

Creative Alternatives Online - Pilot Project – Executive Summary

Period: 3rd May - 1st December 2017, Alef Trust

Programme Design & Aims: Creative Alternatives' online pilot programme was jointly funded by Sankalpa Foundation (£7,000) and St.Helens Council (£1,000) and **was modelled on the existing local arts-on-prescription service in St.Helens delivered by Alef Trust**, offering **weekly creative and mindfulness-based activities**. Pilot programme access lasted for **12 weeks per client**. We aimed to engage **a total of 20 clients in 2 groups** (10 of which were required to be resident in St.Helens - a stipulation by the local council). The online programme was built and delivered through a **collaborative learning environment (CLE)** which Alef Trust also utilises in the delivery of its online postgraduate programmes. The participants **had access to an entire website accessible by sign-in**, which **featured written content**, as well as **videos and weblinks**, pointing to additional resources.

Clients: In total, **24 clients** enrolled on the online programme, **10 from St.Helens**. 3 were male (all St.Helens residents), 21 female. **19 clients were aged between 40 and 65**, the others were younger. 13 described themselves as employed/self-employed, the others stated they were unable to work, unemployed or retired. **Most highlighted several factors which negatively impacted their wellbeing**, from caring responsibilities (4), to physical health problems (7), to additional mental health conditions (4).

Programme Impact: As in the local arts on prescription programme there was some client drop-off from start to finish. 17 participants completed 6 weeks of the programme, 14 completed the entire programme. For those completing the entire programme, qualitative evaluation highlighted a range of benefits, **from improved wellbeing and confidence, to improved social engagement and physical activity, to significant changes in lifestyle**. **SWEMWBS** data from the entire pilot programme showed **an average increase of 5.2 points** between entry and exit, **on par with the local programme**. **Lifestyle data** highlighted the following benefits:

- 58% clients felt that their physical activity had improved
- 75% clients stated that their GP visits had reduced
- 50% clients told us that they have entered paid employment
- 75% clients said that they had engaged with arts/cultural activities

"I have more confidence now and I was aware of this in my job interview. I feel much happier simply being me and more able to openly engage with others. This programme has also helped me to engage with activities ongoing (including exercise), which I know I would not previously have taken up." (Julie)

"I am not as depressed or anxious as I was and I have had no more disassociation experiences. My concentration is improved. I am sleeping better and eating better. I am living a more normal life." (Janet)

Several clients highlighted the **particular suitability of an online programme** for their circumstances:

"I liked the fact that it was online, so that no travel time was involved and also privacy is maintained. Group learning is not for everyone." (David)

"I have done a Creative Alternatives at my local Library earlier this year, but found it hard to fit into my busy life." (Sandra)

"I have severe depression and anxiety and find it difficult to go to the things outside of home, so an online course is ideal." (Rosie)

Key Learning from Pilot:

- Online arts on prescription is **complementary to local provision, supporting those who cannot attend locally**. Whilst online provision cannot cater for those with low computer literacy or no computer or internet access, certain groups of people will be well served, **enabling flexible participation alongside work or caring commitments**, for example, and indeed supporting those who are house-bound.
- **Client recruitment was initially slow but accelerated when we started using online advertising**. A short Facebook campaign costing £32 recruited 9 of the pilot participants.
- We found that online provision enabled a **streamlining of administration and programme evaluation** through utilization of online tools for data gathering and analysis. We also found that **two facilitators could support 20+ people on the programme at a time (instead of 12 in a local group)**. Online provision allows greater client numbers per group, **thereby reducing per-client programme cost**.
- **With a total budget of £8,000 and 24 clients, CA online cost £333 per client**. In contrast, local provision in St.Helens costs in the region of £540 per client (calculated on a budget of £40,000 supporting 74 clients who engaged with CA during phase 2).



Client artwork: 'gratitude'

Conclusion:

An online arts on prescription programme plugs a gap, supporting those who cannot attend local provision. It also breaks down boundaries, enabling people from different parts of the country to connect with each other and build friendships and experience a sense of community despite the physical separation and distance.

Partnerships with organisations in different regions of the country could ensure that an online programme catering at a regional or even national level has relevant local support, so that clients could be supported to connect to their local community and services.

Vital to the success of any future online programme is sustained funding, ensuring that team and working processes could be maintained and developed and partnerships expanded, to enable growth of the programme and increase in public awareness. Continued research into the dynamics, challenges and benefits of online arts on prescription would also be essential to ensure development of best practice.

"This programme really had a huge impact on me and my family. Through mindfulness, reflection and thinking about what I stand for, my husband and I decided to stop drinking alcohol altogether. Over the past few weeks, we have managed to do this together and have already noticed positive changes to our sleeping patterns and our digestion. This course was such a wonderful intervention for me." (Aimee)