The Queen's Award for Voluntary Service

The MBE for volunteer groups

Borderland Voices: Art for health & mental wellbeing

Consolidation and community involvement



'Wobbly' – our contribution to the 'Where's Wallaby' Trail

Borderland Voices, Story of our Year, 2025-26



Masked mayor at the 'Face your Fears' finale

Introduction and executive summary, Andy Collins, Coordinator

After last year's hectic finale of the Women's Land Army Project, followed by the lengthy associated reporting to the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), 2025-26 has seen quieter consolidation coupled with serious consideration of Borderland Voices' (BV's) future.

Having waded through all the NLHF reports and spreadsheets, we took a conscious decision to concentrate on smaller grants with (hopefully) proportionate admin.

We assembled a Business Plan, even though it was frequently difficult to align our charitable purposes with business concepts (see the section on Medium to Long-term Strategy). However, the process did crystalise our USP (unique selling point): 'Arts for mental well-being: supportive, personalised and there for as long as participants need it'. The facts that most of our participants come for years, for their weekly top-up of mutual support and creativity, and that we have an adequate space at Leek Health Centre (LHC) only 1 day/week (with currently no funding for additional artists) means we continue to be restricted to 2 weekly sessions, putting referrals/self-referrals on a waiting list.

Socialising always goes hand in hand with learning/developing arts skills at BV. We've managed several visits this year, some including tea/coffee and cake and the Rudyard day with lunch, too. WELLIES CIC from Sudbury delivered some fun craft sessions. And, as part of the 'Face your Fears' project (see Impact section) we involved BV volunteers in supporting activities both for a creative group at John Hall Wellness Garden and in the Butter Market.

In addition to regular events (HuG environmental arts Festival at the Foxlowe, Twilight Market, W End



Participants, in 40s attire helping at the VE Day 80th anniversary event

Funday) we've been heavily involved this year in many other community events. We organised a Wellbeing evening for Mental Health Awareness Week and were invited to contribute to both the VE Day 80th anniversary celebrations and the Nicholson Memorial centenary exhibition. For the latter, we asked Monument guide Ben Benefer to come and introduce the topic. We designed a beautiful wallaby for the Moorlands 'Where's Wallaby' Trail; stewarded the 'Rescue Me' stall at a Repair Café; made an artwork trail for 'Advent Celebrations' (successor to '24 Doors'); artwork for #ShowTheLove (organised annually, nationally by the Climate Coalition); were part of a Smart Symptoms Roadshow (organised by Support Staffs [SuS] as part of Village Halls Week); and hosted a Healthwatch Q and A session. In addition to BV workshops, our 'Face your Fears' project (see Impact section) delivered sessions at John Hall Wellness Gardens and with the public in the Butter Market, leading to a wonderful public finale. Additionally, we were the first group to explore (creatively as is our way) the Nicholson Museum's textile 'handling box', with Nic Jacubowski from OUTSIDE/Friends of the Nicholson introducing it and Andy feeding back to the Friends group. I believe this level of community commitment is exceptional for a relatively small charity such as BV.

I continue to do admin from home but am almost always at LHC on Wednesdays. 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.

Networking remains vital to keeping BV in the eye of the public and of organisations and individuals we deal 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 centres on the 'Face your Fears' project. Predictably, it was at times an emotional roller-coaster but all agreed on its value.

In a county-wide context, Sheena and I were honoured to represent BV in Lichfield Cathedral for a service celebrating the retirement of Lord Lieutenant Sir Ian Dudson (taking our Queen's Award to display alongside all other local Queen's and King's Awards).

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

Our objectives. We continue to:

1. Provide weekly, enjoyable arts activities (primarily writing and art) to support the health and mental wellbeing of regular participants, who live in and around the Staffordshire Moorlands;
2. Employ local professional artists, supplemented by in-house expertise, to lead the writing and art sessions;
3. Encourage participants to socialise and support one another throughout the week, not just in workshops;
4. Tackle stigma through displays, public events, publications, media coverage etc. which also raise awareness of our work;
5. Take part in community events of all kinds.

Under each heading, these are our Key Achievements:



Sheena with our Queen's Award in Lichfield Cathedral



#Showthelove, Elaine, felt tip pen

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

Our core activities (creative writing and expressive art sessions) take place in-person, at our base in LHC. They embody the 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' (currently being promoted across the county by the County Council). From the helpful acronym CLANG (Connect, Learn, be Active, Notice and Give) it's obvious that BV covers them all.

The activity room is often near capacity (12) but is available only on Wednesdays. Participants from across the Moorlands and further afield enjoy writing, art, drinks, biscuits, supportive chat and lots of LAUGHTER, which are all 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.

Again, we've had no student placements, but have welcomed a new visual artist (Amelia Carr) and worked with the WELLIES group from Sudbury. We enjoyed return visits from many artists and meeting up, after a long break, with Anthony Hammond. On 2 occasions, other members of the community (Ben Benefer, Nicholson Monument guide and Nic Jacubowski, OUTSIDE/Friends of the Nicholson Institute) helped to introduce new topics.

Sarah Males facilitated most of the writing workshops, with Andy filling in as necessary.



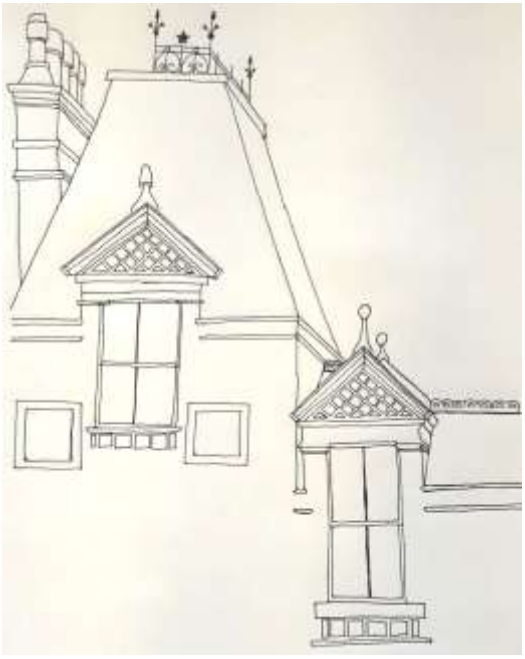
Same mayor, different mask. 'Face your Fears' public event, OUTSIDE booth, Leek Butter Market

Art sessions have included spring patterns (Andy), Easter cards (Andy), African-inspired masks (Gavin Bowyer), 'swillows' (willow swallows, Anthony Hammond with 'Waymaking'), Leek's historic buildings in water colour (Sheena, for the Nicholson Centenary Exhibition), designs for the Where's Wallaby Trail (Andy), Botanical 'tapestries' (the WELLIES project), the Nicholson Memorial and red poppies in needle felting (Amelia Carr, for the Centenary Exhibition), Advent Images (Andy, for the 2025 Advent Celebrations), 1920s-style Rudyard posters (Sarah), 'Face your Fears' mask-making (Gordon MacLellan), Halloween (Andy), Xmas wreaths (WELLIES), Warmth and wildlife – past present and future (Andy), Xmas crafts (Andy), objects from the Nicholson Museum 'handling box' (Andy), Green #showthelove hearts with natural images (Andy), Oriental art - ink paintings (Andy).

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

3. **Socialisation, peer support and group visits.**

Socialisation and peer support underpin BV. Writing and art sessions are inclusive and encouraging, but then an invisible web – of phone calls, visits, shopping, emails, texts, car shares and practical help - upholds people throughout the rest of the week.



Leek Buildings, Will, pen study

We were able to join an informal 'Waymaking' session at Stockton Brook Waterworks, where we made our willow swallows with Anthony Hammond. 'Our' Wallaby designs were transformed by immensely talented sisters Phillippa and Rachael Corcutt into a stunning finished form. We then visited him at Hulme End when the Trail was installed. We spent a magical day at Rudyard Lake (which included a sail down the lake in the new trip boat), gathering ideas for 1920s style posters. The 'Longest Yarn 2' came to Tean – depicting the story of WW2 in knit and crochet. We spent hours admiring the handiwork, and some time relaxing with the tea/coffee and cake. Participants, trustees and relatives enjoyed the now-traditional bring-and-share Christmas lunch at LHC.



'Face your Fears' mask, Simon, felt tip pen on pre-formed mask

Finally, Sheena and Andy received an invitation to take our Queen's Award to Lichfield Cathedral for a service celebrating the retirement of Lord Lieutenant Sir Ian Dudson.

4. **Tackling stigma and raising awareness.**

Andy continues to represent BV via attendance at mostly online meetings. In particular these include the Staffs Moorlands Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Forum and the VCSE Alliance Mental Health Forum.

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

Equally, we especially value the input which participant trustees make to the Board.

As always, we have contributed to a number of local events, both face-to-face and in displays.



Rudyard visit.

Boarding the trip boat for a sail up the lake, with commentary from Ray Perry.

Our Facebook group (https://www.facebook.com/groups/1398672493722468) is an active virtual space where members and 'friends' share news and views.



Bouquet of spring flowers, Mavis, collage and pen

BV organised a 'Wellbeing' evening for Mental Health Awareness Week in May 2025. Featuring participants reading their writing and a display of artwork, it attracted a good audience and we persuaded 1 or 2 non-participants to contribute.

'Face your Fears', supported by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund was a real exercise in learning how to face up to our worst nightmares. In addition to BV workshops we delivered sessions for a group at John Hall Gardens and engaged with members of the public (and many councillors) as they passed the OUTSIDE stall in the Butter Market. This all culminated in a 'Face your Fears' 'happening' (finale) in the Quaker Meeting House, featuring both readings and the mask designs which were the visual element of the project.

We contributed to a 'Smart Symptoms' Roadshow (organised by Support Staffs, in Village Halls Week, to take health checks and information about support services out into local communities) and held a Healthwatch Q and A session one lunch-hour at BV

Yet again, the writing group made quick work of assembled the 2026 calendar and Bob Foster kindly agreed, once more, to produce camera-ready artwork for printing. We were very fortunate this year that Finnikins Garage on Ashbourne Road agreed to sponsor the calendar, although we still sell as many as possible to raise



Shuttle and flowers, Mary, pencil crayon

money. This offsets all the complimentary copies (and postage on them) which remain vital to raising awareness of BV and mental health issues generally. As usual, we sent copies to the King and Queen and the Prince and Princess of Wales,

5. Community involvement.

We were invited to take the Women's Land Army exhibition to the VE Day 80th anniversary commemoration held in Leek Trestle Market. Two of our participants volunteered to help out and came dressed as Land Girls.

As usual, we took part in the annual HuG environmental arts Festival at the Foxlowe. There we delivered a family-friendly activity making little hedgerow dioramas featuring butterflies, as the theme was 'Hedgerows'. We took a similar activity to the West End Family Funday.

We contributed a significant amount of varied work to the 3-week Nicholson Memorial centenary display held in Moorlands House. This consisted of watercolours of Leek's old buildings (done with Sheena), poignant writing inspired by an introductory talk from Monument Guide Ben Benefer and stunning needle-felting of the Monument with red poppies, done with Amelia.

As a community group, we applied, successfully, to be paired with professional artist(s) to design a colourful, larger-than-life (fibreglass) Wallaby. The Moorlands 'Where's Wallaby' Trail celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Peak Wildlife Park which features wallabies among its many animal attractions. Our gifted artist sisters – Rachael and Phillipa – brought our designs to stunning reality and we were able to attend the official launch and to visit 'our' wallaby in situ.

Participants helped with the Twilight Market (to sell calendars) and also a 'Rescue Me' stall at the Repair Café. This splendid innovation from County Waste Disposal allows 'preloved' goods, too good to be skipped, to be re-homed via pop-up stalls across the county. Volunteers who steward the stall take the monetary donations which new owners make. The '24 Doors' Living Advent was scaled-back to community-led 'Advent Celebrations' and we contributed a trail round Leek of 24 pieces of seasonal artwork.

While the Museum is closed for renovation, BV became the first group to experience the Nicholson Museum's textile 'handling box'. We gave feedback to the museum redevelopment group in the form of writing and art inspired by the objects (from silk moth cocoons and a metal-tipped shuttle to a stylish 1980s 'Slimma' reversible skirt and a pair of child's wooden clogs).

For #ShowTheLove, a national project organised annually by the Climate Coalition, participants produced some exquisite drawings, in green heart-shapes, of things in our local environment which are particularly important to us.

The ‘Face your Fears’ project, Smart Symptoms roadshow and Healthwatch Q and A mentioned in the previous section also involved BV significantly in the wider life of the community.



Leaf patterns in spring, Jeanette, water colour

Impact/value

This year’s assessment of BV’s value (and value for money) comes primarily from evaluation of the impact of our ‘Face your Fears’ project. It was funded by a grant of £1,645, from SMDC and the UK Government’s Shared Prosperity Fund.

As a community-led creative arts programme, it provided 17 volunteering opportunities and 14 artist-led workshops. These were 8 creative workshops (4 x writing, 4 x art) with BV participants at LHC, 3 writing sessions with participants at Leek’s John Hall Wellness Gardens and 3 full-day public creative workshops delivered from the OUTSIDE stall in Leek Butter Market. The final performance by participants, involving their words and masks, took place at Leek Quaker Meeting House.



African-inspired masks, all participants, cardboard/mixed media

The workshops helped reduce the social isolation of people with mental health issues, bolstering the confidence and self-esteem needed in day-to-day life. They also provided creative activities for the public to engage with, in the newly-renovated Butter Market, with an important underlying message about mental wellbeing.

These family-friendly creative activities in the Butter Market allowed [BV] to extend the project to a wide cross-section of the general public. Over 3 full day sessions, 260 individuals took part - both local residents and visitors from afar. These very visible Butter Market sessions also provided an opportunity to talk to Town, District and County Councillors and the town mayor subsequently attended the Finale.

We asked participants in the John Hall Wellness Garden sessions for 1 word to sum up their experiences and these were: ***Enjoyable, Inclusive, Stimulating, Caring, Creative, Slightly mad, Friendly, Tantalising, Supportive, Inspiring, Validating, Mind-expanding, Connecting, Heart-warming, Understanding, Cathartic, Welcoming.***

BV participants found the workshops both challenging and cathartic, helping some people deal with quite difficult things going on in their lives. Below is a very small selection of the shorter pieces of writing. Many of these were read at the finale with some included in a short YouTube video of words and images of the event.

Understanding your fears

Is it safe, is it safe, is it safe today? Is she smiling, is she sad? Is she shouting or is it tears?
I am not so sure. Now she's quiet or is she looking stern? The house is so still now, I can hear myself breathe.
If I sing, will she love me? If I'm quiet, will she smile? Dare I ask for a biscuit? Dare I ask for a drink?
If I'm lost, will she come? Will she find me? Will she hold me and tell me that I'm loved?
Maggie



#Showthelove observational drawings, all participants, pen and felt tip pen

Understanding your fears

I don't really know if I do understand my fears only that some days there simply seems to be one after another most of which (but not all) are about some different pain or illness and where they may or may not lead, I know that if I give any of those thoughts more than a couple of minutes it is a road to disaster and my mood very quicky sinks probably for the rest of the day.
Bill

Confronting your fears

Your fears can and do rise up like phantoms and ghouls baring their teeth, your heart rate beats a little faster as you tremble and quake under the incessant onslaught that pounds your mind with increasing ferocity. Refuse to join in with this melee, stand your ground and try to go inward, inward, inward. This is not easy; the battle will continue but eventually this will pass and within the centre of the storm you will find peace.
Bill

Identifying your fears

The fear of life itself is my biggest fear. One can break it down to a day at a time and even break it down further to five minutes at a time. So, if I do something, in five minutes I've conquered five minutes of my day. It is difficult to switch off my constant thoughts, but art and creative writing do help me focus for a while and at the end I have achieved something to be proud of.
Rachel

Confronting your fears

Way back in the nineteen eighties I had a really bad dream. I dreamt that I was going on holiday with my family and the plane that I was on crashed and none of us survived. Ever since then I became afraid of flying. Sometimes when something like that happens it becomes like a trigger and although we know that it's irrational, we think that the wort is going to happen to us. I managed to conquer my fear of flying somewhat when a friend offered me a free flight in a small, twin-engined plane that he rented. Halfway through the

flight he let me have control of the plane and although I was bit nervous at first, I really enjoyed it because I had control. I still get a bit nervous when I have to fly anywhere but I'm not half as bad as I was. So, confronting my fear of flying certainly helped me. Now next on the list is spiders!
Linda

Understanding your fears

Well, I suppose I could write a book on this subject, years of challenges, bullying at school – physically, bullying mentally in marriage, relationships, work; life is a progress of negativity that is balanced with positivity, we learn, try to understand, then grow and take on the world! A strange education of life.
Tia

Taking courageous action

Taking a deep breath, she stepped through the bulkhead door onto the deck of the airship. Pausing a brief moment to catch her breath and steel her nerves before tenderly stepping towards the guardrail of the ship and looked out over the sea of clouds, gripping the rail to steady herself and took in the views, and daring to glance down between the gaps within the cloud layer she saw the white cliffs of Brittania and the glinting sea and just beyond the cliffs the imposing city walls of Londonia loomed with its oxidised copper roofs upon its watchtowers and then the city sprawling within, The Portus Dubris District she believes, but this was not her destination, that lay further north, where Caledonia called her name. She had watched her homeland fade on the horizon and now she watches her new country, her new home come into view, fighting against her fear of heights to say farewell and hello properly. The Airship's horn called her approach as they dropped down for their layover at The Royal Londonia Air Docks before continuing Northwards.
Will

Confronting your fears

Confronting our fears is not easy. Lying awake at night worrying about them causes tiredness the next day and results in walking around like a zombie. I used to be scared of spiders, I still don't like them, but I've learnt not to panic as it only makes things worse. Worry over money is very common fear too, for many of us. I find the best thing to do when confronting my fears is to "let go and let God". It is also very helpful to take one day at a time. That way we are dealing with only twenty-four hours' worth of fear and worry. There is also a little rhyme that works well – it goes like this "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference. So, my advice is "let go and let God".
Pauline



Oriental landscape, Tia, ink and water

Understanding your fears

The fears are because of the state of things.
The state of the world.
The life I went through, I strangely thought I was contributing to some good in the world, things in the world were getting better.
Then at the very time in my life that I become powerless they get very bad indeed. And I fear for my children and grandchildren having to live in such a world.
Mary

Fall

Fear of falling. From where? Up high. I think everyone has that fear. No off my feet. Well just get back up. Not that simple. Why? Because I'm broken. Are you sure? Is that what you truly believe? It may not be easy but change your way of thinking. Be like a tortoise perhaps; when they fall over, they roll until they're back on their feet. Don't rush, take your time till you eventually find your feet again.
Jane

Facing fears

Is it grit and determination or the gratitude of surviving that gets us all through our own personal challenges? Some of us roaming about in dark places, others searching for the light that is always just out of reach. Maybe holding onto our faith or loved ones hoping they can pull us through. Fear is the debilitating shadow that follows us around, reminding us of the importance of welcoming in moments of pleasure and joy however small or fleeting. Eventually learning that it is the key of acceptance that opens a door enabling us not to delete, but walk alongside, our fears: knowing this is the true path.
Jo

Confronting your fears

What if you lost your mind? Lost track of time,
watched your energy seep and slide away
What if you never achieved anything?
Or travelled anywhere,
What if death was impending and you were lonely wallowing a stark figure against a sunless sky?
What if your tread was heavy? But you left no footprints
What if there were no markers? No fairy lights lining the path on which you stroll
But what if it isn't a destination but a dead end?
What if you're lost in a maze? But keep reaching the centre, not the exit, the way out.
What if you're enclosed in this room? The fire's smoke seeping underneath the door, with no escape.
How to accept being lost, at a loss, bereft of sanity,
How to re-learn the ways of life and rediscover a self,
Rather than a cardboard cut-out, or a silhouette, with no form, fluidity, movement.
Anna



Christmas tree, Advent Celebrations, Rachel, felt tip

Feedback for the finale from the audience included:

- Thank you. I really enjoyed it last night. So interesting. (by email)
- Very interesting and inspirational. Gave a good perspective on fears and their basis.
- Brilliant! (heart) xxx
- All true words tell a story; thank you all.
- What a truly inspiring presentation by such gifted writers and artists.
- Great, informative evening (smiley face).
- Very good. Thought-provoking. Borderland Voices is a valuable resource.

And this is just a small sample of feedback on the whole project from BV participants:

Heartfelt words of courage found, hard won.
No straight lines here though, of progress into sanity and courage.
But like the river, we face obstacles and strengthening pace until a quieter flow brings peace.

The Face your Fears Finale allowed all our heartfelt words to be heard; all our experiences and newfound courage to be witnessed and valued.

A challenge. A tough project to tackle. Many challenging and heart wrenching subjects were discussed. Sometimes distressing but also uplifting. The project provided artistic ways for me to challenge those fears within a safe space. Allowing me to gain a new perspective, helping me through fears and on the path to conquering fears. A very rewarding project and very wonderful performance when it all came together. The masks we all wear being symbolic of the fears we hide from people we don't want to know our fears.
But I'd like to offer thanks for allowing me to tackle something I'd be too afraid to do on my own so thank you.

Volunteers

Andy, as coordinator, relies on our BV 'family' of trustees, volunteers, arts facilitators and of course our participants who make up our incredible peer support network.

Because funding is an ever-present issue, we all rely on the expertise of Liz, our accountant, and the hours she puts in, many on a voluntary basis. Bob's IT skill again turned the calendar into camera-ready artwork for printing. When Andy is away, Sarah and Mark set up and take down the activity room, with help from participants. Car drivers give lifts when we go on visits and others maintain phone contact with people who can't come along to BV. Linda, Tia, Anna's mum, Sue Taylor and Tina have all helped at public events, with Linda and Tia dressing the part for the VE Day celebration.

Gordon MacLellan devoted unpaid time to organise the finale of the Face your Fears project and to assemble a short Youtube video of selected images and words from it.

Medium to Long-term strategy

The trustees adopted a Succession Plan, prepared by Bob, at the end of last financial year. Although it doesn't address the underlying issue of replacing Andy and Liz eventually, it does provide a roadmap for 'holding the fort' if either of them is temporarily indisposed. A Trustee sub-group (with Andy and Sheena) have now assembled a Business Plan.



Nicholson Museum, textile 'handling box' study of selected items, Pauline, felt tip pen

Pauline, Bob, Sheena and Andy worked with Sarah Roberts (SuS) to develop a Business Plan. Although the template was aimed at charities, much bore little resemblance to BV's situation e.g. our ability to diversify income is limited and we scarcely have 'competitors'.

However, the exercise did focus minds. A priority, already identified in the Succession Plan, must be eventually finding and funding key staff to take on Coordination and Accountancy, probably in a phased way.

Meantime, we have deliberately avoided large, admin-heavy grants. This does entail, however, a treadmill of smaller applications together with the resultant feedback reports for successful ones.

This year we've received funding from Leek Building Society, the Community Foundation for Staffs, Staffs County Council, OUTSIDE Creative Commissions, UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UK Government/SMDC), Healthwatch Staffs, WELLIES (in-kind support via workshop delivery), and SMDC's Community Climate Change and Nature Action Fund. In a limited move towards income diversification, we approached various small local businesses and were delighted to receive sponsorship for the newsletter from Cathy Bower Photography and British Boxers (underwear/nightwear) and for the calendar printing from Finnikins Garage.

Networking and links

Andy continues to attend relevant meetings, online where possible, to save time and the environment while maintaining our visibility.

We were sad to say goodbye to Jill Norman, longstanding operations manager for **Support Staffordshire (SuS) (Staffs Moorlands)** who retired last March. Her successor, Baz Tameez, is based in Newcastle but we continue to work closely with Leek staff such as Celia Muir. As our VCSE umbrella organisation, SuS delivers useful, free training and offers advice on e.g. available funding.

We also network with the following:

- SMDC Officers and Councillors
- Staffs Moorlands (VCSE) Forum
- Staffs CC: Library; County Archives; Councillors
- Integrated Care System (ICS) for Staffs 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
- 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



Nicholson War Memorial, composite piece, needle felting (one of our contributions to the Centenary Exhibition)