



**The Queen's Award
for Voluntary Service**

The MBE for volunteer groups

A year crowned with another major award

**Borderland Voices: Art
for health &
mental wellbeing**



The High Sheriff's Award – another feather in our cap

Borderland Voices, Story of our Year, 2024-25

Introduction and executive summary, Andy Collins, Coordinator



***Putting on the style for the 40s Celebration Day
photo courtesy Mark***

As is often the case, it's felt like quite a roller-coaster of a year. The 40s Celebration Day at the Foxlowe in May (culmination of our National Lottery Heritage Fund [NLHF] Women's Land Army [WLA] project) took immense organisation and involved too many volunteers to mention. But the weather did us proud and it was joyful from beginning (setting up for a start at 11) to end (when the dance band played the last waltz at 10). In between we had music, sunshine, blacksmithing, 40s food courtesy of Julie at the Foxlowe, a wonderful Polish dance troupe and much more, with people in period costume mingling everywhere. The day attracted about 1300 people and a glowing compliment from OUTSIDE's Sarah Bird (see Impact/Value).

On the flip side, the WLA leaflets to accompany the exhibition didn't arrive in time; and when they did they'd been bound incorrectly so had to go back, but such is life.

A successful bid to Staffs County Council (SCC) funded our core service for 9 months. We continue to support regular participants' mental well-being via two face-to-face creative sessions every week (writing and expressive art) and engage in outreach to counteract stigma. Sarah Males is our writer in residence, with various visual artists leading expressive arts sessions. I fill in gaps as necessary, which saves money. Having a large enough room at Leek Health Centre (LHC) only 1 day/week and with currently no funding for additional artists, we're restricted to 2 sessions and put referrals/self-referrals on a waiting list.

Suddenly in November LHC indicated that they couldn't renew the lease but, at the 11th hour, found us a slightly smaller room. Then at the beginning of March we were moved back to 'our' original room. It is now, conveniently, laid out permanently conference-style, with padded chairs round a central island of tables. This makes setting up much easier if I'm away.

Socialising is always as vital to BV as learning or developing arts skills. We've had fewer visits this year, but the art group had 5 monthly sessions in the Foxlowe Bar area. This was an attempt, within the SCC funding, to engage with support group



Photos transferred onto cotton tote bags and notebooks - Jeanette



***The Rockabilly Dolls provided wonderful close-harmony singing of 40s favourites throughout the 40s Celebration, interspersed with a George Formby tribute act.
Photo courtesy Mark***

Reaching N Staffs (RNS) who meet there weekly. Unfortunately few RNS members got involved, and several from BV found the area very cold (we were there November to March) so it was disappointing.

The SCC project, as a whole though, was fun and successful. It highlighted the 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' which have long been promoted to support physical and mental health. These are Connect, Learn, be Active, Notice and Give (which have always underpinned BV activity). Creative interpretations of these themes feature throughout this document. We're organising an event on Monday 12 May, 7pm in the Quaker Meeting House to showcase the writing and art (a date for your diary).

I continue to do admin from home but am almost always at LHC on Wednesdays. With the current room arrangement, there's little setting up to do, which makes my life easier.

All participants are volunteers in one way or another, perhaps without realising it, maintaining BV's vital web of emotional support and practical help. I'm indebted to them, to the trustees and to our accountant, Liz.

In December 2024 we received an invitation from the Lieutenancy to attend a 'Together at Christmas' carol service in Uttoxeter parish church. It reflected the Princess of Wales's Royal Foundation Carol Service in Westminster Abbey with its theme of 'Empathy'. I was pleased that participant trustee Bill was able to come with me.

Apart from the SCC grant, I've had time to apply only for small sums to fund discrete projects, such as textile sessions for Leek's first Textile Festival and Gordon McLellan to lead our '24 Doors' activities.

Networking remains an important way to keep BV in the minds both of the general public and of organisations we have contact with. This annual 'story', our calendar, monthly newsletters and the Facebook page are equally important ways of maintaining a public profile.

The section on Impact/Value includes feedback from participants at the end of the WLA project (which contributed to our successful final report to NLHF) plus selected evaluations from lead artists during the SCC project (which will likewise feed into its final report).



Acrylic flower study - Tia



Volcanic landscape, Texture - Will

In March I was asked to deliver a short speech on Covid Reflection Day, highlighting in particular the contribution made by the voluntary and community sector during the pandemic. At the event, held in John Hall Wellness Gardens, various civic dignitaries spoke, children from St Mary’s Catholic Academy recited poems (including one by our participant trustee Bill) and there were 2 moving songs.

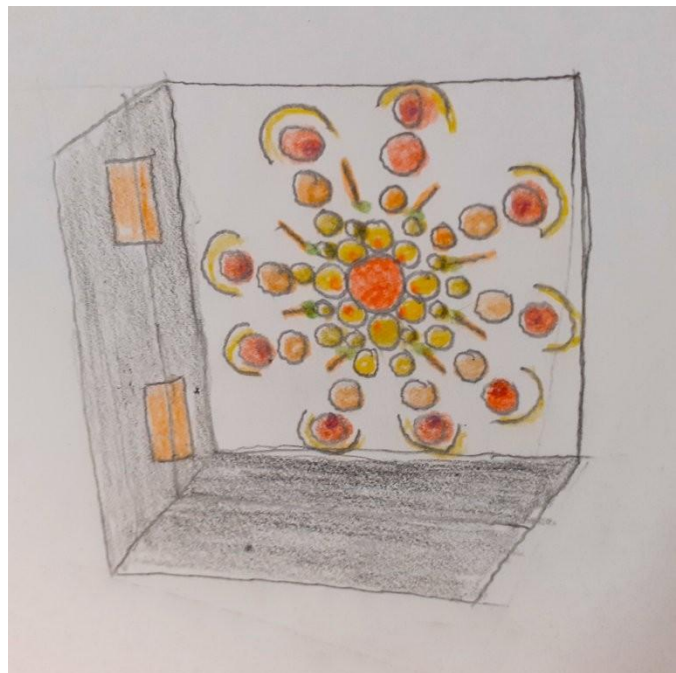
Finally, at the end of this eventful year, we received a prestigious accolade: an award from Julia Mitchell, retiring High Sheriff of Staffs, ‘in recognition of great and valuable services to the community’. I was delighted

to be able to take my husband, John, to the awards ceremony in Stoke Town Hall – a very grand building.

Please enjoy this story of our year with all its colourful images.

Our objectives. We continue to:

1. Provide weekly, enjoyable arts activities, in many forms, to support the health and mental wellbeing of regular participants, from in and around the Staffordshire Moorlands;
2. Employ local professional artists, supplemented occasionally by in-house expertise, to lead arts sessions;
3. Encourage participants, whether or not they have mental health issues, to socialise and support one another in order to help combat stigma;
4. Tackle stigma through displays, public events, publications, media coverage etc. which also raise awareness of our work;
5. Take part in community arts events.



Observational drawing - Jeanette

Under each heading, these are our Key Achievements:

1. **Weekly creative writing and art sessions.**

Core activities (creative writing and expressive art sessions) take place in-person, at our base in LHC. We completed the WLA project and then took inspiration from a range of other topics, many linked to the ‘Five Ways to Wellbeing’ (initially proposed by the New Economics Foundation in 2008). They are: Connect, Learn, be Active, Notice and Give.

The activity room is available only on Wednesday and is generally near capacity (12). Our participants from across the Moorlands and further afield enjoy writing, art, drinks, biscuits and the supportive chat which is integral to BV activities. Many generously donate weekly, or as their finances allow, to support the sessions, even though money is tight.

2. Arts-sector employment.

We've had no student placements, but have welcomed 2 new visual artists, enjoyed some return visits and Andy has led several sessions, to cover for illness, holidays etc.

Sarah Males facilitated most of the writing workshops, with Andy filling in as necessary, and we had another workshop with Alison Boyle.

Art sessions have included Curlews (Moira McCourt), Castleton Garland Day (Sarah), colour and texture (Andy), coastal towns (Andy), flowers in watercolour and pen (Sheena), textiles including needle-felted landscapes and beaded bracelets (Kim Greenwood), 5 ways pocketbooks (Sarah), the autumn equinox, autumn landscapes and Halloween (Andy), Connect (wall-hangings for 24 Doors evening, Sarah), capturing 'Activity' (Sarah), Notice (observational drawing, Sarah), Give (posters, Sarah), Christmas – love it or loathe it? (shadow puppets, Gordon McLellan), Christmas decorations (Andy), flowers in acrylics (Frances Naggs), Imbolc and the Snow or Bony Moon (Sarah) and



Castleton Garland Day - Pauline



Curlew display at Leek Quaker Meeting House



Movement, being Active - Tony

photography ('Learn', Cathy Bower).

Some of this artwork illustrates our story, together with photos of various visits and events.

3. Socialisation and peer support.

BV revolves around socialisation and peer

support. Writing and art sessions are inclusive and encouraging, but an underpinning web – of phone calls, visits, shopping, emails, texts, car shares and practical help holds people throughout the rest of the week.

Nothing could have been more social than the 40s Celebration Day which flooded the Foxlowe with colour, movement, energy, music and nostalgia. Several participants, notably Linda, Tia and Tony, really got into the swing and the 40s costumes.

Though we've had fewer visits than last year (during the WLA project) we went with OUTSIDE's WayMaking to Gradbach. It



Art session in the bar area of the Foxlowe

being Maggie's birthday, she celebrated by paddling in the Dane. We also had the 5 joint sessions with

RNS in the Foxlowe bar, somewhat marred by it being a chilly area in winter. On our day trip to Pam Brough's 'stone caravan' for one of the photography sessions, we saw hail, snow and sun, but were cosy inside.

Yet again, we enjoyed a relaxed, bring-and-share Christmas lunch at LHC.

4. Tackling stigma and raising awareness.

Andy continues to attend various

online meetings, where she represents BV. Foremost are the Staffs Moorlands Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Forum and the VCSE Alliance Mental Health Forum.

We're fortunate to have 3 District Councillors on the Board and the Admin Assistant of Leek Town Council, who are all well placed to further the cause of BV.

Our Facebook group

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1398672493722468>

is an active virtual space where members and 'friends' share news and views.



Acrylic flowers - Rachel



Christmas bring and share lunch, which included trustees



Textile display in the Nicholson Institute: felted landscapes, woven/beaded cuffs and bracelets and creative writing

And we have contributed to a number of local face-to-face events.

Obviously, the 40s Celebration Day in May 2024 was huge, probably the largest event that BV has ever staged. It was promoted as part of the Leek Arts Festival and drew crowds of at least 1300.

We also raised awareness of the plight of curlews, with a display of beautiful artwork done during an afternoon with Moira McCourt. We exhibited it

at the Quaker Meeting House and also at Warslow Flower Festival, next to the Moorlands Climate Action display.

For the umpteenth year, we delivered a kid's activity (WLA-based) at the annual Foxlowe HuG environmental arts festival in June 2024. We delivered a similar activity at Leek 'Party in the Park' (celebrating 100 years of Brough Park, July 2024).

Andy took the WLA exhibition and kids activities to a D-Day commemoration event in Endon in June 2024, involving 2 local primary schools and Sarah followed this up with similar activities at Endon Breakfast Club in August 2024.



Curlew display in Warslow Church for their Flower Festival

Our BV banner, designed for and flown during Leek's inaugural textile festival, featured words symbolising what BV means: Mind, Help, Support, Friendship, Togetherness, Creativity, Well-being, Health, Fun, Art and Talking. Additionally, we contributed a small but striking display to the festival, of textile work done with Kim Greenwood and short pieces of creative writing about 'Textiles'.

As usual, the writing group quickly assembled the 2025 calendar and Bob Foster kindly agreed, again, to produce camera-ready artwork for the new print firm. To meet 'market demand', Bob incorporated the days of the month in a way which makes the calendar much more user-friendly. Again, Tia helped at the Twilight Market where we sold quite a few. Although we raised the price to make a modest profit, it's as popular as



Community library session created shadow puppets for '24 Doors'
Photo courtesy Gordon McLellan

ever, remaining a vital awareness-raising tool. We also sent copies to the King and to the Princess of Wales, both of whom acknowledged it warmly.

5. Community involvement.

Most of our contributions to the life of the community are listed in the previous section.

In addition, OUTSIDE Arts coordinated another '24 Doors' 'living advent calendar' throughout December 2024. Our contribution this time reflected, in a fairly light-hearted way, BV's concern with mental wellbeing (at a time of year that many find challenging). 'Christmas – love it or loathe it?' was a shadow-puppet play which Gordon McLellan devised with BV participants and people who attended a community workshop in Leek Library. The words came from BV writing sessions with Sarah.

Although some people enjoy Christmas, others dislike the artificiality and commercialism or miss loved ones; so we asked the question 'What would you rather be doing?' For some, this was enjoying a walk on a frosty winter

morning, for others soaking up the sun on a Caribbean cruise.

The repeat performances took place in one of our last year's venues: the main doors into Moorlands House on Stockwell St. We enlivened the stairwell with colourful '5 ways' banners, some made jointly with the RNS group. Despite indifferent weather, over 415 people (often families) knocked on the door and watched the show. OUTSIDE asked visitors for 3 words to sum up their experience; 'magical', 'fun', 'brilliant', 'community', 'exciting' and 'inspiring' featured frequently.



24 Doors event: Christmas, love it or loathe it? Shadow-puppet play, devised and performed by Gordon McLellan. Words BV, puppets BV, community and Gordon McLellan. Photo courtesy OUTSIDE

The Women's Land Army Project

Blessed by glorious weather, the grand finale event, a 1940s Celebration Day in May 2024 at the Foxlowe, was a resounding success.

The date just happened to coincide with the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Monte Cassino, where the Polish 2nd army was pivotal. Many veterans eventually came to Blackshaw Moor resettlement camp just outside Leek (one of many such camps throughout Britain) and established our local Polish community. A decision to have some joint elements of celebration (in addition to a separate and immensely popular Polish exhibition in the Nicholson) meant that our 40s Day included Polish cut paper craft, some Polish food and the splendid Manchester Polish Dance Troupe during the interval in the evening ‘Swing Band’ dance.



Acrylic flowers and still life - Simon

Legacy activities have included the various events mentioned in Section 4 above; a final talk to a WI by Chair Pauline and a follow-up presentation to the Moorlands Brunch Bunch (to whom our historian Richard Godley gave a very early talk) by Andy.

Andy spent many hours assembling the final narrative report for the NLHF and similarly Liz laboured over invoices to demonstrate that we had used public money correctly to achieve our stated outcomes. This unlocked the remaining 10% of the grant in arrears.

Impact/value

The assessment of BV’s impact this year comes primarily from 2 sources: participant feedback at the end of the WLA project (summer 2024) and a selection of evaluations from lead artists during the 9 months of activity (July 2024-March 2025) funded by the Staffs County Council grant.

As a result of our delivering the ‘Five Ways to Wellbeing’ project, Andy is now part of an online

partnership, led by SCC, examining how “To empower individuals in the community to realise their own unique ability to support their health and wellbeing, using the 5 ways framework of Connecting, Being active, Taking notice, Keeping learning and Giving.”

But the first accolade comes from Sarah Bird, Creative Director of OUTSIDE Arts.

Massive congratulations Andy to you and all the team on such a wonderful, joyful and inspiring



5 ways to wellbeing – stitched, illustrated booklets

celebration. 40s celebration day [May 2024], Sarah Bird, OUTSIDE, Creative People and Places, Staffs Moorlands/Arts Council England

BV participant feedback (end of WLA project)



Bony, hunger or snow moon - Mary

BV has helped me so much since I first started. I was a nervous wreck who didn't wish to interact with anyone and shook just by being in a room of strangers. It's helped me interact with new people, create a social group (something I don't have a lot of, outside this space) and I've made good friends. I've gained some confidence back, interact more in group discussion and enjoy it – something I never thought I'd achieve – all through the support of BV.

I enjoy the comradeship, the caring, the quality of the work and the voices.

I came to Leek still unable to shake off substance dependency. Alongside conventional detox, my GP suggested Borderland Voices as a way to regain social confidence and a sense of self-worth. I took up the suggestion; BV was welcoming and supportive. The people were an essential part of my recovery, and the journey I have since made, in becoming an active member of the community in Leek. I cannot speak highly enough of those who make BV what it is.

The service that BV provides gives participants wider empathy and knowledge of the wider world and an increase in confidence through working with others, who may have similar or differing problems with mental health. The WLA project proved interesting for participants of different ages – they gained knowledge of the history of the Land Army together with taking part in the various reminiscence projects, artwork and creative writing – altogether improving self-confidence and ability to interact with others away from their home environment.



Coastal town - Pauline

The group is always very well presented and stimulating. I enjoy the chance to discover new things and see the creativity of others. The Land Girls/Lumber Jills was a new area for me and was fascinating. I was introduced to paintings of the era by Evelyn Dunbar, Laura Knight etc.

Can't think I would change anything; it helps me cope with everyday life. BV helped me when I desperately needed it.

I look forward to painting and colouring; it makes me feel better.



Landscape, colour - Andrew

I've been fascinated by what I have learned about the WLA. It's been very moving to imagine myself in their shoes. BV has been and is a highlight in what has often felt like a difficult internal life. The atmosphere is warm and friendly and provides a safe space. This enables me/us to develop our creativity – to find our voice. The writing can be very therapeutic. And the atmosphere of unconditional love is so very valuable.

Having the opportunity to work with others on a long-term project has been very beneficial to the cohesion

and developing friendships in the group.

Although I'll never be a confident person, on a weekly basis my spirits are lifted and often it is the springboard into the rest of the week, which cannot be overestimated. I've always felt wanted, accepted and needed at BV, which is great, and I have some really lovely friends, who I know have all had their personal issues, so I feel close to them because I realise ever more acutely how much we need one another.

'One moment in time', so the song goes; we all should have our one moment in time, a moment when we can shine, be proud of ourselves. Mine was a few years ago now, when I hadn't long joined BV and I got the chance, at the Foxlowe in Leek, to stand on stage and read a piece of writing that I wrote about the WLA, in front of about 60 people. I had zero confidence and I was so nervous, but I did it; I got through it. That was truly one of my best moments in time.

BV are seriously a life-line to people like me who need to feel accepted, respected and be doing something worthwhile for my mental health and wellbeing. Working on the WLA project was very interesting, the amount of work was amazing because we all worked as a team; as I believe the women on the land did. Britain is great because people all stood together, even as the bombs landed. Working together gets positive results!

Lead artist's evaluations, SCC/VCSE grant project



Photograph - Jeanette

I encouraged people to work together to appreciate each other's images too and guide each other. The group dynamic was really nice and people enjoyed working together.

People enjoyed learning a new skill which they can use in everyday life as a creative outlet.

Some of the images created were fantastic and I definitely saw people's confidence grow each week, as well as their skills. **(Cathy Bower, photography)**

Participants showed evident absorption in the process of painting and talked about the relaxing nature of the activity. They also enjoyed seeing the differences between their own and others' work and were supportive to each other when evaluating their own and others' work.

They became more confident and fluent with their use of the materials and appeared to be increasingly comfortable sharing their work within the group.

It's very apparent that participants appreciate the opportunity to attend the group and explore and increase their skills in a supportive caring setting. It's also clear that the classes are very important to them for maintaining their mental health. **(Frances Naggs, acrylic flower studies)**

Workshops were calm and the participants' concentration was good and they were pleased with the work they'd produced which helped their confidence and feeling of well-being. I cut out and mounted the individual 'blooms' into mini 'bouquets'. Subsequently these were digitally amalgamated into a composite image for the cover of the calendar, which always aims to include work by all group members. **(Sheena Barnes, watercolour and pen flower studies)**

For some regular BV participants, visiting a less familiar venue and working alongside another group was a challenge but all managed very well. Over the weeks, they developed confidence and familiarity with the Foxlowe space.

Each of these activities provided opportunity to discuss and explore how individuals can look after and improve their wellbeing. In some instances this was about recognising things people are already doing, including regular attendance at BV. **(Sarah Males: Connect, be Active, Notice and Give art sessions delivered at the Foxlowe. [Learn was covered by photography])**

I hoped this activity would be relaxing and engaging in itself but would also provide each participant with their personal "self-help" booklet for future use. This seemed successful.

A few participants asked for help with sewing and binding pages together, showing confidence in being able to seek and accept help. **(Sarah Males, 5 ways pocket books)**

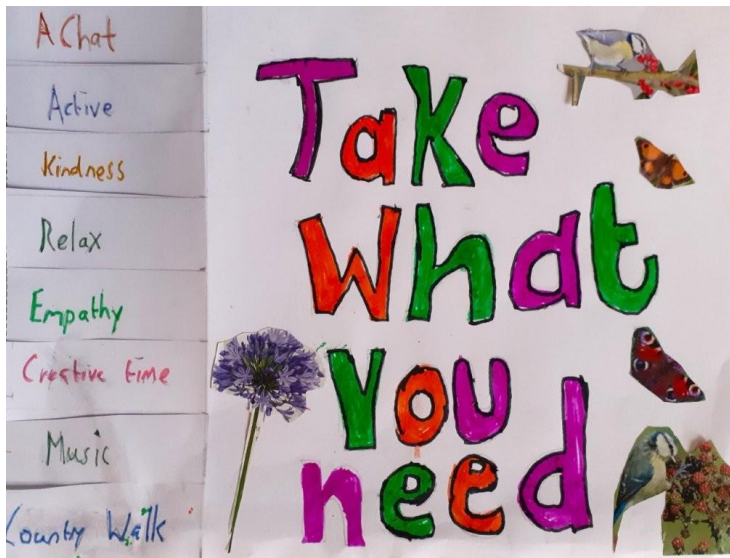
All engaged well with the Five ways theme, learning and creatively interpreting each of the ways. This was maintained at intervals throughout the nine months the project ran.



Photograph - Simon

Participants were able to identify opportunities for further activity within their daily routines, discussing classes, groups and facilities in the local area (in addition to recognising how they benefit from participating in Borderland Voices on a regular basis.)

(Sarah Males, Creative writing, specifically about the 5 ways to wellbeing)



A 'Giving' poster - Matt

Although needle felting was new to everyone, they soon learned the technique (without stabbing themselves with a needle). All revelled in the vibrant colours of the wool tops used for the felting, but equally learned how to overlay thin skeins of different colours to achieve gradations. The finished scenes were varied and colourful, ranging from the Beatles Yellow Submarine to a pastoral scene of sheep in a field.

I was proud to mount the finished pieces, together with short pieces of creative writing about 'Textiles', as a small display contributing to Leek's first-ever Textile

Festival. **(Kim Greenwood, textiles – felted landscapes and woven beaded bracelets)**

Volunteers

Andy, as coordinator, our trustees, volunteers, our arts facilitators and of course our participants make up the BV peer support network which is almost like a family.

This section wouldn't be complete without mentioning Liz, our accountant; Andy relies heavily on her and the hours she puts in, many on a voluntary basis. For a second year, Bob turned the calendar into camera-ready artwork for printing, including space for notes/birthdays etc which people had requested. When Andy is away, Sarah and Mark both help set up and take down the activity room. Tia, Will and Bill help in various ways most weeks. Those with cars give lifts when we go on visits and others maintain phone contact with people who can't come along to BV. Linda and Tia have also helped at outside events, as well as coming in wonderfully 40s style to the 40s Day at the Foxlowe.

Our Chair Pauline contributed significantly to the WLA project throughout, while she, Bob and Mark helped with the mammoth task of organising May's WLA finale.

Yet again, our good friend Gordon MacLellan, came over the hills from Buxton to facilitate and deliver our event for the OUTSIDE '24 Doors' project.



Photos transferred onto notebooks

And of course Andy's husband and daughter are both towers of strength.

Medium to Long-term strategy

Finally we have started seriously to investigate 'Maintaining funding' and 'Planning for succession' with the help of Sarah Roberts of Support Staffs (SuS).



Photo taken at Pam's - Maggie

The final report on the WLA project absorbed much of Andy's time until August. Its successful completion brought in the last 10% of the NLHF grant to pay for the last of the work undertaken on the project. Since then, there have been 1 or 2 small grants, plus just over £12.5K from Staffs County Council to run all BV creative activities for 9 months, July '24 to March '25.

Pauline made a successful bid to Sus for a bursary covering 10 hours of professional advice. Sarah will act as a critical friend, helping a sub-group to think about succession planning, funding, strengths and weaknesses in

an ever-changing world and ultimately to produce a business plan.

After an initial session with Sarah, the Trustees met before the end of March to look in detail at Succession Planning. Bob drafted a report in 2021, following meetings with Liz, Mark and Andy, but it always slipped to the bottom of the agenda.

BV largely depends on Liz and Andy. In the event of either being unable to continue, temporarily or permanently, named trustees have now volunteered to undertake the jobs needed to keep BV going.

The next stage, to develop a Business Plan with Sarah's help, will continue in the coming financial year.

Networking and links



Watercolour flower study - Tia



Equinox - Mavis

- Archives; Councillors
- Integrated Care System (ICS) for Staffordshire and Stoke
- Leek Town Council: Officers and Councillors
- Stone and Water (Buxton-based artists' cooperative)
- Brighter Futures and the Mental Health Helpline
- Staffs Moorlands social prescribing link workers
- National Council for Voluntary Organisations
- W Midlands Arts, Health and Wellbeing Changes – 12 Steps to Mental Health
- National Association for Social Prescribing
- Institute for Voluntary Action Research
- Adult Community Mental Health Team
- Baring Foundation
- John Hall Wellness Garden (Rethink)
- WELLIES health and wellness CIC
- Staffordshire Community Foundation
- Citizens Advice Bureaux
- The Foxlowe Arts Centre
- Leek College of Art
- Dove Valley Centre
- SuS Health and Care Forum
- OUTSIDE Arts Project
- Samaritans
- Healthwatch

Whenever possible, Andy 'attends' relevant online meetings. These save time and the environment while helping us maintain important networks.

We've had excellent relations with Jill Norman, longstanding operations manager for **Support Staffordshire (SuS) (Staffs Moorlands)** who retires on 31st March and look forward to developing a similar rapport with her successor, Baz Tameez. As our VCSE umbrella organisation, SuS deliver various useful, free training courses.

We also network with the following:

- Staffordshire Moorlands District Council: Officers and Councillors
- Staffs Moorlands Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Assembly
- Staffs County Council: Library Service; County



Wall hangings, including some of the 5 ways to wellbeing decorating the stairwell of our door, '24 Doors' living advent evening