

# NEWCASTLE AND GATESHEAD ART STUDIO: Evaluation August 2014



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1. **INTRODUCTION**

**1.1 Newcastle and Gateshead Art Studio (NAGAS)[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Set up in 2004, NAGAS is a charitable organisation providing creative-based services for people with mental health problems, promoting social inclusion, encouraging social interaction, building resilience, developing skills and ability, and enabling potential. NAGAS run a user-led creative studio service (including disciplines across visual arts, music and performance) four days a week at their base in Newcastle upon Tyne for Newcastle upon Tyne and Gateshead residents. The studio provides a clear pathway of recovery for those suffering the effects of, or at risk of experiencing mental health issues. Their mission is:

*“to provide a sustainable service that engages people in creative activity, which promotes social inclusion and interaction, develops skills and ability which builds resilience, enables potential and improves wellbeing.”*

**1.2 Background to the evaluation**

The last independent external project evaluation was conducted between June and August 2011 by Carol Meredith Consultancy Ltd. As a result the NAGAS staff team were able to strategically plan and develop the organisation further. By cultivating a clearer vision of the future and demonstrating an unshakable need for the service, NAGAS were successful in securing funding from the Big Lottery ‘Reaching Communities’ Fund to consolidate their accomplishments and build on their successes. The Big Lottery funding award afforded NAGAS integral financial security and enabled them to continue to provide and develop an innovative and creative mental health support service. As the three year period of Big Lottery funding is now drawing to a close, it is once again time to stand back to objectively evaluate the project.

NAGAS commissioned me[[2]](#footnote-2) to undertake this external independent project evaluation. I got to know NAGAS as a result of a period of research fieldwork I conducted at the organisation between October and December 2013 for my doctoral research into experiences of stigma and discrimination. My knowledge of the sector, professional skills as a researcher and my familiarity with NAGAS made me a suitable candidate for the evaluation project as I developed my role as a ‘critical friend’ to the studio.

**1.3 Methodology**

The methods I employed to carry out the evaluation were predominantly qualitative. Details are delineated below:

* Semi-structured interviews with 20 existing members;
* Qualitative questionnaires dispatched by post and e-mail to a sample of 20 members who had not accessed the service for six months or more;
* Statistics gathered by staff on attendees at the studio and members’ progress;
* Semi-structured interviews with 6 stakeholders/professionals who regularly refer prospective members to the studio;
* Semi-structured interviews with 5 ‘critical friends’ of the studio;
* Discussion with 6 potential stakeholders and 25 prospective beneficiaries of project expansion; and
* Desk based analysis of materials such as grant applications, reports and previous external evaluations.

A qualitative approach was the principal method because current health literature demonstrates the effectiveness of involving all stakeholders in any research process as the best way of creating a knowledge exchange (Beal et al, 2007; Beresford et al, 2006; Dennis Jr. et al, 2009). This method allows people to speak for themselves and enables participants in the evaluation to focus on their own experience (Basset et al, 2006).

**1.4 Evaluation aim(s) and the report**

The aim of this evaluation is to reflect on the work carried out by NAGAS with the ultimate objective of providing a strategic foundation for the studio to move forward to develop and extend their work beyond current parameters. In particular I assess the effectiveness of the current ‘engagement, participation and development’ model (or ‘EPD’- see 2.1) from a member, referrer and stakeholder perspective. Doing so indicates what works well and what works less well. Following discussion with critical friends, potential stakeholders and beneficiaries, I also make a number of recommendations for the future.

The evaluation demonstrates an emotive and overwhelming need for the project, particularly in terms of the remarkable impact of NAGAS on the lives of its members. This report highlights and celebrates phenomenal achievements, thereby evidencing good practice, and explores how NAGAS can extend their current client base, enhance social inclusion, reach more people in need of the service and develop financial sustainability and security.

1. **THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT & NAGAS**

**2.1 NAGAS and the socio-political context**

Austerity has hit the UK hard and continually hits individuals with mental health problems and disabled people harder (Campaign for a Fair Society, 2013). In the North East the outlook is particularly bleak; mental health services continue to disappear, hospitals continue to close and the range of facilities provided by the NHS and third sector organisations persistently dwindles away. It has recently been announced that a major overhaul of mental health services is about to take place in the North East, an overhaul which will see a further reduction of frontline staff and the number of psychiatric beds available (The Chronicle, 2014).

Amidst this cruel relinquishing of services and resources, mental health problems continue to increase and statistics paint a worrying picture. From a national perspective, the favourite overused statistic is that one in four of us will, at some point, experience a mental health problem or mental distress (Mental Health Foundation, 2014). Despite the prevalence of mental health problems the situation is far from improving and people experiencing distress are frequently subject to wide-ranging inequalities (Arboleda-Florez, 2003). Literature suggests the effects of a mental health problem, such as stigma, discrimination, social isolation etc can permeate to such a degree it can have a devastating impact on all areas of life including employment, parental rights, housing, immigration, health care and access to justice (Mental Health Foundation, 2012; Time to Change, 2012; Mind, 2008; Sayce, 2000).

An overwhelming body of literature has developed over the last decade which provides considerable evidence to indicate that involvement in the arts and services such as those provided by NAGAS, can significantly improve a person’s mental health and sense of well-being. (For example see Hacking et al, 2006; Secker et al 2011; and Stickley, 2012.) Thus, participation in activities such as those NAGAS currently provide have been proven to improve social interactions and interpersonal skills of individuals, reduce social isolation, improve confidence and build resilience, and ultimately mitigate the negative effects of mental health problems. NAGAS measure how well they perform against these objectives using the ‘EPD model’ below.

**2.2 The EPD model**

Over the course of the Big Lottery funding, NAGAS developed and currently employ an ‘EPD’ model to monitor and measure the ability and progress of members with reference to ‘engagement’, ‘participation’ and ‘development’ (EPD). The model was adapted using a combination of the Outcome Star model (OS) and The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS).

On their first attendance at the studio members complete a questionnaire which measures the severity of their mental health problem, the frequency of deterioration and members’ perceived mental health at the time of referral. At 12-weekly intervals staff members meet to discuss progress using the model.

Engagement is measured by quantifying ‘social inclusion’ from a score of 1 ‘not attending’ to 5 ‘seeking further opportunities’ and quantifying ‘relating’ from a score of 1 ‘not communicating’ to 5 ‘supporting others with engagement’. Participation is measured by quantifying ‘involvement’ from a score of 1 ‘not involved’ to 5 ‘supporting staff to involve others’ and quantifying ‘coping’ from a score of 1 ‘not coping’ to 5 ‘supporting others to cope’. Development is measured by quantifying ‘promotion’ from a score of 1 ‘no movement on’ to 5 ‘work, volunteering and/or further education externally’ and quantifying ‘well-being’ from a score of 1 ‘stuck’ and 5 ‘self-reliance’. The results are then plotted on a star diagram.

This sophisticated method has been effective in monitoring the progress of members. The method is also mindful of the distinct and overlapping challenges members face. However, these measurements are carried out by staff members only at twelve weekly intervals. This gives little opportunity for members to discuss their progress. I realise that discussion in terms of progress occurs informally between staff, and to formally review progress with members runs the risk of transforming the service into something more formal or rigid and perhaps less effective for members. However, I do think it is important to somehow incorporate an element of member involvement in order to provide an opportunity for them to reflect on their own development and progress. I am not suggesting this should be done formally but NAGAS may want to consider more creative ways in which this can be done.

**2.3 Achievement despite austerity**

During the early stages of the evaluation I talked to staff about capturing NAGAS’ achievements over the course of the Big Lottery funding award from its commencement in April 2012 to the present day. Staff met together to reflect on their accomplishments and collaborated to form following time line:

**April 2012** New staff structure in place to reflect EPD model

Members meetings to be held with BSL interpreters for deaf members

New chairman, Alisdair Cameron, appointed

New music studio opened in the studio

NAGAS uncover the ‘graffiti board’

**May 2012** Fieldtrip to Pitman Painters Exhibition at the Woodhorn Gallery

Bobby Baker performance for NAGAS at the Star and Shadow cinema

Bobby Baker becomes a NAGAS patron

**June 2012** Strategic planning day with all stakeholders

Sent NAGAS publicity material to all GPs in the local area

New board member, Vera Buchan

Ongoing exhibition at Jack Sprat’s Bistro

**July 2012** Business plan and EPD-outcome star model in operation

Trip to and exhibition at Tynemouth for the ‘Sand art project’

**Aug 2012** Policy and procedures updated

**Sept 2012** Trip to see the ‘Flow’ exhibition on the Quayside as part of Baltic

Camille (member) and Kevin (assistant manager) in National touring exhibition ‘Reassembling the self’

Susan Aldworth becomes a NAGAS patron

Trip to see Quentin Blake exhibition at the Laing Art Gallery

Commencement of the ‘Elephant Toes and Trunk’ film season- NAGAS are a partner

**Oct 2012** NAGAS have a presence at World Mental Health day celebration held at Monument

Doodle project- production of a 260 ft long doodle

Marie Chambers (member) exhibit at the Washington Wetlands Centre

RASP ‘Regional arts studio partnership’ established via Northern Rock learning and development grant

**Nov 2012** New environmental procedure in operation

NAGAS part of ‘Connecting Principles’ in conjunction with Newcastle University

**Dec 2012** Christmas party celebration for staff and members

**Jan 2013** Specific workshop sessions begin- including workshops in Photoshop, ceramics, printing, creative writing, music.

NAGAS notice board established

**Feb 2013** Success in obtaining funding from the Gateshead capacity fund

Equipment obtained for the music studio

Staff attendance at the ‘listen hear’ seminar at Mind Institute, Newcastle

Staff and member attendance at the ‘Alice in Bed’ performance at the Stephenson Works, Newcastle

New IT equipment in place

**March 2013** Charge for personal budget members in operation

‘NAGAS vision’ in operation, an excel based database of members and electronic method of monitoring EPD

**April 2013** NTW trust pilot of art therapy sessions (April to June)

**May 2013** Trip to the art and architecture trail at Kielder

**June 2013** Awarded Lilly Matthews fund and filming for ‘Apples is Apples’ commenced

Puppetry workshops begin- 10 weeks pilot run by a volunteer

**July 2013** First members’ newsletter published

Deaf awareness training at NAGAS

A series of three animation workshops, ‘First Steps’, held at Baltic

Trip to exhibition at Cragside

**Aug 2013** Held a social prescribing information session

Trip to and exhibition at Tynemouth for the ‘Sand art project’

Late night Wednesday begins- extension of opening hours on Wednesdays

**Sept 2013** ‘Gloaming Elephants’ film season at Star and Shadow Cinema- NAGAS are a partner

NAGAS annual exhibition ‘Finding a Way’ at the Holy Biscuit Gallery

Staff members Lynne and Jon begin BSL level 1 qualification

**Oct 2013** Involved in Oxford Hearing Voices Study

AGM at Star and Shadow along with celebratory event with members

Part of World Mental Health Day at Monument

Support from Enterprising Newcastle Tender Readiness

Trip to Sunderland Glass Centre and members were trained in glass painting

Exhibition of the work of a deceased NAGAS member in remembrance of Derek at The Sanctuary art space

**Nov 2013** Community artist training and community development training provided by NLDC

ISOS housing partnership established for music workshops

**Dec 2013** User involvement officer employed 30hr per week- existing volunteer fills post

Time to Change grant for ‘bARTer’ obtained in partnership with other local organisations

Survive to thrive continuation funding awarded from the Community Foundation

Member employed to run weekly ceramics sessions for ten weeks in partnership with NLDC

Christmas party celebration for staff and members

**Jan 2014** Trip to Laura Knight at Laing Art Gallery

NAGAS become an NVSC associate member

Partnership with Hive Arts established

Partnership with Northern Lights established

Award in education obtained by four staff and two volunteers

**Feb 2014** Brilliant Britain Filming commenced

New office furniture received for studio

First Aid training for staff

Singing workshops with the Sage begin at NAGAS (six weekly sessions)

Two staff members attend mental health awareness training

**March 2014** Lloyds TSB confirmation of funding received for 50% of involvement officer’s post

Andrew, member, begins volunteering at Northern Print as a result of partnership training

‘Just giving’ everyclick appears on website

**April 2014** Nominated for BBC radio 4 award ‘All in the Mind’

Time to Change bARTer project begins

Member visit to print studio of Teresa Easton at Limestreet studio workshop

**May 2014** Won ‘Star Award’ from ISOS housing

Hosted Ouseburn Futures evening event

**June 2014** New board member, Andrea Satterthwaite, appointed

NAGAS merchandise developed and made

NAGAS funding appeal video complete

Film ‘Apples is Apples’ premier at Star and Shadow

Google analytics in use

WRAP Information (Well-being recovery action plan) training day inhouse

**July 2014** NAGAS appear on Community Channel ‘Brilliant Britain’

Training on Mental Health provided to Northern Print

Partnership working with NTW acute day services- NAGAS volunteer, Lynne, also volunteers for NTW

New exhibition of print work at Newcastle College

Studio member attending 7 day outward employment training via NAGAS

This timeline demonstrates such a plethora of achievements, both from an organisation perspective and in terms of individual members. Having considered the current political climate, the current EPD model of measuring progress and the wonderful accomplishments of the studio since the commencement of Big Lottery funding, it suggested to me that this idea of ‘achievement’ could be a way in which to develop the existing model. For example, concentrating on engagement, participation, development AND achievement; a theme I develop throughout the report as a result of empirical findings.

**2.4 Summary**

* The effects of austerity on people with mental health problems cannot be ignored, particularly in light of continuing cuts to mental health services from a local perspective.
* The benefits of engaging in arts-based activities for people with mental health problems have been substantiated by myriad independent research projects. The remainder of this evaluation contributes to the persuasive body of literature claiming services like NAGAS really do ameliorate and mitigate the negative effects of a mental health problem.
* NAGAS astutely operationalised many of the negative effects of a mental health problem such as ability to cope and demonstrating self-reliance into their own EPD model which has proved to be an innovative way of assessing progress.
* NAGAS have demonstrated a range of incredible achievements since April 2012.

*RECOMMENDATIONS:*

* *Incorporate an element of ‘achievement’ into the EPD model*
* *Actively involve members in the process of assessing and reflecting on their own engagement, participation, development and achievement.*

1. **THOUGHTS FROM THE BOARD AND REFLECTIONS OF THE MANAGER**

**3.1 Thoughts from the Board**

*“As NAGAS has progressed from being an idea, a pipe-dream if you like, to a successful, popular and now essential service for the people of Newcastle and Gateshead, it has been an honour as a board member to be along on the journey. It’s been a bumpy ride at times, and resource concerns have rarely been far away, save for the wonderful funding from Big Lottery and other charitable funds, but the feeling of achievement in a truly collaborative, co-productive enterprise between mental health service users, artists, community workers and volunteers endures. With a personal background in mental health, as both a service user and a community worker, it was evident from the start that we were on to something special, practising a sort of alchemy that turned the prosaic into the life-enhancing, going far above and beyond the notion of a mere studio, to something living and vibrant. This can only be attributed to the people, all of whom, staff, volunteers and most definitely the members bought in to a shared vision and delivered it, producing an entity that transcends bricks and mortar, and combines passion, flair and integrity to marvellous effect.*

*Dropping by at NAGAS is never dull, and always social, but social with a point and purpose, showing that meaningful, productive and beneficial activity can be fun as well, something that is sadly all too often missing from statutory and other mental health services. Professionalism, safety and competence are all rightly in place at NAGAS, but the essence of the project is its community feel, the sense of belonging and doing that enriches everyone’s lives. The socio-economic climate, austerity and welfare “reform” plus certain disheartening “disinvestments” in mental health do not engender much stability in the lives of service users, and it could be argued, impede notions of recovery or progression. This backdrop makes NAGAS all the more vital and special, bringing enjoyment to users’ lives, a place to be and belong and an environment in which to develop and flourish.”*

Alisdair Cameron, Chair.

**3.2 Reflections of the manager**

“*My role as studio manager has evolved over time. I initially was employed part time as development worker with a small yet dedicated board, no base to work from and no budget to deliver any services. The concept was in principle for me to support the development of a service within central Newcastle that was initially focused on a significant capital investment from Newcastle council. This funding was eventually achieved however it later becomes unsuccessful after the landlord withdrew interest in the project. This initial setback became the catalyse for the process which I believes led to a service which was much more developed using the principles of good community development and heavily member focused.*

*My work experience after leaving university as a fine art graduate started as a volunteer at St Nicholas mental health Hospital. Whilst being there I was offered the role as arts worker running the day to day service. Following this position I moved onto various roles within housing, community development and mental health.*

*With this strong knowledge of community, arts and mental health networks I started small scale projects and facilitated a working group made entirely of members from the mental health community. These individuals had a real desire to see a new person centred creatively based service developed. Eventually we started running a one day a week service within our current location and from this demand grew and evidence of need was collected. The closure of services like St Nicholas art room in 2009 and the effects of significant austerity measures further established the acute need for our service. With this backdrop we gradually began achieving larger investments from charitable grants and a more substantial service grew with now three full time members of staff and a large pool of highly skill creative practitioners.*

*I feel both privileged and proud of the service we now deliver thanks to the brilliance, dedication and passion of our staff, volunteers and of course members. I look forward to continuing to develop NAGAS alongside them.”*

Bob Malpiedi, Studio Manager

1. **MEMBER PERSPECTIVES**

**4.1 Introduction to the member evaluation**

When members first attend the studio they meet with a NAGAS member of staff to gauge what they want to gain from their time at the studio and how they see themselves engaging, participating and developing. At 12-weekly intervals the ongoing EPD of each member is measured, decided and recorded by studio staff at a meeting only staff members attend. I have included a snapshot of those statistics in the relevant sections below pertaining to engagement, participation and development (EPD). The activities of NAGAS are all led by a process of member consultation usually via well attended monthly forum meetings facilitated by the User Involvement Officer and minuted by members. The topics for the agenda are open to suggestions, and meetings include interpreters for our numerous deaf members. Other feedback methods include questionnaires, chalk boards, pin boards, message box and a graffiti wall.

Semi-structured interviews with 20 existing members indicated that current members believe NAGAS provides an excellent service. Most members I interviewed had been attending the studio for more than 1 year, all described their ethnic origin as being ‘White British’, the mean age of respondents was 53 years, and I interviewed an equal number of men and women. Interview responses are collated below in the relevant sections relating to the EPD model. In addition, 20 postal and e-mail questionnaires were sent to members who had not attended the studio for six months or more. I received 8 responses which are also included in the analysis below.

At the time of the evaluation a snapshot of the member demographic looked like this:

GENDER:

Male 63 %

Female 37%

DISABILITY:

Consider self to be ‘disabled’ 98%

Consider self not to be ‘disabled’ 2%

ETHNICITY:

White British 88%

Mixed 3%

Asian 3%

African 4%

Caribbean 2%

AGE:

0-24 4%

25-34 10%

35-44 22%

45-54 36%

55-64 18%

65+ 10%

Both the quantitative and qualitative data demonstrates how members with an ethnic origin of ‘White British’ are over represented. There is also an over representation of members aged 45-64 and over three quarters of members are above the age of 35. Both sets of data do not reflect the wider population of the UK (see Mind, 2011). This data raises a concern regarding diversity of members and should be an important consideration for NAGAS in terms of the direction(s) they may wish to move in to develop their existing project to enhance social inclusion (see 6.2 and 6.3 for suggestions).

NAGAS has a detailed formal complaints procedure which gives individuals the right to talk to a manager, assistant manager or board member. A response is assured within ten weeks of a complaint. NAGAS have yet to receive a formal complaint.

* 1. **Engagement**

Throughout the period of Big Lottery funding NAGAS achieved over and above all of its stated outcomes. Since April 2012, the studio accepted 426 new referrals and 398 people participated in activities evidenced to support engagement. Furthermore, every respondent I interviewed said they felt welcome attending the studio, despite under half of interviewees saying they were initially nervous about coming along and joining in. Most members I interviewed attended the studio at least twice a week and engaged in more than one activity. For example, see responses below:

*“Creative writing session, watercolours session, use the computer and paint.”* Jeanette

*“Painting and drawing, I started drawing more and doing sketches…I go to the creative writing session, Tuesday there’s a jamming session and discussion group…”* Allan

*“Photography and started doing drawing but had to stop because of my arthritis.”* Marie

*“I paint and I made a penguin sculpture, and just finished an owl in ceramics, I try to do everything and learn bits and pieces.”* Margaret

In terms of how engaging helps members’ mental health, responses demonstrate the importance of the social environment fostered by the studio, how NAGAS staff help members grow in terms of their self-esteem, how the studio gives members something to look forward to and a place to learn valuable skills which in turn, can prove therapeutic both socially and emotionally. For example:

*“It’s very relaxing, people are nice, can get on with your own thing and not hassled- you don’t have to do set tasks.”* Michael

*“Just helps 100%, tenfold, I think a lot of problems I’ve had, I’ve had antidepressants thrown at us but to make yourself happy you have to make yourself proud of yourself and this got me back to doing my art- I’m like a different person, I was diagnosed with social anxiety but now I am talking to people more.”* Simon

*“Gives me a distraction, a sense of well-being, before I was stuck on a ward with no quality of life.”* Andrew

*“Oh it’s definitely a life line, this place is all I’ve got and if I didn’t come here I wouldn’t meet people, I’d be stuck in my house. I get ideas and tips for my art work and I would be lost and devastated if this place closed down.”* Anon

Out of all of the respondents to the questionnaire sent to lapsed members, all members said that they enjoyed their time at NAGAS and over half said they would consider returning to the studio at a later date. Most responses from the paper and e-mail questionnaire suggested lapsed members had not returned to the studio because of a change of circumstances in their personal life. However, it would be useful for NAGAS to keep more of a detailed record of members who cease to attend the studio. Keeping in touch with these members would help to ensure NAGAS are doing all they can to encourage engagement and participation (and ultimately, development and achievement).

* 1. **Participation**

As mentioned above in 4.2, since April 2012, NAGAS have accepted 426 new referrals and as a result, 398 individuals have participated in the activities NAGAS provides which are evidenced to support engagement. The most obvious instances of participation highlighted by the members I interviewed concerned participation in creative activities. For example, drawing, ceramics, creative writing, painting and learning about art history. However, other members cite learning to use to computer as valuable skill they’ve acquired which means they can participate in the world of social media and research art projects and develop interests themselves. It is not only the ‘obvious’ skills members have developed which means they have been able to participate more, over half explained it was their social skills and confidence which had grown via participation at the studio and encouraged members to be more involved. For example:

*“I’ve learned social skills- how to be more social. Also, teamwork and discussion work, in the members meeting I take minutes so that’s something I wouldn’t have done before…also obviously drawing and painting skills.”* Michael

As Margaret describes, being in the studio environment and others who are learning:

“*You can’t help but take it all in and be part of it…*”

Most respondents had participated in at least one of the many trips organised by NAGAS. Trips respondents specifically mentioned were those to Cragside, Kielder, local exhibitions, Tynemouth, Sunderland Glass Centre, and participating in the exhibitions curated by the studio. As Andrew explained:

*“Went to Tynemouth last summer, it was beautiful and we took over the beach. I was in the Holy Biscuit exhibition with a print and a marbling art work called ‘what is psychosis?’ I go to printmaking and ceramics sessions.”* Andrew

Only one of the respondents said she had not participated in the trips or exhibitions because of personal circumstances which rendered being out for the full day impossible.

I asked the member interviewees how they felt participating in both the day to day life of the studio along with trips and exhibitions improved their individual lives. The responses speak for themselves:

*“Got me out and about doing more things and one thing leads to another, you meet people and see how other people live. I think Bob and Kev are really helpful, like even just for things like getting my paper sorted out.”* Stephen

*“I think I have become more relaxed and at home with people.”* Michael

*“I feel proud of myself and I’m making good friends, people like to see you and talk to you. I’m coming to the end of my methadone programme and it’s great to be meeting with like-minded people- completely different people to before.”* Simon

*“Given me a sense of wellbeing, structure and a reason to get out of bed on a morning.”* Andrew

*“It did inspire me from when I started, I was quite ill with depression and had an illness and new flat and here helped enormously, a lot of people are good to talk to, they’re fun.”* Allan

*“Actually just mingling with people and mediums of art work has been really nice. Have off and on days, I’m quite happy coming, it gets us doing something and concentrating on stuff, the staff are really good.”* Karen

In terms of the written questionnaires sent to lapsed members there was only one member who felt she couldn’t participate in the activities of NAGAS due to the presence of another member who had upset her. Staff members were unaware of the situation at the time and the issue has since been resolved in writing.

**4.4 Development**

When 151 members were asked whether attending sessions at the studio had a positive effect on their well-being, 92% of members said yes. 83 % recorded an increase in independence and 8 individual members have become volunteers and one member has been employed as a direct result of their involvement in NAGAS. The aforementioned data should be read in conjunction with NAGAS’ baseline information of members which is recorded when members first attend the service. For example, 62% of new members consider their mental health needs to be ‘severe’ when they are unwell, 31% ‘enduring’ and 27% ‘very poor’. Thus, to have data which demonstrates that 92% of these members record an improvement in their mental well-being as a result of attending NAGAS is remarkable.

Most obviously, the members I interviewed talked about how their creative skills and artistic techniques have developed from attending the studio. Many members said their inclusion in the various exhibitions curated by the studio had been a milestone and big achievement for them in terms of their involvement with NAGAS. Some members had used the confidence they had gained from regularly attending the studio to participate in other activities, develop their skills and pursue their interests with more determination. For example:

*“The Washington exhibition, I would never have done that if it wasn’t for them pushing us and I sold 6 photographs. They’ve pointed out how good my photography is from a few years ago…”* Marie

Other members recognise how their social skills have developed:

*“Drawing has improved and skills have improved but also learning to work as part of a team and learning about other people and art by talking to other people and we give advice and feedback to other members.”* Anon

There are a number of deaf NAGAS members who use sign language to communicate. As a result a number of the members have begun to learn sign language in order to be able to communicate better with the deaf members. Two of the interviewees said that they were learning sign language.

I asked members more generally if there were things they did now that they didn’t do before they attended the studio. I was met with a range of responses from developing practical art skills, to social skills, to more practical living skills. For example:

*“Preparing food to bring for my lunch- I wouldn’t do otherwise.”* Anon

*“I use pottery and print making skills and my art work is more worthwhile. I am training to be a printmaking technician and have been volunteering with Northern Print since May 2013, wouldn’t have been able to access that if it wasn’t for Bob.”* Andrew

*“Open up more to people and I think I deal with frustration better. In here there is a lot of frustration, they’re tiny things but a big deal an dealing with other people- I’ve learnt better.”* Marie

Although a small number of members, like Margaret felt their life outside the studio hadn’t changed but considered the studio to be a ‘haven’:

*“Not things haven’t changed really, this is a haven for me…outside life is still the same.”*

I also asked members how they thought their time at the studio could help them develop in terms of their own futures. Approximately half of the respondents said that they couldn’t see themselves developing beyond the studio and that they were happy with their lives the way they were. The other half said they might like to volunteer at the studio as a next step, or generally be more creative. There was only one respondent with a definite aim which involved life outside of the studio:

*“I would like a flat of my own and ideally I would like to be a joiner, but working towards my printmaking helps me meet people.”* Andrew

The responses from the postal questionnaire indicated that it wasn’t the environment at NAGAS which meant they were unable to attend and develop their skills. Instead, family problems and worsening mental health meant they were unable to regularly attend.

It is abundantly clear from the statistics and the interviews that by attending NAGAS, members begin a journey of personal development which members recognise within themselves. Although members score their own mental well-being when they first come to the studio, there are no other formal opportunities to do so. Development is more commonly measured by staff, who meet together to assess members’ needs and development. Part of NAGAS’ beauty is the informal nature of the service and to incorporate an element of achievement into the existing model would not have to alter the atmosphere of the studio but it would help focus members a lot more. I suggest that there is scope to extend how development is measured and that measurement should include some collaboration with members. In addition, whilst members recognise some of their achievements, it is not recognised or recorded formally. Suggestions include, holding mini achievement events for members, encouraging members to develop a portfolio of work over a specific period of time, and/or members talking through their development with a sessional artist who may be better placed to signpost to opportunities outside the studio. Such activities would develop members further and encourage members to achieve even more out in the community.

**4.5 Member case studies**

Three existing members, Simon, Jeanette and Lynne (Lynne is now a paid sessional artist at NAGAS) agreed to write their stories in more depth as a contextual account of what NAGAS has meant to them. All three narratives speak for themselves and stand as testament to the great work the studio does on a daily basis...

*“well where do I start? a whole child hood, a long odious journey through my teenage years, right up to the ripe old age of 36!!! all those years spent using illegal substances! from chronic weed smoker to recreational ecstasy dropper, moving into the gloomy circles of hard drugs and injecting! so it came as no surprise to me or my family, that at 36, I was receiving treatment for heroin addiction.  But! and it’s one hell of a But! the one thing I’ve always enjoyed in life (other than getting off my face!) is art! from being a very small boy, only with all the drug taking, a whole life time of mental torment, a few destructive relationships, a 19 year battle to find my mother, three amazing children, god knows how many full time jobs to hold down and a whole load of other stressful things.....it’s something (art) that I had never really took too seriously! and I certainly didn't expect it to be my one ultimate saviour, that was until I just so happened to receive the right counselling, from the right person! who recognized a real need in me to fulfil my child hood dreams, hobbies and pastimes…and it was this person that introduced me to N.A.G.A.S... since joining the art group I have worked on all manner of different personal projects, and have thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it! my drug use has ended and I am 18 milligrams away from completing my methadone program! I have never felt so proud of myself, I’ve never felt so positive about my future, I have never felt so happy! and that would not be possible if it wasn't for the 100% support, help, friendship and encouragement of the staff and fellow members, of what I now refer to as my N.A.G.A.S art group......”* (SIMON)

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*“It’s Never too Late by Jeanette*

*I’m 63 years old and I’m only just doing things that I really want to do.  
From an early age I used to spend my time at the library and I’d go swimming.  At the age of 8 I used to go to the Green Market to collect wood boxes, We would load it in a wheel barrow and push it up Corporation Street to the big lamp and along Elswick Road.  Once we got home we would chop the boxes up to make bundles of firewood and sell them to the people in the area, I was given a shilling which was a lot of money in those days.  I saved it up to pay for my first holiday. At the age of 11, I went to Butlins.*

*My first proper job was when I left school at the age of 15 at John Waddingtons. When I was 17 1/2 I left to join the Army.  I didn’t mind the strict regime as I was brought up strict.  I met my first husband there but after 18 years of marriage, he left for someone else so I came home to start again.  
1985 was my turning point, I got a job at the Royal Mail which I really enjoyed.  I was a posty first after a while went indoors to sort the mail.  I had that job for 23 years, I didn’t want to leave work but through pressure I was medically retired at the age of 59.*

*I was ill for a while then I started looking for another job. I trained as a care worker and passed my NVQ 2 and full diploma for Health and Social Services. I was employed as a care worker, which included shopping and cleaning.  The service users asked me to give them art lessons, so I went back to college to study BTEC 3 and full diploma in Art, I also did Maths and English.  
I got laid off from care work after 2 years so I went back to college again to do a metal work short course.*

*I’m also an official for UK athletics, officiating meetings at Gateshead and Jarrow stadiums. It’s voluntary work and I enjoy helping others. In my spare time I go running and compete in races, up to half marathons. I still swim and like drawing and painting.  
As you can see, it’s never too late to do things. I’ve started coming to NAGAS in April 2013 and it gives me something to look forward to. In that time I’ve gone from running to officiating races and people here helped me think about moving on to do that as I’ve not been able to run, so I spoke to peers and engaged more, I’ve opened up and got more confidence. Being here has allowed me to be more creative and if you have an idea, NAGAS help you with them to achieve what you want to.”* JEANETTE

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*“In July 2002 I graduated from Dundee University with a 2:1 (Hons) degree in Ceramic Design. I secured a Place at St Martins University, Lancaster to study a P.G.C.E in secondary Education, which was to start in the September. During the Summer I returned to Vermont, USA to work on a summer camp for adults and children with learning difficulties, where I had worked the previous summer. Unfortunately whilst working at the camp I started to feel very depressed which led to me taking an overdose and being admitted to hospital. I spent two weeks in a psychiatric unit before being flown home. Upon my return home I was admitted in to a psychiatric unit and was diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder.*

*After my discharge from hospital I went to live with my parents. At the time I had very little input from mental health services and struggled to fill my time. I had no structure or purpose. The services available to me were limited and I had no space for creative expression.*

*However with the support from family and friends I became stable enough to undertake a P.G.C.E in 2004. In September 2005 I started my first teaching position where I continued to teach until February 2010. Due to my depressive state I was admitted back into a psychiatric unit.*

*Whilst I was an inpatient I was referred to NAGAS. When I was discharged from hospital NAGAS provided me with a creative space, in a supported environment where I could express my turmoil in a constructive way.*

*When I became unwell I felt like my life was over, I lost my job and my home and life as I knew it no longer existed. Over time the Staff at NAGAS recognised my talents, experience and skills. I now volunteer at the studio and teach a ceramics class each week. The staff helped me to reach my true potential once again and nurtured me back to a position where I have confidence, self belief, purpose and structure in a chaotic world. During my illness I have experienced many dark times and without NAGAS I believe my mental health difficulties would not have improved. Although I still experience difficult times and struggle with depressive thoughts, the structure and stability NAGAS has offered me has aided my recovery.”* LYNNE

**4.6 What next?**

I asked the member participants in the evaluation what the studio does best. Most respondents commented on the happy and relaxed environment in the studio itself, and that the lack of pressure on members to do a specific task was a welcome relief when compared with the ethos of other support environments they had experienced. The staff members were always mentioned as being wonderfully supportive and encouraging. For example:

*“It’s a nice little community, people accept each other quite well and if I don’t want to talk I am left to my own devices.”* Anon

*“Encouragement you get and support from other members.”* Marie

*“Staff always there to help you and don’t turn their back on you, they’re very friendly.”* Anon

*“I feel quite relaxed here, it’s the atmosphere. You get your off days but I’ve learned a lot and still learning.”* Karen

*“The character of the place, it’s packed full of character, not a sterile environment like on the ward.”* Andrew

*“Excellent for art work and allows us to be ourselves, there is no pressure on us.”* Michael

When I asked the interviewees what they thought the studio could do better, most members wanted the freedom to comment anonymously and so there are no names attached to the quotes I have used in this section. Around a third of respondents commented on the lack of space and chairs available during busy periods. A third of members suggested that the studio should be open five days a week, as opposed to its current four day week opening times, and suggested the studio should extend its daily opening hours. Another third suggested more field trips and journeys to national destinations as opposed to the local trips which are the only trips which have been offered to date. A number of members suggested more work with the Baltic and other galleries and another suggested a wood carving course. One member suggested staff should engage more with the members and display less favouritism to certain members. The following quote highlights slight friction in the studio environment:

*“Staff to interact with the members more, they’re stuck in the office, I know they need time in the office but just for them to come out and say what you’re doing is good and suggest things. Also, less favouritism in exhibitions…sometimes in here you can say something that means nothing but can be taken the wrong way by other members so you’ve got to watch what you say – they think it’s about their art but it’s nothing to do with it. It’d be nice if that didn’t happen.”*Anon

There is no doubt that the quotes from existing members and the statistics demonstrating an improvement in the well-being of members is testament to the provision of an excellent service which has been a lifeline for many of its members. It is part of their way of life, a place to go and interact with others. Whilst members most obviously learn and develop their skills in the creative arts, they also learn about people, interact and develop valuable social and interpersonal skills. Two members, who prefer to remain anonymous, both said to me privately that attending the studio had saved their life. Where would Simon or Lynne (4.5) be now if it wasn’t for NAGAS? This section demonstrates such a desperate continuing need for the services NAGAS provides.

To assess continuing need for the service I asked members what life would be like without NAGAS, some of the responses are included below:

“*I've been coming to NAGAS for years it’s the only mental health project I have found worthwhile, stimulating and rewarding* .” Stephen

*“NAGAS, I wondered what a strange name, only to discover nagas is a plant, a hot spicy pepper. NAGAS put spice into our life, without it life would be empty like a bland tasteless curry.”* Carol

*“This project helps me because I'm not isolated by myself and can draw and chat to other people which is a bond. The staff are helpful and very experienced in art and crafts, much better with proportion than me. The facility gives me structure day by day.”* Tony

*“I appreciate the art studio because it gives me the chance to be creative as well as taking me mind off my problems. Part of the experience is the friendly atmosphere.”* Les

*“Depression, anxiety, low self-esteem. NAGAS has been a life saver for me. I'm very relaxed when I'm there. The staff are very helpful and they are there for me when I'm having problems.”* Sandra

*“NAGAS is an essential service and is very therapeutic and relaxing. In fact it is the only service I have. It is great from a social point of view and also from the point of view of learning new art and craft skills.”* Michael

*“I was referred to NAGAS whilst I was an inpatient at a psychiatric hospital. I attended one day a week. After I was discharged NAGAS became my main focus. I had structure and routine. NAGAS gave me support and stability in a chaotic world. I could express myself creatively in a safe environment. After many months of structured support my mental health started to improve. The staff at NAGAS recognised my skills and experience as a teacher. I now run a ceramic workshop once a week and support members in a voluntary capacity. NAGAS has helped me to realise that mental ill health does not have to be a negative on ones life. I now use my experience to support others suffering with mental health difficulties. NAGAS has helped me reach my potential, increasing my confidence and self-worth.”* Lynne

Members do recognise they are learning new skills and developing themselves personally in all sorts of directions, but there is scope for this to be more focused and for the NAGAS staff team to encourage further development and recognise achievement. This is something the current model does not do so well. Incorporating achievement via regular events and harnessing development by involving members in discussions about their own progress would be a way to do this. It would also help members plan and realise longer term aims where appropriate such as volunteering and work opportunities. Given that 90% of active members attend at least one workshop, this could be vehicle NAGAS use to develop members and focus on achievement.

I have also highlighted how keeping in touch with members who don’t return to NAGAS would be useful and may increase the number of people who not only engage but maintain their participation in order to develop their skills, and ultimately, achieve.

Finally, the mix of members in terms of age and ethnicity is a concern in terms of diversity. Finding ways to enhance NAGAS’ capacity for social inclusion is something which is discussed later in this evaluation report (see section 6).

**4.7 Summary**

* From a diversity perspective ‘White British’ members are tremendously over represented, as are members aged 35+. The figures suggest NAGAS are not reaching all of the communities literature indicates are in need. However, there is a satisfactory balance of men and women.
* The organisation is steered by members in the form of forums, suggestions boxes and graffiti walls etc.
* NAGAS have achieved above and beyond the outcomes agreed for their Big Lottery funding.
* There is unequivocal evidence to suggest the environment at NAGAS is welcoming and as a result members regularly describe an improvement in well-being, self-esteem, confidence, social skills as well as the practical art/creative skills such as print making, ceramics, creative writing.
* There is evidence to suggest peer support works well at NAGAS.
* NAGAS is as important to people’s lives for learning new creative skills as it is for providing structure and a supportive environment in which they can thrive personally and increase confidence and improve their sense of well-being.
* Events and trips are important to the members. Evidence suggests the exhibitions raise the confidence and self-esteem of members.
* Members enjoy partnership working with organisations such as the Baltic.
* The interviews and case studies provide indisputable evidence that there is an overwhelming and continuing need for the service. Just ponder the question- where would Simon or Lynne be now if it weren’t for NAGAS?

*RECOMMENDATIONS:*

* *Develop a designated place/time for members to recognise and reflect on their own development and achievement, and plan for the future.*
* *Develop an inclusion strategy to increase diversity of members in respect of age and ethnic origin.*
* *Extend opening hours and increase number of days the studio is open.*
* *Explore scope for arranging national, as opposed to local, field trips.*
* *Improve partnership working*
* *Develop a protocol to keep in touch with lapsed members*

1. **STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES**

**5.1 Introduction to the stakeholder evaluation**

The majority of members find their way to NAGAS as the result of receiving information from a professional or via a referral by a mental health or medical professional. The most recent breakdown of referrals from professionals to the studio since April 2012 is as follows:

GPs 49%

CPNs 28%

Social workers 10%

Psychologists 8%

Psychiatrists 5%

From of the twenty people I spoke to for the member evaluation, only two had come to the studio without any professional intervention. The remainder had been referred via an occupational therapist, a community psychiatric nurse, social worker or psychiatrist.

In order to evaluate stakeholder perception of the studio I conducted semi-structured interviews with 6 stakeholders/professionals who regularly refer prospective members to the studio. The responses have, once again, been divided up to reflect the constituent elements of the EPD model.

**5.2 Engagement**

In terms of referring potential members to the studio, every stakeholder I interviewed said that they tend to mention NAGAS to a service user if they have an interest in the arts and/or are creative, but also if they feel a service user would benefit from the structure, social contact and activities. As Michael, occupational therapist explains:

*“It depends on people’s interests and developing structure because we have that structure in the hospital and we’re looking to replicate that in the community, and NAGAS can replicate that for social contact and activity…So I refer when people are interested in art but also for structure, social contact and activities- there’s a wealth of opportunity there. I know they have lots of trips and activities and feedback I have had has all been really positive.”*

I asked stakeholders if there were any instances where they didn’t refer and the responses varied indicating a reluctance to refer or signpost a service user who required a lot of individual support or if they are not far enough down the path of ‘recovery’. In this instance, stakeholders usually keep NAGAS in mind until service users are well enough to be referred. One stakeholder explained that she doesn’t refer if she knows the service user is uncomfortable being around other people with mental health problems. Another stakeholder said they would not refer someone who is physically disabled because she felt the environment wasn’t suitable and potentially unsafe, she later admitted it had been a while since she had attended the studio herself and so this may have changed.

In terms of how stakeholders believe NAGAS engages potential and existing members and many cited how the NAGAS experience has improved service users’ sense of well-being. For example:

*“I think it’s about the environment, the supportive environment…there are no expectations, and some people don’t want expectations, they just want to get away and do art…but they don’t have to do things it’s like in an art class, it’s about meeting individuals and gives them a little bit more. Someone I was working with started going to other activities as a result of being there, like the star and shadow cinema, which makes them feel better about themselves.”*Louise, Senior social worker

I asked all stakeholders if there was anything that would make it easier to refer to NAGAS and ‘no’ was the unanimous response. Every respondent said it was easy to refer and NAGAS staff made the process as friendly and as easy as possible for both professionals and prospective members. One stakeholder did raise the issue of risk assessment:

*“it’s a pretty open referral system, the forms are fairly straight forward and as a matter of courtesy I would ring ahead…say I would like to bring someone to look around, I let Bob or whoever get an idea of what they’re coming there for, I think we’re fairly open and the referral system suits us. But one thing they might want is a copy of risk assessments for people coming through the door in terms of covering themselves…whether that’s something they could incorporate. I’m fairly open if there have been issues with drugs or alcohol but at the minute they don’t ask for any official documentation which they might want to do for risk management and to protect themselves and people who attend.”*Anon

When stakeholders were asked how they felt NAGAS could engage more of their client base, the response from all six respondents was that they couldn’t because they refer or signpost everyone they think it might have an interest in the studio.

**5.3 Participation**

I asked stakeholders what kind of activities the members they have referred have participated in and the responses were varied. One stakeholder described how she had seen a marked difference in a service user she once referred to the studio and how participation in the activities at NAGAS had changed him as a person:

*“Tuesday when I came with that other client and a guy was about to come down and let us past and he said hello, when he started to say hello and talk I didn’t recognise him, but I chatted to him after, he’d been coming a year and I did recognise him because he’d been in the service. He said the studio was great, he was in therapy and was referred, had a really troubled upbringing but turned his life around and wanted to go to the studio, he’s very motivated and wanted to come straight away. I think he finished early from work and would come for a few hours, now his hours of work have shortened and he comes more often, he said it’s brilliant, he’s making something for his son, you could see how it made a difference. Even through difficult times he has held on to the studio…it all adds to managing their issues or recovery.”* Anita, community development worker

Other stakeholders highlighted the importance of members being able to work at their own pace and participate in what becomes important to them:

*“There’s a few been interested in the music, so specifically the guitar lessons and at the moment it’s really really good value, it’s not set, you don’t have to go for that one hour and that’s it, it’s a whole afternoon of learning. A more relaxed approach, to everything they do, there’s a structure there but it’s a very lose structure and it’s more, it’s client led, so people can actually work by themselves but there’s lots of other people around who will support them if they do want to do other things.”* Jim, technical instructor, ADS (adult day services)

I asked stakeholders if they could think of an example of service users they had referred who had participated and gained something positive from the experience. One stakeholder described how someone he referred became so involved at NAGAS that they also started doing their art work outside of the studio and displaying it in their house. Other respondents said it was participating in the studio environment which assisted greatly with recovery and softer social skills. As Paul, housing support worker explains:

*“members learn practical skills relevant and relative to what they want to obtain- techniques or mediums. Also, given the actual inherent conditions and atmosphere of the studio there is opportunity to develop social skills and communication skills in environment and there’s no direct pressure so can be involved in a social situation without any anxiety.”*

When stakeholders were asked about members they had referred who stopped coming to the studio, all stakeholder responses echoed the replies from the paper questionnaires sent to lapsed members i.e. it was usually because of personal circumstances outside of the control of professionals. As Michael, occupational therapist illustrates:

*“There have been people who have got unwell again and then some people move away…there was someone who dipped in and out, it wasn’t because of anything at the studio, it was a chap with very low motivation and suffered from more negative symptoms of schizophrenia, low motivation and struggles to get involved in things like that, and looking for him to have a routine to avoid a relapse but at the time we weren’t able to motivate him, he went for a few months, found it difficult in his mental state and said it wasn’t for him at that time.”*

**5.4 Development**

I asked stakeholders if there were things their service users who have attended NAGAS do now that they wouldn’t have done before. Generally, respondents talked about attendance at the studio increasing and developing members’ social skills, confidence, self-esteem and developing their confidence to travel independently and integrate into the community. Most respondents pointed out how it was tailored individualised service to enable members to learn new skills and the social development which made such a difference in the lives of individual members. One of the stakeholders was able to provide a specific example:

*“I had one guy who went recently who is a really complex case, a long history and been very unwell and when he came back to this area he wanted to replicate some of the structure he had in hospital elsewhere, and NAGAS provided that, and now he’s built towards that and really enjoying it and doing volunteering, and there’s that level of encouragement which has meant he’s been able to do that. They’re really good at signposting.”* Anon

**5.5 What next?**

All stakeholders praised NAGAS and hoped that the work of the studio continued, particularly in these times of austerity. Many of the comments demonstrated, once again, an irrefutable need for the service. As Jim, technical instructor ADS, eloquently explained:

*“There are little organisations around that do bits of sessions like NAGAS but NAGAS is so open and accommodating to our client group, it would be a disaster if they don’t get more funding. Whenever I’m down there it’s a busy place, they support a lot of people, and they made a good transition from the art room to NAGAS as well and made people comfortable. The transition was really smooth and worked really well and it’s always busy. When you say what else could they offer, the creative part, with the music, the creative writing and all the print and all the crafts, I think if they want to do anything else on top of that it might water it down a bit, because they offer a lot at the moment. Just would like to add I know funders are always wanting you to change stuff and look to do new stuff, but why change it if it works? NAGAS works.”*

When I asked stakeholders what the studio did best the responses ranged from being a supportive and inclusive environment, the variety of activities on offer, a safe non-judgmental environment and a place for members to express themselves without pressure or constraint. Subsequently I asked stakeholders what NAGAS could do to improve the service and the responses included bigger film projects, increase facilities for physically disabled people (this has recently been done- a ramp has been installed along with the availability of lower tables for wheelchair users), being open five days a week, and there was a query (following on from 4.2) whether copies of risk assessments should be obtained/conducted by the studio. However, in response to comments concerning risk, a risk assessment is now included in every application form and given to the referral agent.

There was also an interesting suggestion relating to increasing retention and the level of support:

*“I think the other thing is whether there can be…well I don’t know what happens next to the client on Tuesday, she picked up the forms but she is still very anxious, she talked about a friend coming with her and I will have to ask bob but her friend doesn’t have mental health problems. Some clients are very anxious when they come and particularly for their first few times…I think it would be good to have someone to greet them and sit with them. Me and my client were talking about that outside she said I like it but I think I will duck out and I wondered whether Bob could have something in place, like more certain, so when you drop your form in for members to let them know when you’re coming and have someone another member (like peer support/mentor) or staff who will be there at their first few visits, someone to welcome them and be with them for the first few sessions…because that’s a sticking point. People who have been going for years and who are quite stable could be welcoming and sit them down and spend time with them the first times they come, it doesn’t have to be staff, but it would get them talking- for some of my clients it’s too fluid to say come as you are with the form and you can come for your first session then if you want, it’ too much for people high on anxiety for the first few times. Trouble is if you’re like my girl on Tuesday she might be nodding her head but she is probably thinking she wants to get out.”* Anita, community development worker

**5.6 Summary**

* Most members are referred or signposted by medical or mental health professionals, or workers in the community.
* Stakeholders recognise the value of NAGAS, not just for developing technical art skills but for social contact, interactions and structure the studio provides. Members being able to work at their own pace is cited as being extremely positive.
* All of the feedback from stakeholders was positive and importantly they see a marked difference in the well-being of the individuals they refer. The comments and quotes from this part of the evaluation illustrate the significant impact stakeholders believe NAGAS to have on the lives of their members.
* Most commonly stakeholders refer to the major impact attendance at NAGAS has on members’ self-esteem, confidence, social skills and sense of well-being.
* Stakeholders believe the NAGAS fosters a unique environment which is key to its success. In particular, the lack of formal pressure on members means members travel at their own pace and events improve members’ sense of achievement.
* The reason members cease to attend is usually due to personal circumstances rather than because they are not enjoying spending time at the studio.
* The referral process is smooth and easy, with no suggestions for improvement.
* Stakeholders would be ‘lost’ if it were not for the existence of NAGAS.

*RECOMMENDATIONS:*

* *Extend opening hours and increase number of days the studio is open.*
* *Develop a buddy system for new members who require it. This would harness and develop the ethos of peer support in the studio and provide existing members with responsibility. For example, pairing up a new member with an existing member buddy for their first 3 visits.*

1. **CRITICAL FRIENDS & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD**

**6.1 Critical friends & NAGAS’ current profile**

An integral element of the evaluation involved consulting five ‘critical friends’ with significant expertise in mental health, local infrastructure and support services. These individuals were interviewed in order for NAGAS to benefit from the wealth of professional and specialist insight from a number of perspectives, with particular focus on how the studio can expand and sustain its work. The five participants in this part of the evaluation were, Steve Nash (chairperson and coordinator of VOLSAG); Alisdair Cameron (Launchpad team leader/NAGAS chair); Dr Simon Hackett (head arts therapist, NTW foundation trust); Karen Watson (manager, CSV volunteer centre); and Dr Sankalpa Basu (consultant psychiatrist, North and East Community Mental Health Team).

I asked the interviewees what they thought NAGAS did well and whilst the art and creative guidance was the obvious and unanimous first response, it was unequivocally followed by providing a unique support service which is inclusive, safe and welcoming. This is echoed by Steve’s comments:

*“In Newcastle there is less and less places like NAGAS and we need them and some need to be connected to creativity because there is a connection between recovery/therapy and the arts. And so it is a really important service and occupies a necessary niche. They create a sense of space for the people who go there and they manage to provide a safe place and building base, but I would never call them insular, they are forward looking and link to the art world and beyond. They’re such a good example of a building based service that any mental health system in a town should have.”*

And summarised by Sankalpa:

*“I think it <NAGAS> is an incredibly important resource for people who have had severe mental health problems and are trying to recover from it or, are trying to maintain their stability for long term while coming to terms with the real deficits imposed on them by their mental health problems. Its importance is even greater today as health budget is shrinking and the mental health trusts have been hit disproportionately by it.  NAGAS, in my opinion provides a unique range of support. It has been around for a long time and there is lot of awareness about it among the service users, I think it should do well to expand its services and have a greater percentage of people who self-refer as well. I feel a lot of the 3rd sector work nowadays is concerned with practical stuff, like computers, improving CV etc. In NAGAS people seem to be more concerned about self-expression and social participation brings in an important but often overlooked part in recovery. I have some patients who have tried the NAGAS and have moved on as they have got better. I have some other patients who have been going to NAGAS for a long time and it constitutes the only social engagement for them. I feel quite positive when I talk to my patients about NAGAS…I am very hopeful that NAGAS will continue to be there for a long time.”*

In keeping with a focus on the EPD model but exploring the notion of ‘achievement’ I also asked respondents what they felt NAGAS’ biggest achievements were. Responses included broadening the range of activities and endeavours such as the production and recent premier of the ‘Apples is Apples’ film, and engaging well with other partners in sectors such as health and education.

**6.2 Developing the service: suggestions and recommendations**

With a focus on developing the NAGAS service, I asked the critical friends what they thought NAGAS could do more of and how they could improve the NAGAS experience for members. All respondents stressed the importance of maintaining and continuing the service. Both Karen and Alisdair also suggested an excellent practical idea- to have taster workshops or satellite sites/outreach sessions to augment and enrich social inclusion which would also enable NAGAS to become more involved in communities where prospective members may not know much about them. This would also encourage and strengthen NAGAS’ profile in the community and increase its partnership working.

In terms of improving the experience of NAGAS for members longer opening hours were suggested along with weekend activities. Steve and Karen both suggested stronger links with higher and further education. Karen also suggested NAGAS should make more of a “fuss” over their exhibitions and events, using local networks such as CSV volunteer centre, to publicise their work and raise their profile. Karen also suggested that the acronym ‘NAGAS’ means it is not always clear what services are provided.

I asked critical friends about groups of people or sections of society NAGAS don’t currently engage with and who they felt they ought to be engaging with. The under-representation of BME groups was noted and there was a suggestion to do more to actively attract and include people with mental health problems from ethnic minorities. Karen also suggested making steps towards actively including younger people. Simon suggested more defined routes of progression for members’ development beyond the work of the studio:

“For example, progression towards people contributing to or facilitating service-user led groups or activities that are arts based; getting accreditation for their art work; involvement in community arts work; volunteering within the regions cultural sector; working towards employment in the cultural sector or other areas…”

And developing ways members’ engagement in the arts, via NAGAS, can lead to supported personal development, including:

“developing a role for NAGAS members in community arts provision that can involve others who are facing challenging circumstances…” Simon

Along with developing the peer support aspect of the studio.

I have taken into account the suggestions from critical friends along with the empirical findings from my research with existing members and stakeholders. As a result, and in addition to the recommendations already made in previous sections of this report, I make the five following recommendations for continuing and developing NAGAS and the service it provides to new and existing members:

1. To actively engage sections of society who remain unengaged by NAGAS. For example, people from younger age groups (18-30) and ethnic minorities. This could include a number of satellite workshops/outreach/taster sessions and/or hold specific workshops for certain groups (e.g. veterans) and introduce them to the studio environment gradually. See below 6.3.
2. To develop the EPD model to include ‘achievement’ and include members in the active reflection on their own progress. As most active members attend at least one workshop, the workshop sessions could be a vehicle for facilitating this new focus. For example, NAGAS may wish to consider running the workshops on a twelve week rolling basis and at the end of the 12 weeks there is a small achievement event. Additionally, spending some time with members at every twelfth attendance at a workshop to reflect on their development, mental well-being and achievements, perhaps by developing a portfolio of work. This would also provide an opportunity for staff members to signpost and encourage members to undertake opportunities in the community and beyond NAGAS. Such activities may range from performing poetry, taking part in an exhibition and thinking about using skills to volunteer in other arts based organisations.
3. Develop practice to contact members who have only attended the studio once and those members who regularly attend but have not attended for three weeks.
4. Develop a ‘buddy/mentor’ system for new members. For example, it has been highlighted that often members are nervous and anxious the first few times they attend, despite the friendly atmosphere. If new members were allocated a ‘buddy’ for the first three attendances at the studio, this could support their engagement and participation. It also provides existing members with a sense of responsibility and a chance to develop their own support skills. These buddies could also go along to some of the satellite workshops or taster sessions to talk to perspective members about NAGAS and help support new members in the community. Doing this introduces existing members to new organisations which they may find interesting and could develop their own links for volunteering, developing skills, employment opportunities etc.
5. In terms of reflecting the changing nature of the project and the change members experience as a result of attendance, NAGAS may want to consider a strapline for the project, with a focus on change. For example, ‘NAGAS: changing lives through art’.

**6.3 Potential stakeholders and beneficiaries**

Following on from the suggestions above and findings from the first half of the evaluation I discussed NAGAS’ current situation with Bob Malpiedi, NAGAS studio manager. We specifically discussed increasing NAGAS’ reach into the community and enhancing capacity for social inclusion. I then consulted six relevant organisations and discussed with them and their members (at team and group meetings) the viability of satellite sites, taster sessions, workshops etc and working in partnership with NAGAS.

I spoke to three third sector organisations specifically involved in supporting people from BME communities in Newcastle and all three welcomed the proposal to provide a number of satellite arts workshops or taster sessions for their clients. Not one of the organisations had heard about NAGAS and the work it does but were keen to know more. Prospective stakeholders and potential members said that the main barrier in terms of engagement with other services is the geographical location (if it’s not immediately close by people are reluctant to travel) and anxiety about attending somewhere where they feel they will be a stranger. Suggesting the idea of satellite workshops or outreach sessions was met with enthusiasm and interest, and both prospective stakeholders and members were keen to be involved in that element of the project design. Prospective members also said that if they met some of NAGAS’ existing members at the workshops, they might be more inclined to come along to the studio. As one prospective member said:

*“I don’t like going to new places, I feel comfortable here…but I am interested in art, I used to draw. And maybe, I don’t know, if I met some of the people who go there, like if they came here, that would be good…”* Anon

I also spoke to two potential stakeholder organisations in the Newcastle area which support young people with mental health problems. They both welcomed the opportunity to work alongside NAGAS to develop outreach sessions/workshops- particularly in creative writing. They said that from their experience young people between the ages of 18-25 would be reluctant to attend the studio but if the studio came to them and they could be creative with their peers, it would encourage them to become more involved. Additionally, I spoke to an organisation providing support and advice to veterans who said their client base would be quite happy to come along to the studio, but only if there was a group set up for specifically for them in the first instance, rather than as a drop in. I later talked to clients of that organisation who said they would come along to the studio for a workshop they knew was specifically set up for them. I asked whether they think it would encourage them to come more regularly:

*“Well I don’t see why not but I like to get to know people before I say I am going to go to a place. That’s why I think, you know, like you said about us coming in for a specific workshop all together, we would get a chance to see what it’s like.”* Geoff.

This further work has identified the scope for a much richer engagement with the local community and sections of the society that are often deemed ‘hard to reach’. There is real scope for, and interest in, NAGAS reaching out into the community to work with prospective members whilst maintaining the core activities at the studio. Taking the NAGAS message beyond the walls of the studio would certainly increase diversity and ensure many more members benefit from such a stimulating and supportive service. Simultaneously, holding outreach sessions in the community could also encourage existing members to go along in the form of ‘buddy support’ and encourage them to make their own links with new organisations, develop new interests and skills, make new friends and increase their confidence in the community.

**6.4 Sustainability**

NAGAS have faced a number of challenges to their initial sustainability plan. It was thought that being contract ready for personal budgets, as part of the personalisation agenda, and being involved in social prescribing and the clinical commissioning groups (CCG) would yield a firm source of income. Sadly this aim has not been realised because the external structures are not in place and CCG are choosing not to invest in activities at this time (which was the initial expectation). As Steve explains:

*“NAGAS did really well being ready for personalisation. I know the benefits so far have been limited, and they do have some people there now, but I think more than a lot of organisations I have known, certainly of a similar comparable size. NAGAS take opportunities seriously and they invest in them and they’re proactive rather than waiting for something to reveal itself. They go out and seek and explore and innovate. I think they should continue with personalisation thing and not despair about it not taking off as much as they hoped, because it’s not going to go away and over the next six months we will be hearing more about personal health budgets and it could revitalise the personalisation thing or make it more complicated, but there could be opportunities there…I think social prescribing, there is a lot of investment by one of the CCGs in Newcastle but they’re not investing in in activities. They’re investing in link workers- but in Newcastle we have an army of link workers through fulfilling lives project and other projects, I think there is a need for it, to link people and navigating but at a time when funding is being cut left right and centre, people are going to be linked to less and less things. I know the thing with social prescribing, as it’s set out, they’re not really seeing specialist voluntary sector services as places they would link people…I think that in time, there will be issues around how, where does social prescribing, support and MH meet and I think NAGAS could be in a good position.”*

NAGAS continue to work tirelessly to ensure they are contract ready for tender opportunities but such opportunities are not currently available. At the time of publication of the evaluation, Bob was setting up a meeting with the mental health lead for CCG West. A further suggestion for sustainability was from Karen who suggested making stronger links with the local universities for providing placements for social workers and earning revenue that way.

NAGAS have identified some excellent examples of partnership working (see achievement timeline 2.3). This has come about as a direct result of Big Lottery funding their core costs since April 2012 NAGAS- without Big Lottery funding NAGAS wouldn’t have been able to pursue the smaller projects such as the bARTer project with Time to Change, production of the ‘Apples is Apples’ film etc.

There is no denying that the current socio-political climate is currently more brutal than it has ever been. I asked the critical friends what are the biggest challenges NAGAS faces and Alisdair’s response illustrates the challenge(s) perfectly:

“*Funding, first, second and third*.”

This is a sentiment echoed by all stakeholders, critical friends and potential stakeholders. When asked how best NAGAS can overcome the funding barrier the suggestion was to continue to build alliances with other third sector organisations along with health services and statutory services. With that in mind I suggest that the staff team, along with member ambassadors, regularly begin to attend VOLSAG, NCVS, GVOC etc. meetings to ensure they are kept in the loop in terms of further opportunities and to build those alliances. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that without further funding from the Big Lottery, the future of the service is bleak. As Steve describes:

“*I think the financial and economic thing is huge, the councils don’t have any more money to commission or contract they haven’t already commissioned and the things they have commissioned they’re bundling it up.”*

Despite austerity and adversity NAGAS remains as a highly thought of organisation by key figures entrenched in the local mental health landscape:

*“I am very impressed with the work at NAGAS and do hope that it can continue to progress with its members interests at the heart of its activities*.” Simon

*“NAGAS are a really key part of the local range of services.”* Steve

**6.5 Summary**

* The environment created by NAGAS is inclusive, safe, non-judgmental and welcoming which has proved integral for members’ well-being and recovery.
* NAGAS has been instrumental to the recovery of many members and there is a continuing demand for the service.
* I have made a number of recommendations for development and improvement of the service in the text box in 6.2.
* Potential stakeholders consulted for the evaluation demonstrate an enthusiasm for taster sessions and outreach satellite workshops. Conversations reveal a gap in provision for arts based services for harder to reach communities and potential beneficiaries have indicated a keenness to attend and be involved in such projects.
* NAGAS’ initial sustainability plan has not been realised mainly due to external factors but strengthening partnership working and alliances with other third sector organisations, mental health services and statutory services must continue.

**7. CLOSING REMARKS**

The dual purpose of the evaluation was to measure and assess the service NAGAS has been providing since April 2012 and, using the findings as a basis, to establish a strategic plan for developing and improving the service.

The service NAGAS continues to provide is irrefutably in demand. The statistics evidence an improvement in members’ well-being, engagement, participation and development as a direct result of attending the service. The interviews with existing members emotively portray the lifeline NAGAS provides and the significant impact it has had on the lives of its members. Interviews with stakeholders also indicate a continuing overwhelming need for the service. This sentiment is echoed by key professional figures in the mental health community. As Jim, technical instructor says (5.5):

“*NAGAS works!”*

Whilst it can be unequivocally demonstrated that NAGAS is integral to the lives of members and a valuable and respected source of support in the eyes of mental health professionals, NAGAS’ precarious funding situation cannot be escaped.

With this in mind I move to the second part of the evaluation- exploring scope for developing the project. I have identified, via consultation with potential stakeholders and members, a number of ways NAGAS may choose to move forward to enhance social inclusion, increase diversity and develop its members further. The following are just some of the ways in which NAGAS may choose to increase its capacity for social inclusion and further ameliorate the negative effects of mental health problems:

* Evolving the service to include a buddy system;
* Satellite workshops and taster sessions in the community designed to include a wider range of age groups and ethnic minorities;
* A method for reflecting on development with members; and
* Incorporating ‘achievement’ into the current EPD

Finally I would like to say that NAGAS is an extraordinarily inspirational place, testament to both the hard work and innovative approach of the staff and the sheer brilliance, enthusiasm and uniqueness of its members.

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1. Newcastle and Gateshead Art Studios will be referred to ‘NAGAS’ or ‘the studio’ throughout the remainder of the evaluation report. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Victoria Armstrong, doctoral researcher at Durham University <https://www.dur.ac.uk/directory/profile/?id=10928> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)