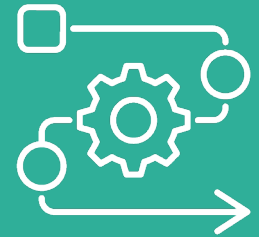


Introducing a lived experience ambassador model for Creative Health Boards



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The poor health that scars our region doesn't just hold back our economy, it stops people from making the most of their talents and enjoying the lives they deserve

(Oliver Coppard, Mayor of South Yorkshire)

The Problem/Context

This report offers a model for incorporating Lived Experience Ambassadors into the delivery of creative health in Doncaster. In this context 'lived experience' refers to people who have long-term health issues and have lived experience of using creative health to improve the quality of their life.

The project is part of the Creative Health Boards Project, funded by the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and Arts and Humanities Research Council Arts (AHRC) through the 'Mobilising Community Assets to Tackle Health Inequalities' programme. The programme aims to develop an innovative model to make arts, culture, and creativity a core part of health and care services across the UK.

When considering access to creative activities in Doncaster four separate issues were identified as limiting potential uptake of creative health:

1. A need for lived experience to become a meaningful part of the delivery and governance of creative health in Doncaster.
2. The competing objectives of the Creative Connector role, which required the post holder to split time between strategic work, and 'on the ground' work meeting and supporting potential participants. (The first-year evaluation of the post recommended the role focus on the strategic work, but this would leave a gap regarding the 1:1 support and interventions) (Holding, 2025).
3. A lack of capacity amongst staff working in the statutory and voluntary sector services attended by people with long term health issues, which meant that potential referrals to creative health activities may not happen or could not be thoroughly tailored to individual interest and need.
4. An overstretch of creative health service providers and their staff's time, which meant that less time could be spent raising awareness of creative health in feeder services and therefore opportunities to engage underrepresented groups were being missed.

The **Creative Connector** is a new position in Doncaster, funded by the Creative Health Boards Project to understand how this role might strengthen localities creative health provision. The Creative Health Connector acts as a vital link between key community assets, in this case: darts (Doncaster's participatory creative arts charity), Cast (Doncaster's professional theatre), and Heritage Doncaster (which operates Doncaster's heritage venues). Working alongside these organisations and the Doncaster Creative Health Board, the Connector champions the Board's vision: that everyone in Doncaster should have access to participatory creative activities, leading to happier, healthier, and more resilient lives.

The Connector's work is multifaceted, focusing on:

- Empowering lived experience: Supporting the community assets, Creative Health Board, and researchers to connect with individuals who have experienced ill health, encouraging them to actively participate in the programme, whether by engaging in activities or contributing to research.
- Breaking down barriers: Identifying the obstacles and opportunities for people at high risk of poor health to participate in art, culture, and creative activities.
- Raising the profile: Promoting Arts & Health programmes to ensure they are inclusive, widely used, and valued by both residents and healthcare professionals.
- Identifying and overcoming barriers to participation and engagement in art, culture and creative activities is a key focus for the programme. This role was created to address a crucial need: bridging the gap between creative resources and the healthcare system.

Reflections/Data Points

Autoethnographic reflections carried out as an Embedded Researcher in the cultural assets in Doncaster as part of the Creative Health Boards Project, identified data from recent participatory action research projects and developments initiated by the Creative Connector with confluent tones to the issues outlined above.

- At a series of focus groups people with positive lived experiences of creative health had spoken passionately about wanting to find ways to 'pass it on'. To raise awareness of creative health, and to be able to act themselves to help others access creative health activities. (Story Circling sessions – Doncaster 2025, led by the Embedded Researcher in Creative Health).
- Cast (a theatre in Doncaster), had recently led a successful 18-month Ambassador programme where three people with lived experience had taken on the role of ambassador, and enabled people from their own communities to access the theatre, attend shows and take part in creative health activities. Ambassadors were chosen due to their own experiences of creative health, and their connection to a community Cast felt was underrepresented in their work.
- Target communities were people seeking asylum or with refugee status currently living in Doncaster, the African diaspora and people with long term health needs or experiencing health inequalities.
- 75% of people attending the ambassador trips were not white British. 22.95% of attendees were from the African diaspora. 66.28% of attendees were either refugees or seeking asylum in Doncaster. Highest levels of attendance were from people living in the target postcodes- representing high levels of long term ill health: DN1, (20%), DN2, (24%) and DN7.
- (13%). 16% of people attending identified as living with a long-term health issue and 14% said they lived with a disability. 43% of people attending had not been to Cast before, and 39% had not been to a theatre before.
- Statistics demonstrated that the Ambassador Programme had been a successful way to reach communities previously underrepresented in the theatre.
- A Roundtable event held by the Creative Health and Wellbeing Alliance as part of their 'State of the Sector Survey' (Tang, 2025), identified the need for workforce development in the sector, and a need to provide opportunities to enter the

creative health workforce for underrepresented groups, including people who are long term unemployed.

- Doncaster recognised a need to enable people who are experiencing health inequalities and long-term ill health to return to the workforce or find opportunity to volunteer if they are able, (Doncaster Economic Strategy, 2030; City of Doncaster, 2022). This is reflected in the funding of local projects such as Pathways to Work and

Connect to Work designed to support people on long term sick leave return to the labour market.

- The Creative Connection model, designed and initiated by the Creative Connector, (currently working with Doncaster Creative Health Board), offered the potential for placements as part of a city-wide creative health ambassador scheme, building on the success of the Cast specific model (Cartwright, 2025).

The Creative Connection model, developed by the Creative Health Connector, is designed to enable 5-6 local services to collaborate with cultural assets providing creative health in the region. A Creative Health Connection (CHC) is a title given to an organisation or service who have a commitment to working with the cultural sector to ensure that everybody in Doncaster can access participatory creative activities, resulting in them feeling happier, healthier and more resilient. (Potential services could include GP hubs, DWP, local family support services and mental health services, eg Mind).

A Creative Health Connection has three key aims:

1. Connecting individuals with lived experience of ill health who are using their service into Creative Health programmes.
2. Collaborating with the cultural sector to ensure programmes are meeting the needs of those with the highest risk of poor health.
3. Working with the cultural sector to monitor and evaluate the impact of Creative Health programmes on individuals' health journeys.

(‘What is a Creative Health Connection, Cartwright, 2025)

Hypothesis

The Researcher hypothesised that a robust and well-structured city-wide Ambassador programme could alleviate pressures on the current creative health workforce and the Creative Connector, and enable people with lived experience to pass on their positive experience to others. Harnessing the enthusiasm of previous participants on completion or after significant personal change, when they were most motivated to ‘pass it on’ to others.

Key objectives for the model were:

- To work with the Creative Connection prototype.
- To offer a valuable experience for those volunteering to be Ambassadors.
- To increase potential of future employability for those participating.

- To work in such a way that it would raise awareness of creative health and its benefits in other services and organisations.
- To enable an increase in participation across creative health from previously underrepresented groups.

The model had to be something that felt workable for both the Creative Connector, the cultural assets, Creative Connection organisations, and people who would potentially become Ambassadors.

Methodology

Autoethnographic reflections from experience of the Sheffield model

Analysing the data above the Researcher was reminded of a city-wide Recovery Ambassador model in Sheffield, initially part of the Drug and Alcohol Commissioning Team (DACT), that had come into being when they were working as a Drug and Alcohol Worker in the 00's.

Being part of a participating agency (2006-2013), mentoring and supervising lived experience Ambassadors from the scheme as part of their role, the Researcher had direct experience of the positive impact of the model. Furthermore they recognised how the impact of that scheme corresponded with the key objectives listed as important for this work.

Researching the Sheffield Recovery Ambassadors scheme

The Sheffield Recovery Ambassador scheme is now in its 20th year. There have been changes over the two decades the scheme has been operating, and it has moved from being overseen and staffed by commissioners to being provided by a local commissioned service. Currently it is overseen by the Progression Pathway Team Leader at Likewise, part of national charity Waythrough.

An interview with the Progression Pathway Team Leader provided the following information:

- Overseeing the Ambassador Scheme is currently part of a wider job role, taking up one day a week of that individuals time.
- There are up to ten Ambassadors in each cohort. A cohort is with the scheme for one year.
- Ambassadors take part in a supported interview, (a more supported version of a regular employment interview), and their suitability is assessed by a panel, and in line with their reference from a supporting keyworker whom is knowledgeable about the persons recovery journey.
- All Ambassadors undertake mandatory training online, using the provider services online training

portal for staff, (data protection, GDPR, health & Safety, confidentiality, child protection, protecting vulnerable adults etc). This has reduced the cost for training sessions in house.

- A partnership with Northern College¹ enables students to then undertake more role specific training (peer mentoring, motivational interviewing, speaking and presenting etc.), at their residential site, where Northern College fund the cost.
- After completing all training (participants are expected to do this in six months), Ambassadors begin volunteering two days per week at a partner service. The volunteering period is six months.
- Each partner service volunteers a staff member to induct the volunteering Ambassador and provide 1:1 supervision and mentoring during their placement. The supervisor liaises with the Likewise Team Leader once a month, or if requiring extra support.
- At the 12-month point Ambassadors complete and receive a certificate and references.

The scheme has been particularly successful in enabling Ambassadors to progress to employment in the Drug & Alcohol sector. Over the last two years, four people of the 18 in those two cohorts have secured employment in the sector (22%). Over the past 20 years the employment of previous Ambassadors has contributed to and shaped the Sheffield Drug & Alcohol workforce.

The scheme has been instrumental in developing understanding of local drug and alcohol provision and promoting the work of the sector in other services, (e.g. GP's, hospitals, homeless services), through their hosting of Ambassadors.

Services who participate report positive impact on staff time due to the tasks taken on by the ambassador, evidenced in their returning as volunteer host services year after year.

The following infographic encapsulates the model:

¹ Northern College is a residential adult education college in South Yorkshire, dedicated to providing education opportunities to adults aged 19+, particularly those without formal education, returning to work or changing careers. They offer financial and academic support to learners.

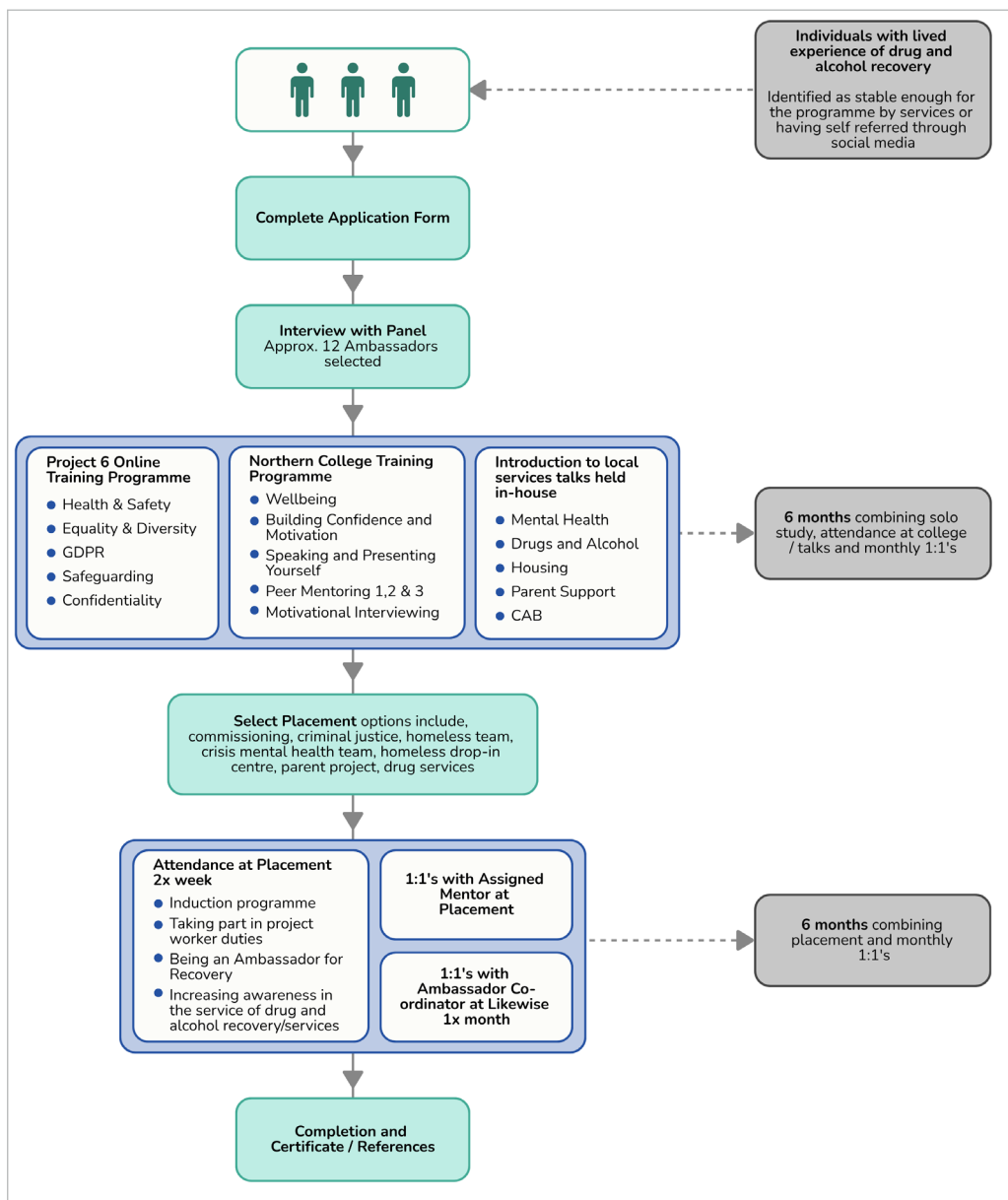


Fig 1: Sheffield Recovery Ambassadors Model

Created by Emilie Taylor to illustrate the model delivered by Likewise, Sheffield, after conversations with Scott McKay, 2026

Reviewing the Sheffield Recovery Ambassadors model and adapting to align with the creative health landscape in Doncaster

The Researcher met with the Creative Connector and the Director of darts- a cultural asset providing creative health- to consult the infographic of the Sheffield Recovery Ambassador model and identify if or how this could help inform a model for creative health in Doncaster.

Key adaptations made were:

- Reducing the number of people in the cohort to both suit the number of Creative Connection potential partners, and due to alleviating some pressure in initially establishing the programme were it to be trialled. (Recognising the potential to increase in future years in needed).

- Requesting the support of a creative health practitioner who is familiar with the potential Ambassador as part of their application. This felt important to understanding if the person was ready for role and responsibility of becoming an ambassador.

A key concern regarded, if it were to be trialled or delivered, how the model would be funded. Largely this would be dictated by the future of the Creative Connector role. If a future for this role is secured, and delivery of the scheme is built into the job role it would require 1 day a week- which it was felt was time currently being spent supporting individuals who could instead be supported by the Ambassadors.

Training would be provided by making use of existing online staff training portals at cultural assets/ creative health providers, or voluntary

sector partners, and then partnering with Northern College for in-person sector specific training. The people attending the Ambassador scheme would fit the Northern College remit for funded places. This would mean training would incur no additional cost.

Remaining delivery costs would be travel and refreshments for participants, and administrative costs.

It was recognised further information was needed regarding liability and insurance of the individuals participating, and who would be accountable, (the Creative Health Board, or the Creative Connection partner service).

The Model

The following infographic is the model for a Lived Experience Creative Health Ambassadors Scheme, developed by the researcher for using in tandem with the Creative Connection model. It has the potential to be overseen by the Creative Connector, as part of including lived experience in the work of the Doncaster Creative Health Board.

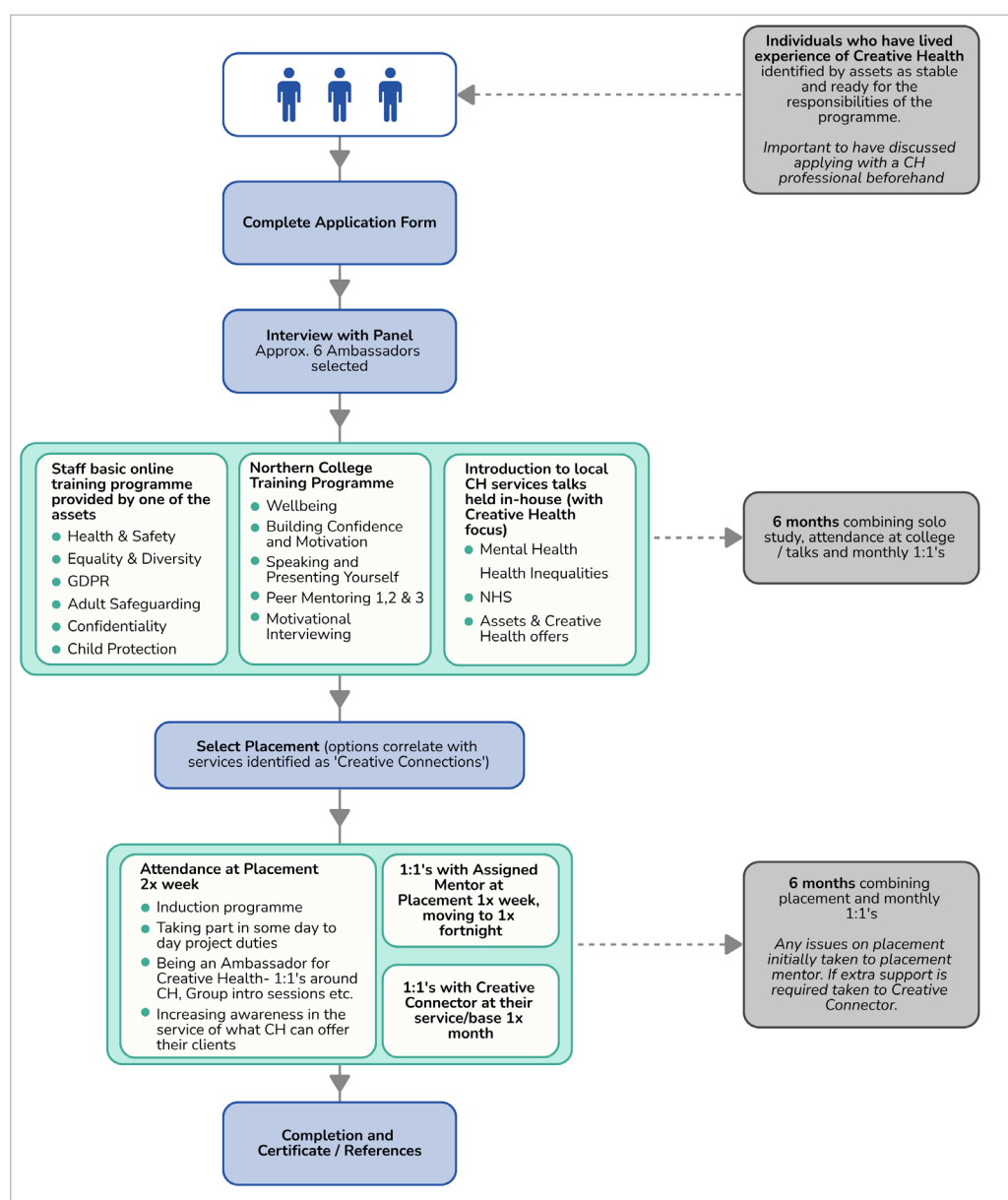


Fig II: A model for Lived Experience Creative Health Ambassadors

Emilie Taylor, 2026

It is the opinion of the Researcher that this model could have positive impact on the four key issues outlined as requiring action:

1. Lived experience could become a meaningful part of the delivery and governance of creative health in Doncaster. Illustrated in the figure below.
2. The competing objectives of Creative Connector role, which required the post holder to split time between strategic work, and 'on the ground' work meeting and supporting potential participants, could be reduced in line with recommendations. Through outsourcing some 'on the ground' work to Ambassador volunteers the postholder could focus more time on strategic work.
3. Ambassadors could contribute positively to the lack of capacity amongst staff working in the statutory and voluntary sector services. As these services are attended by people with long term health issues- a target group for potential referrals to creative health activities, Ambassadors could assist in undertaking 1:1 advice sessions, group sessions or referrals thoroughly tailored to individual interest and need.
4. Ambassadors could step in where the overstretch of creative health providers and their staff's time means current staff cannot. Meaning more time could be spent raising awareness of creative health in feeder services and in arranging opportunities to engage underrepresented groups who are being missed.

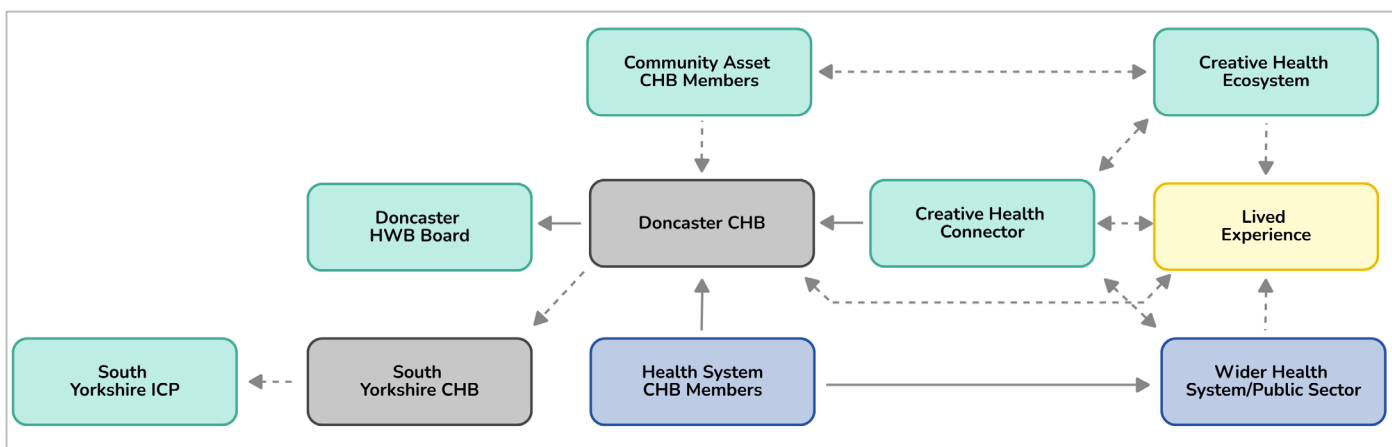
Recommendations

Funding

The Ambassador Scheme has the potential, if it follows the example of the Sheffield model, to increase employment amongst people living with long-term ill health, supporting the goals of the Doncaster Economic Strategy 2030 (City of Doncaster, 2022). Particularly the mission priority 'Employment Opportunities for All' which aims to promote a *'compassionate approach to employment support'* providing equitable access to jobs for individuals facing complex barriers (including disabled residents, and the long-term unemployed). Future employment of people bringing lived experience would also be positive impact on the diversity of the creative health workforce, in line with CHWA's recommendations in 'State of the Sector Report' (Tang, 2024).

It is worth bearing in mind the relationship of the scheme to future employment opportunities for the long-term unemployed in Doncaster when considering potential funding avenues for either an ambassador's scheme, or for one day of the Creative Connector post if delivering the scheme.

The scheme could also be eligible for funding through The National Lottery Community Fund (Reaching Communities), or Awards for All for an initial smaller pilot sum and meets the criteria of the Garfield Weston Foundation.



Wider Implementation

Beyond Doncaster the Creative Health Ambassador model potentially fits well with the current Creative Health Leads Programme being implemented nationally. Funded by Arts Council England and Baring Foundation, overseen by the National Centre for Creative Health. The scheme is subsidising the first two years of a 'Creative Health Lead' (CHL) role for 25-30 health and care systems across England. Appointing cohorts of six localities staggered at 3–6-month intervals.

The CHL's are planned to work across prevention, population health, neighbourhood models and clinical pathways to strengthen the strategic and operational integration of creative health in their localities. A combination of strategic work and on the ground support for neighbourhood teams and creative health assets- familiar to the Doncaster Creative Connector role.

In a recent press release, after selection to receive a CHL, Nick Broughton, (Chief Executive Officer of Buckinghamshire Oxfordshire & Berkshire West and Frimley Integrated Care Board), describes a key desired outcome from participating in the scheme, as enabling more people from currently excluded populations to feel connected to creative health: *'particularly those who don't always find traditional services easy to access'* (National Centre for Creative Health, 2026).

Future trials could test the hypothesis that the Creative Health Ambassador model could be overseen in different localities, by CHL's, to support neighbourhood teams and creative health providers extend their reach and develop their services in alignment with local need.

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Creative Health Connection

What is a Creative Health Connection?

A Creative Health Connection or CHC is a title given to an organisation or service who has a commitment to working with the cultural sector to ensure that everybody in Doncaster can access participatory creative activities, resulting in them feeling happier, healthier and more resilient.

What does a CHC involve?

A Creative Health Connection has three key aims:

1. Linking individuals with lived experience of ill health into Creative Health programmes.
2. Working with the cultural sector to make sure programmes are meeting the needs of those with the highest risk of poor health.
3. Working with the cultural sector to monitor and evaluate the impact of Creative Health programmes on individuals' health journeys.

What are the benefits of being a CHC?

CHCs will receive the following:

- Quarterly updated information about Doncaster's Creative Health offer including fliers, text message updates and newsletters.
- Shared data and case studies around participant health journeys.
- Bi-monthly meeting with the Creative Health Connector to discuss challenges, identify opportunities and support with aims.
- An invite to be part of the CHC Network where training, shared learning and peer support is available.

Who manages the CHC?

CHCs are agreed by Doncaster's Creative Health Board and the network is managed and maintained by the Creative Health Connector

Suggested organisations/services

- | | | |
|------------------|---------------------|---------------|
| - AHP | - Jackson Hope/ | - Open Minds |
| - Doncaster Mind | Andy's Man Club | - Flourish |
| - 4Doncaster | - Changing Lives | - Age UK |
| - PFG | - ASPIRE/ Project 6 | - GP Training |