



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

The MBE for volunteer groups

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



Gradually Reconnecting, Face-to-Face



Coil pots, made with placement student Jess

Borderland Voices Annual Report, 2021-22

Introduction and executive summary, Andy Collins, Coordinator

It's 24 years since Borderland Voices (BV) began using participatory arts to support mental well-being and improve public understanding of mental health issues. Thankfully, the second half of this year has allowed us to restart both the face-to-face creative sessions which so many people find invaluable and the outreach which counteracts stigma.



Floral form, Tia. Print making

Although we may now have to accept that COVID-19 will always be with us, the vaccination programme and sensible precautions have enabled us largely to dispense with Zoom. We held exploratory lunchtime get-togethers in August so that people could see how comfortable they felt, meeting again in a group, in an enclosed space. Facilitated writing and art sessions recommenced in September. As I mentioned last year, we now operate out of premises to the rear of Leek Health Centre (LHC) on Fountain St. Again, last year, I touched on the fact that we have use of a (good sized) activity space only 1 day/week, in comparison with Bank House. There we could have held sessions 5 days/week, given the resources to employ arts facilitators. This is starting to become an issue for various reasons.

Firstly, with the easing of restrictions, Social Prescribing Link Workers have referred a steady trickle of new participants. Social Prescribers generally operate within GP's surgeries (although in our area they're employed by Support Staffordshire [SuS]). The idea is not new - BV ran a pilot 'Arts on

Prescription' project 16 years ago – but social prescription has recently become popular with the NHS. The idea, of 'prescribing' people with exercise, art, social groups etc. rather than medicalising everything, is very welcome. Unfortunately, the model doesn't include financial support for those groups and charities which take pressure off the health services. Secondly, many people's mental health suffered during Covid and more individuals are approaching BV to take part in our activities. Finally, Kniveden closed and the future of Rethink's services, including John Hall Gardens, was in the balance. For 20 years, the former provided specialised arts and gardening therapy in the community for people with often complex needs. The latter, thankfully, has reinvented itself as John Hall Wellness Garden and seems to be thriving. These uncertainties sent yet more participants in our direction and we now have a waiting list.

Our Women's Land Army (WLA) project, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), has made quiet, steady progress despite the pandemic. Our Chair Pauline and project employees Richard Godley and Catherine Croney have visited the Staffordshire Records Office. Richard finally



Women's Land Army memorial visit



BV reading at the 'Writing Leek' event (photo R. Godley)

in-person participation, although many were still hesitant about public transport at that time. Rain didn't dampen enjoyment or interest in seeing the memorial and the rest of the incredible site. For several months, our writer-in-residence, Sarah Males, facilitated BV sessions linked to the WLA. In March, (Trustee) Mark was instrumental in organising Leek's first literary festival – Writing Leek – including WLA exhibition stewarded by Richard and WLA-themed writing delivered by BV participants. We've also displayed the exhibition at various other town events as they have gradually restarted.

I continue largely to work flexibly from home: enhanced by acquiring a laptop with money from the National Lottery's Celebrate 25 Fund (the remainder we contributed to Leek's Welcome Back activities as lockdown eased). I've participated in Zoom seminars from LHC and, during a 3-day power cut at home, taken my 'office' to friends who still had electricity and internet connection. I am, however, almost invariably at LHC on Wednesdays to set up the room and clear away; new tasks, post Bank House.

Most participants have now returned to in-person sessions, although some remain wary of using buses, especially when they are full of school pupils. Sadly, a general deterioration in health means that 1 or 2 previous 'regulars' such as Marion can no longer join us, but participants keep in touch with them by phone.

Although the self-help art group remains in abeyance, a replacement for Patchwork has developed. Craft and Chatter takes place each Monday, 10.30-12.30, in Leek Library and includes participants who formerly came to Patchwork at BV.

Our wonderful volunteer Becca, whose Packs inspired so much excellent art, had to leave us to concentrate on her MA course and the 'day-job' which finances her studies. We were, however, delighted to welcome Jess Vere on a 3-month student placement from Derby University's Creative Expressive Arts, Health and Wellbeing undergraduate degree.

managed to deliver his fascinating illustrated Zoom presentation to an appreciative audience. After he, assisted by Pauline, gave talks to Ladydale Care Home and Meerbrook WI, Pauline arranged a selection of his WLA artefacts in Leek Library. After a general display in Cheadle Library during their Arts Festival we also exhibited WLA memorabilia there. Catherine continued following up contacts to record reminiscences. As promised, (trustee) Matt Swindlehurst, son of a Lumber Jill, coordinated a coach trip to see the WLA memorial at Alrewas in September. Open to the general public, this was our first attempt at encouraging wider



Floral still-life, Mary. Acrylic

Quite apart from the always-inspiring calendar, which was significantly simpler to assemble in person, outreach events have become easier, thanks to the easing of Covid restrictions. There are details under 'Tackling stigma and raising awareness' but I must mention one other thing. Lyn Swindlehurst, who became Town Mayor in May 2021, is dedicating her fund-raising efforts and significant social media exposure to 2 charities, one of which is BV. We're immensely grateful for her support.

As always, the Board has both encouraged me throughout the year and provided volunteer assistance at various events. Our accountant Liz is a constant source of help and advice without which I, and BV, could not function. But in the end, BV is all about our participants, who have continued to cope in uncertain and trying times and support one another and us.



Corona-quilt (everyday rituals), Mary. Felt-tip pen



Crop study, Will. Pencil

Our objectives. This year we've endeavoured, subject to Covid restrictions which remained until September 2021, to:

1. Provide weekly, enjoyable arts activities, in many forms, to support the health and mental wellbeing of regular participants, in and around the Staffordshire Moorlands;
2. Employ local professional artists to facilitate arts sessions;
3. Encourage participants to socialise and support one another, whether or not they have mental health issues, to help combat stigma;
4. Tackle stigma through displays, exhibitions, public events, publications, media coverage etc. which also raise awareness of our work;
5. Participate in community arts events as funding permits.

Under each heading, these are our Key Achievements:

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



Chinese New Year, Liz. Mixed media

participants were relieved to come to our new home for writing, art, drinks, biscuits and the supportive, informal conversation which is integral to BV activities. Many participants continue generously to make weekly voluntary donations to support sessions. A suitable room is available only 1 day/week, which also means setting up beforehand and clearing everything at the end of the day.

2. **Arts-sector employment.** *Sarah Males continued frequently to join the Zoom writing and to undertake the (unpaid) collating of work. Becca produced monthly art-packs before starting an MA in Art Therapy at Derby University in October 2021. In September 2021 we finally returned to in-person sessions. Once more, Sarah usually runs the writing group while different people deliver the expressive art strand, for 3-4 weeks at a time. From February (actually to the end of April) Jess Vere, a Derby University student, is spending her final year 3-month placement with us.*

Becca's remaining art packs included: contributing to an online 'Corona-quilt' (theme – rituals of everyday); 'Steal their style' (Salomon, Kahlo, Hockney, Warhol, Miro, Dali); Historic buildings; Rousseau's jungle artwork; and Klimt/Art Nouveau. Since September we've tackled Trees, inspired by a

We maintained core activities (creative writing and expressive art) remotely until September 2021 when we reverted to in-person sessions, not having the resources to run Zoom as well.

Although writing works quite well remotely, art sessions really need interaction with the lead artist who can demonstrate, help and inspire. Sadly, relatively few people responded to Becca's wonderful art-packs which we posted out every month. After researching sensible precautions, we restarted sessions at LHC in September. In spite of initial misgivings about meeting again in person, many



Grin Low Woods visit



Still life with fruit, Simon. Acrylic applied with fingers

this document.

3. Socialisation & peer support.

The challenge of maintaining social contact and support, often so vital to those with mental health issues, lasted until the lifting of Covid restrictions and beyond. It lingers for people who still worry about meeting face-to-face or travelling on buses; whose worsened physical health makes attendance impossible or whose mental well-being has deteriorated.

But participants continue to support one another in innumerable ways. Bill Taylor, Jane Malkin and Mark Johnson were recognised in the 2021 Volunteer Star Awards arranged by SuS and finally received their awards in person, after an initial virtual ceremony. Bill and Mark are again nominated in 2022.

Most participants gradually returned in-person from September '21. Andy undertook training about how to keep people as safe as possible. The freedom to develop creativity and share experiences again over a drink and a biscuit offered a stark contrast to the darkest days of lockdown. But participants didn't forget those unable or unwilling to re-join us and kept in touch. We've also gained



Mark, Jane and Bill on awards day (with town crier Bill Lomas who has made several donations to BV)

visit to Buxton's Grin Low woods (Sarah); Wartime Crops (Sheena); Christmas and New Year cards (Andy); and vibrant acrylics (Frances Naggs).

Jess has introduced print-making techniques, 3-D work (coil pots and wire/papier mache figures) and plans abstract landscapes in April. In a different vein, Ruby, an artist we've worked with in the past, is now a part-time Grow Well Coordinator at the Serpentine Community Garden in Buxton.

Examples of all the wonderful and colourful artwork illustrate



New Year card, Pauline. Mixed media

several new members. With the lifting of restrictions, we've finally made some visits again (National Memorial Arboretum (NMA), Alrewas, September '21; Grin Low Woods and Poole's Cavern, Buxton, October '21) and enjoyed a 'bring and share' Christmas lunch at LHC.

4. Tackling stigma and raising awareness.

Even 'post-Covid', many meetings where Andy represents BV, including the Staffs Moorlands Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Forum, remain on Zoom. Zoom also facilitates larger seminars with national participation (see Froglife, below). But with the relaxing of restrictions, we've also taken part again in face-to-face events.

Online, Facebook group membership continued to grow (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1398672493722468>).

To Staffordshire's History Festival, which remained online in October '21, we contributed daily photos and writing inspired by our visit to the WLA memorial at the NMA. In November '21 Andy and trustee/writer Mark contributed to

a national Froglife seminar on Zoom entitled 'Transforming lives through nature, sound and vision'. After Andy's intro and Powerpoint of selected BV artwork inspired by nature, Mark ran a mini creative writing session. At an online session organised by the National Association for Social Prescribing (NASP) Andy met Desi Gradinarova of Heritage England (HE) who wrote up our WLA project as a case study for both HE and NASP. (https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/land_girls/)

For a second year, there was no Mental Health Awareness Week in May '21, but by late spring 2021, when life began to open up, we displayed the WLA boards in Leek and Cheadle Libraries and took part in the Foxlowe's HuG environmental arts festival (June '21). The WLA theme tied in with the Blues and Americana festival (October '21) and WLA and general artwork appeared in a Town Council art display (October '21). We had a stall at the '21 Christmas lights switch-on.



WLA display. Sheena @ Blues & Americana festival. Photo Mark

Assembling the 2022 calendar was significantly easier with the writing group together and the result was as stunning and popular as ever. It remains a vital awareness-raising tool. Artwork stimulated by the Grin Low Woods visit is included in Buxton Art Gallery's Treasuring Trees exhibition, running February to June '22. Creative writing always features prominently in the monthly newsletter now, but in March '22 it literally

took centre stage. Mark was a lynchpin in a literary event – Writing Leek – with a major section devoted to BV participants reading their creative writing inspired by the life of Land Girls and Lumber Jills.

5. Community involvement.

As outlined in the previous section, civic and community life has gradually returned (for most people) to something approaching normality.

Even in May, when people remained ultra-cautious and public venues had to impose strict social distancing measures, we managed displays in libraries. Zoom (and similar technologies), as a legacy of the pandemic, continues to make certain types of community involvement (especially meetings) more convenient and environmentally friendly. For most of us, though, the latter part of the year has seen a welcome return to sitting round tables talking or chatting to visitors about displays and mental well-being.

Impact/value

Once again, Andy has had no time for formal impact assessment. Yet the eager return to in-person sessions of most existing participants, the enthusiasm of new ones and our reputation with referring organisations underline the value of BV to its members and the community.

Two edited extracts offer some context. The first is from a research digest commissioned by the Lloyds



Xmas decoration, Tia. Mixed media

Bank Foundation, highlighting the overwhelming value of small, local charities in supporting their communities during the pandemic. The second cites some of the evidence for social prescribing schemes. And BV offers precisely what social prescribers, needing creative outlets for their clients, are seeking.

The remaining quotes are writing from participants, demonstrating what BV has meant to them this year, and two thank-yous (for the Froglife seminar and the calendar).

The Value of Small in a Big crisis, Lloyds Bank Foundation of England and Wales, March 2021 (Most emboldening is original).



WLA display, Writing Leek event (photo R.Godley)

Firstly, we found that **smaller charities have demonstrated tremendous energy, flexibility and professionalism** to understand the implications of the crisis and continuously to adapt their provision to ever changing needs and circumstances **(they) 'showed up' and 'stuck around'**, using their position of trust



Corona-quilt, (everyday rituals), Matt. Pencil crayon

within communities experiencing complex social issues to support vulnerable people when they were needed most.

Secondly, the service offer concentrated on addressing four main areas of need - access to food, **isolation and loneliness**, information, and **mental health/wellbeing** – in ways tailored to different groups and communities experiencing complex social issues. Smaller charities found **multiple ways to maintain human contact** by checking up on people, keeping in touch with them, and connecting them to one another wherever possible.

Thirdly, the work of smaller charities during the pandemic has created **value for a wide range of different stakeholders: for individuals and communities** through personal outcomes linked to health, mental health, and social isolation that have prevented lives from getting worse and

ensured that people will be in a better position at the end of the pandemic than they would have otherwise been.

Finally, despite the incredible response of smaller charities to the pandemic - and the benefits this has brought - it has also presented them with three major challenges: the **changing nature of service user and community needs; organisational challenges associated with financial and human resources** and concerns about staff wellbeing and 'burnout' and finally, **sustaining relationships with clients, volunteers, and key partnerships** developed prior to and during the pandemic.

NASP Evidence Note: social prescribing and mental health November 2021 (The **emboldening** is mine).

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as 'a state of wellbeing in which the individual realises his/her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work [function] productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his/her community'.

Non-medical referrals such as befriending services, practical information including benefits and financial advice, **community activities, arts and culture** and physical activities, and those that take place in nature **can alleviate issues relating to loneliness, stress, mild to moderate depression, and anxiety.**



Solitary tree, Mark. Photograph



Abstract form, Liz. Print making

One report concluded that social prescribing holistic programmes can adopt a **preventative approach** to work with patients with long term conditions. Such an approach can be comprised of **peer support groups, creative arts**, physical activities, cooking courses, complementary therapies which the authors found were **all associated with better mental health and wellbeing outcomes**. The same study also found that engaging in holistic, structured activities **allowed individuals to be more involved in their own care, which further supports long term preventative care**.

Participant feedback

Forgetting

Here are some things that I have forgotten:

I have forgotten that the world revolves around me
 I have forgotten that my troubles are more important than others' misery
 It's quite slipped my mind that being kind is not enough reward

I have forgotten that actions deserve immediate applause
 I've totally forgotten how to cause a scene
 For the life of me I can't recall how to cry and bawl

I'm not perfect; I quite often remember that I stand at the centre of the World
 And for that moment I am what I was: bitter and curled
 But there's always Borderlands as an aide memoire
 When my memory stretches a little too far
 And to help me remember, just how to forget...

How are you going to use your new freedom?

Not much has changed yet, unfortunately, but it will be good to meet with groups of friends in gardens or parks again. I hope to go to the cinema soon when something interesting to me comes up on the programme. I went to an exhibition the other day which was good. However, I won't feel properly free until I can bump into someone in a crowd without worrying, jump on a crowded bus, join a non-socially distanced queue for the butcher's, browse close to another bookworm in the library, squeeze onto a packed tube train. In other words, I will only feel really free when I am no longer afraid of contact with my neighbour, my friend and my family and possibly causing them or myself the chance of harm.

Moving

It can be hard to get moving



WLA display Leek Library (photo Pauline)

Not just lack of motivation
Pain sometimes takes over my body
Making movement incapacitating.

Sleepless nights
When you want to just sleep
Turns into times of the day you nod off
When you want to be awake.

Before the lockdown
I went to the gym once a week
Losing this it has shown me
Just how much that one little movement helped.

But now my movement's coming back
By the kindness of a friend (*)
We walk out in the nice open scenery
It's helped me so much just having that movement.

(* a BV friend)

Wall

I was blocked/Every turn I took a wall appeared
I felt trapped/I'd turn
See what I thought was a way out
A wall would appear in the free space
Words would form becoming the wall:
'You're useless,'
'You're stupid,'
'You can't do anything.'
Every turn the words form the wall
Blocking me in/Further and further
Becoming claustrophobic, I scream
The words form:
'No one can hear you'
'No one's coming'
'No one cares'
Then new words appear, forming like a step.:
I
Care
 We
 Care
I see the words form more steps
The bad words try to mask them, failing:
You
 Matter
 You're
 Not
 Useless

I take the steps, trusting these new words, reaching closer to the top.
The nasty evil thoughts that cloud this place begin to whirl around,



Bring and share Christmas lunch at LHC



Coil pot, Tia

trying to knock me from the kindness of the words.

I hold on, knowing I'm close,

You

Are

Amazing

Believe

In

You

Because

You

Are

Wonderful.

I'm at the top.

The doubts, the darkness recede

It feels warm and bright

I look at those last words

Sometimes it's hard to believe in yourself.

But there are people with you who are helpful steps to help you remember:

You are a wonderful person.



Wartime crop, Izzy. Pencil

A huge thank you for all your brilliant, informative and entertaining presentations at the yesterday's webinar. I think the event went very well with lots of positive feedback. It is amazing the work that all of your organisations are doing, really impressive and impactful.

Cheers

Kathy (Wormald), Chief Executive Officer, Froglife

I just wanted to thank you so much for the lovely calendar, it came in the post today. It's such a nice change to receive something like this rather than the usual bills etc.

I have been looking through each month and it's just brilliant and shows how the group helps people to feel confident to express themselves and create an art piece.

Jayne Bowyer, Clerical Assistant, Springfield School (whose students gave us a donation)



Abstract/floral image, Tracey. Collage/Mixed media

Volunteers

As last year, our participants' peer support network has remained invaluable to all of us, including me. Then, since September '21, most of the other volunteering roles which sustain BV have re-emerged.

Our reliance on certain volunteers remains unchanged: Liz, our pro bono accountant, administrator and IT wrangler; Richard's photos for the calendar and our records; Bob, BV's webmaster.



Wartime crops, Liz. Watercolour. (Photo Richard Egan)

Heather (Tomkinson) donated arts materials; Sheena now continues to mount artwork, organised for a BV display board in the activity room, helped at the Christmas lights event; Matt arranged the coach trip to the NMA, is supporting (wife) Lyn's mayoral fund-raising which will benefit BV; Pauline's hard work on the WLA project has included setting up and stewarding displays and planning talks and visits to the Records Office; Sarah copy-types writing; Mark helped with display stewarding, wrote the intro for the online #StaffsHistFest, stewarded at the Christmas lights event, helped me present to the Froglife seminar, set up the Writing Leek event; Gordon (MacLellan) engineered our invitation to the Froglife seminar, facilitated the day visit to Buxton and included resulting artwork in the Gallery exhibition, worked on a couple of joint grant applications (so far unsuccessful); Pauline and Bob are revising the 3-year plan; the writing group selected



Tiger, Pauline. Felt-tip pen.

images for the 2022 calendar and wrote appropriate accompanying pieces; Maggie (Pollard) transported the Writing Leek display; Alison (Smith) donated expensive acrylics needed for sessions with Frances Naggs; various participants shared transport for our Buxton visit; people brought delicious food for our Christmas bring and share lunch; student Jess Vere's placement is voluntary. So volunteer input has largely returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Once again, my thanks to husband, John, who sustains me both when I'm working from home and when I arrive back from Leek, shattered, after a Wednesday at LHC.

Medium to Long-term strategy

'Maintaining funding' and 'planning for succession' remain top of the agenda, with both proving difficult to achieve.

Bob has produced an excellent 'succession' document, but ultimately the future of BV depends on eventually finding new faces to assume key roles e.g. Liz and Andy.

The funding situation for the next 1-2 years depends on the willingness of the NLHF to extend the WLA project (in view of the difficulties caused by Covid) and give us the 2nd half of the grant. All things considered, we've actually achieved a great deal, although not always as planned and not in schools or care homes.

We have a waiting list for activities, but Andy has not, to date, been able to attract money to fund facilitated sessions in another venue.

Networking and links

Andy is happy to 'attend' the online meetings which are a legacy of Covid, saving time and the environment but continuing to build and maintains networks.

It's with the financial help of **Support Staffordshire (SuS) (Staffordshire Moorlands)** that we have our LHC premises; as the VCSE umbrella organisation, they delivered invaluable training when restrictions eased.

We also network with the following:

- Moorlands Information Group (mental health: statutory and voluntary bodies and service users)
- Staffordshire Moorlands District Council: Officers and Councillors
- Staffs Moorlands Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Assembly
- W Midlands Arts, Health and Wellbeing
- Staffs County Council: Library Service; County Archives; Councillors
- Stone and Water (Buxton-based artists' cooperative)
- Brighter Futures and the Mental Health Helpline
- Staffs Moorlands social prescribing link workers
- SIL Leek (support for complex mental health needs)
- National Council for Voluntary Organisations
- Changes – 12 Steps to Mental Health
- National Association for Social Prescribing
- Institute for Voluntary Action Research
- Together we're Better (Sustainability and Transformation Plan Staffordshire)
- Coalition for Efficiency (training)
- Adult Community Mental Health Team
- Baring Foundation
- Leek Town Council
- Small Arts Network
- The Foxlowe Arts Centre
- Leek College of Art
- Leek Arts Forum
- Dove Valley Centre
- SuS Health and Care Forum
- Dr Plot's Festival
- Leek High School
- Rethink
- Healthwatch
- Kniveden Partnership



'Spring at last', Matt. Felt-tip pen

With new referrals from Social Prescribers, Kniveden, SIL and self-referrals, and the welcome return of familiar faces, both writing and art groups are often at capacity. Indeed, if everyone 'on the books' turned up, finding enough space would be difficult. The existence of a waiting list just underlines the vital service BV provides locally to support mental well-being.