Council for Wales and G4S and was delivered in Parc Prison from September 2022 to May 2023. Creative Roots was delivered through a multi-skilled arts team under the performance, live art and dance organisation Mr & Mrs Clark. The Creative Roots project aimed to provide a safe space for residents of Parc Prison to take time out of their daily routine to engage in a range of activities on the prison wing. Creative Roots offered an introduction to yoga style mindfulness exercises and different ways of creating art, including printmaking, fine art and painting, and photo journalism. Everyone who took part displayed their artwork in an exhibition inside and outside the prison in May 2023.

Higher Plain was responsible for measuring the impact of the project and the research aim was to explore if engaging with experiences of art practices (that the Creative Roots project offered) as well as yoga, mindfulness, had any positive influence and effect on the well-being and health of the men engaged with the project. Informal focus groups were used to explore the general experiences of the arts project but also the five themes from the CHIME recovery model for mental health to better understand the overall narratives and the well-being of the men during and following their engagement with the project. As highlighted earlier, CHIME is an acronym for Connectedness, Hope and Optimism, Identity (changes to/of), Meaning (to self, mental health, others, goals), and Empowerment, Choice, and control (over one's life). Focus groups were also facilitated with the prison staff involved with the project and the artists that led the project.

Ultimately, the project did increase the feelings and experiences of well-being where those who engaged felt greater connectivity, hope, identity, meaning, and empowerment. It gave those involved an opportunity to take off the 'prisoner mask' and be more relaxed, more open, and creative, and in doing so the experiences and outcomes were positive and to a degree could be described as transformational.



Although this was a small-scale project in one prison it does have some useful learning and application to wider prison settings. It is likely that to support positive well-being for residents in prison, and to support their desistance and rehabilitation journey, that education provision should provide an environment that supports the development of informal discussion-based learning. These such environments support people to feel respected, have choice, have opportunity for creativity and expression, feel safe, and ultimately feel they are being treated as humans within a community and not just criminals and prisoners. There were also powerful experiences from engaging with and then practising yoga and mindfulness by the men who took part in the project, with many explaining how they would use it to support their well-being and gaining a calmness, clarity, and control over their thoughts and emotions when within their rooms when 'banged-up.'

This project also illustrated that art projects in prison can have powerful learning for artists and that it can support their own creative development, offer greater insights into the human condition, and challenge pre-conceived ideas of what a 'prisoner' is and acts like. Practitioners that work in prison also found the Creative Roots project and the approach to delivery powerful and provided clear learning on how art can support well-being of residents in prison and how respectful, genuine, and inclusive communication and relationships are a foundation for supporting residents to feel hope, connected, and empowered to want to change and commit to personal growth; essentially to feel fully human and to be 'humanised.'

Finally, it was also clear that projects like Creative Roots, where there is so much genuine care and commitment to residents in prison, as well as being within the prison, that it is an emotional, physical, and psychological challenging environment and so those involved in such work need to focus on their own well-being and use reflective practice and peer support to effectively manage these experiences.

Learning and Recommendations for Future Practice

- 1) Art is a powerful well-being and human experience when supported inclusively and effectively and should be developed more widely in prison settings.
- 2) There should be regular provision for residents in prison to engage with informal education that offers creative spaces and opportunities that support pro-social peer and non-prison practitioner engagement, freedom of expression, choice, and the development of new experiences and skills.
- 3) Yoga and mindfulness practice can be a powerful tool for well-being, self-agency, and emotional and psychological regulation and control and could be an important element to recovery, rehabilitation, and desistance to residents in prison settings.
- 4) Human-centred relationships that focus on developing trust, respect, compassion, understanding, and genuineness should be the approach to practice for all of the workforce within prison environments.
- 5) The CHIME model is a useful framework for understanding well-being of residents in prison and could be used more extensively within prison and community settings.
- 6) Reflective Practice should be used with all practitioners that work and deliver projects within prison settings to support their own well-being and this should be practiced individually and in group contexts to offer peer support.
- 7) Training and induction for all practitioners that deliver projects within prison settings should include support for practitioner well-being.
- 8) There needs to be longer term art projects in prisons and research to explore the longer-term potential for art being a significant element for successful rehabilitation and desistance.

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“Creativity gives hope that there can be a worthwhile idea.”

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Appendix I: Pictorial Narrative Map for Residents who engaged with project



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Appendix II: Pictorial Narrative Map for Project leads & Staff



Visual by Eleanor Beer 2023 ©

