

# Women at the HeArt

## Executive summary 2014



Report produced by:



Alison Leverett-Morris  
58 Hayfield Road Oxford OX2 6TU  
e: [alison@almassociates.co.uk](mailto:alison@almassociates.co.uk)  
t: 01865 554276 m: 07722 051756

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## Executive summary

**Women at the HeArt** was a Thames Valley Partnership project, funded by Arts Council England, The Monument Trust and Thames Valley Probation and building on the organisation's experience of using the arts with vulnerable groups.

The project aimed to:

- Creatively empower vulnerable women
- Embed good creative practice into support services
- Provide excellent professional development for artists working with vulnerable groups

The project ran between March 2012 and February 2014 across 4 partner sites:

- Alana House, Reading: A women's community project and a one stop shop for vulnerable women who have multiple needs
- The Old Fire Station, Oxford: The homeless charity, Crisis, working alongside an independent arts charity to develop partnership projects and collaborative work
- Elizabeth Fry hostel, Reading: the only female Approved Premises in the south, one of 6 in England and Wales
- InterAction, Milton Keynes: An arts organisation working to improve the life chances of people in challenging circumstances

Six artists delivered the project and offered innovative methods of intervention:

- Christine Wilkinson (visual artist)
- Dionne Freeman (visual artist)
- Carla Conte (mixed media artist)
- Clare Goodall (mosaic/mixed media artist)
- Emmy O-Shaughnessy (drama/performance artist)
- Maria Trevis-Hackemann (performance artist/communications trainer)

The project included:

- Participatory arts sessions involving vulnerable women
- Investment in the artists: training, mentoring and Action Learning
- Creative training for support staff working with vulnerable groups
- Public exhibitions of work at The Old Fire Station in Oxford, InterAction in Milton Keynes and Meadowbrook College in Oxford

As a discipline, the arts can inspire personal challenge and growth. The project highlighted the challenging nature of working through the arts with highly vulnerable groups. Responses to the arts processes ranged from enthusiasm and focused attention - to reluctance and nervousness. Some behaviour was controlling, manipulative or defensive. Many experienced difficulty mixing with the group and/or had a low tolerance for fellow participants. This manifested as aggression, quiet withdrawal, engaging only with the artist/facilitator or a lack of general interaction. At the start of the project the majority of participants were very low in confidence and appeared to feel defined by their life circumstances, experiences and past 'mistakes'.

It is in this context that the significance of the project achievements is best understood. The project impacted deeply on participants, support staff and artists. The evaluation found potentially life-changing examples of skills development, increased confidence, attitudinal and behavioural change and personal growth.

The project achieved each of its aims:

- Participating women demonstrated improved creative and social skills, increased confidence and self-esteem and expressed a sense of achievement rarely experienced elsewhere in their lives
- Support staff reported an increase in skills to engage vulnerable women and enhanced understanding of how arts projects support their organisational objectives
- The artists reported increased skills, confidence and ability to work with vulnerable women

The following factors are identified as instrumental to the project's success:

- Artists' understanding the complexity of needs 'underneath' participants' behaviours
- Artists' responding appropriately to individual and group needs
- High quality *accessible* arts activity
- Skilled facilitation
- Investing in the artists
- Investing in support staff

The evaluation identified the following areas of learning:

- The project space influences experience and outcome:
  - Communicating acceptance is an essential component to engaging vulnerable women
  - Provision of a safe, creative space in which participants' can observe, respond and react to presented opportunities encourages engagement and enables learning
  - A strategy of expectation (about process, activity or end result) is less effective
- The importance of being aware of how different processes might impact:
  - There is value in offering opportunities that are fun, enjoyable and relaxing
  - Creative processes which enable a sense of completion is of significance for individuals whose life experience is often shaped by 'unfinished business'
  - An emotional or challenging response can be triggered by any arts process or situation
- Facilitation:
  - It is effective for artists to connect with/respond to participants' needs (rather than 'problems')
  - Awareness and understanding the complexity of needs is essential
  - A needs focused approach can be personally challenging for artists/facilitators
  - It is important to balance individual and group needs
- Support for artist facilitators:
  - Artists need appropriate training and support in place to ensure self-awareness, objectivity, safe-guarding and high professional standards
  - A team approach to facilitation is effective. Sole working is inadvisable
- Collaboration with partner agencies and support staff:
  - Effective collaboration with partner agency support staff is essential
  - The most significant barriers, to engaging support staff are (i) lack of clarity/understanding about project purpose and (ii) personal/internal barriers, such as fear or lack of confidence to participate in the arts
- Barriers to involvement:
  - Vulnerable women need a lot of support to attend projects of this type
  - Lack of childcare is a barrier for some women
  - Having access to 'women only' projects is of value to vulnerable women

Through creative arts processes, Women at the HeArt enabled vulnerable women, support staff and artists to develop new skills, gain confidence and experience a deep sense of personal growth and achievement in both personal and/or professional lives.

## Summary: Aim 1: Empower vulnerable women

### Outcomes

#### Increased self esteem:

Feeling accepted, trusted, respected and valued...  
Recognition of talents, skills, abilities...  
Awareness of personal strengths, qualities and capabilities...  
Feeling better: more positive self image...  
Recognising ability to make a positive contribution: to group processes and in personal lives eg. creating and sharing personal artworks with children ...

#### Increased confidence:

To try new activities, use different arts materials, tools, equipment...  
  
For self expression through words, visual arts, movement...  
  
To engage with new people, attend different venues, interact in a group context...  
  
To change patterns of behaviour and attitude: approach challenges differently: try new ways of being/interacting/presenting...

#### Sense of achievement:

Conflict resolution: working through challenging interpersonal relationships to a positive outcome  
  
Increased resilience: moving on from 'mistakes', trying different approaches, positive solutions  
  
Sense of completion: pride in visual and performance art works  
  
Public exhibitions of artwork

Skilled / extensive development work by project manager to:  
- Ensure venue support staff sufficiently equipped to support project: planning meetings, artist led creative training.  
- Ensure vulnerable women have access: 8 x artist led outreach workshops, publicity, liaison with relevant staff and agencies.  
- Ongoing feedback and planning with key agencies.

43 creative sessions delivered. Average no. of women attending:  
Alana House: 3  
Elizabeth Fry: 13  
Milton Keynes: 6  
Oxford: 6

#### Broad range of creative opportunities offered:

Visual arts processes: glass painting, weaving, mixed media sculpting, burnishing, wood work, painting, colouring, drawing...  
  
Performing arts processes: singing, voice work, movement, mirroring, devising, collaborating, sharing, reflecting...  
  
All arts processes balanced opportunities to create individual and collaborative pieces. Processes encouraged self-reflection, self awareness, conversation, connection collaboration and skills development.

### Interventions

### Starting point

The project was ambitious in aiming to engage vulnerable women unfamiliar with taking part in arts activities and who were not a cohesive or established group. At Elizabeth Fry women were required to attend as part of the terms of their probation. At Alana House women could choose to attend. Milton Keynes and Oxford required development work to attract participants to an unfamiliar venue and activity. To successfully engage participants, it was evident the women needed to 'be met where they were' and for the complex mix of issues and needs within each group to be recognized. Engaging the women required a response to issues such as low confidence, anxiety, limiting beliefs and feelings of failure. The artists needed to be sensitive to the breadth of needs 'underneath' displayed behaviours - which included withdrawing, resistance and threats of violence as well as more positive interaction. A constant balancing of the needs of an individual and the needs/dynamic of the group was also necessary.

**Summary: Aim 2:** Embed good creative practice into support services by seeking to improve staff development and skills base

## Outcomes:

Crisis: Project highlighted importance of considering women with children. Whilst single people are Crisis' main criteria, there is the potential to offer support for women with children within their preventative work.

Staff across all projects reported an increased understanding that arts projects are "*as much about developing self-esteem as about arts skills and activities*"

Staff at Elizabeth Fry reported how the project highlighted the complexity of their service users' needs and lives "this was a valuable reminder to me as a professional"

Crisis: Increased awareness of importance of targeted women's work / creating a safe space for women (in what is a male dominated environment): Crisis now run a women only arts group

New professional links and cross referrals made between participating agencies: Crisis with DV unit, Lifeline, Refugee Resource, Costwold House Eating Disorder Unit. St Frances Trust with MK Women and Work.

Staff at St Frances, MK report feeling confident, to lead arts projects themselves. Report having witnessed "tangible evidence" of the value of arts projects

### **Crisis: Old Fire Station, Oxford**

Visual and performing arts project led by Dionne Freeman and Emmy O-Shaughnessy

1 x staff training session  
6 x creative outreach sessions  
7 x creative sessions  
Planning and evaluation  
Public exhibition

### **Milton Keynes**

Visual arts: Christine Wilkinson, Dionne Freeman, Clare Goodall

1 x staff training  
6 x outreach sessions  
6 x project sessions  
Planning + evaluation  
Public exhibition

### **Elizabeth Fry Probation hostel, Reading**

Visual arts: Christine Wilkinson, Carla Conte, Dionne Freeman.  
Performing arts: Maria Trevis-Hackemann

1 x staff training  
1 x creative taster session  
8 x project sessions  
1 x project sharing event  
Planning and evaluation

### **Alana House, Reading**

Visual arts: Christine Wilkinson.  
Performing arts: Maria Trevis-Hackemann

1 x taster session... 1 x staff training  
7 x project sessions

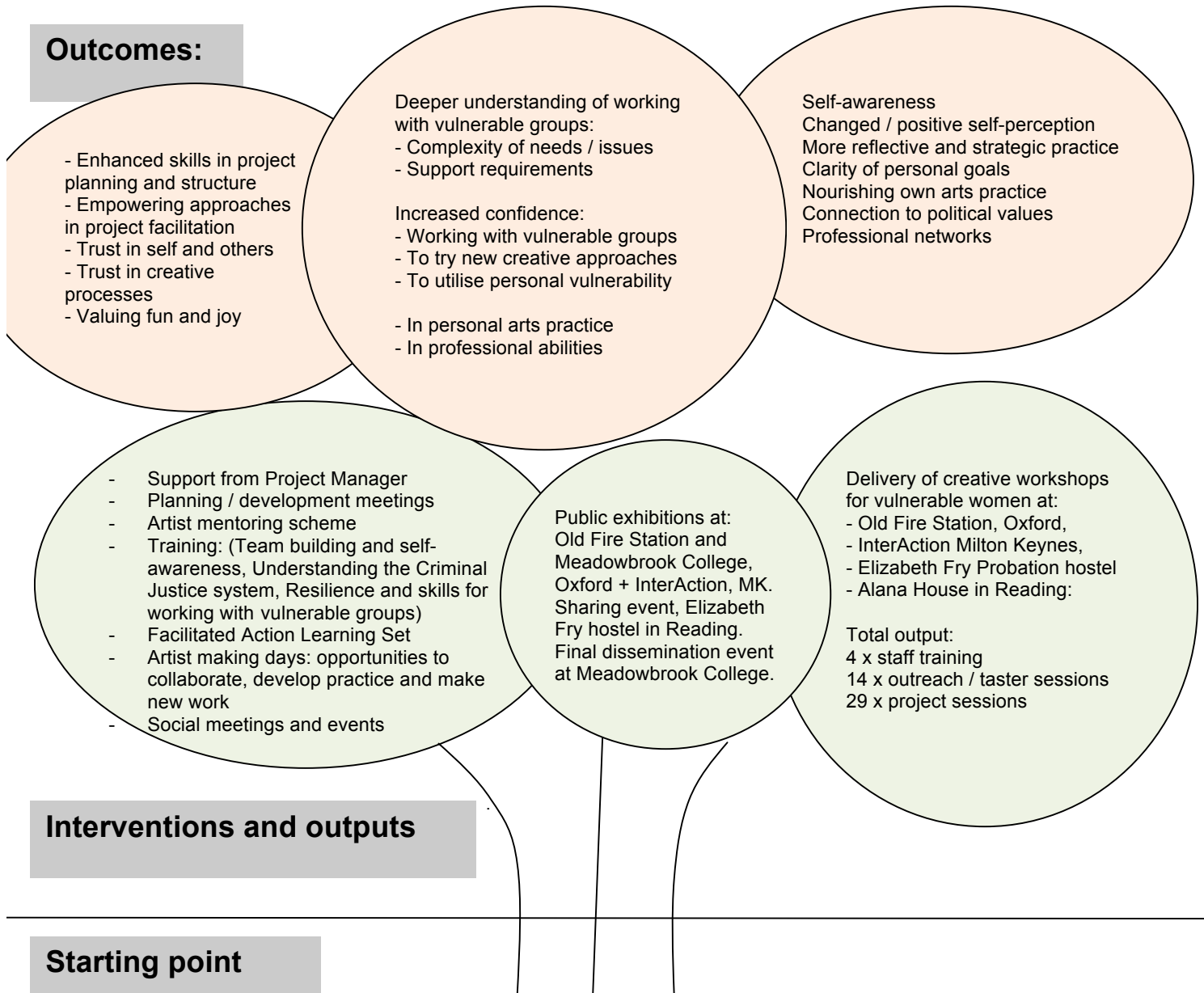
## Interventions

## Starting point

Effective working partnerships were already in place through past projects with some of the chosen sites. Thames Valley Partnership was instrumental in setting up Alana House, although staff changes had taken place in the meantime giving rise to the need to start from scratch in building relationships and understanding. Elizabeth Fry: Approved premises are always interested in taking on new initiatives to help support their residents but it had been many years (and change of management and staff) since the last piece of work managed by Thames Valley Partnership took place there. Initial contact at the Old Fire Station was made through existing arts links and after discussions, it was apparent that the work would sit more comfortably within the Crisis side of the organisation so relationships were developed, and meetings held with key individuals to progress the project. Milton Keynes was a mixed agency site and development work was carried out to find key partners in the location. Some of this was done through InterAction MK, the community arts organisation who hosted the workshops.

**Summary: Aim 3:** Provide a platform for excellent professional development for artists working with vulnerable groups

**Outcomes:**



**Interventions and outputs**

**Starting point**

**Dionne Freeman:** Visual artist: extensive experience of working with a wide range of vulnerable groups; experience of delivering artist training and informal mentoring. Interested in mentoring over a longer period and extend opportunity to current practice.

**Carla Conte:** Youth Worker, practicing artist/workshop leader /exhibitions/events: some experience of working with vulnerable groups, but little experience of working with vulnerable women.

**Clare Goodall:** Mosaic artist and tutor: Experience of working in Family Centres, wanted to develop skills in working with vulnerable women and to gain experience of working with other artists.

**Emmy O-Shaughnessy:** Recent graduate of Masters at Goldsmiths College in Applied Drama, Theatre in Community/Education / Social contexts: 8 years experience of working with young vulnerable people, wanted to gain experience working with older groups.

**Maria Trevis-Hackemann:** Performance artist (cabaret) with a background in corporate training: Some experience of working with vulnerable groups but not with vulnerable women.

**Christine Wilkinson:** Visual artist with extensive experience of working with vulnerable groups (since 1987). 20 years experience of delivering training for artists: not extended into artist mentor role, prior to this project.



Thames Valley Partnership  
Townhill Barn  
Dorton Road  
Chilton  
Aylesbury  
Buckinghamshire HP18 9NA  
01844 202001  
[www.thamesvalleypartnership.org.uk](http://www.thamesvalleypartnership.org.uk)  
Judy Munday  
[judy@thamesvalleypartnership.org.uk](mailto:judy@thamesvalleypartnership.org.uk)

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