



The Amelia

Roll for Initiative!

A toolkit to support the use of role playing games
to support wellbeing



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Come with us on a fantastic journey of fun and discovery!

The first thing to say about this toolkit is that it is—well—a toolkit. It's not an academic evaluation or a polished showcase of best practice. Instead, it's a practical, experience-based guide designed to help organisations—particularly those working in wellbeing, community engagement, or creative health, run their own role-playing game programmes to support mental health.

This toolkit is based on Roll for Initiative!, a six-month programme developed by The Amelia Scott and funded by West Kent Mind through the National Lottery Community Fund. It was created with a simple but powerful aim: to explore how tabletop role-playing games like Dungeons & Dragons can foster creativity, confidence, and connection among adults seeking to improve their mental wellbeing.

We believe role-playing games can be transformational for people of all ages and backgrounds. They offer long-term benefits, appeal to audiences, especially neurodivergent individuals who are

often missed by traditional arts-based programmes and help create lasting social bonds between players. Whether you're a wellbeing practitioner, creative health professional, or community organiser, this toolkit is designed to be accessible, adaptable, and achievable - even for small teams with limited resources.

It's a starting point, a resource, and an invitation to imagine new ways of supporting people—one roll of the dice at a time.

What is Dungeons & Dragons?

Dungeons & Dragons (often shortened to D&D) is a tabletop role-playing game that combines storytelling, imagination, and dice rolls to create shared adventures.

At its heart, D&D is about collaborative storytelling: players create characters with unique personalities and abilities, then work together to overcome challenges, solve mysteries, and explore fantastical worlds guided by a Game Master (sometimes called a Dungeon Master).

Unlike board games with fixed rules and outcomes, D&D thrives on creativity and choice. There's no "winning" in the traditional sense—success comes from building stories, forming connections, and having fun. The game uses a set of rules to add structure, but the real magic lies in the players' ideas and interactions. Whether you're negotiating with a dragon, exploring a haunted forest, or simply sharing a laugh around the table, D&D offers an inclusive space for imagination and connection.

Using Role-Playing Games for Wellbeing: A Guide to Roll for Initiative!

The Project

Roll for Initiative! is a pioneering creative health intervention developed and delivered by The Amelia Scott, a cultural hub in Tunbridge Wells.

Rooted in the mechanics of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) and other tabletop role-playing games, the programme explores how collaborative storytelling, and imaginative play can support adult mental wellbeing, particularly for neurodivergent individuals and those who may not engage with traditional arts-based wellbeing activities.

The programme's core aim is simple yet powerful: to nurture creativity, build confidence, and foster meaningful social connections.

Participants work together to create characters, solve problems, and navigate fictional worlds, forming deep bonds and discovering new ways to express themselves.

Why Role-Playing Games?

Role-playing games offer a unique and inclusive creative outlet. Unlike visual arts or activities requiring fine motor skills, tabletop roleplaying games rely on imagination, communication, and empathy. This makes them especially accessible to individuals who may struggle with conventional creative formats. The benefits observed include:

- Rapid group bonding and trust-building
- Increased confidence and self-expression
- Lower dropout rates compared to other creative health programmes
- Long-term social and emotional impact

Programme Delivery

Roll for Initiative! has run twice—once in person and once online—supporting a total of 20 participants. Both formats demonstrated positive outcomes, with the in-person version offering broader social benefits. The programme was funded by West Kent Mind through the National Lottery Community Fund as part of the Creative Minds initiative, which supports six-month creative courses across West Kent.

The course runs for 24 weeks, with weekly 2-hour sessions. Each session is supported by a West Kent Mind wellbeing worker, volunteers, and at least one Game Master. Participants were recruited via West Kent Mind's website and social media channels. Eligibility criteria included being over 18, living within the West Kent Mind's catchment area, and seeking to support or improve mental wellbeing.

The in-person course was oversubscribed, resulting in a waiting list!

Impact

Initially met with scepticism due to its unconventional format, Roll for Initiative! quickly proved its value. It was the most radical proposal within the Creative Minds programme, diverging from traditional activities like painting and cooking. Its success has helped build a compelling case for the use of table top role playing games in wellbeing work.

Evaluation and Impact

To support the development of Roll for Initiative!, the team consulted academics and practitioners experienced in using role-playing games for wellbeing. While research in this area is still emerging, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that tabletop roleplaying games offer significant benefits – particularly for neurodivergent individuals and others seeking alternative forms of creative engagement. The feedback received during this consultation was overwhelmingly positive, reinforcing the view that Table Top Role Playing Games (TTRPG) represent a promising and under-researched avenue within the field of creative health.

West Kent Mind anticipated that this course would attract a higher proportion of neurodivergent participants than other Creative Minds offerings—an expectation that proved accurate. This insight, combined with emerging academic research, gave the team confidence to support participants effectively and led to a research partnership with the University of Plymouth.

The impact of the project was measured in three ways; Wellbeing impact through surveys, academic qualitative interviews and feedback on course delivery.

Wellbeing impact on participants

The impact on participants wellbeing was measured at the beginning, middle, and end of the course through monitoring forms based on the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS). The results showed improvements in:

- Mental wellbeing
- Creativity
- Social connection

Dropout rates were significantly lower than other Creative Minds programmes, and most participants continue to meet weekly to play independently.

Academic study

Alongside evaluation outlines above, we partnered with University of Plymouth psychologists Dr Liam Cross and Dr

Gray Atherton and their Neuroplay Lab to conduct a study with participants, using qualitative interviews analysed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The study revealed three key themes:

Belonging and Safety

Participants felt a strong sense of belonging, reinforced by the understanding that the game space was safe and inclusive.

Creativity Beyond the Game

World-building and character creation sparked creativity in other areas of life, including hobbies and work.

Hope and Pride

Engaging in a new activity and forming new relationships gave participants a renewed sense of hope and pride in their ability to thrive.

Participants were quite evenly split between women and men. In the first session, several women expressed concern about being the only female players, reflecting the stereotype that D&D is male-dominated. Inclusive facilitation and group dynamics helped address this, aligning with research on creating safe therapeutic spaces.

Long term legacy

There has also been a long term, legacy benefit from the program with the majority of the group continuing to meet weekly to play D&D independently of the project. Feedback received during the course showed that the 24-week nature of the group gave participants time and space to develop deeper connections, which supported participants to continue meeting.

The Amelia Scott Context

Opened in 2022 and operated by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, The Amelia Scott is the UK's first building to combine a civic museum and art gallery, library, tourist information, adult education, and council services. This integrated model attracts a diverse audience, including vulnerable residents seeking support with housing and benefits—making it an ideal setting for inclusive wellbeing interventions.

Participant Feedback

"It takes a long time to get a good campaign going, so the time enabled us to get properly acquainted with the game and to be comfortable playing."

"It gave the time to form strong connections and for the benefits of that really to sink in. From experience I know that shorter groups do not do this."

"I have left the house more than I have in years. I have made so many friends and feel more confident in my social circle. This has truly been the highlight of my week."

"For external reasons my mental health has plummeted over the course of the programme, but the group has been a protective factor."

To summarise

Roll for Initiative! has demonstrated that museum-based creative health sessions can successfully move beyond traditional visual arts and crafts. It offers a diverse range of participants the opportunity to engage with the space, find support, and build lasting friendships and connections.

The programme's success contributes to a growing body of evidence—such as Atherton et al. (2024)—supporting the use of role-playing games in mental health interventions, especially for neurodivergent individuals.

I'm Convinced! How to run the sessions

The sessions are comparatively simple to run. You will need: A Game Master (often also called a Dungeon Master) and that is it at its simplest!

Ideally the session will involve at least one person to support the Game Master to run the session, for our project this was a Wellbeing Project Worker from West Kent Mind and a volunteer (although these are not essential).

Overview of Structure

The sessions should be split into at least two broad phases (ideally three):

- **Phase one** – Introduction to the game and learning how to play.
- **Phase two** – Playing the 'campaign'
- **Phase three** – Supporting participants to gain knowledge and confidence in running the game themselves.

Phase One:

This should ideally be about 6 sessions – but can be condensed (if all of the group have played before this can become a one session, session zero).

In the first session introduce the participants to the game – what is it, how do you play, some history and the wider community (See PowerPoint - What is Dungeons and Dragons.pptx).

Throughout phase one it is a good idea to introduce the principles of role play to participants. There is no need to use the full rules at this stage, but by introducing role play and the ideas of collaborative storytelling, the group can begin to grasp important concepts before the more complicated rules of D&D are used.

To achieve this, we used a few very simple scenarios, for example, You are in a forest walking along a path, you hear a noise in the forest to your left, what do you do? – these 'mini' games do not need to last long, you can achieve the aims within ten minutes, but they

give participants a taste of how the game works and begin to build confidence, and help people to form ideas around the kinds of character they would like to play in phase two.

In session two we would suggest introducing character creation – This is easily done by using the character builder included on dndbeyond.com – It is a good idea to ask participants to create a free account on dndbeyond.com before the second session. We have also produced a PowerPoint looking at character (What makes a good character.pptx).

Once you have introduced the character creation tool make sure there is time to again run a simple ‘mini’ game – use a different prompt this time, for example, You are in a town, a child runs up to you and asks for help, what do you do?

Session three is the ideal time to support participants to create their character – Use the character creation tool on dndbeyond.com. Spend the majority of the session

on this so that people do not feel rushed. Towards the end of the session play another ‘mini’ game using a prompt of your choice.

Session four is the opportunity to begin introducing the three pillars of D&D – Exploration, Social Interaction and Combat.

We would suggest focussing on one of the pillars in each of the next three sessions:

Session four - An exploration focussed one-shot (A one shot is a game played in a single session)

Session five - A social interaction focussed one-shot

Session six - A combat focussed one-shot

This is where an experienced DM comes into their own, all these concepts will be familiar to them.

If you do not have access to an experienced DM there are a range of online resources available to support you to learn the skills you will need to run sessions. We would recommend listening to and watching ‘actual play’ podcasts and YouTube videos as well as podcasts designed to support you to learn the skills needed to become a DM, it would also be very valuable to run some taster sessions with colleagues. This is a great chance for you to develop confidence and experience.

Phase two:

Phase two is the ‘campaign’ this is a long form story played over multiple sessions, we would suggest at least 6 sessions, but this can vary. The campaign allows players to delve deeper into their character and to create a rich and immersive story.

The campaign can be a ‘homebrew’ (A game setting created by the DM) or a prewritten scenario (There are many, many prewritten scenarios available on the internet).

By running phase one and two you

have a twelve-week program which will support participants to learn the game, become proficient, gain confidence, make connections and improve their wellbeing. If you are able to

run a longer program you can either extend phase one and two or whichever phase you feel needs more time or move on to phase three.

Phase three:

Phase three builds on phases one and two and offers participants the opportunity to learn skills which will allow them to run their own games.

This phase should ideally last around four weeks and be broken into two sections:

Phase three section one - Support participants to learn the techniques of running a game as a Game Master – this section should last 3 weeks and be designed to take participants through the key skills needed to run a game – again this is where your experienced Game Master comes into their own, using their experience they can guide participants in the process they use to run games. One of the important things to bear in mind with D&D is that there is not a single way of playing or running a game, it is an art as much as a science.

Phase three section Two - The final session(s) should be used to enable participants to run a one-shot for themselves with support from your Game Master. This is a wonderful way to end the sessions and gives participants a fantastic sense of achievement and a skill they can continue to develop outside of the formal sessions.

All this may sound overwhelming, but at its heart D&D is a way of telling a collaborative story, the rules can be as important as you choose and the way your group plays will be different every time you run a program. D&D is about imagination, connection and most importantly fun! (oh and snacks, snacks are important).

So grab your dice and get going!

Recommended Resources

If you're new to Dungeons & Dragons or looking to build confidence as a Game Master, these resources offer inspiration, guidance, and practical tools:

Actual Play Podcasts

Simply search for these in your podcast player of choice:

- **Critical Role** – Immersive storytelling and expert GM techniques from a team of professional voice actors.
- **Not Another D&D Podcast (NADDPod)** – Humorous, creative homebrew adventures with strong character work.
- **The Adventure Zone** – Accessible and heartfelt campaigns hosted by the McElroy family.
- **High Rollers DnD** – UK-based live-play series with rich world-building and engaging characters.
- **Dungeons & Daddies** – Light-hearted, comedic fantasy adventures with a unique twist.

Dungeon Master Advice Podcasts

- **The Dungeon Master's Block** – Tips and interviews for DM skill-building and creativity.
- **Dungeon Dudes** – Practical advice and actual-play content, including campaign design. **Role Play Chat** – Discussions on storytelling, improvisation, and session planning. **How Not to DM** – Lessons learned from DM experiences and common pitfalls.

Actual Play Video Series

You can search for these on YouTube:

- **Critical Role on YouTube** – Full campaigns and one-shots for inspiration and GM learning.
- **Dimension 20** – Dramatic and comedic storytelling with high production values.
- **Natural Six** – Cinematic, narrative-driven sessions with strong roleplay.
- **Extra Credits Plays: Learn to Play D&D** – Beginner-friendly tutorials and actual play.

Websites & Tools for DMs

- **D&D Beyond – Dungeon Master’s Guide** – Official digital guide for rules, world-building, and tools. dndbeyond.com/posts/1452-how-to-be-a-dungeon-master
- **DungeonMasters.Guide** – Free online hub for rules, DM tools, and adventure building. dungeonmasters.guide
- **The Daily Dungeon Master** – Blog with tips on improvisation, narrative design, and player engagement. Arcane Eye –DM advice, scenario ideas, and product reviews.
- **RPGbot** – Detailed guides on combat pacing, homebrew balancing, and encounter design. rpgbot.net
- **TheGamer** – Best Online Tools for DMs – Curated list of digital resources for maps, NPCs, and more. thegamer.com/dungeons-dragons-best-online-tools-dm-dungeon-master

If you want to ask a question or would like a little bit more support, please contact:
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