



Arts on Prescription

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Introduction – What is Arts on Prescription?



Visualise a person visiting a doctor with a mental health problem such as anxiety. Instead of prescribing therapy or pharmaceutical treatment, the doctor prescribes participation in community-based arts activities. This is Arts on Prescription.

Arts on Prescription programmes promote mental health and well-being. They do so by offering community-based arts activities, where individuals participate in group-based culture and arts activities such as painting, playing music, dancing, and visiting museums. Participating in culture and arts activities helps individuals to cope with their mental health issues and fosters a sense of community and social belonging.

As a non-biomedical approach to mental healthcare, Arts on Prescription creates a powerful collaboration between the cultural and health sectors - two fields that, together, offer unique and complementary strengths. Arts on Prescription programmes are often initiated by local or regional public authorities, who work together with cultural institutions and referral channels to plan and implement the programme.

Although the positive impact of arts activities on mental health and well-being is well established, Arts on Prescription programmes rarely progress beyond the pilot stage. The EU-funded project [Arts on Prescription in the Baltic Sea Region](#) aims to change this by providing public authorities with the guidance and support needed to develop effective and sustainable programmes.

We invite you to read on and let us introduce you to the various benefits of Arts on Prescription!

Why use arts to promote mental health and well-being?

1 POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES

Arts on Prescription is a model of social prescribing that connects people to a range of non-clinical services in the community to improve their health and well-being. Arts and health programmes have been tested and studied extensively over the past years, and studies show that they improve the mental well-being of participants (see infobox “Culture’s Impact on Health”). Arts on Prescription is therefore well suited to complement treatment, to fill the gap in mental health care services, and provide more comprehensive care.

Additionally, Arts on Prescription programmes can:



serve as an alternative for individuals who may not benefit from traditional mental healthcare,



help people who don't seek medical/health services but may have mental ill-health or be at risk of developing a mental health disorder due to loneliness, life crisis, bereavement,



help to destigmatise mental illness,



foster connectedness to local communities, offering favourable and more sustainable methods for individuals recovering from mental health problems.

Culture's impact on health:

Insights from [WHO 2019 Report](#)



Regular engagement with cultural activities such as attending concerts has been linked to a reduced risk of depression, contributing to better mental health outcomes



Participating in cultural events, particularly in older age, has shown promise in preventing cognitive decline and promoting cognitive health, thus enhancing overall well-being in the elderly population.



Engaging in cultural activities fosters social cohesion by providing opportunities for individuals to connect, interact, and share experiences, ultimately contributing to improved community health and resilience.



Across all age groups, involvement in cultural activities has been associated with enhanced psychological well-being, offering avenues for expression, creativity, and personal fulfillment.



Access to and participation in cultural events and activities play a crucial role in reducing health inequalities by providing avenues for marginalized communities to engage, express their identities, and access supportive social networks.



Cultural engagement has been linked to positive physical health outcomes, including reduced stress levels, improved cardiovascular health, and better overall physical functioning.



Recognizing the health benefits of cultural engagement, healthcare systems are increasingly integrating cultural interventions into their practices, promoting holistic approaches to health and well-being.

2 COST-EFFECTIVE PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURE

Artistic and cultural interventions also have large potential for health prevention and promotion. Participants have reported multiple perceived benefits for mental well-being, including improved self-esteem, confidence, sense of achievement, sense of purpose, and self-acceptance.

Arts on Prescription programmes are low risk interventions that offer opportunities to explore and learn new skills and can encourage individuals to challenge themselves in settings free from external demands. Because of their preventive and health-promoting effect, Arts on Prescription programmes can alleviate the pressure on primary healthcare, e.g. by reducing visits to general practitioners for non-medical issues.

Studies suggest that Arts on Prescription (AoP) measures are cost-effective because they often utilize existing resources within local communities. These resources include personnel with the necessary skills to be link workers, as well as cultural institutions and departments that have close contact with and can refer participants to the programme. The “Arts on Prescription in the Baltic Sea Region” project and its pilot programmes will contribute to the knowledge base on how AoP can be implemented within different public health systems in partner countries, and how it has been incorporated into their municipalities and regions.



Museum on Prescription, AoP pilot, Cēsis
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Crafts courses, AoP pilot, Cēsis © Lelde Goba

3 NEW INCOME OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CULTURAL SECTOR

Arts on Prescription programmes can contribute significantly to societal well-being and establish mutually beneficial relationships between the health and cultural sectors. This does not only ease the burden on healthcare systems, but it introduces new target audiences to culture and the arts, provides new income opportunities for the culture sector and thus stimulates the innovativeness and economic resilience of the cultural sector.



Musical Vertigo - course on make-up and principles of character building, Chojna © Jaroslav Gaszyński

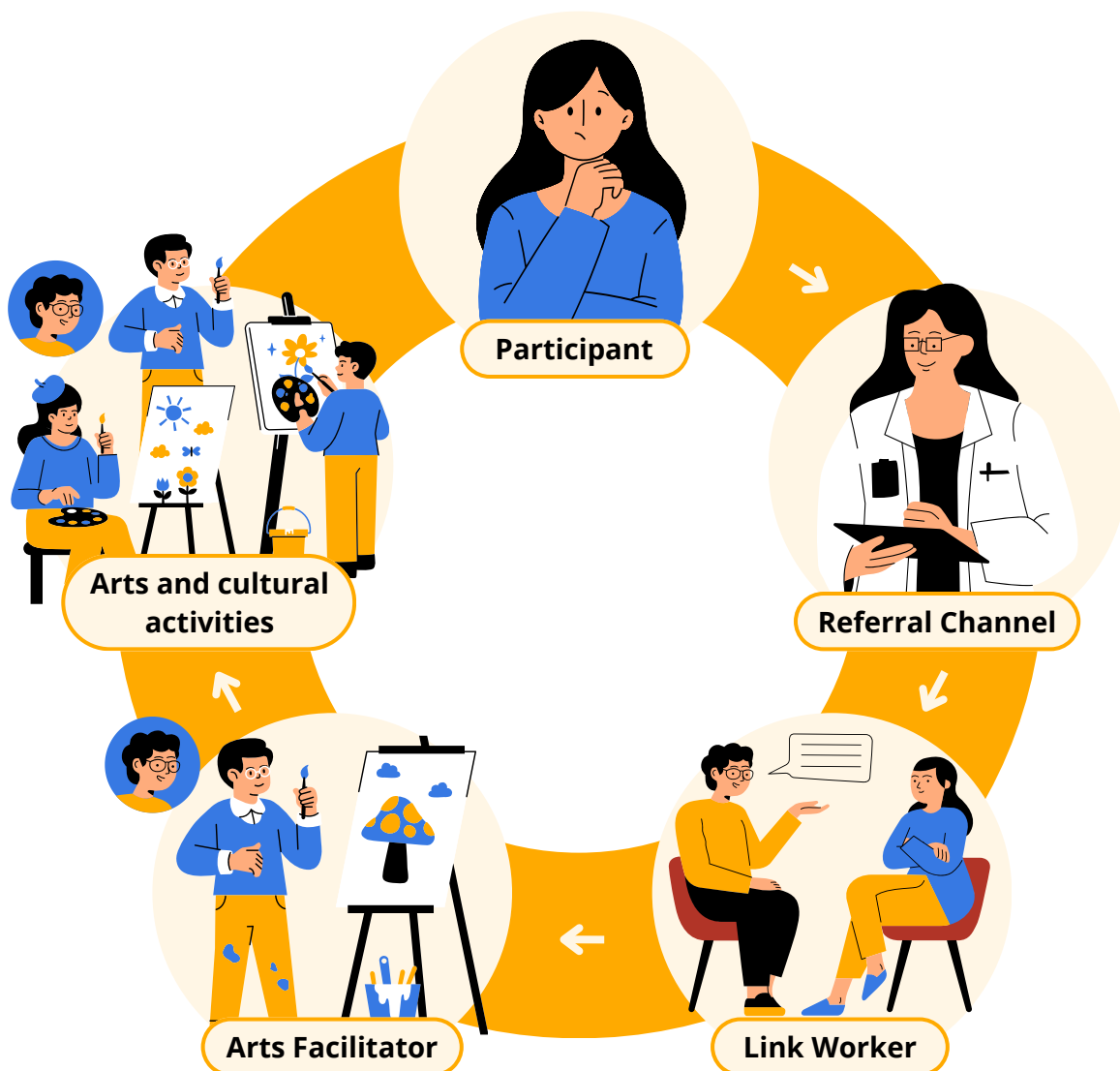


Musical Vertigo - emotions through meditation, shouting and various acting exercises, Goleniów © Aleksandra Filipczak

How does Arts on Prescription work?

Arts on Prescription is one example of the broader concept of social prescribing (similar to e. g. literature, nature or exercise on prescription). It enables health professionals or other referral channels to refer individuals to a range of weekly creative and participatory activities to promote their mental health and social inclusion. These activities can include painting portraits, writing song texts, sculpturing with pottery clay etc.

Arts on Prescription provides the opportunity to make use of the benefits and opportunities of artistic and cultural interventions. The concept is adaptable to local contexts, such as the availability of culture institutions and artists and financial resources. It is suitable for a great variety of target groups.



The “Baltic model” of Arts on Prescription

The concept of social prescribing in general, specifically Arts on Prescription, has been tested in various countries, including the United Kingdom, Sweden and Denmark.

Despite very positive results, there has not been any larger scale roll-out or mainstreaming of Arts on Prescription in any European country.

This may be due to the following aspects:

1

there is little experience overall in setting up and implementing Arts on Prescription programmes in the vast majority of regions and municipalities, thus public authorities have too few accessible examples to model their programme after,

2

collaboration between the culture and health sectors is unusual and therefore they need to overcome certain barriers,

3

local, regional and national decision-makers are unaware of Arts on Prescription's public health measures and cost effectiveness as a mental health promotion intervention.

The partners of the project “Arts on Prescription in the Baltic Sea Region” supported by the European Union under the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021-2027, have developed an adaptable generic programme concept - also called the Arts on Prescription Baltic Sea Model.

The aim of the project is to highlight, through piloting in selected municipalities and regions in the Baltic Sea Region, that this model is feasible and valuable for both the culture and the health sector, as well as cost-effective and transferable to other regions. Moreover, the project partners strives to raise awareness among decision-makers at all levels with the aim that Arts on Prescription becomes embedded in public health policies, strategies and financing schemes.

While Arts on Prescription is highly contextual and requires local adaptation, the “Baltic Model” is based on joined values and standards that have proven to be applicable under socio-economic conditions across different locations.



Arts on Prescription activities are **non-therapy**, although participation and immersion in the arts in itself may have therapeutic effects.



The programme **is for people with mild to moderate mental health issues** such as stress, anxiety or depression, or those at risk of developing mental health issues for instance, due to loneliness.



The programme consists of **varying arts categories (between 3-5)**, which means the participants will engage with different genres during the programme.



The programme is **group-based** and offers activities that are **facilitated** and **participatory**. Simply providing access to a local museum or theatre is not considered Arts on Prescription.



One programme cycle is 8-12 weeks and offers activities between one or two times a week.



The programme aims at creating a **‘diagnosis-free space’** to approach the individuals for who they are, not focusing on any diagnosis they may have. This is done by creating a non-judgmental environment where the individuals feel safe in the group and feel safe to express themselves and where their unique needs and goals can be addressed.



To ensure wide accessibility, participating in an Arts on Prescription programme is **free of charge or very low cost**.



All Arts on Prescription activities are **voluntary**. Participants are never pressured to participate in anything they find uncomfortable.



The referral channels do not only consist of primary health care providers such as physicians or clinical personnel. Social and other public services can also be involved and there can also be a self-referral option to persons who wish to participate. By doing so we aim to extend access to the programme to people with mild to moderate mental health issues or at risk of developing mental ill-health due to e.g. loneliness.



All professionals receive a **remuneration** for their high professionalism. This includes link workers, artists and arts and culture facilitators. Additionally, all receive **training** before the programme starts to become aware of their own vulnerability and to meet the needs of the participants.



Musical Vertigo, Talks with Sylwia Różycka, Chojna
© Jaroslav Gaszyński

Even with these outlined components, the components of a local Arts on Prescription programme can vary greatly depending on the availability of cultural facilitators, artists and locations in the community. They might also be adjusted to the needs and preference of the selected target group.

The economics of Arts on Prescription

The “Baltic Model” of Arts on Prescription described above has been developed and piloted in 2023-2025 with co-funding provided by the European Union. Currently, Arts on Prescription programmes are pilot or project-based. It is necessary to up-scale programmes that are sustainable and continuously financed at the local, regional or national level. An ideal financial model would consist of the public health, culture and social sectors to provide cross-sector co-financed programmes. This would ensure that all sectors have a shared commitment and ownership of the programmes’ quality, success, and sustainability. Besides public financing, resources may also be provided through private funds and donations.



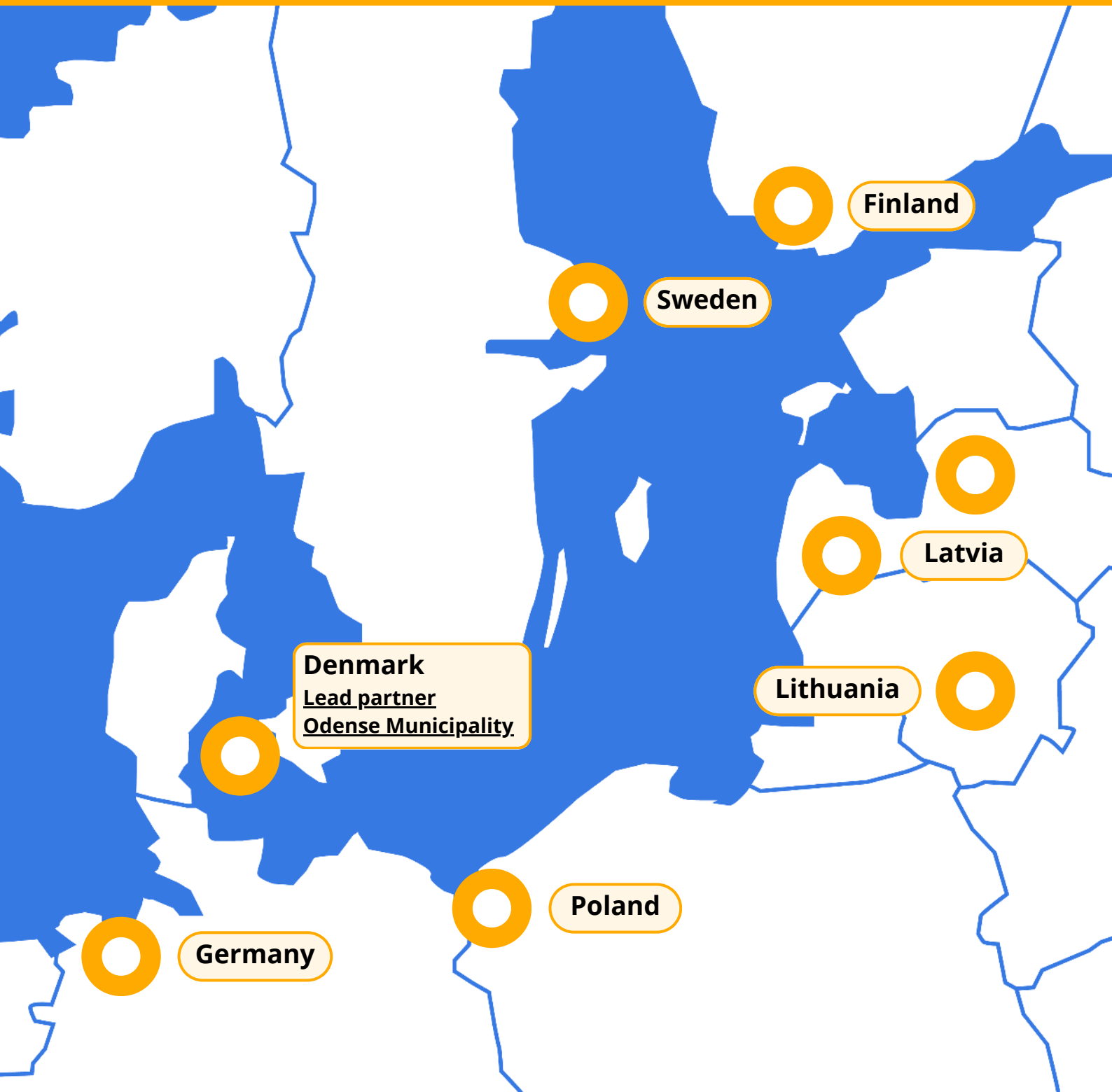
For policy and decision-makers to make well-informed investment decisions, it is of course important to know about the costs and benefits of Arts on Prescription programmes. This is a complex matter, as the potential benefits may include not only savings on clinical and pharmaceutical treatment but also improved well-being (which may in turn lead to increased economic activeness and productiveness of individuals) and new income opportunities in the cultural sector. In 2025 a cost-benefit analysis is being carried out by the National Institute for Public Health, University of Southern Denmark, a partner in the Arts on Prescription in the Baltic Sea Region project. The analysis is based on data collected from all seven piloting locations across five partner countries. The results will be available in autumn 2025.

How to start?

If you are interested or planning an Arts on Prescription programme in your community, you can read more about the “Baltic Model” and find extensive practical guidance in the projects comprehensive [online guide](#) for practitioners in health and culture as well as decision-makers. Additionally, you can contact one of the many mentors listed in the guide to assist you on your Arts on Prescription journey. The guide has been compiled by experts and practitioners from the health, cultural and research sectors. The first step, however, should always be to identify and involve the most important actors and stakeholders in your region. Arts on Prescription should always be a joint effort, bridging the gap between the health, cultural and social sector.



Museum on Prescription, AoP pilot, Cēsis
© Lelde Goba



Project partners

The “Arts on Prescription in the Baltic Sea Region” partnership consists of local and regional authorities, culture and education institutions and research institutions from seven countries around the Baltic Sea Region. The project is led by Odense Municipality in Denmark.

Project partners

Denmark

Lead partner Odense Municipality

University of Southern Denmark

Germany

Ministry for health, women and
consumer Protection of the Free
Hanseatic City of Bremen

Bremer Volkshochschule - adult
education centre / Ministry for Culture

Latvia

Cesis Municipality

Saldus district municipality

Poland

Westpomeranian Region

Media Dizajn

Sweden

Secretariat of the Northern Dimension
Partnership in Public Health and Social
Well-being (NDPHS)

Sunderby folk high school

Norrbottnen Region

Finland

Turku University of Applied Sciences

Lithuania

Lithuanian University of Health Sciences



Museum on Prescription, AoP pilot Cēsis

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Read more

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SDU 

Co-funded by the European Union (ERDF), this #MadeWithInterreg project helps to improve the mental well-being of citizens in the Baltic Sea Region.