The Stuart Low Trust

The Change We Want To See

The Stuart Low Trust

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Summary 3
Introduction 4
Theory of Change 5

WHO WE SPOKE TO 8

WHAT WE DID 9

WHAT WE FOUND OUT 11
Social issues that impact on wellbeing 11
Local issues that impact on wellbeing 14
Participant centered outcomes 17
Our activities and how we describe them 19
Defining key concepts 20

WHAT WE LEARNED 25

NEXT STEPS 26

Summary

It is vital that we understand our participants' needs, experiences and aspirations. This knowledge will help the staff to ensure that the activities delivered meet these.

In March 2019 the Stuart Low Trust started developing a Theory of Change. We were keen to include participants in this process. Over 70 participants shared their perspectives on this process.

Staff and participants believe that the most pressing social issues they face are:

- Loneliness and isolation
- Stress (caused by high density population. Transport)
- Community Safety/Violence & crime (Stabbings, Pickpockets).

Staff and participants agreed that the main local issues are:

- Budget cuts
- Anti social behaviour
- Homelessness and lack of suitable affordable housing
- High cost of living e.g. high cost of public transport, evening classes/further education
- Lack of community / community spirit
- Unemployment.

.

There was consensus between staff and participants in how we group our activities to form three main strands of delivery:

1. **Arts:** Choir, Philosophy Forum, Art Workshops and Art Visits
2. **Nature:** Gardening Project and Nature Visits
3. **Wellbeing:** Friday Evening Events, Wellbeing Workshops.

Speaking to our participants helped highlight the fact that further work is needed to define what we mean by 'arts', 'nature' and 'wellbeing'.

Participants' feedback was reflective and helped staff clarify aspects of our Theory of Change.

Introduction

About the Stuart Low Trust

The Stuart low Trust is an Islington-based organisation with a pan-London reach. We provide safe spaces and community activities for free, focusing on arts, nature and wellbeing, most of these delivered out of hours. We connect and support people for better health and wellbeing.

Participant voice at the Stuart Low Trust

Participant voice is at the centre of the Stuart Low Trust

The Stuart Low Trust has been described as a lifeline, bringing people living with or recovering from mental health issues together, via its out of hours activities. To ensure that we are delivering activities that meet the needs of our participants, it is vital that we understand their needs, experiences and their aspirations.

To achieve this, we consulted with participants to find out more about the issues that they face and how they think the Stuart Low Trust supports them.

Theory of Change

In March 2019 the Stuart Low Trust started developing a Theory of Change. This outlines how our work is contributing to our mission.

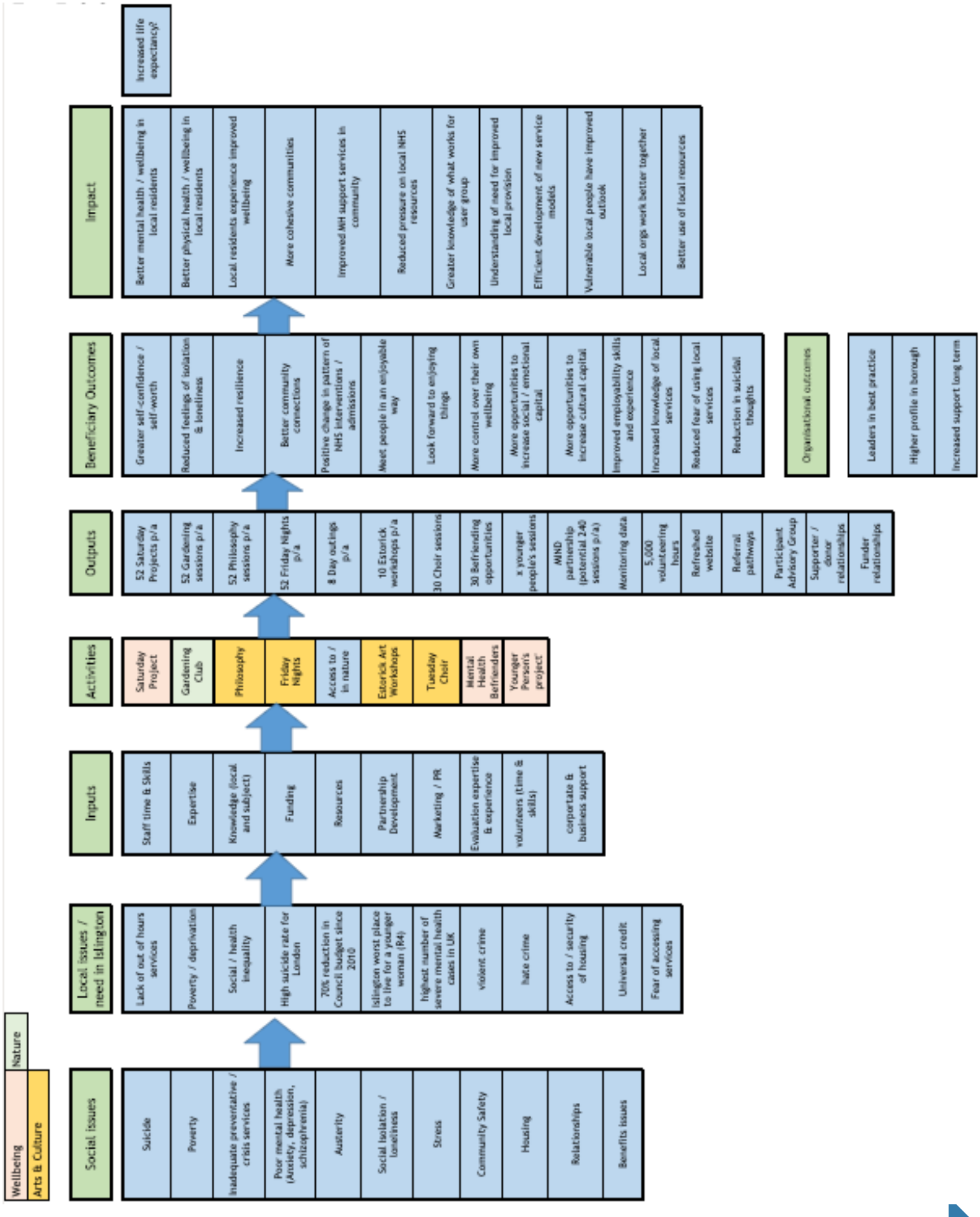
We aim to ensure that local people, especially those experiencing social isolation or mental distress, have access to the support they need for better health and wellbeing.

To develop a Theory of Change, staff at the Stuart Low Trust explored:

- **The issues** - any/all social and local issues affecting our participants
- **The inputs** - any/all resources required by the organisation
- **The activities** - the projects that we deliver
- **Outputs** - any/all provisions we deliver
- **Beneficiary Outcomes** - any/all positive consequences of our outputs experienced by our participants
- **Intended Impact** - We believe impact is the positive and negative long term effects produced by our activities. These changes can be direct or indirect and intended or unintended. They should be as specific as possible with respect to the time frame, measurement, and group of people.

The process helped us consider the context in which the organisation is working, map our projects and reflect on how they relate to each other.

Theory of Change



Participants' input on our Theory of Change

We wanted to check whether the Theory of Change we had devised accurately represented participant experience.

We were particularly interested in participants' perspectives on:

- social issues that impact on wellbeing
- local issues that impact on wellbeing
- our activities and the language used in categorising them
- participant-centred outcomes

In order to do this we wanted to promote discussion with our participants about these areas, and compare their thoughts with our own assumptions to find any cross-section.

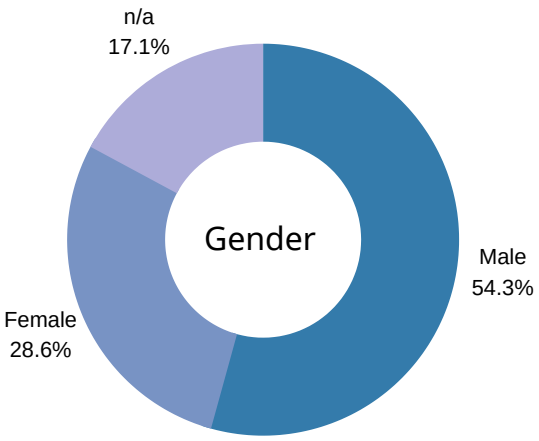
> “Give(s) us somewhere to go.”

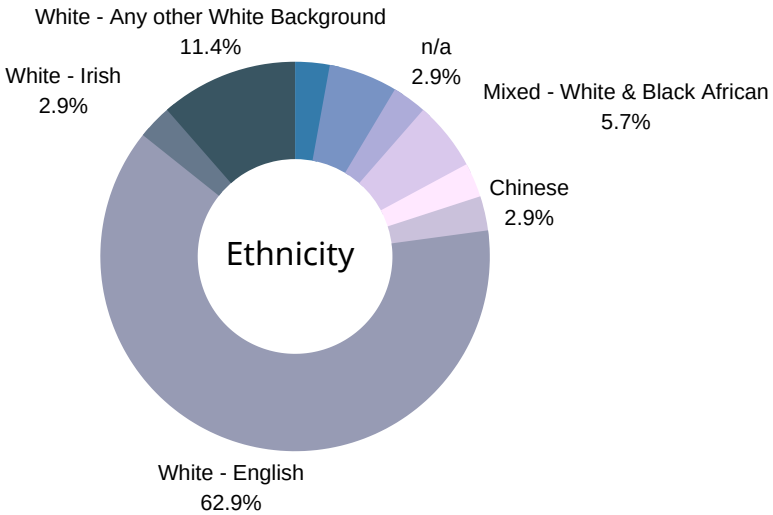
Who we spoke to

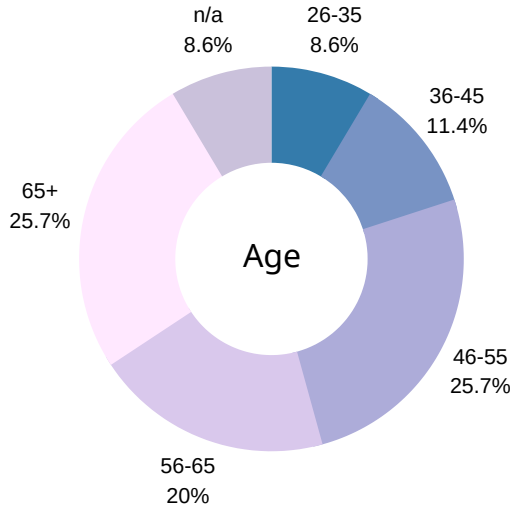
To ensure that we are delivering activities that meet the needs of our participants, it is vital that we have an understanding of their needs and experiences.

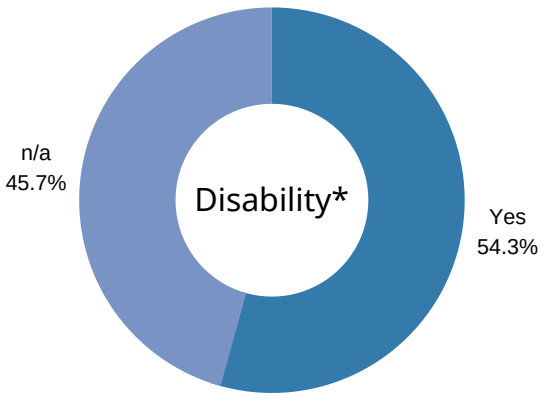
Over 70 participants shared their insights and experiences. We invited our participants to share demographics data with us. However, not all participants wanted to share this. We captured the following demographics data from 36 participants:

This process of data capture has highlighted the need for the organisation to review its M&E processes and expand the demographics data to ensure that we have a diverse reach.







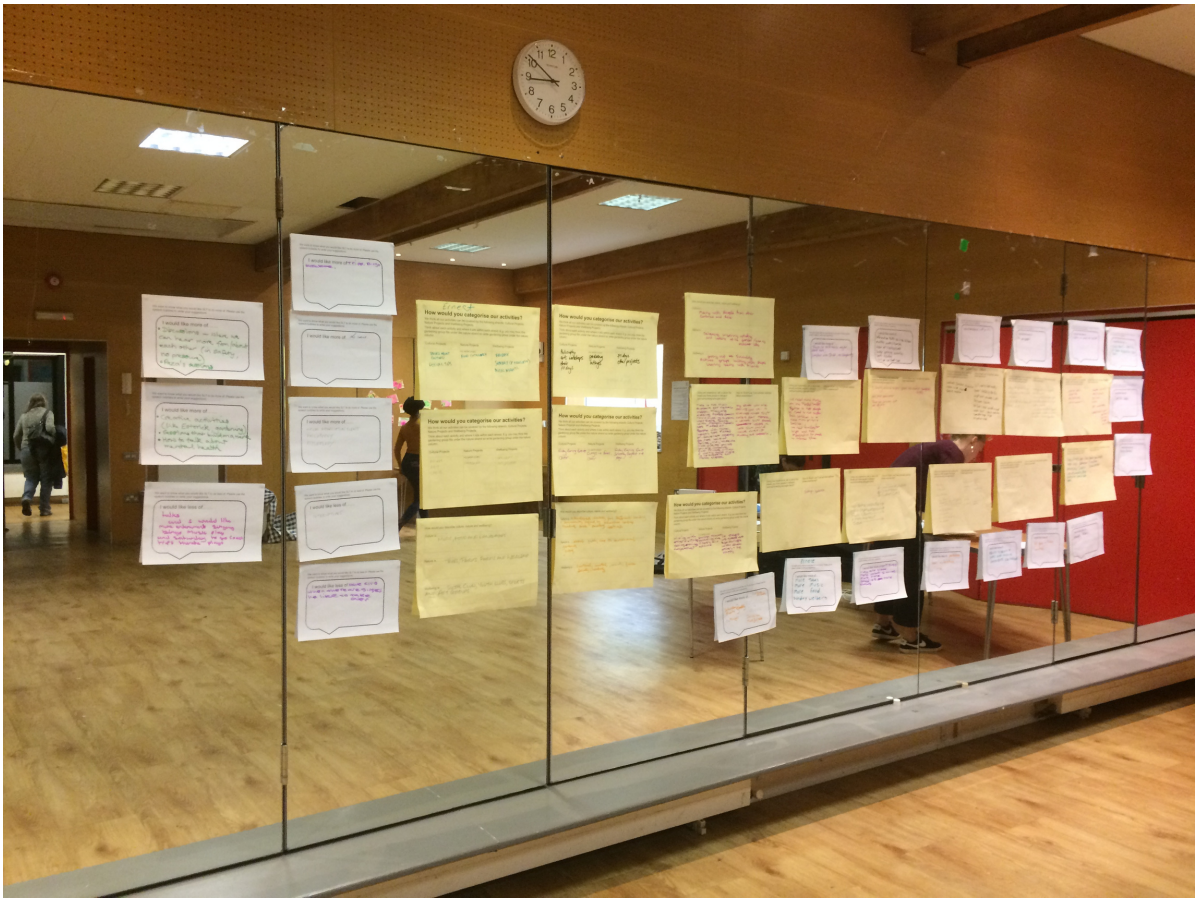


Do you consider yourself to have a disability or disabling condition (e.g. hearing impairment, dyslexia)

What we did

We were particularly interested in participants' perspectives on local issues/need, our activities and participant-centred outcomes.

We facilitated a range of round table discussions where participants were asked a series of questions that promoted discussion about these areas. We also invited participants to email in their feedback on these questions.



We devised some questions based on the key themes within the Theory of Change.

Social and local issues

Using your experience, tell us about the issues you think that people in Islington (and surrounding boroughs) face?

Our outcomes - reflecting participant-centred outcomes

How does the Stuart Low Trust address these experiences?

Our activities - reflecting on how we describe them

How would you describe culture nature and wellbeing?

Using your definition of culture, nature and wellbeing, how would you categorise our activities?

What we found out

The process of engaging our participants was enlightening for the staff and a meaningful exercise for participants.

In the following pages we present the **staff** reflections on each area of focus, followed by a summary of the information **participants** gave us. We then reflect on the similarities and differences in focus.

Social issues that impact on wellbeing

Staff thoughts:

Our Theory of Change identified a number of factors that may impact on participant wellbeing.

We have defined social issues as issues that impact on the the individual.

These are the social issues the staff thought our participants face:

- Suicide
- Poverty
- Inadequate preventative / crisis services
- Poor mental health (Anxiety, depression, schizophrenia)
- Austerity
- Social
- Isolation / Loneliness
- Stress
- Community Safety
- Housing (poor)
- Relationships

Social issues that impact on wellbeing

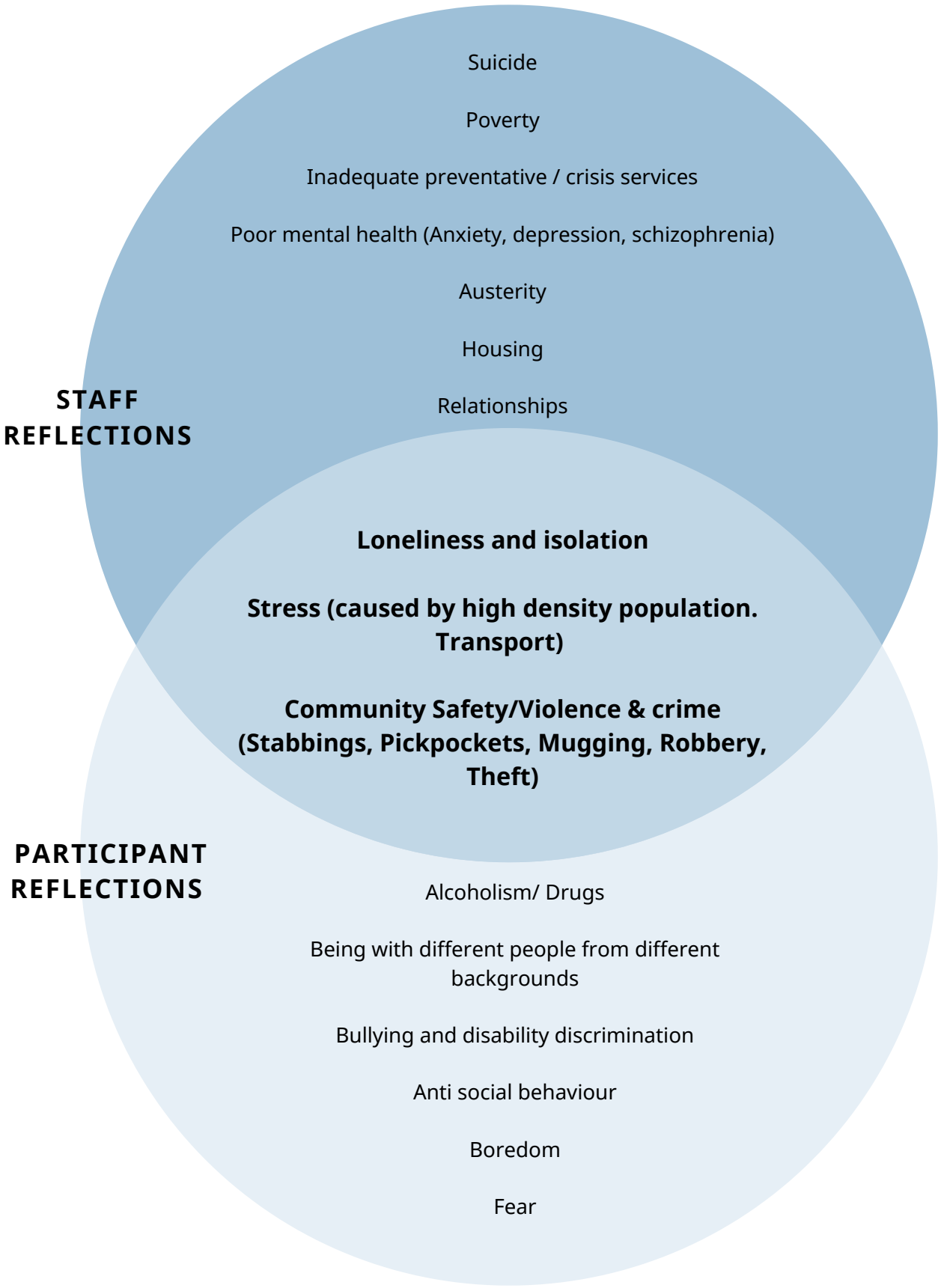
Participants' reflections:

"Without a place or venue for people with mental health problems we can face isolation and loneliness. As well as each day being the same."

The most frequently mentioned issues participants think that local people face are:

- Loneliness and isolation
- Alcoholism/ Drugs
- Violence/crime (Stabbings, Pickpockets, Mugging, Robbery, Theft)
- Bullying and disability discrimination
- Anti social behaviour
- Stress (caused by high density population. Transport)
- Boredom
- Fear

Overlap between staff and participant thought on social issues:



Local issues that impact on wellbeing

Staff thoughts:

We have defined local issues as issues that impact on the local community.

Our services are delivered in Islington and the according to our 2018 impact report, nearly 6 in 10 live in Islington, with just over a quarter coming from the four neighbouring boroughs (mainly Camden).

Therefore we focused on issues experienced by people living in Islington and surrounding boroughs. This included:

- 70% reduction in Council budget since 2010
- Islington worst place to live for a younger woman (as found by BBC Radio 4's Woman's Hour)
- Islington has the highest number of severe mental health cases in UK
- Islington has a high rate of violent crime
- Islington has a high rate hate crime
- Access to / security of housing
- Universal credit
- Fear of accessing services

Local issues that impact on wellbeing

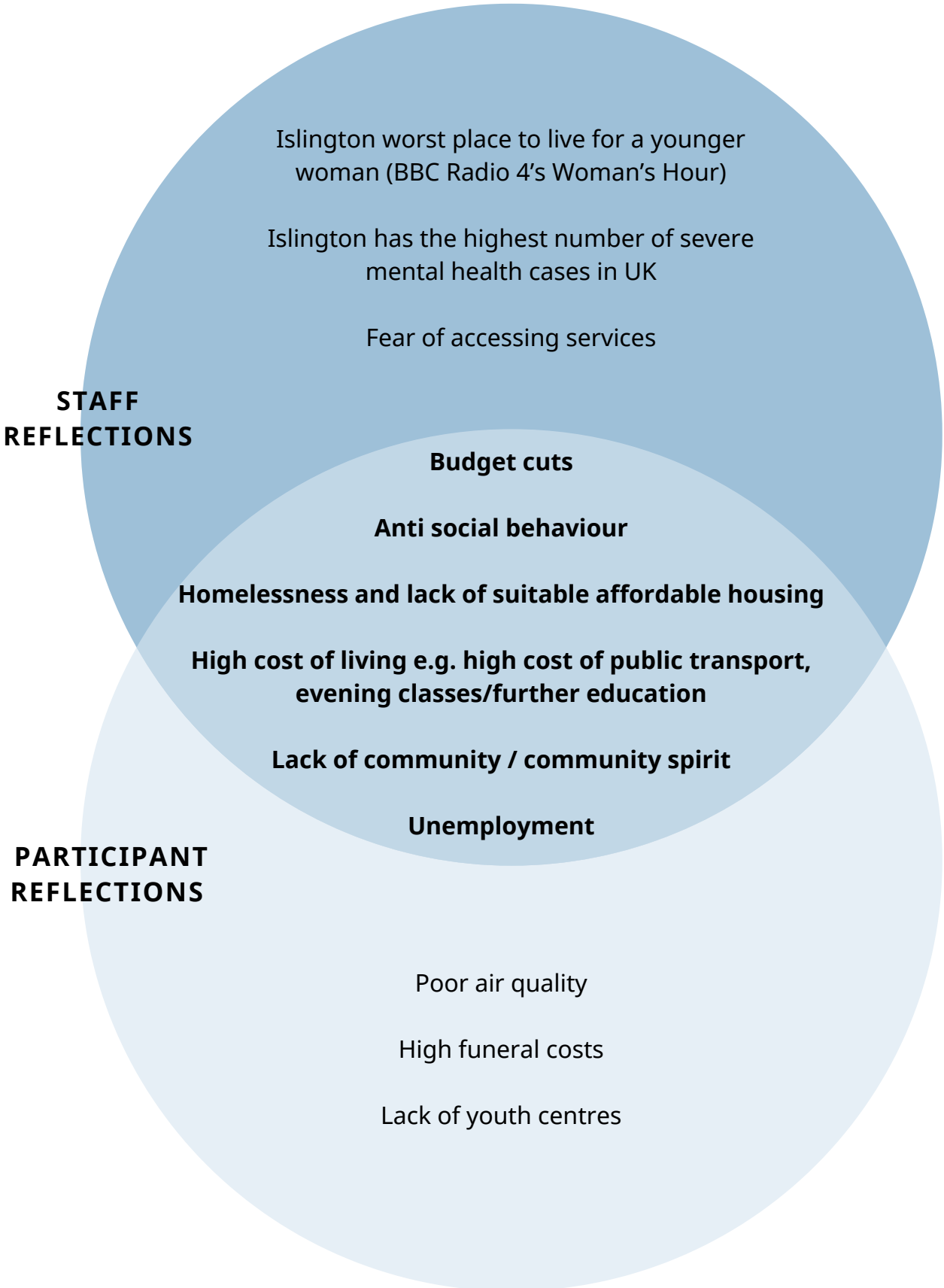
Participants' reflections:

> "We need more money on the mental health system to help people in need not to suffer from isolation to have more group to socialise."

The most frequently mentioned issues participants think that local people face are:

- Homelessness and lack of suitable affordable housing
- High cost of living e.g. high cost of public transport, evening classes/further education
- Budget cuts
- Poor air quality
- High funeral costs
- Anti social behaviour
- Unemployment
- Lack of community/ community spirit
- Lack of youth centres

Overlap between staff and participant thought on local issues:



There was a high level of overlap between participant and staff identified local issues. Interestingly participants focused on very specific issues such as funeral costs, air quality and lack of youth centres.

Participant-centred outcomes

Staff thoughts:

As part of the Theory of Change we identified a range of outcomes. Outcomes are the effect that any of our interventions have on our beneficiary groups.

The list below focuses on participant-centred outcomes:

- Greater self-confidence / self-worth
- Reduced feelings of isolation & loneliness
- Increased resilience
- Better community connections
- Meet people in an enjoyable way
- Look forward to enjoying things
- More control over their own wellbeing
- More opportunities to increase social / emotional capital
- More opportunities to increase cultural capital
- Increased knowledge of local services
- Reduced fear of using local services
- Reduction in suicidal thoughts

Participant-centred outcomes

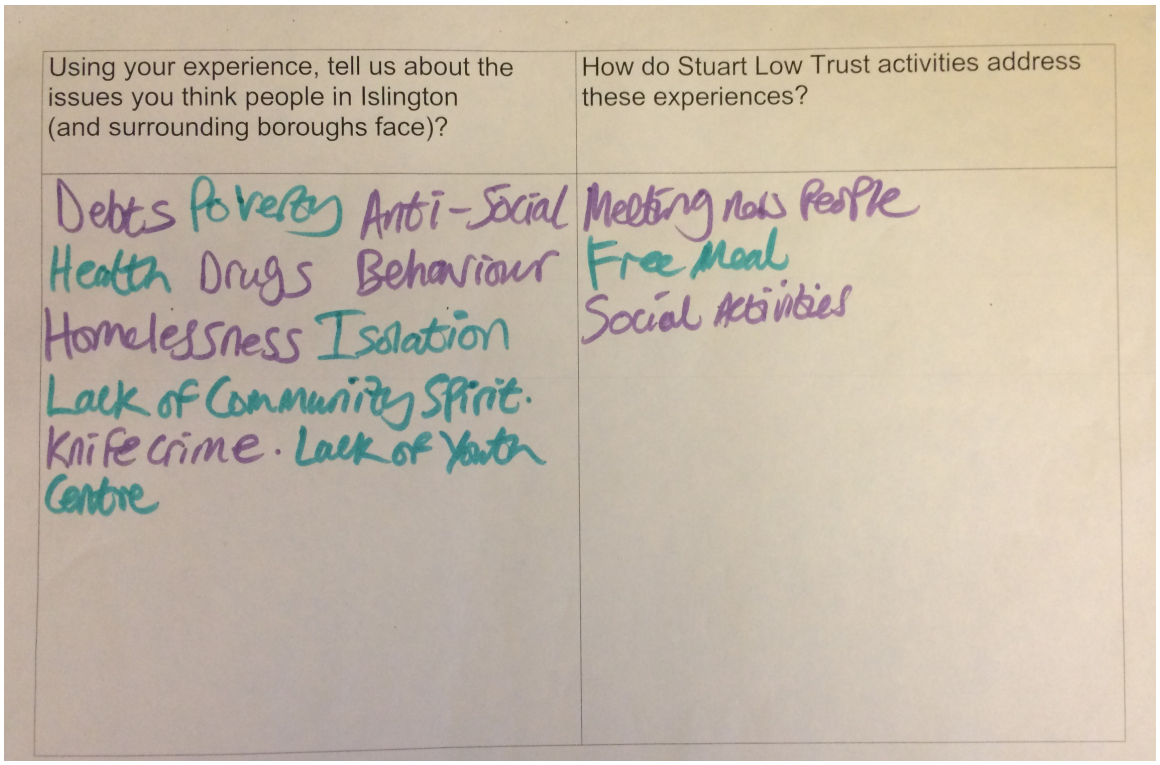
Participants' reflections:

In order to find out what participants thought our effect was, we asked them how the Stuart Low Trust activities addresses the local / social issues that they had previously defined.

They told us that we:

- help people socialise
- help meet new people
- provide 'mind' stimulation.

We did not ask participants directly about outcomes. If we had posed more focused and targeted questions, it is likely that we would have received a spesific response.



Using your experience, tell us about the issues you think people in Islington (and surrounding boroughs face)?	How do Stuart Low Trust activities address these experiences?
Debts Poverty Anti-Social Health Drugs Behaviour Homelessness Isolation Lack of Community Spirit. Knife crime. Lack of Youth Centre	Meeting new People Free Meal Social Activities

Our activities and how we describe them

Staff thoughts:

As part of discussions on the Theory of Change, we reflected on the activities we deliver.

Staff grouped these activities into three strands. Each activity could be categorised under at least one strand.

There categories were culture, nature and wellbeing.

Culture

- Philosophy forum
- Choir
- Art workshop
- Art visits

Nature

- Gardening project
- Nature visits

Wellbeing

- Friday Evening Events
- Wellbeing workshops

Staff were not asked to define these terms, however evidently culture was used to describe 'high culture' activities. Broadly we included art, music, literature and philosophy. As a result, we saw our Philosophy Forum, choir, art workshops and art visits forming a strand of 'cultural work'.

Defining key concepts

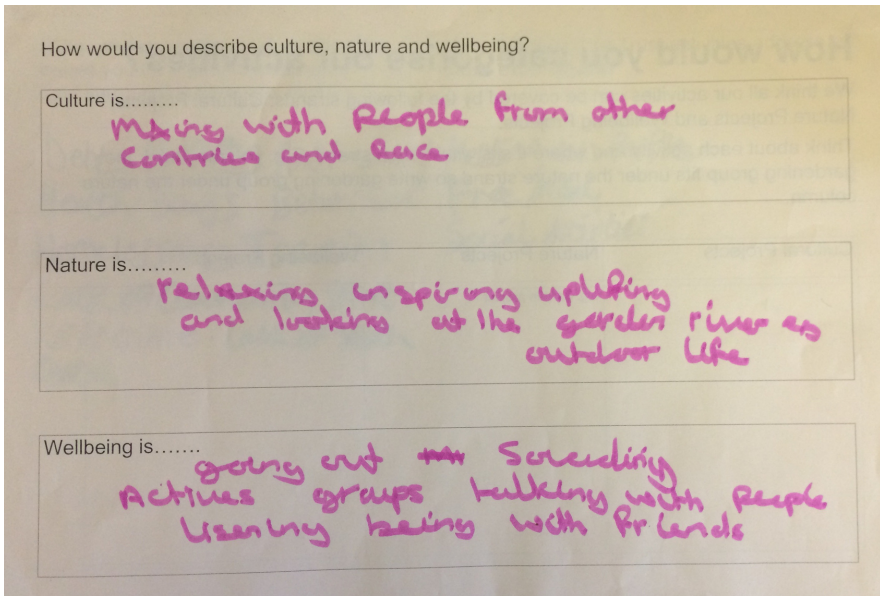
Participants' reflections:

We asked participants to define the words culture, nature and wellbeing and then to categorise our activities based on their definitions.

The process of defining these words supported the participants in categorising our activities. We wanted to understand how they had generated their answers and were very clear that there were no "right" answers.

We didn't expect to see a big difference between how our participants defined these words and how our staff had been using them. However, as shown in the following page the participants' definition of the word 'culture' was significantly different from how staff had been using it. The staff were describing 'high culture' e.g. philosophy, choir, art, etc., while participants viewed culture more broadly.

This led to staff using the word 'arts' instead to describe the group of activities which include our philosophy forum, choir, art workshops and art visits. It was felt this might be a more specific and less contested word to describe this strand.



Definitions

Participants' reflections:

Culture is...

> "A developed identity from different country and community defined by behaviours, language, thinking, foods, parenting identities."

Our participants defined culture by using the following terms:

- language
- food
- music
- customs and traditions
- behaviours
- clothes
- ideas
- learning about people who are different from me.

This definition of culture was not consistent with how the staff had originally viewed it, which was based on a definition of 'high culture'.

Definitions

Participants' reflections:

Nature is...

"Nature can put me back in touch with what's important."

“The whole of the environment that surrounds is and of which we are the part and also what is innate to and characteristics of ourselves as human beings."

" A quality of disassociation arises without connection to nature."

Our participants defined nature by using the following terms:

- In relation to natural things such as trees, gardens, animals, woodland, hills, greenery, calming, grounding
- In relation to natural places such as Culpeper Community gardens
- In relation to natural phenomena such as the weather, the four seasons
- By the relationship humans have with our environment, particularly the ability for nature to teach us things about ourselves
- By the impact that spending time in nature has on inviduals, e.g. calming, grounding.

Definitions

Participants' reflections:

Wellbeing is...

"Being whole!"

"The feeling of being at ease with our lives, our homes and the people with whom we are surrounded and the ability to energetic or take on tasks with perfect freedom."

"Well-being- feeling able to deal with the challenges life throws at you and having strategies and people to support when you feel out of kilter."

"Being content!"

Our participants defined wellbeing by using the following terms:

- By engaging in activities that people enjoy e.g. music, philosophy, mindfulness, social clubs, youth clubs, sports and art groups.
- By their relationships with others
- By their ability to deal with challenges
- By having their basic needs met- ie enough food, stable housing
- By having good health.

Our activities

Participants' reflections:

We then asked participants to group our activities into these three categories, using their own definitions.

They came up with similar patterns of groups to the staff:

Culture

- Philosophy forum
- Choir
- Art workshop
- Art visits

Nature

- Gardening project
- Nature visits

Wellbeing

- Friday Evening Events
- Wellbeing workshops

However we believe it is possible that participants categorised the 'culture' activities through a process of elimination (not being nature & wellbeing). This is evidenced by the fact that their definition of the word culture did not immediately describe high culture or arts activities.

What we learnt

Things we would do differently next time

In many ways this data capture was unplanned. What started as a conversation with participants at one of our Friday Evening Events was extended across all of our other programmes.

As a result there are several things that we would do differently, if we were to run a similar exercise again.

- **Engage sessional staff and volunteers more.** Our staff and volunteers have a unique insight into our activities and the impact they have. Capturing their insights will enable a fuller picture of the Stuart Low Trust's work and its impact.

- **Clearly define key concepts** as a staff team before asking our participants to define them. For example, we were surprised by the broad definitions of culture that the participants provided. As a result of this feedback we have renamed one of our streams of delivery as 'arts' as we felt that there would be a broader understanding of what this term means.

- **Develop better questions for capturing protected characteristics information** - previous form was limited e.g. gender options are only male/female.

- **More timely feedback and write up.**

Next steps

How we'll be using this information to inform our work

Work on the Theory of Change has prompted discussions on how we talk about our work. These discussions were interrupted by COVID19 and the social distancing measures implemented to combat this global pandemic.

Once 'normality' returns, we hope to resume these reflections. We will focus our conversations on the following themes.

Refining how we talk about our work.

The process of creating a Theory of Change has enabled the organisation to reflect on how we create change. Putting participant voice at the centre, ensures that the organisation remains 'grass roots' as it grows.

Participant reflections often provided a fuller definition of concepts than the staff had initially considered.

Participants identified issues that staff hadn't considered such as the impact of air quality.

Ensuring participant voice is at the centre of Stuart Low Trust's processes	Providing a clear cycle of communication with participants so that there continues to be a two way dialogue. Developing a participation strategy, which outlines the Stuart Low Trust's approach to participant voice. Set up a participant volunteer steering group to provide advice on the delivery of our activities. Reviewing our Monitoring and Evaluation processes to ensure that we collect meaningful and actionable feedback. Share information about how we are using this information to develop out activities.
Reflecting on our outcomes	Further define our outcomes. Developing a clear outcomes framework that outlines the impact that we are hoping to make.

Thinking about how we capture information about a range of participant experience.

We actively seek views from people who come from different backgrounds with different experiences of health and social care, and who may have encountered different degrees of social exclusion, stigma and discrimination.

This will include thinking about the barriers to them being involved in sharing their experiences.

Currently we capture date of birth, gender (male/female), ethnicity and information about whether participants consider themselves to have a disability. This does not enable us to know whether we are actually capturing the views of people from different backgrounds.

We invite people to provide more information about about long term impairments they experience. Of those who identified with a disability, only those with physical impairments did so. It is difficult to know what barriers people might be facing and if anyone identified as having mental health issues.

References

1. **State of Equalities Report- Islington 2019**
2. **SLT Impact Report 2018**

Acknowledgements

We want to thank all of our participants who filled out our questionnaire.

To find out more

Email us:
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Follow us on social media.

Visit our website:
www.slt.org.uk