

Our response to the NHS Change consultation

The following is our organisational response to the government's [NHS Change](#) consultation to shape a 10-year health plan for England.

Q1. What does your organisation want to see included in the 10-Year Health Plan and why?

The British Association of Art Therapists is the professional membership organisation for art therapists in the UK. We work to promote art therapy and provide professional support and advice to our members. We represent art therapy to commissioners, policymakers and opinion-formers and work to ensure that the wider public understands what art therapy is and how it can help transform lives.

Our full members are all qualified art therapists, regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). Art Therapy is recognised as both an Allied Health Profession and a Psychological Profession in the NHS in England.

Art therapy is a form of psychotherapy that uses visual and tactile media as a means of self-expression and communication. Art therapists aim to support people of all ages and abilities and at all stages of life, to discover an outlet for often complex and confusing feelings, and foster self-awareness and growth. It can help people of all ages and at all stages of life, including those whose life has been affected by difficult personal or cultural experiences, illness and/or disability.

The UK has a serious mental health crisis. The leading mental health think tank, The Centre for Mental Health, has (among other things), identified that:

- Children from the poorest families are four times as likely to have a mental health problem by the age of 11 than the wealthiest children
- Black people in the UK are four times more likely to be sectioned under the Mental Health Act than white people
- People with severe mental illness face a 20-year shorter life expectancy than average in the UK.

Whilst the NHS cannot solve this mental health crisis alone, the 10-year health plan must help address these serious issues that have devastating effects on individuals, communities and the economy. We would like to see the unique contribution that art therapy can make to support people with mental health problems clearly recognised in the plan; art therapy can support the NHS to deliver a comprehensive mental health service in the widest range of setting for all sections of the community.

Q2. What does your organisation(s) see as the biggest challenges and enablers to move more care from hospitals to communities

Art therapy can help hospital services by helping patients in a wide range of settings outside of hospital. Art therapy can be delivered in community mental health centres and clinics; schools and educational institutions (often through school counselling services) and through not-for-profit organisations, such as Mind and other mental health charities.

Art therapists are adept at working upstream and downstream in the system. They can help keep people well and out of hospital in the community, but also can respond appropriately to need in in-patient settings, working effectively as part of multidisciplinary teams and helping support timely discharge.

In hospital settings, patients often feel a lack of control. Art therapy can provide a sense of control and autonomy, while group art therapy can foster social connections and reduce feelings of isolation crucial for mental health and so help prevent the need for hospitalisation.

Art therapy in schools, can offer children support early on when they have difficulties. For some, this may avoid them needing to be taken out of school to attend hospital-based therapy sessions. The school environment can feel like a safer place to receive support than a mental health service, and sessions can be with an individual child or a group. Access to art therapy across the country is inconsistent, creating significant inequalities for patient care. Some parts of the country have a reasonable availability of art therapy services, others do not, even where qualified art therapists are available and there is local demand. There is a need for art therapy to be part of a unified national approach to workforce planning and service provision to ensure that everyone, regardless of location, can access the expertise of art therapists.

The wider Allied Health Professions (AHP) community is seeking to grow community-based rehabilitation teams, embedding AHPs into GP surgeries, schools, and community rehabilitation units, to provide accessible, preventative, and personalised care. Art therapist should play a key role in these teams, helping reducing reliance on acute services. Even where GP surgeries are full (as is often the case) with little space for rehabilitation services, art therapy can be effectively delivered in wider community settings, including creative spaces such as museums and art galleries, enabling services to engage with a wider range of people who may not otherwise access care.

Q3. What does your organisation see as the biggest challenges and enablers to making better use of technology in health and care?

Utilising technology, online platforms, and telehealth are not new to art therapy. Digital art therapy, including the application of computer-generated content and use of digital media has been employed over the past three decades as more and more art therapists have introduced technology into their clinical work. Art therapy has adapted to the online environment, with art therapists using platforms like Zoom, or dedicated therapy platforms to conduct sessions, and others using digital art tools and apps to create and share artwork during sessions - this can include drawing apps, digital painting software, and even simple tools like Microsoft Paint. Other art therapists use a combination of online and face-to-face sessions; a "blended method" allowing increased flexibility that can be tailored to the client's needs.

Online art therapy has made it easier for people to access services, especially those in remote areas or with mobility issues. It also allows for more flexible scheduling, which can accommodate clients' busy lives. Online art therapy can lead to a decrease in stigmatisation for those seeking help and create new possibilities for client connection, empowerment, and openness.

However increasing use of this technology by art therapists is not without its challenges. Not all clients have access to the internet connections or the necessary digital devices, while others may struggle with using digital tools and platforms which can create stress and reduce the effectiveness of the therapy. Ensuring privacy and confidentiality in online sessions is paramount and secure video conferencing platforms and encrypted file-sharing methods are essential. For others the lack of physical presence can affect the therapeutic relationship with the non-verbal cues and the tactile experience of creating art with physical materials harder to replicate online.

Despite these challenges, many art therapists and clients are increasingly finding online art therapy to be a valuable and effective alternative.

Q4. What does your organisation see as the biggest challenges and enablers to spotting illnesses earlier and tackling the causes of ill health

Preventative measures and early interventions are essential for managing health conditions, reducing hospital dependency, and enhancing life quality. Art therapists can contribute to prevention by implementing tailored interventions at an early stage. An example of this is art therapy groups for people with first episode psychosis, that research demonstrates is a valuable resource to early intervention teams.



In the work environment, occupational health support is often unavailable until individuals experience prolonged or recurrent absences due to illness. Early access to support such as art therapy to help prevent long-term absences and support individuals is needed. Art therapists can work with people to help manage stress and other mental health challenges and help workplaces support employees' health and productivity more effectively.

To do this effectively art therapy needs to be expanded into a wide range of settings and access to services should include options to access an art therapy. Alongside this there needs to be a wider campaign that enables the public to better understand the role and benefits of art therapy.