

CREATIVE EXPLORERS: FACILITATING FAMILY CREATIVITY AND WELLBEING

Islington Heritage is a local authority heritage service in north London. We run a diverse, creative and community focussed engagement programme for local families designed around our institutional aim: to use heritage to make Islington a happier, healthier and fairer place to live.

SUMMARY

Creative Explorers was a collaborative research project delivered in partnership with arts organisation All Change, House of Illustration and other selected wellbeing partners. It explored different models of working to effectively deliver tailored workshops for families experiencing mental health challenges.

We spent six months co-developing the project, working with clinical psychologists, clinical commissioners who commission services in health settings, artists, a peer ambassador and cultural partners.

Through desk research, meetings with external experts, training and steering groups we explored:

- models of working
- safeguarding
- sector priorities
- creative outputs
- referral routes
- evaluation structure

We consequently developed a 10-week pilot project of weekly workshops split across two cultural sites, Islington Museum and the House of Illustration. Each workshop lasted from 11am - 2pm and included a free lunch. The workshops were co-developed by the artists and the cultural site. They used diverse creative approaches, including illustration, model building, messy play, light installations, music production and spoken word as conduits to help families explore and respond to collections.

Families were referred to the project through local children's centres, schools, mental health services and refuges. The project was over-subscribed. We worked with 11 families, nine of whom completed the 10 weeks. Families had to have one child under five, but older children were also welcome. We chose to do this because we felt that our venue has a lot to offer for families with under 5s – a safe space, in-house early years expertise and good access.

The project was evaluated by the University of West London using baseline questionnaires, workshop observations, interviews and a visual matrix. The project learning was also captured by an illustrator.



AIMS AND GOALS

For our organisation

Our organisational aims were to:

- discover if we could deliver such projects
- build sustainable referral routes
- update safeguarding structures
- experiment with workshop structures
- experiment with evaluation
- co-develop and co-deliver with other creative and wellbeing partners
- work alongside peer ambassadors.

For our audience

Islington Heritage's family programme is focused on early intervention. In this project, we wanted to support families facing mental health challenges to:

- access our venues
- build relationships with staff
- spend quality time together, in a safe space, taking risks and building positive memories
- explore their creativity
- develop new skills
- build networks of support
- improve their sense of wellbeing.

Our goal was that the families would ultimately feel comfortable accessing our core programmes.



OUTCOMES

The project was challenging due to its complexity, but we learnt lots!

For our organisation

We developed successful relationships with a wide range of family organisations who:

- continue to refer families to our programmes
- are potential future project partners and funders
- challenge and support us to adapt to meet local needs.

We discovered the opportunities and limitations posed by our venues and structures, so we now know how best to:

- practically develop and deliver such projects in terms of timings, locations, age-range, workshop length, staffing and safeguarding. For example, a longer workshop, including lunch, was successful for us as it gave us flexibility to meet families' needs and gave time for the families to build relationships with one another and staff.
- structure sustainable referral routes - we recruited families through local children's services and health services. Therefore we knew the families' needs in advance and were able to discuss with referrers how best to accommodate these.
- collaborate with artists
- evaluate
- recruit, manage and pay peer ambassadors - we worked with adult social services to advertise the opportunity and recruit the right candidate.

For our audience

The participating families:

- visited new venues
- built relationships with staff and other local families
- spent quality time together learning new skills, being creative and communicating positively with one another
- went outside their comfort zone and challenged themselves
- improved their sense of mental wellbeing. continually remarket the project depending on our audience and learnt to speak our cultural, families' and wellbeing partners' languages.

We did this through attending training courses such as Mental Health First Aid. But most useful was spending time with partners from other sectors in structured meetings learning about their priorities, challenges and interests, unpicking jargon and sharing expertise. This was free as partners committed to sharing their expertise as part of their partnership agreements.

LESSONS LEARNT

- Ensure a long lead-in time for real collaboration, organisational change and recruitment of families and partners
- Collaborate with cultural and wellbeing partners, but be prepared to listen, learn and bend. Continually question partners about their language, assumptions, priorities and processes.
- Co-develop creative content with peer ambassadors, artists and the cultural venue. The peer ambassador could share their lived experience of mental health, our artist contributed new creative approaches, while the cultural venues had expert knowledge of their collections and venues. Sharing this expertise meant we created a richer project, which better met participant needs, and ensured artistic excellence and new learning for the venues.
- Recruit families from multiple agencies and designate a single person to be their liaison point. This was a relationship building project so we needed to constantly communicate with participants. We found texts and phone calls worked best.
- Ensure the project doesn't negatively impact upon participants' wellbeing and ensure next steps are carefully planned, clearly defined and supported
- Plan for the project team's training needs and emotional wellbeing, recognising they will be under emotional stress

TOP TIP

Ensure a long development phase to build effective referral routes and enable opportunities for risk-taking and open-ended co-development with partners.

BUDGET

The project was free for participants.

The delivery of the project cost roughly £8,500 but could have been delivered much more cheaply if needed. This covered partner management costs, artist fees, peer ambassador costs, refreshments and materials. We spent six months planning the project with partners. Staff costs were covered by core funding and health partners contributed their time for free.

FUNDING

The project was funded, as one part of a larger complex research projects around mental health provision, through the Arts Council England's Museum Resilience Fund.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Look out for the full project evaluation in April 2018.

This case study was written by Rebecca Campbell-Gay, Heritage Education Officer at Islington Museum.

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