



Evaluation Report

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It's not what people know you know, it's everything else

A poem created for and with staff at Mid Cheshire Hospital Trust, by Beth Calverley



Everyone knows that porters know everything
but you tell me every porter is resuscitation-trained
and I didn't know that.

Everyone knows that healthcare workers know the facts
but you tell me you're also fluent in body language,
forming your knowledge into words we understand.

And you tell me you know the feeling too –
people coming for mastectomies know
you know what they're going through.

Everyone knows that people who work in hospitals
help fellow humans, but you talk about the tortoise
you looked after for a patient in your own home.

Everyone knows healthcare is a lifelong vocation,
but you tell me you used to be a florist
so you see your patients as the hardiest carnations.

And you left school without your GCSEs.
And you re-trained in a supermarket pharmacy.
And you became Band 3 at 60 - a feat you never thought you'd achieve.

Everyone knows hospital staff aren't just medics,
that the talents of admin, facilities, estates,
nurses, therapists, and HCAs, power this trust.

But how many people know that some of these sunflowers often feel invisible?
Everyone knows you do this job because you care,

but you tell me that when someone is on their own,
you know you're the only one they trust
to help them climb their stairs alone.

And you tell me that without the NHS
your family might not have coped.
And you know how to pick people up at their worst,

how to get them back to their best.
And you tell me qualifications can only get you so far.
Experience brings the rest.

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Key terminology

Term / abbreviation	Meaning
NHS	National Health Service
Hospital Arts Managers	People working in a coordination or management role within NHS Trusts (or their accompanying charities), whose posts are dedicated to producing arts projects for that NHS Trust. Actual job titles vary widely.
Arts and health	Broad term to describe work that takes place at the intersection of arts and healthcare settings or conditions. Sometimes described as 'creative health', 'culture, health and wellbeing'. Hospital Arts is a subsection of this field.

Contributors to Our National Health Stories

We acknowledge and thank everyone who contributed to this project, and this evaluation. We especially want to thank the NHS staff who shared their stories in this project, and all the NHS staff who have cared for us in our time of need over the past 75 years.

NHS Trusts	Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust Chelsea & Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust Liverpool University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust Mid Cheshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust Royal Brompton & Harefield NHS Foundation Trust Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust Somerset NHS Foundation Trust St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust University Hospitals Bristol and Weston NHS Foundation Trust University Hospitals Derby & Burton NHS Foundation Trust University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
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Artistic Director	Kwame Kwei-Armah
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Central creative team	Chris Bush - Writer Jennifer Tang - Associate Director Ruth Chan - Composer Teunkie Van Der Sluijs - Dramaturg
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Funding partners	Arts Council England NHS Charities Together NHS England NHS hospital charities (17) and NHS Trusts (3)
Steering group	Ruth Charity – Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust Griselda Goldsbrough – York and Scarborough Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust Guy Noble – University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust Laura Waters – University Hospitals of Derby & Burton NHS Foundation Trust
Project team	Creative Director: Emma Dunton Engagement Producer: Damian Hebron Creative Consultant: Elgiva Field Creative Consultant & Project Development: Sud Basu Consultant Producer: Linda Bernhardt Marketing & Digital: The Cogency PR & Media Relations: Nadja Coyne PR
Evaluation Team	Evaluation Lead: Rosie Dow Evaluation Associate: Kathleen Wright

About the National Arts in Hospitals Network

The 19 NHS Trusts who participated are part of the National Arts in Hospitals Network, a membership organisation made up of NHS managers and professional leads who are involved in the leadership and delivery of Arts, Heritage, and Design services across NHS hospitals. The purpose of the group is to share best practice, to find solutions and offer support to those working within this field of healthcare. The organisation works together to raise the profile of the profession, improve, and standardise approaches to working and to instigate innovative projects that celebrate the arts across the NHS.

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Executive summary



→ The NHS's 75th birthday in 2023 marked an important moment for the institution and its 1.3million-strong workforce. **NHS staff have often been in the public eye over the past few years:** the 2020-22 COVID-19 pandemic was a time of extraordinary change and trauma for front-line staff, and it contributed to existing challenges in the NHS such as growing waiting lists and recruitment and retention problems, which have since been exacerbated by a national cost-of-living crisis and high inflation.

→ Improving and **supporting staff wellbeing is crucial to helping address some of these challenges**, and several NHS think tanks and working groups have recommended that NHS Trusts provide more opportunities for staff to reflect on and express their diverse experiences, to help them feel more supported, listened to, and valued - both as individuals and collectively.

→ Set against this backdrop, Our National Health Stories was an ambitious national enterprise which aimed to tell the human stories of NHS staff in the year of the NHS's 75th birthday. Through creative arts - poetry, music, dance, visual art and more - the project team set out to **reveal and share the multitude of individual, human stories behind England's NHS workforce**, documenting their personal experiences of working in the NHS. Building on the creative storytelling work many NHS Trusts had initiated during the pandemic, the project aimed to **celebrate NHS staff's humanity, care, and resilience**, and shine a light on the evidence-backed role of the arts in supporting people's wellbeing in NHS settings.

→ Working with 19 NHS Trusts across England through their Hospital Arts Managers, Our National Health Stories was convened by a small Steering Group from the National Arts in Hospitals Network and a central creative team, with support from a portfolio of funders including Arts Council of England, NHS Charities Together and local NHS hospital charities. Working with over 85 freelance artists, **the 19 participating NHS Trusts collected staff's stories locally** using a range of artforms, then shared these with the central creative team who created a finale piece from them, consisting of a **'relay' event (live performances across the country) and a finale event** at Aviva Studios in Manchester on 23rd November 2023.

→ In total, **over 2,600 NHS staff actively took part** in Our National Health Stories. In staff feedback surveys, **respondents reported that overall, the project met its key aims around staff wellbeing**, by helping them feel more valued (73% agreed), connected to other NHS staff (75% agreed) and supported by the NHS (65% agreed). Participants reported that the arts activities offered them space to connect with others, express themselves and feel seen and listened to. The small number of staff who didn't fully agree with these sentiments highlighted the need to address wider factors such as pay and working conditions first, to improve wellbeing.

→ This evaluation also revealed **some evidence that the project had helped to raise the profile of arts in the NHS**, especially amongst participating staff members, communications teams, and NHS leaders. The national perspective combined with the powerful nature of the stories collected, and their illumination of the often unseen and intangible elements of NHS staff's day-to-day experiences, was seen as vital to this. Those who participated in the finale event in Manchester reported particularly positive experiences, describing the event as moving, uplifting, and motivating. For NHS Trusts who didn't participate in the finale events or have good support locally for their projects, the profile-raising aspect of the project was somewhat more limited.

→ Key practical challenges encountered by Hospital Arts Managers in Our National Health Stories included the **short timescale and limited set up time** of the project, which was largely unavoidable due to funding only being confirmed late-on. The **limited central coordination resource** also contributed to the NHS Trusts feeling at times disconnected from the core of the project and unsure of its goals. This also added to the **challenge of encouraging NHS staff to participate in the project**, which given the constraints of their working lives was already challenging.

→ Recommendations for future similar projects include ensuring a **longer timescale and a more co-created project**, with more central coordination resources who could work more closely with the NHS Trusts over a longer period of time to secure maximum profile and engagement in the project locally, as well as nationally. Many NHS Trusts involved also reflected that it would be good to include **more opportunities for staff to create artwork with their counterparts in other NHS Trusts**, and more spaces for Hospital Arts Managers to collaborate with each other, and with the central creative team, to help design and contribute to the finale event.

Introduction and background

75 years of the NHS



“5th July 2023 marked 75 years of the National Health Service...
When it was founded in 1948, the NHS was the first universal health system to be available to all, free at the point of delivery. Today, nine in ten people agree that healthcare should be free of charge, more than four in five agree that care should be available to everyone, and that the NHS makes them most proud to be British.” - NHS England¹

The NHS is a singularly British institution. Founded in 1948, three years after the Second World War ended, its aim was to improve the health and wellbeing of the nation by providing universal, free-of-charge access to basic healthcare. Since then, the NHS has grown to be the biggest single employer in the UK and indeed in Europe, with around 1.3 million employees². Whilst the institution is British, the NHS workforce has always been global: today people from over 200 nationalities work in a wide range of NHS roles, far beyond just doctors and nurses: pharmacists, therapists, healthcare assistants, porters, estates and facilities teams, administrators, researchers, domestic services staff, receptionists, project managers and many more besides.

On an ‘average’ day in the NHS in England...

- more than 1.2 million people attend a GP appointment.
- nearly 260,000 people attend an outpatient appointment.
- more than 37,000 people call 999.
- more than 44,000 people attend a major A&E department, and about 25 per cent of A&E patients are admitted into hospital.
- around 675 patients go into critical care.

(Source: King’s Fund³)

The NHS's 75th birthday is an important landmark: as well as celebrating the achievements of the past 75 years, this is an opportunity to reflect on what the NHS means to Britain today and consider how we look to the future to meet the changing health needs of the nation.

NHS staff and their wellbeing in 2023

The NHS's ability to provide effective care in line with our needs relies on its ability to recruit and retain enough staff to meet demand. The current picture around these aspects is rather stark⁴:

- **Recruitment:** there were 112,000 vacancies in the NHS in June 2023. This is a slight fall from a peak of 130,000 in December 2022, buoyed mostly by international recruitment.
- **Retention:** leaver rates through retirement and other means remain historically high. The King's fund noted that the 2022 NHS staff survey results indicate that "overall morale of the workforce has declined for a second year, with nearly a third of respondents often thinking about leaving their organisation, an increase of 5.7 per cent since 2020 (a five-year low)."⁵

In the past three years NHS staff have faced extreme and perhaps unprecedented demand, change and trauma arising out of the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of patients requiring often intensive treatment during periods of lockdown not only placed additional demands and risks on NHS staff, it also greatly exacerbated the already-long waiting lists, challenges in the social care sector and the desire to offer more holistic and person-centred approaches to healthcare⁶.

The turbulence of the COVID-19 pandemic was also followed swiftly by a cost-of-living crisis, both of which have brought NHS staff into the public consciousness in differing ways:

“ [During the pandemic] people were banging pans and sending chocolates and now [staff are] having to strike and go to food banks, what's the message to staff about how they're being valued?” – NHS staff member

The King's Fund cite poor staff wellbeing as a major contributing factor to low morale, and according to the International Public Policy Observatory, poor mental health and wellbeing among its staff is estimated to cost the NHS £12.1 billion a year.⁷ Beyond the impact on staff themselves and NHS finances and resources, there is good evidence to show that poor staff wellbeing has a negative effect on patient experiences and outcomes in the NHS, with a systematic review in 2016 finding a significant correlation between poor wellbeing and patient safety⁸.

In 2022, the COVID Trauma Response Working Group therefore specifically called for a focus on improving NHS staff wellbeing, including offering social and peer support, improving team cohesion, and creating more opportunities for staff to share experiences with each other:

“Do provide an opportunity for staff to talk about their experience, in order to enhance support and social cohesion. This can occur at the end of shifts or at significant points in the response. This may take place individually between a staff member and manager or supervisor, or in teams of people who work together. These sessions should not involve

anyone being mandated to talk about their thoughts or feelings. It is important for organisations to provide these opportunities, but for staff to be free to decide whether to attend or not. If offered, these sessions should be provided during a staff member's shift (not afterwards) so as not to encroach on rest and recovery time.” Source: COVID Trauma Response Working Group ⁹

These recommendations match several of the NHS's own goals in its 2021 framework for Creating a Health and Wellbeing Culture: supporting each other and working together; purpose, potential and recognition; and facilities to rest, recover and succeed. ¹⁰

The role (and evidence) of arts in healthcare and NHS staff wellbeing

So how can arts and creativity help with these goals and provide those much needed (and much recommended) opportunities for staff to connect, share, recover and be recognised?

“If there is a crisis with staff wellbeing - the arts can start them on that journey of repair.” – Hospital Arts Manager

A growing evidence base points to many potential health and wellbeing benefits of engaging in arts and creativity. Large-scale population level analysis has indicated that the arts are linked to better mental health and higher life satisfaction across the lifespan, less depression in later life (which in turn is linked to a range of physical health benefits) and a greater ability to cope with mental health problems in everyday life¹¹. The What Works Centre for Wellbeing also stated that there is good evidence that participatory music, visual arts, and heritage activities (libraries, museums and galleries) can support people's subjective wellbeing¹².

The NHS has a long history of engaging with the arts to improve healthcare environments and support patients and staff. The first known hospital arts programme began in 1973 in Manchester with an artist in residence, and by 1978 was running “mural painting, graphics and performance as well as producing paintings to hang in the hospital corridors and waiting rooms”¹³. The evaluation of that project had the following words in its forward, which still undoubtedly rings true for the dozens of NHS Trusts, their Hospital Arts Managers and artists now delivering similar programmes across England:

“It is my firm belief that ‘art’ in hospitals is not a luxury to be sacrificed while money for kidney machines, nursing staff or operating theatres is scarce. These ‘tangibles’ should not be compared with the intangible benefits which result from artists working within the hospital environment. Often it is not a question of spending more money but rather a plea for a more imaginative use of existing funds. If hospitals remain dull, boring, and depressing places people do not feel well; if they feel unwell it takes them longer to get well and that costs more money. Doctors are often guilty of overprescribing tranquillisers, barbiturates, tonics, and cure-alls as a camouflage for the fact that they are too overworked to talk to their patients. Perhaps this is an area where money could be saved and re-allocated by employing artists to improve the visual and social environment of hospitals and clinics.” – Peter Coles, Evaluator

More recent research and evaluations of hospital arts programmes include the following findings:

- In 2019, Chelsea and Westminster Hospital found that the mental health and experiences of those receiving intrusive examinations, surgery, chemotherapy, and emergency care were improved when visual art is installed. It also found that clinical staff working in the children's emergency department noted that digital art improved young patients' anxiety and decreased their pain. This built on their 2004 findings, including that the use of art and music made a positive impact on women in labour and those having chemotherapy or undergoing surgery.¹⁴
- A 2021 Evidence review noted that 16 studies revealed that art in hospitals has positive effects on well-being and behaviour.¹⁵
- A 2018 review of visual art in hospital spaces noted that art contributes positively to the hospital atmosphere and can serve as a much-needed distraction for patients.¹⁶
- An evaluation of the Arts Council of Wales's investment in 'Arts and Health Coordinator' posts in seven Welsh Health Boards 2018-2022 revealed evidence for the positive contribution of the roles to the physical and mental health of patients and the wider population at various stages of their care - from prevention of illness through to treatment and recovery - as well as staff wellbeing.¹⁷
- The North East London NHS Foundation Trust (NELFT)'s evaluation of its 'Art Day' programme for staff found that there was an increase in staff's average self-rated wellbeing score after each Arts Day, with long term follow-up surveys showing that attendees felt valued.¹⁸
- Breathe Arts Health Research's evaluation of their Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust online staff choir during the COVID-19 pandemic reported that 88% of members said the singing improved wellbeing, 75% reported a positive impact on their connection with others and 50% reported a positive impact on their experience of healthcare work. The evaluation of their online dance programme for staff during the same period reported similar results.¹⁹

A brief history of arts in hospitals in England is included below (Appendix 3). It demonstrates that over the (roughly) 50 years 1970-2020, arts in hospitals emerged in support of patients and through efforts to humanise healthcare environments. While many hospital arts programmes did deliver work with and for staff, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a significant shift and expansion in the ways in which the arts were used to support staff. Many Hospital Arts Managers describe a clear shift in approach and demand from staff - especially to explore the ways in which the arts might support their wellbeing in this unique and challenging time.

With this shift in focus (and in some instances, increase in organisational support) came a concurrent shift in attitudes among staff. While there have always been individual champions for the role of the arts, this mushroomed through the pandemic and has left a legacy of support and understanding among all staff groups. Many staff report that the arts have provided creative opportunities for them to tell their stories through and beyond the pandemic, giving them a vital means to reflect on, process and express their experiences as well as helping others understand what they've been through. This groundswell of support created ripples around the country which enabled the project to build momentum and surf a growing wave of staff support for the arts.

This sea change in attitudes coincided with the growing membership and mutual support offered by NAHN. In the absence of a strategic national oversight, it is unlikely that the shift in programming and attitudes that was happening in many hospital arts programmes would have been recognised and brought together. The shared experience of storytelling which was benefitting individual staff in their own hospitals became apparent as a national phenomenon and a shift in the relationship between the arts and NHS staff.

“Stories are a great catalyst for healing, change, understanding within society. This is how human beings learn about each other and move on. Art is a vehicle for telling stories, but it’s a safe vehicle. A removed form of self-expression. It’s a mirror of society but that one bit removed. Art is great because the range of artforms give people opportunity to engage in different ways that work for them and are much more accessible.” –

Emma Dunton, Creative Director, Our National Health Stories

This approach also aligns to the NHS’s move towards collecting more qualitative and narrative information about peoples’ experiences of healthcare in England. Surveys and statistics will always be important, but more qualitative methods – case studies, focus groups, social media quotes and creative methods - are becoming an increasingly important part of how the NHS learns about the stories behind those statistics.²⁰

“In the last 3 years we’ve been using much more qualitative and narrative data. We want to move peoples’ thoughts beyond the national quant data to looking more at individual stories, including using creative arts to learn about caregivers and care receivers. As well as learning about examples of good, or not good, care, these approaches also help us to know what questions to ask in the national surveys. They help us to see issues that we might otherwise be missing.” –
Lesley Goodburn, Head of Patient Experience, NHS England

Aims and approach of Our National Health Stories

Our National Health Stories was primarily about celebrating the NHS and its staff around the 75th Birthday. The project aimed to create space for NHS staff to paint the real picture of their day-to-day lives in the NHS and to tell their real-life stories through the creative arts. Additionally, the project aspired to highlight the significance of the arts within hospitals, aiming to raise its profile and acknowledge its pivotal role in enhancing healthcare environments.

The inspiration for the project came from a small group of Hospital Arts Managers who, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, had been increasingly working with NHS staff to support their wellbeing and tell their stories. Coming together through the National Arts in Hospitals Network, they collectively recognised how powerful this work had been locally, and how much more powerful it might be to join forces across NHS Trusts to tell those stories.

It is worth acknowledging the unique and bespoke nature of each hospital arts programme. As noted above, arts in hospitals in England has evolved organically and locally over 50+ years. Often, this growth has been driven by hospital arts charities. These local charities have seed funded, incubated and occasionally invested significant sums in building wide ranging arts programmes. Sometimes arts programmes are housed within the charity, sometimes the charity funds roles or even teams within NHS departments (varying from Communications to Estates to People teams). Through this report we refer to NHS Trusts as a generic term, acknowledging the very different circumstances, funding models and levels of resource among different hospital arts programmes.

The 75th Birthday of the NHS provided a perfect moment to do so. Creative Director Emma Dunton came on board and worked with the team to create a vision for a national storytelling piece that would see local NHS Trusts share their staff's stories with a central team, culminating in a finale performance and campaign to tell NHS staff's stories with the nation.

“Art gives people a chance to express themselves in different ways. Space to be more contemplative and reflective. These are personal stories; individual responses rather than something homogenised like survey results. What we are gathering is so much richer and deeper.” - Hospital Arts Manager

Once funding was confirmed in early 2023, story collection began across the 19 NHS Trusts; those stories and many more from the past few years were shared with the central creative team, headed up by Artistic Director Kwame Kwei-Armah. The team devised and produced a finale performance where many NHS staff travelled to Manchester to perform the songs, dances, poems, and artworks they'd created locally in the finale piece, alongside professional performers who interspersed and enhanced their performances with interludes, musical accompaniment, and stage installations.

Many artists work regularly in hospitals and other NHS settings, finding their way to this work through a myriad of different paths. This project drew heavily on artists who knew their hospitals and who had developed skills in working with staff and patients over many years. It also introduced many new artists at different points in their careers and working in many different artforms to the field of hospital arts. The nature of much hospital arts practice is that it happens in private, quiet spaces, not in galleries, theatres and concert halls. While this project was designed to raise awareness of hospital arts more broadly, it will be interesting to see how the experience of this collaboration will impact on artists (including many of the core artist team) who had previously limited exposure to the hospital arts field.

Within the overarching aims of creativity, celebration and reflection, Our National Health Stories had an explicit aim to improve staff wellbeing, by helping staff feel more listened to, valued, and connected to each other. The hope was that this might be something of a watershed moment for the NHS in terms of public perceptions of the arts in the NHS and their potential to support people's health and wellbeing.

The approach taken was as follows:

In 2023, 19 NHS Trusts undertook creative storytelling projects with staff and artists in their Trust, using a range of artforms – poetry, music, visual art, digital arts – to collect stories from NHS staff. This was coordinated by Hospital Arts Managers in the Trusts and local artists.

The local stories and artworks produced were combined with historical stories collected in the 19 Trusts and shared with a central creative team, who draw out key themes from the stories and create an overarching narrative.

These overarching themes were shared back with the Trusts who then used them to create a celebration arts event in their local trusts in November 2023.

The central creative team used the key themes to devise and produce a national celebration arts event, featuring staff from across the Trusts and their stories, in Manchester on 23rd November 2023.

There was an accompanying media and press campaign to share the local and national stories with the public.

Theory of Change: Our National Health Stories

The theory of change below is intended to show how the project's activities link directly to the short and long term impact on staff wellbeing and hospital arts.



Evaluation approach and methodology

The main purpose of this evaluation was to measure to what extent the project met its aims, and whether the impacts and outcomes noted in the Theory of Change did, in fact, take place. We aimed to learn:



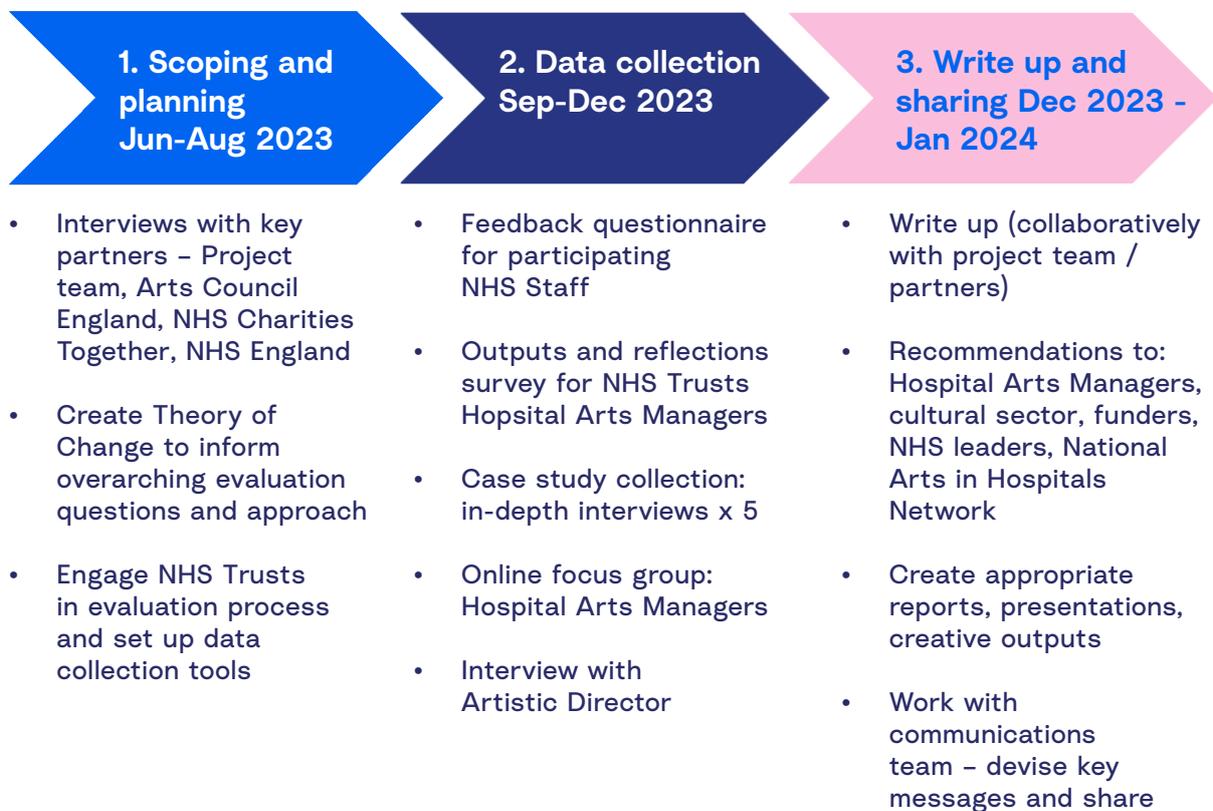
To do this we took a **mixed methods approach**, combining quantitative, qualitative, and narrative data collection as follows:

- Staff feedback forms, using Likert scales (1-5) to ask participating staff to what extent they found the project helped them to feel more connected, supported and valued, together with open questions on their perceptions of the arts and their experiences of the project.
- A survey to Hospital Arts Managers in Dec 2023 to collect output data on participant and audience numbers, and top-line reflections on the experience of the project.
- A focus group of 10 Hospital Arts Managers on 30th Nov 2023 to ask about the successes and challenges of the project and gather their feedback on the national celebration event.
- 4 in-depth interviews with Hospital Arts Managers and the creation of case studies.
- 1 in-depth interview with an artist who worked with 4 NHS Trusts and creation of a case study.

Responses

- Staff feedback survey = 60 participating staff from 8 NHS Trusts (of 19 participating Trusts)
- Survey to Hospital Arts Managers = 18 respondents from 17 NHS Trusts (of 19 participating Trusts)
- Focus group of Hospital Arts Managers = 10
- Case studies = 5

Fig 1. Evaluation approach for Our National Health Stories



Findings

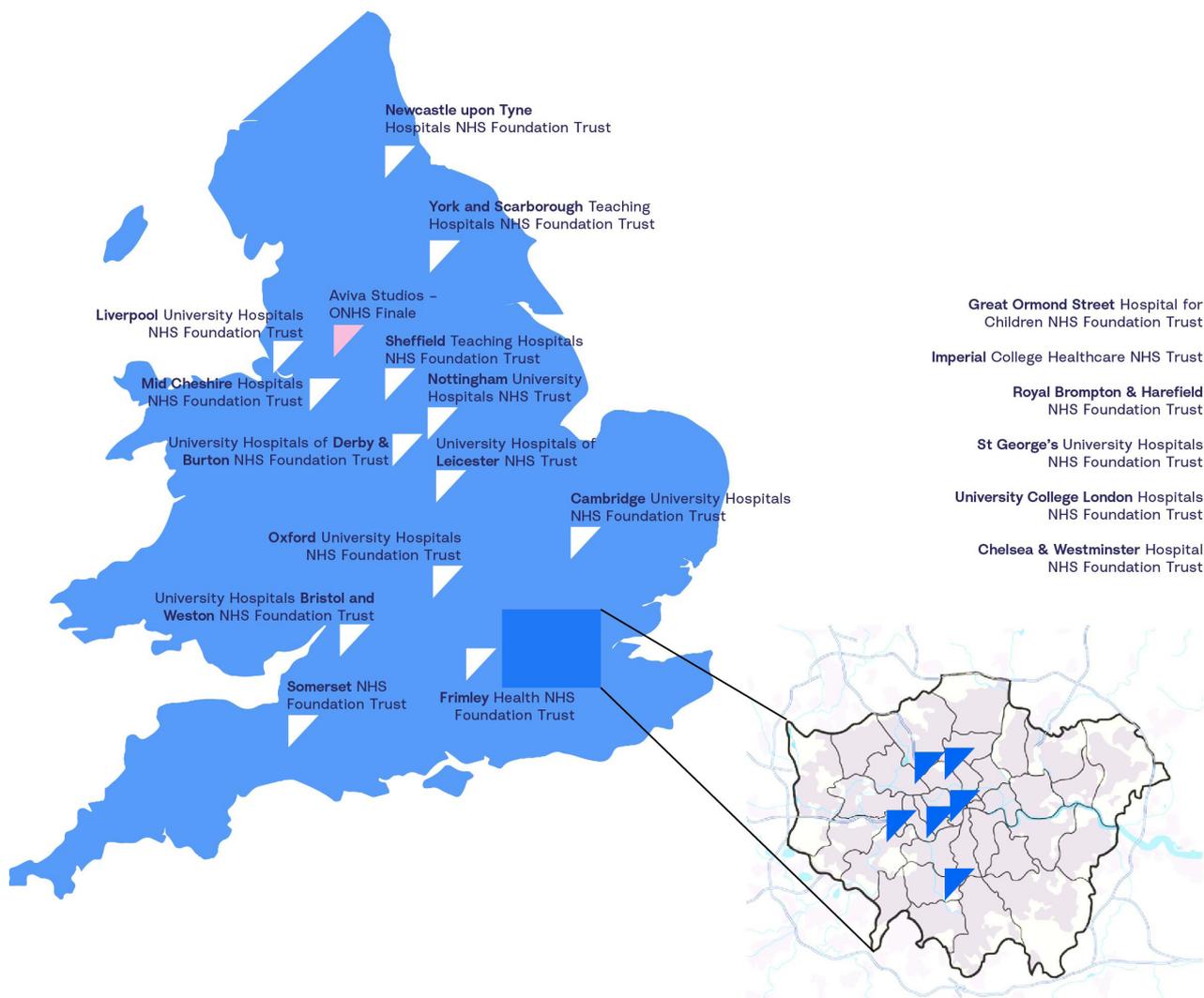
What happened

1 - Reach, scope, and audiences

The following shows the scope and scale of the project and its reach. Data reported by participating NHS Trusts and The Cogency, see Appendix 1 for a full by-Trust breakdown.



NHS Trusts



Whilst the number of participating NHS Trusts was relatively small compared to the number of NHS Trusts there are in England (215 at Nov 2022), many participating NHS Trusts were very large: in total the 19 NHS Trusts involved employ a total of around 235,000 staff, which is around **18% of the total NHS workforce in England**.

Geographically there was also a good spread with representation from every area across England including NHS Trusts in the North East, North West, the Midlands, South West, London and the South East. Some limiting factors in terms of participation for NHS Trusts were likely to have been:

- The scope/size of the project
- The existence or capacity of arts teams within NHS Trusts
- Whether or not the NHS Trust or its charity could provide a small amount of funding towards the local elements of the project
- Communication – whether NHS Trusts knew the project was happening.

Staff roles

A key aim of Our National Health Stories was also to shine a light on the multitude of roles and departments within the NHS, showcasing teams and experiences of staff beyond just medics. In that respect, the project has been very successful, with many of the Hospital Arts Managers actively choosing to target and work with teams they considered to be less visible generally, such as porters, administrative staff, domestic staff and estates and facilities teams. The word cloud below displays the range of different roles participating staff undertake.

Fig 2. NHS roles of staff who participated in Our National Health Stories*



*Data reported in staff feedback survey respondents and by Hospital Arts Managers

Art forms:

It was also an important aim for this project to use lots of different artforms as vehicles for expression and storytelling for NHS staff. Whilst poetry and music were naturally heavily featured in the Our National Health Stories local storytelling projects, there are other perhaps more surprising additions such as ceramics and dance. Using multiple artforms in the same project was also popular, likely due to a desire on Hospital Arts Managers' parts to spark the interest of as many staff as possible.

Fig 3. Artforms used in Our National Health Stories*



*Data reported in staff feedback survey respondents and by Hospital Arts Managers

Art form themes:

As part of the creative and storytelling process of the project, all the stories (over 550) collected from the 19 NHS trusts underwent a comprehensive evaluation by Dramaturg, Teunkie Van Der Sluijs from the Our National Health Stories creative team. This meticulous review and analysis led to the identification of eight overarching themes within the stories of the NHS staff, serving as the foundation for the collaborative narrative showcased at the finale event at Aviva Studios in Manchester on the 23rd Nov 2023. The identified themes extracted from the collective experiences of NHS staff include:

- **Nature:** The prevalent presence of nature, prominently depicted through visual mediums and the symbolism of trees and branches, represents the diverse pathways within the NHS and their interconnections.
- **Behind Closed Doors:** Exploration of the individual facets of NHS work, encompassing the distinct roles, personal experiences, and the often-unseen aspects that colleagues or the public may not perceive.
- **The Uniform:** An examination of the vibrant colours of the NHS uniform, delving into its symbolic significance and the necessity of these colourful elements working together like a cohesive jigsaw puzzle.
- **The Bigger Picture:** A recurring motif highlights the understanding that each individual plays a crucial role in a larger organisation.
- **Technology:** An exploration of the evolving role and history of technology within the NHS.
- **The Hard Work:** Collective reflection and insight into the relentless dedication and hard work integral to the day-to-day operations within the NHS.
- **Experiences with Patients:** Shared reflection on the impact of patient experiences, moments that stay in the memories of NHS staff throughout their careers.
- **Years of Service:** A collective contemplation on significant moments in the role of NHS staff, encompassing events such as the challenges posed by COVID-19, experiences with death and involvement in palliative care.

This collaborative and co-produced narrative, enriched by the eight themes, unfolded as an insightful portrayal of the multifaceted experiences and personal stories of NHS staff, captivating audiences both live at the finale event and through streaming and media platforms.



Photo credit: Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust



Photo credit: University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust

Event attendance and media coverage

A marketing and communications agency The Cogency, was engaged in this project to track audience numbers at the live finale event and on the streaming platforms. They have supplied the following data on public engagement.

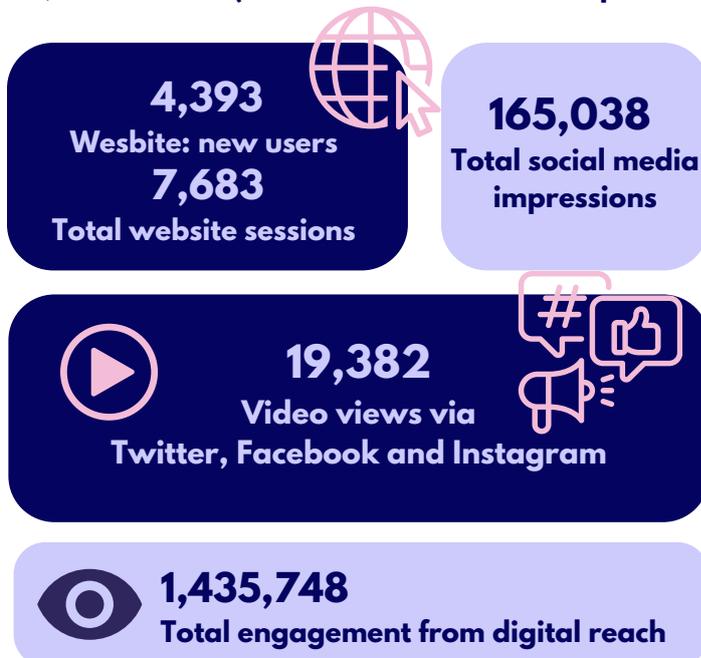
NHS Trusts 'relay' performances, live-streamed on 22 Nov 2023:



Live finale event at Aviva Studios, 23 Nov 2023:



Digital, social reach (website and social media platforms):



Press media coverage

Our National Health Stories has gathered broad media pick-up over its timespan, including several National and local BBC Radio broadcasts, including a half hour programme inspired by the project which was broadcast twice on Radio 4 and is available [on demand on BBC iPlayer](#).



BBC Radio 4 programme

Live Radio broadcast to an audience of:

900,000

This broadcast was featured in Radio 4 programme previews in the Radio Times and the Daily Mail.



BBC Local Radio

Several radio features highlighted Our National Health Stories projects happening within the NHS trusts:

- Radio Tees
- Radio Cumbria
- Radio Nottingham
- Radio Leicester
- Radio Cambridgeshire

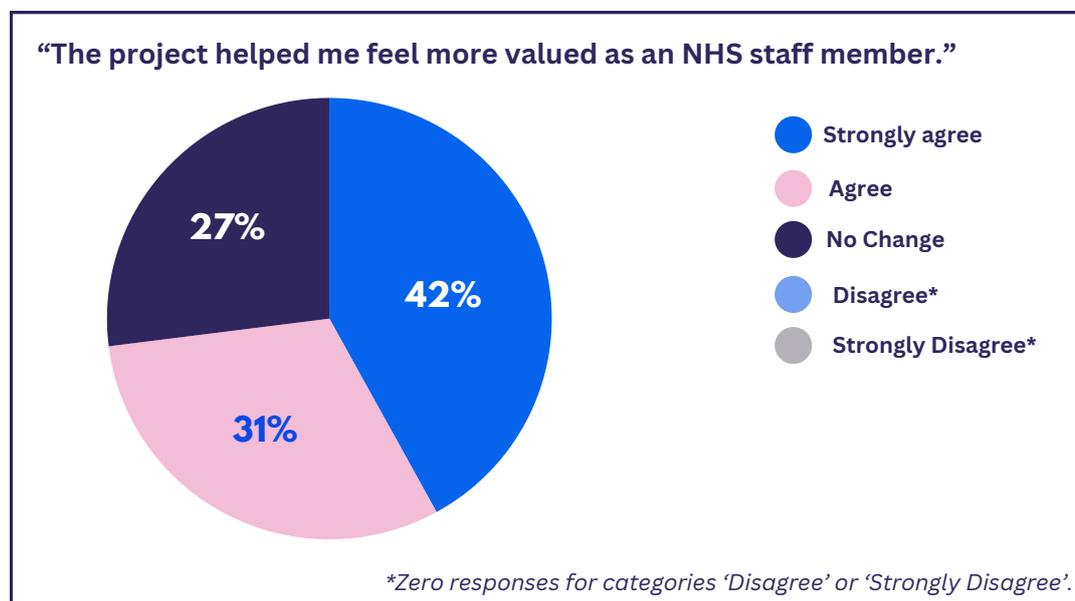
Other coverage highlights include:

- Project launch coverage in [The Stage](#), Daily Telegraph and [The Sun](#) plus a feature on Radio 4 flagship news show the Today programme, featuring an interview with artistic director Kwame Kwei-Armah.
- Performance preview coverage in Manchester titles, including [Manchester Evening News](#), [I Love Mcr](#), [Manchester's Finest](#), [Secret Manchester](#), [Manchester Wire](#), [Visit Manchester](#)
- Manchester performance featured in The Guardian's [monthly round up of performance to stream online](#)
- Manchester performance [reviewed by national theatre title What's On Stage](#)
- Project and performance coverage in titles local to NHS trusts and specialist media including [The Weston Mercury](#), [Nottingham Post](#), [The Bookseller](#)

2 - Impact on staff wellbeing

To measure the impact of the project on participating NHS staff members' wellbeing, they were asked to complete a feedback questionnaire at the end of their participation and reflect on whether the project helped them to feel more valued, connected, and supported as NHS members of staff, and offer their reflections on factors contributing to this.

2a - Feeling valued



In the staff feedback survey, **73% of respondents (n = 44 of 60)** agreed that Our National Health Stories had enhanced their sense of feeling valued as NHS staff members, which was a key aim of the project. In the open-text answers, respondents reported the following factors as contributing to this:

- The project allowed staff to **reflect on, and cultivate, their individual and group identity** as NHS staff members through the creative arts, helping them to feel **acknowledged, heard, and appreciated**.
- The project provided a **creative outlet to reflect on and express their experiences** within the NHS, including experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. This contributed to a shared sense of **collective memory** and recognition.
- The project **boosted staff's morale and enabled meaningful interactions** between existing and new colleagues, offering them something to look forward to at work.

“The activities gave me something to look forward to at the end of my working day. I really appreciated making something creative for the NHS... to enhance experience of patients, staff, and visitors. Thank you for investing in our interests and awakening a creative side that was dormant.” – participating NHS staff member, survey response

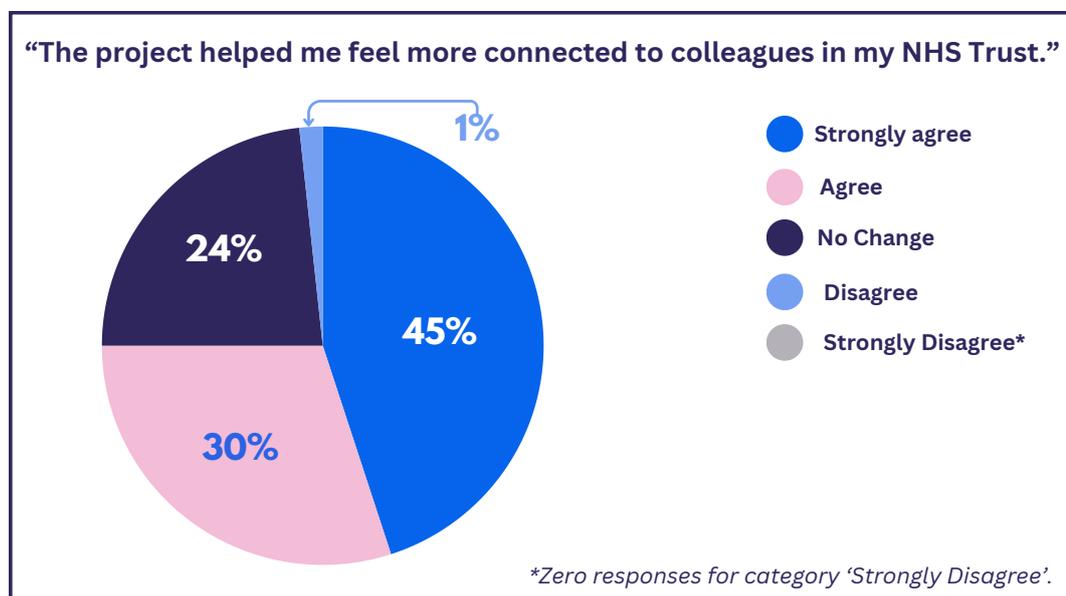
“I found seeing the completed picture very emotional, it literally moved me to tears. Remembering what was happening at the time [of the pandemic], seeing the names of the people that worked with us, some of which have now been posted elsewhere, some that came into help us short term. The words had real feeling and it was lovely to see the whole multidisciplinary team reflected in the picture. It was a positive reflection on how far we have come since the height of this pandemic. Absolutely worthwhile.” – participating NHS staff member, survey response

For the 27% of respondents (n = 16 of 60) who reported “no change” in their sense of being valued as an NHS staff member, they reported various factors, which may have played a role:

- Disparities between the opportunity and pre-existing negative experiences within their role such as feeling “undermined”.
- Perceiving little support for the project from the local NHS Trust in general, outside of the communications and creativity teams.
- Some staff members reported that they already felt valued, and therefore the project didn’t increase this feeling.

“I’m not certain it was meant to make me feel more valued, however, I valued the opportunity immensely - so I supposed it did what it was meant to.” – participating NHS staff member, survey response

2b - Feeling connected to other NHS staff

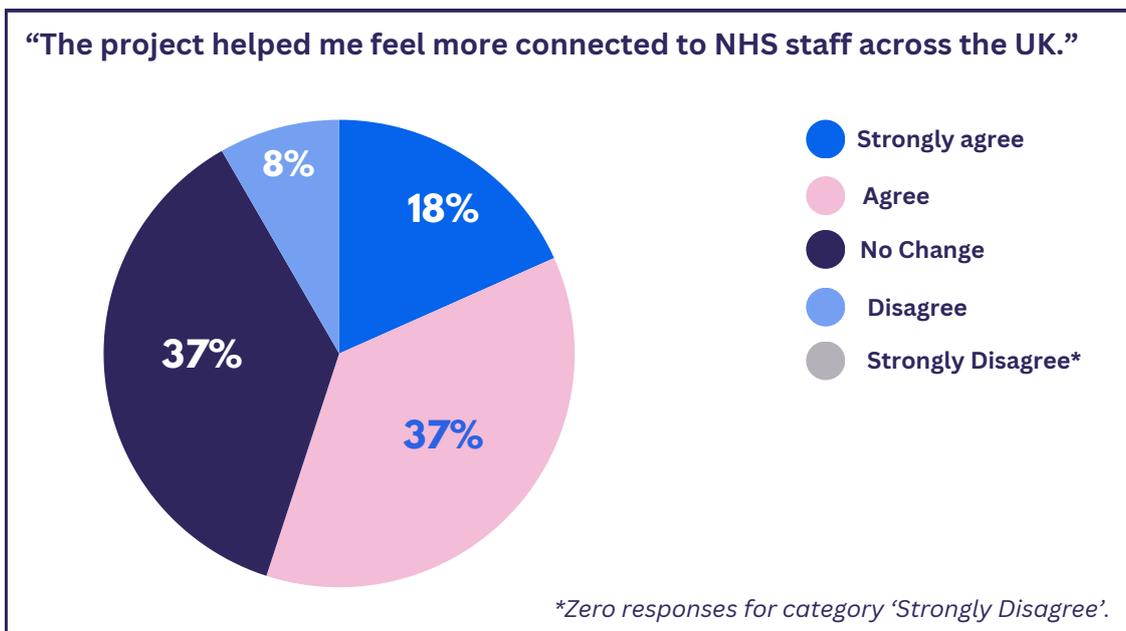


One of the project’s key aims was to use the arts to foster better connections with colleagues. In the staff feedback survey, 75% of respondents (n = 45 of 60) agreed that the project helped them feel more connected to other staff in their own NHS Trusts. The factors they shared that contributed to this were:

- The project fostered connection by bringing together individuals from different roles, teams, and departments, which was a welcomed opportunity.
- Some felt that the project helped them feel more part of a team within their NHS Trusts.
- The creative nature of the project enabled staff to connect socially (outside of a clinical setting), to reflect on their roles and express their experiences with one another and establish new friendships.

“Being able to participate in this project not only finally made me feel a connection with the other workers in the NHS, but also made me feel more at peace with the role I am performing within it. It gave me a place to express myself at my work and that is an incredible thing.” - participating NHS staff member, survey response

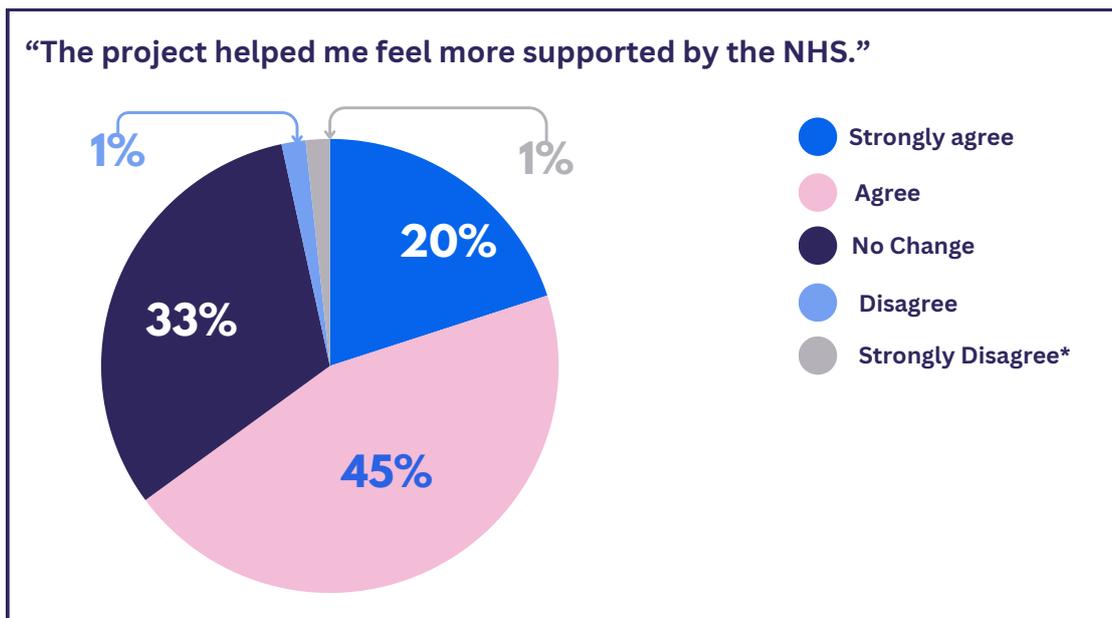
“Having the opportunity [in projects like this] always makes you feel connected, plus it makes you want to spread the word about new projects the trust is supporting, and how they benefit the patients and staff / and volunteers wellbeing.” - participating NHS staff member, survey response



However, when it came to feeling more connected with staff from other NHS Trusts, responses were more mixed, with **45% (n = 27 of 60) reporting ‘no change’ or disagreeing**. Additional feedback around these perspectives was limited, however we know not all NHS Trusts were able to participate in the finale event which was the only opportunity to engage with staff from other NHS Trusts.

“No connection to others [NHS Trusts] just awareness others were completing the same tasks.” - participating NHS staff member, survey response

2c - Feeling supported



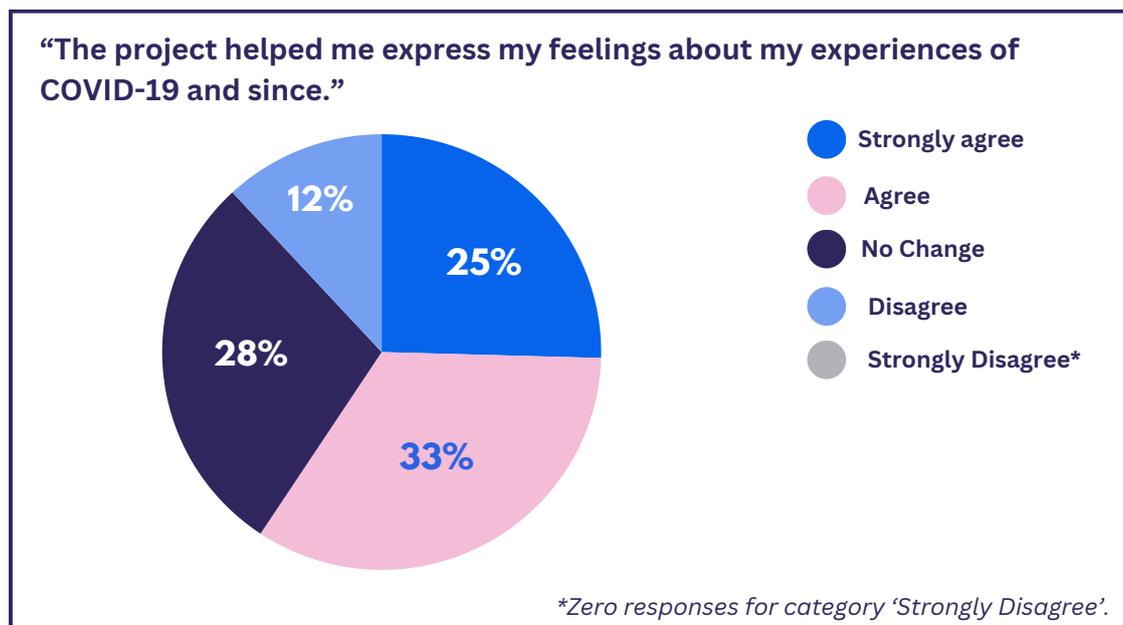
Another key aim of Our National Health Stories was to provide NHS staff with creative opportunities aimed at helping them feel more supported at work. **65% of respondents (n = 39 of 60) agreed** that the project helped them feel more supported by the NHS and highlighted several key factors contributing to this:

- Again, the project’s ability to **foster connections** between staff and allowing them to **express themselves** through artistic means was important.
- The **NHS Trusts’ commitment to the project**, which staff felt underscored the Trusts’ support for the arts with the NHS and emphasised its potential to enhance the wellbeing of patients, caregivers and staff.

“I loved taking part in this... it brought us together beyond the day job... It was incredible to [see] all of the entries – we have some real talent; the standard was extremely high.” – participating NHS staff member, survey response

However, **35% of respondents (n = 21 of 60) did not share the perspective that the project enhanced their sense of support from the NHS or responded, ‘no change’**. Only a few provided additional insights into this, stating that they would feel more supported if other conditions at work such as pay were improved. This suggests that the use of arts to support staff wellbeing may need to happen in conjunction with other factors and conditions that staff also consider important to their wellbeing at work.

2d - Expressing experiences of COVID-19 and since



More than half the respondents (58%, n = 35 of 60) agreed that the project enabled them to express their feelings and experiences related to COVID-19 and its aftermath. Several contributing factors shared by respondents were:

- The project provided participating staff with **opportunity to revisit challenging periods and the emotions they experienced** during those times.
- The act of sharing personal stories among colleagues **facilitated reflection and acknowledgement** of forgotten feelings.
- The project **increased awareness of shared experiences** and emotions among participating staff, providing crucial support for recovery.
- However, **40% of respondents (n = 24 of 60) reported 'no change' or disagreed** that the project helped them in expressing these feelings. Reasons shared by these respondents included:
 - **Reflecting on COVID-19 evoked negative memories and feelings** that participating staff believed could 'ruin' the positive outcomes of the creative projects.
 - The project was presented to some NHS Trusts more as an opportunity to depict the “unseen side of the NHS”, rather than being COVID-19 focused.
 - Some participating staff had little or no experience with COVID-19.

“I don't feel it did help me express my feelings as we wanted to keep the artwork positive and not all our feelings were positive about Covid and since but didn't want to ruin the art piece by putting out negative thoughts or feelings.” – participating NHS staff member, survey response

3 - Perceptions of art, storytelling, and creativity in healthcare

Beyond the impact on staff wellbeing, it was also a key aim of the project to raise awareness of the benefits of participating in arts and creativity for staff and NHS Trusts. Participating staff and Hospital Arts Managers were asked to reflect on this aspect through the feedback surveys and focus group.

3a - Staff's perspectives on arts in the NHS

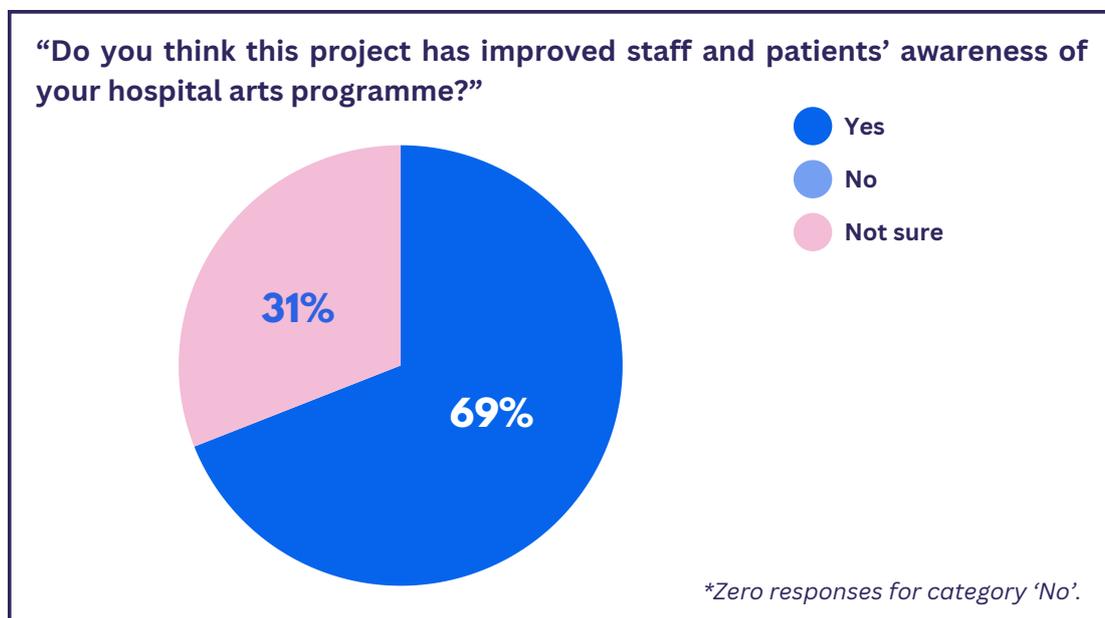
In the staff feedback survey, participating staff were invited to reflect on whether they believed the project had changed their perception of the arts in the NHS. In summary:

- Many staff reported that the project **had increased their interest in, and appreciation of, the arts**, instigating a desire to participate in future arts projects within the NHS.
- For some, the project not only reinforced their existing belief that the arts are good for wellbeing, but also **deepened their understanding of how the arts supports health and wellbeing**, with several reflecting on the therapeutic benefits they experienced.
- Many reflected on **the arts as a therapeutic tool for reflection, self-expression and fostering connections**.

A few respondents noted that the project did not change their perspective as they **already had a deep appreciation** for the arts and/or past positive experiences of hospital arts projects.

“It has re-invigorated my belief in the power of the arts to heal, to bring joy, to enable expression and to connect people in ways that words alone and emails do not.” – participating NHS staff member, survey response

3b - Hospital Arts Managers' perspectives on arts in the NHS



In the Hospital Arts Managers survey, **69% (n = 12 of 17)** agreed that the project had helped to raise awareness of their hospital arts programmes. Reflections they shared on this aspect included:

- The biggest change in perceptions of art in hospitals appeared to happen for **staff who actively participated in the project**, especially if it was their first-time taking part in the arts at work.

“Those staff that were involved had the opportunity to learn more about and appreciate [my team’s] work within the Trust. The colleagues involved shared the fact that they saw the ways in which our work and the arts can help raise the profile of their own work / departments within the Trust.” – Hospital Arts Manager, survey response

“I think we have a core staff group who really enjoyed being involved with the project and will continue to engage with staff arts offerings in future now.” – Hospital Arts Manager, survey response

- Others reported getting positive feedback from colleagues in the communications and leadership teams. The national aspect of the project, for those NHS Trusts participating in it, gave extra weight and impetus to this, with many reporting that the finale event created a ‘buzz’ within their NHS Trusts and led to improved visibility for the arts programme on platforms such as social media and the staff intranets.

“There has been a real buzz as a result of the project being on a national scale, particularly following the finale in Manchester last week.” – Hospital Arts Manager, survey response

“Having our Staff Choir head up to Manchester made for a great story in Trust Comms, and to the Executive Board of our Trust. This meant that the Executive Team came to our local performances, for example.” – Hospital Arts Manager, survey response

The Hospital Arts Managers who responded ‘not sure’ to the survey question around this did not generally offer any further commentary, however some did note that national press and social media did not appear to receive huge engagement beyond the participating NHS Trusts themselves; others noted that they found engaging colleagues in the project was challenging throughout.

“I don’t think the finale event Manchester helped raise the awareness as it was too far away for our staff to attend. Staff engaged in the project, mostly knew of the programme already.” – Hospital Arts Manager, survey response

“More clear and simple messaging around the content of the project from the outset may have helped with having an impact on the Trust more widely.” – Hospital Arts Manager, survey response

How it happened



Photo Credits (Clockwise)
James Drury - York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
Staff at Nuffield Orthopaedic Hospital

1 - Key successes

In the survey, case study interviews, and focus group, Hospital Arts Managers were asked to reflect on the successes of the project. The following is a summary of the key overarching points they shared:

- The project presented NHS Trusts with an **opportunity to focus on staff wellbeing and engage with more staff**, sometimes for the first time.
- Having an **end goal and a time limited project** helped to create and build momentum across the NHS Trusts. Hospital Arts Managers described the project as a rewarding, “once in a lifetime” experience. Many also appreciated the ambition of the project and the feeling of a coming-together of hospital arts programmes across the country, which was celebratory and positive in tone.
- The **local aspects of the project were reported to have been well received** and allowed Hospital Arts Managers to build strong relationships for future arts projects.
- The **body of creative work** - poetry, portraits, musical pieces, installations and much more - was extensive, and Hospital Arts Managers reported this as an opportunity to now inspire future work and act as a legacy from the project which will support the profile of NHS arts programmes locally.
- The Hospital Arts Managers whose teams were part of the finale event described it as a **powerful, professionally produced event** which showcased hospital arts programmes and was both moving and uplifting. Many took inspiration from the work shared at the finale by other NHS Trusts and valued being part of a wider national coming-together.

“The relay and final performances helped overcome the frustration or challenges of putting the project together. The art that was produced in the end was exhilarating and an extraordinary experience.” – Hospital Arts Manager, focus group response

“It was great to be part of the ‘bigger picture’ of hospital arts and it was a rewarding and special opportunity for our Staff Choir, who loved performing on stage in Manchester. It was great to have the Engagement Producer on board, perhaps more roles like this would have been beneficial for both participants and [Hospital] Arts Managers.” – Hospital Arts Manager, survey response

“This [project] highlights staff’s talents and skills beyond their uniforms. These are creative people in their own right - there is another side to them which this project will show - these are human beings with interests, skills and passions beyond their day jobs.” – Hospital Arts Manager

“Our Staff Choir have grown so much in confidence and the whole experience of writing their song and performing in a national project, has really brought the group together.” - Hospital Arts Manager

2 - Key challenges

In the survey and the focus group session, Hospital Arts Managers were asked to reflect on the main challenges they had faced during the project, and what feedback they had for the central project team and creative team. The following points were shared:

- **Engaging staff was reported by many to be the biggest challenge**, particularly for newer arts teams and/or those with small teams. Whilst this was felt to be an inherent challenge of delivering creative projects for staff wellbeing due to NHS working patterns and staff's confidence to engage in the arts at work, there were other factors unique to this project:
 - **A perceived lack of clarity about what the project was about** at the start and how the local elements of the work would fit into the finale. Most communications from the central team were by email rather than through meetings, which some Hospital Arts Managers believed made it more difficult to build common understanding and consensus across the NHS Trusts.
 - **The project's short timescales**, particularly in later weeks, when Hospital Arts Managers reported feeling uncomfortable about returning to the same groups of staff to ask them to re-engage. Requests were often made at short notice and could be unclear, which made it more difficult to engage NHS staff to participate.
 - **A perceived lack of practical support for Hospital Arts Managers** from the central team to help them develop the local aspects of project, particularly in the early stages. Some fed back that they felt isolated from the central creative team and lacked confidence and support around whether their efforts in this project were heading in the right direction.
 - **Difficulty convincing staff to engage in the Manchester finale event** if they weren't close to it geographically. While a significant central budget was set aside to facilitate travel to the event, the communication regarding this resource might have been impeded by the timing of the project and the engagement challenges.
- The relatively linear structure of the project (where local NHS Trusts collected stories, then sent them to a central team who took it from there), meant that many felt this was **an opportunity for co-creation that was missed**, as there weren't any opportunities for Hospital Arts Managers and participating NHS staff to work with staff from other NHS Trusts.
- **Support from local NHS Trust and NHS Charities' communications teams in support of this project was mixed**; some were incredibly helpful especially in terms of engaging staff in the project. Others preferred to prioritise their own pre-scheduled comms or had more pressing matters arise that jettisoned work on this project last minute or at crucial times. Hospital Arts Managers felt that having a clearer understanding of the goals and target audiences for the project might have helped them better engage their communications teams.

Most of these challenges were felt to be down to the **limited central coordination resources and the very short timescale for the project**, which was due to funding not being confirmed until Apr 2023 (with a mandate for the work to be completed by the end of the year).

“The timeline was incredibly tight considering the 3 years it took to develop the project. I think this created difficulty in us achieving as much as we would have liked as a result.” – Hospital Arts Manager, survey response

What happens next?



Photo Credits (Clockwise)
James Drury - York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
Chris Payne - Live Finale, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
Chris Payne - Live Finale, University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust
Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust

1 - Legacy and learning

In the focus group, case study interviews and surveys the NHS Trusts told us that they will take forward some of the following reflections into future work:

- **How to engage NHS staff in arts projects for their wellbeing:** many Hospital Arts Managers reflected that given the challenges they faced – and often overcame – in this project, they will take forward a lot of learning about how best to engage NHS staff in arts and health projects. Multiple solutions and positive approaches were shared:
 - » **‘Going to’ staff:** taking artists and creative projects into everyday spaces for staff such as hospital atria, staff rooms, canteens and so on.
 - » **Making it snappy:** bringing a creative interaction to staff that they can dip into for ten minutes in their work area rather than asking them to come to a longer workshop at lunch time or after work.
 - » **Getting the message across:** being prepared that staff engagement could take a long time, but works by building momentum slowly and steadily. Some things that can help include using established wellbeing at work programmes and having ambassadors to spread the word.
 - » **Varied art forms:** working with multiple art forms can improve reach and accessibility for staff, so many reflected on how they will build from the multi-artform approaches they used here in the future and make sure any creative staff wellbeing offerings are as varied as possible to maximise engagement.
 - » **‘A little push’:** Hospital Arts Managers need to be gently tenacious, sometimes shout a little louder and give people a little push to be involved, knowing that confidence is often the barrier so it might be just what NHS staff need.
 - » **The skill of the artist:** working with the right artists who can make their art form accessible and not intimidating is crucial.
- **Collaborating with other NHS Trusts:** many Hospital Arts Managers found it useful to connect with others in similar roles in this project, to share ideas, artist contacts and work through challenges, as well as find some solidarity and a national voice for this work. Some reflected that they will now more proactively seek opportunities to do this more in the future.
- **Timelines for big projects:** given the challenges many Hospital Arts Managers raised around the short timescale of Our National Health Stories, they will use this learning to ensure their own local projects have longer lead-in times for securing funding and commissioning artists before starting the process of engaging staff.
- **Sharing the story of this work:** the focus and prioritisation of sharing stories with wider NHS colleagues, leaders and the public in Our National Health Stories has made some Hospital Arts Managers more aware of the importance of working with their NHS Trust communications teams to share outcomes and results of their arts projects. They also reflected that relationships formed with communications teams in this project will be useful in future.

2 - Recommendations for future similar projects

Based on the findings from the focus group, case study interviews and surveys to Hospital Arts Managers and participating staff, the authors make the following suggestions for future similar national storytelling projects for NHS staff:

Keep 'as is':

- The core principle of collaborating across NHS Trusts towards one goal and event.
- The creation of space for different Hospital Arts Managers to work together and learn from each other.
- The professional creative team and partners (e.g. venues, organisations, expertise).
- The Our National Health Stories identity and website.
- Having a creative figurehead (Kwame) to give credibility and profile.

Keep, but change:

- Longer timescale of engagement with NHS Trusts (at least 12 months) to build momentum and involve NHS staff.
- More regionalised budget, with local spending spread over a longer period.
- More geographically accessible finale event/s, perhaps regional performances.
- More timely and regular central coordination and communications from central team to Hospital Arts Managers, with greater clarity regarding a tangible theme and clear end point.
- More opportunities for collaboration between Hospital Arts Managers and central creative teams, to make better use of Managers' skills and knowledge of the NHS.
- More balanced in terms of artforms (e.g. more visual arts as well as poetry).

Add to the project:

- Additional dedicated resources in the central coordinating team/s, such as a Programme Manager, to bring all the pieces together and facilitate more effective communication between the different teams and Trusts.
- Regular opportunities, such as creative sessions, where Trusts and their staff could work together and support each other during project development (perhaps in smaller, regional groups).
- More finale performances back at hospitals.
- More profile for local artists in the finale event/s and communications.
- More visits from the central creative team to the Trusts.
- Central templates for communications materials that all Trusts then use.
- Opportunities to bring local artists together to feed into the finale event/s.

3 - Recommendations for creatives and cultural organisations when working with the NHS

- **Be ready to listen and respond** to a wide range of people. There are so many opportunities to be creative within the NHS and share experience through the arts, but this requires a lot of adapting and sensitivity to the myriad of people and their experiences in the NHS.
- If you don't already have a way in to the NHS, **link with your most local hospital arts team** and make it clear what you are able to offer and your experience. They are often grateful to those who reach out to them even if they do not have any immediate opportunities available.
- **Take time to understand the pressures NHS staff face** and be prepared to balance creative ambitions and endeavours with the needs of the NHS workforce and its constraints.
- **Connect with the National Arts in Hospitals Network** for advice and guidance.

4 - Recommendations for NHS leaders to support impactful arts and health work in NHS Trusts

- Think about how the arts can intertwine with NHS goals and strategies (such as staff retention, mental health and improving the environment) to **create a fully holistic and person-centred approach** to staff wellbeing and patient care through the arts, rather than seeing creative projects as being simply a 'nice to have'. The arts create meaningful interactions and good news stories, both of which the NHS often very much needs.
- Arts and creativity can also be used for **obtaining quality feedback from staff and patients**; people may not want to or feel able to fill in a survey about their experience, but they may take part in a creative session to give their feedback through poetry or drawing.
- Trust your Hospital Arts Managers - they are experts in what the arts can offer. Go and talk to your arts teams and **learn how the arts can help you to meet your strategic aims**, for staff, patients, and visitor wellbeing. Allow yourselves to think about impact on a wider scale; the arts are not just about mood lifting. Creative solutions often cost a lot less than you would imagine - and deliver other positive outcomes you perhaps weren't expecting.
- Advocate for the continuation and (if needed) **development of a permanent arts team** to align an arts programme with your own NHS Trust's strategic objectives, establishing your own hospital as a cultural venue and a convening venue for creativity and the arts to occur.
- Advocate for the role of the National Arts in Hospital Network (NAHN) by becoming a member and actively participate in the exchange of best practices for delivering arts within NHS hospitals. NAHN is not only instrumental in fostering competence and confidence in developing new arts programmes, but also can provide mentorship support, tailored to the diverse levels of experience and expertise across NHS trusts.

“We are not magicians; quality creative engagement and artistic output needs to be accounted for. Work strategically with arts teams so that arts can be embedded in how we aim to support patient experience and improve the built environment. Let us (safely!) take risks and create brilliant, beautiful work with and for the hospital community.” – Hospital Arts Manager, survey response

5 - Recommendations for evaluations of future similar projects

- Future similar work would benefit from **earlier engagement of the evaluation team**, ideally in the funding application stage, so that the evaluation team is able to work closely with the central project team, creative team, NHS staff and Hospital Arts Managers to co-create an evaluation plan before the project starts. This might help to develop more sophisticated evaluation methods and convince more people and Trusts to take part in the evaluation.
- Robustly measuring the impact of creative work on participants’ (staff) wellbeing will always be challenging given how subjective wellbeing is as a concept, however it would be worth attempting to **measure participants’ wellbeing before and after participation** using validated wellbeing scales, which could be adapted to suit the needs of participants and the project. This might allow the evaluation team to measure attributable change rather than just gathering retrospective feedback.
- **Involving an academic research team** who can build on the findings of this evaluation to measure change and report results in peer-reviewed journals may help to further boost the credibility of the work, especially in terms of its health and wellbeing impacts.
- Explore opportunities for more **creative methods of evaluation**.

The stories of the stories



We also asked people to share their stories of working on Our National Health Stories. These highlight some of the key findings in this evaluation, and offer deeper, more personal perspectives on this project, its impact on staff and the creative pieces produced in some of the local NHS Trusts.



Photo Credits (Top to Bottom)
Chris Payne - Live Finale
University Hospitals Bristol and Weston NHS Foundation Trust
Staff portrait by Harriet Riddell,
Oxford University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust



‘When the lights came on, people lit up’

Artistic Director reflections

By Kwame Kwei-Armah

I believe in arts for everyone and arts as healing. I know data suggests that the arts contribute to our wellness, though I’m not sure we have to validate why art must be part of anything – we just know it is part of everything. When I went to visit a Leicester hospital and saw a violinist at a patient’s bedside playing songs, that direct link to healing and making people smile was so clear to me.

For me, the appeal of Our National Health Stories was that this was a big complex project where there was so much potential to spark joy on a large scale, by creating a carriage and infrastructure for the NHS staff to tell their stories. I’m a child of the NHS, my mother worked for the NHS, but she also crocheted; I know that NHS staff are three-dimensional people and I wanted to celebrate that.

Our role in the creative team was to create a strong enough container for the stories to celebrate the NHS at 75; to bring our professional skills and lend them to these NHS artists and show them in the best light. I wanted to show the breadth of NHS staff’s experiences and artworks without over-emphasising on COVID: I didn’t want to define 75 years of the NHS by the last two. My vision was also very much two-fold, so the finale and the relay were equally important; I wanted there to be a link between the Trusts not just with the central piece. So, when the last Trust in the relay signed off with “Now over to Manchester!”, that was a special moment.

In deciding which stories to include in the relay and finale, I was really impressed by the quality of the stories from all the Trusts. The local artists had helped people create great artworks, which we enhanced with 4 dramatic pieces by a pro writer to link the stories together, music to underscore the poems and add atmosphere, and visual projections to allow the audience to engage on many levels.

The timeline was tight, but I had faith that ‘it will be what it will be’. I was incredibly happy with how it went, very proud of how everyone performed. The NHS staff projected pieces of their souls onto the stage: when the lights came on people lit up. That final moment when everyone was on stage as one was very moving. When community artists – which to me is what NHS staff are - bring their heart to a project there is always something special and, in this case, it was extra special because these are the people that we rely on for healing. Art heals, not just for those accepting but those giving.

The hardest bit of the whole process was having a technical rehearsal then a show on the same day, as it all felt a little rushed. But I don’t know how we could have got around this and thankfully it all worked out! For other cultural organisations or artists wanting to engage in working with the NHS, I’d say that what’s important is that you understand what and who you’re trying to serve. In Our National Health Stories, I was trying to serve the staff to show their artistic sides. And I was proud of the NHS management for saying “thank-you” to the staff and allowing them to engage in this. It was a beautiful 75th birthday present to the NHS!

“We shall share the hidden places”: a COVID-19 storytelling project in University Hospitals of Derby and Burton NHS Trust

By Laura Waters, Head of Arts and founding member
Our National Health Stories team



Carved tree sculptures with words from stories by staff working in UHDB during the COVID-19 pandemic 2020-2021, by E J Lance (artist) and Miles Halpin (Sculptor)

In late 2019, a colleague asked me if our team could run a series of workshops for junior doctors. They were concerned about the high levels of stress junior doctors were experiencing and thought a creative outlet might be beneficial to them. This was a significant moment. Until then, we had mostly worked with patients; we saw the pressures staff were facing every day and believed the arts could help, but it had been difficult to convince staff to take time to look after themselves and benefit from creativity.

The COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 paused our plans to run those in-person workshops (though we did eventually run them online), but suddenly, the whole Trust saw the same clear need to support NHS staff. Almost immediately, a psychologist colleague contacted me to ask if we could help collect staff's stories. She recognised early on that staff were at high risk of PTSD, burnout, and mental health problems, and that the arts might offer them one way to find catharsis and relief.

So, we started a project called 'Staff voice', where we simply asked staff to share stories with us. We worked with our comms team to give them a very open brief - they could send drawings, songs, words - and we also linked into the staff wellbeing team in the Trust, who were able to arrange a wide range of further psychological support where needed. We kept the call open for a year and worked with over 200 staff.

It was mostly poetry and photographs that came back. In all the stories I saw such a desire - a need, even - for staff to share the reality of what they'd been through, not to flinch from the details. They had been put in this extraordinarily difficult situation out of their control and they needed others to hear the reality of that. Another thing that came out in the stories was the staff's strength and solidarity. Many reflected that caring for people was their vocation, they'd chosen this, and they accepted the burden, but they'd only get through it together. One poem that

particularly stuck with me was one from a staff nurse who had been moved to the ICU ward to work during the pandemic. His poem was called 'When this is over', about all the things we were missing at the time - seeing family, enjoying trips to places - but it was still hopeful for the future. It was so powerful, particularly as the poet is a quiet, reserved character.

When this is over

by Daniel B. Griffith, Staff Nurse Ward 206, UHDB

When this is over we shall meet again
We shall go on trips;
And I shall show you the hidden places.
We shall have lunches, dinners and picnics.
We shall go to the theatre;
And we shall learn to live again.
When this is over we shall meet again
We shall not forget;
And we shall share the hidden places.
We shall have adventures.
We shall go to church and temple;
And we shall learn to live again.
When this is over we shall meet again
We shall remember;
And we shall share our stories.
We shall be happy.
We shall be joyful;
And we shall learn to live again.

By September 2020 we'd got so many stories from staff that we decided to ask our resident musicians to create songs in response. They wrote 'A grateful heart', followed by 'the longest winter' in 2022, using material directly from the staff stories. We also had our resident visual artist work with a sculptor to create a 'choral forest', 6-8-foot-tall sculptures carved from wood with staff's words painted on. We shared all this at a concert in Lichfield Cathedral in October 2022, where the staff wellbeing choir performed the songs and ten staff read out their poems to an audience of 500 people. To see their everyday experiences amplified and listened to by so many people was incredibly moving, not least for the staff themselves.

Beyond the pandemic, this year we held workshops where staff created ceramic tree buds, on which they imprinted one word that summed up their experience of working in the NHS in 2023. Most were positive words like 'empowering', 'beautiful', 'meaningful', 'flourishing'. This surprised me, as two years ago some of those stories were so horrendous; I think it just shows the resilience of this workforce, but it also shows the uplifting power of the arts. After the very first staff workshop the whole group of staff got together and told us the workshop was "the first time they hadn't felt awful in this building for 2 years". To hear them describe the benefits of the arts in this way was amazing.

The challenge is keeping that momentum going now that we are no longer in the throes of COVID-19. Staff morale is still low, and yet this experience has really brought home to our team that happy staff really do mean happy patients. Across

such a huge Trust (1.5 million patients) we can't possibly reach all patients even with an arts team of seven, so we want to shift our focus now towards helping staff to bring the arts into their work with patients at a bigger scale, and in a much more sustainable way.

Sowing the seeds of collaboration: from local to national storytelling

At the same time as we started collecting stories in 2020, I was having lots of conversations with other hospital arts teams about what they were doing: suddenly we were all collaborating, sharing ideas and innovating. The pandemic had brought us all together even though we were locked down in different parts of the country. Many of my counterparts had adopted a similar focus on staff wellbeing and that's really where the ambition to do a national storytelling project came about and the seeds of Our National Health Stories were sown. I often think about how a project of this scale and ambition may never have come about if not for the pandemic. With the added impetus of the NHS's 75th birthday, Our National Health Stories gave us a platform to showcase our stories to the rest of the country, giving staff extra impetus to engage with the arts. To me it reinforces the message at a national level that the arts are essential to NHS staff's mental health, so hopefully NHS leaders will now see how important it is to create more opportunities like this and collaborate with other NHS Trusts more broadly - after all we're all part of something much bigger here. Another observation is that the alignment of this project to NHS Charities has been very important: their support highlights how important charities are to helping arts in the NHS to really thrive and support the Trust to best effect.

Excerpt from One Year On...

by Louise Tristram, Lead Upper GI Clinical Nurse Specialist, UHDB

... To the loved and the lost, the young and the old
I give you my word we brought them into the fold.
It's been a tough ride and at times too much
The people we've lost and the families we touch.
Amongst it all there are some happy endings
It takes time to heal but bodies are mending.
So as I reflect and try to digest
I know we fought hard and we did our best.

‘A whole little world’: illuminating NHS staff members’ stories through poems and soundscapes across four NHS Trusts

Written in conversation with Beth Calverley, poet

Beth believes poetry can be found everywhere. People often think poetry is about writing things in a certain way, but everyday speech can be creative, expressive, poetic. Beth gives people the opportunity to speak and weaves their words into poems that can help them feel listened to, heard, and valued. She believes giving people that opportunity is especially important in hospitals, where experiences may be difficult to articulate. From that perspective, the aims of Our National Health Stories resonated with Beth’s work, and she was delighted to collaborate with four of the participating NHS Trusts in Bristol & Weston, Mid Cheshire, Oxford, and Somerset. Beth had three main approaches: The Poetry Machine, team poetry workshops, and staff interviews as part of an audio artwork created in collaboration with musicians.

The Poetry Machine is a theatrical set with a bright yellow umbrella, bubble engine, flagpole, writing prompts, and a typewriter that Beth takes into hospital spaces. For this project, she invited passing staff members to stop by and co-create a poem, asking them some questions such as ‘what would you like more people in the Trust to know about your work?’ ‘Is there something you say or hear every day at work?’ She worked responsively, allowing the conversation to evolve, before weaving staff’s words into a typewritten poem and offering it to them for feedback. Once the staff member was happy, Beth gave them their poem to keep and took a photograph of the typewritten poem, with their permission.



‘The Poetry Machine at Somerset NHS Trust’, photo credit: Corbin O’Grady Studio and Art for Life

For Beth, a stand-out interaction was with a medical secretary, whose role had recently gone through a review after which their pay grade had changed. This person told Beth that what wasn’t acknowledged in the review process was the support they offer consultants, emotionally and practically, and how they might notice carer strain in relatives. Though these aspects of their role may not have been part of the formal review, the creative process can draw out elements that perhaps aren’t always quantifiable.

The Medical Secretary

By Beth Calverley, created with Lou at Somerset NHS Foundation Trust

The medical secretaries
Have recently been downgraded

from Band 4 to Band 3.
A lot have left, but after 32 years

you wanted to stay.
Who else would listen in for carer strain?

Ask these questions
nobody else would ask – “how are you?”

Have you got any health concerns?
Do you need some respite in your day?”

Who else would answer the questions
the patients are scared to ask?

“How soon can I have sex after the hernia?
“Well we’d prefer you to wait

until you’re home.” Who else
would teach your consultant the swear words

they wouldn’t otherwise know?
Give them the respite they need to keep going

On days when it’s really tough
when they’ve had enough

when they think it’s their fault
when they’re overwhelmed

when they need
a hug.

As part of Beth’s ONHS collaboration with University Hospitals Bristol & Weston NHS Foundation Trust, Beth recorded her conversations with staff at The Poetry Machine with their permission then created a poem based on themes that emerged during the conversations. Beth then worked closely with the musicians in residence, Beth Roberts and Tamsin Elliott to create a recorded audio piece mixing Beth’s poem, staff voices, hospital sounds and specially written music. The piece is called Listen In, a collective narrative about the importance of listening. The artists also worked with the staff choir on a live version, which was performed at an Arts and Health Festival in Weston-Super-Mare. In that piece - as in hospitals - people came together from all over to bring this new, small world to life.

“Ask this whole little world and try to listen – they will show you what it means to listen.”

Listen In, by Beth Calverley inspired by staff at University Hospitals Bristol & Weston NHS Foundation Trust

Beth also ran group workshops where she offered team members prompt cards, handstamps, magnetic poetry and so on, and asked them to choose something that reminded them of their work, patients, or each other in some way. She then wove their words into poems, which Beth offered them for their feedback and changes.

In Mid-Cheshire, Beth worked with several teams including many from the Estates and Facilities teams, bringing their behind-the-scenes work into the spotlight. Some of these teams talked about how they feel ‘walked past’ in the corridors, yet they see each other as the ‘cream of the crop’ because of their deep-rooted sense of pride in their work. Some expressed how emotional they felt listening to their words reflected back. In Oxford, Beth wove a poem from the contributions of over 50 staff in the Trust, through The Poetry Machine and team workshops, which was made into a video. Her hope is that all four Trusts will use the poems created towards future creative work like murals and installations.

Reflecting on this project, for Beth consent and trust are always key, and it was even more important for this public-facing project to make sure staff were happy with how their stories were represented. Having given staff the chance to feedback on the pieces before they were finalised, Beth then felt nervous handing them over to the national central team and not knowing precisely how they would be interpreted. Beth’s suggestion for future similar national projects would be that hospital resident artists are invited to collaborate with the central creative team on the finale piece.

‘The bones of love remain’: perspectives from The Newcastle Upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

By Katie Hickman, Arts Programme Manager

Our National Health Stories gave us the scope here in Newcastle to make our local celebrations around the NHS’s 75th birthday even bigger and participate in something national that gave our staff a unique opportunity to share their stories with a wider audience.

Starting in July 2023, we worked with New Writing North to run drop-in sessions and online workshops for our staff. The writer, Laura Lindow, supported staff to craft their own stories, giving them guidance and feedback to help them turn the story they had in their heads into a creative written piece that they were happy with. Initially, staff were curious but perhaps slightly hesitant, though interestingly we found them much more ready to engage with the online sessions than in person. This was perhaps because the online sessions included staff working from home or made them feel safer somehow. The national aspect also appealed; I think it felt like we were being given a chance to shine a light on the ‘North East’.

In total we worked with 40 staff to help them write their stories and we sent a selection of these to the central Our National Health Stories creative team. The process of crafting their thoughts into written pieces really seemed to boost staff’s confidence and for me it was also a good counterpoint to staff surveys, which don’t necessarily give staff space to tell their own stories, in their own creative way. We were so pleased to offer them that opportunity in this project and were thrilled they had so much to say.

The thing that struck me the most was staff’s honesty, and the reality of what it means to be in an NHS space every day. Some stories were quite hard-hitting, but I’m so glad people had this outlet for processing different experiences. One poem that really stayed with me is from someone in palliative care who talked about being with people during their final breaths. Another was from a Black staff member who wrote about a feeling of ‘being the only one’ when first moving to the North East years ago.

Milestone

by Vicky Thomas, Consultant Paediatrician

As the NHS turned 75
I was confirming a peaceful death.
Listening for breath that wouldn’t come
Feeling for a pulse that wouldn’t beat.
People think the cutting edge is what we do
The scalpel, the adrenaline, the rush.
Inside we know it’s something else instead;
The tenderness of saying it’s the end.
The gentleness and fierceness of tears
The tick then tock from breath to death.
The old, the new, the never was or will.
A room at midnight where we laugh and weep.
When all else is gone, the grief, the pain,
The fingerprints, the bones of love remain.

The Only One

by Odeth Richardson, Head of Service Occupational Therapy

I remember when I first came, expecting people of the same
Alas, no one looked like me. It was a lonely place to be.

I struggled to understand the lingo, often asking to repeat.
No idea what canny or ganning meant but knew I needed to pay the rent.

I wrestled with shall I stay, shall I go, then decided to go with the flow.

Had to get used to dreary dark colours, alongside dreary dark weather.
I needed some sunshine to make my skin glow, but had to be content with being my own rainbow.

I've met some cool folks over the years who inducted me into the Geordie way.
On a good day, that was ok, yet there were times when the loneliness hit you, sitting in a room where
you are the only one.

Being the only one brought privileges and pain,
I had the privilege of being exposed to so many different things, it left my head in a spin.

Pain was a plenty, manifested in grievance and despair.
I remembered my mother saying, no pain, no gain, so used this mantra to refine my armour to ensure
I remain.

Fast forward, the passing years, I remember how it felt like to be the only one.
Alas, this has not changed, I remain the only one, longing for some company to talk to someone who
looks like me.

To talk without the need for explanation. To find my tribe. To get comfortable. To bring my whole self.
The ache of isolation, a constant companion, leaving me longing for connection, a bittersweet canyon.

The yearning remains, perhaps this year, I live in hope things will change.

To me these stories go beyond, and overcome, the idea that “the NHS” is some big amorphous thing, showing instead the human side and the relationships that make up this institution: the people behind the employer. That’s also what I love about the arts: you never fully know what to expect, and someone will always surprise you. Staff were also so pleased to travel and experience the finale together: it was a privilege to witness staff make new connections and forge stronger existing ones on that day. In fact, we would have loved even more opportunity to connect with staff from different Trusts (even if just online).

In terms of legacy, we are hoping to make an anthology of the stories as the Writer in Residence programme continues. We’ve also held a new creative writing development course for staff, which they seem to be really enjoying, and we’re just about to grow the arts team here with new investment from Newcastle Hospitals Charity. Hopefully this project will serve as a good stepping stone for the new team by giving us some national profile and really highlighting the benefits of the arts in healthcare.

“We’re in the same band, but we play different instruments”: storytelling in Oxford University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust

By Ruth Charity, Arts Lead, Artlink



Staff and artist Simon Grennan at the Horton General Hospital restaurant with one of the 'Caring Work' table top vinyls and banners for the project. Photo credit: Ruth Charity

We've been collecting stories from our staff in various ways for some time now, as it's felt increasingly important – particularly during Covid - to understand and communicate our staff's everyday experiences and to use the arts to support their wellbeing in various ways.

We've worked with our resident poet, Beth Calverley, to co-create poems with staff teams to reflect the nature of their work and Beth has also brought her Poetry Machine into our hospitals to create individual poems with staff. This culminated in Beth creating a poem for the whole Trust, from which we made a film, *All Kinds of Bright*, with staff reading the lines they'd created. Excerpts from the poem are now being incorporated into a sculptural artwork for the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford.

During COVID-19, we invited stitching artist Harriet Riddell to work with teams across the Trust - from pharmacy, digital, patient contact, finance, procurement, and clinical teams - to capture stories and experiences of being involved in the vaccination rollout. We wanted to reflect this feat of cross-team working so from sketches on site, online conversations, and photographs the artist created a large artwork stitched onto three hospital uniforms. This artwork - *Left Arm or Right?* - is now installed in the John Radcliffe Hospital, accompanied by smaller framed works, some stitched directly onto face masks, and a poem co-created by Beth Calverley and staff teams involved in the rollout. This not only celebrates those who powered the vaccination rollout across the Trust, it also marks an important historical point in time for all those working in our hospitals.

When the Our National Health Stories project came along, it felt like the perfect way to showcase, and build from, the storytelling work we'd already been doing. With funding from Oxford Hospitals Charity, we created a series of events in each of our four hospital sites on 5th July 2023 (the NHS's 75th birthday), inviting a poet, Pat Winslow, and visual artists Tom Cross, Rachel Barbaresi, Tamsin Grove and origami artist Lizzie Burns to our hospitals to gather staff stories.

We also invited artist Simon Grennan to talk to our Estates and Facilities staff in housekeeping, cleaning, portering and estates about their experiences; he then selected 12 quotes by staff that echoed their caring roles, which are a key but often unrecognised part of their work. These quotes were designed into table-top vinyls and installed in all cafés and restaurants across our four hospitals.

There was such a sense of pride in the poems and artworks, it was clear that staff really valued being listened to and seeing their words given profile. People who work in the cafes and restaurants where the tabletops are, told me many staff have commented on the power of a simple sentence, and I think the quotes humanise the spaces by offering this way of visualising staff voices.



Tabletop vinyl,
Simon Grennan

During these projects one story that stuck with me was that of an Estates staff member who talked about dealing with an electrical issue at a patient's bedside which brought him back several times and he built up a good relationship with them. I was also struck by the way porters talked about their physical and emotional connection to patients; they see it as their role to lighten the mood and bring a smile or exchange of words to change people's days. These stories highlight how much more these people's roles are than just that functional job of, for example, fixing something, transporting someone, even bringing a cup of tea. These are still caring roles. What's also clear is that this comes with some challenges for those staff who, unlike clinical staff, do not necessarily receive training in how to deal with trauma, bereavement and so on. That's why it feels so important to give them a voice and an opportunity to reflect on, and recognise, what they do for patients.

“All of the staff I worked with feel the general distinction that the public - service-users - make between the work of clinical and other staff in hospitals. Everyone described how this idea was contradicted every day by the experience of patients - that all hospital staff are carers, not only clinical staff. Staff talked a lot about the importance for care-giving of emotions and emotional connections, empathy and story-sharing. They also spoke to me often about the importance of emotional and interpersonal understanding for their work as members of a team, of how they felt that patients are encompassed in that. Overall, I felt that everyone I worked with saw themselves as producing care and sustaining a caring environment for each other as well as patients.” – Simon Grennan, artist

At first, I wasn't sure about whether staff would engage in these projects. We know staff have limited ability to take part in creative projects at work because they have limited time. Many Estates and Facilities staff aren't online so can't be reached by email, and their working patterns can be restrictive. I was therefore pleased that the projects were so welcomed - almost 400 staff have taken part in the different events and artforms. I've learned that what works best is to go to staff and public spaces and offer flexible and different ways to connect to creative projects. Creative workshops can seem intimidating, but the skill of the artists is to make the engagement accessible. Once someone feels comfortable and supported, they end up loving the activity and being listened to. We know that one person can break the ice for a whole team to then get on board. It was particularly interesting working with some of the private companies who deliver some of our estates and facilities services. Some took staff wellbeing very seriously and really helped us to reach more staff; others have naturally been less engaged and more challenging to work with. Outsourcing arrangements in the NHS can therefore clearly present both opportunities and barriers when it comes to staff engagement in creativity.

In lieu of our staff attending the finale as it was too far to travel, we created local events at our hospital sites to promote the project to staff. We invited Harriet Riddell back to all of our 4 hospital sites to stitch staff portraits, incorporating phrases from her conversations with staff into the artwork, and asked poet Pat Winslow to accompany her to write poems for, and with, staff. We now have a wonderful archive of staff images and stories which we intend to print and display across the Trust, together with the poems and stories we've gathered from earlier projects. This has been a wonderful collaborative project bringing together 19 trusts in one creative endeavour - something to build on in future.

“I don’t think you see the special in what you do”: creating poetry and illustrations with staff at Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust

By Megan Dawes, Arts Coordinator



Mural at Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham.
By Amy and Lizzie from HandMade Theatre

Staff wellbeing is a massive priority for our Trust; we have a dedicated staff wellbeing team who develop offers such as mindfulness and movement. However, I think it's good to also be able to offer arts projects to staff, since some people will naturally gravitate more towards creative and artistic means to help them find that much-needed release, relief, and support.

As a small arts team (just me!) supported by a steering group, in early 2023 I commissioned artists from HandMade Theatre to create a mural for each of our 3 sites, with legacy funding from the Medical Staffing Committee. Somewhat organically, the focus ended up being on staff: the artists found the staff's stories so interesting, not just doctors and nurses but cleaners, facilities staff, ambulance drivers, managers and more. So, when Our National Health Stories came along, we already knew how powerful it would be to shine a light on the diverse roles, people, and stories in our workforce.

For the NHS 75th birthday week in July 2023, with funding from Nottingham Hospitals Charity, we commissioned a poet, Matt Miller, and an illustrator, Tomekah George, to travel around our sites with a 'story trolley'. Matt asked staff some questions then developed the beginnings of a poem in the session which he finished off later on (staff signed off a final version). Tomekah drew staff's portraits there and then, capturing the moments the staff members told Matt their stories. We emailed all staff to let them know when we would be in the public spaces and arranged visits with teams who don't usually use email (porters, domestic staff, etc.). There was such a broad mix of stories, from COVID-19 experiences to people sharing their long careers, and lots of day to day snippets of, say, funny things that have happened at work. This shows the importance of seeing the lighter side of NHS work and how much people enjoy their jobs here, despite the evident challenges.

Some of the most moving stories came from staff reflecting on their own experiences as patients and carers. One shared a story of them getting bad news, another dedicated their poem to another staff member who cared for their daughter. Sometimes it's easy to forget that NHS staff go through all the same things as the rest of us, which includes getting sick, getting bad news, and being hospitalised. People really poured their hearts out in this project, despite (or perhaps because of) knowing they would be shared very widely. I believe art can make it easier to express and share with the world how you feel about an experience. Then seeing that reflected back to staff, alongside their portraits, really boosted their self-esteem, built a sense of community, and generated a lot of excitement when we came to share it publicly.

Our exhibition of the final 12 poems and illustrations shows how the NHS connects us all, highlighting how much kindness and dedication it takes to work here in these challenging times, which is very inspiring. A staff dance piece created from one of the poems also gave us a chance to do additional workshops and events, and we were thrilled to be asked to share the dance in the Manchester finale. It is deeply moving to see NHS stories shared by the professional actors alongside staff from the Trusts themselves and I am so incredibly proud of our 8 staff members who performed 'Motown Dancer', choreographed by Next Door Dance, written by Matt Miller with music by Jimmy Power. They were absolutely brilliant! We also had a fantastic local event in Nottingham where professionals and young people from Next Door Dance brought to life 5 poems through dance and music. I feel that these events have left a real legacy that will be shared, discussed and celebrated in the conversation around hospital arts for years to come. The national element to this project has allowed us to promote arts in health more generally in the Trust by saying we are part of something bigger than just one person (me) doing arts in health work. It has given my work more context and credibility.

At first the staff involved didn't perhaps realise the whole scope, and I think I also felt the same at the start: I was still quite new in post and other Trusts involved had so much more experience and resource than us in terms of working with staff and storytelling during COVID-19. The short deadlines involved also presented challenges as it took time to get staff on board, and I didn't always feel that I knew how best to engage staff and contribute. Now we know it's possible to work with staff and to us that's a win that we can now build on.

Genuine Ray

For 'Katie', by Matt Miller

Dear Ray, at City Hospital,
who helps my daughter with her splint –
I don't think you see the special in what you do
so I wanted to say this to you:

Through your kindness,
your calm, friendly patience,
my daughter has come from
kicking and screaming to
joining in with ballet class.
From walking on her knees,
to tip toes,
to getting her life and passions back.

You call us back
when no-one else does.
Hard-working, no self-importance, no fuss.
You're on our side. You're there for us.
In every bureaucratic physio battle
you're squeezing us in for appointments,
understanding,
never rebuking for not following
instructions,
smiling, encouraging, persevering.

You've built rapport and constant trust.
For my daughter, and for me, that's so
Important.

And now she gets to choose
the pictures on her splint –
we've got animals now,
to replace the Minions!

You've made life easier.
I hope you know you're incredible.
I've never met anyone
so helpful and genuine.

Conclusion



On the milestone of the NHS's 75th birthday, Our National Health Stories created space for NHS staff to come together, sharing and reflecting on their experiences of working in the NHS, with the aim of supporting their wellbeing and shifting perceptions of the role of the arts in healthcare.

This evaluation has revealed that, for NHS staff who actively participated in Our National Health Stories, the project did indeed play a role in enhancing their wellbeing; a majority reported that they felt more valued and supported in their roles following this project and developed strong connections with other NHS staff (particularly within their own Trusts). The project also appeared to provide a welcomed opportunity for staff to express themselves, acknowledging previously 'hidden' emotions around difficult past experiences at work (including during the COVID-19 pandemic) and have their stories listened to, fostering reflection and awareness of shared experiences. In these respects, many of the key aims of the project appear to have been met for those staff who participated, and these findings echo and build on previous evidence that suggests that creative activities can play an important role in supporting NHS staff and enhancing healthcare environments.

The wide-ranging creative activities were also successful in uniting this diverse workforce and highlighting the many unseen contributions staff make to patient care every day, often over and above their job descriptions. The depth and variety of the stories collected, from thousands of staff, also suggest that this project achieved something quite special in spotlighting so many unique individuals and stories that comprise it, challenging the idea of the NHS workforce as an amorphous body and showing the humanity our NHS staff bring to work every day.

In addition, this evaluation revealed some positive progress in how art, storytelling, and creativity are now perceived within some parts of the participating NHS Trusts, because of the project. For staff who took part, engaging in creative activities not only heightened their interest in the arts, but it also often deepened their appreciation and understanding of the arts as a powerful tool for supporting wellbeing. The national elements, especially the finale performance, for those Trusts who attended it, were also felt to be particularly important in raising the profile of arts in the NHS. This sentiment was echoed and emphasised by the Hospital Arts Managers, who received plenty of positive feedback from colleagues, especially those in the communications and leaderships teams, about this project. Many are hopeful that this will inspire more support for future local and national hospital arts projects.

However, this evaluation did bring to light some disparities in the practical experiences of the project between the 19 participating NHS Trusts. Key challenges reported by the Hospital Arts Managers included navigating the project's short timescale, a lack of clarity regarding the overall scope and objectives at the outset of the project and limited central coordination resources. This sometimes exacerbated the inherent difficulties Hospital Arts Managers face when engaging NHS staff in arts projects at work, namely their varying work patterns and staff members' confidence to take part in creative projects. Several NHS Trusts were also unable to take part in the finale event in Manchester due to travel constraints; this also appears to have affected some's experience of the project.

Clear recommendations emerging for future similar projects therefore include having more dedicated resources in the central coordinating team/s, more opportunities for collaboration between Trusts throughout the project, and a more co-created finale piece which is accessible for all locations (perhaps through having several 'finale' performances back at hospitals).

Furthermore, whilst engaging NHS staff in the arts appears to have had a positive impact on participating NHS staff through this project, some also clearly felt that this engagement could not necessarily mitigate the negative effects of other factors at work such as pay and working conditions. It is clear, therefore, that the arts have a key role to play in supporting wellbeing, so long as this happens alongside other staff wellbeing initiatives and good working conditions.

The authors hope that this evaluation may support all parties involved – the NHS Trusts, Hospital Arts Managers, the National Arts in Hospitals Network, Arts Council of England, NHS Charities Together and creative and cultural organisations – to further consider the role and value of creative arts and storytelling within the NHS, especially on a national level, and to continue building from here to make sure the arts can become a core pillar of NHS staff wellbeing initiatives across the country. The spectrum of diverse experiences and overarching challenges highlighted will also hopefully help Hospital Arts Managers continue to shape future hospital arts programmes around staff engagement and contribute to the expanding evidence base for the role of arts in health and wellbeing.

Appendix Table 1: List of participating NHS Trusts' local projects

NHS Trust	No of sites engaged	No of staff in Trust	No of actively participating staff	Project summary	Contact
Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust	1	11,500	Data not supplied.	Staff performed poetry written by them in unconventional, but familiar locations such as the hospital's Laundry Room. Drawings and artworks were also used as the backdrop of the performance to illustrate the staff's experiences.	Rosie O'Donovan: rosie.odonovan1@nhs.net
Chelsea & Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust	4	7,000	Data not supplied.	A drawing project led by artist Emily Thomas, who captured staff's stories. A display of her illustrations formed part of the final contribution, along with a performance of an original song from the staff choir.	Saskia Delman: saskia.delman@cwplus.org.uk
Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust	3	12,000	1,885	Singing and creative art with an exhibition of prompts within colourful rainbow trees.	Emma Carr: emma.carr11@nhs.net
Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust	1	7,000	110	Poet Cecilia Knapp engaged with 90 staff members through interviews and creative writing workshops before creating a poem entitled 'Come With Me'. Artist Lily Sakula attended some of these interviews/workshops and then delivered a series of animation workshops with patients, families and staff to visualise the poem.	Ciara Hazelwood Ciara.Hazelwood@gosh.nhs.uk
Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust	3	15,000	60	Poet-in-Residence Keith Jarrett collaborated with staff in creative drop-in workshops, compiling responses to essential prompts of the project to effectively capture and share their stories.	Kate Pleydell: kate.pleydell@imperialcharity.org.uk
University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust	3	18,500	100	Poet-in-Residence led workshops with staff to gather and present stories at the Carnival of Stories. Also involved multi-art forms - object handling, poetry, dance and music.	Sallie Varnam: sallie.l.varnam@uhl-tr.nhs.uk

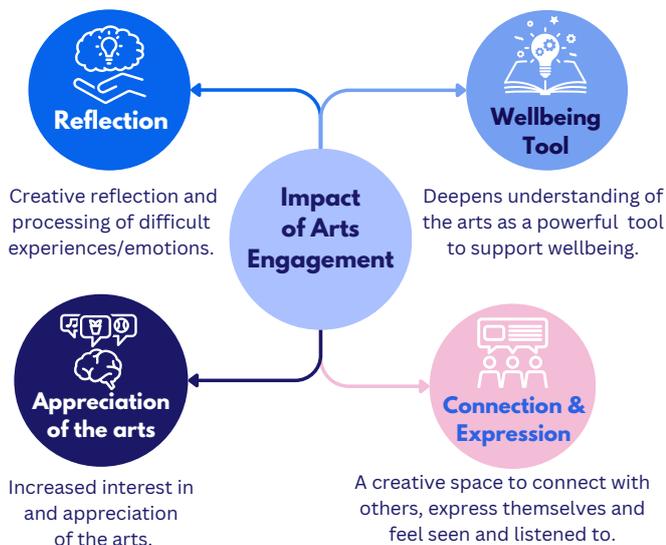
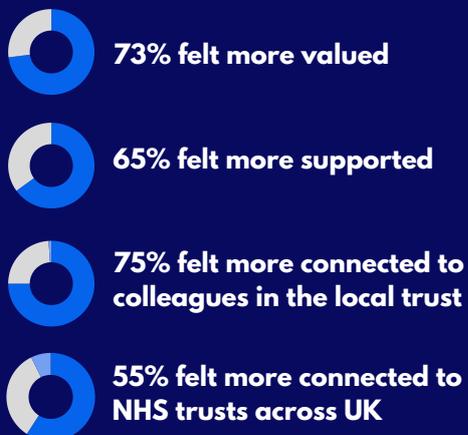
Liverpool University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust	3	15,000	1,500	A variety of creative workshops across all sites then a celebration of the outcomes.	Paula O'Malley: paula.omalley@liverpoolft.nhs.uk
Mid Cheshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (info taken from case study)	5	5,000	71	Worked with poet Beth Calverley to deliver workshops with several teams including many from the Estates and Facilities teams, bringing their behind-the-scenes work into the spotlight. Creative prompts were offered, and staff shared their experiences which Beth turned into poems; some staff also wrote their own lines of poetry.	Deborah Riding: deborah.riding@mcht.nhs.uk
Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust	2	18,000	40	The Writer-in-Residence engaged staff in poetry and storytelling through a range of creative opportunities, including drop-in sessions, online development sessions, and open calls.	Katie Hickman: katie.hickman2@nhs.net
Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust	3	18,000	82	A 'Story Trolley' accompanied by a poet and illustrator travelled across the Trust's three sites to capture staff's stories during NHS's 75th anniversary week. A mural featuring staff portraits and a 75-mosaic piece was also crafted in sculpture sessions and poetry sessions were brought to life through dance and music during the live performances.	Megan Dawes: megan.dawes@nuh.nhs.uk
Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust	4	13,500	268	Collaborated with a diverse group of staff members utilising multi-art forms such as poetry, origami, portrait stitching, drawing and meaningful conversations to collect stories. This collaborative effort resulted in an enlightening ONHS project, which captured their experiences within the NHS environment.	Ruth Charity: ruth.charity@ouh.nhs.uk
Royal Brompton & Harefield NHS Foundation Trust	1	3,688	65	Musician-in-Residence Stacy Dowdeswell wrote and performed a song using words and stories of Trust staff called 'Here We Are'.	Annabelle Bond: a.bond@rbht.nhs.uk Conni Rosewarne: c.rosewarne@rbht.nhs.uk

Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust	1	18,500	25	Invited staff to contribute poetry, drawing and sound recording about their work experiences.	Mir Jansen: Mir.jansen@nhs.net
Somerset NHS Foundation Trust	2	12,500	144	The project involved staff engagement in poetry workshops, and creative writing sessions which expanded upon an initial 2020 art exhibition titled 'Our Hands in the Time of Corona'.	Caroline Barnes: caroline.barnes@somersetft.nhs.uk Lisa Harty: lisa.harty@somersetft.nhs.uk
St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust	1	9,000	110	Staff responded to creative prompts, designed by artist Hannah Coulson at various events over the Summer, e.g. St George's Arts Week and the NHS 75th Birthday. The staff choir also wrote a song and performed it to mark the occasion.	Grace Lindley: grace.lindley@stgeorges.nhs.uk
University Hospitals Bristol and Weston NHS Foundation Trust	1	13,000	30	A collaborative sound piece created by resident artists; poet Beth Calverley, and musicians Tamsin Elliott and Beth Roberts that mixes poetry, staff voices, hospital sounds and specially written music.	Emily Malins emily.malins@uhbw.nhs.uk
University Hospitals Derby & Burton NHS Foundation Trust	2	13,000	50	Staff shared stories throughout 2020-2022 in a range of artforms, then resident musicians created songs in response. A resident visual artist worked with a sculptor in 2022 to create a 'choral forest', 6-8-foot-tall sculptures carved from wood with staff's words painted on. In 2023, workshops were held where staff created ceramic tree buds, on which they imprinted one word that summed up their experience of working in the NHS in 2023.	Laura Waters laura@airarts.net
University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust	5	12,000	65	Working with five poets to capture staff experiences of working in the NHS, including spoken word performance and music concerts.	Guy Noble: guy.noble@nhs.net
York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust	1	10,000	50	Engaged artists and musicians to work with staff to listen to their stories and share their thoughts through creativity.	Griselda Goldsbrough: griselda.goldsbrough@nhs.net

Appendix 2: Infographic Summaries

Our National Health Stories ➔ Impact (short-term)

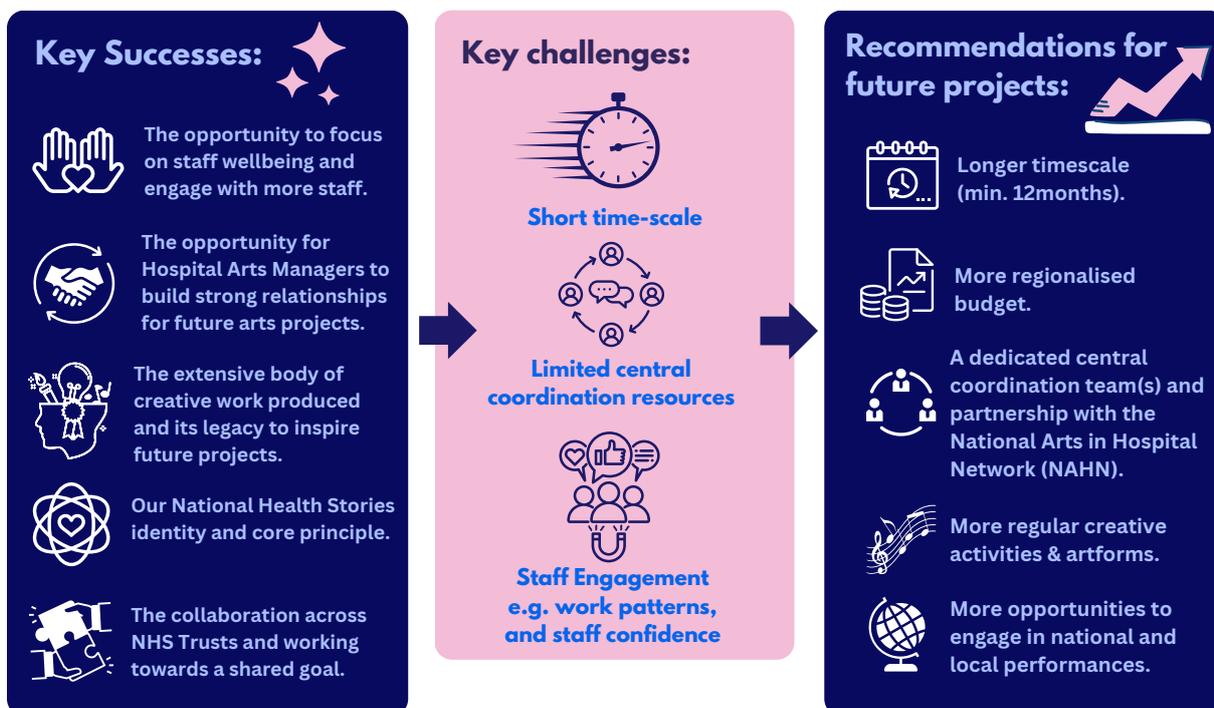
*Impact on NHS staff wellbeing:



- Many of *Our National Health Stories'* key aims appear to have been met for those staff who participated. However, for some, engagement did not mitigate other negative factors such as work conditions and pay.
- These findings build on previous evidence that suggests that creative activities can play an important role in supporting NHS staff and enhancing healthcare environments.

*Staff feedback Survey = 60 staff respondents from 8 NHS trusts (of 19 NHS trusts)

Our National Health Stories ➔ Process and recommendations



*Hospital Arts Managers: Focus group = 10 respondents | Survey = 17 respondents from 16 NHS Trusts

Appendix 3: The Arts in Hospitals

This brief (and partial) history of the role the arts have played in English hospitals was prepared for the Our National Health Stories project. It offers a sense of the ways in which the arts have played many different roles in the NHS and particularly in changing hospital environments and challenging the medical model of patient care. It offers an insight into how the Our National Health Stories sits in a historical context and perhaps a sense of how this project might be built upon to grow and enhance the role of the arts in healthcare.

The presence of art in hospitals dates back hundreds of years. However, it's not an unbroken history, at least not in England. In Victorian times, the arts were used not to provide cultural salve for patients but to elevate hospitals' social status – and, ideally, to raise money for their work. Jenny Lind, the so-called 'Swedish Nightingale', was among the 19th-century artists who performed benefit concerts in aid of the Hospital for Consumption & Diseases of the Chest, which eventually became the [Royal Brompton Hospital](#).

It was really after the Second World War – indeed, shortly after the founding of the NHS – that the arts began to find a more secure foothold in the English healthcare system. [Paintings in Hospitals](#) was founded in 1959 by Sheridan Russell, an almoner at the National Hospital for Neurology & Neurosurgery in London, who established a collection of artworks that could be loaned out to hospitals for the benefit of people's health. The charity continues its programmes today, with a [3,700-strong collection](#) featuring works by the likes of Antony Gormley, Anish Kapoor, Yinka Shonibare and many others.

But the contemporary history of art in English hospitals arguably began exactly 50 years ago in Manchester with artist and academic Peter Senior, who sought to explore ways in which the arts could play a more proactive role in healthcare environments. In 1973, Senior was invited to exhibit his work in the outpatients' department at Withington Psychiatric Hospital in south Manchester. The success of this small-scale exhibition led to Senior becoming a de facto artist in residence at Manchester's [St Mary's Hospital](#) – effectively starting what became the [Manchester Hospitals' Arts Project](#).

Senior's project embedded the arts in Manchester hospitals in two pioneering ways. Firstly, and most visibly, Senior – and, later, his so-called Arts Teams of artists and others – created and installed artworks in what were then very drab hospital environments: what Senior called 'visual disaster areas', waiting areas and corridors that weren't even installed with picture hooks or railings where works could be hung. Secondly, he encouraged patients and staff to create art themselves, even presenting an exhibition of work by St Mary's staff that served to convince sceptics that there was a valuable place for arts in hospitals.

Senior was guided by a simple but powerful credo. 'If you believe, as I do, that all people are creative, it is a question of finding the appropriate means, the particular techniques that will suit their personalities,' he said. 'When you've seen this happen, you realise that those activities are relevant and important to people... All people enjoy getting involved with making things.'

Senior's project eventually expanded to hospitals across Manchester. Then in 1988, at [Manchester Metropolitan University](#) (MMU, then Manchester Polytechnic), he established the research-led organisation [Arts for Health](#) to help guide the provision and use of the arts within healthcare. As well as commissioning and presenting new artworks in healthcare settings, the organisation went on to present a variety of important projects, publications and conferences – including, in 1999, the first International Conference on Culture, Health & the Arts.

By that time, the movement that Senior had set in motion was blossoming in hospitals and healthcare settings around the country. In 1979, to give just one example, [The King's Fund](#) charity established the Murals for Hospital Decoration, latterly known as [Art in Hospitals](#), which commissioned young artists to create murals for NHS buildings in Greater London.



Photo credit: Mural at Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham. By Amy and Lizzie from HandMade Theatre

Just as the benefits of the arts in hospitals continues to receive wider recognition, so an increasing number of NHS hospitals are introducing arts programmes of their own – building collections of visual artworks, inviting artists to help patients and staff connect through creative activities, and generally improving the hospital experience for patients, visitors and staff. Evidence is growing that creativity and culture improve health and well-being, and doctors are turning to creative approaches through ‘social prescribing’ to help people manage long-term health conditions.

Bringing together managers and professional leads who work to bring arts, heritage and design services to hospitals across England, the [National Arts in Hospitals Network](#) (NAHN) works to raise the profile of arts in hospitals, share best practices and instigate innovative projects that celebrate the arts across the NHS.

The NAHN’s activities are allied with the work of organisations such as the [Culture, Health & Wellbeing Alliance](#) and the [National Centre for Creative Health](#) (NCCH), which works widely across the cultural, heritage and health sectors. The NCCH was founded following the publication of [Creative Health](#) – a landmark 2017 report from the [All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing](#), which was established in 2014 to raise awareness of the benefits that the arts can bring to health and wellbeing.

The 19 NHS hospital arts programmes involved in Our National Health Stories have commissioned artists as varied as Quentin Blake and Grayson Perry; worked with poets, filmmakers, musicians and theatre-makers across the country; and created opportunities for thousands of staff to explore their creativity. To give just a few examples:

[Imperial Health Charity](#), which supports the five [Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust](#) hospitals, have commissioned artists including [Julian Opie](#) and [Bridget Riley](#) to create new work especially for their hospital spaces, alongside a substantial arts engagement programme and a [Staff Arts Club](#).

[Newcastle Hospitals Charity](#), affiliated to the [Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust](#), supports a range of projects across all mediums – and even invited the [National Youth Orchestra](#) to perform for patients at the [Great North Children’s Hospital](#).

The [University Hospitals of Derby & Burton NHS Foundation Trust](#) benefit from the work of [Air Arts](#), established in 2007 to bring art, dance, drama, poetry, storytelling, crafts and music into the Trust’s five hospitals, and working closely with staff and patients to provide personalised creative activities.

Bringing together 19 NHS hospital trusts, Our National Health Stories is the latest and arguably largest such initiative ever presented in England – a testament to the power of the arts in this landmark year for our NHS.

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