

Interreg
Baltic Sea Region



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RESPONSIVE PUBLIC SERVICES

Arts on Prescription

An artistic, painterly illustration of three people wearing blue overalls. In the foreground, a woman with long, wavy blonde hair smiles broadly. Behind her, a woman with short, wavy white hair also smiles. To the left, a man with dark hair and a beard is partially visible, also smiling. The background is a vibrant, abstract composition of colorful brushstrokes in shades of blue, yellow, red, and pink. A large, bright yellow brushstroke is visible in the upper right corner. A yellow banner at the bottom contains the title text.

Arts on Prescription

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Introduction – What is Arts on Prescription?

Imagine someone visiting a doctor because of a mental health problem such as anxiety. But instead of prescribing therapy or pharmaceutical treatment, the doctor hands this person a prescription for participation in a painting class, a storytelling seminar or a dance session. This is Arts on Prescription.

Arts on Prescription programmes can aid individuals in coping with mental health issues they are facing, or are at risk of developing. They do so by providing opportunities for self-expression, self-discovery, access to other people in similar situations, local artists, and cultural facilitators. Taking part in arts and cultural activities helps participants connect or re-connect both to themselves and others.

As a non-clinical and non-pharmacological approach to mental healthcare, Arts on Prescription brings together two sectors that at first glance do not seem to have much in common: culture and health. Arts on Prescription programmes are often initiated and carried out by local or regional public authorities in collaboration with cultural actors and referral channels.

Even though the positive effect of arts activities on mental health and well-being has been proven many times, there are still not very many examples of Arts on Prescription programmes that go beyond the pilot stage. The EU-funded project [Arts on Prescription in the Baltic Sea Region](#) attempts to change this and provide public authorities with guidance and support in setting up successful 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 EFFECT ON INDIVIDUAL MENTAL HEALTH

Arts on Prescription, like other social prescribing approaches to healthcare, can offer several advantages alongside standard mental health services. Arts and health programmes have been tested and studied extensively over the past years, and studies show that they can significantly improve the mental well-being of participants (see infobox “Culture’s Impact on Health”). Arts on Prescription is therefore well suited to complement conventional treatment and provide more comprehensive care.

In addition to that, Arts on Prescription programmes can:



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



aid in the detection of individuals with previously untreated mental health problems by addressing issues beyond clinical disorders such as loneliness and other struggles not typically diagnosed in a healthcare setting,



help to destigmatize mental illness,



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

Culture's impact on health:

Insights from [WHO 2019 Report](#)



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



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



Cultural engagement 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 great potential to be preventive and health promoting. Participants have reported multiple perceived benefits for mental well-being, including better self-esteem, confidence, sense of achievement, sense of purpose, and self-acceptance.

Arts activities also 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 indicate that Arts on Prescription measures are cost-effective because they often make use of resources already available in local communities and do not require clinically trained staff. The “Arts on Prescription in the Baltic Sea Region” project, with its pilot programmes in various countries with different public health systems, hopes to add to this evidence.



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 actors in the cultural field 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

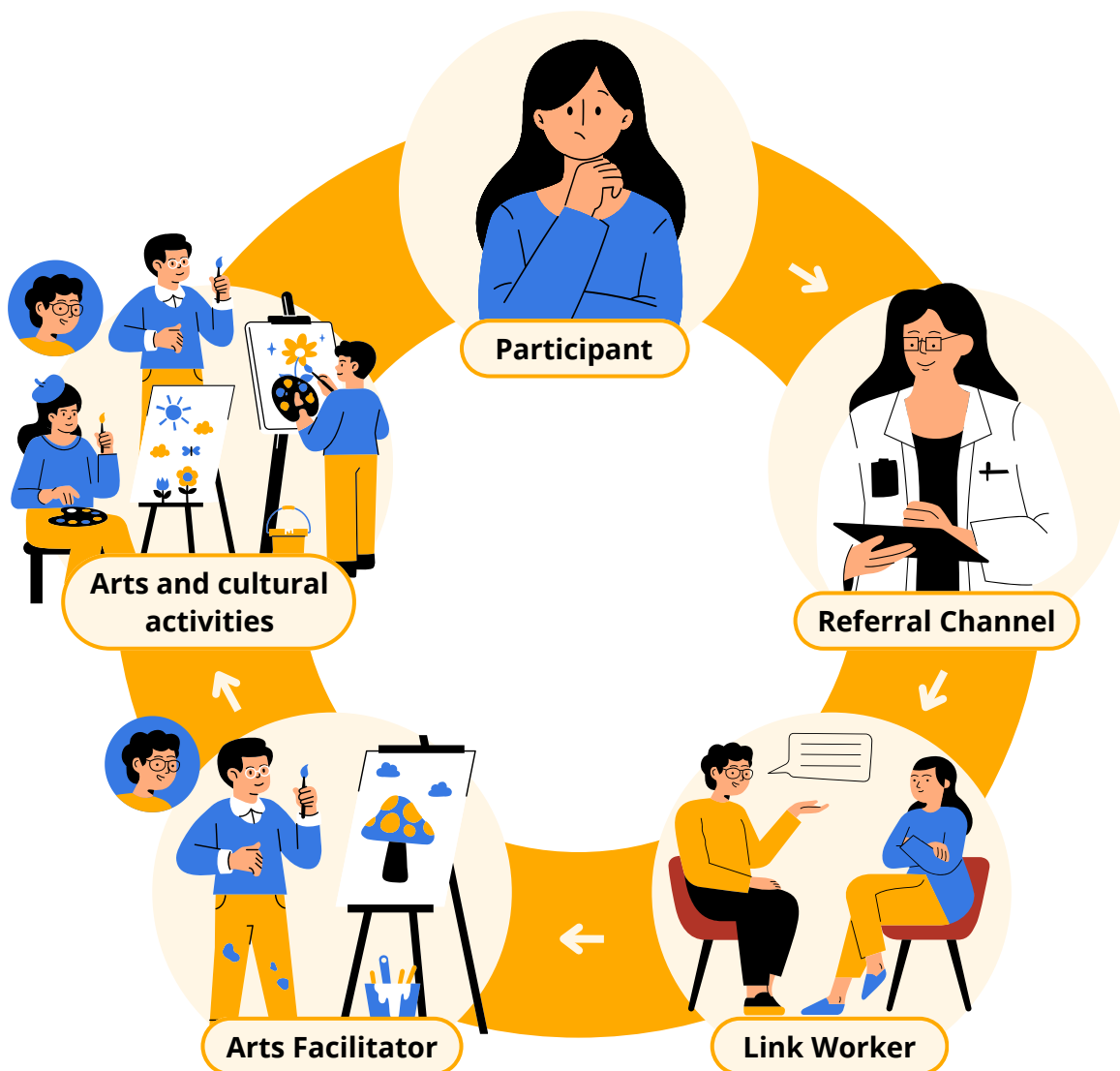


Musical Vertigo - emotions through meditation, shouting and various acting exercises, Goleniów © Aleksandra Filipczak

How does Arts on Prescription work?

Arts on Prescription is one example of the broader concept of social prescribing (similar to e. g. books, education 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 circumstances, such as the availability of cultural actors and financial resources, and it is suitable for a great variety of target groups.



The “Baltic model” of Arts on Prescription

The concept of social prescribing in general, and Arts on Prescription specifically 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, and public authorities have too few accessible examples to model their programme after,

2

actors from the culture and health sector are not used to cooperating with each other and need to overcome various barriers to do so and

3

decision-makers on financing at the local, regional and national level are not yet aware of the public health benefits of Arts on Prescription and unsure about its cost-effectiveness.

The partners of the project “Arts on Prescription in the Baltic Sea Region” which is supported by the European Union under the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme 2021-2027, have therefore set out to develop a transferable concept which could be called the “Baltic model” of Arts on Prescription.

The aim of the project is to show, through piloting in selected municipalities and regions in the Baltic Sea Region, that this model is operable and beneficial for both the culture and the health sector as well as cost-effective and transferable. Moreover, the project 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, our “Baltic model” is based on a joint set of values and standards that have proven to be applicable in different locations under different socio-economic conditions:



Arts on Prescription activities are **not therapy**, although participation and immersion in the arts in itself may have therapeutic effects.



The programme **is targeted towards 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 artistic and cultural activities offered are **facilitated, participatory and experienced in a group**. 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 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 mental health issues or at risk of developing conditions such as stress, anxiety or depression.



All professionals engaged in the programme are **paid fairly**. This includes link workers, artists or arts and culture facilitators. This is to ensure a high level of professionalism and training and is a recognition of the value provided.



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

Even with these common standards, 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 is being developed and piloted in 2023-2025 with co-funding provided by the European Union. To roll out Arts on Prescription programmes and make them sustainable, singular pilot interventions are not sufficient. They must be turned into programmes that are continuously financed at the local, regional or national level. Cross-sectorial co-financing provided by public health, social and cultural funds would be the ideal case, as it ensures that all sectors have a shared commitment and ownership in the programmes’ quality, success, and sustainability. Beside public financing, resources may also be provided through private funds and donations.



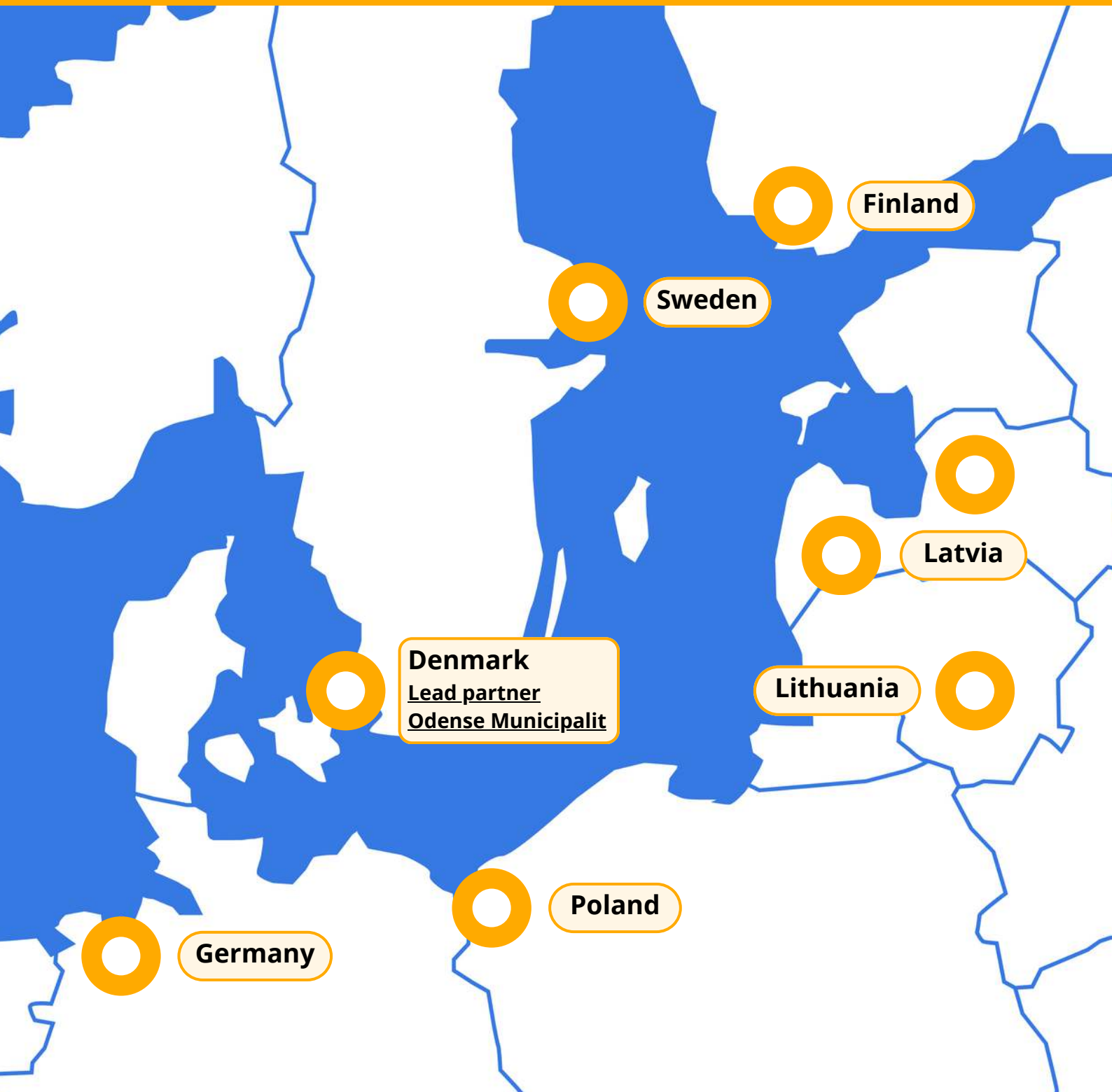
For policy and decision makers to take well-informed investment decisions, it is of course important to know about the costs and benefits of Arts on Prescription programmes. This is a complex matter, as the potential benefits may include not only savings on clinical and pharmaceutical treatment but also improved well-being (which may in turn lead to increased economic activeness and productiveness of individuals) and new income opportunities in the cultural sector. As part of the project “Arts on Prescription in the Baltic Sea Region” the National Institute for Public Health, at the University of Southern Denmark is carrying-out a cost -benefit analysis based on the pilot programmes carried out in various Baltic Sea Region countries. Results will be published on the project website once available.

How to start?

If you are interested in trying out Arts on Prescription in your community, you will find a more extensive description of the “Baltic model” as well as practical guidance in the online [“Arts on Prescription” guide](#) that will be launched in 2025. The guide has been compiled by experts and practitioners from the health, cultural and research sectors. The guide also contains a list of experts for various topics that you may wish to contact if you need specific advice or support. 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
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Project partners

The partnership of “Arts on Prescription in the Baltic Sea Region” 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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Die Senatorin für Gesundheit,
Frauen und Verbraucherschutz



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