

The art of wellbeing

The positive health effects of art are well documented. But much more can be done to incorporate this into our care system, writes **Ed Vaizey**

I am delighted to have secured a debate in Parliament on the contribution that the arts can make to our health and well-being. As co-chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, I will be calling for government to acknowledge that the arts can make a significant contribution to addressing a number of the pressing issues faced by our health and social care systems.

The APPG has recently published a report on this issue, based on two years of extensive research and discussions with individuals and organisations from the worlds of health, arts, academia and politics. The inquiry provides considerable evidence to support the idea that arts-based approaches can help people to stay well, recover faster, manage long-term conditions and experience a better quality of life.

Arts engagement and participation can have a positive impact on health and well-being at every stage of a person's life. The early years are crucial to fostering the cognitive and socio-emotional skills that serve children well in later life. The arts can have a central role in aiding these development processes. For example, reading aloud to children spurs linguistic advances and enhances school readiness. Learning to play music has been proven

to advance literacy and spatial reasoning.

For those of working-age, there is significant evidence of the benefits of the arts for improving quality of life – particularly around workplace stress, serious illness and managing long-term conditions. Arts therapies have been found to alleviate anxiety, depression and stress and, for example, have been shown to play a part in hastening recovery and lifting mood amongst stroke sufferers.

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This becomes even more applicable for adults beyond working age. The arts have a clear part to play in fostering healthy ageing, staving off frailty and boosting brain function. In a study of those with dementia, music therapy was proven to reduce agitation and the need for medication in two thirds of participants. A brilliant example of this is 'A Choir in Every Care Home' – a new project from Live Music Now which is encouraging music and singing in care homes across the UK.

Arts interventions can also save money and help health and social

care staff in their work. An arts-on-prescription project showed a 37% drop in GP consultation rates, representing a saving of £216 per patient. A social return of between £4 and £11 has also been calculated for every £1 invested in arts on prescription. Within the NHS, £2.4bn is lost through sick days every year. Arts engagement helps staff improve their own and their patients' health and well-being, yet is not a habitual part of the training and professional development of health and social care professionals.

With so much evidence supporting the efficacy of the arts to improved health and well-being, it is clear that more should be done to incorporate this approach into health and social care systems. Increased understanding of the benefits and greater engagement from policymakers and ministers is imperative in this process.

I look forward to making the case for the invaluable contribution the arts can make to a healthy and health-creating society and I hope that the government can support the process of change. 🎵



Ed Vaizey is MP for Didcot and Wantage and a former culture minister. His debate on the effect of the arts on health is on Wednesday 11th October

