

## Meeting Summary for ArtWorks Alliance Members Gathering 10am 19th March 2024

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*This report on the ArtWorks Alliance gathering is a draft document, reflecting the initial insights and discussions from our recent meeting. It is important to note that this document will undergo iterative development as we continue to engage in additional sessions and gather feedback from our members, stakeholders, partners, and supportive guides. These ongoing conversations are crucial to ensuring that the report accurately captures the evolving nature of our discussions and the collective vision for the future of the alliance. As such, we welcome and encourage the active participation of all involved as we refine our strategies and objectives in line with the developmental journey of our community of practice.*

Dr Rob Watson, Tuesday, 02 April 2024

## 1 Introduction – Gathering Purpose

*“Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” Etienne & Beverly Wenger-Trayner.*

At the Artworks Alliance Gathering on 19<sup>th</sup> March, we discussed the importance of being a network of participatory artists, and a community of practice, that is itself driven by the participation of our members. Our discussion was facilitated by Adrian Sinclair from [Union Arts](#), and focused on ways we can improve communication to enhance collaboration that goes ‘beyond the boundaries’ often associated with creative and participatory arts practice.

Through a combination of interactive discussion and conversations in breakout rooms, Adrian asked gathering attendees to explore a set of emerging themes that examined the potential of ArtWorks Alliance as a community of practice. Using [Mentimeter](#) as a digital tool for gathering responses, Adrian was able to focus the discussion on plans for the future, such as the importance of community and connection, and the organisation of the network, the creation of a stock of resources that we can share to enhance our individual work and practice.

Topics that attendees wanted to raise included the potential for future work by the alliance in relation to advocacy, multidisciplinary art, therapy, career development, training, and the need for improved collaboration. The conversation ended with discussions on mentoring, volunteer contributions, and the importance of understanding the group's members' interests and needs.



Figure 1 Location of Gathering Participants

## 2 Organising Tasks, Verifying Work, and Community Practice

Adrian led a discussion on future needs for participatory artists across the UK, noting the importance of community and connection within our work culture, which has led to the development of this network. The discussion was structured in a set of breakout groups based on specific themes such as activism, social change, and well-being, with the aim of facilitating conversations and potential training sessions. Feedback would be gathered through the use of Soom's AI summarisation and tagging system, and also Mentimeter to categorise and tag content that can be structured to provide a pathway forward.

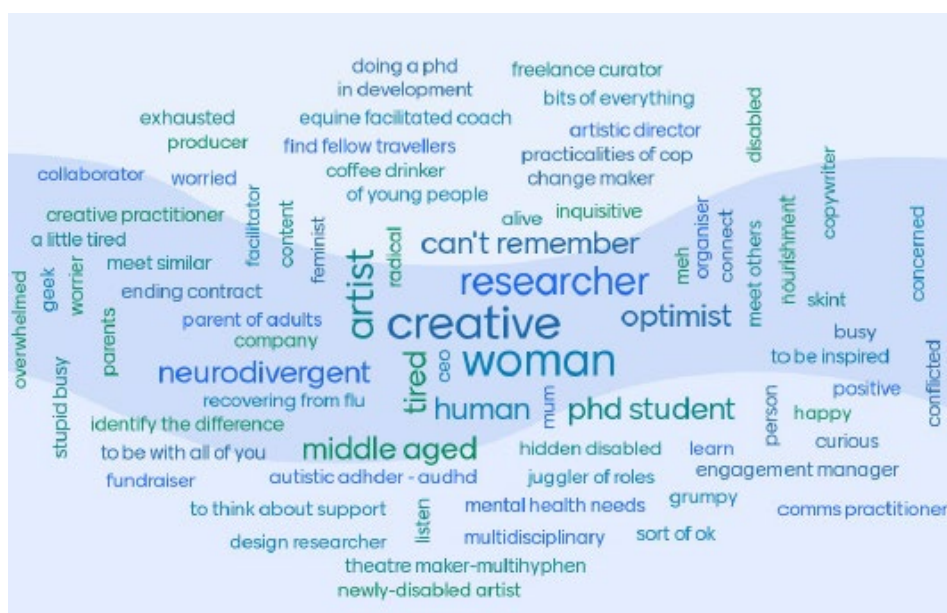


Figure 2 How Participants Described Themselves

### 2.1 Why Are You Here

Before the discussion began, the attendees at the gathering were asked to explain why they attended the event. Their responses were grouped into six categories:

1. **Curiosity:** Some attendees were drawn by a general curiosity about what the gathering could offer, seeking to understand more about the ArtWorks Alliance and the opportunities for engagement it presented.
2. **Exploration:** A number of participants were interested in exploring the field further, including discovering what others expect from the alliance, energising their own practice, and examining collaborative work methodologies.
3. **Nourishment:** For some, the session promised intellectual and emotional nourishment—a space for "soul food" and "brainfood," where they could gain energy from engaging with like-minded individuals.
4. **Community:** The sense of community was a strong draw. Attendees were interested in communities of practice, particularly in terms of their participation and the depth of

engagement in participatory practice. They sought to connect with peers who shared a commitment to deepening participatory arts practices.

5. **Contribution:** Others were motivated by the desire to contribute, seeking to understand how they could support the community of practice, whether through direct support mechanisms or by scaling existing efforts.
6. **Networking and Learning:** The event also attracted those looking to network with others in the field, think about future work, and learn. This included both seasoned practitioners and those newer to the field, highlighting a shared desire for growth, connection, and mutual support.

This diversity of motivations underscores the gathering's role as a multifaceted platform for participants, offering a space for engagement, development, and collaboration across the participatory arts community.

### 3 The Who, What and How of AWA

Attendees were encouraged to engage in break-out discussions around their interest in operating as a community of practice. These discussions were organised according to five thematic areas, reflecting the diverse interests and expertise within the community. The themes were:

- Activism, Social Change, and Climate Change.
- Ethics, Good Practice, and Models.
- Wellbeing, Health, and Impact.
- Mentoring, Career Development, and Training.
- Lucky Dip, allowing for exploration of topics beyond the predefined themes.

These themes guided the breakout sessions, facilitating targeted discussions and enabling attendees to delve deeply into areas of particular interest or relevance to their work. This structured approach was aimed at harnessing the collective knowledge and experience of the community to foster collaboration, share insights, and identify opportunities for collective action within these key areas of participatory arts practice.

In the discussions during the break-out groups, attendees shared a range of insightful reflections and questions that underscored the complexity and richness of operating as a Community of Practice (CoP) in participatory arts. Highlights from this feedback include:

- Recognition of the positive and useful nature of these meetings, with queries about continuing connections beyond these sessions.
- An emphasis on the experiential nature of a CoP, highlighting that understanding and value come from active participation and growth from within, rather than external observation.

- The importance of valuing each participant's contributions and the benefits of support systems for individuals who often work alone.
- A call for a community ethos centred on collaboration, sharing, and a rejection of competitiveness, contrasted with competitive environments like those seen on 'The Apprentice'.
- Concerns about the competitive nature of funding within the arts sector and the potential role of the ArtWorks Alliance in advocating for systemic changes to foster more collaboration and less competition.
- The existing sense of a CoP amongst participants, with suggestions to make this more explicit through the formal acknowledgment and structured support for work opportunities, equitable pay, and skill diversity.
- The necessity of both face-to-face and online meetings to accommodate different needs and preferences, enhancing the sense of community and shared learning.
- The potential for creating mini working groups to co-create resources, share knowledge through newsletters, and foster an environment of trust, belonging, and mutual growth.
- Questions about the future direction of the CoP, pondering whether naming and structuring the community would change its nature or simply clarify its purpose.
- Suggestions for practical tools to support the CoP, like a wants/needs board for articulating and addressing members' expectations and requirements.

These discussions reflected a collective desire for a CoP that is inclusive, supportive, and effectively leverages the diverse skills and experiences of its members. The feedback emphasised the importance of transparency, mutual support, and a structured approach to collaboration, highlighting a forward path that values both individual contributions and the collective growth of the community.

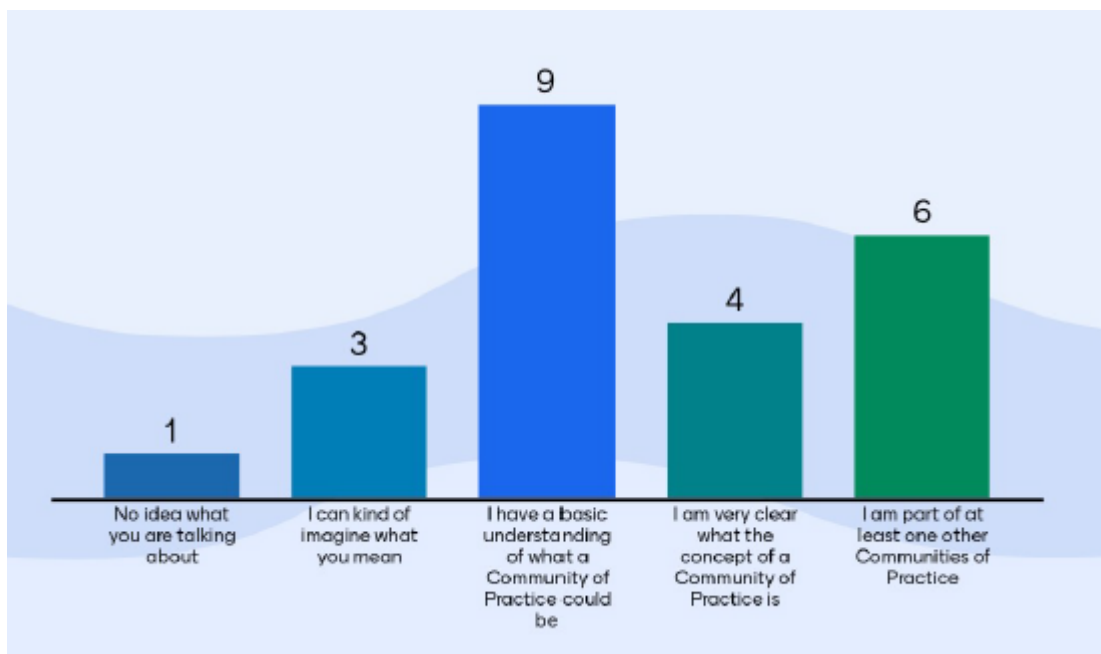


Figure 3 Confidence In Describing Community of Practice

#### 4 Themes and Priorities for our Alliance/Communities of Practice

In the breakout sessions participants identified a wide array of themes and priorities crucial for the development of the Alliance as a community of practice. These discussions revolved around the following key areas:

- **Support for Freelancers:** There was a strong emphasis on the need to support freelance practitioners, particularly in light of financial challenges such as the "cost of greed crisis" and diminishing fees. Providing a platform for freelancers to find work, including those requiring flexible arrangements due to disabilities, was seen as essential.
- **Advocacy:** Advocacy emerged as a dual theme: advocating for participatory arts within a broader societal context of limited funding and increasing recognition of the arts' role in addressing contemporary issues like climate change and the mental health needs of young people.
- **Community Expansion and Diversity:** A significant focus was on expanding the community to include a broader range of participants, moving beyond traditional qualifications, and embracing diverse ways of engaging in participatory arts. This includes reaching out to artists working informally in communities, such as Hip-Hop artists, and fostering an inclusive environment that acknowledges and supports the experiences of queer, disabled, and racialised people.
- **Learning and Development:** Providing learning opportunities for less experienced members of the field, through mentoring, training, and peer support, was highlighted as a priority. This also encompasses the development of practical skills, ethical practices, and transparent facilitation tools.
- **Collaboration and Co-Creation:** The importance of collaborative work, co-creation, and shared ownership in participatory arts projects was emphasised, alongside the need for clear definitions of participatory practices and transparent discussions around payment and ethics.
- **Inclusion and Accessibility:** Ensuring inclusivity and accessibility within participatory/community arts was underlined as a necessity, including considerations for how physical spaces and attitudes might be barriers to participation.
- **Research and Evaluation:** There was an interest in developing stronger connections with researchers to find funding opportunities, as well as in developing innovative approaches to project evaluation that go beyond traditional metrics.
- **Policy and Strategic Advocacy:** Engaging with statutory organisations, strategic bodies, and funders to advocate for systemic change within the arts sector was identified as a key area of focus. This includes responding to consultations and developing bids for funding that could support the community's activities.
- **Cultural and Political Responsiveness:** Participants expressed a desire for the Alliance to engage with broader cultural and political issues, including climate change and the role of arts in a politically charged environment.
- **Community Practice and Development:** The discussions underscored the importance of fostering a sense of belonging, trust, and mutual support within the Alliance, enabling members to grow both individually and as part of the wider community.

These themes reflect the complex landscape in which participatory artists operate and the diverse needs and aspirations of the ArtWorks Alliance community. The focus on advocacy,

inclusion, learning, and collaborative practice points towards a forward-looking agenda aimed at strengthening and expanding the reach and impact of participatory arts.

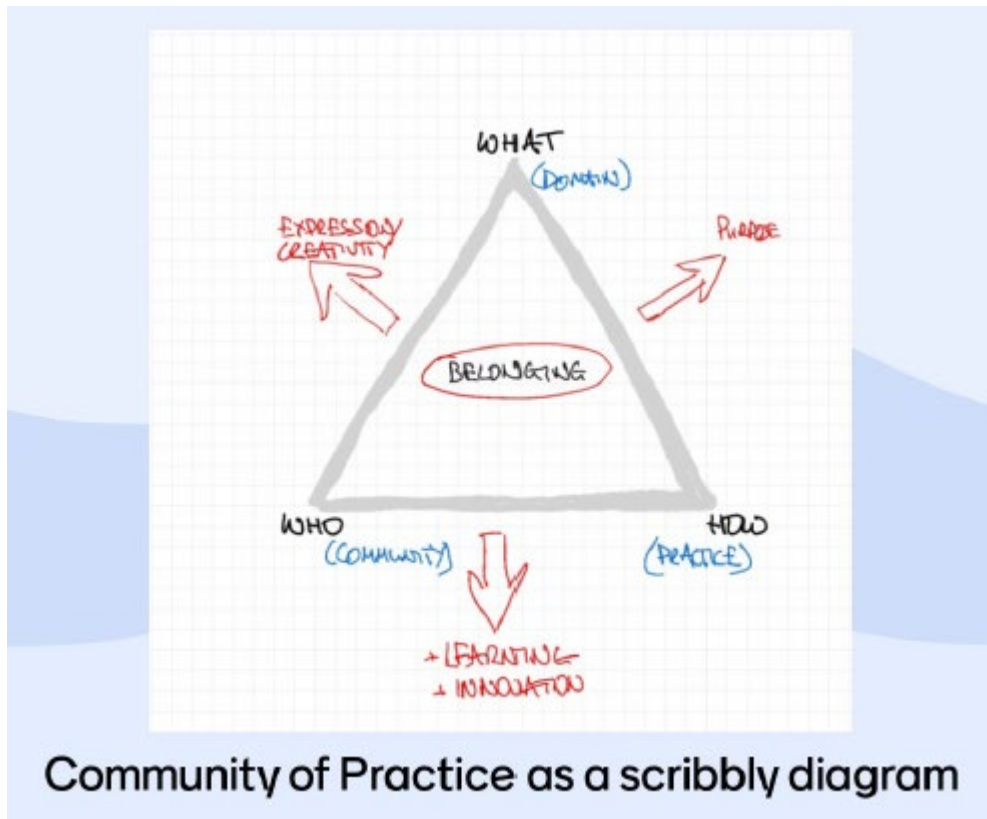


Figure 4 Dynamic Interactions of a Community of Practice

## 5 Breakout Discussions

### 5.1 Community Practice and Advocacy Discussion

In their breakout discussion, the Community Practice and Advocacy group focused on how to enhance the collaborative efforts within the ArtWorks Alliance and beyond, with a specific emphasis on the broader implications of their work in society. The group discussed various strategies for supporting freelancers, particularly in navigating economic challenges and advocating for fair compensation and equitable opportunities in the participatory arts sector.

The conversation highlighted the importance of advocacy, not only for securing funding but also for elevating the role of participatory arts in addressing critical issues like climate change and mental health. There was a strong consensus on the need to expand the community's reach by

including diverse voices and practices, thereby enriching the alliance's collective knowledge and impact.

Learning and development emerged as critical themes, with the group identifying the need for structured opportunities for mentoring, training, and skill-sharing to support the growth of less experienced practitioners. This led to discussions around creating inclusive and accessible spaces that cater to the needs of a diverse range of participants, including those from underrepresented groups.

The group also tackled the complexities of collaboration and co-creation, underscoring the need for clear definitions and ethical frameworks that support transparent and equitable practices. The importance of engaging with research, policy-making, and strategic advocacy was recognized as vital for pushing the boundaries of participatory arts and influencing systemic change within the cultural sector.

Overall, the Community Practice and Advocacy group's discussion underscored the collective desire to foster a more connected, supportive, and impactful community of practice. Their report back highlighted a forward-thinking approach to developing the ArtWorks Alliance, centred on inclusivity, advocacy, and the continuous development of participatory arts practices.

## **5.2 Event Planning, Logistics, and Community Focus**

The Event Planning, Logistics, and Community Focus group concentrated on the foundational elements necessary for the successful organization and execution of future ArtWorks Alliance events. Their discussion acknowledged the critical role of thoughtful planning and logistics in fostering a sense of community and enhancing the overall impact of these gatherings.

Key points highlighted included the importance of selecting accessible venues that accommodate the diverse needs of participants, ensuring that all members of the community feel welcomed and valued. The group discussed strategies for streamlining event logistics to maximize engagement and participation, such as efficient time management and the inclusion of diverse and dynamic speakers to enrich the program.

Furthermore, the group emphasized the need for a community-focused approach to event planning, one that actively involves participants in the decision-making process and encourages collaboration and shared ownership of the outcomes. This approach is seen as vital in building a cohesive and supportive community of practice that extends beyond the events themselves.



The group also identified the potential for leveraging online platforms and tools to enhance accessibility and participation, especially for those unable to attend in person. This dual approach of combining in-person and online elements was proposed as a means to broaden the reach of the alliance's activities and to foster a more inclusive and engaged community.

In summary, the Event Planning, Logistics, and Community Focus group's report back emphasized the importance of intentional and inclusive event planning as a mechanism for strengthening the ArtWorks Alliance community. Their insights point towards a strategic approach that balances logistical precision with a deep commitment to community engagement and inclusivity.

### **5.3 Mentoring Career Development and Training**

Hannah led a discussion on mentoring career development and training, emphasising the importance of identifying shared needs within the community to collectively build resources and support. There was also a brief conversation on the concept of 'volunteers' but no specific details or decisions were reported. Hannah closed the meeting by stating that the themes discussed were not definitive, but rather a starting point for future discussions. Adrian was given the floor to wrap up the meeting.

### **5.4 Extending Self-Organising Ethos of Artworks Alliance**

Adrian presented the idea of extending the self-organising ethos of the Artworks Alliance, inviting members to contribute their skills and ideas to develop the community. He suggested that members could help with website details, the oversight group, or the development of specific themes, while also volunteering for communication duties. Hannah agreed to help with mentoring, and both emphasised the importance of volunteers' input. The team also planned future gatherings on topics such as interdisciplinary works and international collaboration, which Adrian promised to share. Towards the end, the team discussed the possibility of an outdoor summer gathering, and Abi was mentioned but her input was not detailed in the transcript.

### **5.5 Artworks Alliance Community of Practice Discussion**

The Mentoring, Career Development, and Training Discussion Focus group dedicated their breakout session to exploring ways the ArtWorks Alliance can support its members' professional growth and development. The discussion revolved around the crucial role of mentoring in nurturing emerging talents and providing pathways for experienced practitioners to share their knowledge and insights.

A key theme that emerged was the need for a structured mentoring program, tailored to meet the diverse needs of the community. The group underscored the importance of matching mentors and mentees in a thoughtful manner, taking into consideration the specific goals, challenges, and areas of interest of each participant.

The discussion also highlighted the potential for developing training sessions and workshops that address current trends, skills, and methodologies within participatory arts. Recognizing the fast-evolving nature of the sector, the group advocated for a dynamic and responsive training agenda that keeps pace with the needs of practitioners at different stages of their careers.

Moreover, the group emphasized the value of career development opportunities, such as networking events, panel discussions, and collaborative projects, which can open new pathways for professional advancement and creative exploration. These initiatives were seen as essential for fostering a vibrant, informed, and connected community of practice.

In summary, the Mentoring, Career Development, and Training Discussion Focus group's feedback underscored the importance of establishing robust support structures for mentoring, training, and career development within the ArtWorks Alliance. These initiatives were highlighted as vital components for empowering members, enhancing their skills, and fostering a sense of belonging and collaboration within the community.

## **5.6 Steering Group Activities and Advocacy Discussion**

The Steering Group Activities and Advocacy Discussion group engaged in a focused dialogue on enhancing the strategic direction and advocacy efforts of the ArtWorks Alliance. The group examined the roles and responsibilities of the steering group in leading the alliance, emphasizing the importance of clear, strategic planning and active advocacy to advance the interests and visibility of participatory arts.

A central theme was the necessity for the steering group to actively champion the values and objectives of the alliance, ensuring that these are communicated effectively both within the community and to external stakeholders. This includes advocating for the participatory arts sector in broader cultural, social, and political contexts, highlighting its impact and importance.

The group also discussed the importance of engaging with funders, policymakers, and other key players to advocate for supportive policies and increased funding opportunities for participatory arts. There was a consensus on the need for a proactive approach to challenge and influence the existing structures and perceptions that impact the sector.

Furthermore, the importance of internal advocacy within the ArtWorks Alliance was highlighted, with a focus on supporting members through shared resources, knowledge exchange, and collaborative opportunities. The group recognized the need for the steering group to facilitate these activities, fostering a strong and cohesive community of practice.

In summary, the Steering Group Activities and Advocacy Discussion group underscored the critical role of the steering group in guiding the ArtWorks Alliance towards achieving its strategic goals. Their discussions pointed towards a dual approach of external advocacy for the sector and internal support for the community, aimed at strengthening the impact and reach of participatory arts.

## **5.7 Exploring Activism, Social Changes, and Support**

The Exploring Activism, Social Changes, and Support group delved into the intersections between participatory arts, activism, and societal change during their breakout discussion. This group underscored the transformative potential of participatory arts in driving social change and addressing critical global issues such as climate justice and equity.

Participants highlighted the importance of participatory arts as a tool for activism, emphasizing the need for the ArtWorks Alliance to foster projects and initiatives that directly engage with social and environmental challenges. The group discussed strategies for supporting artists and organizations in this realm, including the creation of platforms for sharing resources, case studies, and best practices that spotlight the impact of arts-based activism.

The discussion also covered the significance of building a supportive network for practitioners engaged in socially and politically charged work, recognizing the unique challenges and pressures they face. There was a strong call for the Alliance to facilitate connections, provide emotional and logistical support, and advocate for the value of arts in activism to funders and policymakers.

Moreover, the group explored ways the Alliance could encourage a broader engagement with activism within the arts community, including diversifying the types of artists and practitioners involved and creating inclusive spaces for dialogue and collaboration. The potential for interdisciplinary and cross-sector partnerships was also noted to amplify the impact of arts-based activism.

In summary, the Exploring Activism, Social Changes, and Support group's report back highlighted the critical role of the ArtWorks Alliance in championing the use of participatory arts as a powerful medium for social change. Their discussion focused on the need for robust

support systems, advocacy, and the facilitation of collaborative opportunities to empower artists and organizations dedicated to making a difference through their work.

## 6 Offering Support to our Self-Organising Community of Practice

Participants of the gathering demonstrated a strong willingness to contribute to the development of the Alliance as a self-organising community of practice, offering a rich variety of resources, skills, and experiences. Their contributions can be summarised as follows:

- **Communication and Information Sharing:** Several participants suggested enhancing the alliance's communication strategies, including the proposal of regular Zoom calls to guide members through website content and updates. This would complement the information already available on the website and in newsletters.
- **Expertise Sharing:** Individuals offered to share their specific expertise, ranging from experience with Heritage Fund projects to working with displaced persons and design research skills. One participant mentioned a resource they've developed, aimed at addressing many of the issues discussed, offering to share this tool with the community.
- **Community Placemaking and Development:** Contributions here included offers to assist with community placemaking efforts and the development of research and engagement strategies. This includes offering to serve as an informal artist in development and facilitating international art festival participation to enhance the representation of participatory arts.
- **Research and Academic Connections:** Several participants, including a PhD student, offered to contribute their research skills and academic connections. This includes developing research projects, helping to generate an archive of projects or readings, and assisting in making connections with higher education institutions for research-informed practice and funding opportunities.
- **Accessibility and Inclusion:** There was a strong focus on improving accessibility within participatory arts, with offers to contribute lived experience and expertise in creating networks for disabled artists at work. This extends to hosting sessions on communications, advocacy, and fundraising to support broader accessibility and inclusion within the sector.
- **Peer Support and Mentoring:** Offers were made to develop and participate in a peer mentoring programme, highlighting a commitment to mutual growth and support within the community. This includes willingness to engage in focus groups and provide support and suggestions for working within specific sectors like the criminal justice system.

The breadth of offers made by participants showcases a collective commitment to leveraging individual strengths and resources for the benefit of the ArtWorks Alliance community. These contributions highlight a desire to foster a more connected, supportive, and impactful community of practice through shared knowledge, skills, and experiences.

## 7 Summary

The ArtWorks Alliance gathering brought together a diverse group of participants to explore and address the multifaceted challenges and opportunities within the participatory arts sector. The key issues discussed were centred around enhancing support for freelancers, advocating for the value of participatory arts, expanding community engagement and diversity, fostering learning and development, and strengthening collaboration and co-creation. Here's how these issues will be taken forward:

- i. **Support for Freelancers:** Recognizing the economic challenges faced by freelancers in the sector, the alliance plans to develop platforms and programs to connect freelancers with work opportunities, including those that offer flexibility for individuals with disabilities. This effort aims to ensure fair compensation and equitable opportunities, responding directly to the financial instability many practitioners face.
- ii. **Advocacy for Participatory Arts:** The gathering underscored the need for a concerted advocacy effort to highlight the significance of participatory arts in addressing social, environmental, and political challenges. Future activities will focus on engaging with policymakers, funders, and the broader cultural sector to secure supportive policies and increased funding for participatory arts.
- iii. **Community Expansion and Diversity:** The alliance is committed to broadening its reach by actively welcoming and including a diverse range of voices and practices. This includes reaching out to underrepresented groups and embracing non-traditional art forms and practices. Efforts will be made to create inclusive spaces that encourage dialogue and collaboration among a wider audience.
- iv. **Learning and Development:** Recognizing the importance of continuous professional growth, the alliance intends to implement structured mentoring programs, training sessions, and workshops tailored to the needs of its members. These initiatives will focus on current trends, methodologies, and skills development, aiming to support practitioners at various stages of their careers.
- v. **Collaboration and Co-Creation:** To foster a collaborative community of practice, the alliance plans to facilitate co-creation projects and shared learning opportunities. This will involve setting up systems for transparent communication, ethical practices, and shared ownership, ensuring that all members feel valued and supported in their collaborative efforts.
- vi. **Strategic Direction and Internal Advocacy:** The steering group's role in guiding the alliance's strategic direction was highlighted as crucial. Future activities will involve clear, strategic planning and internal advocacy to ensure that the values and objectives of the alliance are effectively communicated and pursued, both within the community and in broader advocacy efforts.
- vii. **Engagement with Research and Policy:** The alliance aims to strengthen its connections with the academic and research community to foster innovative approaches to participatory arts. This includes developing partnerships to find funding, engaging with policy-making processes, and contributing to the discourse on the role of the arts in society.

The ArtWorks Alliance gathering marked a significant step toward addressing the pressing issues faced by the participatory arts sector. By focusing on these key areas, the alliance is

poised to enhance its impact, foster a supportive and inclusive community, and advocate for the transformative power of participatory arts in creating social change.