

Working Together



**Embedding health and wellbeing in
museums and heritage organisations**

Evaluation Report, November 2025

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The Culture, Health & Wellbeing Alliance
(CHWA) and Group for Education in
Museums (GEM)

**Working Together was supported by
the National Lottery Heritage Fund.**

Front cover image: Optimism sessions
– Celebration evening, Prince Philip
Maritime Collections Centre.

Image opposite: Reflective Journal
(detail) Museum lead, Scottish
Maritime Museum.

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Foreword

Victoria Hume, Executive Director, Culture, Health & Wellbeing Alliance (CHWA)
Rachel Tranter MBE, Director, Group for Education in Museums (GEM)

There is mounting recognition—supported by a substantial body of research—of the powerful role museums can play in improving mental and physical wellbeing, particularly through creative and participatory practices.

In early 2025, a DCMS-commissioned report assessed society-wide impacts of £0.02 billion for arts activities in museum settings for the general health of older adults.¹

Beyond these economic benefits, however, is a story we know better but speak of less: of people finding meaning and community in spaces that have sometimes seemed aloof and distant.

Government interest in Creative Health has grown steadily since the publication of the 2017 Creative Health Report and 2023 Creative Health Review.² Funders—notably Arts Council England, the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and a number of independent foundations such as the Baring Foundation—have begun to prioritise health-related inclusion, co-production, and practitioner wellbeing in their strategies.

Yet museum-based Creative Health work is often delivered by individuals or small teams on a grant-to-grant basis, without the sustained organisational or sector-wide support they need to flourish, deepen partnerships and reach more people in their communities.

As membership organisations devoted to museum and heritage learning

professionals and Creative Health workers respectively, GEM and CHWA have a long history of working together, focused on how we can help museums support the health and wellbeing of their staff and communities. We saw an opportunity to help the sector to embed this work, by empowering those who do it, providing them with additional skills, stronger relationships and structural support. Our members made it clear that they wanted training, peer support, and help to form lasting partnerships with health, social care and community partners.

As Working Together concludes in mid-2025, it leaves behind a compelling case for museums as long-term partners in public health. We are thrilled with the evidence this evaluation presents of the impacts of Working Together on the people and institutions who have taken part. Realising the sector's potential, however, requires more than recognition; it demands structural reform across the sector, with health and wellbeing embedded into policy, funding, governance, strategy, and staff support. In this sense, it serves as a call to action: to build a more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient future for museums as community health assets.

¹ Frontier Economics (2024), Culture and Heritage Capital: Monetising the Impact of Culture and Heritage on Health and Wellbeing. Report prepared for DCMS. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/678e2ecf432c55fe2988f615/rpt_-_Frontier_Health_and_Wellbeing_Final_Report_09_12_24_accessible_final.pdf

² All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (2017), Creative Health: The Arts for Health & Wellbeing. Available at https://ncch.org.uk/uploads/Creative_Health_Inquiry_Report_2017_-_Second_Edition.pdf; National Centre for Creative Health / All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health & Wellbeing (2023). Creative Health Review: How Policy Can Enhance Creative Health. Available at <https://ncch.org.uk/creative-health-review>

Purpose of this report

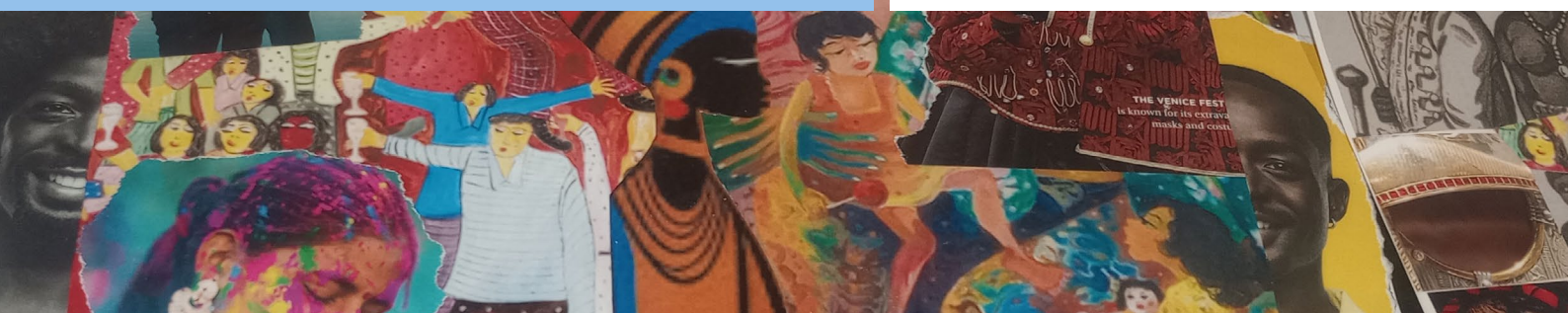


“Working Together has been a motivator for change and development within our organisation [...] It has encouraged us to look more closely at staff wellbeing and improved our understanding of supporting communities, shifting us to a focus on co-production. The project has enhanced our partnerships with [the] third sector and artists, enabling us to become a more inclusive, safe and welcoming place where people can come together and enjoy creative activities.”

Museum project lead

This report brings together two years of evidence and evaluation, gathered through reflective and embedded evaluation approaches. It presents the outcomes of the Working Together programme, along with further learning and recommendations for museums and heritage organisations and funders. It aims to support best practice within the museums and heritage sector and lay out strategic recommendations to embed Creative Health work across organisations, ultimately enabling a much wider range of people to engage with heritage, without barriers, and in a longer-term and more sustainable way.

Image: Participants from The Dandelion Project, Sconce and Devon Park, Newark



6

Six diverse partner museums and heritage organisations

3

Three interconnected activities:

- pilot new projects
- training (CPD)
- peer support and advocacy

Underpinned by the Creative Health Quality Framework's eight core principles:

- | | |
|------------------|-----------------|
| • Person-centred | • Collaborative |
| • Equitable | • Realistic |
| • Safe | • Reflective |
| • Creative | • Sustainable |



Image: Participant from The Dandelion Project, Sconce and Decon Park, Newark

Executive Summary

Working Together was an 18-month Creative Health programme (2023–2025), supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and co-delivered by CHWA and GEM. It supported six partner museums and heritage organisations—selected for their commitment to working with underserved communities—to embed Creative Health practice. Each organisation developed a pilot project in response to local health and social needs, working within a supportive network.

The programme aimed to improve health and wellbeing through museum and heritage engagement, particularly among individuals and groups facing health inequalities, while also building the sector's confidence to partner with health and care services. It sought to strengthen the museum and heritage sector's strategic commitment to wellbeing and encourage a shift in organisational culture.

What were the programme's outputs?

Working Together delivered six Creative Health pilot projects, an extensive CPD programme and promoted its learning and impact to wider audiences through strategic advocacy work. Activities were guided by the Creative Health Quality Framework³ and included both in-person and online components.

Legacy

The programme's legacy will include GEM/CHWA sector-wide training on Creative Health for learning professionals working across museums, heritage and cultural settings; and the dissemination of this report and its recommendations, alongside a short film currently being developed by Molineaux Productions. This dissemination will focus primarily on the audiences

identified in the recommendations below: museum and heritage organisations (and their senior leadership in particular) and funders. Recommendations for CHWA and GEM will be built into our organisational strategies.

What was the programme's impact?

Strengthening sector capability for Creative Health delivery

Museum and heritage professionals described the programme as “*unbelievably inspiring*.” Staff gained knowledge and practical skills in co-production, safeguarding, adaptive facilitation, and trauma-informed approaches. The combination of structured Creative Professional Development (CPD) opportunities and personalised mentoring helped organisations shift from uncertainty to confidence, moving toward more inclusive, participant-led programming. Although areas for improvement included clearer goal-setting and specific training for volunteers, Working Together was widely recognised as transformative.

Establishing sustainable cross-sector partnerships

The programme fostered deep, trust-based collaborations between museums,

³Culture, Health & Wellbeing Alliance/Jane Willis (2023). Creative Health Quality Framework Available at www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/resources/creative-health-quality-framework

freelance artists, community-based organisations, and health and social care providers. Freelancers felt respected and included, while project partners valued museums' and heritage organisations' flexible approach to collaboration and the programme's overall inclusive ethos. These relationships strengthened project delivery and created the foundations for long-term capacity, advocacy and reciprocity across stakeholder groups.

Enhancing relevance through inclusive practice

Working Together effectively engaged communities and individuals affected by trauma, social isolation, and long-term physical and mental health challenges. Museums and heritage organisations piloted co-designed approaches developing small-scale, targeted activities that prioritised trust-building and a sense of belonging among project participants. Facilitators—including some with lived experience—played a crucial role in reshaping museum and heritage practice, helping in-house staff to dismantle systemic barriers, thereby making institutions feel safer and more representative. Participants described the museums as welcoming, creative, and emotionally supportive spaces, and remained engaged throughout the lifespan of projects.

Embedding care to advance organisational wellbeing

Wellbeing was prioritised for participants and museum and heritage staff. Staff involved in the programme reported reduced professional isolation, greater emotional support, and stronger networks. The programme lead's mentoring role supported museum and heritage teams to set boundaries, reflect strategically, and advocate for change. Internally, many organisations adopted wellbeing-focused policies, training, or board-level roles, marking the start of more systemic change.

Developing museum and heritage leadership in Creative Health

The programme supported a new generation of Creative Health advocates. Early and mid-level staff in particular gained confidence,

influencing organisational strategy, and sharing learning with colleagues through presentations at national conferences and industry shows. At the same time, creative approaches to heritage collections—including sensory work and trauma-informed interpretation—reinvigorated how professionals used objects to foster wellbeing.

What were the key lessons learnt?

A new approach to museums and heritage practice

Working Together challenged the output-driven, delivery-focused culture of the museums and heritage sector. It showed that Creative Health flourishes when organisations slow down, make space for relationships and experimentation, and embed care and lived experience into design and delivery. The programme's generous 18-month timeframe and non-prescriptive structure allowed practitioners to reflect on process, take risks, and adapt to the emerging needs of different stakeholders.

A cultural shift in attitudes to wellbeing

The programme prompted a shift in how participating museums and heritage organisations viewed staff wellbeing. It highlighted the importance of internal care processes empowering teams via a peer-support model to build emotionally safe and sustainable practices. Some organisations began to rethink leadership structures, decision-making power, and how Creative Health is integrated across departments and hierarchies.

Transformation through co-production

The programme explored co-production as a flexible, relational process and methodology. Co-production training reshaped how organisations engaged with communities: project teams let go of rigid structures and worked collaboratively with partners and participants to co-design content and delivery. This shift resulted in more meaningful engagement, a stronger sense of community ownership, and programming rooted in real-life experience and need. Artists and creative facilitators noted the depth of participant engagement, often leading to powerful experiences that far exceeded expected learning outcomes.

Peer learning, networks and joy

Peer-support networks emerged as a vital component of sustainability for future Creative Health work. These non-hierarchical spaces enabled museum and heritage professionals to celebrate success, share challenges, and sustain creative energy. The programme also ignited feelings of happiness, playfulness and creativity in project teams—experiences which helped close the gap between project leads and participants, and which are essential to professional and personal fulfilment and wellbeing.

Reflective and care-filled practices

Reflection and care were central to the programme's success. Project teams embraced creative, person-centred evaluation methods—such as reflective journals and group debriefs—leading to deeper understanding of the impact and value of their work. Evaluation became a tool for learning, rather than just accountability.

Sustainability challenges remain

Despite its successes, the programme exposed ongoing sector challenges—particularly the reliance on short-term, project-based funding. While some museum and heritage organisations aligned their work with public health priorities, many face capacity pressures and limited core resources. The legacy of Working Together depends on intentional investment in people, leadership, and values-driven practice.

Recommendations:

The evaluation makes the following recommendations:

For museums and heritage organisations to...

- Embed wellbeing into organisational culture by assigning senior leadership responsibility, updating staff roles, and ensuring ongoing training, supervision, and internal support structures.
- Build long-term partnerships with third-sector organisations and raise the visibility of wellbeing work through strategic communication.

For CHWA and GEM to...

- Maintain partner connections through regular communication and events, and provide practical resources including training packs, role templates, and tools to embed mental health at governance levels.
- Offer training on funding and budgeting to support sustainable wellbeing initiatives.

For funders to...

- Prioritise relational, person-centred approaches over scale-focused metrics, fund proven programmes with strong community links, and address systemic barriers by supporting core wellbeing roles and embedding wellbeing in sector-wide evaluation frameworks.

Image: Creative Coal Group, Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens



About the Working Together programme



6 pilot projects

took place in England (York, Sunderland, Newark and Sherwood, Portsmouth, Hampshire, Greenwich), and Scotland (Irvine).

25 museum and heritage staff and trustees

11 volunteers

11 freelance creative practitioners and facilitators and

4 critical friends

Image: Museum lead, Coal gallery, Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens

490

participants
engaged with projects

280

individuals

participated in consultations as part of research and development work, including piloting creative resources.

11

healthcare, support and community organisations

partnered with museum and heritage organisations on projects.

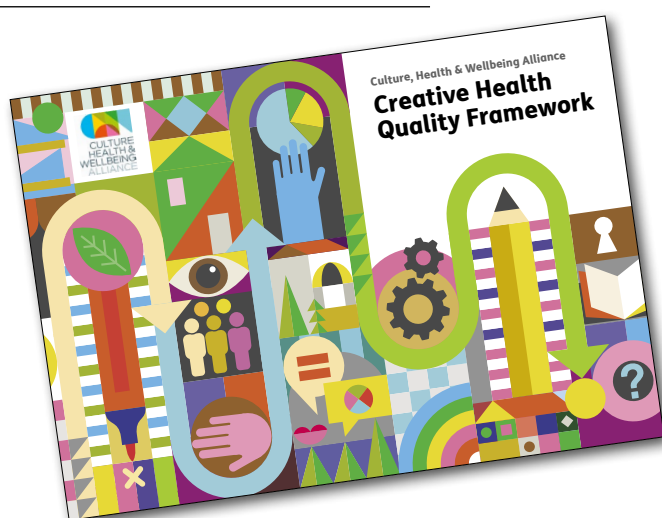
Working Together was an 18-month Creative Health programme funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) and jointly delivered by the Culture, Health & Wellbeing Alliance (CHWA) and the Group for Education in Museums (GEM). It began in autumn 2023 and concluded in autumn 2025.

A diverse cohort of six partner museums and heritage organisations took part, ranging from multi-site local authority and independent heritage sites to national maritime museums. Selection followed an open call in October 2022 with priority given to organisations working with communities facing multiple deprivation, and across areas identified as part of the previous government's Levelling Up for Culture initiative.⁴ Museum and heritage organisations worked together as part of a supportive network, piloting new practices and partnership work, aiming to embed Creative Health within their organisations. Their individual projects were designed in response to local health priorities and the needs of local and hyper-local communities, identified through early research and development.

Programme activity took place both in-person and online and included six Creative Health pilot projects, a professional development training and peer-support programme, and advocacy work.

The programme was underpinned by the Creative Health Quality Framework's eight core principles:

Person-Centred, Equitable, Safe, Creative, Collaborative, Realistic, Reflective, and Sustainable. These principles guided planning, delivery and new ways of working, embedding quality and good practice throughout the programme.



⁴See www.artscouncil.org.uk/your-area/priority-places-and-levelling-culture-places

What did Working Together set out to achieve?

The Working Together programme aimed to:

- Improve the health and wellbeing of a wider range of people engaging with heritage organisations;
- Create more opportunities for people and communities facing health inequalities to engage with museums and heritage organisations;
- Support skills development in Creative Health for museum and heritage professionals and volunteers;
- Positively contribute to museum and heritage professionals' greater wellbeing;
- Embed health and wellbeing work in museum and heritage settings and support the sector to build more meaningful relationships with healthcare and community partners—both nationally and strategically;
- Galvanise museums' and heritage sites' strategic and organisational commitment to health and wellbeing work;
- Create institutional levers for change;
- Make health and wellbeing work within museums and heritage sites more sustainable.

Who was involved?



Image: Dialogic Objects,
created by Sorhed for
York Museum Trust

The programme's lead partners were CHWA and GEM. The programme was led by Louise Campion and evaluated by Siân Rosa Hunter Dodsworth.

The participating organisations were the National Museum of the Royal Navy, Portsmouth; Newark & Sherwood District Council (Castle and National Civil War Museum); Royal Museums Greenwich; the Scottish Maritime Museum; Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens; and York Museums Trust. Each worked in partnership with community and/or health organisations as well as freelance creative practitioners (see Case Studies for more information).

At both planning and delivery stages, Working Together benefited from critical friends including Mah Rana (Royal College of Art, formerly a Director of the LENS—Lived Experience Network), academics Dr Nuala Morse (University of Leicester) and Prof. Piotr Bienkowski (University of Manchester), and artist and consultant Daniel Regan.

Training modules were codesigned and delivered with the Ideas Alliance, National Centre for Creative Health, GLAM Cares, the Museums Association, Accentuate (Curating Visibility), Ali Coles, Daniel Regan, Dr Tola Dabiri and Dr Jill Sutherland.

Additional speakers at Working Together events included David Cutler (Baring Foundation), Tony Butler (Derby Museums), Ronan Brindley (Museum and Gallery Programming and Engagement Consultant), Prof. Helen Chatterjee (UCL), Jemma Channing (Arts Council England).

What happened?

Working Together produced a series of outputs across three key interconnected areas of activity. Six community-focused pilot projects were both enabled and enriched by an online CPD training and peer-support programme and in-person meetings. Advocacy work with both senior leaders in the participating organisations and the broader sector took place at strategic points in the programme.

1. Pilot Projects

Projects took place in-person, either on-site at partner museums and heritage organisations or in local community and healthcare settings. They were overseen by staff working in community participation, learning or equivalent roles who were in turn supported by wider teams including freelance creative practitioners; colleagues from learning, curatorial, collections care, visitor services and senior management teams (e.g. directors and heads of department); trustees; volunteers; and critical friends/advisors with lived experience relating to physical and/or mental health. Facilitated by micro-grants of £15,000, projects were small-scale and between four and 12 weeks in length.

Project activity included:

- textile, printmaking, creative writing, zine-making, music, and mindfulness workshops;
- community research;
- pop-up events;
- community exhibitions;
- bespoke community resources such as object-handling boxes, sensory bags and mindfulness heritage trails and podcasts;
- research trips to museums and heritage sites;
- volunteering opportunities;
- training for a cross-section of museum/heritage staff and third-sector organisations.

Who took part in projects?

- Young people (aged 16–25) from global majority backgrounds; in kinship care; unemployed; involved with or at risk of offending;

- Families affected by substance misuse, kinship care, or with children with SEND;
- Adults (aged 25–45) from global majority backgrounds;
- Women experiencing mental health challenges;
- Older adults (aged 50+) with long-term health conditions, additional learning needs, memory loss, or social isolation, including care home and hospital residents;
- Carers and family members supporting older adults with similar needs.

Museum and heritage project teams focused on engaging individuals and groups typically excluded from cultural opportunities. This included people facing severe and/or complex physical and mental health conditions, social isolation, or significant life challenges. As a result, most projects were designed for smaller, more targeted groups, though some included broader, open-invitation activities for carers, families, and the wider community.

2. CPD training and peer-support programme

Working Together's training and peer-support programme ran in parallel to pilot projects, supporting the evolution of heritage practitioners' health and wellbeing practice as work was underway. It took place both formally—through the delivery of a series of nine CPD on-line training workshops, briefings and occasional in-person meetings and informally—through ad-hoc mentoring and project-development provided by the programme lead.

2.1 Training Workshops

- Introduction to the Creative Health Quality Framework
- Reflective Practice & Creative Health Evaluation
- Boundaries & Safeguarding
- Coproduction: Theory & Practice
- Staff Wellbeing
- Representation & Wellbeing: Decolonising Curation and Curating Visibility
- Understanding Big Health Systems
- Social Prescribing & the Social Determinants of Health

(These sessions and the resources developed to accompany them will provide the basis of future training to be rolled out after the programme's completion.)

2.2 Breakfast Briefings

Four online 'Breakfast Briefings' were specifically designed for directors and senior leaders from the partner museums and heritage organisations. Co-chaired by CHWA and GEM, they aimed to engage decision makers in strategic thinking about Creative Health.

The briefings combined short, focused presentations with group discussions, creating space for strategic reflection and peer exchange. Topics included: the long-term value and organisational benefits of embedding Creative Health; funding opportunities across culture, arts, and health sectors; the evolving health priorities of the Labour government; and the ongoing challenges of sustaining credible wellbeing work within a financially constrained environment.

Speakers included the programme's organisers, museum and heritage directors with extensive Creative Health knowledge and experience, and funders with a focus on health-related cultural work. The sessions also encouraged open discussion of institutional barriers, and provided practical resources and signposting to relevant training and research. Designed to foster honest, critical conversation and long-term strategic thinking, the briefings supported leaders in positioning health and wellbeing at the core of their organisations' missions.

2.3 One-to-one and group support in developing projects

As pilot projects began to take shape, project leads increasingly reported that they were keen for Working Together to facilitate more opportunities to share and develop knowledge and practice. The programme lead responded to this request by facilitating online peer-learning sessions on key topics, encouraging teams to share their work at sector conferences, and enabling access to external professional development opportunities—such as a trauma-informed practice session held at Manchester Art Gallery. Ongoing informal mentoring was also offered through one-to-one chats, check-ins, and the sharing of practical resources, advice, and funding opportunities via email and video calls.

3. Advocacy

Advocacy for Working Together was carried out by the directors for CHWA and GEM, the programme lead, and museum/heritage project leads, with the latter championing the programme not only within their own institutions but also wider professional networks via three conference presentations and one workshop:

- GLAM Cares Conference "Mapping Your Networks" showcased Working Together and emphasised the value of strong, supportive networks in Creative Health work.
- GEM Conference "Creative Reflective Practice!" guided attendees in making 'reflection books' while exploring how reflective practice supports professional growth.
- Museums + Heritage Show "Working Together: Embedding Creative Health and Wellbeing Work in Museums" spotlighted real examples from the programme, such as co-produced dialogic objects and mental health awareness initiatives adopting a whole-museum approach.
- GEM Conference (2025) "Sustaining Museum Learning Practices: Supporting and prioritising staff wellbeing in museums and sharing examples from the Working Together network to support our own wellbeing and those we manage".
- NEMO (Network of European Museum Organisations) conference (2025) "Museum Practices for Wellbeing" sharing the learning from Working Together

Advocacy work will continue into the future (see Legacy, above).

About the evaluation process



Evaluation aims

The Working Together evaluation proposed to assess the programme against its original aims and outcomes, with special emphasis placed on capturing experiences and feedback from diverse groups of stakeholders. It prioritised learning and understanding over judgement and sought to identify insights, achievement and challenges. Central to the process was the invitation—to museum practitioners and others—to reflect on their participation in Working Together so as to understand and shape both individual projects and the wider programme's story of change.

Evaluation approach and scope

Evaluation happened at both a macro (programme) level and micro (pilot project) level:

- 1) Macro-level evaluation was led by the external evaluator and structured around a core set of evaluation questions. It focused on capturing overarching 'bigger-picture' learning, processes, outputs, and impacts across five thematic areas: skills development, partnership working, participation, wellbeing, and strategic capacity-building.
- 2) Micro-level evaluation was designed and implemented by each individual museum and heritage partner. Methodologies and data collection tools were diverse and shaped by specific organisational priorities, staff skill-sets, and the contexts and needs of participant groups.

Museum and heritage partners were given full autonomy to evaluate their pilot projects according to their own requirements while receiving support from the programme lead and external evaluator. This included an initial online training session at the start of Working Together, which introduced a curated

selection of toolkits and creative, qualitative methods, followed by a virtual drop-in workshop—held six months before the programme's end—to refine evaluation methodologies and address any challenges.

The evaluator, programme lead and director of CHWA also met once a month to share and discuss emerging findings and identify possible improvements for the programme. This evaluation is already supporting CHWA and GEM in strategic planning, advocacy work, and the development of sector-wide guidance and training that will be launched post Working Together.

Evaluation methods

Methods aimed to gather both qualitative and quantitative information that provided an in-depth understanding of the experiences of museum and heritage professionals, volunteers, freelance artists and facilitators, representatives from health and social care and community partner organisations, and pilot project participants.

- Reflective diaries were used by project leads, project support staff, freelance artists and some participants, encouraging contributors to pause and thoughtfully record subjective accounts of their perspectives and experiences of Working Together. Diary entries included writing, sketches, diagrams, and scrapbook-like materials (flyers, invites, photographs etc.).
- Semi-structured 1:1 online interviews were conducted at the start of Working Together with both directors of CHWA and GEM and the programme lead. A total of eight project leads and support staff were also interviewed twice; both at the beginning and end of 2024. Questions posed at the start mapped assumptions, motivations and expectations. Questions posed at the end explored experiences (both positive and negative) along with shifts and changes and points of learning.



- Four online group forums were held in February 2025 to hear the views of partner organisations, creative facilitators, and project participants. A total of 16 people participated in these, with honoraria offered to ensure accessibility and pre-surveys used to guide discussion.
- Online surveys were implemented after every training session and captured feedback on the relevance and effectiveness of each one.
- Project data forms were also submitted at the end of the programme by museums/heritage partners summarising activities, outcomes, and learning.

Image: Museum leads and partners 'Sharing the learning' event, York

Ethical Practice and Accessibility

The evaluation adhered to strong ethical standards, ensuring care remained at the heart of all engagements. Accessibility was prioritised through clear communication, inclusive design, and compensation for freelancers⁵, partner organisation and participants' time. The approach was designed to foster openness and build trust, even in contexts where contributors were unaccustomed to evaluative and/or reflective practice.

Informed consent was explained and obtained from all those who contributed to evaluation, and their right to anonymity and confidentiality respected.

⁵ CHWA's payments policy may be a useful resource here: <https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/news/general-news/new-policy-payments-freelancers-and-low-or-unwaged-colleagues>

Evaluation findings

The following section provides an overview of the evaluation's main findings. Care has been taken to reflect a range of experiences from all key stakeholder groups with data summarised thematically, highlighting areas of success as well as complexity and challenge.

“Being part of the Working Together group has not only been informative, with such a wide and diverse set of training, but by bringing together colleagues [...] working in similar roles, it has also been immensely valuable to share success and how to avoid mistakes! The generous funding, with very few strings attached, has allowed us to co-develop projects from the very start with our communities [...] embedding [them] into our day-to-day programming.”

Museum project lead

Image: Museum leads and partners 'Sharing the learning' event, York



1. Skills Development

The Working Together training programme had a significant impact on museum and heritage professionals, building confidence, deepening skills, and embedding Creative Health practice across all six partner organisations. Participants consistently described the training as high-quality, unique, and essential preparation for this specialised area of work.

Combining practical tools with reflective discussion, the sessions supported professionals—mid-career community engagement specialists—to gain or refine skills in managing community health projects, set boundaries, and deliver inclusive, trauma-informed work. The online format and open-door policy also enabled broader participation, including freelancers, volunteers, and community partners. Another key outcome of the training was increased self-confidence. Many professionals initially expressed doubt about how to lead Creative Health work; by the end, they had adopted a more reflective and responsive mindset, moving away from perfectionism and embracing learning through experimentation.

Training on co-production was especially impactful, helping teams move beyond top-down delivery to participant-led models. This shift led to the creation of codes of conduct, shared-working manifestos, and more inclusive planning processes. Staff became more confident managing group dynamics and recognised uncertainty as a normal part of collaboration.

The training also spurred strategic change. Some partners invested in additional mental health and safeguarding training, improved volunteer support, and introduced systems for sustaining future Creative Health work—such as loans-box management or wellbeing roles. Finally, the programme had a ripple effect. Learning was shared across departments, with some leads presenting at national conferences or advocating for integrated Creative Health approaches with funders and local authorities.

“It was one of the most impactful things we’ve done as an organisation.” Museum project lead

2. Professional support and reflective practice

A significant factor that enabled skills development to take place effectively across the programme was the role of the Working Together programme lead, who guided and mentored museum and heritage partners at all stages of their projects. Her ability to scaffold advice around her own professional experience and her adaptive, hands-on and empathetic approach were particularly valued by project leads. Her support also encouraged honest discussions around challenges—for example, questioning whether a team was best positioned to work with a particular community group, or how to responsibly adapt plans based on participant feedback. In these instances, the programme lead helped shift teams from feeling overwhelmed to a place of renewed confidence and motivation.

The programme lead also proved crucial in helping museum and heritage partners articulate their project’s evolving story, particularly when outcomes diverged from original plans. Through regular check-ins and informal meetings, she helped project leads understand changes to project plans and delivery as part-and-parcel of creative and responsive programming and an inevitable response to in-situ learning. This strengthened museum and heritage partners’ strategic thinking and reflective practice, empowering them to make both bolder and more informed decisions. In this sense, the mentoring relationship went beyond task-based problem-solving to encompass emotional support, critical reflection, and professional growth—factors that all together will be pivotal in building long-term capacity within partner museums and heritage organisations post-Working Together.

One key challenge identified was the need for clearer guidance in setting goals at the outset of pilot projects, as some partners were initially unsure of their objectives. In-person meetings—described by project leads as fostering deep conversations and opportunities for connection—were also preferred. Additionally, there was a clear demand for even more practical, skills-based training for both professionals and volunteers—particularly around structuring beginnings and endings for community-focused work, developing evaluation frameworks, and advocating for health and wellbeing internally. Finally, a gap in accessible and relevant volunteer training was highlighted, which, if addressed, could better support the wider engagement aims of museums and heritage organisations.

3. Partnerships

“There was a remit of generosity. I really felt I had agency.” Freelance artist

Working Together showed that successful Creative Health partnerships emerged from rich, multi-layered networks involving museum/heritage staff, volunteers, freelancers, and organisations across health, social care, and the third sector. Through early consultations and research, museums and heritage organisations identified local wellbeing needs and shared goals with collaborators. This groundwork proved essential to developing meaningful, sustainable partnerships and more impactful pilot projects. As funding ends, there is strong commitment from project leads to sustain these relationships to keep museum and heritage work relevant to local communities in the long-term.

The programme highlighted that relationship-building is time-consuming and rarely straightforward. Project leads embraced a flexible approach, following energy and interest, and accepting that while not every relationship would be immediately fruitful, each could plant the seeds for future collaboration. This move away from transactional towards

shared, trust-based relationships helped museum and community organisations better understand each other's needs and approaches.

Partner organisations gained significantly from their involvement in Working Together, appreciating the inclusive design process and how local projects met their objectives and those of the people they support. Museum and heritage collaborations helped smaller community-based organisations to build capacity and in the case of NHS partners, offered health workers creative outlets, helping relieve the stresses of day-to-day work. Partners valued the flexible, participant-led approach, underpinned by excellent communication and shared ownership of outcomes.

Freelance artists and creative practitioners were a vital part of Working Together's success, contributing skills, lived experience, and new ways of working. Museums were intentional about collaborating with practitioners whose values aligned with the programme's aims, and/or had existing connections with participant communities. Co-production practices empowered artists, offering training, access to collections, and genuine input into planning processes. Freelancers spoke very positively about the fact they felt treated as equals with feelings of mutual respect further improving confidence and collaboration. Tools like MOUs and regular debriefs strengthened these relationships further.

The programme laid the groundwork for lasting partnerships, with plans to maintain connections through regular updates and continued collaboration. Its ethos of openness alongside designated time to build relationships is now influencing museum and heritage partners' organisational strategies and wider engagement models.

Some challenges emerged, with a small number of partner organisations reporting a lack of clarity around co-production processes, concerns about the degree to which their contributions were being publicly acknowledged and celebrated by museums and heritage organisations,

and calls for clearer boundaries and role definitions. Questions around long-term sustainability and resourcing of partnerships also remain.

4. Widening Participation

From the outset, Working Together projects were designed to address specific local health and social needs, focusing intentionally on underrepresented and vulnerable groups often excluded from mainstream cultural experiences. Through consultation and testing, museum and heritage staff engaged people facing severe health inequalities, social isolation, and mental or physical health challenges. This tailored, intentional focus led to meaningful creative work with smaller participant groups, which in turn built heritage and museum partners' confidence in delivering Creative Health work aligned with public health and third sector priorities.

Representation and accessibility were central to the programme's training, which was led by facilitators with lived experience of issues such as homelessness, disability, and mental ill-health. Training addressed systemic barriers including racism, ableism and colonialism, helping museum and heritage staff to reflect on how to create welcoming and inclusive collections and spaces. As a result, pilot projects achieved noticeable improvements in how museums and heritage organisations were perceived and accessed by new audiences, with participants reporting feeling safer, more creative and more connected as a result of their involvement.

Innovative programming formats, such as co-produced, open-ended sessions, led to deeper engagement and greater accessibility—particularly for participant groups affected by trauma or who identified as disabled and/or neurodivergent. Smaller group sizes allowed for consistent, meaningful participation and the development of strong relationships between participants and staff. Some practitioners reflected that scaling up projects would have diminished the impact they had on individuals and groups, especially for those whose mental health needs made larger group settings inaccessible. By the end of

the programme, participants described how projects had helped them to form friendships, feel part of a community and experience a sense of belonging. Projects both brought people together for the first time and helped revitalise existing groups, giving them new purpose and visibility. However, challenges remained. Some museum/heritage locations had poor public transport access, and keeping in touch with participants—especially young people—was difficult when traditional communication methods clashed with their preferences. Staff morale was also occasionally affected when attendance numbers or group dynamics didn't meet expectations, though group discussions and reflection via the training and peer-support programme helped those involved develop a deeper appreciation for the value of each engagement.

5. Wellbeing

“Throughout the project, I’ve felt very supported by managers and senior staff [...] this consistent involvement shows a genuine commitment to the project and to the values we’re trying to embed.” Museum project lead

5.1 Museum and Heritage Professionals

As previously mentioned, a key support throughout Working Together was the programme lead, who provided consistent, non-judgmental guidance through group and one-on-one conversations. For many project leads, these discussions felt therapeutic, offering a safe space to navigate the emotional demands of Creative Health work. Training sessions further encouraged staff wellbeing by taking a person-centred and adaptive approach, with some specifically focusing on self-care. These helped practitioners manage the emotional labour involved in their day-to-day work and modelled trauma-informed, emotionally safe environments.

“If it had been another project I’d have been tempted to just keep going and put a positive spin on things.” Museum project lead

The programme also helped museum and heritage professionals become more self-aware and confident in advocating for their own wellbeing at work. Project leads reported feeling more empowered to assert boundaries, more able to recognise the signs of stress, seeking institutional support when necessary. In some cases, staff were inspired to initiate conversations with HR and senior leadership teams, which subsequently contributed to more wellbeing-focused workplace practices being implemented. Additionally, Working Together helped reduce professional isolation by building a supportive peer network. This community of practice enabled collaborative problem-solving and emotional support, which project leads many saw as vital to sustaining their wellbeing.

While Working Together actively ‘held space’ for project teams’ wellbeing, systemic issues did emerge in several of the participating museums and heritage organisations with some practitioners reporting heavy workloads without inadequate in-house support, risking burnout. In this way, while individual practices improved, institutional change lagged behind, leaving some practitioners to feel as though they were pushing for wellbeing improvements alone. This disconnect occasionally hindered museum/heritage teams’ engagement in training-related activity and created added pressure on entry and mid-level professionals to lead on change from within.

5.2 Project Participants

“We know this resource will have a really positive impact on our patients [...] and seeing the patients engaged and happy [also] has a really positive effect of the staff in the ward. It lifts them up.” NHS partner

Participants engaged in Working Together pilot projects experienced powerful wellbeing benefits. The creative sessions offered sanctuary and emotional support—particularly for those in crisis or managing long-term health issues. A consistent outcome was the strong sense of connection participants felt with others with emerging social bonds also helping to counter loneliness and build supportive communities.

Creative workshops also provided emotional relief and escapism from the challenges of everyday life. Participants frequently described them as the highlight of their week, offering calm, structure, and moments of joy. The creative focus—free from pressure to produce polished or ‘finished’ outputs—allowed for self-expression and therapeutic making, which built confidence and emotional resilience. Some even credited the projects with helping them rethink their lives and futures, including using the skills they had developed to support professional applications, visa applications or life-goals.

Safe, welcoming spaces fostered a growth in independence. As projects went on, many participants reported taking on more responsibility in sessions and/or becoming less reliant on support workers. Activities also had lasting impact, equipping individuals with stress-management strategies like mindfulness and emotion regulation that they continued using to positive effect after workshops had finished.

Meaningful engagement with museum/heritage collections and nature further enriched the experience, offering opportunities for reflection, identity-building, and emotional nourishment. Time spent outdoors was especially impactful for wellbeing.

Still, challenges existed. Low attendance—due to health-related barriers or logistical access—at times disappointed participants hoping for opportunities for broader social connections. Project endings also proved difficult, raising concerns about the sustainability and the emotional risks of disbanding safe, structured groups that participants had come to rely on and value.

6. Embedding Health and Wellbeing into Organisational Structures

Working Together influenced how museums and heritage organisations embed health and wellbeing into their structures in significant ways. As a result of their participation, some introduced or enhanced formal measures such as wellbeing policies, board representation, and wellbeing subcommittees—signaling growing top-level commitment. Others delivered training on safeguarding and trauma-informed practice to entire teams, marking a shift towards organisation-wide responsibility. ‘Breakfast briefings’ with senior leaders helped professionals shape their strategic thinking around wellbeing and promoted networking at leadership levels.

The programme also prompted a change in how museums and heritage organisations designed and delivered programming across audience groups, with many describing ways in which they had updated their approach to schools and family activities through collaboration and the use of sensory tools and wellbeing practices. Co-production processes was described by project leads as increasingly integrated across both formal and informal learning activities, making engagements more relaxed and impactful. Overall, museums and heritage organisations reflected on the programme’s impact in terms of the way it had helped them reimagine their collections and spaces as tools for wellbeing—exploring how Creative Health practice could be incorporated as a core component of heritage practice rather than treating it as a separate work strand.

Cross-departmental collaboration also grew. The programme encouraged teams from curation, learning, and collections to work together, often for the first time, boosting knowledge of Creative Health and its impacts. In local authority museum contexts, this sometimes extended to collaboration with other council departments, which showed health and wellbeing work as a means of connecting public services.

Sustainability emerged as both a priority and a pressure point. Despite some organisations incorporating wellbeing targets or focusing on the development of self-led resources to reduce dependency on museum/heritage staff, Creative Health work is time and resource-heavy, which poses a challenge to long-term viability, especially within a context of limited and/or reduced funding and overstretched teams.

Persistent challenges include questions about decision-making authority—specifically, who within museums and heritage organisations hold the power to embed Creative Health meaningfully and sustainably. Some institutions lacked clarity on which leaders should drive this work. The programme also created space for internal reflection, allowing staff to assess their own wellbeing and foster dialogue across institutional hierarchies, including with trustees. However, without continued resources, long-term investment and a commitment from leadership, these internal gains risk being lost beyond the life of the programme.

7. Unexpected outcomes: Emerging Leadership, objects, evaluation and creativity

“This is the most fun I’ve had in my job for a long time.”
Museum project lead

Working Together unexpectedly fostered strong leadership skills among entry and mid-level museum/heritage professionals. Many staff who admitted feeling isolated in their roles prior to the programme became confident spokespeople, presenting at national conferences and influencing peers and senior leaders. Mentoring and training helped staff make a case for Creative Health priorities as an embodiment of institutional values, with others successfully negotiated dedicated time to develop their expertise with their line managers. While all substantial gains, Working Together’s legacy will depend on the extent to which

these emerging Creative Health leaders are supported and recognised by their senior teams in future.

Object-based engagement was central, with heritage collections used to inspire creativity, storytelling, and emotional connection in participant groups. However, the traumatic or contentious content in some collections also posed challenges, raising important considerations around inclusive and trauma-informed practice. Sensory loan-based resources opened new possibilities for engagement, but also highlighted the need for thoughtful design that avoided triggering distress in vulnerable users. Ultimately, participating museums and heritage organisations came to appreciate that their collections were not just historical artefacts but, when used appropriately, emotionally resonant tools for improving wellbeing.

The programme helped create a strong, supportive peer network among museum and heritage professionals. What began as casual exchanges in training sessions evolved into a meaningful community of practice, where staff felt confident to share both their successes and setbacks in a non-competitive space. Online meetings and in-person events supported this connectivity, though time constraints sometimes limited full participation. Additionally, the emergence of senior leadership-level networks (via the breakfast briefings and final gathering in York) marked a strategic shift, helping galvanise top-down support for health and wellbeing across and between museums and heritage organisations.

Evaluation grew into a key area of learning. Creative and reflective methods like journals and group reviews were embraced by project teams and participants alike, supported by Working Together's external evaluator and resources like the Creative Health Quality Framework. These approaches helped legitimise qualitative data collection alongside quantitative, but also revealed the need for clearer guidance—especially for early-career

staff—on how to advocate for and embed meaningful evaluation within and beyond specific projects. Collaboration between the programme lead and evaluator over the whole two-year period offered opportunity for deep and nuanced learning and led to tangible improvements in the design and delivery of Working Together in real time.

Perhaps most powerfully, the programme reignited a sense of joy and creativity not only for participants and staff from partner organisations but for museum, heritage and freelance practitioners too.

Many described Working Together as the most fun and rewarding work they had done in years, thanks to playful collaborations and innovative engagement with people and collections. Creativity should be seen as an key requirement to job satisfaction and staff wellbeing. However, unless partner museums and heritage organisations think carefully about how creativity is supported to flourish through their internal culture, practices and professional development pathways, there is a risk that this experience will remain confined to short-term projects like Working Together.



Image: Exhibited participant artwork, The Journey Project, Scottish Maritime Museum

CASE STUDY 1:

York Museums Trust: Dialogue & Creative Loans Boxes

The team:

1 member of staff (YMT), 1 freelance artist (Dialogue box) and 1 freelance producer (Creative Conversation box)

Delivery/project partner:

Dementia Forward (consultation work also carried out with York Cares)

Project output:

2 sets of object handling boxes and associated training for YMT staff, volunteers, community partners and participants

“Working with Dementia Forward we brought the idea of conversation rather than memory into the boxes. These wellbeing activities add another dynamic to a museum visit.”

Museum project Lead

Project overview

York Museums Trust (YMT) piloted an innovative project centred around the development of creative object-handling resources to support people living with dementia, memory-loss, and/or experiencing social isolation in North and East Yorkshire.

Developed in collaboration with an artist/researcher Dr Kimberley Foster (sorhed) and freelance producer Joanne Charlton, and local charities Dementia Forward and York Cares, the project produced two distinct engagement tools: the Object Dialogue Box and a series of Creative Conversation Boxes.⁶ These resources built upon YMT's previous work explored through the House of Memories dementia awareness programme and are designed to spark meaningful conversation, emotional connection, and imagination through touch, storytelling, and play.

The Object Dialogue Box, created by Kimberley, contains artist-made objects inspired by YMT's diverse collections. These are intentionally idiosyncratic and tactile, provoking open-ended emotional and personal responses rather than relying on users' historical knowledge or memory recall. Creative Conversation Boxes, developed by Joanne, explore five themes including home life, holidays,

and fashion and make use of familiar materials such as photos, textiles, and music. Both resources serve as starting points for inclusive interaction; supporting carers and community facilitators to lead sessions outside of traditional museum settings.

Key outcomes and learnings

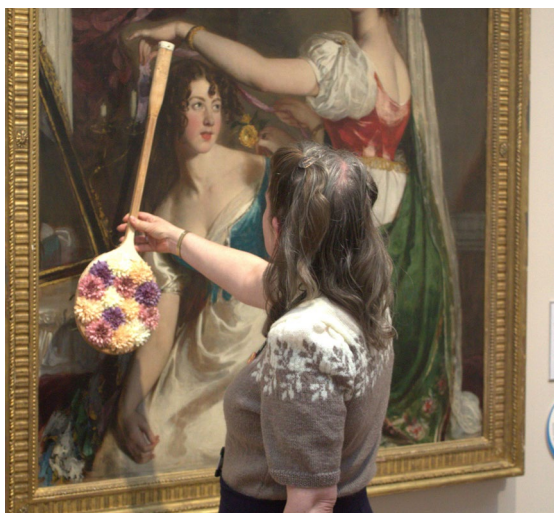
The project emphasised co-production and sustainability. Four days of consultation with Dementia Forward shaped the boxes' content, followed by pilot sessions with community partners and training for YMT staff and volunteers. A key ambition was to embed these resources into YMT's broader offer via a loans system managed by front-of-house staff and supported by trained volunteers, ensuring long-term use beyond the pilot phase.

Launching in summer 2025, the boxes will be free-to-borrow by carers, healthcare providers, and community groups, and YMT has set itself a goal of engaging around 20 users a month.

In overseeing the development of the resources, Project Lead Philip Newton reported significant professional learning, particularly around creative risk-taking,



Images:
Museum
staff trying
out dialogic
objects, York
Art Museum



internal advocacy, and the value of flexibility in project development. However, he also noted operational challenges, including insufficient time to engage with all aspects of the Working Together training programme alongside his other work duties. Despite time constraints, the project reignited his creativity and strengthened partnerships with local organisations. Working Together's training programme also offered practical insights into trauma-informed and inclusive engagement practices, which he found invaluable. The boxes' potential for broader use—in schools or even corporate settings—has already been identified and the project lead is currently exploring a

monetised model to support the boxes' maintenance and improvement going forward.

For Kimberley, the project offered a space for deep reflection and experimental object-making. Her approach highlighted the emotional power of museums and the importance of touch, sensory engagement, and subjective interpretation. Joanne brought expertise in creating and managing loan boxes for older audiences, and reported that the project supported her professional growth and creative freedom, inviting her to explore YMT's collections in new and interesting ways.

Overall, the project reframed YMT's approach to engagement by centring emotion, curiosity and community voice and offers an example of how museums' roles in public health and wellbeing might be broadened to align better with local organisations' need as well as national dementia care strategies. By combining artistic and imaginative innovation with practical, community-focused tools, YMT's pilot demonstrates how museums can act as accessible, inclusive spaces for connection and creativity—especially for those often under-served by traditional cultural programming.

CASE STUDY 2:

National Museum of the Royal Navy: 'Chatterboxes'

THE
NATIONAL
MUSEUM



The team:

3 members of staff (NMRN), 8 member staff (Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust) and 1 freelance artist/play designer

Delivery/project partner:

Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust – Queen Alexandra patient experience and playworkers team

Project output:

2 sets of object handling 'Chatterboxes' (5 for the Adult Ward and 1 'chatter-ship' for the Children's Ward)

Project overview

The National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN) developed Chatterboxes in collaboration with Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust: interactive, creative resource-boxes inspired by naval battleship HMS Victory. The boxes were designed to improve communication and wellbeing for children and adults (including adults living with dementia) during hospital stays at Queen Alexandra Hospital in Portsmouth.

Led by the museum's Community Producer, Joanna Valentine, the project built upon a previous pilot project from 2021 with the hospital's dementia unit. Via Working Together, the Chatterboxes emerged as a cross-sector, co-produced initiative shaped through close consultation with hospital staff, playworkers, and patients. The Chatterboxes were built by play designer Play Explore Art and were rolled out across hospital wards in autumn 2025.

Two tailored types of boxes have been produced: five for adults—primarily those living with dementia—and one 'chatter-ship' for children. Co-production was a core method throughout the project, although strict hospital protocols limited the direct involvement of patients. Children were consulted via hospital playworkers and contributed directly to the design of their ideal Chatterbox while Joanna gathered additional insight via the project's Hospital Adult Working Group, conversations with hospital staff, and patient questionnaires,

alongside her previous experience working with similar audiences. The resulting content prioritises sensory, play-based and nature-themed engagement for children, while ensuring the adult box remains inclusive and appropriate for those seriously unwell and/or in a vulnerable state, yielding a variety of interpretations and enjoyment through repeated engagement.

Key outcomes and learnings

Key project outcomes included new and deeper partnerships between the participating museum and the NHS and increased organisational awareness of museums as spaces of and for wellbeing. Joanna's confidence in spearheading NMRN's Creative Health work was bolstered by Working Together's training offer and prompted some organisational changes, such as wellbeing being added to museum volunteer role descriptions and the NMRN sharing the project through their external comms. A trustee's attendance at one of the programme's training sessions also sparked helpful internal conversations at a senior management level about what makes a healthy work culture and how the organisation might better address gaps in staff wellbeing support and training.

Working Together was a positive experience for the project lead. It supported her to become a vocal wellbeing advocate both in her place of work and her local community. Furthermore, exposure to trauma-informed and safeguarding practices through the programme had an immediate impact on her practice, leading her to implement new tools to aid co-production such as Memorandums of Understanding with partners and participants of other projects.

In professional terms, the Working Together programme and pilot project helped the project lead find enthusiastic collaborators in the health and social sector as well as a wider supportive network of community practitioners working in museums. Conference presentations and cross-sector engagement through the Portsmouth Health and Wellbeing Alliance have reinforced her belief in the importance of museum-led health initiatives. She now sees health as a central focus of her future community work, with ambitions to work with ten groups identifying with protected characteristics on creative projects that help meet their and Portsmouth's health priorities.



CASE STUDY 3:

Scottish Maritime Museum: The Journey Project

The team:

9 members of staff (SMM) and 3 trustees (SMM), 1 freelance participatory artist

Delivery/project partner:

Barnardo's

Project output:

Family wellbeing sessions, creative sessions based on museum collection, links with exhibiting artists, a community exhibition and volunteering opportunities, mental health first aid, safeguarding, trauma-informed and accessibility training for staff

“[I] enjoyed every moment of the workshops and made new friends as well as learning new skills. My confidence and sense of purpose and achievement have soared.” Participant

Project overview:

The Journey Project at the Scottish Maritime Museum (SMM) was a health and wellbeing initiative developed in partnership with Barnardo's, working with Participatory Artist Ellie Swanston. It aimed to support families and young people affected by trauma, kinship care, substance misuse, and poor mental health, as well as families with children with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities). Through co-produced creative sessions, community exhibitions, volunteering opportunities, sensory resources, and supported museum visits, the museum evolved into a safe and welcoming space for vulnerable communities. The project placed emphasis on building trust and fostering long-term relationships over short-term outcomes.

Key outcomes and learnings:

Key outcomes for participants included improved mental wellbeing, increased confidence, reduced social anxiety, and greater social connection. Many families who previously felt disconnected or excluded from the SMM now see it as a place of comfort, creativity, and belonging. Young people, including young refugees, accessed creative experiences that supported self-expression and even developed skills that could be included as part of visa applications based on workshop participation.

Internally, the project transformed how the museum worked. Staff across all levels, from Front of House to the Board of Trustees, participated in training in trauma-informed practice, safeguarding, and mental health awareness. Two staff members are now trained as mental health first aiders. These developments helped to shape new policies, practices, and attitudes within the museum, promoting inclusivity and sensitivity to the needs of diverse audiences. As a result of the Journey Project, a wellbeing committee has been established and a dedicated health and wellbeing board representative is in place to support strategic development in this area.

Another major shift was the museum's adoption of a co-production process/methodology, enabling participants and partners to shape programming collaboratively. Staff embraced this model despite initial uncertainty. Rather than delivering rigid, pre-defined sessions, the team now works responsively across all programme strands, adapting to feedback and prioritising participant agency. This has led to longer average dwell-times for audiences overall (from 10 to 50 minutes), more meaningful engagement between museum staff and visitors, and increased interest from local schools and organisations in the work of SMM.

The partnership with Barnardo's brought both opportunities and challenges. While family support workers were on board with the project's flexible and responsive ethos, some higher-level management were more comfortable with traditional short-term project models. Nevertheless, the museum cultivated strong working relationships with Barnardo's, including co-developing sensory bags and activity boxes tailored to children with additional needs.

SMM staff Claire Jones and Jennifer Pless described the Working Together training and peer network as transformative—offering a rare chance to learn, reflect, and experiment without the pressure of hitting predetermined outcomes. The training enabled them to build their confidence, deepen their sector knowledge, and make significant positive shifts in their practice. The programme also highlighted the importance of testing out and embedding evaluation methods that used creative formats and prioritised capturing the social impact of their work.



The museum's focus is now on sustaining this momentum. Funding applications are currently being written with aim of securing community engagement roles, upskilling volunteers and developing outdoor creative spaces for wellbeing. Plans are in development to expand co-production approaches to further enable SMM to better align with local and national strategic aims to tackle social isolation and improve mental health and wellbeing. The Journey Project is not just a successful one-off pilot but marks a cultural shift in how SMM relates to its community, placing care, inclusion, and collaboration at its core.



CASE STUDY 4:

Royal Museums Greenwich: Open Waves and The Optimism Sessions

The team:

4 staff members (RMG), 1 critical friend,
3 freelance artists/facilitators, 5 volunteers

Delivery/project partner:

Everyone's A Singer CIC and Less Talking

Project output:

Two parallel projects made up of a series
of workshops delivered over 12 weeks



Project overview

Royal Museums Greenwich (RMG), through the Prince Philip Maritime Collections Centre (PPMCC), launched two creative wellbeing projects—Open Waves and The Optimism Sessions—aimed at engaging hyper-local communities and people from global majority backgrounds. These projects were developed and co-produced with creative organisations Everyone's A Singer CIC—Tracy Durrant and Less Talking, and delivered by Project Lead Khursheed Hussain, audiovisual artist/creative practitioner Jasmine Kahlia, writer/curator and musician Gabriel Dedji, and Artist/Poet and Creative Practitioner Joel Sydenham.

They aimed to engage adults (aged 25–45) from African Caribbean communities (Open Waves) and young people (aged 16–24) for The Optimism Sessions. Participants were invited to creatively respond to objects from the museums' collections through music-making, art, and storytelling, with strong emphasis placed on emotional wellbeing, connection, reflection and lived experience.

Key outcomes and learnings

Over weekly sessions - initially two to 12 weeks in length and then repeated for a further nine to 12 weeks - projects created safe and supportive environments that encouraged personal expression

and community-building. Participants consistently reported benefits such as reduced stress, increased confidence, and renewed creative interest, while others cited increased motivation in future plans and social awareness. A total of 73 people engaged with the workshops overall. Attendance was lower than anticipated, but those who did attend were deeply engaged, highlighting the qualitative success of the projects. Smaller group sizes also allowed for deeper dialogue and one-to-one facilitator engagement.

The projects highlighted possible creative ways of opening-up difficult-to-access museum collections and catalysed shifts in practice at RMG. Staff across departments became involved in planning, evaluation, and delivery. A student placement volunteer helped trial creative evaluation tools, and key leadership figures took active roles in supporting and guiding the project forward, becoming strong advocates in Creative Health in the process. Internally, the projects have prompted a commitment to more strategic programming in future and an emphasis on reflective, evidence-based planning. Co-production emerged as a powerful approach, with community partners and facilitators taking ownership over marketing and session design, subtly adapting their delivery style to suit the needs of different groups.



Despite this, the project did face several challenges. The location of the PPMCC proved difficult for some participants to access, and communication (particularly via email) with attendees was ineffective at times. Facilitators also expressed concern over attendance numbers, prompting RMG to begin experimenting with alternative formats, such as shorter sessions and the integration of activity into existing public programmes. The experience underlined the importance of managing expectations, maintaining flexibility, and prioritising sustained partnerships over one-off engagement as a means of boosting participant numbers in the long-term.

Legacy outputs include webpages that document the projects and their shared outcomes, an Optimism Zine, which captures the voices and artworks of participants, and audio pieces linked by QR-code to objects on display at the PPMCC created during Open Waves. Both will be integrated into the museum's public offer by becoming installed alongside artefacts on display. This will extend the impact beyond the sessions themselves and reach out to new audiences. Participants will also be invited to an annual Community Day celebration at PPMCC, further acknowledging and embedding their contributions to RMG.

Ultimately, Open Waves and The Optimism Sessions have been influential on RMG's approach to community engagement and wellbeing. They demonstrate that museums can support emotional health through creativity, and that smaller-scale, deeply reflective engagement can yield meaningful outcomes.

The projects also highlight the need for long-term funding, realistic planning, and clearer understanding of impact—shifting focus from numbers to depth of connection and quality of experience.

Going forward, RMG is committed to sustaining this work and building on the trust and relationships established through these pilots.



CASE STUDY 5:

Summary of The Dandelion Project – National Civil War Centre and Newark Museum

The team:

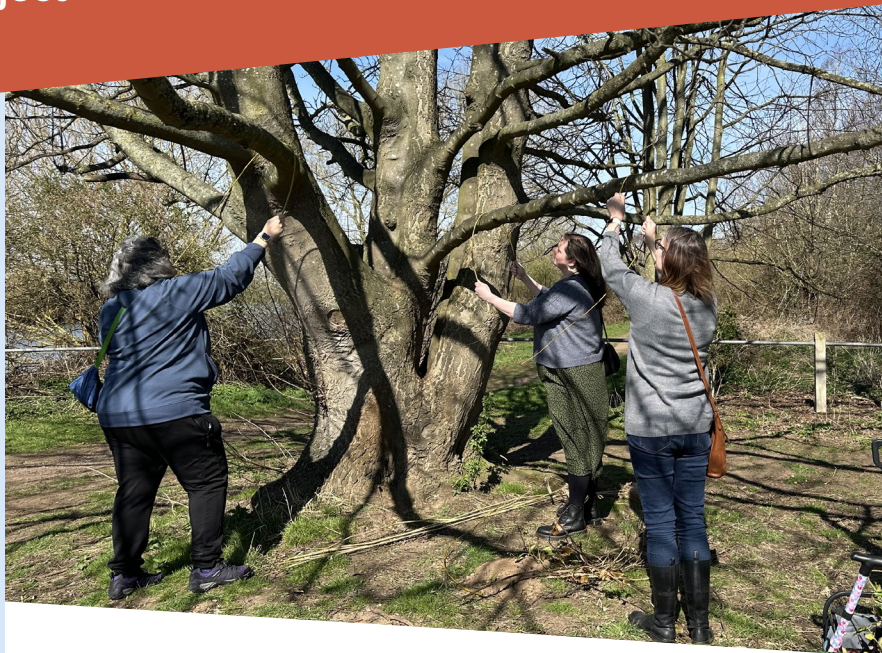
3 staff members (NCWC-NM), 1 freelance artist/facilitator

Delivery/project partner:

Sconce and Devon Park Rangers

Project output:

A series of weekly creative workshops, audio intervention/podcasts and resource boxes for family events



Project overview

The Dandelion Project, delivered by the National Civil War Centre and Newark Museum, was a targeted wellbeing initiative supporting a small group of women living with poor mental health in Newark and Sherwood, Nottinghamshire. Developed by Learning and Participation Manager Denise Greany and freelance practitioner Liam Skillen, supported by Lucy Armstrong, and facilitated by artist Kristina McCormick, the project offered fortnightly mindful art sessions in Sconce and Devon Park. These sessions used nature-based, process-driven creativity to promote emotional wellbeing, reduce anxiety, and foster community.

This initiative built on a previously successful collaboration with the same group and artist, who had co-produced an exhibition for the museum.

Key outcomes and learning:

Initially, the project hoped to support men, particularly veterans, through mental health programming. However, in spite of extensive consultation with local men's mental health groups and service providers, this engagement strand did not come to fruition as although group leaders were keen, potential male participants showed little interest working with NCWC-NM. In contrast, the women's group had

already expressed a strong desire to continue working together, prompting the museum team to pivot and deepen this existing partnership. This decision reflects a key learning: successful community engagement often builds on trust and relationships already in place, rather than creating entirely new structures.

The outcomes for participants have been profound. Group members report reduced anxiety, increased independence, and enhanced confidence. They describe the sessions as a vital part of their week, with one participant transitioning from needing support to attending independently. Working outdoors, using natural materials, and engaging in mindful practices fostered a sense of calm in individuals as well as place-based pride. The emphasis on process allowed participants to engage meaningfully with a variety of creative and artistic techniques without the pressure of a public-facing output.

For the museum, the project expanded its understanding of inclusive practice and wellbeing-focused engagement. Denise and Liam developed new skills in trauma-informed approaches and reflective facilitation, which are now having an impact on the way they plan family and community programming. Kristina also benefited professionally,



using the opportunity to develop new resources, including mindfulness toolkits and session boxes that will be shared with a broader public later in 2025.

The project's reach is also being extended through the creation of QR-coded mindfulness prompts and mini-podcasts that will be installed on park benches across Newark. These subtle public interventions aim to share the project's benefits more widely while respecting the privacy and needs of the core group. Internally, the project has prompted a cultural shift: senior management now view community wellbeing work as integral to the museum's mission.

Other insights included the importance of working "where the energy is," prioritising participant-led design, and resisting pressures to scale up in ways that would compromise the experience of vulnerable individuals. The team also recognised the essential role of skilled facilitators and the need for sustainable planning to ensure legacy beyond the project's immediate funding.

The Dandelion Project illustrates how museums can function as safe, creative spaces for mental health support when projects are co-produced, relationship-driven, and embedded in and relevant to the local context. Its legacy will continue through extended partnerships, new resources, and a strengthened commitment to wellbeing as a core part of museum practice.

Images: 5 Participants and group leader, Dandelion Project, Sconce and Devon Park, Newark



CASE STUDY 6:

Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens: Creative Coal Project

The team:

8 staff members (SM&WG), 1 volunteer,
1 freelance creative practitioner

Delivery/project partner:

Holly House Care Home in Washington
Arts Centre Washington Dementia ward
at Sunderland Royal Hospital Sunderland
Libraries Services/Culture House

Project output:

A series of workshops, community-focused
'Creative Coal' loans boxes, museum visits,
training for staff and volunteers

Project overview

The Creative Coal project, led by Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens (SMWG), was a co-produced initiative focused on improving wellbeing and social connection for vulnerable older adults living in Sunderland, through creative engagement with local heritage. The project centred around the co-creation of community resource boxes developed in partnership with the museum's Creative Age group—a group for over-50s, some of whom live with long-term physical or mental health conditions, dementia, and/or may be experiencing social isolation—who meet at museum every week for social and creative activities.

The multisensory resource boxes were inspired by coal mining history and contained tactile objects, photographs, links to playlists and oral histories, creative prompts, and conversation starters. Participants worked with museum staff, freelancers and volunteers—including project lead Jennie Lambert, project volunteer Sarah Robson, creative facilitator Elizabeth Baker, and textile artist Rosi Thornton—to develop two boxes based on the coal mining themes of “up top” and “down pit.” Drawing from museum

“Just being here [...] talking to people and remembering things from a long time ago. It was nice and I enjoyed it.”

Care Home Resident

collections, temporary exhibitions and external research trips to heritage sites across the North East, the contents explored the topic of coal mining through engagement with adjacent ‘universal’ themes grouped under the following headings: community, feeling safe, time to relax, make do and mend, light in the dark, then and now and change. Designed for use in care homes/ supported living settings, libraries, and hospitals, these boxes offer sustainable, self-led engagement tools that do not require museum staff to facilitate. To support this, SM&WT created an introductory film to the boxes, explaining how they can be used and showing older people interacting with and enjoying them, and plan to run training for care home workers in autumn 2025. A dedicated webpage and supporting resources will also be launched at this time and the museum is keen to develop more boxes as part of its upcoming redevelopment and future co-creation projects.

Key outcomes and learning

Outcomes for participants were significant. Members of the Creative Age group reported a strong sense of pride, ownership, and connection through the project. The co-creation process empowered them to make decisions about the group's direction and gave them a platform to share their lived experiences. They were proud to be involved in a project that would support other, potentially more

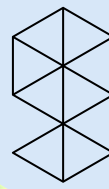


Image: Creative Coal Group and staff,
Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens

vulnerable, older people in their local area. Reflective journals and feedback forms helped the project lead monitor engagement and wellbeing, while also reinforcing participants' learning and collaboration. The project also drew in new members, generating fresh energy and conversation, although these transitions had to be carefully managed by museum staff -through wellbeing check-ins and light-touch monitoring- to maintain group cohesion.

The project prioritised inclusive and trauma-informed approaches, acknowledging the personal and political sensitivities surrounding the mining industry and its legacy in Sunderland. One key learning was the emotional resonance of heritage objects, which staff and volunteers discovered were triggering for some participants even when approached with care. This required thoughtful facilitation, safeguarding training, and emotional support for both staff and participants.

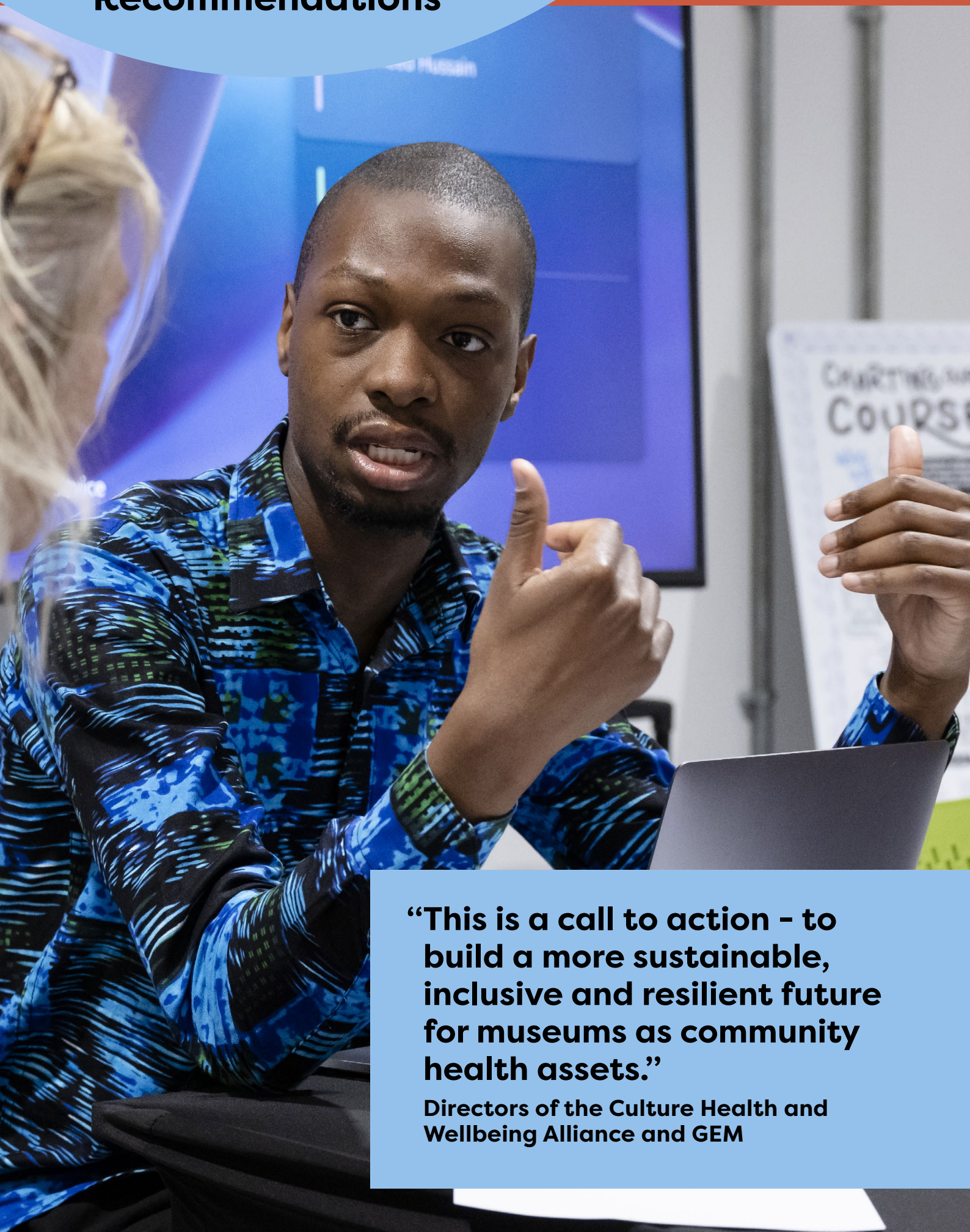
For staff and volunteers, the project offered professional development and deeper understanding of Creative Health work. Volunteer Sarah Robson expanded her role and received additional training, while museum staff benefited from safeguarding and reflective practice tools. The creative facilitator played a crucial role in alleviating delivery pressure on staff and ensuring the project's person-centred ethos was maintained. The training and peer support from the Working

Together network contributed to a more sensitive and sustainable approach to Creative Health practice, leading to the development of strong foundations that will be built on in future.

At the organisational level, the project highlighted both the value and strain of long-term co-production. While senior staff support Creative Health work, concerns about capacity and costs remain. The project also underscored the need for more integrated support structures for staff and volunteers, clearer communication strategies, and long-term funding to embed this work within Sunderland Culture's broader programme.

Creative Coal demonstrates the powerful role of culture and co-production in supporting health and wellbeing. It also reveals the challenges of sustaining such work in resource-constrained environments. As a pilot, the project offers a template for broader roll-out, while also advocating for the strategic recognition of Creative Health within both the cultural and health sectors.

Recommendations



“This is a call to action - to build a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient future for museums as community health assets.”

Directors of the Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance and GEM

For museums and heritage organisations

Leadership and organisational culture

- Assign someone from senior leadership teams to be responsible for health and wellbeing across the organisation, ensuring it is championed at a strategic level and not left solely to junior or delivery staff.
- Museum director and senior managers visibly engage in health and wellbeing conversations at all levels of the organisation, creating feedback loops where staff can see how their insights are being acted upon.

Sustainable practice and workforce support

- Review and update learning, participation, and community engagement staff job/roles descriptions so that they include wellbeing responsibilities—for communities, partners, museum colleagues and themselves.
- Acknowledge and plan for the turnover of staff both at museums/heritage organisations and partners organisation

by embedding training and reflective practice as ongoing, not one-off, commitments.

- Create internal communities of practice and mentoring structures to support staff delivering Creative Health work, who often work in isolation.
- Put in place supervision/support structures for staff delivering Creative Health work.

Strengthen cross-sector partnerships

- Develop longer-term, more formalised relationships with third-sector partners to ensure health and wellbeing work is embedded beyond individual projects. Make next steps concrete and specific.

Communication and advocacy

- Develop communication strategies that publicly acknowledge and celebrate wellbeing work, especially when it responds to local needs. Use case studies and press engagement to raise visibility.

For CHWA and GEM

Ongoing communication and partnership working

- Continue and grow the partnership (e.g. through successful delivery of upcoming Creative Health training programme for the museums/heritage sector).
- Add museum/heritage partners to CHWA and GEM's mailing lists to help them feel connected and to share updates.
- Organise an annual partner catch-up to share progress and outcomes.

Resources and knowledge-sharing for embedding wellbeing work

- Provide a resource pack summarising all training sessions.

- Share partner insights on how project budgets were spent to generate ideas for cost-effective approaches in future.
- Offer a template role-description for wellbeing and mental health specialists in the museum and heritage sector.
- Provide a menu or audit tool outlining ways to embed mental health support, aimed at trustees and board members.

Support for funding and sustainability

- Deliver future training and guidance on how to apply for Creative Health funding and ways of reprioritising core costs to support wellbeing work.

For funders

Recognise the value of process-driven work

- Reduce emphasis on scale and visibility as primary success measures. Instead, funding models and evaluation criteria should recognise the value of person-centred, relational, and process-led approaches that deliver meaningful, if smaller-scale, impact.

Support existing and proven programmes

- Prioritise funding for programmes that have demonstrated positive outcomes

and strong community relationships. Sustainability should not require re-invention but strategic scaling and adaptation.

Address structural barriers

- Acknowledge how austerity, staff shortages, and insecure funding directly limit community engagement and Creative Health work in museums.
- Create funding streams and policy levers that address these systemic issues—including funding core wellbeing roles and embedding wellbeing metrics in sector-wide evaluation.

Next Steps for museum and heritage partners

On 4 July 2025 programme producers from CHWA and GEM, museum project leaders, senior leaders and trustees came together at York Art Gallery to reflect on the evaluation of Working Together and to share and discuss realistic and sustainable steps to embedding the programme's legacy into future museum strategy. As part of these conversations partner museums created lists of concrete, realistic and sustainable actions that they planned to implement on returning to their sites. These are included below:

Advocacy and internal communication

- Provide marketing and comms teams with simple statements about the impact and outcomes of ongoing Creative Health programmes and ask them to play a more active role in advocating for Creative Health work internally and externally (providing advocacy training, if required).
- Find better strategies for advocating for Creative Health work to colleagues, at all levels of the organisation; explain to

them and to trustees how important this area of work currently is (use metrics and language they understand!); explore with them possible ways of weaving health and wellbeing priorities into everything the museum does.

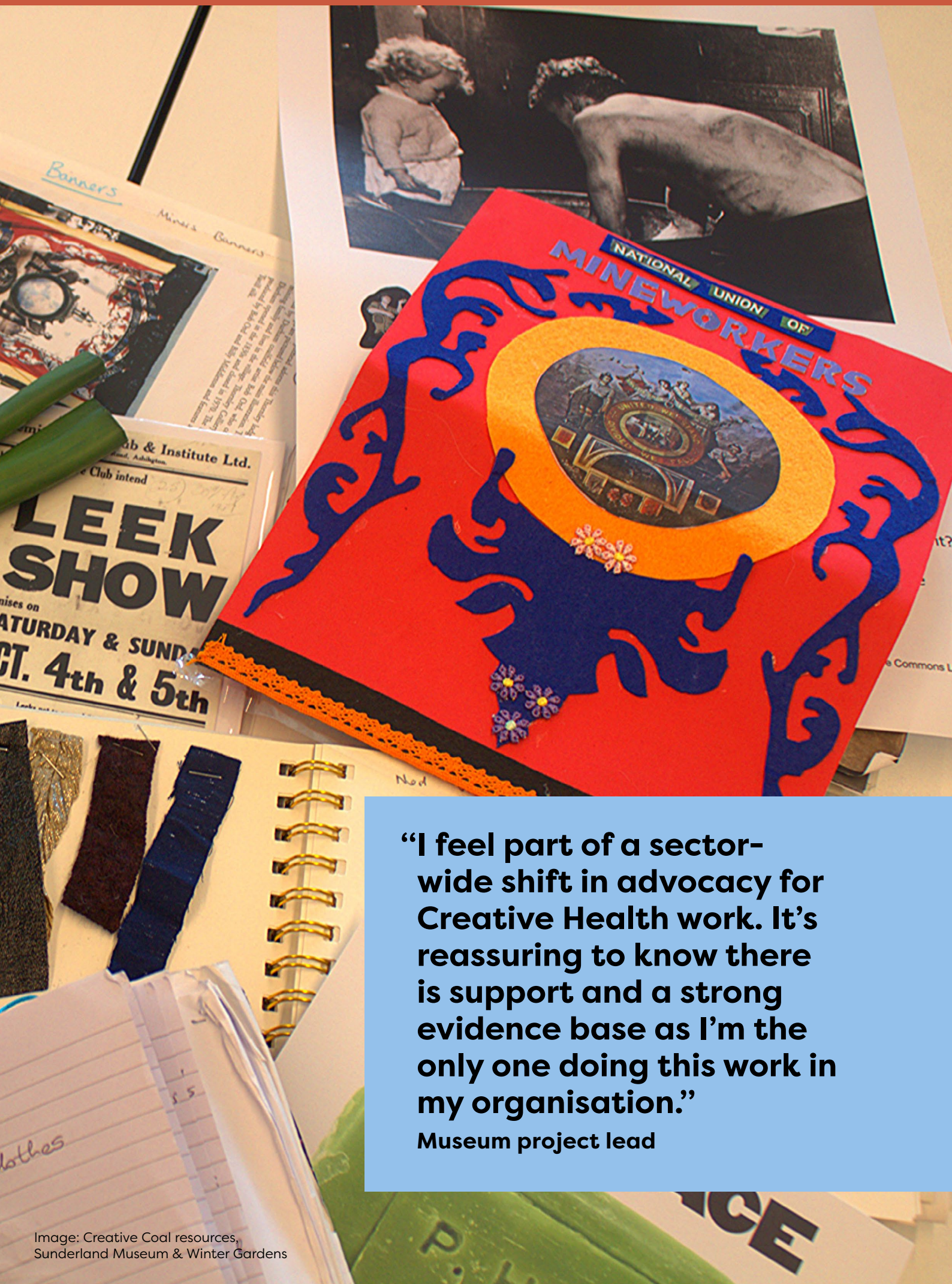
- Create a manifesto for Creative Health work. Share and make this visible internally and externally.

Governance and strategic leadership

- Ask board members with expertise or a special interest in health and wellbeing to become organisational leads/advocates for Creative Health work.

Wellbeing policy and organisational practice

- Develop a wellbeing policy for staff, volunteers, and audiences.
- Develop a mechanism to monitor staff wellbeing.
- Think about how existing gallery spaces/ permanent exhibition can be adapted to support Creative Health.



“I feel part of a sector-wide shift in advocacy for Creative Health work. It’s reassuring to know there is support and a strong evidence base as I’m the only one doing this work in my organisation.”

Museum project lead

Acknowledgements

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More information including short films
about the pilot projects can be found at:
**[www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/
programmes/working-together](http://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/programmes/working-together)**
www.gem.org.uk

