

CREATIVELY MINDED AND IN RECOVERY

Exploring participatory arts for people with addictions

By Dr Cathy Sloan



Bristol Drugs Project: Creative Communities

BY SOPHIE WILSDON

Sophie is Creative Communities Lead at the Bristol Drugs Project.



BDP's Rising Voices choir. Photo © Robert Browne.

Creative Communities is a part of Bristol Drugs Project (BDP), a harm reduction drugs charity that has operated in Bristol since the mid-1980s. Creative Communities was born 10 years ago when I had the idea of starting a regular weekly singing group as a complement to our structured day care programme. As a group worker, I was finding it increasingly difficult to support people to find words to describe their coming round the cycle of change once more, why they were falling into the same patterns whilst sitting in the same rooms with the same group workers, doing the same worksheets. I had recently joined a community

choir and thought the model could be replicated at BDP. The choir leader was up for the challenge and BDP was open to a new idea, so we were off.

The choir soon formed a core group who wanted to stay on after they had finished the programme. So we knew we had started something unique in the treatment system and decided to open it up to the wider recovery community.

We now have seven weekly creative groups and partner with four major arts organisations: Rising Voices Recovery Choir, Bristol Recovery

Orchestra (alongside Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra), Oi Polloi theatre group (alongside Bristol Old Vic), Beginners Music (alongside Changing Tunes), Recovery in Motion movement group and Hip Hop Garden, which brings together permaculture principles with Hip Hop. We also run Bristol Sober Spaces, a project that puts on quality music nights for the sober and sober-curious communities.

Creative Communities was born out of looking for creative ways to support people to make changes in their drug use in a harm reduction setting. As a musician, I knew the benefits of music on my own mental health, and also could see the strong correlations between creativity and recovery. I had friends for whom music had been both a blessing and a curse in terms of providing solace, but also that the gig scene could become somewhere where problematic drug use could be hidden in plain sight.

“ I can honestly say being part of MY CHOIR is my proudest achievement in recovery. It's given me confidence and crushed my anxiety. And my PTSD didn't stand a chance when I replaced it with the peace, stability, support and a million good things. ”

Participant

Each group is slightly different, but all operate under harm reduction principles in that anyone is welcome at any stage of drug use and change, as long as they are in a fit state to engage. Performance is very much a part of our model, which our members tell us is confidence building, builds community, and gives of sense of achievement and pride. We've performed in all the major concert halls in Bristol, including Bristol Beacon, St. George's and Bristol Old Vic.

The choir is led very much from a natural voice network ethos – anyone can sing, and you don't need to read music. The orchestra requires people to be able to follow chords or written music as the pieces are more complex. Oi Polloi is open to all, as is Beginners Music, hip hop and Recovery in Motion. One of our aims is to open up the arts to people who are likely to have been stigmatised and excluded. We enhance these opportunities by having

access to free tickets for concerts, thanks to our friends and partners at Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, Fitzhardinge Consort and Gasworks Choir.

We regularly get feedback from people that the group they are in is the central part of their week, and their recovery.

“ Creative Communities has been the cornerstone of my recovery from the outset. Harmony, connection, continuity, mutual support and belonging. It encourages trust, self-discipline, mindfulness, sociability, self-confidence and it's FUN!!! ”

Participant

We attract new members to our groups all the time, and it is a pleasure to see how quickly people can feel connected and excited by new possibilities. R joined the orchestra in January 2024, and says it had taken him years to stabilise after decades of heroin use, unstable housing and managing his schizophrenia.

“ Eventually, after a suicide attempt, I got a prescription for schizophrenia and methadone which I'm still on now. Although my health has become very poor and still have hardships, like my best friend dying last year, I am keeping positive with the help of those around me including the Recovery Orchestra. I've only been playing with the orchestra since January but have found it such a boost to my wellbeing, a target to go for and also a challenge. It gives my music a good outlet and gives me some structure with something good to aim for. ”

Participant

We are invited to perform all over Bristol and beyond, which increases people's sense of purpose, confidence and pride in what we do.

“ We were invited to sing at Newport Cathedral to help celebrate 20 years of Kaleidoscope - a joyous and life-affirming event where we met workers and clients from over the water, who immediately said they want to start their own choirs. So proud that we're spreading the word about music in recovery! ”

Participant

We also offer opportunities for members to become peers who support behind the scenes, or to join our steering group which is made up of members and external arts professionals. H has been a peer supporting the projects since 2016.

“ My weekly sessions with Bristol Recovery Orchestra and Rising Voices serve as a continual inspiration for the way I aspire to live. I strive to capture and carry that joy with me daily. ”

Participant

Our partnerships with arts agencies are something we are especially proud of, and equally, we know it benefits them too.

“ We have learnt a huge amount from our 5 years of working together with BDP and hold it up as a hugely successful partnership. The care and community of BDP staff and volunteers underpins the success of the Recovery Orchestra, allowing Jon James and the BSO supporting musicians to do what we do best – facilitating extraordinary music making. We have replicated this blueprint in similar projects across the southwest. ”

Lucy Warren, Head of Participate for Community Health and Wellbeing at Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra

Later this year, we will celebrate ten years of Creative Communities with a Gala Fundraiser. We will showcase all our groups, celebrate our members talents and put another dent in the stigma that surrounds people who use or have used drugs. We are incredibly proud that we have survived funding cuts, changes in treatment systems and the pandemic, and are now stronger than ever. Let's see what the next ten years brings.

