

Summary of findings

Research conducted by Manchester University Business School

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## **Creative START 50+**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Creative START service began operating in January 2007 and is geared towards those in the local community aged 50 plus. It expands the offering of the START in Salford arts project to older people. This project runs arts based training, educational and cultural activity in areas such as painting, creative writing, pottery, woodwork, textiles, digital photography/media in order to encourage the development of creative, personal and social skills in a positive environment.

The service objectives are to deliver arts based training focused on maintaining mental, physical and social well being from community venues in different areas of the city. The service is organized in blocks of activity with the first ten weeks orientated around drawing and painting. It is organized by two arts co-coordinators recruited specifically to deliver the Creative START 50 Plus service, presenting some sessions and hiring session artists to lead on different topics to groups in each of the eight neighbourhood areas in the city.

Making people aware of the service was a key challenge and the arts co-coordinators have taken a multi-pronged approach to marketing through contacting the neighbourhood team and the local community development officer. On occasion they have, where appropriate, contacted older peoples forum groups in the area. The coordinators then attend this or something similar and give a presentation of the service they are running backed up by posters and leaflets. Word of mouth is perceived by the coordinators to be the most effective for drawing in a wider number of participants and the coordinators have been to events directed towards older people which might be run by the Salvation Army or the PCT and geared towards multiple service providers for older people.

The type of sessions on offer ranges widely. A non-exhaustive list includes; Drawing Portraits, Creative Writing, Landscape Painting, Belly Dancing, Digital Photography, Calligraphy and Sculpture. Participation in the program lasts one year and towards the end of this period users are encouraged to establish or join user led groups so that they may continue with their artistic interests and sustain a support group with some assistance from START staff. To help support the development of user led groups following the first cohort of Creative START 50+ participants START in Salford paid for a number of sessions to be delivered by professional artists. This helped to give the user led groups focus and a measure of continuity as they made the transition to becoming an independently constituted body. As few participants had experience of creating and developing such a group prior to this, START provided important support and advice on how to go about this process and where relevant information and assistance might be found.

### **Aim of the evaluation**

To review the operation of Creative START 50 Plus and consider the evidence in support of its use of art as a means to maintain the mental, physical and social wellbeing of older people in Salford.

## **FINDINGS**

### Who uses Creative START 50 Plus?

The following section explores the demographics of who is using the Creative START 50 Plus service drawing on internal monitoring and evaluation material. In January 2007 the remit given was to have eight groups set up and each coordinator running four sessions a week themselves. Then April to June 2007 there was to be a further 8 groups set up. The previous groups would now have session artists employed to carry on running the activities.

There are currently 15 tutor led groups and four user led groups as of April 2008. The groups vary in size from 6-8 people up to a maximum of 30 in one group. The initial target of 200 users per year set out in the START in Salford Business plan is, by and large being met. The drop out rate was just under 5% (4.9%) for January to December 2007 taking the number of participants to just below target at 193.

In the absence of data for the first quarter our analysis concentrates on the April – December 2007 period. Over the April-December period the figures (see Figure 2.) suggest that around one third of those participating in activities were men and two thirds were women. The artist coordinators indicated that some activities appealed more strongly to men than others. Digital photography was perceived to hold more appeal than Textiles for example whereas visual art activity appealed to men as much as women. The coordinators felt that provided the men were already in the program when the textiles activity took place they were happy to engage with it, but anecdotally they felt that men were less likely to join a group if it was involved in textiles activity at the time of their enquiry.

The majority of Creative START 50 Plus users can be categorized as White British. Only 6 are identified as coming from a different ethnic group. Two identify as Black British and four as White European. The predominance of the White British community reflects also the findings of the core START service that suggested that use by members of minority ethnic groups was minimal. The Black and Minority ethnic population of Salford at 4% is relatively low in comparison to England & Wales as a whole, which is 9% according to the 2001 Census. This places the low take up amongst the BME population in context. The researchers found no indication from users, artist coordinators or management that the structure of the program was affecting access to the activities for specific groups. Further research would be needed to ascertain why the BME population in Salford were making less use of Creative START 50 Plus than might be expected.

The age profile set out in Figure 4 suggests that the service is reaching a broad age range, but drawing most of its members from the 60-69 and 70-79 age groups. A sizeable minority of users are aged 50-59, but not surprisingly the numbers aged 80 or over are much smaller.

Interestingly the percentage of those using the service that live alone is over 40% (40.9%). Respondents in the focus groups and interviews noted that a key benefit of the service was its impact on social wellbeing. As we discuss in the next section this manifested itself in different ways. The clearest example was in the chance it gave service users to meet new

people and build new friendships and informal support groups. The arts coordinators thought it offered people the chance to make new friends and connections that could be followed up outside of the group activity setting.

‘They get support, tremendous support as they have gelled within a group and they support each other and they become friends to the extent of meeting each other outside the group setting’ (Arts coordinator- Creative START 50 plus).

It was the opportunity to forge new friendship and sustain them that was viewed by one arts coordinator as integral to the development of the user led groups.

‘Ultimately that support for each other has led to the user groups, as they wouldn’t exist if it wasn’t the case that they didn’t like meeting up week after week’ (Arts coordinator – Creative START 50 Plus).

The perspectives of the arts coordinators regarding the importance of the Creative START activities for improving users feeling of social wellbeing and the breadth of their social network was supported by user testament during the focus groups.

#### User perspectives on Creative START 50 Plus

In this section we focus on the two focus groups conducted. One with current users of the Creative START service who are six months into the program and one focus group with previous participants who are now involved in running User Led groups

In a parallel examination of the core START service (Johnson & Wiggan, 2008) we found that participants were positive about their experiences of the service. The views expressed in the Creative START focus groups were similarly overwhelmingly positive on the myriad of benefits people indicated the service had delivered.

The participants who had completed the course thought that it had improved their knowledge of art and their creative skills. This opened up new avenues of activity that previously many had lacked the confidence or resources to explore. The low cost of the Creative START program and subsequent User Led Groups was a key attraction for some participants who found that living on a low income put adult education courses beyond their reach.

“We did creative writing and it’s been a really good year and its taught us a great deal. It’s taught us we don’t have to be restricted. Many of come from an era where you were told by a teacher that you had to do it in a particular way and if you didn’t then it were wrong. For a lot of people of my generation it’s restricted them as you think you can’t do it because the teacher said you can’t do it, but what we’ve learnt from the instructors is that you learn the basics and then you put your own impression on the work and I think this has given people a confidence they didn’t have before”. (user led group participant).

“I never thought I could draw, at school you could do it or you couldn’t – you were either good or bad and there was no encouragement if you were told you were bad. And this is wonderful because I’ve found a talent I never thought I had” (user led group participant).

“I’ve had a digital camera for three years and I couldn’t understand it. So I joined a group and

I've learnt more in six months about the camera and computer than in 3 years with books" (current course participant).

"Another thing is that when you're on a limited income it's very difficult to do things or go anywhere. One of the first things you think is how much is it going to cost. This was a great way to be introduced to drawing, water colours, acrylics and you didn't have to spend any money and you could find out whether you liked it" (user led group participant).

The main benefits identified by participants were linked to how involvement with the service enhanced their social wellbeing and improved their ability to cope with mental ill health and poor physical health. Their comments reinforced the points made by the coordinators that the service had given people confidence. It had widened their social circle permitting the formation of new friendships and for those experiencing loneliness and isolation it provided a low cost space for people to meet and engage in a common activity. In some cases it had also enhanced participants relationships with other family members. Developing their art and creative skills and interests was welcomed by all participants as offering a means through which to bring the generations together by stimulating discussion and joint activity between older and younger members of the family.

"The hardest thing is for someone on their own is to pick up their courage to go the first time, but then once you do you find everyone is the same as you they're all brilliant and they're in the same boat as you – I thoroughly enjoy it, it's done me a lot of good" (user led group participant).

"I've been on my own and it's good, you meet people and they give you courage. You talk about your disabilities and other things and you learn. It gets you out of the house that's the main thing" (user led group participant).

"What I've found is that it's a link with the younger generation, my son is in his early thirties and I didn't realise that he liked certain artists. I was looking for painting and I asked my son to bring it up on the computer and he said I like that and I like this as well and he brought up some on the computer the pictures that he liked. And I thought that was really interesting because before that we'd never talked about art before. Another member of the group has a grand child who is into art and they found they could go to WH Smiths and it was their grandchildren who were giving advice about what to buy. It's another link you see between the generations, most of the time kids get to a certain age and they don't want to know you, but with art they actually open up" (user led group participant).

These activities gave users a focus and channeled energy into a specific task with a clear goal ensuring that groups were more than a social gathering, but maintained a social element whilst temporarily taking people away from their day-to-day concerns. Some participants reported this had made a difference to their experience of mental ill health enabling them to cope better with bouts of depression. Others felt that by attending the sessions the physical ill health they experienced was ameliorated.

"I suffer from depression and the arts course has helped keep me going and this START program was for me a blessing. Sometimes things go on and you can't control them and you need something to help you. Having somewhere to go and meet people and START gives you that. Things go on in your life and you have to deal with them and sometimes dealing with them it can get you down and you need to be able to get away from that and START gave me

that” (user led group participant).

“I also suffer from terrible depression and some days I think ‘oh I’m not going to get through’, but then I’ve got that on Friday and it is like a life saver because I’m out and meeting with people” (user led group participant).

“If you’re unwell then you tend to sit at home and dwell on it whereas if you’ve got something to do then you don’t think about it” (current course participant).

“I’ve had a stroke and whilst I’ve had to cut back on many activities, this type of activity does help – I’m no longer able to type but gradually I’m getting repaired and becoming involved in something that involves a bit of brain and a bit of manual dexterity together is a help” (current course participant).

The issue of transport was raised in both groups along with the importance of holding the sessions during the day and at locations readily accessible. Users commented that older people were concerned about their personal safety if required to travel in the evenings. They therefore welcomed the fact that these sessions occurred during the daytime. Transport was also identified as a issue for some potential and current participants. Users felt that some areas of Salford were poorly served by public transport and that this had made attending sessions problematic for some of their colleagues. Other participants mentioned that even where people had access to a car concerns existed on issues of secure parking due to previous experience of vandalism and theft from motor vehicles.

A consensus existed across the two focus groups that access to tutor support was essential for the maintenance of a viable learning group. During the 12 month course it was viewed as essential that qualified artists led the groups. Participants at this stage did not have the expertise of confidence to play a role in leading groups nor did they have the desire to do so. They were attending because they wanted to learn something and widen their social network without the responsibility of participating in the running a group themselves. And from their comments it is doubtful that at the time they would have had the capability to do so.

“There’s a big limitation on people’s ability and willingness to come out and travel especially amongst older people. A lot of people for illness or whatever reason no longer drive and public transport is erratic if not non-existent in some places like Boothstown in Salford where the bus service is poor due to being on the boundary between Salford and Wigan” (current course participant).

“You’ve also got the fear about leaving your car unless you’ve got a secure car park as you can have your car broken into only so many times and coming into the inner city area can be seen as being more risky. If it’s in your own area then you’re more confident about knowing where is safe” (current course participant).

The support given by START during the transition to user led groups was identified as critical to ensuring that the groups could successfully negotiate organizational issues such as writing a constitution, electing officers and applying for funding. If this had not been

forthcoming the participants thought that the sustainability of the groups would have been brought into question.

“When we set up the group we had the people here (arts co-coordinators) to encourage us and help us and that was important as we wouldn’t have known about setting up a constitution or the community fund and that support was really important for those first six weeks otherwise it wouldn’t have happened” (user led group participant).

“We couldn’t have done without the teachers, it’s like a ship can’t sail without a captain and we would’ve just become a social group” (user led group participant).

“One of the problems you find with Salford is that they start a group and then they won’t run it again and you think why do they do that, they get a group of people together and then they pull the rug from underneath it. You get involved in something and then the next thing it’s gone and it’s not there anymore and you think... oh right then, how many times do you here we’ve run out of money” (user led group participant).

“It’s very helpful to have a tutor who sets an agenda week to week. If we’re not careful if it becomes too client led then the meetings may degenerate into gossip shops and not anything constructive” (current course participant).

“You need somebody to lead a group and you need somebody to be there every week and we’re retired we can taker off when we want. The whole point of joining a group like this is that you aren’t responsible for anything” (current course participant).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The Creative START 50 plus scheme has been largely successful in achieving its target of 200 participants per year.

The majority of participants identify as White British. We found no evidence to suggest that recruitment and enrolment practices favoured or discriminated any section of the local community. Further efforts may be required though to improve the reach of the service and encourage older citizens from Black and Minority Ethnic groups to participate.

A large number of service users live alone and identified opportunities to make new friendships and increase their social network as a key benefit that the service offers. For some individuals becoming involved in art and creative activity had enhanced their relationships with younger family members. These parents and grand parents found they had a new shared interest with the younger generation stimulating discussion and joint activity.

Service users with experience of mental and physical health problems suggested that the service provided a number of benefits. It gave a structure to the week with the activity acting as a focal point. Combined with attendance at sessions this helped to get people away from their day-to-day concerns and problems and improved self-confidence.

Professional tutors were a key component of the service. Many participants had limited or no previous experience of this kind of activity and valued the support and assistance session artists and the arts co-coordinators gave. The transitional support provided by START to the

user led groups were seen by the user led focus group as key to their viability. In the absence of this support some respondents remarked that the groups would have not been successful due their lack of familiarity with the procedures for setting up groups and booking and paying for art tutors. By ensuring this support was in place START has enabled a number of groups to establish themselves and has prepared a pathway for future 50 Plus participants to follow upon completion of the Creative START course. There were concerns expressed by some of the members about how financially viable the self led groups would be, for example, if they have to pay for a room plus tutors on occasions in addition to materials, it could get expensive and if the numbers dropped it made it more so.