All sorts! It’s an opportunity for all of us to learn new skills. We’ve done everything from silk screen printing to decoupage, from enamelling to pyrography and loads more besides. We work with clay, wood, metal, fabric, clay, paper, beads and even recycled materials. We’ll try anything once.

We’re not just there to do creative things together. It’s about creating more compassionate communities - to share, to learn, and to bring people together. We get together and talk about our lives and experiences. We listen to and support each other.

We’ve started to have a shared lunch at some of the groups, which is a great way to get to know each other. Everyone brings along something they’ve made which they’ll share with everyone else. It’s fantastic. We have one guy who had never really cooked until recently when he lost his wife. He now brings in the most amazing dishes and is looking into setting up a cookery course for people who find themselves living on their own.
What difference have the groups made, both to yourselves and everyone else who takes part?

We try and create a supportive space which allows people to open up and support each other. People can feel very isolated. The groups are an opportunity for people to come together in an environment where they can talk about their problems, get advice and share experiences.

Having the chance to talk about your problems with someone who has had similar experiences to you is so powerful. When you get to share your problems with someone who really understands them there’s a deeper connection and it resonates with you.

We’ve all got to meet such interesting people, from all walks of life and different backgrounds. Everyone has a different story, they’ve all got their own history, and it’s fascinating to find out more about them. You never cease to be surprised and amazed about the things you find out about people when you get to know them. We’ve met some extraordinary people and made such great friends. Many of us now get together outside of the group, meeting up socially. It makes you feel like you belong more, and that you’re part of a community. We feel more like an extended family than friends!
What do you think are the benefits of interacting with people through arts and creativity?

It’s a great opportunity to build up your confidence. When people first get involved, they tend to be really shy and nervous. Often they’re coming from a really vulnerable place. It’s a big thing to admit that you need help or that you’re lonely, especially if you’re not feeling very well or you’ve lost a loved one. The activities give people a way to engage at their own speed, and to get to know people. It helps to put people at ease.

When you create something together, you’re making a connection with someone else. It’s a lovely way of interacting with people, and helps you get to know people. Being creative helps to free you. You don’t have to talk if you don’t want to. When you’re concentrating on creating something, you can forget about your problems for a while.

It’s also great to learn something new. A lot of us never really thought of ourselves as creative or artistic, but you learn to appreciate your own talents, and to acknowledge each other’s skills and accomplishments.

No matter what your background, or how old you are, everyone can be creative. Everyone has the potential to see things in a different way or to talk about things in a different way. Being creative helps you reassess things around you and perhaps see things in a different light.

It makes you feel like being more creative not just in the group, but at home and in your general life. It’s helped us to share experiences, and it’s great to be able to make things as gifts for your friends and family.
What advice would you give others thinking about using arts to engage with older people?

It’s so important to make sure you get the information out there about what you’re doing. So many people don’t know what’s going on around them.

You need to think about how people are going to get to and from any group you organise. Transport can be a massive problem, especially in rural areas.

Never forget how difficult it can be for people who are lonely and isolated to take that first step over the threshold. We’re always conscious of this and finding ways to make people feel welcome and support people to get involved at their own pace.

Don’t underestimate people’s ability to change things. People are capable of so much more than they think they are. When you come together with others, you can achieve so much more than you can on your own.

People often say that they’re not creative, but we see them produce the most incredible and beautiful things. If you bring people together, amazing things can happen. It isn’t always easy, and there are always challenges, but when it works there’s nothing like it. You empower people to support themselves and to create their own connections. There will always be negative people who will tell you something can’t work, but if you get a few like-minded people together with a positive attitude, you can build up momentum and anything is possible.

Whatever it is that you want to achieve, just go for it. See what you can do and what you can get out of it. Most importantly, whatever you do, make sure that you enjoy it, and that you have fun.

You can find out more about Arts4Wellbeing by visiting www.arts4wellbeing.co.uk or by contacting Mike and Sara at info@arts4wellbeing.co.uk.

You can also see a short film highlighting some of the work of Arts4Wellbeing at https://youtu.be/qWZaMW1FOHo.