



Reaching Communities end of grant report - January 2024

Overview

This Reaching Communities (RC) grant has covered and supported the deepening, consolidation and reach of our charity community work, with a particular focus on developing and expanding our Creative Pathways to Healing and Meaning programme, 'focussing on therapeutic arts-based interventions to support long term recovery from addiction, trauma and PTSD.' [1] Since this grant was awarded we have seen much change in the wider environment. The time period has encompassed the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. Our response has remained creative and steadfast to best support our already existing community and to reach out into the wide addiction recovery community of Devon.

The grant has enabled us to consolidate our staff team, with Ali Chapman and Jo McGain coming fully on board as part time employees. We are extremely proud to have seen Ali make incredible personal and professional development from her first attendance as a participant in 2016 to training as our lead nature connection facilitator and now a programme leader. Ali is a highly valued and valuable core part of our small staff team. The support of the RC grant has been instrumental in this progression, and allowing Jo McGain (previously doing a few freelance hours) to be taken on as a staff member and to offer vital background support to the smooth running of the charity.

The Creative Pathways (CP) focus of the grant has allowed our creative director and founder Caspar Walsh to spearhead the creative inclusion of many of our participants and has allowed a flourishing of the expressive part of our work in a very professional and inclusive way. The grant has allowed us to focus on wider training events, supporting those long term members of our community to really deepen in their own journey and develop their own personal engagement and growth and also to develop leadership and facilitation skills for those that are seeking to develop in this way. Our reach in partnerships and links around the region has grown and we have made significant contact with other related projects and ventures, even if no solid partnership has formed. Our flagship New Tribe residential programme has continued to be our main entry point to our work and continues to have a significant impact on those people who come through.

COVID-19

The start of this grant period was March 2020. From the very beginning the impact of the Covid pandemic, particularly our face to face events, has been significant and long lasting.

Even once in-person gatherings were permitted after a series of lockdowns we've found people's willingness and resilience in coming to face to face meet ups has significantly decreased. We have seen this as a continued impact, where people have become more accustomed to meeting online from their homes without travelling, sometimes considerable distance across Devon, coupled with the cost of living crisis where fuel costs are often prohibitive.

One of our great strengths as an organisation and as a small team is our responsiveness, flexibility and creativity when it comes to adapting what we are offering based on the ever changing situation on the ground and the feedback and response we receive from our community. If something doesn't work, or isn't taken up in the way that we thought it might be, we respond by offering something different. With online meetings having become more the norm we've adapted some of our events accordingly and found for example our new Multi Addictions online meetings having much greater take up than comparable in person events.

Experience Days

After the period of lockdowns lifted we offered various Experience Days across Devon but found the uptake minimal despite linking in with drug and alcohol agencies, supported housing and other groups and through existing community members. We changed direction with these days offering them instead to specific target groups, deciding to put emphasis on meeting people at the earliest stage of recovery in their own communities.

This new format has been more successful in actively engaging people.

Case study - Torbay

- Initially one 3hr session supported by 3 members of the R2F community in their community, joined by 12 new participants at various stages of recovery, much engagement and positive response.
- Followed on with the request for a full Dartmoor day that was joined by 15 people for a day of nature connection, meditation, creativity practices.
- 2 of this group then joined a residential, with the possibility of those not yet ready choosing to join at a later date.
- Partnerships developed with Jatis Project supported housing and Walnut Lodge (Torbay Drug and Alcohol Service). Karen (NHS worker) came on through this.

Learning from this is that community in-person outreach - catching people at the earliest stage of their recovery - is the most fruitful form. In local drugs projects there is often no funding beyond 3 months of clean time and we need to be well placed to engage with those that are interested and ready. This also supports our wish to keep partnerships strong and alive and the challenges based on a high turnover of staff with organisations being regularly put out to tender, where we build strong relationships with one person who then gets moved on.

Our original projection was that 100-200 people per year will join Experience Days.

2021 - none delivered due to pandemic and reluctance all round to meet in person

2022 - 2 days delivered with 10 volunteers and 8 new people reached

2023 - changed format to a targeted audience

Fire stone Plymouth attended 2 days with 10 new people reached

Torquay Jatis project and Walnut Lodge - 2 events reaching 15 new people

The targeted events allowed us to effectively reach more people, engage the existing community members based there and to work closer with existing services.

We over estimated reach and did not anticipate encountering blocks due to the pandemic and agencies not following through on initial agreements.

Mentoring Days - an addition to original RC proposal

At the time of application our predicted numbers were 5-17 per month joining.

Up until 2020 our monthly Mentoring Days were really strong and well attended by our community. Despite ongoing efforts after the lockdown, engagement with these days never recovered from the impact of Covid - the loss of momentum of regular meetups and people's willingness to meet in person. We tried various different ways to build these regular in person meetings up again, with the new format of Home Turf Days and participants taking on organising a day voluntarily in their local environment. This has not yet taken off. We realised this needed to be a paid position with consistent focus.

From lockdown the numbers dropped on Home Turf days. This was alongside the increase in numbers at other events and the involvement of the community in these events. As the community has grown we have noticed that there are small community hubs of people within R2F who meet up outside our official events to go for walks, swims etc and continue their creative interests. A fantastic legacy.

2021 - 8 mentoring days with 46 attending in total

2022 - 1 mentoring day with 10 attending in total

2023 - 2 Home Turf days with 6 attending in total

What we have found is that regular online meetings have taken their place, meeting people in the ease of their homes from their point of entry into the community. One of the impacts of Covid in general was the context of meeting online becoming really normalised across society overall.

We are experiencing that our community energy is currently with training and volunteers coming together to meet for longer. People staying active within our community are wanting to learn and develop both personally and with their skills and experience in leadership. In response to this and community interest, we're putting more active energy into training and mentoring sessions which are an extension of an element of outcomes from the recent RC grant. Our latest small grant from the Police and Crime Commissioners

fund (December 2023) is for regular one to one mentoring and training days involving outside facilitators as well as our core staff team.

New Tribe

“What an experience and amazing introduction to Rite to Freedom. After years of not feeling ‘part of’ I have now found a safe place to open my heart, be vulnerable and connect with others who are on the recovery path. I have a positive changed view of myself which has given me nourishment and more determination to enjoy the joy life has to offer. Thank you.” – Emma, New Tribes, July 2023

Over the period of the RC grant funding we have had 51 new participants come through our New Tribe residential programmes. Our original projection was 30-50 per year. Our originally anticipated numbers were significantly impacted by Covid-19 and its follow on effects. We stayed in discussion with lottery funding officers throughout this process.

In response to the pandemic in person restrictions, we devised a series of online retreats, with 2 delivered. These were more successful than we had imagined they’d be leading to a number of participants joining our community and others attending in person residential retreats when restrictions were lifted.

2020 - Online retreat 11 volunteers / 5 new reach

2021 - Online retreat 5 volunteers / 7 new reach

The online retreats allowed us to continue delivery, but as importantly provided a means of the community staying connected, creating a new way of delivery and participating. Over 200 hours were given voluntarily by our community.

In the autumn of 2022 we took the decision to go for lower numbers on our New Tribe residentials - emphasising the very personal nature of the experience, with a smaller staff team, creating a more trusting and safer container for staff and new participants to drop into and open up, allowing a deeper quality of space and time for those present to explore their healing and wellbeing journey. We put these lower numbers into practice from our March 2023 residential.

Recruiting new participants has been impacted by the transition of teams we’ve had partnerships with. We experience our partnerships having high turnover of staff as they regularly go out to tender. Consequently relationships change as partner organisation staff teams change. Regular work is required in staying up to speed with where new and current partner organisations are headed with the inevitable change in ethos. We often rely on our community members who work in these organisations to be our access point in.

We are also glad to be able to offer something back to those working in addiction services who are in recovery themselves. As they’re holding so much it is important for us to support them in not losing sight of their own needs. We have several people in our community in this situation.

We have started working with external group supervision where all paid and voluntary community staff are able to be in group together without a need for any to hold or facilitate. This allows for a level playing field where group and community dynamics can naturally emerge. This is observed, gently challenged and supported by the external supervisor with recommendations for CPD and personal development for all involved. This allows for any hidden tensions to be addressed and the invisible impacts of power across the community to be brought into the open.

New Tribe retention from 2020

June 2020 (online) - 1 person attending Creative Pathways

Oct 2020 (online) - 2 people regularly attending MA meetings, 1 subsequently attending in-person residential, 1 volunteering.

July 2021 - 3 volunteering, 1 freelance work, 2 attending Creative Pathways

Nov 2021 - 3 volunteering, 1 freelance work, 1 attending Creative Pathways

July 2022 - 3 volunteering, 1 attending Creative Pathways

Sept 2022 - 1 volunteering

March 2023 - 3 volunteering, 1 freelance work

July 2023 - 3 volunteering and have expressed a want to join the next CP residential

Creative Pathways (CP)

“Creativity whether writing, art, sculpting, photography or music has a power and release when it is in motion, that feeling is out of my head and into the world and can no longer destroy me. The journeying is ongoing, I feel the fizz of mischief and adventure with it.” - Ali, Creative Pathways, May 2023

This new programme has been developed extensively through the course of the grant period, including residential retreats, stand alone days, exhibitions and live events, art works, merchandise and our soon to launch online course.

We have found an important progression from those engaging on New Tribe residential to joining us as volunteers to then participating in Creative Pathways. We had anticipated more new service users coming to Creative Pathways but we have found it to be much more of a follow-on experience, and has allowed participants in our community to continue to deepen their own growth and recovery.

Ali Chapman is one good example of this, joining as a participant and reporting on how supportive and refreshing it is to step out of a leadership role to being a participant again.

Our learning includes pitching to other places than services, people have exited treatment and wider recovery groups, modalities and networks.

New participant numbers are low. Our focus is as much on existing members of the community as those new in. Recovery is progressive. The deepening of our healing and recovery is attained through Creative Pathways is key to the cohesion and growing of our

community. As we grow we change, approaching the work we do together from a different perspective.

Multi Addictions Recovery Meetings

We have developed this offering during the course of this grant, very much in response to what our community has been interested in engaging with. In response to feedback we now run these online calls weekly, initially with a recommendation of 6 months clean time. In response to need, this evolved into inviting people in at any stage of recovery - with at least 1 day away from chemical or behaviour of choice. We have regular and consistent attendance on these calls hosted predominantly by people who have been through our programmes as participants and supported through our staff training to build confidence in their leadership skills. Each themed discussion is recorded between the two main speakers and offered as part of our new membership platform.

We are experiencing a regular and steadily growing number of new attendees from different recovery modalities. These meetings have grown into a popular access point to our community and average between 6-12 participants each week. We've had participants come on to join a residential from those meetings, and interest with other events as well. Within our current community we have a core of 8 or 9 who regularly join, and the meetings are hosted by members of our community.

Recovery Conversations

We continue to enjoy an increasing profile from these podcasts exploring our 3 pillars of nature connection, meditation and creativity. This is currently our strongest area for diversity. Contributors have said they are drawn to join as a result of the diversity and range of conversations on offer. New podcasts are being offered each month as part of our membership platform content. These are part of helping us to build our independent income streams.

Ongoing Community / Staff Training / Leadership Programme

Current active community – 43 (whatsapp group)
27-30 volunteers from last year.

Some of our key learning is that community growth is slow and there is a need to really invest in those people that stay engaged. On average one person from each residential stays involved in the community in some way volunteering including residentials, standalone days, online meetings, arts events, creative contributions and promotion or progressing onto joining Creative Pathways. This has been consistent throughout the history of running our residential programmes since 2016. We are branching into offering one to one mentoring sessions to ongoing active members of our community with Caspar Walsh supported by a small grant from the Police and Crime Commission. The purpose is to support the ongoing personal and professional growth of those who sign up. We are looking to build the numbers of those who can act as recovery mentors. This new programme has been in response to requests from the community.

The Community Council has been a significant development in making sure to involve the community in feedback, decisions, growth and learning. This has been slow to take off ground with quarterly meetings. We have a really strong core group involved and are currently inviting more people on board.

Overall Numbers

Having had consistently full events (often with waiting lists) pre pandemic, we have witnessed a reduction in numbers for face to face events post pandemic; specifically with residential. Feedback and conversations indicate a fall in confidence in face to face connections throughout society with a new reliance (and convenience) on online support. While there are evident advantages in online support we know from experience that face to face connections prove to offer the greater overall and longer lasting impact. We are continuing to encourage and make as accessible as possible all face to face meetings.

New participants through our NT residential programme since 2020 – 51

Our offering is a personal experience on a small scale. We also offer multiple levels of experience, including visiting facilitators and creatives mature in their recovery. This deepens the experience, raining and stability within our community, reducing the risk of relapse.

How we've involved people from our community in the work we do

The fact that we are part of the community means that we have a clear idea of what the needs of the community are. Through the Community Council, training events, residential, polls, questionnaires, feedback, and online meetings we are able to assess the needs of the wider community. From the newest member to our longer standing members we listen. As with any community there are those who engage more and we appreciate that there is work to do to capture more (and more diverse) voices.

Our community members are extremely well networked, through working in supported housing, drug and alcohol services, addiction research with Exeter University. This web of connection helps us to stay close to the actual needs on the ground. We will continue to challenge the one size fits all approach to recovery.

Current community involvement is through:

- Attendance / Delivering Multi Addictions meetings
- Creative content - music/ photos/creative pieces for exhibitions
- Events - manning stalls at festivals/ chatting to people at Ashburton
- Suggesting guests for Recovery Conversations
- Training weekends
- Volunteering on residential/ days/ events
- Community council
- Active and supportive WhatsApp group
- Feedback after every event
- Attendance at Trustee meetings

Progression from participant to volunteer to paid staff (see example below)

“I started my Rite to Freedom journey post rehab in 2016, something was missing for me in 12 step recovery and I had outgrown my time with services. Rite to Freedom has consistently given me community support, growth, mentoring and opportunities for professional development. I gained confidence, found my voice and challenged the belief of the Mental Health system that I would constantly be using their service and not work. I stepped up from volunteer to lead Nature Connection facilitator then onto a few hours paid work into my position today as Project Coordinator. One of my greatest joys is still being part of the community and having opportunities to keep healing and learning as I develop. I have a great sense of pride watching friends within the community flourish.” ~ Ali Chapman

The differences we have made (both big and small)

Through this grant Rite to Freedom has really found its ground and spread its roots. Thanks to the immense support of this grant we are a different entity from 4 years ago. We have so much more on offer and have consolidated our place in the whole recovery field in Devon. We are much more widely known, really helped by the public creative events we have run. The solidity and long term nature of this grant has hugely supported us to consolidate and grow, put down deeper roots and establish ourselves more fully. It has helped us to get to the next point of growth as a community, ready to move into the next stage of our growth and provision.

In response to a survey question in 2023, “Have you felt less isolated and a greater sense of community and connection in your life since being involved in R2F?” 94% said yes.

Grant learning

- cost of living crisis - more money needed to cover transport costs for people.
- a want for those involved to deepen their learning by revisiting Creative Pathways for example as they mature in their recovery and can look at things from a different perspective
- the need to start engagement at an earlier stage so as to already have built trust to provide the next step on when exiting services
- difficulties experienced when trying to work with drug and alcohol services, mainly around their structural changes and staff turn over
- the legacy of involvement with R2F has created strong friendships outside of the community in localised geographical areas, meeting up for walks on Dartmoor, wild swimming and camping etc
- Creative Pathways inspiring individuals to connect more with arts centres and to continue developing their own creative practice
- inspired by the level of care and understanding within the community around engagement and accommodating particular long term health issues for some
- how wonderful the last staff training was. Care and personal treatment meeting people’s individual health needs and supporting people to do what they can - long

term significant health issues to still be able participate at their pace and to be looked after in community.

- that we are sometimes over ambitious in our hoped for reach and that it is a slow hard graft of reaching the people that benefit most from our services.
- the impact of Covid-19 right at the start of our grant. Our adaptability in response to this, changing and evolving what we have offered and involving our community in our decision making around what we are offering.

Future plans

We are currently deep in the midst of securing more grant funding to allow the services that we offer to continue. We have worked hard recently on diversifying our income streams so that we are not solely reliant on grant funding and can reduce the amount of time needed to invest in this. This includes our new membership scheme and our range of merchandise.

We are tentatively expanding our networks into the Cornwall and Bristol areas where we have found a need and interest in what we have to offer.

We will continue to offer our New Tribe residential as one of the main points of entry into our work and to extend the creative work that has been and continues to be developed through Creative Pathways.

[1] From original grant application, September 2019