



Leicestershire Partnership
NHS Trust



Reflections on the Soft Touch Arts Project at Westcotes House.

by Dr Jeanette Bowlay-Williams, consultant clinical psychologist and clinical lead for the CAMHS young people's team

“Art is a human activity consisting in this, in that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings, and also experience them.”

Leo Tolstoy 1897

If emotional responses are the purpose of artistic expression, then there is no doubt that the Soft Touch arts project has been a huge success.



The project was delivered by the CAMHS young people's team in partnership with Soft Touch Arts, an award winning Leicester Charity which uses creative media to engage with disadvantaged young people. It was the brain child of community psychiatric nurse Emily Cumberpatch (pictured left), who had seen first-hand the positive impact that working with the charity could have for young people in terms of their engagement, self-confidence, emotional expression, and ability to work co-operatively with others. Over the 12 weeks that the group ran, the ten teenage service users developed a range of new skills.

All of the young people involved in the project were either Looked After Children or young people who had been adopted. As such, they represent a group of young people who have experienced significant childhood adversity, abuse, neglect and trauma, multiple rejections and displacement

from their family of origin. Typically this client group find it difficult to form trusting relationships with others due to their experiences, and to engage with mainstream services. It is perhaps unsurprising then that, during the design stage of the project, themes of difference, diversity and not belonging emerged powerfully.

By the end of the 12 weeks, the group had produced many incredible pieces of art. From the imposing Transformer, whose true identity remains concealed beneath a mask and armour, to the aliens searching through space for their home; from the friendly Yeti who welcomes you to see beyond his monstrous reputation to the hauntingly beautiful 20ft whale which swims alone in the depths of the ocean, the message was clear: a request for acceptance of difference, not to judge on first impressions and to recognise the vulnerability that lies below the surface.



In addition, the group produced four life-size silhouettes of young people, representing both their journey through CAMHS and what mental health services mean to them. It was heart-warming to see words such as 'understanding', 'trust' and 'empowerment' featuring on these pieces of art.



A special art exhibition to unveil the work was held on 21 November 2018. It was well attended by the artists and their families and carers, as well as by members of the Trust Board, senior managers and clinical staff. This was the first time the young people had seen the work displayed on the walls with all its impact. It was delightful to see them talking about their work so articulately and passionately with a real sense of pride in what they had achieved.

We set off on this project with the aim of giving the young people a voice... and they spoke! Using the medium of art and the walls of the building as the canvas they shared important messages

about their experiences. What they told us didn't always make for easy listening, but we did listen. As guardians of the messages from the young people to us all, what could be more validating than giving it a place of residence in our building? The art work proclaims 'in this place we will hear you'.



On behalf of the young people's team, I would like to thank all those staff who attended the exhibition at the end of what was undoubtedly a busy work day, in order to give this event such a sense of occasion. I would also like to extend a very special thank you to Emily Cumberpatch whose effervescent enthusiasm, passion and dogged determination made the whole thing happen.

As a team, we would warmly welcome anyone who would like to come and visit Westcotes House in

Leicester to see the art work. In return we have but one simple request: have an opinion on the aesthetics of the work, experience the emotional reaction it generates, and whether you love it or hate it, please appreciate it.

*"Only in the darkness
can the stars shine"*

