

# Practising Well

## Conversations & Support Menu

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Funded by: Arts and Humanities Research Council & Clore Leadership  
Date: November 2021  
Full report: <https://doi.org/10.48526/rgu-wt-1538558>

The purpose of the Practising Well Conversations and Support Menu research has been to draw out strands from the 2019 Artists Practising Well report. It has been written within the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic, the rapidly accelerating climate crisis and the murder of George Floyd which come on top of wide-ranging systemic inequalities. Creative practitioners will be living with and processing their own experiences of these events, whilst supporting others through participatory arts offers. This research is focused upon:

What are the key challenges to mainstreaming the 'affective support' conversation within participatory arts?

What evidence-based information is needed to facilitate conversations around affective support between the stakeholders of this work?

When should these conversations within the various project models take place?

How is affective support to be resourced, and who has responsibility for this?

Updated glossary of terms to aid shared understanding of common terms.

This 3-month research project contributed to the field of cultural leadership. Balancing academic rigour and pragmatism in terms of time, the research design consists of:

A literature review

Focus group conversations

Semi-structured Interviews

The literature review mapped a range of subject areas: *Wellbeing at Work, Precarity and Needs, Reflective Practice Principles in People-Orientated Professions, Types and Methods of Affective Support* and a selection of *Associated Materials*.

Reviewing *Wellbeing at Work* literature found that while most research focuses on employment contexts, there are insights from several studies which highlight the isolating nature of self-employed work and the risk of mental ill-health. *Precarity and Needs* maps out the financial situation in which creative practitioners work, and the impact of ineffective instrumental support and managing peripatetic working. There are issues with uneven power dynamics between organisations and creative practitioners, which contribute to difficulties around asking for help. By introducing *Reflective Practice in People-Orientated Professions* there are opportunities to explore how reflection can be used to unpick unhealthy assumptions around practice, process work-based experiences and engage in a continual sense of curiosity and development. By sharing *Types and Methods of Affective Support* there is an opportunity to consider a range of support approaches beyond those which may be most familiar: Action Learning Sets, Coaching, Creative Practice, Embodied Practices, Mentoring and Reverse Mentoring, Peer Groups, Performance Review, Research, Supervision, Team Meetings and Writing. The *Associated Materials* section - which brought the literature review to a close - highlighted a conference, practice handbook, research article and online resources that demonstrate the high quality work already being developed, discussed and actioned in this research area.

The focus groups and semi-structured interviews offered a range of in-depth experiences. Common concerns and nuances were synthesised into four areas for discussion:

Impact of isolation and precarity	Symbiotic relationship between instrumental and affective support	Role of consultation and choice	Awareness of the barriers to accessing affective support
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The *impact of isolation and precarity* found that the accumulative effect of a lack of fair contracts - issued late - and subsequent late payment of invoices, together with a lack of inductions, would result in increased workload. The *symbiotic relationship between instrumental and affective support* is key. Attending to instrumental support - the resources and organisational structures which support the work - communicates respect and value to the creative practitioner. The *role of consultation and choice* is a central component of this work going forward - without it affective support offers are likely to fall short of being useful or relevant. Developing a clear *awareness of the barriers to accessing affective support* - the need to financially prioritise paid work and hesitancy over appearing needy - and mitigating against these factors will ensure that creative practitioners access support when it is offered.

A culture change is needed around participatory arts to ensure creative practitioners are consistently supported in the work they do. First in terms of fair contracts, timely payment and inductions; and second by having the opportunity to test different types of affective support so they can each create their own menu. To enable this, changes must be made at policy level to reflect the true cost of this work. By taking action now, the good work which is already underway in this area can gain momentum, and collectively we can contribute to a situation where everyone has the opportunity to practice well.

The report recommends:

### **Supporting**

Instrumental support needs to be in place consistently across the participatory arts sector as a whole. Induction, introductions, fair contracts which include allocated planning, debrief and evaluation time, and prompt payment of invoices all communicate value and respect to creative practitioners and are the foundations of any participatory arts work.

### **Promoting**

Affective support and reflective practice activities need to be promoted as a mechanism by which to sustain professional curiosity in the participatory arts sector, and not simply as a way to avoid burn-out.

### **Collaborating**

Adopting a collaborative approach to the design, delivery and evaluation of affective support initiatives (to include creative practitioners, organisations and other stakeholders) will help to ensure frameworks of support are suitable for both creative practitioners - in their different career stages and specialisms - and organisations, in terms of management processes.

### **Planning**

Planning processes which include creative practitioner support conversations as an integrated part of project inception, recruitment, development, delivery and evaluation - and which allow space to adapt as individual needs change and as the work dictates - will help to embed support in a sustainable way.

### **Learning**

Engaging in a period of experimentation, experiential learning and evaluation around affective support will help stakeholders understand what works well.

### **Guiding**

Updating grant application guidance to include specific questions about - and inviting costs related to - affective support for creative practitioners will communicate an understanding of the true cost of participatory arts work.

### **Evaluating**

Prioritising funding to support longitudinal wellbeing studies of creative practitioners working in a range of participatory arts settings will help to build an evidence-based picture of the impact of this work on individuals and the sector.

### **Developing**

Securing funding to establish a working group which includes diverse representation from freelance, organisational and funding perspectives, practice, research and operations to collectively develop this work in the future will help to ensure change happens and in timely ways.