



Sowing the seeds of change: the art of people power

Reflections on our approach to innovation in HARP 'Seed'

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Introduction

COVID-19 presented many new challenges for people’s health and wellbeing in Wales. HARP’s partners believed the arts could offer health organisations new perspectives and approaches to finding solutions, so we launched the HARP ‘Seed’ project.

Delivered in 2020-21, HARP Seed was about collaborating to generate - or ‘seed’ - those initial great ideas and innovate at pace. We worked with health and care organisations to identify challenges that mattered to them, and they were paired with six artists (two per team) to generate and develop new creative ideas that helped them meet their challenges. Delivered in partnership with [People Powered Results](#), this was a structured and rapid innovation process that incorporated coaching support and other people powered methods that enable people to take on new ways of working.



“Creating the conditions to innovate” - from [Nesta People Powered Results](#). We used this framework to design activities and map progress in HARP Seed.



What we did

To begin, we advertised for health organisations to bring their challenges to us and then selected the three we felt best matched our aims and ethos.

Next, we advertised for artists to join them, and facilitated a 'Sandpit' event between the artists and health collaborators, aimed at exploring each person's skills, perspectives and motivations to establish common values and goals.

We then brought three new teams together in weekly webinars, taking them through a mapping, goal setting, design, testing and evaluation process to explore how creativity could help them achieve their goals. We wanted to ensure the artists were active collaborators in the early phases of innovation rather than simply being commissioned later to run an intervention, which is what often happens:

"Until taking part in this project, I had only encountered the sometimes difficult dynamics of working as a commissioned artist in which the creativity must be funnelled in a specific way, decided by the health organisation" (Jain Boon, artist).

We used activities and approaches from the [People Powered Results 100 Day Challenge](#), which we adapted for the Zoom setting. As well as the structured activities such as goal setting and idea generation, we also used playful and creative activities to foster a culture of reflection and build trust across the teams - you can find out more about these in our HARP Playbook at www.healthartsresearch.wales.

HARP Seed's successes

The teams chose to use HARP as a safe space to explore some of society's deep-rooted problems. The three projects were:

- **Doing the Write Thing:** storytelling for Black NHS workers during Covid-19
- **Creative First Aid Kit:** to support care workers during and beyond Covid-19
- **Messages of Hope:** overcoming stigma and isolation for sexual violence survivors

All three teams successfully tested creative projects, with promising results.

Through the creation and exhibition of artworks by people with lived experience ('Messages of Hope'), and a targeted news campaign, New Pathways successfully increased their referrals in rural Mid Wales, where they had historically struggled to get people to come forward, by around 40%.

The **Doing the Write Thing** team created 10 audiobooks and a powerful animation video detailing Black NHS workers' experiences. These were shared with the leadership team at their NHS partner to support future workforce development and their response to the Welsh Government's Race Equality Action plan.

The **Creative First Aid Kit** team received a warm response from the care staff who participated, and the council hopes to make the provision of creative support a mainstay of their wellbeing offer to staff.

An unexpected but positive outcome of Seed, was that by involving the artists in

the exploration of a challenge with health and care teams, art wasn't just used as the treatment or intervention but as a way for the teams to diagnose and explore the problem. Art and the artists provided a vehicle for problem-solving, rather than the destination. Reflecting on this, Jain Boon, one of the artists in Seed, told us that *"Seed offered a framework I had not encountered before. I appreciated the triad of health organisation, artists and Seed facilitators. This was immensely powerful as we found a shared language with the health organisation to explore the development of the project... By offering an ethos of collaboration, the Seed project tried to instil a practice of listening both for the artists and the health organisation. Listening to each other can be hard. So having this third 'space' with the HARP team was really valuable in the development of the project and meant that the people participating in the project (the New Pathways service users) were also listened to."*

Deputy CEO of New Pathways, Mike Wilkinson, also told us that Seed gave front-line staff and artists a renewed energy and agency, and also brought a detailed level of insight to issues and challenges in the system that could inform longer-term strategy: *"The process has far exceeded our expectations and has led us to think more creatively about our services"*.

In Seed, innovation worked best when artists and health partners were ready to listen to each other and celebrate their differences. This work was needed. The teams worked on very difficult and entrenched challenges, but when the links in the chain - health organisations, leaders, funders, artists and facilitators - were bold, resilient, open and empowered then they were able to do amazing things.

What we might have done differently

Reflecting on some of the more challenging aspects of Seed, there are some things we might do differently next time.

- **Give clearer timescales.** For the Seed strand of HARP, we made a deliberate decision not to set an end date, because we weren't sure how long testing ideas might take during the lockdowns. But on reflection, we didn't communicate that clearly enough and believe it may have hindered momentum. **An agreed end date might have helped** (the 100-day challenge intentionally does this). We could also have been clearer upfront that the timescale was open-ended.
- **Focus on goals, not roles.** The nature of the collaborative approach meant that the team members were often working outside the boundaries of their usual roles and job descriptions. This challenge to participants' mindsets and habits, both individual and institutional, did create tension at times, especially for colleagues who were used to working together in a particular way. We could have placed more focus on 'goals not roles' earlier on, helping all team members to feel on an equal footing when it came to decision making.
- **Dig deep, early on.** We learned the importance of establishing the right leadership, permission and values from health partners upfront, and encouraging team members to bring an open, curious mindset. In any innovation process or partnership, it's worth taking time early on to think about leadership, access to health data, institutional barriers and intra-organisational relationships. We didn't always do this as thoroughly as we might have in Seed and it did have an impact on some team members who struggled to engage with the time commitments we were asking for.

- **The money challenge.** We (HARP) held a small budget for teams to test ideas. At times this encouraged teams to focus on what they could afford instead of coming up with the best ideas to meet goals. It was difficult to balance our roles as a 'funder', where we had to say yes and no to certain things based on the cost, and 'coach', where we wanted to empower teams to make their own decisions. This changed the way they viewed us, and our roles, too.
- **Balancing different perspectives.** There was a constant need to reflect and recalibrate the dynamic between health and arts collaborators, and as facilitators we didn't always get the balance between 'art' and 'health' right. For example, we could have done more to establish the artists as equal collaborators at the beginning of Seed. We were pleased at the commitment and ambition shown by the health partners and it felt right to put the focus on the health challenge, but giving the artists more time to showcase their creativity earlier might have helped health partners better understand how they worked, and be inspired by that.

Where to from here?

Our HARP partners have committed to adopting and absorbing the learning and recommendations from the Seed programme, which we hope will inform how they fund, support and advocate arts and health innovation in the future.

For investors and health and care leaders to find new solutions where it's most difficult, they might consider what new perspectives and creativity can offer.

To read more about HARP Seed, the projects we supported, and the activities we used, visit www.healthartsresearch.wales. Here you can also find a downloadable HARP Playbook of all the tools, approaches and resources we used across the programme.

To find out more about People Powered Results, visit www.peoplepoweredresults.org.uk

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