



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Healing Arts Week

Evaluation of University of
Birmingham-led Events

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Executive summary

Healing Arts Birmingham 2026 brought together artists, researchers, practitioners, policymakers and members of the public to explore the role of creative practice in health, wellbeing and social justice. This evaluation focuses on six events led or supported by the University of Birmingham's Culture Forward initiative and assesses participant experiences through observation, surveys and interviews.

Overall, the events were highly successful and generated strong engagement from a diverse range of audiences. Participants consistently expressed enthusiasm for creative approaches to health and wellbeing, valuing opportunities to learn, reflect, create and connect with others. Creative and participatory methods were particularly well received, with activities such as Forum Theatre, painting workshops and public conversations providing engaging ways to explore complex issues relating to health, care and social inequality.

A key finding was the value participants placed on dialogue across sectors and communities. Events that brought together researchers, practitioners, artists and members of the public created productive exchanges of ideas and experiences, helping to bridge academic, professional and community perspectives. Open discussion formats encouraged participants to contribute their own views, ask questions and engage critically with current research and practice. Many participants viewed these opportunities for cross-sector exchange as an important part of developing the emerging field of creative health.

The evaluation also identified ongoing challenges relating to the delivery and sustainability of creative health initiatives. Discussions highlighted tensions between the long-term relationship-building required for community-centred work and the short-term funding cycles that often shape research and arts projects. Participants raised concerns about how meaningful partnerships can be developed and sustained when institutional priorities and funding timescales do not align with community needs.

The principal area for improvement concerned communication and coordination across the festival. Participants reported confusion about event formats, programme information and the wider festival offer. Many attendees were aware of individual events but had limited awareness of the broader programme, suggesting a need for more integrated promotion, clearer event descriptions and stronger coordination between partner organisations. While individual events were widely praised, the festival itself was less visible as a coherent city-wide initiative.

In conclusion, Healing Arts Birmingham successfully demonstrated both the public appetite for creative health activity and the value of creating spaces in which diverse audiences can learn from one another. The festival provides a strong foundation for future activity. Building on this success will require clearer communication, stronger coordination across partners and continued support for long-term, community-centred creative health collaborations.

Introduction

This report discusses the evaluation of University of Birmingham (UOB)-led events during the Healing Arts Festival held in the city between 22 to 26 June 2026. Events were held across Birmingham and the Midlands, promoting creative-based practices in health, care, wellbeing, and social justice.

The Healing Arts initiative is part of Jameel Arts & Health Lab's outreach campaign in collaboration with the World Health Organisation. The Birmingham festival was also co-led by the Birmingham City Council (BCC), supported by a host of other organisations, communities and institutions around the Midlands. As stated on their website, Healing Arts brings together "artists, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers to tackle health inequalities and embed creative practices at the heart of public life."¹ 120 events took place during the festival week (some of which were postponed or moved online due to safety concerns relating to the extreme hot weather). These spanned from roundtable discussions with Q+A panels addressing current research and policies, to painting and dancing workshops identifying ways in which care and wellbeing can be achieved through independent and group creative practices.

This report explores evaluation and feedback taken from six events led or

supported by UOB's Culture Forward initiative.

Evaluative Method

The evaluative approach combined observational notes taken by the evaluator at each session, short mentimeter surveys during the sessions and anonymised mini interviews with participants.

The evaluation focused primarily on the success of the sessions and the festival as a whole. Interview and survey questions included:

- What did you enjoy about today's session?
- How did you come across this event and/or Healing Arts Birmingham?
- What do you think could be improved from today and/or this week?

The mixed-methods approach aimed to garner a broad set of views on the events. As far as reasonably possible, the evaluator attempted to gather data from a diverse and proportionate number of stakeholders and participants.

Steps were taken to minimise disrupting the participant experience through the mixed use of interviews during breaks/at the end of the session and observational

¹ **Healing Arts Birmingham**, accessed July 20, 2026, <https://www.healingartsbirmingham.org/>.

notes throughout. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and uploaded to a secure SharePoint. Recordings were subsequently deleted from the physical device. The interviews were semi-structured, starting with the key questions, but allowing space for participants to direct the conversation according to their own perspective. Observational notes were scanned and uploaded to the secure SharePoint. All data was anonymised.

Due to the sensitive nature of some of the event topics, all event leads were contacted beforehand in order to ensure the evaluation methods were appropriate and respectful of participant needs. This also ensured that any logistical issues were discussed in advance and disruption to the participant's experience was minimised.

Project Activities

The evaluation covers six events supported and led by UOB's Culture Forward initiative.

Creative Health: Research in Action

An afternoon of talks led by UOB's Culture Forward initiative, bringing together academics and researchers, creative practitioners, community leaders, and public health experts in order to start a discussion exploring the relationships between research, creative practices, and public health and wellbeing.

This included a Q+A with UOB professors and researchers, as well as a range of external practitioners working with creative practices. Following the

Q+A session, groups were invited to take part in printmaking whilst discussing questions posed to them by the Culture Forward team around creative practice in the community. These ideas were then shared towards the end of the session.

Vanley Burke and Pat Noxolo in Conversation

This open discussion offered insights into Burke's life and practice, including the relationships, experiences, and personal ideas and thinking that shaped his work. Burke is regarded as one of the most important figures in Black British photography. His work documents everyday life, community experience and political struggle across Birmingham and further afield. He was joined by Professor Pat Noxolo, Chair in Postcolonial Geographies at UOB, who brought a complementary perspective that explored how Burke's photography and archival work connects to the wider cultural, historical and academic conversations surrounding race, place and representation.

Burke and Noxolo's relationship is a long-standing, relaxed one – with one participant describing the discussion as eavesdropping on a conversation between two friends – with conversations linking to artistic practices crossing over with health narratives and wellbeing.

Uli Painting Workshop and Talk

The Uli painting workshop introduced Uli – a traditional Igbo art practice – in order to explore themes of maternal care, the

body, and intergenerational knowledge. Historically practiced by women in south-eastern Nigeria, Uli is a form of mural and body painting that expresses symbolism, storytelling and cultural identity. These practices are often also associated with care, protection and everyday life for women across generations.

This session offered space for reflection and exchange, inviting participants to consider their own personal and shared experiences of care and wellbeing through creative practices. The workshop was hosted by PhD researcher, Gloria Adichie, and supported by Dr Juliet Gilbert, Associate Professor in African Studies & Anthropology at UOB. The workshop was also a part of the Beyond The Fattening Room project and its Embodied Care display in the Library of Birmingham. The event took a hands-on approach that invited creativity and physical manifestation of care through the painting, with materials made from traditional sources – the paint was a mix of gum, water and natural materials such as sandalwood and clay. It encouraged open dialogue between all participants and the host.

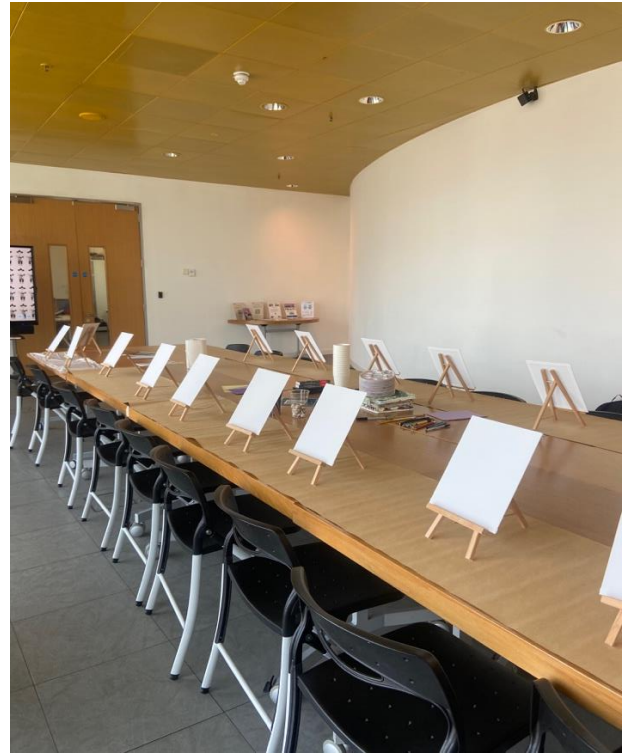


Figure 1 Uli Painting Workshop Setup

Extending Nature: Beyond the Tech – Creative, Clinical and Community Perspectives

The Extending Nature session was proposed as an open gathering and discussion around the exciting potentials and risks when developing new technologies – in this case specifically an app – across creative, clinical, and community settings. It addressed navigating the needs and concerns of different groups when designing new software and media and how nature, creative practice, and health can and should be considered when developing specific software. The central case study focused on Extending Nature, a project funded by Innovate UK with representatives from EcoGPX Ltd and Intercultural Roots for Public Health, who came together to discuss the

development of their new app, 'Places', that combines technology and nature to assist with generalised anxiety conditions. Extending Nature was moved online due to concerns about travel and room conditions during the heatwave. This, in turn, led to a lower public turnout than expected.

Art, Prisons and Health Symposium

The Art, Prisons and Health Symposium was an Ikon Gallery-organised partnership with Agder Kunstakademi (an independent art school based in Agder Prison, Norway) and Culture Forward. It showcased initiatives from the UK and Norway such as Art at HMP Birmingham, Agder Kunstakademi, and Project Phoenix & Project Athena – the latter led by UOB's Professor Peymane Adab and Professor Miranda Pallan.

The symposium highlighted how the criminal justice system does not always support care for inmates, whilst also reflecting on the role of creative practices within prison and probation systems in order to support rehabilitation. This session included a talk by Nikky Gandy – artist and photographer working primarily with homemade pinhole cameras in HMP Birmingham. Gandy discussed her reflective and working processes and how this interacted with teaching the men in the prison about creative practices in relation to wellbeing and expression. A major aspect of this is the use and effects of light, and how a prison building, due to architecture or security measures, will often have very little natural light that prisoners can access. Gandy discussed how circadian

rhythms and lack of natural light has been scientifically linked to faster ageing in the body and development in middle aged prisoners of illnesses and conditions often seen in older patients. By working with light in her photography, Gandy brings creative practice to the prisoners whilst also demonstrating the lack of access to natural light in prisons.



Figure 2 Art in Prisons session

National Arts in Hospitals Network at Healing Arts Birmingham – Addressing Health Inequalities in UK Maternity Care in Superdiverse Settings

This Forum Theatre performance addressing health inequalities for migrant women in UK maternity care was a community research project led by the Institute for Research into Superdiversity (IRiS) at UOB and the Community Interest Research Centre

(CIRC-CIC). It highlighted how women in the city of Birmingham often face barriers to healthcare during pregnancy and childbirth, including language challenges, confusion due to unfamiliarity with the healthcare system, and isolation. Community researchers discussed with members of their own community about their lived experience of maternity care in the UK and transformed those stories into a powerful, co-created Forum Theatre performance.

This event was open and interactive, inviting and empowering the audience to step into real-life situations depicted by the performance and collectively explore issues and potential improvements. The session led the audience in a direction not to simply critique the care that the actor-patient was receiving, but also to step into the performance themselves and discover if there was any way the

patient could have changed the outcome.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and current research into and discourse around the state of maternity care in the UK, IRiS and CIRC-CIC handled the topic in close collaboration with the NHS, ensuring that no specific institution or centre was implicated and followed the NHS guidelines about the public nature of the performance.



Figure 3 Vanley Burke and Pat Noxolo in conversation

Key Findings

Using creativity to represent healthcare issues was welcomed

Sessions that used creativity were especially well-received. The Forum Theatre piece, for example, allowed a conversation to develop about a highly emotional and sensitive topic, depicting and combining the experiences of many individuals across the community of migrant women in Birmingham into one scenario. This avoided placing blame or responsibility onto particular individuals or one institution and allowed a more generalised dialogue.

“I really enjoyed it. I think it’s great to have different formats for getting research across, especially when it’s such powerful and impactful work. We know about inequality in maternity services, but to see it played out this way was really valuable.” – Participant at the Forum Theatre session.

Evaluation of sessions that brought members of the public together to create art or conversations between each other also demonstrated the popularity of creative practice. Feedback gathered at events such as the Uli painting workshop and the conversation with Vanley Burke highlighted the sense of satisfaction and joy that having access to sessions such as these gave to participants. Specifically, having a dedicated space to come and create in the city enabled them to focus on their own wellbeing, as well as being a tool for education and connecting with other members of their community.

“It was such a treat to spend an afternoon painting in the middle of Birmingham – it doesn’t happen very often, especially in such a comfortable environment.” – Participant from the Uli Painting Workshop.

Cross-sector dialogues are seen as necessary and productive

Amongst practitioners, there was a clear appetite in particular for open dialogues about creative practices in the care and wellbeing of different communities. Participants had the impression that Healing Arts Birmingham events were opening conversations with fellow practitioners and researchers and enabling members of the public to see the effects and importance of creative practices embedded into healthcare.

“I really appreciated the diversity of different sectors coming together. I think it’s incredibly important for the emerging field of creative health to be open and inclusive, bringing together people from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. This has been a really enjoyable and interesting event, and I’m excited to see what comes next.” – Participant from the Creative Health: Research in Action session.

Open-format discussions allow for exchange between different audiences

Creating space for open discussions and dialogue proved particularly successful when participants were a mix of practitioners, researchers and members of the public. Open-format dialogues empowered individuals to express opinions on the topics of the events, and ask questions of researchers, artists, and institutions about the role of creative practice in healthcare in Birmingham. This allowed a connection and discussion between practitioners and the public, as well as a connection between researchers and institutions like UOB and Jameel Arts about the difficulties that sometimes arise from working with larger institutions when wanting to commit to a long-term creative solution in a small community.

At the Creative Health: Research in Action sandpit, for example, an interesting discussion developed about barriers to working with Universities: participants noted that these included creating time in an organisation's schedule, transparency about their agenda for the community that the research is happening in and questions about who the creative output created during the research belongs to.

Funding and priorities do not always align

Cross-sector dialogues also highlighted concerns around funding of creative health. Funding issues within the arts and healthcare systems have long been an issue, and the discussion-based sessions such as the UOB Creative Health panel highlighted these problems. There is a disconnect between funding and needs in community initiatives and research, and priorities and timelines of larger institutions and funding bodies do not align with the realities of those initiatives. Practitioners commented on the long-term connection needed with the communities in which they are embedding themselves. Questions were raised about how researchers can ensure ethical practice when building and sustaining personal connections given the mismatch with timeframes mandated by funders and/or the short-term nature of most research funding.

Confusion during the festival calls for more clarity in both the content and logistics

The major criticism raised by participants was the need for greater clarity in the organisation of the Healing Arts Festival. Two main areas of confusion included the content advertised and the overall logistics of the festival events. Different organisations and institutions involved in Healing Arts appeared disconnected from one another and the need for greater coordination of outreach and marketing was a common piece of feedback repeated across the sessions attended.

When asked where they had learned about the Healing Arts sessions, multiple members of the public at both the Uli painting workshop and Vanley Burke events mentioned the Ikon Gallery digital newsletter that featured Ikon-supported sessions from the Healing Arts festival. Some of those individuals seemed surprised to hear there was a range of events taking place throughout the week and had not previously heard of the

Healing Arts Birmingham festival. There appeared to be a greater level of outreach and marketing towards practitioners and professionals, but more for specific sessions that related to their field of work, and less of the festival in its entirety. Clarity on content also became a noticeable factor, with the Healing Arts website having multiple pages for one event creating confusion. There were comments made in both the Creative Health panel and Uli workshop about lack of clarity regarding the aim and purpose of the session. Specifically, participants asked that open discussions are labelled as such, and that events advertised as creative drop-in sessions really are drop-in friendly.



Figure 4 Panel discussion at the Creative Health: Research in Action sandpit. From left to right: Maria Witek (UOB), Rawad Mahyub (Muath Trust), Hamid Lea (Zawiyah Trust), David Evans-Powell (UOB), Yasmyn Nettle (Re.Future Collective), Qulsom Fazil (UOB), Marley Starskey Butler (interdisciplinary artist)

Recommendations

Overall the Healing Arts Festival Birmingham was a successful beginning to a dialogue that is both relevant and popular with communities and practitioners in the Midlands. The range of events was strongly commended by participants, and guest speakers and

session leads were popular and successful. Overall satisfaction from participants was palpable and demonstrated the popularity of initiatives and conversations in creative health in the Midlands. There is, however, a need for greater clarity in both the content of the events and the logistics of the festival as a whole. Participant interviews and observations highlighted that – despite great enthusiasm for these types of events in the Midlands – the structure of the festival was difficult to navigate. Miscommunications about the content of sessions added to this lack of clarity.

In light of these findings, the evaluator proposes the following:

1. A centralised system of communication between all organisations co-leading and supporting events
2. Clearer timetabling of events as they span across the city and beyond
3. Clarity in the content and logistics of an event
4. Greater build up to the festival as a whole through both individual organisations and institutions promoting the events, and a centralised promotion system that encourages more members of the public to get involved.

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