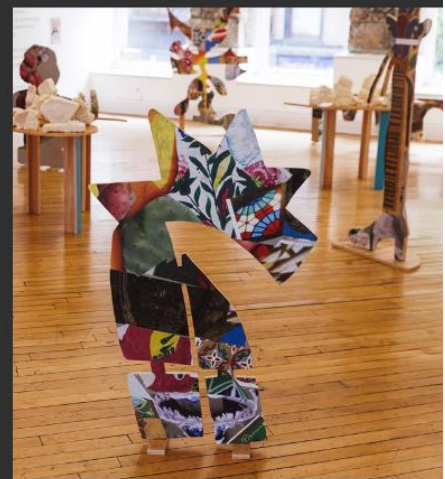
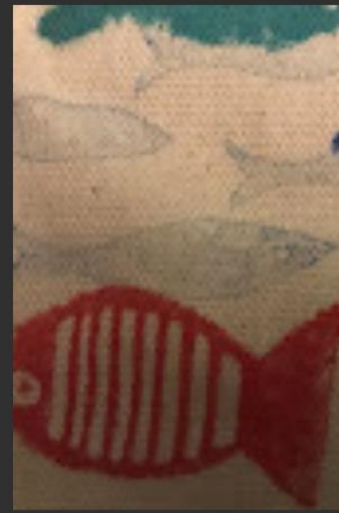
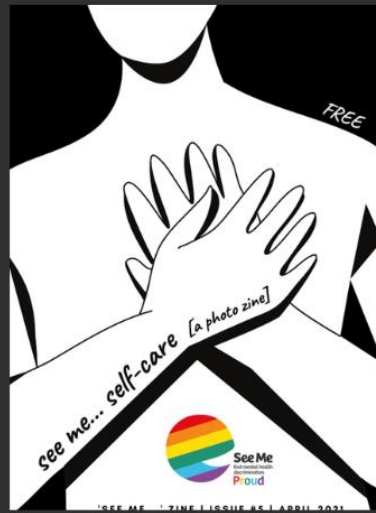


Creating Space: Arts-based approaches to tackling mental health stigma

Learning and Impact Report | October 2025



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See Me

See Me is the national programme to end mental health stigma and discrimination in Scotland. Guided and supported by people with experience of mental health problems, See Me challenges mental health stigma and discrimination. The programme aims to influence changes in attitudes, behaviours, cultures and systems so that people with experience of mental health problems are respected, valued and empowered to achieve outcomes important to them. A priority for the programme is to better understand and address the mental health stigma that is disproportionately experienced by particular groups of people in Scotland.

Mental Health Foundation

The Mental Health Foundation is the UK's leading charity for everyone's mental health. We are home to Mental Health Awareness Week and, with prevention at the heart of what we do, we aim to find and address the sources of mental health problems so that people and communities can thrive. Alongside its role as managing partner, the Mental Health Foundation (MHF) works in partnership with See Me to deliver its research, learning and evaluation functions. This includes the delivery of primary research, evaluation, evidence reviews and knowledge exchange to inform programme development.

See Me recognises that terminology and labels used to refer to groups racialised and marginalised by society is ethically and politically complex, can be harmful and is subject to debate and update. Throughout this report we have used the terminology partners themselves have used to refer to the communities they are led by and work with. We have included a glossary at the end of the document to illustrate our own current understandings of key terms. We are committed to continually engaging with this critical debate to understand and mitigate harm.

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Foreword

Creative approaches have been part of See Me's work for many years, but over the last four years creative methodologies have become more central, as they align closely with intersectional approaches to anti-stigma interventions. As such the purpose, process and impact of creative approaches have been an area of focus for learning and evaluation in recent years.

As See Me moves towards taking an intersectional approach to address mental health stigma and discrimination across the whole programme, creative approaches have become a core and intrinsic part of it. The creative approaches used and supported by See Me are underpinned by intersectional principles, which we explain in the body of the report. The learning that emerges from creative projects illuminates the causes, nature and impacts of intersectional stigma on mental health.

This report documents See Me's journey so far relating to embedding creative approaches. And we can clearly see the impact this is having at both the personal and cultural levels, reducing internalised stigma and changing public perceptions, in addition to building a picture of the particular nature of stigma when it is simultaneously experienced in multiple forms.

Our ambition is to utilise the learning and materials created in a more strategic way to advocate for institutional and structural change. Through outlining the rich learning about the nature of stigma experienced at different intersections, community-led evidence around what is effective to bring people together to challenge it and also sharing good practice in participatory creative processes.

Looking forwards, we particularly want to explore further the links between the conditions created by well-facilitated, politically engaged creative projects - and how, in turn this may impact on the longevity and impact of anti-stigma interventions at all levels in society (Structural, Cultural, Institutional and Personal) (Pérez Portilla, 2016)) The conditions we refer to, for example, create safety, trusting relationships, and opportunities for peer support leading to significant wellbeing outcomes for participants including increased confidence, empowerment, reduced isolation, and feelings of greater choice and control.

We hope this report is insightful for anyone involved in participating in, facilitating, supporting or funding creative anti-stigma work and underlines all the unique and transformative role that participatory creative projects and the participants at the heart of them play in tackling stigma and discrimination.

See Me team, October 2025

Executive Summary

This report documents and evaluates the learning and impact from creative approaches supported by See Me in addressing mental health stigma and discrimination in Scotland. The report highlights the strategic use of arts-based methods, particularly through the See Me Anti-Stigma Arts Fund.

Key Questions:

1. How are creative approaches used by See Me to tackle stigma and discrimination?

See Me employs creative approaches to tackle stigma and discrimination by integrating arts-based methods into the projects supported by the programme. These methods include the creation of visual arts, theatre, music, and many other forms of creative expression, as well as supporting community-led participatory creative processes.

One of the key strategies used by See Me to support challenging stigma at all levels, is to facilitate and fund participatory arts projects which engage people who have lived or living experience of mental health problems. This collaboration ensures that art, resources and events which result from anti-stigma projects are not only authentic but also resonate with participants and audiences on a deeper level.

By meaningfully involving people with lived and living experience of mental health problems in creative projects and outputs, See Me ensures people's stories and perspectives are safely and authentically represented and that involvement in the process builds individual and collective empowerment. This approach also fosters understanding, reduces stereotypes, and encourages supportive perspectives.

The use of creative approaches by See Me is guided by several key conditions for effectively addressing stigma through public-facing artwork, identified through research within See Me (see [Using the Arts](#) report). These include collaboration with people with lived experience, balanced representation, and community-focused display.

2. How have creative methods been used to further See Me's intersectional approach to anti-stigma work in Scotland?

Funding and supporting community-led creative approaches has been instrumental in taking steps to address the significant gaps that have existed in See Me's understanding of the nature of intersectional mental health stigma experienced by communities, and the action needed to address it. By funding and supporting projects that explore intersecting experiences of stigma and community-led solutions, See Me has been able to connect with more people and new networks and build relationships with grassroots organisations led by and/or working with marginalised communities. These projects often focus on specific experiences of intersectional discrimination, relating to mental health stigma and racism, gender, and socioeconomic status, for example. Working with partners that are led by or who

work meaningfully with marginalised groups ensures people's autonomy is upheld in the process of sharing their experiences and that choice is central to any creative outputs shared.

3. How can creative approaches help us understand the nature of experiences of stigma and discrimination for different groups?

Creative approaches can provide a trauma informed, structured process for exploring and understanding diverse experiences of stigma and discrimination and community-led solutions. By using methods such as visual storytelling, theatre, and participatory arts, See Me and its partners can better understand the nature of intersectional stigma in different contexts and how it operates. Creative methods allow participants to express their experiences in ways that transcend traditional language and literacy barriers and enable a sense of agency and control in how experiences are communicated, fostering empathy and deeper understanding among audiences and participants alike.

4. What is the role of See Me as a funder in supporting inclusive, creative anti-stigma work?

See Me plays a crucial role as a funder in supporting inclusive, creative anti-stigma work. Through the Anti-Stigma Arts Fund and other funding mechanisms, such as commissioned work, See Me provides financial support to projects that tackle mental health stigma through community-led creative approaches. This funding strategy emphasises flexibility and trust, encouraging funded partners to design and evaluate their work independently, while receiving guidance and support from See Me. This approach has helped build strong relationships with community organisations, through which See Me has developed a greater understanding of intersectional stigma, enabling See Me to refine their role as a funder to better support organisations embedded within these communities.

5. To what extent have creative approaches helped reduce mental health stigma and discrimination experienced by groups supported by this approach?

Creative approaches have significantly contributed to reducing mental health stigma and discrimination experienced by the groups supported by See Me. Participants in arts-based projects have reported increased confidence, reduced self-stigma, and a greater willingness to discuss mental health problems. These projects have also sparked important conversations within communities, fostering a more supportive and understanding environment. The impact of these creative approaches is evident in the positive feedback from participants, project partners, and audiences, highlighting the transformative power of the arts in challenging stigma and discrimination.

Key learning

The report sets out a series of key learning points and recommendations for practice:

- **Active Participation:** Meaningful involvement in creative practices such as visual arts, theatre, and music has proven effective in addressing internalised and public stigma. These activities provide individuals with lived experience the opportunity to safely share their stories and take ownership of how their realities are represented, including through abstract forms. Additionally, such engagement offers therapeutic and wellbeing benefits, which may contribute to long-term positive outcomes.
- **Peer support:** Participatory creative processes in a group setting provide further benefits such as peer support and community connection and the opportunity for collective agency and healing.
- **Visibility:** Sharing creative works in public spaces provides an opportunity for social contact. It offers a platform for people with lived and living experience to share their work with wider audiences, which can foster understanding and reduce stereotypes, as well as advocate for wider systemic change.
- **Shifting power:** Creative anti-stigma methods, and participatory processes in particular, are designed to transfer power towards people and communities most impacted by stigma and discrimination. This means resources created through such projects more accurately represent people's lived realities and benefit the individuals and groups involved on their own terms. This type of meaningful collaboration is crucial for the authenticity and community defined positive impact of anti-stigma projects.
- **Building mutual understanding:** Creative and participatory approaches can help to more safely and meaningfully explore how social identities and structural inequities shape and influence each other, particularly in the context of mental health stigma. This understanding is essential for addressing the particular nature of stigma and discrimination faced by different groups and building solidarity and community connection.
- **Psychological safety:** Creative and participatory methods can support the development of environments where participants feel safer to discuss and explore sensitive themes around mental health and intersectional stigma. This psychological safety is crucial for effective co-production and meaningful engagement.
- **Meaningfully widening participation:** Prioritising building trusted relationships with organisations representing marginalised communities (as well as revisiting and critically re-defining the purpose of the fund and its communication strategy) has enabled See Me to dismantle access barriers. This has led to an increased number of applications from groups representing multiply marginalised experiences of mental health stigma and discrimination.

Recommendations

It is hoped that these recommendations will be useful to both institutions and organisations funding creative anti-stigma work, along with anyone using or planning to use creative methods in anti-stigma work.

1. **Peer Support:** Ensure that those involved in delivering creative anti-stigma projects can access spaces for mutual support and sharing expertise, particularly around issues of psychological safety, structural inequality, community building and power. This can be achieved through the learning set model used by See Me, for example.
2. **Trauma-Informed Approach:** Creative projects should take an explicitly trauma-informed approach, anticipating and building in mental health and wellbeing support throughout the project's lifespan with a particular emphasis on avoiding re-traumatisation of participants through sharing personal experiences without feeling safe and in control of the narrative. Carefully considering safeguarding and cultivating conditions where people feel safer are necessary for meaningful participation.
3. **Sufficient Funding and Resources:** Creative projects require sufficient funding and resources to allow for the time, expertise, and capacity needed to design, deliver and evaluate high-quality projects. This includes considering the need for ongoing support beyond the project's planned finale.
4. **Flexibility, Trust and Open Communication:** Funded partners should be prepared to cede power and adapt project plans in response to the needs and preferences of participants. This includes being flexible with engagement strategies, schedules, and activities, empowering participants to own/lead the project that is reflective of their experiences and sensitive to their context.
5. **Embedding Sharing Learning and Project Outputs:** Ensure that the learning outputs and resources from creative projects are embedded in wider anti-stigma work in a way that honours the work and wishes of the project participants. Learning from experience and evaluation of creative approaches should continue to be embedded across all programmes of See Me work, as well as sharing learning more widely to influence national programmes. This can help ensure a lasting impact and extend the reach of the project's outcomes.
6. **Continued Funding:** Funding of creative participatory projects should form a key part of mental health anti-stigma strategies, building on learning and previous success.

These key learnings and recommendations highlight the importance of creative approaches in tackling mental health stigma and discrimination, and provide valuable insights for future projects. Further reading can be found here: [Blog: Taking an Intersectional Approach | End Mental Health Stigma and Discrimination](#)

Introduction

As Scotland's national programme to end mental health related stigma and discrimination, See Me is committed to understanding and advocating for change across society at all levels (structural, cultural, institutional and personal) (Pérez Portilla, 2016) to end mental health stigma and discrimination. This includes supporting community-led work to build a social movement of people across Scotland who are passionate and determined to end mental health stigma.

We know from [previous work](#) that those who experience poor mental health in combination with intersectional stigma and discrimination at all levels will have distinct experiences depending on many social, economic and political factors. These factors include marginalisation and oppression related to characteristics including (but not limited to) race, sexuality, gender and class, which contribute to inequities in mental health outcomes. This means certain groups experience disproportionate outcomes which stem from systemic marginalisation and result in very different experiences from members of groups that are more advantaged by constructed societal norms (such as those who are white, middle class, heterosexual, cognitively 'able' etc.).

See Me has a long history of supporting and developing creative projects intended to tackle mental health stigma and discrimination. See Me conducted an evaluation of creative methods and anti-stigma work in 2020, marking the start of a more strategic approach to supporting arts-based projects by the organisation. This report precipitated the 2021 launch of the See Me Anti-Stigma Arts Fund. Now in its fourth year, the Anti-Stigma Arts Fund provides individuals, groups and organisations with the opportunity to access funding for creative projects that aim to tackle mental health stigma and discrimination. Over the past four years, See Me has also sought to enhance its use of creative approaches across the wider programme of work. This paper seeks to build on and revisit previous research to explore the progress of creative approaches to tackling mental health stigma and discrimination as part of See Me's Arts Fund, and within the broader work of See Me. This paper will also set out the evidence of impact which has emerged from the initial four years of the arts fund.



Image 1: Volunteer Chik performing at Inspiring Life event 2024

Background and Context

“Stigma is a powerful force for social exclusion. In a 2022 survey by the Global Mental Health Peer Network, 80% of more than 400 participants in 45 countries worldwide agreed that “stigma and discrimination can be worse than the impact of the mental health condition itself” (Thornicroft et al., 2024)

Mental health stigma and discrimination in Scotland

It is estimated that around one in four people are affected by mental health problems in Scotland in any one year (Scottish Health Survey, 2021). Mental health problems often co-exist with physical health conditions and in Scotland poor mental health is directly linked to poverty and social exclusion (Public Health Scotland, 2018).

Further, it has been evidenced that some population groups in Scotland are at increased risk of poor mental health including people living in poverty, people from LGBT+ communities, adversely racialised communities and carers (Public Health Scotland, 2018). This evidence demonstrates that mental health problems are not equally distributed across the Scottish population, and that intersecting factors including stigma and discrimination, social disadvantage, poverty, unemployment childhood adversity and long-term health conditions often result in poorer mental health outcomes (Public Health Scotland, 2021).

Mental health related stigma is pervasive and has far-reaching consequences within our society. The Scottish Mental Illness Stigma Study (2022) found that people who report experiencing stigma related to their mental illness describe unfair treatment, exclusion from decisions and opportunities, dismissal of their needs or opinions, pressure to act against their wishes, and exposure to negative attitudes or inadequate support. As a result of this stigma, many avoid situations in which they fear they may experience further stigma and discrimination. This leads people to avoid seeking help when they need it, to withdraw from relationships, employment and educational opportunities (Scottish Mental Illness Stigma Study, 2022).

See Me's Approach

See Me has been tackling mental health stigma and discrimination in Scotland for more than 20 years. The organisation acknowledges creative and arts-based approaches as fundamental to tackling stigma and discrimination within the programme and have built a strong body of work using these methods. This has been guided by three key factors:

1. Evidence-based anti-stigma approaches
2. Commitment to taking an intersectional approach
3. A strong international and experiential evidence base supporting the use of creative approaches

Tackling mental health stigma and discrimination: what works?

An internal literature review conducted by the Mental Health Foundation for See Me in 2020 identified several key mechanisms for addressing public stigma. The paper emphasises the importance of multi-faceted approaches to addressing public stigma,

which include protest, education, social contact, and involvement of people with lived experience:

- **Protest challenges negative messages:** Protest aims to reduce stigmatising messages in the media and other sources and can empower participants, but it may unintentionally reinforce stigma if not accompanied by positive messages.
- **Education increases understanding:** Educational interventions provide information to counter stereotypes and can improve attitudes short-term, though long-term behaviour change is less certain. Educational interventions that include social contact are found to be most effective.
- **Social contact changes attitudes:** Planned interactions between people with mental health conditions and others, especially targeted groups like employers or healthcare workers, effectively reduce stigma, especially when contact is local, credible, targeted, and continuous.
- **Involvement of lived experience is crucial:** People with direct experience of mental health stigma should be central to designing and delivering anti-stigma programs, which may lead to more relevant and impactful projects.
- **Recovery-focused programmes reduce stigma:** Peer support and mutual help programmes promote hope and recovery, which can decrease self-stigma and improve quality of life for participants.
- **Targeted behaviour change is promising:** Focusing on specific discriminatory behaviours within particular groups, considering social and cultural contexts, may yield more measurable changes.
- **Empowerment benefits participants:** Involvement in anti-stigma efforts can empower individuals with mental health conditions, leading to lower self-stigma and better recovery outcomes.

More recently, anti-stigma interventions were reviewed as part of the 2022 Lancet commission on mental health stigma (Thornicroft et al., 2022). The review identified several different ways in which stigma can be challenged, mirroring those identified in the MHF review. Thornicroft and colleagues found meaningful inclusion of people with lived experience and social contact to be the components of anti-stigma programmes with the strongest evidence base. Social contact is the planned coming together of people who have a particular identity or experience with others who do not, to collaborate on a shared project. Social contact is most effective when it is sustained over time and attends to unequal power dynamics.

Intersectional stigma

Whilst the anti-stigma intervention reviews outlined above focused specifically on tackling stigma related to mental health, in reality mental health and the stigma and discrimination that surrounds it, does not exist in isolation. Mental health is shaped in unique ways by people's complex and unique identities and impacted by life experiences in each of these domains (Alegría et al. 2018).

Many people who experience stigma and discrimination related to their mental health also experience other forms of stigma and discrimination. These include marginalisation and oppression around a range of characteristics including (but not

limited to) race, sexuality, gender and class, which contribute to inequities in mental health outcomes. This means certain groups experience disproportionate outcomes which stem from systemic marginalisation and result in very different experiences from members of groups that are more advantaged by constructed societal norms (such as those who are white, middle class, heterosexual, cognitively 'able' etc.). For example, people from adversely racialised groups are more likely to experience social stressors and disadvantages compared to people from non-racialised groups (Alegria et al., 2018).

When thinking about mental health, considering the experiences of living with stigmatised identities, living conditions, health conditions, or coping behaviours is crucial. It allows us to obtain a more accurate picture of how people's lived experience impacts their mental health and what should be done to address this (WHO 2022). People's unique characteristics are not the cause of poor mental health. Rather, it is how these markers are perceived by others and (un)accommodated for by systems that result in power imbalances that lead to people and communities becoming marginalised. This othering of people and groups is a cause of mental health problems (The Mind Clan, 2020).

Research into intersectionality and mental health is still quite limited (Fagrell-Trygg et al., 2019), and this extends to research examining what works to tackle intersectional stigma and discrimination. Yet as has been shown, stigma has far-reaching detrimental consequences, and tackling this in all its complexity requires multi-faceted, innovative and creative methods.

Creative approaches to tackling mental health stigma and discrimination

There is growing international recognition of creativity as a tool to tackle stigma and discrimination (The Health and Social Care Alliance, 2024).

A key challenge of anti-stigma work is the ability to foster (and evidence) lasting change in attitudes and behaviour. There is evidence to suggest that creative approaches are particularly well-placed to enable transformational change which also enhances wellbeing. The arts are said to have transformative potential as they can act as a catalyst to enter the required 'space' for wellbeing to arise. That is, the arts may act as a catalyst for seeing things differently, which can alter the way we see ourselves and others (Garner et al, 2007:6). Participatory creative processes are particularly well suited to fostering individual and collective transformational change (Cranton & Lipson-Lawrence, 2009) which is required for stigma reduction at all levels and well aligned with intersectional anti-stigma interventions.

Artistic and creative approaches have been effectively used to reduce mental health stigma and discrimination (El Halabi et al., 2024) across a wide range of settings. Evidence shows that creative practices are a particularly appropriate method for sharing knowledge and learning on mental health and in doing so, tackling stigma. For example, arts programmes in schools have been shown to enhance mental health literacy, empathy and inclusion (Campos et al., 2018; Twardzicki, 2008), and drama and theatre have been effectively used to reduce mental health stigma among healthcare providers (Michalak et al., 2014). Songwriting in psychiatric units has

been shown to lower self-stigma amongst patients (Silverman, 2013). A recent systematic review by Gaiha et al (2021) of arts-based interventions for children and young people found that interventions using film or multiple art forms significantly improved participants' knowledge of mental health and attitudes towards people with mental health conditions. A randomised controlled trial of a drama-based anti-stigma video (This is My Brave) showed that creative methods can more effectively tackle mental health discrimination than traditional interventions (Kosyluk et al., 2021); videos showing people with lived experience of mental illness and recovery sharing their stories through poetry and song more effectively reduced perceived difference between participants and people with mental illness than lived experience stories shared through non-creative mediums.

Existing research also shows that arts-based initiatives can help build community connectedness and reduce stigma experienced by different communities and multicultural groups. A World Health Organisation report exploring the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing states: "It has been noted that arts-based approaches are particularly helpful when working with multicultural groups," (Fancourt & Finn, 2019, p18). Creative and artistic methods can be a helpful way of communicating and targeting methods of specifically reducing mental health related stigma experienced by specific populations or demographic groups. For example, Qasim and colleagues report on the positive impact of a comedy theatre production focusing on racism and complex PTSD in addressing intersectional stigma experienced by a largely "Black, Asian Minority and Migrant Ethnic" audience. They write,

"Arguably, performance art offers a means by which previously neglected or discriminated against communities can critically engage with a more complex and nuanced set of representations of mental distress...The utilisation of comedic and dramatic performance may encourage audiences to think more critically about matters such as stigma and its intersection with race, laying the foundations for more meaningful and informed conversations about mental distress, and associated experiences within services and wider society." Qasim et al., 2020, p 13

Unger et al (2013) highlight the use of fotonovellas on depression to address stigma related to antidepressants and mental healthcare amongst the Hispanic/Latino population in the United States – a population group which has comparatively high levels of health disparities. Fotonovellas are a form of visual storytelling that combine photographs with narrative text. Their study showed that the use of fotonovellas led to significant reductions in antidepressant stigma, mental healthcare stigma, and increased intention to seek help and support. This indicates that the use of creative approaches such as fotonovellas can be particularly helpful when trying to reduce stigma experienced by marginalised populations.

A recent meta-analysis funded by See Me of studies using Photovoice to tackle mental health stigma showed that this creative approach can reduce self-stigma, and can be an effective way of reducing social distance, perceived danger and anger towards people with mental illness (Adeboye et al., 2025). A reduction in stigma resistance (the ability to challenge mental health stigma) was also reported, however

the tool used to measure this concept was critiqued, and it was concluded that more evidence is needed (Adeboye et al., 2025).

Furthermore, artistic expressions can foster empathy and understanding amongst both audiences and participants, which are crucial to reducing stigma. Researchers argue that “the arts can change stigma by constructing shared meanings and engaging audiences on an emotional level” (Quinn et al., 2010). By emotionally engaging audiences and creating shared meanings, the arts can help to break down prejudices and misconceptions about mental health.

Evidence shows that the most effective arts programmes are those that use participatory methods. Personal involvement and facilitating a sense of ownership can enhance the effectiveness of anti-stigma initiatives. “While there is no consensus that any one type of arts programme is the most effective, results appear to be strongest when individuals and communities are actively involved in the creation of the art” (Fancourt & Finn, 2019, p.18).

Existing research by Scotland’s Health and Social Care Alliance (2024) supports the notion that creative methods can be a particularly inclusive form of engagement because it mitigates barriers that can often be present for specific marginalised groups in anti-stigma interventions, such as language and literacy barriers:

“Creative engagement can be considered an inclusive practice because it may not have traditional language or literacy barriers compared to other forms of engagement.”
(Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland, 2024, p.6)

“Respondents noted that creative engagement methods can be particularly useful to engage with a group who don’t share a common dominant language. Because literacy skills are not required for most forms of creative engagement, it was suggested that it can be a more accessible way for participants to connect and share experiences without sharing a language.” (Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland, p.21)

Creative methods open up options for communication, using a diversity of tools other than written or spoken language. In this way, creative methods can create safer spaces for connecting with others and working through difficult experiences. Creative approaches can have cathartic effects on individuals and groups, as well as the potential to create artistic outputs which can be used to communicate experiences to broader audiences.

This report explores how through supporting, learning from and embedding creative and participatory approaches, See Me and the organisations it is working with are playing a role in tackling intersectional mental health stigma in Scotland.

Aims

The aims of this evaluation are to answer the following questions:

1. How have See Me used or supported the use of creative approaches to:
 - a. tackle mental health stigma and discrimination?
 - b. increase the diversity and reach of See Me's partners and their participants?
2. What is the role of See Me as a funder in supporting inclusive, creative anti-stigma work?
3. How can creative approaches help us understand the nature of experiences of stigma and discrimination for different groups?
4. To what extent have creative approaches helped reduce mental health stigma and discrimination within groups supported by this approach

5. Methods

Working with See Me's Communities and Priority Groups Team, we identified a series of outcomes and indicators (see Appendix), which guided the evaluation. We used this matrix as a framework through which to conduct a gaps analysis of secondary data sources such as annual reports, post-event reflections and ad-hoc feedback from project partners, participants and audiences. During this process, we identified quotes and excerpts from each data source that related to each outcome, identified which indicator it most related to, and noted the key themes. A count of data sources relating to each indicator identified gaps in the data. We worked with the Communities and Priority Groups team to identify additional data sources relating to these indicators, searched the See Me website, and conducted a short survey of the See Me team to gather their views. We also conducted an informal, semi-structured interview with Gail Aldam, Arts and Events Manager at the Mental Health Foundation regarding the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival.

During the re-drafting process of this report, the most recent set of See Me's Anti-Stigma Arts Fund reports were made available, which added to the dataset. These reports were analysed separately and findings were added into this report.



Image 2: Artist Nik Dixon running a creative workshop at See Me's 'Who Creates the Story?' event, 2023

Findings

How does See Me support the use of creative approaches to tackling mental health stigma and discrimination?

See Me has a long history of supporting creative approaches. The organisation has invested in creative approaches which bring people together to engage with the stories and experiences of people with lived experience of mental illness stigma and discrimination. To do this, See Me have embedded, employed and supported creative approaches in several ways, most notably through the Anti-Stigma Arts Fund, but also within their volunteer programme, communications, wider partnership working and resource development.

Researching the use of arts to challenge mental health stigma

The [Using the Arts](#) report conducted by See Me in 2020 reviewed literature on the use of the arts to tackle mental health stigma, exploring the anti-stigma impact that art projects can have both during its creation and through its display and the opportunities for audience engagement that this may bring. The review identified several methods that can be used to tackle stigma through sharing art with different audiences. These included: engaging in the event, lived experience voices and stories, a focus on recovery, post event discussion/Q&A and availability of educational/signposting materials. The effectiveness of these in challenging the three components of stigma (knowledge, attitudes and behaviour) were explored through a research survey conducted at the Scottish Mental Health Arts and Film Festival in 2020.

The research found that the process of engaging in the event and hearing lived experience voices and stories were most effective at reducing stigma in audiences. The report highlights several key conditions for effectively addressing stigma through public-facing artwork:

1. **Collaboration with Lived Experience:** Art about mental health should involve people with lived experience directly in its creation, ensuring that their stories and perspectives are authentically represented.
2. **Balanced Representation:** Art should avoid portraying mental ill health solely through despair, violence, or unpredictability without proper context, and instead, it should emphasize stories of recovery, resilience, and hope.
3. **Community-focused Display:** To influence attitudes effectively, artwork should be exhibited within the communities it seeks to impact, rather than in traditional art spaces, making it more accessible and relatable to the public.

These guidelines aim to ensure that mental health art initiatives foster understanding, reduce stereotypes, and encourage supportive perspectives.

Funding creative approaches

See Me has provided financial support to anti-stigma work employing creative methods for at least the past ten years, initially through the Community Innovation Fund, and since 2021 through the Anti-Stigma Arts Fund. The Anti-Stigma Arts Fund currently represents the largest specific, strategic and regular financial investment that See Me makes into creative projects. However, See Me also commissions other work on an ad-hoc basis (see box, right), and offers financial support to partner organisations (e.g. ILFA), See Me volunteers and others through grants, to support their own creative anti-stigma projects.

Common amongst all these methods is a ceding of control by See Me. Whilst the organisation is strategic about what pieces of creative work receive funding, it doesn't seek to make any further decisions about a project once funded and aims to remain flexible on everything from design to evaluation of projects. All projects are required to produce a report on their learning and impact. See Me does however provide support and guidance to organisations and individuals running the projects, for example through [learning sets](#).



Image 3: Artist Josie Valley at the Caring Conversations launch, Paisley

Examples of commissioned and grant-funded projects

- [Reliquary](#) 2019: See Me & MHF in partnership with An Lanntair commissioned artists to conduct a series of workshops with staff and participants from three Stornoway-based mental health organisations. The resulting handmade wooden boxes and their contents represent the lives of the people creating them and were exhibited as part of [SMHAF in 2021](#).
- [Caring conversations](#) 2018: Artist Josie Valley, commissioned by See Me & SMHAF, facilitated workshops exploring mental health perspectives among both service users and staff in Paisley, culminating in a collaborative installation with support from ceramicist Kevin Andrew Morris and artist Simon Worthington.
- [Conversations for Change](#) 2015: artist Pam van de Brug with the Consultation and Advocacy Promotion Service [CAPS]. The project aimed to bring together people with first-hand experience of mental ill-health to explore the way mental health is viewed in Edinburgh, and turn the public's views on mental health into art exhibited in the city.
- [Wellbeing Project](#) 2025: The Govan Community Project offer trauma-informed, culturally sensitive mental health support for people affected by the asylum system and forced migration. See Me are funding them to run creative workshops exploring mental health stigma, discrimination, and access to support, aiming to improve how mental health services respond to diverse needs.

CASE STUDY 1: Voices through the lens

Key themes: Structural discrimination experienced by racially marginalised communities; participatory photography; peer support; safety; benefits to participants of meaningful engagement in participatory creative work; funding

Voices Through the Lens was a collaborative community research project between researchers from Glasgow Caledonian University and community organisation ILFA. See Me funded the pilot phase of this project in response to previous [work by](#) ILFA's founder during the Covid-19 pandemic. This work identified how young people from minoritised ethnic communities in Glasgow experience intersectional stigma and discrimination within the systems and structures designed to support them, including mainstream services, schools and communities. It evidenced pressures of parental culture, gaps in knowledge about mental health including where and how to seek help and the lack of tailored support available to them (See Me Impact Report, 2024).

The project sought to raise awareness of the issues that racialised young people face, and to highlight the intersectional nature of these. It centred on the lived experience of young people, as a way to support them to develop their own understanding of mental health stigma and discrimination, with a view to increasing community and connection.



Image 4: PhotoVoice content from young people who participated in Voices Through the Lens

“... it was about that community empowerment as well, not just for the young people but also for their parents, leaders in the community...” (Project lead)

Mental health stigma is experienced by racialised young people in schools and communities, and also from family members, friends and peers. For the young people involved in the project it was important for them learn how to safely articulate their own understanding of stigma and discrimination and how it impacts them, that would then empower them to take action to address it.

The Voices Through the Lens project created a safe peer-support space for young people from racialised communities to discuss mental health using creative methods. Through PhotoVoice, participants gained skills to express their experiences of stigma and discrimination via photography. The project allowed them to share their voices as co-researchers, addressing gaps in evidence ([See Me impact report, 2024](#)), and to influence service providers in reducing stigma through improved training and service design.

Impact

Participants gained skills in photography, critical thinking, reflection, presentation, leadership, relationship building, networking, and advocacy through workshop activities. They deepened their understanding of stigma and discrimination and how to address them. By acting as co-researchers and sharing their stories, participants became more aware of the effects of stigma in their communities and beyond.

Project lead Judy Wasige reflected that:

“Using participatory photography is known to be empowering because it takes people away from loneliness and not being able to vent or tell or get their frustrations out, so it’s really a great tool to help them release that pressure.”

Project staff and researchers developed skills in facilitating community-based participatory research and community engagement. The Project Coordinator undertook Mental Health First Aid training and developed networking skills. The student researchers also developed skills in participatory research, meta-analyses and using systematic review software.

Funding Voices Through the Lens

Creative projects require sufficient funding to be successful. The project lead reflected that investment in equipment, for example digital cameras, is important not only to ensure the high quality of project outputs, but also to show participants that their contributions are valued. Providing participant incentives is also essential as compensation for their time and to overcome any financial barriers to participation. Voices Through the Lens co-researchers received £20 for each session they contributed to.

Adequate funding for project staff was vital, not only in the delivery phase, but also during project set up and after the project ends, to ensure that all deliverables are achieved including showcase events and reporting. ILFA staff reflected that the project funding only allowed for a part time project coordinator, which in hindsight had impacted negatively on delivery. To achieve positive outcomes, funding must allow for the time, expertise and capacity needed to deliver effectively.

The project lead has observed that less funding is allocated to organisations working with racialised communities, than to mainstream community-based organisations. In this context, See Me’s seed funding and support for the project has been critical to the success of the work. They felt that there is work to be done to encourage more funding applications from racialised communities, to overcome obstacles including language barriers, lack of trust, apprehension around monitoring and evaluation requirements, and expertise in completing successful funding applications.

ILFA has been successful in securing further funding from the National Lottery to continue Voices Through the Lens. This is a relatively small amount - £9k over 12 months – therefore to ensure that funding is maximised, the project has been organised into smaller, more manageable stages, aligned with realistic outputs and outcomes. Therefore, See Me’s funding of the project whilst in its very initial stages allowed for greater development and experience in completing funding applications, allowing them to make stronger applications and succeed at securing funding into the future.

CASE STUDY 2: The Anti-Stigma Arts Fund

Key themes: Ethical funding, participatory arts, tackling intersectional stigma

Launched in 2021, the See Me Anti-Stigma Arts Fund was initially conceived as a way to embed and test the findings of the [Using the Arts](#) research paper outlined above, and to understand more about using the creative approaches as a tool for engagement.

The Arts Fund provides grants of between £500 and £5,000 to artists, organisations and groups, enabling them to deliver projects that tackle the issue of mental health stigma through community-led creative approaches. The Anti-Stigma Arts Fund prioritises projects working with people impacted by multiple forms of stigma including mental health stigma, supporting them to establish safe, creative spaces to develop creative processes and works based around the issues they choose to focus on.

“The Anti-Stigma Arts Fund has become a crucial mechanism for us to understand the nature of intersectional stigma and the methodology we need to tackle it. Even more importantly we can see how, when well supported, participatory creative projects lend themselves particularly well to creating spaces of greater safety where confidence and self-expression can develop alongside increased community connection”

(See Me blog commissioned by the Alliance Social Care Academy)

Each year the Arts Fund selection panel review applications from across Scotland, from which between four and six projects receive funding. Projects are chosen which clearly explain how mental health stigma will be addressed through creative work. Chosen projects also clearly explore how other intersections of identity impact the stigma experienced. Learning over the last four years has underlined the importance of funding groups and organisations who demonstrate a trusted relationship with the communities they work alongside.

Once projects are selected by a shortlisting panel using a framework underpinned by intersectional principles which centres epistemic justice. Partnership agreements build on this initial application, outlining the outcomes the project seeks to address during the year, and the process through which these outcomes will be achieved. Projects are then supported through regular communication with the See Me team and a series of [online learning sets](#) with the other funded project partners. Project partners report on progress towards their identified outcomes in an end of year report.

Since its initiation, the Arts Fund has supported 19 projects using a variety of artistic approaches to engage communities and explore mental health through creative expression. Each project uses creative means to challenge mental health stigma and foster open conversations across Scotland. The funded projects are outlined across the next two pages, and further details of all funded projects can be found [here](#).

The See Me team reflect that project learning and outputs have significantly improved See Me’s understanding of the ways in which intersectional stigma impacts

on communities, enabling See Me to refine their role as a funder year on year to better reach, shortlist and support organisations led-by and/or meaningfully embedded within communities. The See Me team also reflected that learning from the fund has fed directly into work influencing government policy, and other external development work including work with Health Improvement Scotland, NCISH and Public Health Scotland.

2021-2022

In 2021 Me used the 2020 research into tackling stigma within audiences to guide the creation of the first See Me Anti-Stigma Arts Fund. In its first year priorities for the fund were encouraging partnership working and skill sharing. The fund was also intended to build new partnerships with communities that See Me had not previously worked alongside.

The fund received more than 72 applications from organisations and individuals across Scotland. From these applications, See Me funded six projects:

- **Unblemished** - Artist Nat Walpole and researcher Valentine Conlan collaborated with transgender/non-binary individuals to produce a comic book that explores the intersection of trans identity and mental health stigma. Distributed via social media and a book launch, it highlighted the challenges trans people face in accessing mental health support.
- **G52 Project** – Glasgow Initiative of Facilitation and Therapy (GIFT) practitioners engaged with young people in a suicide-affected community through creative sessions and a questionnaire. The project sought to secure further funding to expand its reach and establish a community steering group.
- **Mindwaves** - Community Correspondents created three short films addressing stigma and severe mental health conditions. One film, "And Then Stigma Comes Along," was incorporated into training programs, with plans to develop discussion resources.
- **Artlink** - Working with Chinese students at Stirling University, Artlink created a wellbeing eBook for future international students. This resource focuses on identity and mental health and will continue with new student cohorts.
- **Be Kind Project** - Led by young people from CAMHS Dumfries & Galloway, this project produced an animation and educational leaflet for youth mental health. It included discussions with policymakers and distributed 500 educational booklets.
- **Judged** - MECOPP's forum theatre performance highlighted different ways in which mental health stigma and discrimination is experienced in the Gypsy/Traveller community.



Image 5: Images from MECOPP forum theatre project with members of Gypsy/Traveller community called 'Judged'

2022-2023

In the second year of the Anti-Stigma Arts Fund See Me prioritised participatory creative projects led by groups and organisations.

The fund received 41 applications from organisations across Scotland. From these applications, See Me funded four projects:

Hear Me Out - Hear Me Out was a project which produced a short film by Dr Isa Roa and Tom Can Ven Hurk. The film was called *A Little While Longer*, which explored suicide stigma. In the film, three male suicide survivors are given the opportunity to tell and visually illustrate their stories.

Bazooka Arts – Produced a community film that, through the process of creating it, provides a therapeutic context for participants to explore their own experiences of mental health stigma and discrimination.

SAY Women - SAY Women produced a Public Information Comic to illustrate the difficulties faced by survivors of sexual abuse when it comes to mental health stigma and discrimination. Facilitated by artist-researcher Dr Nic Dickson, the project engaged young women who are survivors of childhood sexual abuse, sexual violence and recent homelessness over this ten-week project.

Icebreaker Dundee - Icebreaker was a collection of spoken word performances around gender, mental health and the link between them. They were performed live in front of an audience, and recorded before being posted on social media.



Image 6: Maeve Grindall and Nik Dickson with a poster from Arts Funded project SAY Women, presented during See Me's Who Creates the Story event, 2024



Image 7: Image of Fever Peach performing at 'Prism' a spoken word night hosted by Icebreaker Dundee which explored themes around gender and mental health

2023-2024

In the third year of the Anti-Stigma Arts Fund See Me were able to use data gathered through the previous years to prioritise particular intersections of experience, specifically those of racially marginalised communities. The guidance information and application questions were framed more explicitly around intersectional principles. The fund received 73 applications from organisations across Scotland. From these applications, See Me funded six projects:

Empower Women for Change (Beyond the Canvas) - Focuses on Black and minority ethnic women's experiences with mental health stigma, featuring a community exhibition in Glasgow.

Maryhill Integration Network (Monuments for the Present) - Explores social inequalities and reclaims public spaces through exhibitions, engaging refugees and asylum seekers. Monuments for the Present is an exhibition that sets out to examine how public monuments in the UK have been the focus of debate and action that question dominant narratives of national identity, imperialist extraction, and white supremacy.



Image 8: Collaborative Artwork created by "Beyond the Canvas" Project Participants

Music Broth (The Solace Singers) - A Glasgow choir for female-identifying survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence, performing during 'Make Music Day' at The Mitchell Library. Live choir performances included pieces composed by participants.

Orkney Blide Trust (Headspace Showcase) - The Headspace Showcase is a creative festival that aims to both challenge misconceptions around mental health and raise awareness of Orkney's Blide Trust and the therapeutic opportunities they make available.

Rowan Alba (Conversational Events) – Hosted six open-conversation mental health events across National Galleries Scotland, led by clients with lived experience of trauma and alcohol related harm, and using gallery exhibits to explore different issues.

Sarah's Sanctuary (Slipping Through the Net) - A creative support project for those bereaved by suicide, culminating in a community artwork on Stornoway.

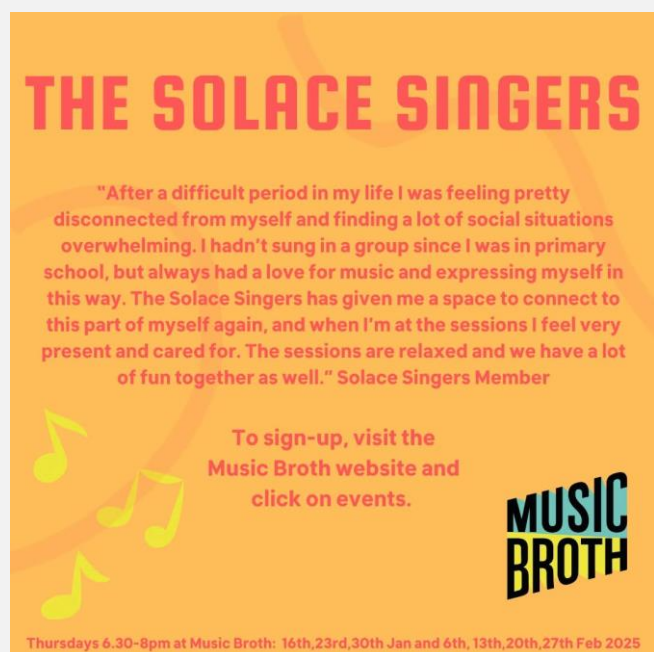


Image 9: Solace choir Facebook post

2024-2025

The fourth year of the fund focused on projects connected to supporting people with experience of poverty, to highlight the intersection with mental health stigma.

The fund received 71 applications from organisations across Scotland. From these applications, See Me funded three projects:

Sharpen Her: The African Women's Network and Open Aye - [The Sharpen Her network](#) supports African women, addressing barriers to participation in society and building capacity. As part of the project, Sharpen Her are partnering with [Open Aye](#), a social enterprise. It provides expertise in participatory photo projects, particularly for under-served communities. Members of the network are analysing and documenting lived experiences of mental health stigma and intersectional discrimination as part of a photography project. Many of the women in the Sharpen Her network have migrant or refugee backgrounds, and have experience of trauma, discrimination, mental health problems, poverty and racism.

Mindwaves - A series of podcasts that explore the experience of living with mental health problems and poverty, and the way these experiences are stigmatised. It is led by an editorial board made up of Mindwaves volunteers who will plan, record, edit and publish a podcast series that centres lived experience, tackling stigma and discrimination.

Simon Community - [The Simon Community](#) provide information, advice, care support, accommodation and homes to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Through its We See You project, The Simon Community is running a weekly art therapy group for 12 weeks, followed by a weekly peer-led community art group. The group will be a space to explore the intersection between mental health stigma and the experiences of poverty-related stigma. There will be a focus on the experiences of people who use substances and the stigma that exists in society and mental health services.



Image 10: Image from the Sharpen Her resource: A Visual Guide & Directory for Mental Wellness

The role of See Me as a funder in supporting inclusive, creative anti-stigma work

See Me's choice to fund creative anti-stigma projects through the Arts Fund and other means plays an important role in building relationships with communities not previously represented in See Me's work.

From these relationships, See Me aim to deepen their understanding of mental health stigma through an intersectional lens and embed the learning across programmes.

Establishing a mutually supportive, trusting and flexible relationship with those leading the projects is key, and giving space to share learning and experiences is significantly valuable and appreciated. This ethos around funding is a key element of how See Me uses creative approaches to tackle stigma and discrimination.

An important element of See Me's role and approach as a funder is that it tries to ensure that applicants have a positive and supportive experience of the fund even if they are not successful. Some positive feedback from unsuccessful applicants evidence this:

"Thank you so much for the really kind and generous feedback and for copying over the comment from the member of the panel. It feels very validating that the intention, reasoning and need behind the proposal was recognised. (Email from fund applicant)

It is hoped that offers a broader support and encouragement to projects See Me are not able to fund who are hopefully able to pursue alternative funding or support.

Over the past four years The See Me Anti-Stigma Arts Fund has received over 250 applications. Of these, See Me have only been able to fund 19 projects with a total budget for the fund each year of between £10,000 - £18000.

See Me team reflections from a creative approaches learning event *Who Creates the Story?* in 2023 show that conversations around funding throughout the project provide 'a forum for people to voice issues and to listen, based on respect and openness to learn'. The event also helped to consolidate their belief in the importance of funding for creative anti-stigma work:

"It was nice to hear from our long-standing partners, LGBT Health and Wellbeing, and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, about the work they were able to do with the fund. And sadly, some of the funds are no longer available. However, this makes the event even more relevant for making a case for putting more funds for creative methods and evidence that they actually work." (See Me team member)

An important element of See Me's ongoing role and approach as a funder must be to advocate for sustained funding for creative projects as part of a community-based mental health activity or strategy.



Image 11: Panel discussion of funding at 'Who Creates the Story?' event

Partnership working

Fundamental to See Me's approach to using creative methods to address stigma and discrimination is the partnerships it develops and maintains. See Me's funding for projects, such as the Anti-Stigma Arts Fund and other funded projects, has often led to deeper and sustained partnerships which extend past the initial funding period. Alongside these connections, See Me has established strong partnerships with a range of other communities, groups and organisations across Scotland. Partnerships are used to explore how stigma and discrimination is experienced by different groups, and to understand how that stigma can best be challenged.

Several key themes were identified when exploring how See Me works with partners to use creative methods to tackle stigma. These include co-production, the importance of building connections, and involvement with the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival. Other examples of the ways in which See Me works with partners includes the partnership with LGBT Health and Wellbeing.

Creative methods have also added significant value to See Me and its partnerships in a range of other ways, including with fundraising and national campaigns. For example, as part of the See Us movement, three [artists created prints](#) that were sold to promote the anti-stigma messaging of See Us, and raise money for See Me.

"Changing perceptions of mental health problems is key in tackling stigma, and these prints can really help to do that. Through each of the prints, you can see that it is okay to express yourself and speak about how you are feeling, in whatever way suits you best. (Wendy, See Me website)

In February 2020, See Me hosted a day of events to mark Time to Talk Day at the National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh. Events on the day included live performances from Edinburgh's Harmony Choir, and youth volunteer Kirsty, who performed some spoken word poetry. See Me staff engaged with members of the public to encourage conversations around mental health, and See Me volunteer Sean developed and led a tour which engaged visitors to use contemporary artwork to talk about mental health (See example of this in figure 3).

Also in 2020, See Me began a partnership with In Motion Theatre on a project called [The Voice Behind the Picture](#), which saw See Me work alongside writers, playwrights and a creative director to create stories and monologues exploring the realities that lie behind what people see, hear or take at face value. This partnership continued with collaborations on two further writing projects Hidden Women in 2021 and Veterans Voices in 2023



Image 12: Material from Sean's guided tour of the National Portrait Gallery

CASE STUDY 3: Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival

Key themes: National mental health arts festival, partnership working

Delivered by the Mental Health Foundation, The Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival (SMHAF) made its debut in 2007 as a Glasgow and Lanarkshire based festival, featuring around 40 events which broadly explored the relationship between mental health and creativity (Aldam et al, 2017). See Me was a partner of SMHAF, and has supported the Mental Health Foundation to deliver SMHAF since this first year by providing varying levels of funding over the years, further enabling a strong grounding as an anti-stigma campaign.

One See Me staff member (a project officer for communities and priority groups) sits on the SMHAF planning group, which meets quarterly to discuss and collaborate on the organisation for the festival. With the planning group meeting quarterly, the See Me staff member ensures that See Me volunteers have the opportunity and are supported to get involved with SMHAF, and that See Me's arts fund recipients have the opportunity to become involved with the festival. See Me's presence on the planning group also helps to ensure that SMHAF continues to drive the anti-stigma agenda forward as part of the festival's core aims.

Since the start of SMHAF in 2007, the festival has hosted the [International Film Awards](#), which presents an annual series of awards for films by filmmakers with lived experience of mental health problems which explore how film can challenge stigma and perceptions, and raise awareness about inequalities and mental health. Several awards are presented each year, with an anti-stigma category previously sponsored by See Me included in most years since 2015, ensuring that anti-stigma messaging remains a core element of the film awards. Furthermore, in many years of the International Film Awards, a See Me staff member has been included on the jury for the awards. This again allows an anti-stigma agenda to be firmly embedded into themes of SMHAF.

The [All, Entire Whole exhibition](#), curated by See Me community champion Sean McGugan, ran for several years at SMHAF. All Entire Whole presents work from a range of visual artists that encourage dialogue to end mental health stigma and discrimination. The exhibit featured photography, painting and sculptures from a number of artists, aiming to change the way people think about mental health. Sean said,

“Art gives us new literacies to communicate and tell stories that we may find too difficult to tell verbally. I think the most difficult stigma to overcome is self-stigma and self-realisation, but art can create a connection to something that breaks this down and gives us an opportunity to tell difficult stories. It empowers.” (See Me website)



Image 13: Artwork by Andrew Henderson exhibited as part of All, Entire, Whole, 2019

“Our primary goals at this stage were to influence the public and the media as the sources of stigma. We aimed to reduce public prejudice by attracting large and diverse audiences and having a positive impact upon their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours.” (Aldam et al, 2017, p.300)

Since 2007, SMHAF has grown significantly its size and scope, now including hundreds of events and engaging over 25,000 people. Since its inception, challenging stigma has been and remains a core aim for SMHAF:

“By engaging with artists, connecting with communities and forming collaborations, we celebrate the artistic achievements of people with experience of mental health problems, challenge stigma and perceptions, and encourage participation in the arts to promote good mental health for all.” (SMHAF website, 2024)

As SMHAF has evolved over the years, so too has See Me’s involvement. In the first few years of SMHAF, See Me contributed significant financial sums to support the festival to gain a solid grounding. Since then, See Me has faced the challenges of significant cuts to its funding, so in turn, the level of financial contribution from See Me to SMHAF has decreased incrementally. This has coincided with SMHAF receiving increased core funding from Creative Scotland.

See Me played a crucial role in supporting SMHAF during its infancy, and continues to play an important role in supporting activities around stigma reduction. Gail Aldam, Arts and Events Manager at the Mental Health Foundation spoke strongly of the vital role that See Me has played in the development of SMHAF, stating that ‘the festival would not have existed without the support of See Me’.

Aldam spoke more broadly of the ways in which the arts can offer a cathartic and valuable means of exploring themes around mental health:

“The arts is an incredibly powerful way of reflecting on people’s lived experience of mental health in a way that promotes empathy, awareness and understanding. It can help people to feel less alone, and that their voice and experience matters.”

See Me’s support for SMHAF has in part driven SMHAF’s continued focus on using the arts to address themes around stigma, and allowed SMHAF to develop into the large-scale, high-profile festival it is today.

Impact of Arts Festivals on Tackling Stigma

As part of the evaluation of SMHAF in 2020, surveys were carried out with audiences and artists. Audience survey respondents were asked if engaging with SMHAF 2020 made them feel more empowered to challenge mental health discrimination and if SMHAF empowers groups and communities to challenge mental health stigma and discrimination. Results showed survey respondents agreed that SMHAF:

- Helped them feel more empowered to challenge mental health stigma (**75%**) and discrimination (**78%**)
- Empowers groups and communities to challenge mental health stigma and discrimination (**71%**)

Artist survey respondents and audience members (**67%** of survey respondents) and artists (**47%** of survey respondents) also reported that their perceptions of people who experience mental health problems had positively changes as a result of the festival. And many thought differently about their own mental health as a result on engaging (**58%** of audience survey respondents; **46%** of artist survey respondents).

See Me Impact Report 2020-21

Building connections and opportunities for peer-learning

See Me have sought to support creative approaches to anti-stigma work using knowledge exchange and peer-learning opportunities to bring people together from different organisations to share their experiences. Two recent examples have included Learning Sets developed for funded projects, and the Who Creates the Story event held in 2023.

Learning Sets

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (NHS GGC) partnered with See Me to facilitate its **Anti-Stigma Fund** between 2019 and 2023. Funded projects delivered a wide range of anti-stigma activities including many creative projects, to explore mental health and stigma. See Me supported NHS GGC to allocate funding, and deliver a series of learning sessions (Learning Sets) to funded organisations, supporting them to adopt an anti-stigma approach and engage in peer support (See Me Impact Report 2020-2021). Evaluation of the learning sets in 2021 showed that participants really valued the sessions for the peer support and the educational content they provided.

The learning sets were adapted based on the findings of this report and since 2023, recipients of the See Me Anti-Stigma Arts Fund have also participated in these Learning Sets. The learning set model brings together creative practitioners who are exploring mental health stigma through participative and collective processes with diverse populations. This offers participants involved the opportunity to network and exchange peer knowledge related to stigma, challenging stigma and community engagement. The learning sets allow See Me to better understand its role as a small grants funder by learning from these processes (See Me Impact Report 2022-23)

The learning sets facilitated important conversations around the balance of power, peer support, the role of personal lived experience as a facilitator, language used to describe stigma in different contexts and creating safe, inclusive spaces. Post-learning set feedback has demonstrated the positive impact of bringing the funded project partners together to learn from one another about different creative approaches to tackling stigma. In response to the question 'Is there anything you found useful about the session?', one participant responded:

"I really loved getting to understand more about the different projects being funded this year and seeing how each one tackled stigma in a different and fascinating way. I think it's really important to build bridges and networks between different organisations who are having these discussions and looking to challenge the current thinking." (Arts Fund – learning sets participant 2024)

Building connections between the arts fund recipients has been key in building a community of creative anti-stigma work, where projects can hear about each other's work, reflecting and learning together.

CASE STUDY 4: Who Creates the Story?

Key themes: Creative learning conference, co-production, sharing and learning



Image 14: Participants at See Me's Who Creates the Story event in 2024

In 2023 See Me co-designed a Creative Learning Event called “Who Creates the Story? Tackling stigma through creative approaches” with many community partners and funded projects. Who Creates the Story? was a full-day creative learning event, with contributions from several Scottish organisations including many partner organisations (e.g. LGBT Health and Wellbeing, In Motion Theatre, ILFA and SMHAF) and representatives from projects funded through the Anti-Stigma Arts Fund (e.g. SAY Women and Icebreaker Dundee).

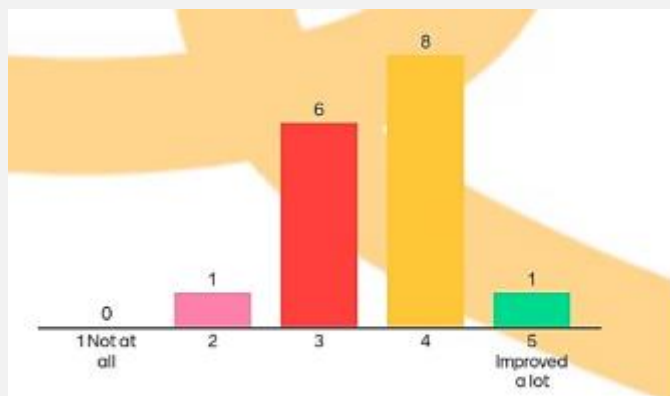
The event was co-developed with contributors who helped to shape the programme, safety procedures, and themes of the event.

The event programme, which included speakers, workshops and interactive exhibitions, focused on how the arts can

help tackle mental health stigma. Participants got the chance to hear how projects and individuals across Scotland have used the arts to reach and engage with different communities in various ways and tackle the issue of mental health stigma and discrimination. A panel discussion focused on the role of the funder in supporting participatory arts projects with mental health themes.

Feedback from participants and audiences at the event demonstrated the impact of the event in enabling connections and improving people's knowledge of how creative approaches can be used to tackle stigma.

A range of data sources including surveys and polls (see Figure 1, right) conducted during and after the event also showed that the event improved participant's knowledge of mental health stigma and discrimination. One



To what extent has your knowledge of mental health stigma and discrimination improved today?

Figure 1: Mentimeter polling at the Who Creates the Story event

respondent wrote that they had enjoyed the talks, and found them informative. Another wrote,

“The day was filled with great speakers and the workshops were great. It was insightful and eye opening to hear what others were doing with their groups and communities. I learned a lot from listening to other speakers about their projects.”

Another respondent talked about joining a network on the back of the event. Event organiser Maeve Grindall (See Me) reflected:

“Through speakers, facilitated workshops and connections made throughout the day, we were able to learn and share so much about how creative approaches tackle stigma by providing safe, engaging, transformative spaces to share experiences and explore the barriers we need to dismantle to create a stigma-free society.” Maeve Grindall, event organiser, See Me



Image 15: See Me Volunteer Chik Duncan facilitating a workshop at Who Creates the Story event, 2024

Embedding creative approaches across the See Me programme

Within See Me, work to embed creative anti-stigma approaches has been led by the Communities and Priority Groups (CPG) team. The team have reflected widely on their experiences of running the Arts Fund, working with partners and hosting creative events. Their reflections demonstrate a growing understanding of the environment needed to foster creativity and learning.

In recent years, the CPG team have been sharing their knowledge and expertise with the wider See Me team, through learning exchange sessions, consultations and collaborative working. As a result, creative approaches are now used within community partnerships, anti-stigma workshops with a range of employers, volunteer support, communications and media. Reflecting on their work in a recent survey, team members highlighted the role that creative approaches now play in effective anti-stigma messaging:

“The Anti-Stigma Arts Fund and its projects have presented a chance to showcase anti-stigma practices in new and relatable ways. Sharing and expressing this information to new audiences has helped draw attention to the work we do at See Me - and illustrating how this work is not always done via delivering training or promoting a toolkit. The projects present an opportunity to carve out a stand-out section on our website and social media - and do well with local media.” (See Me worker)

See Me have increasingly made use of creative approaches beyond the Arts Fund, adopting key elements of approaches employed by projects supported by the Arts Fund (see Arts Fund evaluation, 2021) across different teams and workstreams.

The See Me team have been learning how to apply creative methods to workshops and facilitated sessions with partner organisations, and have reflected on the effectiveness of this approach:

“I have tried to embed creative approaches to engagement with people with lived experience of mental health stigma and discrimination as much as possible in my work. This includes a workshop for mothers whose children are in permanent care, using an approach taken from one of the arts funded projects to explore how stigma feels by using drawing and collaging.” (See Me worker)

The team are now widely promoting the use of creative approaches, feel increasingly confident in using a range of creative methods themselves, and are planning to continue to grow the use of these methods across the programme. As a result, arts-based methods are being built into planning applications and training sessions with external partners, increasing the reach and scope of See Me's work:

“I have included a focus on this in the presentations and inputs I give - I've been promoting use of creative methodologies as an effective (and empowering) way of engaging people and groups who are marginalised and face inequity, including use of creative methods in funding applications”. (See Me worker)

It is clear that creative approaches to tackling stigma and discrimination are being embedded across different work areas at See Me, allowing for further innovative and creative ways to communicate and engage with diverse audiences.

Supporting Volunteer-led Projects

The See Me team use creative methodologies to engage with and help empower people who volunteer with the programme.

"I have also used learning from the creative approaches work to plan training for volunteers on using lived experience, using creative exercises such as journalling and building a tree together to symbolise community."

Artistic and creative exercises resonate well with the volunteers, many of whom have been supported by the See Me team to develop their own creative anti-stigma endeavours.

Volunteers have used creative methods as a vehicle for peer support (e.g. [Hear Me! See Me! choir](#)), to explore their own experiences (e.g. writing poetry), to communicate their experiences with others (e.g. graphic novel Trace, see below), and raise awareness about stigma and discrimination (e.g. [Six Wee Wordies; creative writing workshops](#)).

Trace by Abi Pirani

Artist and See Me volunteer Abi Pirani has used a range of creative methods, including a graphic novel, [Trace](#), to share her experience entirely on her own terms. The novel is only part of the whole project which began several years ago as a puppet show.

Her aim was to start a conversation around the themes that feature in the novel. Although the story is based on her own experiences, she hopes it will have an impact on a wider discussion. Trace follows Abi's journey from childhood into adulthood where she ultimately takes steps to heal, and discovers puppeteering. The novel also features a number of poems with the same theme. Abi says:

"I have been an artist all my life, but it's taken until now to tell my own story. Soon after I turned 60 in 2015, I took up puppetry. I had an idea I couldn't yet put into words - to tell my own story with puppets. Originally, Trace began as a puppet show, but it was interrupted during final rehearsals by the 2020 pandemic. So, I wrote the graphic novel. I work with a wide range of materials and love the processes."

Six Wee Wordies

See Me volunteer Bridget has used her love of books to inspire conversations around mental health through flash fiction. Bridget's Six Wee Wordies workshops encourage participants to think about mental health stigma – and describe it in just six words. Six Wee Wordies has been delivered online and in-person at the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival, the Stepping Stones charity, HMRC, and other live workshops across Scotland.

Due to its early uptake and success, the workshop has now been scaled up and developed into a facilitation pack which can be delivered in a variety of settings.

Feedback from participants at a Six Wee Wordies workshop during Who Creates the Story:

"The workshop was interesting and intriguing. It gave room for participants to share / write their thoughts in a simple way (6 words). It's given me the opportunity to use this in work and in life. Thank you."

"Valuable information that can be used in many ways across the support sector. I'm looking forward to using 6 Wee Stories with my colleagues 😊"



Image 16: Image from graphic novel Trace, created by See Me volunteer, Abi Pirani

How have creative methods been used to further See Me's intersectional approach to anti-stigma work in Scotland

[Evidence](#) from the literature and from community partners demonstrates that intersectional stigma related to mental health is experienced disproportionately by those who experience wider discrimination such as racism, in society within 'mainstream' settings. In order to understand intersectionality as it relates to mental health stigma, the See Me team has recognised the need to examine its ways of working and actively challenge the biases and discrimination, which are maintained through unquestioned norms and assumptions. To address this historic gap in See Me's work, and to better understand the intersectional nature of stigma experienced by marginalised communities, the team have chosen to target much of their work around creative approaches on working with these communities.

As demonstrated in the introduction, existing research supports the notion that creative methods can be a particularly accessible form of engagement. One reason for this is the greater scope for psychological safety in creative projects which allow space for abstraction and anonymity when exploring potentially painful or challenging experiences.

See Me have employed or funded the use of a plethora of creative methods aimed at tackling stigma and discrimination related to mental health. These have included:

- Zines, graphic novels and comics
- Podcasts
- Short films
- Theatre productions
- Photovoice
- Wellbeing e-books
- Animations and educational leaflets
- Exhibitions

These creative approaches have been integrated into various projects and initiatives to engage communities, foster empathy, and promote understanding, ultimately aiming to reduce mental health stigma and discrimination.

Common to all of these methods is a sense that processes are as important as the final outputs. Creative approaches enable mental health stigma and discrimination, whilst central to the project, to be approached indirectly, through discussions and community spaces enabled by the creative processes involved.

"The discussion and process was as important as the outcomes from the project. Creating the comic enabled us to talk about the different forms of stigma. The stories generated helped create the text/imagery for the comic. The comic featured examples of how the survivors experienced stigma in its many forms." SAY Women, 2023

This section explores evidence relating to how See Me has used such creative methodologies to understand and tackle intersectional mental health stigma.

Understanding structural stigma

Over the past few years See Me have been learning about what needs to change in its work and in mainstream settings to address historical and current practices and cultures which reinforce dominance, power and privilege. This learning has guided targeted partnership working, which has enabled See Me to connect with new networks (primarily those reaching organisations representing racialised groups). This is further discussed in the section of the report exploring See Me's role as a funder.

As highlighted above, the Anti-Stigma Arts Fund has prioritised projects with a focus on understanding intersections of stigma especially where See Me has gaps in knowledge or understanding. See Me's internal development around intersectionality has enabled the team to explain the approach and ethos they want projects to embody more clearly and frame the Fund's purpose and priorities with greater transparency. As a result, the Fund now provides an important way for See Me to build new relationships with grassroots organisations led by and working with diverse communities who have a clear understanding and experience of the systemic nature of stigma and discrimination and the impacts of deep and ongoing inequality.

The fund provides a mechanism for groups and organisations to explore and communicate what is important to them in terms of understanding and tackling stigma. Over time, this approach has been better reflected in the description and communications around the fund, attracting a greater diversity of applicants. As a result, many of the applications since 2023 have proposed projects specifically addressing intersectional stigma. Consequently in recent years, the fund has supported projects working with:

- Black and Minority Ethnic women [as described by Empower Women for Change] with experience of mental health stigma
- People with experience of the asylum system
- People bereaved by suicide
- People living in remote rural communities
- People with experience of addiction and alcohol related brain injury
- Survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence.

Over the years, the fund has placed much greater emphasis on funding and working with projects that focus on specific intersectional experiences of stigma. In the most recent iteration of the fund, communications around the launch of the fund explicitly stated intentions to fund projects that meaningfully engage with experiences of poverty and its intersections with mental health. This includes projects which focus on understanding the experiences of racialised communities, people with experience of physical disability or people with experience of mental illness/severe and enduring mental health problems. It was essential that project applications had already identified participants eager to take part, and in many cases future participants had been consulted and had co-designed the project outline.

The learning and outputs shared with See Me at the end of the projects have significantly improved See Me's understanding of the ways in which intersectional

stigma impacts on communities. They have also indicated good practice support interventions and institutional changes needed to tackle it.

Coproduction and participatory approaches

Meaningfully involving people with lived/living experience in the design, planning and development of creative anti-stigma projects enables their voices and experiences to be centred within the work, ensuring that the outcomes are genuinely reflective of their aims for the project. This involvement can foster a sense of ownership and empowerment among participants, which is essential for meaningful co-production and a key strength of participatory creative projects overall.

See Me-funded project Voices Through the Lens used a participatory approach to their PhotoVoice project with young people. A description of the project in See Me's 2023-24 Impact Report concluded that:

"By empowering participants to explore their experiences as co-researchers, and collate and share their stories, they raised their awareness of the impact of stigma and discrimination in their communities and beyond...Participants fed back that they felt in control of their work, that their voices were heard, and their feedback was acted upon."

Further examples of coproduction are given below, from two Anti-Stigma Arts Funded projects 'Be Kind' a project led by CAMHS Dumfries & Galloway and another led by Mindwaves.

Be Kind

The Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) Young People's Participation Group in Dumfries and Galloway wanted to share their ideas, advice and experiences of mental health with other children and young people. With support from the See Me Anti-Stigma Art Fund, they worked with a local artist and CAMHS Participation Lead to produce their 'Be Kind', mental health animation and educational booklet. Here, the project leads highlight the importance of using a 'working together agreement' within the coproduction process, and describe the impact on the young people involved and the lasting legacy of the project:

"The purpose of a working together agreement was to ensure, whilst we were all working together online, we were still creating an open and respectful environment in which the young people were still able to participate alongside the staff and artist, feel safe, sharing their ideas and opinions.

The difference the CAMHS Young People's Participation group is beginning to have on CAMH service is that young people, are now working alongside mental health professionals to co-design and co produce resources, projects and the service together. Participation work creates change; the young people who are involved within this group are sharing their lived experiences of accessing services locally and nationally to make a difference for other children and young people." Be Kind Report, 2022

"We are able to have ownership and control over our own narrative, which is important because it's our own lives." Feedback from an attendee "It's our stories; our lives' is such a powerful quote in terms of why it's important we work in partnership." Be Kind Report, 2022

Mindwaves

This Arts Funded project aimed to work with between four and six people with lived experience of mental ill health to coproduce three 90 second animations about the stigma of living with severe and enduring mental ill health. Here, the co-production process and its impacts on participants is described by the project leads:

“We ran a series of webinars to discuss the ideas and plan and create the animations. In the end, we ran 6 sessions, which was more than we expected, but people had so much to say and it needed space for exploration.

We worked with a production partner, as we’d planned, to do the technical production of the animations. However, the co-production element was even stronger than we’d expected. The group wrote their own scripts, were closely involved in choosing colours, styles and making changes to the animations. They also recorded their own voiceovers and worked well as a team, encouraging each other to get involved. The element of humour in the animations reflects the intimacy in the group.

The impact on the individuals who were involved was quite striking. One participant was moved to (happy) tears when he heard his own voice on the animation.

We involved participants in setting outcomes and designing their own evaluation. The feedback was really strong, both in terms of the outcome and the process of being involved in this.

One participant said in an audio evaluation *“It almost takes co-production to a new level. It’s very easy when you have a long term mental health condition, to feel that your voice doesn’t matter. It didn’t feel tokenistic or pre-determined... my experiences were respected and validated. It’s been fun... it’s fascinating to see the pockets of creativity within the group and that to be reflected in the end product.”*

Mindwaves participant, 2022 Annual Report

Embedding connection and peer support

Another core element seen throughout See Me and partners’ creative projects was the formation of peer support (supportive, educational and positive relationships between project participants). Whilst some creative anti-stigma projects supported by See Me have brought together members of a community that may have been previously unknown to each other, for example Chinese students at the University of Stirling (Artlink, 2022-23 Arts Fund recipient) or young Black people in Glasgow (Voices Through the Lens), others have taken place within existing peer groups such as the Dumfries and Galloway CAMHS Young People’s Participation Group and Orkney Bilde Trust members. The Museum of Things art group in the Maryhill Integration Network was the setting for Arts Funded project Monuments for the Present. Project leads explained that creative activities in themselves may not be enough to foster peer support, or to explore complex experiences. Flexibility and sufficient time are equally important:

“The Museum of Things art group had been meeting for four years, primarily to create art, so transitioning into dialogue-based sessions required a change in approach... We had to increase the number of workshop sessions to delve deeper into the conversations

and produce the artworks needed for the exhibition. While participants already knew each other and were comfortable speaking within the group, it took time to create a space where they felt at ease addressing the complex questions raised by the project.”
Monuments for the Present report

This approach successfully built a safe space in which people felt comfortable sharing their experiences and learning from each other. Project leads highlighted the importance for the group in concluded that:

“The project was not merely about community engagement and workshops; it was a form of community education where everyone collectively learned from one another. It created a trusting and supportive space where participants felt comfortable expressing their feelings and emotions at different levels through the act of making.”

Anti-stigma Arts Funded project reports describe the role of peer support in a variety of ways: as a fundamental process and/or as an intended or unintended outcome. For example, Beyond the Canvas listed peer support as an intended process and outcome, which received positive feedback from participants:

“We aimed to provide a platform for minority ethnic women to share their stories, foster peer support, and encourage positive engagement with the community to challenge mental health stigma.” (Beyond the Canvas, Empower Women for Change, 2024).

The ‘Slipping Through the Net’ project took place within Sarah’s Sanctuary a peer support group on Stornoway for people bereaved by suicide. The project, funded by the See Me Anti-Stigma Arts Fund, was a supportive, creative space that tackled the stigma associated with suicide in an island community.



Image 17: 'A Different Kind of Fish', produced during the Slipping Through the Net project at Sarah's Sanctuary

Rowan Alba used peer support processes with lived experience volunteers who were involved in facilitating the project:

“Volunteers also used a group supervision evening to share conversation around their own mental health, gaining peer support to share open and honest feelings.”

Some projects which aimed to foster peer support amongst participants reported challenges in doing so however, which provides important learning about engagement methods and access.

“Stigma itself was a barrier to attending the group sessions due to the personal nature of the information shared. Groups may have felt too exposing, whereas through the 1-2-1 work narratives were developed and shared. The project was structured in such a way, through responsive practice, to include all voices in this study. SAY Women report, 2023

Again this underlines the huge importance of flexibility and carefully building trust within the project. ArtLink also emphasised that developing opportunities for connection between participants can take time:

“Most of the students weren’t very chatty and it was difficult to get them open up or have an open discussion about themselves or response to the exhibition. We used feedback forms to write their thoughts and to understand them better... Students were from different background and ages (Undergraduate students and MBA students), so it was sometimes difficult to connect with each other. However, going out to the Smith Gallery and sharing an experience together helped them to get to know each other.” ArtLink report, 2022



Image 18: ArtLink participants, 2022

CASE STUDY 5: Community connections

Key themes: reducing isolation, peer support, increased confidence

Rowan Alba's befriending programme, CARDS, offers 1-1 befriending support people with alcohol addictions whose long-term drinking has led to poor mental health and social isolation. Using funding from See Me's Anti-Stigma Arts Fund, Rowan Alba ran a series of open conversational art-based mental health events in National Galleries Scotland for individuals with lived experience of trauma and alcohol related harm.

There were around 15-20 participants in the project, which included new and existing clients, lived experience volunteers and staff. The opportunity for clients to be involved in the project was advertised to befriending service clients through a Zine and 1-1 conversations with volunteers and staff.



Image 19: Doll's house exhibit produced for Edinburgh's Healing Art's Festival, Rowan Alba

Over the course of a year, 12 sessions were held in the education room in the National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh. These sessions provided a space for people to talk about mental health in a non-judgemental environment while participating in creative activities.

During the sessions, participants were given the opportunity to go on a guided tour of other parts of the gallery with local artist Sam Rutherford, either individually or in small groups. During the tours, Sam would comment on particular issues highlighted by art pieces which relate to

mental health, deliberately keeping the conversation open to participants to reflect on how they felt about the art.

Support and training for volunteers was provided, including training in active listening to support clients with their mental health. Volunteers also participated in group supervision which allowed them to reflect, benefit from peer support and share conversations around their own mental health.

Half of the sessions focused on art activity for Edinburgh's Healing Art's Festival, for which the group created an installation of a doll's house. Participants each made their own contribution to the doll's house, which was attached to a meaning related to their mental health. During the festival, members of the public and health



Image 20: Rear view of the Rowan Alba's Doll's House exhibit

professionals participated in an activity with clients which involved making small pieces of art to place in the doll's house which inspired opportunities for open conversation.



Image 21: Out of Sight, Out of Mind exhibit in Summerhall, as part of the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival, 2024

The project also created an exhibit for the Out of Sight, Out of Mind exhibition in Summerhall as part of the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival. The group created a series of Russian dolls, demonstrating how people have many different layers, some of which may be invisible to others.

There were powerful benefits felt by project participants, including reduced loneliness and increased confidence:

“Clients feel a great deal of pride in seeing their artwork represented in powerful exhibitions around mental health. Being asked their opinion both in groups and in exhibitions has helped boost confidence and challenge self-stigma.

Participants enjoy feeling part of the group and seeing other people's work. The trauma-informed space helps people feel relaxed and encourages conversations about difficult subjects. In conversation, clients say they find the sessions cathartic and feel part of a group. This evidences reduced loneliness and increased socialisation.” (Rowan Alba 2025 report)

The project has been beneficial to clients, volunteers and staff, whilst also inspiring broader conversations amongst practitioners and the general public about the intersections between mental health, loneliness, addiction and stigma and discrimination.

Clients who participated were asked about what had changed as a result of their participation in the project. Results were overwhelmingly positive:

- **97%** said that they felt less isolated
- **90%** said that they felt more confident going out the house
- **100%** said that they felt less anxious and more able to cope
- **97%** said that they felt more connected to their community
- **84%** said that they had noticed improvements in their mood, sleep and energy
- **97%** said that they felt more able to explain the challenges they faced in a way others could understand

Creating safer spaces

Creating an environment where participants feel safe to discuss and explore sensitive themes around their mental health and stigma is crucial within any anti-stigma work. Creative engagement can offer a safer way to explore sensitive topics around experiences of stigma, particularly with regards to intersectional stigma (The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland, 2024).

Data gathered during this evaluation demonstrates that creative approaches can effectively facilitate safer spaces to work through difficult or sensitive topics and navigate power hierarchies.

After the Who Creates the Story creative learning event in 2023 for example, one facilitator wrote, *"there is a sense of safety in using these methods and in letting the art speak for itself, which is extremely important. Creativity fosters a safe space by telling the story but protecting the artist."*

Responses to a survey about the use of creative approaches to tackle stigma from See Me team members demonstrate an awareness and understanding of how and why creative approaches can be used to create a safe space:

"See Me delivered a stigma workshop with a peer support for women who had lost custody of their children to adoption... We relied very heavily on creative approaches to deliver this session in a safe, accessible and participatory way... We used a range of easy visual activities to open conversations on stigma - e.g., an activity where participants selected photographs from a huge bank of images to describe what stigma feels like for them... Feedback from participants and the group leader told us that they hugely enjoyed the session and were eager to work with See Me again. I personally observed that using creative methods meant that the group could talk about stigma and think about stigma without going into details of their own personal traumas (although some did choose to share parts of their backstories and why they felt certain ways). It also felt much less extractive, a fairer deal for the participants, and all participants seemed able to engage meaningfully with the content of the workshop."

Partners also wrote of creating safe spaces through their projects and how deeply this is connected to building trust:

"... it was important that safe spaces were created where we could build trust, the young people could build trust amongst themselves, and also with the team such that they were free and it was a natural, almost ethnographic, if you like, approach to the work where we were seeing real-life situations as the young people engaged with the project material." (Project lead, ILFA)

Feedback from project partners highlights the role that creativity can play in giving choice and flexibility as a non-verbal communication tool, which can be particularly helpful for some people who find it harder to discuss their experiences around mental health:

"We discovered that sometimes it's not the language barrier that stops participants from opening up. Some people prefer not to talk about their mental health, but use other form of communication, such as visual art or cooking or writing or dancing. Understanding and support different people's needs and form of communication... We are convinced

that an arts led approach does make it easier to start to explore these challenging conversations where there are complex barriers and assumptions.” Artlink Funded Partners Report, 2022

Creating safer spaces goes beyond the physical space and planned activities of a project; For example, Empower Women for Change reported that the sharing of food can be a key activity for participants within a creative project, particularly for minority ethnic participants:

“We discovered that food played an integral role in engaging participants from minority ethnic backgrounds. The unexpected and beautiful pairing of creating art while sharing culturally meaningful meals fostered a deep sense of comfort and community, making the experience even more impactful for everyone involved.” Empower Women for Change, 2024 report

Harnessing the power of language

Language can be a powerful creative tool through which to express emotions and share experiences. Several creative projects supported by See Me have used spoken or written words, through poetry, spoken word nights, short stories and other creative language outputs. For example, the Icebreaker Dundee funded project saw spoken word performances themed around gender, mental health and the link between them. They were performed live in front of an audience, and recorded before being posted on social media. The Icebreaker project lead said:

“My main creative belief has always been that it’s possible to tackle challenging issues in a way that is both kind and accessible to a wide audience, and I found this project incredibly encouraging and reassuring in that respect.” Icebreaker Dundee, 2023 report

The Voice Behind the Picture

The [Voice Behind the Picture](#) was a project designed to challenge stigma and negative stereotypes about people living with mental health problems through writing and theatre. The project provided **14** emerging writers with the opportunity to create monologues with a focus on mental health during the pandemic, supported by an accomplished director and performed by professional actors. The purpose of the monologues was to create greater knowledge and awareness and share stories of lived experience of mental health problems with a wider audience, during the pandemic. The monologues were screened live as part of the Traverse Theatre’s virtual programme in 2020 and featured as part of the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival in 2020.

13 audience members who watched the monologues and completed an evaluation survey; 54% reported that The Voice Behind the Picture made them feel differently about mental health, in that it made people more aware of different mental health conditions, that stigma and discrimination is still pervasive in society, and they developed a greater understanding of the issues.

“It’s opened my eyes to more complex recovery journeys.” Audience survey respondent

“It got my family and I talking about it lots after we watched it. My teenaged children and husband said it helped them understand some of my “black dog” days better.” The Voice Behind the Picture participant

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By teaching new skills and providing a focus for groupwork that isn't directed solely at mental health, creative approaches can also help empower participants to express their experiences in ways that feel right to them. For some, this means reclaiming the narrative or changing the ways in which language is used within the project. A good example of the power of language was provided by the Arts Funded project by the Maryhill Integration Network. Reflecting on the process of engaging with participants in their annual report, they wrote:

"The participants claimed their own language to speak about the immigration system and imperialism, which resulted in new insights from their perspectives, helping to answer initial action research questions." Maryhill Integration Network report, 2024

Breaking down barriers

Flexibility with language around mental health can restore power to individuals to express and understand mental health, stigma and discrimination in a way that resonates best with their experience. Talking about mental health can also come with substantial shame or stigma attached however, for many communities across Scotland. For example, the Arts Funded project GIFT annual report reflected on the process of engaging with the target community in Pennilee, and how learning more about members of the community understand and approach the subject of mental health helped improve engagement.

"We found that posters and social media posts that spoke directly about mental health had less engagement. When we revised 'Community Conversations about Mental Health' to 'Community Conversations' we found more people were willing to talk to us. We moved away from 'sharing best ideas and working together to tackle mental health stigma', to 'supporting the mental health and wellbeing of our community.' And the other key message that we began to deliver was that the youth art group was about 'supporting the mental health and wellbeing of the young people in our community.' We felt that shifting the responsibility away from the community to find solutions, to an approach where we could offer a space to listen was a key learning " GIFT Funded Partners Annual Report, 2022

Artlink Central were funded by See Me to engage with Chinese students at Stirling University using a range of creative methods. Artlink Central reported that:

"During the planning stage, student coordinators advised us not to use the word, 'Mental Health' to the students as it has a huge stigma attached for the Chinese people and culture. The word will scare students. We had to reassess how we approach the students." (Artlink Central report, 2022)

Creative methods open options for non-linguistic communication, particularly amongst groups in which talking about mental health is uncommon, difficult or discouraged:

"We are convinced that an arts led approach does make it easier to start to explore these challenging conversations where there are complex barriers and assumptions...We discovered that sometimes it's not the language barrier that stops participants from opening up. Some people prefer not to talk about their mental health, but use other form of communication, such as visual art or cooking or writing or dancing." Artlink report, 2022

Using a diversity of tools other than written or spoken language, creative communication can have the power to reach a greater diversity of audiences and participants, therefore extending the reach of See Me's anti-stigma messaging. As a [blog](#) by an anti-stigma podcaster from See Me partner Mind Waves puts it, "where words fail, music speaks". A recent report exploring use of creative methods for anti-stigma work in Scotland reported the following:

"Respondents noted that creative engagement methods can be particularly useful to engage with a group who don't share a common dominant language. Because literacy skills are not required for most forms of creative engagement, it was suggested that it can be a more accessible way for participants to connect and share experiences without sharing a language." (The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland, p.21)

Creative approaches can be particularly useful for engaging with lived experience stories and addressing intersectional stigma, providing safer spaces within which cultural and language barriers can be overcome and difficult and distressing experiences explored with sensitivity.

"Creative activities and tools can help people to communicate their own feelings and ideas in a way that feels comfortable, as well as to start difficult conversations within a group or with others. Sometimes an image or a movement can spark a shared sense of understanding when words perhaps cannot." (Artlink Central, [Creative Wellbeing Activity Pack](#))

"T' developed strong social connections with other participants. Over time she developed confidence to talk freely during sessions, sharing stories that were meaningful to her - sensory aspects of the project - incorporating scent as part of the artwork became a way for her to express herself without needing to refer to the language of the immigration system. She shared the smell of kerosine, and we were able to hold the space of her scent as a group together, in the transformation of her memories (that were not required to be verbalised) into the collective experience of the artwork which she shaped herself." MIN, Maryhill - 2024

Reclaiming the power of storytelling

Creative approaches can be a powerful medium for sharing experiences in a way that engages and builds connection. This is evident in the impact of Arts Funded film "A Little While Longer", which received media recognition. The film features protagonists sharing their personal stories, highlighting the importance of hearing from people with lived experience. This public attention underscores the public's interest in understanding and discussing suicide, and the role that stories of lived experience can play in delivering this messaging and raising awareness:

"With the film and our protagonists' stories having received substantial media attention, it is clear that there is an interest in hearing from people with lived experience and an acknowledgement that talking about suicide and spreading awareness is important. We are full of hope and believe that 'A Little While Longer' has and will reach out to people and do its part in helping to fight suicide stigma in the UK." A Little While Longer Report, 2023

Stories of lived experiences of mental health stigma and discrimination are commonly used within anti-stigma work as an evidence-based way of increasing an

audience's connection to and understanding of core messages. Lived experiences are deeply personal, and the process of sharing them can be distressing. Some people with lived experience report feeling disempowered during the process of sharing their story, finding the process transactional, impersonal, unsupportive or even retraumatizing. This point was highlighted within a presentation at the 2023 Who Creates the Story event. 'Not a Once Upon a Time story'. The speaker, Fakhriya Abdulkadir shared their experiences of feeling left out of decisions regarding how their story was used and which points to emphasise. Fakhriya emphasised the importance of authentically collaborating with people with lived experience, to understand what and how they want to share their story and how this may change over time.

After the presentation several people commented and critically reflected upon the power of stories after a presentation from one contributor about what it meant to share their story. For example, one wrote:

"I found the spoken word pieces really powerful, this was a helpful reminder of the power of stories."

These reflections highlight the transformative power of storytelling in addressing mental health stigma. By sharing lived experiences, participants and audiences can foster empathy, challenge stereotypes, and promote understanding. It also demonstrates the fundamental importance of carefully reflecting on power, control and support when asking or inviting someone to share lived experience. They highlight the critical importance of



Image 22: Presentation at Who Creates the Story event

asking why and how lived experience stories are requested and who benefits from them being shared. Creative approaches, such as films, forum theatre productions, and spoken word pieces, can provide a platform for these stories to be heard and valued while maintaining safety and autonomy for participants.

"It was a powerful message to critically reflect on whose stories are being told and prioritized. Sometimes the focus is on stories of pain, which creates more pain, and we need to shift that to focus more on resilience and strength, stories which are not re-traumatizing, stories which, when told, empower a teller and the listener."

Who Creates the Story' event facilitator reflections

What do creative approaches help us understand about the nature of experiences of stigma and discrimination for different groups?

See Me's work with partners and their focus on funding creative projects that address intersectional stigma has resulted in a wealth of knowledge that they have been able to share through their resources, networking and learning events.

A broad range of data sources explored for this evaluation provided evidence of the depth of learning for the See Me team, project partners, participants and audiences on a range of topics including intersectionality, gender identity, culture and language.

Diversity of experiences

Experiences of stigma intersect and are not homogenous, and creative approaches can offer a way of exploring the nature of these different experiences and how communities have resisted the impacts of intersectional stigma. Through the participatory methodologies underpinning many of the Anti-Stigma Arts Fund projects, participants/artists can share their experiences whilst also recognising the diversity of others' experiences of mental health stigma and discrimination. Participatory creative methods provide a unique way to capture diverse experiences, delivering richer insights and potentially greater psychological safety and peer support than other anti-stigma approaches.

"Through the comic creation, it was useful to explore how survivors experiences are not generic, they are not typical – coping mechanisms may differ, people's ways of surviving and battling stigma are varied." SAY Women report, 2023

Building ways to enhance understanding of each others' experiences is fundamental to addressing the causes of stigma and discrimination.

"We encouraged audience members to reflect on how their experiences of stigma were similar or different to the stories written in the comic. We had some responses from audience members who related to participants and stories in the comics, and it helped them to reflect on their own experiences of stigma, and how they perpetuate stigma in their own lives." Unblemished report, 2022

Furthermore, discussing different experiences, challenges and things that help them, may open up opportunities for people to learn from each other and gain new perspectives. For this to be successful, careful attention must be given to balancing power dynamics within groups.

"As highlighted in Reducing Stigma, Emphasising Humanity, "there needs to be an equal power balance between all partners involved, characterised by core values of trust, human rights principles and approaches, and transparency." If enacted in this way, engaging with people with experiences of stigma can form the core of an approach to challenge stigma offering the most potential for positive outcomes." (The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland, p.35)

Shared experience

Whilst peoples' experiences of mental illness, stigma and discrimination are diverse, there are often also commonalities which may be revealed through the sharing of stories and experiences during the creative process. For example, the groupwork

which was an inherent part of *A Little While Longer* enabled participants to reflect on stigma and the ways it manifested in their lives:

“They helped me to understand that although from different walks of life, we all experienced very similar stigma both internally and from others around us. This surprised me a little.” A Little While Longer report 2023

Creative and artistic approaches to sharing mental health and stigma experiences can also provide an accessible way of engaging audiences in reflection around the subject and their own connection to the theme.

“Arts projects can offer a window into experiences and perspectives in a way that can be uniquely engaging and memorable for audiences. They can be a bridge for people with no knowledge or experience of what is being depicted and they can be useful and comforting for people who share that experience. Audience members may experience self-stigma or they may themselves hold stigmatising views. They may also hold influence or power in a certain setting which engages in stigmatising behaviour at a structural level.” Anti-Stigma Arts Fund report, 2021

An example of how creative outputs can be used to help audiences explore their own experiences was provided by the Unblemished project:

“We encouraged audience members to reflect on how their experiences of stigma were similar or different to the stories written in the comic. We had some responses from audience members who related to participants and stories in the comics, and it helped them to reflect on their own experiences of stigma, and how they perpetuate stigma in their own lives.” Unblemished report, 2022

Intersectional stigma is a driver of poor mental health

People from racialised and other marginalised groups describe how stigma and discrimination is a key driver of poor mental health (Hackett et al 2022; Hamilton et al 2016; Birthrights 2022). Several creative projects supported by See Me have explored the relationship between racism, cultural contexts and mental health stigma, highlighting several key learnings within their reports. Examples of such projects are given within the following two case studies.

CASE STUDY 6: Monuments for the Present

Key themes: participatory creative project, peer support, empowerment, cultural safety

In 2024 See Me's Anti-Stigma Arts Fund provided funding to the Maryhill Integration Network. The project, entitled Monuments for the Present. The project delivered a series of workshops covering a range of creative activities including collages, drawings, and soap moulds, alongside facilitated conversations. At the end of the workshops, participants co-created an exhibition showcasing their creations.



Image 23: Posters promoting the Monuments for the Present exhibition

Project leads had a deep understanding of the harms inflicted by the asylum system and the importance of power sharing within the project. The project was described as providing an antidote to the unfair treatment that participants were experiencing, by treating them as equals who were able to work together to create a high-quality exhibition. One participant expressed that the project had given him a sense of purpose, and provided a space to connect his memories to his present situation

'SM' has waited many years for refugee status and is still navigating the asylum system...the group and exhibition functioned as a space for him to participate in society, and to share knowledge and skills that he was unable to use due to his status and this long, indefinite wait. At times, he shared that he was feeling extremely depressed due to the situation he continues to endure, though during the same sessions, he was able to connect with others, using the subject matter in whatever way he liked in his artwork. This was important, as the space of the art group needed to remain available to people who wanted to use it to try to 'forget' related anxieties. Although we provided an initial framework, participants needed space to reclaim the subject matter entirely, transforming our original framework. 'SM' connected with the materiality of the soap, sharing recipes that his mother had used in Pakistan and inventing new ones. The making of the soap connected his present situation with memories and knowledge he cared about and was able to share. The framework and dialogue around time contributed to foundations of solidarity and openness and provided space for him to voice his experience openly. (Maryhill Integration Network report, 2024).

CASE STUDY 7: Beyond the Canvas: Empowering Women Through Art and Community

Key themes: Participatory creative project, belonging, safety, peer support

In 2024, Empower Women for Change (EWfC) launched “Beyond the Canvas,” an arts-based mental health initiative funded by See Me’s Anti-Stigma Arts Fund. Delivered in partnership with the University of Glasgow’s Byres Community Hub, the project supported ten minority ethnic women from countries including China, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Puerto Rico, Syria, and Yemen. The project sought to



Image 24: Empower Women for Change project participants

provide a safe and supportive environment in which minority ethnic women could share their experiences of stigma and discrimination related to mental health. The project comprised ten weekly workshops which facilitated creative activities such as knitting, painting, cultural expressions and mindfulness.

Over ten weekly workshops, the women engaged in creative activities that fostered resilience, connection, and self-confidence. Through painting, knitting, storytelling, and mindfulness, participants explored and challenged mental health stigma in their communities. Despite challenges such as childcare conflicts and volunteer availability, the team adapted by offering hybrid sessions and reallocating staff hours. Participants also contributed traditional meals, enhancing cultural exchange and group cohesion.

Evaluation using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale and the Internalised Stigma of Mental Illness Inventory revealed a moderate improvement in mental wellbeing and a slight reduction in self-stigma over the 10-week period. While the timeframe limited statistical significance, qualitative feedback highlighted profound personal growth. One participant shared, “This project gave me a voice I never thought I had. It allowed me to express my journey in a way that others could see, understand, and respect”

Beyond the Canvas participants spoke about the sense of belonging and safety that they experienced in the project, which was particularly salient for them because they often felt marginalised:

“Beyond the Canvas seemed to offer me a space to create and be in touch with that part of me that allows me to find and embrace myself again... But Beyond the Canvas was more than art. I finally understood that it is TRUE to its title because it offered so much more than art, it offered true HEALING. It offered a SAFE space where I could be free of the burden of masking and I could SHARE the troubles, the sorrow, the pain, and use art as a therapy tool to heal and cope with all the things we go through, especially as women of minority who are in many ways fish out of water.

I have always felt like I don't belong like no one could get me or understand me because no one could truly see me... But I BELONGED HERE... Here in the midst of this group of exceptionally talented women who despite their very different upbringings, cultures,

...races, and religious beliefs, were all ONE and the same. We all have been through so much and have come here in hopes that we will strive despite it all. They quickly became my family, and Beyond the Canvas became my Home..." (Marie, Beyond the Canvas participant)

The final exhibition at the Byres Community Hub attracted over 2000 visitors, amplifying the voices of women whose stories are often unheard. Collaborations with Migrant Voices, the Byres Hub Knitting Group, and the Scottish Mental Health Arts Festival enriched the experience and extended its reach.

Project leads reflected that:

"The final exhibition transformed participants' stories into powerful public art, gaining recognition for experiences often hidden or silenced, celebrating resilience, and fostering community understanding and inclusivity." Empower Women for Change report, 2024



Image 25: Images from the Beyond the Canvas exhibition, taken from the project website. Picture Credits: UoG Photography Unit; Jamilah Hassan (Volunteer); Farida Tukur (Facilitator)

Visitors to the exhibition shared their feedback, demonstrating the impact of the project on public stigma:

"Thank you for the wonderful event. The story on the screen 'suicide' was impressive. I heard their voice."

"Mental health barriers can be broken by visuals."

"The exhibition makes me grateful for the way in which art and people can come together to share experiences. It is a beautiful atmosphere."

"Beyond the Canvas" demonstrated the power of creative expression in reducing stigma and fostering community understanding. It calls for continued investment in culturally sensitive, community-led initiatives that empower women to share, heal, and lead change.

Sexism, homophobia and mental health stigma

Creative projects funded by See Me have explored intersections between gender – based violence, gender norms and stereotypes, sexuality and mental health stigma and discrimination, reflecting how patriarchal systems impact mental health.

SAY Women's project supported women who had experienced gender-based violence to show how stigma had affected them during group sessions, during which they developed storyboards with 'stigma monsters' and created a 'day in the life' of a survivor experiencing good and poor mental health due to stigma. Much of the day-to-day stigma described by participants was experienced in healthcare settings and related to the diagnosis of Emotionally Unstable Personality Disorder (EUPD). Project leads reflected on how mental health diagnoses and stigma can be profoundly affected by gender

"The comic featured examples of how the survivors experienced stigma in its many forms. Interestingly, structural stigma was identified by many, and the diagnosis of EUPD influenced how they saw themselves, and how others saw and treated them. This was an unexpected theme, which ran through the comic and highlighted the hidden ways stigma can affect women in our society." (SAY Women report, 2023)

The filmmaking project *A Little While Longer* explored how suicide stigma had affected three male participants. Audience members reflected this in the post-event feedback, demonstrating critical reflection on the role of masculinity in stigma:

"There have been centuries in which men have been told to 'man up' or 'show no pain' which means men tend to hide their true emotions (whether that's sadness, guilt, fear, anger). Women have always come together to talk about their problems where as men come together to forget there's!" [sic]

Arts Funded project *Unblemished* explored the intersection between trans identity, transphobia and mental health stigma through creation and dissemination of a comic book. Project reflections showed that the comic book encouraged audience members to think reflexively about how stigma and discrimination acutely affects the trans community, with a particular focus on accessing mental health support as a trans person.

"When I have had cis-het therapists it has made me feel that I couldn't talk about my transness. They didn't understand transness and without meaning to made it feel like it was not as pressing or as important to discuss" Unblemished comic text 2022

Trans identities were also explored in Icebreaker Dundee's spoken word project. Performers aimed to highlight their experiences and how their different relationships with gender roles affected how they are treated and how this impacts mental health. The project lead reflected on the importance of providing support to performers,

"This project really impressed upon me the need to check up on performers before and after, to reassure them that they are empowered to pull out or change their participation at any time, and to have suitable replacements ready." Icebreaker report, 2023

Their reflections also demonstrated valuable insights into the key roles of facilitator and audience and how these need to be carefully negotiated when working with subject matter that has become part of a painful public conversation:

“With this project dealing with contentious issues like transgender culture, the lack of open opposition and the overwhelmingly positive feedback was very encouraging... My main takeaway from this project is that it is possible to deal with minorities and/or vulnerable people in a way that is mutually beneficial, respectful and empowering, but facilitators like myself need to keep that goal in mind and be aware of the potential pitfalls.” Icebreaker report, 2023

The need for cultural safety in support - key learnings:

- Mental health support which takes account of a person's cultural background in context is crucial. However, there are limited services which apply principles of cultural safety (including competency and humility) in Scotland. Community-based support is often more appropriate to a person's needs due to systemic barriers, such as lack of culturally safe provision. There is a lot to be learned from community-based art therapy programmes, such as Empower Women for Change.
- Mental health can be a topic that is not widely talked about within many different communities across Scotland, and so interventions need to engage participants with cultural humility, flexibility and curiosity to have greatest meaning and impact.
- Food can play an integral role in engaging us all in building community and solidarity, which community-led projects often show us. Cooking and sharing meals was used as a key ingredient of the Empower Women for Change and Artlink Central projects.
- Time is a concept which varies between cultures, and how it is imposed in the West is deeply connected to power structures and oppression:

“Through the voices and artwork of the community we worked with, many of whom are dealing with the oppressive structures of the UK immigration system that do not allow for people to have control over their own time in a linear sense, we learnt that a person's sense of time can never fully be controlled. The group resisted these oppressive structures through the complex ways in which they use aspects of memory in everyday life, and in relation to their values. The ‘golden time of making’ shone through and helped to form a strong social space, protocols to do with British perceptions of ‘lateness’ were also challenged and recontextualised in different cultural settings where to be early or on time could be considered the height of rudeness, yet at the same time ‘time is the only thing we can never really get back’ echoed through our conversations.” (Mia, Maryhill Integration Network report, 2025)

CASE STUDY 8: Partnership with LGBT Health and Wellbeing

Key themes: Peer support; Stigma Champions; creative expression; community activism



See Me has a longstanding partnership with LGBT Health and Wellbeing (LGBT HWB). LGBT HWB was set up in 2003 to promote the health, wellbeing and equality of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in Scotland. The Mental Welfare Commission (2017) highlighted that compared to heterosexual, cisgendered people who access mental health services, LGBT people are far more likely to have experienced adversities such as bullying in school, harassment, familial rejection, been at the receiving end of comments that are homophobic, biphobic or transphobic, and had negative experiences with healthcare professionals. It is clear that one of the primary contributors to mental health problems amongst LGBT individuals is the pervasive stigma and discrimination they face.

See Me worked in partnership with LGBT HWB on the *See Me Proud* project. Initially funded by See Me for three years, this funding was extended in 2020 which

enabled See Me Proud to sustain their work across LGBT HWB and the LGBT community to end mental health related stigma and discrimination. The project utilised a community champions model, recruiting volunteers (called community champions) to raise awareness and take action to address stigma. Creative methods were a fundamental part of See Me Proud. See Me Proud Community Champions created and designed a range of creative resources, including zines (see Figure 4), graphic novels, podcasts and videos to engage LGBT+ communities on the topic of mental health.

[What are you most proud of in your work with See Me Proud?] “Probably the Out Zine. I worked with one of the youth champions at See Me, and sent it to Time and Space who were really pleased with the zine, and want to share it with people online.” SMP Champion

In 2019, See Me Proud co-hosted the Mental Health Shorts series with the Scottish Queer International Film Festival (SQIFF). A collection of five short films exploring mental health and LGBTQIA+ related stigma were curated and shown at an event in Glasgow as part of SQIFF. The event included a facilitated discussion after the film screening to provide an opportunity to discuss the themes raised in the films.

To what extent have creative approaches helped reduce mental health stigma and discrimination within groups supported by this approach?

This question focuses on the overall difference that the use of arts-based approaches supported by See Me have made in reducing mental health stigma amongst the groups involved. Thematic analysis of the data showed that creative approaches can have a substantial impact on mental health stigma and discrimination. This was demonstrated through accounts of increased confidence (including confidence to talk about mental health), exploring self-reflection, addressing self-stigma and suicide prevention.

Feedback from a wide range of project partners, participants and audience members demonstrates their learning regarding the impact that creative approaches can have in tackling mental health stigma. Participants at the 2023 creative learning event (Who creates the story) described their key takeaways as “the importance and power of creative approaches in tackling mental health stigma”.

“We are convinced that an arts led approach does make it easier to start to explore these challenging conversations where there are complex barriers and assumptions.”
Artlink Funded Partners Report, 2022

Feedback from another project, Mindwaves, demonstrated that the project had opened up a conversation about mental health amongst people who had previously been hesitant:

“More than one participant reported that people who had never talked to them about mental health had been in touch and said what impact the animation had on them.”
(Mindwaves report, 2022)

Impact on participants/artists

Challenging internalised stigma

Self-stigma is one type of stigma which describes the internalisation of public stigma that people with mental health problems may experience. Across the creative projects supported by See Me, there is significant evidence to show that there was a reduction in self-stigma amongst people who had engaged with the projects.



Image 27: Artwork from Unblemished

For example, the Unblemished project was a creative initiative funded by the See Me Anti-Stigma Arts Fund. It involved a collaboration between artist Nat Walpole and researcher Valentine Conlan, who worked with transgender and non-binary individuals to produce a comic book. This comic book explored the intersection of trans identity and mental health

stigma. The project aimed to highlight the challenges that trans people face in accessing mental health support. The project involved interviews and reflections during the creation of a comic book, which allowed interviewees to examine their relationship with self-stigma:

*"Through interviews and reflection during the comic process, we hoped interviewees would be able to examine their relationship with self-stigma, and hopefully improve these feelings. ...We found out participants all had different mental health experiences, making their relationships with self-stigma differ greatly also. With interviews being right at the beginning of the project, **some participants found a great improvement in mental health due to a reduction of self-stigma when it came to actually posting their stories online, which is an incredibly positive outcome.**" Unblemished Report, 2022*

For some projects, the increased knowledge and understanding of stigma more broadly, enabled better recognition of self-stigma:

"Mental health stigma awareness sessions generally allowed us to build our knowledge and understanding about all the stereotypes and share experiences to apply the strategies and practices in our life." Participant, Empower Women for Change

Beyond the Canvas, funded by the Anti-Stigma Arts Fund in 2024 measured the self-stigma experienced by project participants at the beginning and end of a series of creative workshops for minority ethnic women. Using the Internalized Stigma of Mental Illness Inventory and Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, they showed that self-stigma decreased slightly over the ten-week period, whilst mental wellbeing increased, highlighting positive progress in participants' emotional health and self-perception.

Empowerment and confidence building

Creative approaches, such as arts-based projects, help to create environments where participants feel safe to discuss and explore sensitive themes around their mental health and stigma. This psychological safety is crucial for effective co-production, as it encourages individuals to share their experiences and perspectives openly. By involving participants actively in the creation of arts projects, their voices and experiences are central to the work, ensuring that the outcomes are reflective of their lived experiences. This involvement can foster a sense of ownership and empowerment among participants, essential for meaningful co-production.

*"It almost takes co-production to a new level. It's very easy when you have a long-term mental health condition, to feel that your voice doesn't matter. It didn't feel tokenistic or pre-determined... **my experiences were respected and validated. It's been fun... it's fascinating to see the pockets of creativity within the group and that to be reflected in the end product.**" Mindwaves Report, 2022*

Experiences of stigma are not homogenous, and creative approaches can offer a way of exploring different experiences, as well as different coping mechanisms.

"Through the comic creation, it was useful to explore how survivors experiences are not generic, they are not typical – coping mechanisms may differ, people's ways of surviving and battling stigma are varied." SAY Women report, 2023

Creative methods also help to address intersectional stigma by recognising how different social identities and structural inequities intersect with and influence each other, as well as providing space to explore what more equitable support could look like. These approaches facilitate communication and understanding among participants, overcoming language barriers and enabling effective collaboration.

"It is inevitable that people are subject to pressure from all sides and feel anxiety about all sorts of things as they live. But there are many ways to divert our attention or release stress. Through these activities, the anxiety and stress caused by the cultural and linguistic differences and homesickness of our international students were alleviated, leaving us in a better frame of mind to continue our lives and studies" – participant, Art Link

The majority of creative projects explored within this evaluation used creative methodologies to facilitate conversations about mental health, describing how participants grew in confidence in their ability to speak openly about their experiences with others involved in the project.

"Clients feel empowered to talk about mental health and find creative ways to address issues. One client has devised an artwork that we are helping her to make - a version of Snakes and Ladders where she will have cards to choose from with examples of difficult barriers and scenarios she has found herself in. This evidences reduced self-stigma as she works to improve her life choices." Rowan Alba

Some projects involved participants speaking about their experiences to an audience – either live or through a video. For example, Icebreaker Dundee supported participants to perform spoken word pieces about gender and mental health, whilst A Little While Longer produced videos of the men involved speaking about their experiences of suicide. For many, increased confidence to talk about mental health has extended beyond the initial project.

"Participants expressed a boost in confidence and a sense of being empowered to share their stories. One participant said, "This project gave me a voice I never thought I had. It allowed me to express my journey in a way that others could see, understand, and respect." Empower Women

A clear example of increased confidence to talk about mental health maintained after involvement in the funded project was given within Orkney Blide's report,

"When it came to a radio publicity piece for last year's event the Blide member who had inspired the original Headspace Showcase wrote out a piece about their involvement and what it meant to them. They also had...(staff member) read this out on their behalf and asked to be referred to throughout the show under a different moniker. This year when doing the publicity for the event they spoke on the radio themselves, using their own name and responding to questions being asked rather than preparing something beforehand. I think this shows a massive improvement in confidence over the last year and think Headspace Showcase has been a fundamental aspect of this for him." Orkney Blide report, 2024

Making connections and reducing isolation

The focus on peer support within many of the creative projects was reflected in outcomes for participants relating to establishing new relationships and connections,

and feeling a reduced sense of isolation. For example, Rowan Alba participants took part in a short survey about their experiences of the project and the impact it had on them. 97% agreed that they felt less isolated and more connected to their community. Voices Through the Lens project leads also reflected that

“Co-researchers have also developed... relationship building and networking skills. They have been learning the art of positive peer connection in relation to community issues, and through this process have developed a sense of purpose with a view to influencing change.”

The GIFT project report described how the project had supported community connections.

“GIFT aims to create trauma informed safe spaces that give young people the opportunity to connect through art making. We have created a weekly drop in art space where attendance has increased week on week... This has become a dynamic group with lots of energy and the young people have told us that coming along makes them feel happy, excited, buzzing and safe. They have also had the courage to talk about anxieties, bullying, struggles with dyslexia and difficulties with education as many of the young people feel like they aren’t taken seriously at school... The group has evolved into a social space where young people feel safe enough to bring friends along, and to connect with others, outwith the school environment.” The Gift, 2022

Wider personal development and impacts

Creative anti-stigma project participants are described within the reports included in this evaluation as developing a wide range of skills, knowledge, relationships and attributes that extend beyond the original project objectives. For example,

“Through the critical aspect within conversations held, by learning new creative skills, and actively invigilating the exhibition, the participants grew more confident in speaking about their experiences, but also about the work they created. These skills and competencies actually made a difference for some of the participants, with one member of the MoT group now facilitating their own workshops at the Common Ground, while two other members joined the Glasgow School of Art.” Maryhill Inclusion Network report, 2024

Voices Through the Lens project staff described observing of a range of positive impacts on participants, including: *“an increase in their critical thinking skills, reflective abilities, presentation skills, interpreting and articulating their work, and have develop the capacity for advocacy.”* (Voices Through the Lens project lead interview)

Rowan Alba project facilitators reported observing transformational personal benefits for project participants, including finding new cathartic ways of supporting their own emotions and mental health:

“Participating in meaningful activity has helped improve physical health including harm reduction. Some clients now turn to drawing to help them when they hit a health crisis point. e.g. one client has made a beautiful large drawing of her son who attempted suicide. She spoke of how this is cathartic for her and ‘is better than turning to drink.”
Rowan Alba

CASE STUDY 9: Tackling suicide stigma in A Little While Longer

Key themes: participatory creative approaches; creating safer spaces, self-stigma

A Little While Longer was a short film project led by film-makers Dr Isa Rao and Tom van den Hurk, funded by the See Me Anti-Stigma Arts Fund. The project aimed to challenge and break down the stigma around suicide, especially among Scottish men, by allowing three male survivors of suicide attempts to share and visually represent their experiences.

The three men who took part in the film were involved on an individual basis in planning the content. The documentary was filmed on location in Arran over three days. This was a challenging experience for some of the participants, given the sensitive and very personal nature of the film. The project leads worked flexibly with the men in the film to adjust the filming schedule, building in more personal space and time for breaks. The process, whilst challenging, had positive impacts for the men involved. "Our protagonists told us that during filming they were actually confronted with and worked through suicide stigma that they still held themselves which was a positive outcome we had not expected." They reflected that participating helped them better understand and reflect on how stigma affected them.

"They helped me to understand that although from different walks of life, we all experienced very similar stigma both internally and from others around us. This surprised me a little." (A Little While Longer participant, project report, 2023)

The film was shared online and through community screenings. At community screening events after watching the film, audience members were asked how their opinion on male suicide had changed. The responses highlighted that participants felt that they had greater knowledge and understanding of mental health and suicide amongst men, a desire to have to embed a more accepted public conversation on the issues, and increased feelings of empathy for their peers.

"I feel a better sense of empathy for the men around me who are recovering from previous bad experiences or addiction and I think about checking in with them more often." (A Little While Longer participant feedback, 2023)

Evidence suggests that participants felt that the creative approach taken was an important mechanism to tackling stigma through education and social contact:

"It made me see that there is such a broad scope of reasons that can contribute to male suicide and that there is a broad scope of men that this affects. It made me think that situations like this (a groups of survivors talking) and films like this are so important to change the stigma and educate people." (Participant feedback)

Reflections show that *A Little While Longer* enabled both participants and audience members to begin to explore their own feelings of self-stigma:

"Our protagonists told us that during filming they were actually confronted with and worked through suicide stigma that they still held themselves which was a positive outcome we had not expected." (A Little While Longer report, 2023)

"I now consider myself a survivor" (Audience member)

Impact on audiences and the wider community

Sparking dialogue

Engaging with the arts can spark discussion, for example, on the themes which the event or exhibition touched on. Drawing on themes around mental health, stigma and discrimination in creative projects can spark dialogue between audiences and participants, which can further serve as a mechanism for tackling stigma:

"Our key learnings are that a film like 'A Little While Longer' can serve as a wonderful starting point for conversations on suicide stigma and awareness. As such our main takeaway is that the film is and will be most useful when screened in the community where people can exchange views on opinions afterwards." A Little While Longer Report, 2023

Public attention underscores the public's interest in understanding and discussing suicide, and the role that stories of lived experience can play in delivering this messaging and raising awareness.

Feedback from another project, Mindwaves, demonstrated that the project had opened up a conversation about mental health amongst people who had previously been hesitant:

"More than one participant reported that people who had never talked to them about mental health had been in touch and said what impact the animation had on them." (Mindwaves report, 2022)

Knowledge and understanding

Data reviewed during this evaluation provided evidence of the impact that creative anti-stigma projects can have on the knowledge and understanding of audiences and the wider public, although many projects did not discuss this as an intended outcome.

"Feedback from viewers was positive and strongly suggested that the film raised awareness on suicide stigma and male mental health and in some cases made people question and contemplate their own opinions/preconceptions." A Little While Longer report, 2023

"This exhibition has been my favourite as part of (Glasgow International). I particularly loved the writing + poetry + how it accompanied the soap sculptures and collage. Both beautiful and thoughtful, it provokes ideas around space, beauty, inclusion and community. Loved it!" Monuments for the Present report, 2024

Project reports highlighted the challenges of evaluating audiences' knowledge and understanding. Reports identified difficulties relating to engagement (e.g. low numbers of audience members completing feedback questionnaires), measurement (e.g. benefits of quantitative vs qualitative data collection), and ethics (e.g. opening online videos for comments can result in harmful content being posted).

A Lasting legacy

Several projects supported by See Me produced resources that are now widely available, helping to share the learning long after the projects have finished.

Unblemished and Trace are both examples of comics produced to tackle mental health stigma, which continue to be promoted and shared with audiences across Scotland and beyond. Sarah's Sanctuary and Empower Women for Change created blogs or webpages that share artwork, participant's experiences and learning from the projects. Other resources produced during See Me supported projects enable others to employ creative anti-stigma methods. For example, ArtLink Central produced a Creative Wellbeing Activity Pack, which guides the reader through a range of creative activities such as cooking a meal, blind self-portraits and monoprinting, with facilitation notes to encourage conversations about mental health, stigma and discrimination.

Creative resources developed by See Me volunteers work has also had a lasting impact. Six Wee Wordies, a tool developed by See Me volunteer Bridget for speaking about stigma and discrimination using the medium of six-word stories, has been widely adopted within a range of events and partners' projects. It was used in the *Who Creates the Story* event, receiving positive feedback that it was a *"Fantastic, practical example of an activity that can be used in a range of settings..."* (*Who Creates the Story* event feedback). This workshop was also used within Voices Through the Lens:

"Adopting a See Me anti-stigma resource – 6 Wee Wordies – into the workshops had a positive impact on participant development and communication. The project coordinator said that the resource 'helped to encourage a safe space where participants felt comfortable sharing their perspectives, their own experiences and their inner concerns'. The resource supported staff and participants to prompt and guide respectful discussions and helped participants to express their thoughts and feelings with clarity – 'It is helping them build and develop important tools for introspection and emotional processing'". ILFA project lead

A call to action

Project leads described how creative approaches have led to lasting change within the organisations involved. ArtLink Central planned to engage future years of Chinese students at Stirling through the same creative methods, whilst the Children and Young People's Participation Group significantly impacted on engagement methods with young people within CAMHS service in Dumfries and Galloway.

"The difference the CAMHS Young People's Participation group is beginning to have on CAMH service is that young people, are now working alongside mental health professionals to co-design and co-produce resources, projects and the service together. Participation work creates change; the young people who are involved within this group are sharing their lived experiences of accessing services locally and nationally to make a difference for other children and young people" (Be Kind report, 2023)

Creative anti-stigma project outputs and learnings are consequently helping to shape support services in Scotland.

"We are using audio recordings produced to help increase understanding of individual mental health issues affecting our clients. These are also used as prompts to aid discussion around support for mental health and to share experience with clients who are housebound and unable to attend groups. Rowan Alba report 2024

Artists and facilitators involved in creative anti-stigma projects have also developed new skills and made changes to their practice following the work.

“Project staff have developed skills in facilitating Community-Based Participatory Research work, and skills in community engagement. Further, they have undertaken Mental Health First Aid training, developed effective presenting skills and worked to effectively build their networks. Researchers from Glasgow Caledonian University have developed skills in undertaking meta-analyses and in using systematic review software”
Voices Through the Lens project lead

Facilitators involved in the project with Maryhill Inclusion Network shared detailed reflections on their personal learning and growth:

“As I come from a contemporary art background, the collaboration with Paria, Mia and the participants brought me a more acute awareness of the benefits of social and creative engagement. During the project, I have learnt a lot about language, structure of the sessions, and how to stimulate reflections and conversations from participants, while adapting to the needs of the participants themselves. This knowledge will have a considerable impact in my approach in designing new engagement projects.”
(Monuments for the Present report, 2024)



Image 28: Monuments for the Present exhibition

Key Learning and Recommendations

This report demonstrates that creative anti-stigma projects can be used as an effective tool for tackling intersectional mental health stigma at a range of levels. Several key learnings and recommendations can be drawn from the data used to compile this report and are explored below.

Project facilitators bring a range of expertise in tackling stigma, but this had not always been explicitly linked to mental health stigma and discrimination.

Anti-stigma projects supported by See Me have brought together people with a wide range of skills and experience, including lived or living experience of mental health problems or intersectional stigma, artists, facilitators, academics, researchers, and mental health professionals amongst others. The majority of those involved in running and facilitating these creative projects have often worked with practices which tackle stigma (for example, anti-racism), but for some these were not yet joined up with tackling stigma specifically related to mental health.

Training, support and guidance are therefore crucial to ensure that those involved in running or delivering a creative anti-stigma project have the relevant mental health stigma-related knowledge and skills, in addition to the other expertise they bring to the project. See Me's learning sets model is one example of how to provide this service. Learning sets bring together project leads for online workshops exploring core components of mental health and intersectional stigma, and anti-stigma approaches. Positive feedback from participants suggests this model to be effective in upskilling project leads and providing a peer network.

Creative anti-stigma work can be emotionally taxing

Anti-stigma creative approaches can take an emotional toll on participants and others involved in the project, particularly those with their own lived or living experience. Some project leads shared their surprise at the emotional impact of the work, both for participants and for themselves.

The level and duration of support required for participants was often greater than anticipated. Project leads described a range of measures taken to address this need, including working with therapists or other mental health professionals, providing relevant training (e.g. active listening, mental health first aid) to those involved in facilitating project activities, and offering one to one support to participants either instead of or in addition to group activities. Project reports also highlighted the importance of providing support which can continue where required beyond any planned project finale (e.g. film screening, live event or exhibition).

It is therefore recommended that future creative projects take a trauma-informed approach in which mental health and wellbeing support is anticipated and built into the full lifespan of the project.

Meaningful creative anti-stigma work takes time

Project reports commonly described elements of the work that took longer than initially planned. This included challenges with recruiting participants, more time

needed for engagement and support, and delays in producing final outputs and reporting. Future projects plans should include contingencies for unexpected delays, but this must be enabled by flexible funding models. Time was seen as crucial in project development, and projects commonly reported that processes ended up requiring more time than had initially been planned for. Project reports articulated the importance of funding arrangements which allow for sufficient time, expertise and capacity for to meaningfully deliver high quality projects which tackled complex themes.

Factoring in sufficient time to create safer, welcoming ways of working as a group was felt to be important learning for projects. For example, the Museum of Things art group decided to increase the number of sessions they delivered to allow time to develop ways of working which were based on trust and respect for each other's experiences.

Furthermore, extra time for breaks was built into the creative process of making *A Little While Longer* in order to ensure that participants were able to look after their mental wellbeing whilst exploring challenging topics.

Engagement requires open communication and continued flexibility

In any project, participants will have varying needs, availability, and preferences, which may change throughout the project. Throughout the Arts Funded project reports, project leads described changes that they made to their planned project activities in response to the needs of participants in line with good community engagement principles. Project leads described changing their planned engagement strategy from online to face to face, changing planned project schedules, activities and outcomes, and building in more personalised support for participants. For example, in their annual report, Anti-Stigma Arts Funded project *A Little While Longer* said,

"We realised quickly that due to the sensitive subject matter and the understandable hesitation to open up in front of strangers, our three protagonists had to meet in person and not through online meetings to plan the film so we changed our approach in that we talked to each individual participant about what the film could entail and what they would like to talk about and then created a plan for the actual shoot on Arran. As such, the preparation for the shoot was done more on an individual level and not a group level as originally planned." *A Little While Longer Report, 2023*

Empower Women project leads described a range of changes that they made to the planned schedule and engagement strategy in order to accommodate childcare responsibilities and other responsibilities of the participants involved:

"The target audience of minority ethnic women was successfully engaged, although there were occasional barriers like conflicting childcare responsibilities, which we adapted to by taking a break during the summer and resuming the sessions once children had gone back to school. This strategy however presented its own challenges with most participants being engaged in other activities like travel and college courses at the beginning of the school year. This was ameliorated by providing hybrid facilities to allow participants join the sessions remotely". *Empower Women, 2024*

Creative anti-stigma approaches can create a lasting legacy

Embedding learning outputs and resources from creative projects in wider anti-stigma work is crucial to ensuring lasting impact and can be effective when done appropriately. Anti-stigma tools and resource development and sharing take careful consideration and planning from the start of a project.

“Most interviewees pointed out that once a creative output is made, there must be careful consideration into how it can be embedded as a resource. One example of how to do this, was following each performance with discussion of the themes and signposting to support services. Another example provided was embedding creative output into organisational training materials or distributing among relevant organisational partners.” (The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland, p.18)

Creative projects that are genuinely led by the needs and interests of the participants may already know at the start of their project exactly what the output they want to create is. The relationship between the funded project and See Me as funder must be open and clear enough for the project leads to be able to understand the parameters of the project and flexible enough for See Me to allow the project to develop in line with intersectional principles. One participant on an Arts Funded project (SAY Women) observed that whilst the end product (a comic) ‘raised awareness and told stories of stigma, it did not tell the reader how to overcome these challenges.’ This observation gave a potential structure to a second phase of the Stories of Stigma project.

Examples of other creative outputs within this report have included the 6 Wee Wordies creative writing workshop developed by See Me volunteer Bridget, and the Wellbeing Handbook developed during an Arts Funded project by Art Link Central. In both examples, tools designed to help others to facilitate creative anti-stigma activities were developed and made available online.

Engaging public or targeted audiences with anti-stigma work can be challenging, however. Project partners shared the difficulties they had experienced in a range of engagement activities such as using social media and connecting with a live audience. Some recommended that future projects should ensure that they consider ways to increase the reach of their project for example through partnership working, early in project planning.

Evaluation of creative projects helps demonstrate their impact, but approaches to evaluation and reporting vary greatly

Interviews can provide more depth of insight into the impact of a project on participants. Surveys can be a helpful tool for collecting impact data from a larger number of people, for example an audience. Many projects build in evaluation up until the final events, but do not consider or cannot resource any longitudinal data collection, meaning that any lasting impact of the work goes unmeasured.

Data collated from a wide variety of creative projects for this evaluation varied greatly in the level of detail and depth of reflection provided. Projects focused on different aspects of stigma (e.g. self-stigma/public stigma), and project leads shared their reflections

It is important that project facilitators are supported to understand the benefits of evaluating their work, rather than seeing it as a hindrance. But equally, funders and commissioners should trust project facilitators to understand which evaluation methods will be most appropriate for their project. Project facilitators may also have concerns around the potentially intrusive nature of some evaluation approaches. They may have concerns that probing questions will jeopardise the safe space in a group that has been carefully cultivated over time (The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland, 2024). For this reason, funders and project facilitators should openly discuss how the project will be evaluated in a way that captures the valuable learning and reflections from the project whilst feeling natural and comfortable to participants.

Interviews can provide more in-depth insight into the impact of a project on participants. Surveys can be a helpful tool for collecting impact data from a larger number of people, for example an audience. Many projects build in evaluation up until the final events, but the relatively small amounts of funding available through See Me's funding mean that collecting longitudinal data beyond the length of the project is not possible, meaning that any lasting impact of the work goes unmeasured.

Data collected from a wide variety of creative projects for this evaluation varied greatly in the level of detail and depth of reflection provided. Projects focused on different aspects of stigma (e.g. self-stigma/public stigma), and projects shared their reflections

To meaningfully self-evaluate the effectiveness of creative anti-stigma projects, the evaluators (including those conducting self-evaluations) must have a good level of understanding about stigma. This understanding of the drivers and contexts for stigma is essential in setting outcomes and objectives for the project. This is why demonstrating a good understanding of how stigma and discrimination impact communities' members is built into the application process for the Anti-Stigma Arts Fund for example.

The Health and Social Care Alliance (2024) recommend that projects should build in regular reflective sessions. Projects should involve frequent self-reflective evaluation sessions to discuss how things are going and if any changes should be made, and be flexible to implement those changes as the project continues. Other recommendations made in the same report include:

- In advance of the project starting, project commissioners should work with project organisers to establish the metrics that are appropriate to evaluate the project
- Funders and commissioners should recognise that outcomes can take a long time to be realised, so evidence of outcomes must be broad

See Me provides an [evaluation toolkit](#) with resources that can support project facilitators. The toolkit offers an array of different resources to help with different types of evaluation, including interview guides, reflective logs and further guidance to help with reflective practice.

Meaningful creative anti-stigma work requires adequate funding and resources

See Me plays a crucial role in supporting inclusive, creative anti-stigma work through the Anti-Stigma Arts Fund and other funding mechanisms. While strategic about what pieces of creative work receive funding, See Me doesn't seek to make any further decisions about a project once funded, instead focusing on the provision of training and support for project partners. This funding strategy emphasises flexibility and trust, allowing funded projects to design and evaluate their work independently while receiving guidance and support from See Me. Case studies and examples shared throughout this report illustrate the impact of this funding model. Constraints of funding – See Me provides a good model for funding which guides the initial direction of projects through clear briefs but does not go on to dictate or manage an element of the project process. Instead,

Whilst See Me's funding of creative work is clearly having a positive impact, it cannot provide money for all projects seeking funding. Annually on average, the See Me Anti-Stigma Arts Fund receives more than ten times the number of applications it can afford to fund. Largely based in the third sector, creative anti-stigma work is heavily dependent on often insecure and short-term sources of funding. See Me's Who Creates the Story event included presentations and a panel discussion on funding creative anti-stigma work, which highlighted limited access to resources as some funds (e.g. NHS GG&C anti-stigma arts fund) closed.

In a recent report by Rocket Science for Creative Scotland, challenges related to funding were recognised as the main barriers to health and wellbeing-related creative projects, particularly for small projects. The report also highlighted that funding is geared towards new initiatives, rather than ongoing or established work:

"Funders tend not to want to re-fund work that is tried and tested, but that's what people want and need." Rocket Science, 2001, P. 23

Reflecting on the role of funding for creative anti-stigma projects, Maeve Grindall who runs See Me's Anti-Stigma Arts Fund said:

"The value of projects like these for participants, organisations and communities cannot be overstated and there is an acute need for sustainable sources of funding for creative interventions that place money and power with community-led groups and organisations." ([ALLIANCE blog, March 2025](#))

Funders must consider how they can boost resources to support creative anti-stigma work in a way that provides the time, expertise, flexibility and capacity needed to deliver projects effectively.

Conclusions

Through supporting creative methods and participatory creative processes, we have:

- Explored the intersectional nature of stigma and how multiple forms of stigma interact to shape lived experiences of people, and how this directly relates to mental health outcomes
- Identified the range of necessary steps needed to challenge intersectional stigma and drive transformational change, thereby strengthening the evidence base around 'what works', particularly regarding reducing mental health stigma through applying an intersectional approach.
- Identified what is needed to support intersectional anti-stigma interventions in relation to funding.
- Highlighted data from projects show clear impacts on reducing internalised and public stigma at a personal level, such as through improvements in participant wellbeing and shifting in attitudes in communities.
- Demonstrated how the Anti-Stigma Arts Fund projects supported the creation of materials which are and can be used to advocate for community-based, institutional and systemic change.

This report has highlighted the significant impact of creative methods in addressing mental health stigma and discrimination in Scotland. Through the collaborative efforts of See Me and its partners, it is clear that projects centred around creative practices have successfully engaged diverse communities, fostering empathy, understanding, and supportive perspectives.

Creative approaches, such as visual arts, theatre, music, and participatory arts, have proven to be powerful tools in challenging internalised (self) and public stigma at the personal level (SCIP). These methods provide a space for individuals with lived experience of mental health problems to share their experiences on their own terms, thereby reducing stereotypes and encouraging positive attitudes in audiences. The involvement of people with lived experience in the creation of art ensures that their voices are heard and their perspectives are accurately represented.

The report underscores the importance of directly funding grassroots community organisations, particularly those who work alongside people who experience mental health stigma alongside other forms of discrimination. By funding and supporting projects that engage with marginalised groups, See Me has been able to build meaningful relationships and increase the diversity and reach of its partners. This targeted partnership working has enabled See Me to work with a greater diversity of applicants and participants, ensuring that the voices of those most affected by stigma are leading the conversation.

The evaluation of the Anti-Stigma Arts Fund and other creative projects demonstrates the effectiveness of these approaches in reducing mental health stigma. Participants in arts-based projects have reported increased confidence,

reduced self-stigma, and a greater willingness to discuss mental health problems. These projects have also sparked important conversations within communities, fostering a more supportive and understanding environment.

In conclusion, this report provides compelling evidence of the transformative power of the arts in tackling mental health stigma and discrimination at personal and individual levels. The continued support and funding of creative projects by See Me are essential in building a stigma-free society where individuals and their mental health experiences are respected, valued, and empowered.

Further work is needed to demonstrate the power of participatory creative approaches in challenging intersectional stigma across all levels of society, enhancing wellbeing and building community power. Future projects should seek to further understand the potential for exhibitions/outputs/resources created to be used as advocacy tools to demand change led by communities.



Image 29: Who Creates the Story event

Glossary*

Arts: Over the years, artists, makers and creators have used a huge range of different media to challenge stigmatising attitudes and behaviours associated with mental health. The arts can offer a really powerful platform for people to share their experiences, and show what the reality is for people living with mental health problems.

Coproduction: Co-production means ensuring an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours, so they all have the opportunity to become more effective agents of change.

Communities of place, interest and identity: Communities can be defined by place (geographical location), interest (shared hobbies, passions or concerns), or identity (common characteristics, experiences or social identities like religion, culture or sexual orientation). These categories can overlap and intersect, and understanding them is essential for analysing social dynamics and fostering meaningful connections within and between communities.

Consciousness Raising: Consciousness raising groups grew out of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 70s. These groups were spaces where women could speak in turn about their own experiences and feelings, building solidarity and awareness of the political nature of their personal experiences.

Creative approaches: The relationship between creativity and mental health has existed for centuries, and can offer a powerful platform to tackle stigma and discrimination. Creative approaches when carefully facilitated can offer a safer way for people to explore, understand and address stigma and discrimination. Emphasizing community engagement and empowerment, creative approaches have been used to tackle stigma by “providing safe, engaging, transformative spaces to share experiences and explore the barriers we need to dismantle to create a stigma-free society.” (See Me).

Creativity: “Creativity in this context is defined broadly to incorporate many different forms of creative practice, from visual arts to filmmaking, theatre and nontraditional forms of communication (For example, the use of a board game or narrative style). This report explores alternative forms of engagement, particularly those which harness creativity and participation. The reason for this broad definition is to bring together in one place a breadth of creative engagement methods to showcase the variety of possibilities and potential as well as challenges.” (Alliance report)

Cultural Humility: Cultural humility is defined as “a process of reflection and lifelong inquiry which involves self-awareness of personal and cultural biases as well as awareness and sensitivity to significant cultural issues of others” (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia 1998).

Cultural Safety: Cultural safety is a practice that creates an environment where individuals feel secure and respected in their cultural identities, particularly in healthcare settings.

Discrimination: When a person performs an action, whether intentional or unintentional, that creates barriers and inequality for people with experience of mental health problems. An example of this is not inviting someone for a job interview based on disclosure of a mental health problem.

Epistemic justice: Epistemic justice refers to the fair distribution of knowledge and recognition of diverse ways of knowing, addressing injustices that arise from the exclusion or misrepresentation of certain groups' knowledge

Intersectionality: Systematic patterns of interrelated stigma and discrimination that people face due to aspects of their identities or social circumstances, such as race, ethnicity, economic status, gender, age, sexual orientation or disability. Mental health An umbrella term to refer to both the concepts of mental health problems and mental wellbeing.

Marginalised communities: “groups of people who have been ignored by or prevented from participating in the social, economic, cultural, and political processes of society... Marginalized communities experience exclusion due to imbalances of power and, therefore, are often the subjects of discrimination”.

Mental health: An umbrella term to refer to both the concepts of mental health problems and mental wellbeing.

Mental health problems: These include problems experienced as part of everyday life to serious long-term conditions. They are defined as a range of symptoms that meet the criteria for clinical diagnosis. Examples include common mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, and severe, mental health problems such as schizophrenia. The term is often used interchangeably with mental health, negative mental health, mental illness, mental ill health and mental distress.

Racialised: “This is a sociological concept referring to the processes by which a group of people is defined by their “race.” This process begins by attributing racial meaning to people's identity and, in particular, as they relate to social structures and institutional systems, such as housing, employment, and education. In societies in which “White” people have economic, political, and social power, processes of racialization have emerged from the creation of a hierarchy in social structures and systems based on “race.” The visible effects of processes of racialization are the racial inequalities embedded within social structures and systems.”

Social movement: Social movements have been used to challenge health and social inequalities affecting disadvantaged individuals, groups and communities. They are often called different things, including collective action, community empowerment and social innovation, but they all have the intention of challenging inequality, exclusion and injustice to complex social problems.

Stigma: “The negative attitudes or beliefs based on a preconception, misunderstanding or fear of mental health” (See Me). An example might be someone incorrectly thinking that all people with mental health problems are dangerous because they have seen it in the news.

Transformative change: Often driven by a need to address critical issues (such as tackling stigma and discrimination), transformative change refers to a fundamental and systemic shift in how things are done, impacting entire structures, paradigms, and values. It's a process that involves significant, not incremental, changes within or across organisations or societies.



Image 30: Images from MECOPP forum theatre project with members of Gypsy/Traveller community called 'Judged'

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Appendix

1. A greater understanding of how creative approaches tackle stigma and discrimination
1.1. See Me team report improved knowledge of how and why creative approaches can be used to reduce mental health stigma and discrimination
1.2. See Me team embedding a creative approach across programmes
1.3. Project partners report improved knowledge of how and why creative approaches can be used to reduce mental health stigma and discrimination
1.4. Participants report improved knowledge of how and why creative approaches can be used to reduce mental health stigma and discrimination
1.5. Audiences report improved knowledge of how and why creative approaches can be used to reduce mental health stigma and discrimination
2. To increase the diversity and reach of See Me partners and their participants
2.1. Number of new partners
2.2. Remit/focus of funded groups
2.3. Number of participants/audiences reached
2.4 Size & scale of knowledge exchange events
2.5 Social media reach & engagement
3. Understanding the nature of experiences of stigma and discrimination for different groups
3.1 See Me team report improved knowledge of how creative approaches can be used to understand the different experiences of stigma and discrimination faced by people from diverse communities and backgrounds
3.2 Project partners report improved knowledge of how creative approaches can be used to understand the different experiences of stigma and discrimination faced by people from diverse communities and backgrounds
3.3 Participants and audiences report improved knowledge of how creative approaches can be used to understand the different experiences of stigma and discrimination faced by people from diverse communities and backgrounds
4. To understand the role of See Me as a funder in supporting inclusive, creative anti-stigma work
4.1 See Me team report improved knowledge and understanding of the role of See Me as a funder in supporting inclusive, creative anti-stigma work
4.2 Project partners report improved knowledge and understanding of the role of See Me as a funder in supporting inclusive, creative anti-stigma work
4.3 Participants and audiences report improved knowledge and understanding of the role of See Me as a funder in supporting inclusive, creative anti-stigma work
5. To reduce mental health stigma and discrimination within groups supported by the fund
5.1 Participants and audience report (learning outcomes, e.g. increased confidence to talk about mental health) reduced mental health stigma and discrimination within groups supported by the fund

Table 1: Evaluation outcomes and indicators

See Me is managed by SAMH and MHF Scotland, and is funded by Scottish Government.



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