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Paper Abstract

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Title: *Beyond the Ratio: Researching the social value of arts on prescription*

Aim of project: The paper summarises findings from two research projects: *The Art of Social Prescribing*, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council 2014-15; and the evaluation of *Creative Alternatives*, an arts on prescription programme based in St Helens 2015-16. The former explored the efficacy of social prescribing as a cultural commissioning model in mental health care. The evaluation of *Creative Alternatives* has enabled a reflective appraisal of recommendations made in earlier research, with particular reference to the measurement and articulation of social value.

Method(s) used: The *Art of Social Prescribing* involved a series of stakeholder workshops, interviews with social prescribing practitioners and a review of the literature. Methods used in the evaluation of *Creative Alternatives* include standardised pre, mid and post-participation measures of wellbeing, qualitative methods including facilitator diaries and participant focus groups and social return on investment (SROI) analysis.

Key Findings/Learning: A number of complexities involved in evaluating arts on prescription were highlighted, including challenges in capturing the range of outcomes anticipated by health commissioners including relative cost benefits, set against the need to employ methods that are sensitive towards vulnerable participants and that consider the specific value of the creative experience. Mixed-method social value research was shown to be effective in considering the holistic impacts of *Creative Alternatives*, creating a potential model for evaluating arts on prescription.

Conclusions: Evaluation of *Creative Alternatives* showed a social return on investment of £1:£11.55. It is important however to emphasise the multidimensional nature of social value research. Critics of the method often focus on the extent to which the economic ratio is misappropriated or inadequately defended in policy narratives, with scant reference to the qualitative research that underpins SROI, reflecting the intrinsic value of arts and culture.

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