



Borderland Voices: Art
for health &
mental wellbeing



Creativity and companionship during Lockdown



VE day bunting displayed in the window at Bank House

Borderland Voices Annual Report, 2020-21

Introduction and executive summary, Andy Collins, Coordinator

Since 1998, Borderland Voices (BV) has been using participatory arts to support mental well-being and to improve public understanding of mental health issues. It has certainly been a challenging year in which to pursue that mission.



The Gate of Hades, Mark, pencil

and has already researched the WLA closer to his home in Chesterfield. Instead of face-to-face events, we concentrated on 4 things: preparing fliers and a pull-up banner for when restrictions eventually ease; publicity via press and radio to elicit people with reminiscences, who Catherine Croney has spoken to; editing an anthology of BV writing produced during the year, as a contemporary mirror of the isolation in which Land Girls found themselves; and building a relationship with care homes (specifically Ladydale, thanks to Pauline Elkes) in anticipation of reminiscence sessions when circumstances permit. Although the internet has generally facilitated contact, we had to postpone Richard Godley's online talk about the history of the WLA (scheduled for March 2021) because BT were working on his connection. Nonetheless, many who 'attended' stayed to enjoy a chat and Cllr Matt Swindlehurst, son of a Lumber Jill, offered to coordinate a coach trip to see the memorial at Alrewas in September 2021, when hopefully restrictions will be eased.

In the general upheaval of the year, I'd forgotten that our landlords, Support Staffordshire (SuS), would be reviewing their tenancy at Bank House at the end of 2020. For various reasons including upkeep of a listed building and the additional difficulties involved in making it COVID secure, they decided not to renew. Thanks to their generosity in offering to share an office space, we moved in November with them to new premises in the rear of Leek Health Centre on Fountain St. We have a good

Like everyone else's, our year has been shaped by COVID-19. The country moved into a state of lockdown almost exactly as we entered this financial year. Our grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, to explore creatively the history of the Women's Land Army (WLA) in the area, also coincided with the declaration of the global pandemic and I well remember throwing the final acceptance documents over the fence to Bob (our then Chair) for him to sign, scan and email off.

We had designed the WLA project around public engagement with groups of all kinds and working with schools; suddenly neither of these was possible. As agreed in the application, I appointed two professionals who have already made a start on and will continue to progress specific aspects: Catherine Croney has a background in recording reminiscences and in interpretation; Richard Godley is particularly interested in (and has copious collections of material relating to) both World Wars



WLA project, A5 promotional flier, showing both sides



Way in, Leek Health Centre



Activity room Health Centre

storeroom, a small shared office which includes further storage, and the use of a sizeable activity room – but on Wednesdays only. Few have yet seen any of these facilities but restarting any face-to-face sessions still seems remote.

Working from home during the year has forced me into greater digital activity e.g. hosting Zoom meetings (on the old iMac donated by former trustee Bonnie when she emigrated to The Netherlands); ‘attending’ online training, meetings, peer support etc. (without the need to travel); and posting on Facebook. Formerly I often relied on others for IT help, but my capabilities have improved and I’ve been hosting the weekly writing and monthly art sessions on Zoom since Bonnie left. Still on the theme of IT, Bob has redesigned the website to make it both

fresh and compatible with the smartphones which are increasingly the device of choice.

Twelve months ago, we rarely thought about digital exclusion because we delivered all our sessions in-person. On one hand, Mary could connect from lockdown in Sussex. But on the other, lack of an internet connection, a suitable device or the confidence to connect have prevented some of our regulars from taking part as usual. Via Cheadle CAB’s Lottery-funded scheme, I obtained 3 free Lenovo tablets with 2 years’ free internet connection which have been partially successful. At a time when one can’t simply sit down with someone and go through a new process – perhaps many



Locked down in Sussex, Mary, mixed media collage



Wash bags for NHS staff, Marlene, sewn fabric

times – unfamiliar technology can just be an additional source of stress. This underlines, though, the importance of being able to post out, to those not on the net, both newsletters and monthly art packs; the former now include a selection of the stunning work produced every week by the creative writing group.



Clematis, Cyra, photograph

years of very active service to BV and for agreeing to stay on as Treasurer. We welcomed our new Chair, Pauline Elkes who, as a retired academic historian with an interest in women's history, is proving invaluable in helping to develop our thinking about the WLA project. I'd also like to pay tribute to our participants, who have frequently made donations in cash and kind and supported one another, and me, as never before during these trying times.

Our objectives. This year, we've endeavoured 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.

The Thursday DIY art and Monday patchwork groups remain in abeyance and once restrictions ease, we shall have to consider their needs and the options, given only one day in the activity room.

In spite of the situation, we achieved a degree of outreach. As ever, we produced a stunning calendar incorporating BV images and writing and although distribution was challenging it still reached most of its usual target audience. Increased activity by me and other BV participants has generated 20% more members of our Facebook group. Although, as already mentioned, an IT glitch led to the postponement of Richard Godley's planned talk, for which Zoom had created an audience stretching from Leek to Norfolk and Portugal, we've been successfully involved in two projects which have introduced BV further afield – see the section on 'Tackling stigma and raising awareness' for details.

I remain deeply indebted to the Board of Trustees, who have adapted to meeting on Zoom without the customary tea, coffee and biscuits. In particular, I'd like to thank retiring Chair Bob Foster for his many



WLA recruiting poster, Matt, pencil crayon

Under each heading, these are our Key Achievements:



Landscape, Marion, watercolour

inspired) which I post out to participants. We have started a monthly Zoom art drop-in, where some participants share their work and discuss an Artist of the Month. Others, without Wi-Fi connection or a suitable device, send in their artwork in a SAE and provide plenty of material for the monthly newsletter.

In order to maintain our services (which includes having to pay our rent, even though we're unable to use premises for anything

1. Weekly arts sessions.

We maintained core activities (creative writing and expressive art) remotely, while being aware that digital exclusion has disadvantaged some of our regular participants.

Writers with the technology and knowhow began 'meeting' on Zoom as soon as we went into lockdown and others gradually joined us, although some are still excluded. Sessions changed somewhat in character, with at least half the time devoted to catching up with people, both present and absent, and allowing space to share fears and frustrations. The group sets its own weekly 'homework' and the quality of creative writing remains outstanding.

Fine Art graduate Becca, who joined us as a volunteer at the end of 2019, transformed into our resident, paid artist, in the summer of 2020. She produces high quality, monthly art packs (including templates in case people don't feel particularly

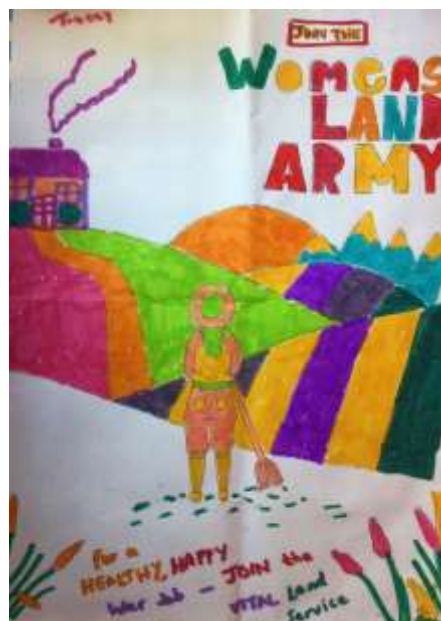
other than storage and as a postal address) we've had small grants from District and County Councillors and the Staffordshire Foundation, plus more substantial sums from the

Baring Foundation, the National Lottery and central Government's COVID fund for small businesses and charities, administered by the District Council. Many participants themselves have also been most generous with donations in cash and kind.

Unfortunately, the Thursday DIY art and Monday patchwork groups have been in abeyance throughout the year.



Botanicals, Suzanne, mixed media



WLA recruiting poster, Tracey, felt-tips

2. Arts-sector employment.

Sarah Males, who previously facilitated the writing group, has frequently joined us on Zoom and indeed has kindly taken on the (unpaid) task of collating the weekly writing. Otherwise, I have run the group. I also sent out a few art-based tasks in early months. Since August however, we've employed former volunteer and Fine Art graduate Becca Baddeley to produce monthly themed art-packs. Incidentally, this experience is enhancing Becca's CV as she is applying to do an MA in Art Therapy at Derby University.



Halloween, Pauline, mixed media collage

The art pack themes have included colour blocking, out in nature, monochromatic colour, Halloween, recruiting posters for the WLA, Christmas, morphs, botanicals and art journaling. Examples of the wonderful and colourful artwork they inspired illustrate this document.

3. Socialisation & peer support.



Colour blocking, Sheena, felt-tips

Traditionally we've met weekly, face-to-face, to share creativity, chat, complaints, coffee etc. We've also managed several visits each year and special events such as Christmas lunch. The challenge was how to maintain, in some measure, the social contact and support which can be especially vital to those with mental health issues.

Digital exclusion and the cancellation of events, visits etc. all contributed to the isolation enforced by lockdown, especially for those living alone. To counteract this, participants continued and extended the usual, invaluable BV peer support network, with some being particularly active either in phoning others or providing practical help in the form of shopping, fetching prescriptions etc. This has highlighted why we gained the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service in 2017, with participants seamlessly offering mutual support in other ways. Although it's always invidious to single people out, I've nominated Bill Taylor, Jane Malkin and Mark Johnson for the 2021 Volunteer Star Awards arranged by SuS (there were none organised in 2020).

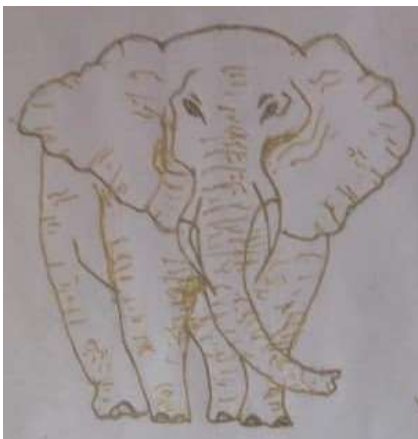
4. Tackling stigma and raising awareness.

Much awareness-raising has had to move online, although some traditional methods have continued such as our calendar, press releases, radio interviews and Andy's presence, via Zoom, in many meetings including the Staffs Moorlands Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Forum.

The calendar, as always, celebrated the creativity of the previous 12 months. Sadly, although we'd already booked and paid for a market stall for Mental Health Awareness Week in May 2020, Derby St was deserted for months on end. Despite Bank House being closed for activities from April until our departure in November, there was a wonderful display of BV bunting in the window (a project facilitated by Sheena and originally destined for the cancelled VE Day celebrations). As many moved online, we gained 20% more Facebook group members (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1398672493722468>). Additionally, BV was involved in two projects with the much wider reach that online activity can generate.



Monochrome landscape, Matt, mixed media



Morph, Pauline, pencil/mixed media

In autumn 2020, Aidan Rhodes' short film ***'The Magic of the Water'*** was woven round words by BV writer Mark. An Emergency Response Fund from Arts Council England and the National Lottery enabled artists and community groups to access funding for digital projects (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHEi-BkHUh4>)

Artist Gordon MacLellan, who's worked with BV many times, approached us to take part in the WWF's ***'8 billion'*** film project. This 10-year, global online story-telling initiative is about how humans the world over (8 billion of us) celebrate and protect nature. Gordon wove together a short film (less than 4 minutes) featuring BV artwork and creative writing, read by participants, which will shortly appear on the '8 billion' site (see <https://www.8-billion.org/>).

5. Community involvement.

Although there have obviously been no in-person events during the year, we have managed remote involvement in various ways which I have largely outlined in the previous section.

In addition, our webmaster Bob puts the monthly art packs on our website where they can be freely accessed and have been used by an arts for health group in Norfolk.

Impact/value

This year, I've found that the additional challenges of running BV remotely have again left me no time for formal impact assessment. But I remain in no doubt of BV's value to its participants. The first four quotes below may refer to arts-on-prescription/Social Prescribing but to all intents and purposes this is what we offer (and with Social Prescribers now in post, it will become ever-more relevant). The remaining six quotes are from participants and demonstrate what BV has meant to them this year.

Tracking momentary experience in the evaluation of arts-on-prescription services: using mood changes during art workshops to predict global wellbeing change, Nicola J Holt, First Published May 22, 2020

... 'There was a significant improvement in global wellbeing across participation in the arts-on-prescription programme. **After each art workshop there was a significant increase on all dimensions of mood: contentment; calmness; and alertness. There was also a significant improvement in these dimensions of mood, over time,** upon arrival at the art workshops each week. Furthermore, improvement in calmness after art workshops significantly predicted changes in global wellbeing.' ...

NHS Reset: How health and care systems can work better with voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) partners. 28/08/2020 (NHS Reset is an NHS Confederation campaign to shape what the health and care system should look like in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.)

... '**Closer working with voluntary sector partners will be vital as local systems recover from the pandemic.** This briefing from the NHS Reset campaign outlines ways integrated care systems can work with the sector to rebuild local systems and reset the way health and care are planned,



Botanical, Izzy, felt-tips



Sky-scape, Simon, watercolour

commissioned and delivered [Andy's note – from autumn 2021, local ***Integrated Care Systems/Partnerships*** throughout the country will deliver all health and care services]...



WLA recruiting poster, Pauline, mixed media collage

Key points

- ***VCSE organisations are essential to the planning of care and supporting a greater shift towards prevention and self-care.*** They are key system transformation, innovation and integration partners.
- ***Organisations across the VCSE sector are uniquely placed to support people and communities*** and are vitally important to COVID-19 recovery planning, supporting population health and reducing health inequalities. Deepening partnerships with VCSE organisations will be essential in supporting communities to rebuild and recover following the coronavirus outbreak.
- ***NHS organisations should maximise the social value they generate by working more closely in partnership with the VCSE sector.***
- ***Local VCSE organisations need to be included in health and care pathways and service redesign planning*** across systems, including population health management and social prescribing in primary care networks...'

National Voices report September 2020. Rolling Out Social Prescribing: Understanding the experience of the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector.

... '(The report) highlights ***the need to provide increased funding to organisations experiencing greater demand for their services through social prescribing.*** The report also stresses ***the importance of adequate funding for voluntary organisations overall, 'many of which have long been underfunded'***...

Measuring what matters: Valuing the voluntary sector in East Sussex, November 2020, Chris Mills, Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR)

It is important that the VCSE sector can articulate its value in ways other than economic terms. Civil society is distinctive and should be proud of its unique contribution. ***We need to articulate how VCSE organisations contribute to what is beneficial and important in our lives.***

Measures of wellbeing offer one potential alternative to understanding the contribution of voluntary organisations. Measuring wellbeing takes us away from an emphasis on productivity and consumption, towards an understanding of our happiness and life satisfaction. That said, there are



Monochromatic minis, Matt, pencil crayon and pen

challenges in measuring wellbeing and establishing causal relationships between VCSE activity and improved wellbeing. Wellbeing measures may also not suit every situation.

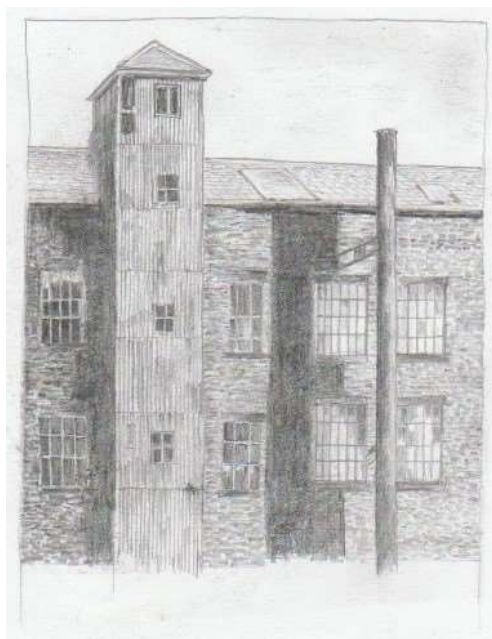
Participant feedback

1. VE Day has come and gone; I've waved my hands and sung 'We'll meet again', so what now? The virus, this thing out of the Blue, or rather the Black, we are locked in by order from Boris. One hour out each day, the couples go past, one behind the other, every day at the same time. What will they do after this, I wonder; do not cough or sneeze, wash your hands, stand apart. I find myself wiping things for no reason. Wear a face mask? But I'm locked in and go to sleep instead of staying alert. So where we'll go from here I don't know, but up to Borderland.



Landscape, Marion, watercolour

2. For thousands and thousands of years, philosophers and religions have been trying to think things out. Who am I? How do I live? What does it mean to be good? Where do I go from here? There's no knowing is there what your final destination will be? Because you can't tell the future, but there are lots of small destinations on the way that are imaginable. And there's always today to live in, to be good, or as good as you can be. After all, look at all the kind friends that are being good to you. Look how wonderfully Borderland Voices have kept us together in these odd times.



Big Mill, Mark, pencil

3. I realised that I wasn't in a bubble anywhere until it was pointed out to me that I'm in a bubble with this writing group. I was so pleased! The contact on Zoom (now that I know how to do it) is vital to my well-being, especially for me as for various reasons I now live alone. My thanks go to the participants and organisers and also thank-you for being patient with my lack of technical knowledge. "It's not my fault."

4. Being a part of a group of caring, sharing, supportive individuals is a very precious thing, and not something anyone of us should take for granted - although being human, we sometimes do. To realise that every one of us in the group has at one time or another plummeted to the depths of darkness and despair, or has been so panic-stricken one can barely breathe, somehow brings a sort of oneness that is perhaps quite rare these days. I honestly feel very privileged to be part of 'our bubble in lockdown'.

5. Thank you for posting this art issue. Finally I found a few minutes of free time to indulge in my 'mood expressions' of past and present within the brief – hope I did

everything as asked. Anyway, it was quite therapeutic. Thank you for thinking of me.

6. I had a number of mental health issues when I came to Leek two years ago. Borderlands was invaluable in helping me address them in what proved to be a welcoming and supportive environment. Perhaps the best experience of all was seeing new members joining the group and watch their confidence and

creative ambition grow. Those people are now confident enough to provide support to other participants, even in the depth of the crisis.

Volunteers



Heart, Suzanne, felt-tips

With no face-to-face sessions, but with additional and different pressures on everyone, the nature of much volunteering for BV has changed. In particular, our participants' peer support network has had to evolve and has been invaluable to us all – me included – as we try to cope with new uncertainties and fears.

When I read some of last year's volunteer tasks, it seems like a lost golden age: supporting the patchwork group; artwork for mental health awareness week; enlarging space in the activity room; cooking the BBQ; car-share transport and raffle prizes. But some things remain unchanged: we all rely heavily on the skills

of our pro bono accountant Liz and Richard kindly took photos for the calendar.

As already mentioned, Becca morphed from volunteer into paid artist, (Chair) Pauline has helped to coordinate progress on the WLA project and Bonnie hosted the Zoom writing sessions until she moved to the Netherlands. Since then, Sarah has occasionally taken on hosting duties when I've been called to another (Zoom) meeting. Mark has produced press releases, collated writing and advised on IT. Jane has written a simple guide to using a Lenovo tablet. Bill has acted like an invisible glue, phoning those people not on the internet to help maintain their connection with BV. Sheena took folders of accumulated artwork out to participants and, yet again, pruned our arts materials in advance of the move. She and Mark hand-delivered calendars.

Finally, I must mention my husband, John, who's not only sustained me as I've adapted to working from home but also helped me in November move everything – furniture, art materials, display boards, the lot – from Bank House to Leek Health Centre in the back of our cars.



Botanicals, Matt, pencil crayon and felt-tips



Still life, Simon, oil

Medium to Long-term strategy

Of course funding and planning for succession must remain central to a long-term strategy but, given the ongoing uncertainties caused by COVID-19, even medium-term planning seems difficult and exacerbated by our greater space limitations (an activity room just one day a week).

As and when we can resume any sort of in-person delivery, social distancing is still likely to limit numbers. Also, we could have the impossible challenge of fitting a quart into a pint pot: 3, or even 4, activities on a single day, instead of two. In other words, we may have to seek funds for additional room hire.

Demand for our services may well

increase in the wake of the pandemic and Social Prescribing is likely to become an important referral route, although I remain unclear about whether any funding will 'follow' patients. As soon as our Heritage Lottery funded 'Land Girls' project can get underway properly, I shall have to start exploring grants to carry on our work when it ends.

Networking and links

In some ways lockdown has made networking – essential to maintaining our profile and keeping abreast of local developments – easier. I've 'attended' meetings conducted remotely because they did not involve a time-consuming and climate-destructive drive across Staffordshire, or even further afield.

I must reiterate that it's only with the financial help of **Support Staffordshire (Staffordshire Moorlands)** that we've been able to move into our new premises in Leek Health Centre and, as

our umbrella and training body, we shall be dependent on them for guidance when restrictions finally ease.



Morph, Tracey, pencil crayon

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
- Leek Town Council

- Staffs Moorlands Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) Assembly
- W Midlands Arts, Health and Wellbeing
- Leek Arts Forum
- Staffs County Council: Library Service; County Archives; Councillors
- Stone and Water (Buxton-based artists' cooperative)
- Changes – 12 Steps to Mental Health
- Rethink
- National Association for Social Prescribing
- Institute for Voluntary Action Research
- Together we're Better (Sustainability and Transformation Plan Staffordshire) [local reps meetings and mental health transformation framework]
- Coronavirus Community Support Fund Learning Hub (linked to CCSF grant received)
- Coalition for Efficiency (training)
- Baring Foundation on-line forum
- Small Arts Network
- Bereavement Coalition
- Brighter Futures and the Mental Health Helpline
- The Foxlowe Arts Centre
- Leek College of Art
- Dove Valley Centre
- Support Staffordshire Health and Care Forum
- Staffs Moorlands social prescribing link workers
- Dr Plot's Festival
- Leek High School
- Healthwatch



Colour blocking, Pauline, felt-tips



Botanicals, Tracey, felt-tips

With no sessions running, we've had no referrals this year from our usual partners such as **Adult Community Mental Health, Social Services Teams, Rethink, Homestart, SIL Leek** (support for complex mental health needs) or **Harewood Park** (rehab unit Cheadle). New faces have dipped in and out of the Zoom groups, although this is probably an unsatisfactory way to integrate into an existing group. Rather, we know anecdotally that our new Facebook members have followed BV activities, accessed e.g. the art packs on the website, and been inspired to use their creativity to cope with an extraordinary year.