

Craft of Caring Mid-Devon: A project in spring 2019 to make Carers more visible in their community; reaching, and supporting carers by offering craft and arts based activities across Mid Devon.

“It is clearer to me, now, how artists can set you free at those vulnerable moments.”

Core activities and outputs were:

Co-production of:

- **A giant nest**(1650mm x 1900mm)
- **a bird house/home tiered sculpture**
- **[7 videos](#)** with reach of more than 16000 (twice the population of Crediton)
- **[‘Care Trail’ exhibition](#), engaging 6 community venues**

“Pleasantly surprised by the breadth of the exhibition and didn’t just represent one type of carer. Intrigued - high calibre, professional artistic exhibition.

Research & Networking to 50 Carers groups , organisations, & individuals across Mid Devon

Engagement of 10 artists to work with carers and provide relevant exhibition artwork

Finding 12 new Volunteers and understanding their interests and potential for involvement

4 Art Lab days for selected community artists to empower them to work with carers

Over 50 Workshop events with over 200 participants

Extensive engagement of mid-Devon residents with consideration of ‘Care’

- We collected more than 20 stories of caring
- Live audience of 6,500 people (81% of the 8,000 population of Crediton)
- Online reach of over 47,000 (57% of the 82,000) population of Mid Devon

Extensive Evaluation and Reflective action research using CHIME, a mental health recovery framework, interviews and participant observation

What we learned

- Art based activity - and a multi-voiced exhibition by carers -particularly increases Connectedness, as well as Hope, Identity, Meaning, and Empowerment in carers, organisations who support them, community venues, and even the artists who facilitate the work. (Link to long report?)
- Carers are very relationship-minded. In practice they chose what to engage in based on word of mouth from trusted sources.
- The identity ‘carer’ is burdened by stigmas or perceived stigmas for some carers - and these perceptions become an additional obstacle to engagements and supporting them. These perceptions isolate carers.

‘Accepting the identity of carer only became necessary when I HAD to apply for benefits. Our situation demanded it. Accepting the identity ‘carer’ felt like a failure. I couldn’t

keep my family going without help. I won't send my children to any carers groups. I won't inflict that feeling on them.' There are no specifically arts based offers for carers in Mid-Devon. A number of carers are engaging in community life via (generic) arts provisions rather than carer provisions.

- Our exhibition and project was powerful in instigating conversations in the public realm about caring, and created a variety of instances where carers - including a number who do not engage with existing care groups - identified themselves.

'Very positive, several patients have commented to me and we have then spoken about dementia/art/expressing oneself/feelings'

'For some people this is the only place where art can be seen. There are areas in Crediton with high levels of deprivation - 80% of people on benefits don't have a computer and come to the library to do so. To be able to see proper artists that provokes a reaction is good..'

- Being in community spaces rather than just 'art' spaces dramatically increased audience numbers (to nearly 6,500 from a projected 180) & impact arose from audience engagement.
'It was nice to have artwork in the spot at the Leisure Centre. It really 'warmed up' what is otherwise a bit of 'institutional' space.'

'You set up a powerful and illuminating trail. Take it to other places.'

- The local arts centre on balance had the lowest reach of all of the venues used. Nonetheless, the artwork there reached specialist audiences - including a BBC Presenter who featured one of them in a podcast.
- Our activities drew an alternate reason to participate in the group than 'talking about the difficult.' It enabled the space to be more socialable and the group to grow.

"It was nice to see carers and supporters really relax and let go of themselves. They had time to talk. Not having pressures and getting loose was really nice."

- Various community organisations have people, resources and services that could be (and in some instances are keen to be) more utilised by carers, but identifying the carers - and getting them to identify themselves is complicated by stigmas or perceived stigmas.

'She (the carer) said I'm not one for this namby pamby stuff. I don't want these do-gooders. I look after my husband and he can't read any more. I get books with pictures in. I said 'Do you realise you can order audio books from 50 libraries for free with a disabled ticket.?' And although it was a negative hostile reaction, I was able to

offer her help that she wouldn't have asked for herself. They (the art works) have provoked a reaction.'

- The appeal of existing support groups and the content of peer support sessions is highly variable. Groups are often led by volunteers, who tend to be keen for quality relevant content but cautious in selecting such content for their group.

"To be honest, I was really skeptical. I thought you might be wasting your time, but they REALLY engaged- and relaxed, and got stuck in. [That carer] is talking about continuing at home, and she's been really down, and difficult to support. She's really enjoying it. She seems renewed and empowered suddenly. I really didn't think they would engage. Do you think you can come again?"

- A variety of ways carers could engage - and a robust outreach programme - were critical factors to the success of our project.

'The way people have reacted has been consistently good. Members of the public can tell that time has been taken to think through what you are doing. Value the work and value the people and the appreciation is reciprocal.'

'Lovely to hear the stories behind the art to give it more meaning and impact. Thank you for sharing your stories.'

- Isolated people and bereaved carers inhabit many similar spaces to carers - and have many similar needs and reactions to engaging with art based interventions.
- Bereavement begins another major life shift for carers and carers organisations are supporting successful volunteer-led peer groups, but moving on from caring is not particularly signposted, and individuals often become embedded in care groups and services for a prolonged period.
- Parent carers and their careers seem to be falling into gaps in provisions. Schools, the NHS, and surprisingly often, the police and social services are all involved - most often in addressing crises. Proactive, ongoing, and developmental support is lacking and this gap is impacting multiple carers and community-based relationships detrimentally. Parent carers were especially positive about our open workshop events.



"People are like my bunch of flowers on their grey leafy background, which depicts how we are all part of a group, or culture or family living, growing, and blossoming together. Sometimes as we develop and age: one of the blooms within that family changes in a different way. They become divorced from the overall group and still holding the same outward

shape, drop away and wilt, becoming a paler version of themselves as they change and lose contact with their group and surroundings. However, through all this the flowers still hold together and keep contact with the stem and root, supporting the one that changes.”

Over several project phases (and funders’ support), over a 22 month period, the project had a total budget of £27,548 - with an intensive delivery period from January - June 2019 when most of the work was delivered. The project was enabled by funding from Devon Community Foundation, Arts Council England, The Community Foundation, and Crediton Town Council.

Naomi Wright MA Art & Nature led our evaluation activity and [authored our long report](#) on CHIME impacts.

Recommendations

- Explorations of **whole community approaches** - to tackle perceived stigmas - and better value the work of carers would the impact of existing provisions by tackling root causes of why carers can be so hard to reach - and increase the outreach and provisions available.
- Developing provisions that **prioritise relationships** will improve take up and reduce vulnerabilities.
- **Use of art based approaches enables whole community approaches** by provoking conversation, reflections and demonstrations of support
- **Enabling of partnership working across sectors** could dramatically improve consistency, quantity, and quality of provisions.
- **Researchers embedded in projects** can provide practical insights - though substantial administration can come with this approach and needs accounting and valuing.

CONNECTEDNESS

‘Absolutely beautiful. As a carer myself, I find it somehow connecting.’

“There were three generations, my mum cared for my dad for three years before he died, I have looked after my husband for 7 years, My daughter has been a young carer, she has been literally in Tescos with her dad falling over. And then a friend was there as a parent carer with her daughter, Their relationship needs healing, because of the family dynamics, you are not only a parent to your daughter who is deeply affected by the son who needs

care. He is the only focal point. So that night it was a date night for her and her daughter. It was an important amazing evening.'

'I feel very connected to the art... It is clearer to me how artists can set you free at those vulnerable moments. It is a big deal, and I'm not shy of that world, I've been an actress, but that whole visual art sort of thing... It has opened up a whole new world. Everytime I look up while I'm washing up with my daughter I see the little flower pounding things and I know it will sustain me.'

'It's those that you don't see that are difficult to help so that's why having the caring art here means that I have connected to more carers than I wouldn't have done without the art being here.'

A carer did a patch, she was not the only one. She was dubious about how it was going to be relevant. She was dead chuffed to see her work as part of the finished piece. She loved doing the activity. Her patch did express what was in her mind. She has opened up a lot over the last year. She laughs... A bit. She enjoyed being a part of something. This is not all to do with the project, Unite volunteers spend a lot of time listening and being an ear, but it all helps.

Hope

'There is so much loss and grief that is very hard to process culturally. There is also so much joy from remembering and ,you know , I know when I remember when my daughter was so ill and look at how she is now. I could never ever imagine where she is now. It is still terribly painful, carrying cultural baggage,and I had to be there like an undercarriage and had so much painful surgery. **All that experience does have relevance.**'

Having people understanding your situation - a problem shared is a problem halved. The action of what you make is just the start. My son went to one of the workshops and got stuck in. **He has never done that before.**

Identity

This project was a great gift personally, it finally shook me up enough about the whole subject, being right in the subject matter, being involved in caring, with art medium, my identity has been totally shifted.

Meaning

'As soon as I saw 'care' I wanted to fall into it and be nurtured. There are many moving patches and as a carer I am glad to see the pain of caring represented as well as other aspects.'

'The patch making was different to the workshops – more meaning and giving a sense of pride at an individual level.'



‘He has an episode, and then things explode for a while, and then, eventually, they’ll be OK again.’



‘This piece tells of what it means to be a carer from my point of view - which was caring for dementia. The rollercoaster is symbolic of never knowing what each day, or even minute, is going to be like, the ups and downs just keep one guessing. The sun and blue stars represent the happy times when we were able to laugh together or just be happy in each others company. The clouds are there for the sad times, the heartache that is ever present when a loved one develops a devastating condition. The red stars represent the intense frustration and anger that one feels but cannot show said loved one’.

I love the (bird)houses - the detail and the individuality of them. I also like them holding memories and feelings.

I thought it was brilliant making the nests last time. I finished it at home and put felt inside it. It’s so important touching and making. Playing and touching different surfaces I was very touched when xx brought in the baby stuff.

‘One of the women looking at the two pieces got quite tearful. Both her parents had had dementia. It made her think that she should do something to make her heal. The art was helping her, so she thought she wanted to help other people. Just seeing the piece of work made her think that.’

‘It is important to have work that shows different feelings, is about community. We need to show things that are not just individual to ourselves.’

Empowerment

A sense of shared ethos and approach and I don't feel so isolated. A sense of speaking another language of other people feels very empowering.

'I think it will empower carers eventually. There are longitudinal opportunities. It will bring them out of an isolated place.'

'This will make a big difference as is (in?) the notion of being represented and dealing with fragile people and underrepresented people. Visually promoting people in this field of work is a step in the right direction in literally making them visible.'

There were 6 women and one man, most of them could tell stories of 'crafting' even in the past tense sharing them in the group. Crochet, knitting, card making, sewing, painting and so on. This shows how offering the art again reaches back into their lives.

Additional Resources (with links)

- The Care Trail Guide
- Video testimonies
- The long report
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A last word

"Is there a case to support this art making with no expectations, just a space to play - particularly for carers with their careers? Both can take part and take from it as they need."