

## Visiting Slough CVS

*Our Thriving Communities Fund Project Manager, Dulcie Alexander, reflects on her visit to social prescribing activities at Slough CVS.*

It's a Tuesday morning when I arrive at Slough CVS, where I am lucky enough to have been invited to try the Supporting Wellbeing Through Creativity activities.

The activity is part of the social prescribing offer for Slough's residents. People are prescribed the activities by their GP or can self-refer, so everyone is able to take part in the sessions.

First, I hear from Kinder and Mewish Bokari from Slough CVS about the importance of partnership and collaboration. Their 2000 volunteers support social prescribing in multiple languages for over 150 cultural communities across Slough. These volunteers build relationships with local groups to spread the word about the social prescribing activities on offer and to raise awareness of how everyone in society can take part, such as with assistance from a volunteer or carer.

It's then time to try one of the classes at an art studio in the top of Slough's main shopping centre, where about ten local people of all ages, genders and backgrounds shared a creative space. There was a sense of tranquillity as we arrived. Everyone was focussed on the artwork they were making, whether painting around mirrors, directly onto canvas, or on intricate picture frames.

Visual arts is not my forte and I feel completely out my comfort zone, like many of the other participants tell me they were when they first visited the session.

A group of three women told me their stories of social anxiety, phobias and health conditions that had caused them to be very isolated through the pandemic. They explained how the arts sessions had been a lifeline, getting them back out into social spaces. One participant told me of their panic issues in enclosed spaces, like the local Iceland shop, where she felt exposed and embarrassed. She said that coming to the art classes enabled her to be out and active, knowing that she had a friendly face of the art leader to welcome her, where other spaces in the shopping centre may not.

One woman explained her phobia of cars, and how she was able to attend the art class thanks to social prescribing volunteers helping her there. She said the process of putting a paintbrush to canvas got her over her fears of re-socialising with her community and she really enjoyed the regularity of the sessions each week.

Finally, I spoke with a writer and illustrator who had been prescribed the visual arts class as part of her cancer care. We talked about the heart mirror she was creating, painting detailed floral work around the edge of the mirror, intended to be hung at home, once completed. She spoke about her love of art and the joy she found working in a creative field, but also about how, some days, her illness and physical health issues prevented her from being creative. We talked of her treatment and how she has chosen her personal end of life journey, shying away from chemotherapy.

“People always think you have not taken up chemo due to the loss of hair. I haven’t to preserve my creativity and to sustain my quality of life. Creating is who I am, my identity and these arts sessions have made me realise this. I have personal ownership over my end of life care”.

It is clear that these social prescribing sessions in Slough are uniting people’s health and creativity journeys – the room listens as people draw, paint and sketch as they chat about their lives, health experiences and how to be in society with mental and physical issues.

Back on the road home, I am full of hope and questions of what I may draw next, and how this incredible work is changing people’s ownership of their own lives, exploring hardship, and going some way to provide a space to better their daily life, experiences and skills.