



Providing Creative Health in Gloucestershire during Lockdown

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Thanks

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"I have loved the weekly contact with our artist and those on the course, it's been so important during lockdown and self-isolation."

- Creative Health participant

During the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, the development and design direction of the five Arts on Prescription (AoP) providers in Gloucestershire, who currently make up Gloucestershire Creative Health Consortium (GCHC), shifted to meet new ways of working and requirements. This paper explores some of the key aspects of how work was tailored, allowing for ongoing and greater access to the services provided, and explores outcomes over the lockdown periods from 23rd March 2020 to 19th July 2021.

The five Creative Health providers are **Artlift**, **Art Shape**, **Cinderford Artspace**, **The Music Works** and **Mindsong**. Between them they work with adults, older people, children and young people, covering a wide range of health conditions such as dementia, chronic lung conditions, diabetes and mental health. They offer a variety of arts-based interventions such as circus and carnival skills, music and singing, visual arts and photography, as well as the clinical intervention of Music Therapy.

They are funded by a variety of income streams, however the joint **Creative Health** work they undertake is funded by Gloucestershire's Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). The qualitative and quantitative data, along with anecdotes and reflections are all kindly provided either by these organisations, or individuals who took part in Arts on Prescription activities/interventions during the lockdown periods.

[Click here to find out more about GCHC partners.](#)

Gloucestershire is a mix of both urban and rural areas, with isolated populations in both.

All of the providers found that individuals they were working with countywide experienced worsening social inequalities and increased adverse psychological symptoms, including depression and anxiety, isolation and loneliness. Crisis points and safeguarding cases rose significantly.

Addressing these inequalities and vulnerabilities requires good local knowledge and relationships.

Our **Creative Health** sector has been established for many years, so is firmly embedded and trusted by health and social care colleagues across the county. This allowed us to signpost, support, refer and advocate in a joined-up way, for those that were most vulnerable during the lockdown periods and beyond.



Image from Artspace virtual exhibition

Themes & evidence

Throughout the lockdowns, providers collected feedback from those managing, delivering and attending **Creative Health** courses. We specifically logged responses to the pandemic including lockdowns, and mapped people's experiences before, during and after attending a **Creative Health** intervention. When reviewing the feedback from all partners we are able to theme the overarching impacts of the pandemic and lockdowns as follows:

Social

- Digital inequalities
- Increased social inequalities

Psychological

- Increased isolation and loneliness
- Lockdown-related low mood and anxiety
- Intensifying of existing depression and anxiety

We know from other studies, as well as our own experiences, that people also encountered worries and anxiety around work, pre-existing and emerging health concerns, and the impact upon children and young people (such as home schooling), but for the purpose of this report we are focussing on the common themes experienced across all providers. This helped us to adapt our services accordingly to meet needs and build a picture of a person's experiences during this time period.

The lockdowns imposed during the Covid 19 pandemic were extremely challenging for the people we work with, particularly as respite and support services were suddenly halted, and family carers of people with dementia found themselves alone in providing 24/7 care. Care homes also experienced extremely challenging times, with both residents and staff isolated and not given the support or resources they needed to cope with Covid 19 cases.

Determined to continue our support, we adapted our services quickly and continued to refine them throughout the pandemic in order to reach people living with dementia in the county.

Mindsong

We provided home circus kits and home aerial rigs to children and young people throughout the lockdowns, together with doorstep and online tuition and home / garden tuition when permitted.

Artspace

We adapted all our delivery to online and posted formats with accompanying support phone calls within 2 weeks. Offering all of our participants the opportunity to continue to engage with us. All of our artists were able to continue working if they felt safe to do so.

Art Shape

The providers all strive to reach as diverse a range of people as possible.

People that live with complex health needs, who may be disadvantaged and vulnerable, and are often already isolated or experiencing societal inequalities. The lockdowns were extremely challenging for those we work with, especially with the added complication of shielding for many and rapidly changing health, social and material needs. We knew we had to redesign our services quickly and with minimal disruption to meet these needs. It was vital to offer adequate options regarding modes of engagement, accommodating differing learning styles and accessibility, including digitally supporting individuals who may have a lack of confidence with, or access to, technology.

The CCG also opened up the funding criteria, increasing our flexibility to ensure as wide a reach as possible during the pandemic.

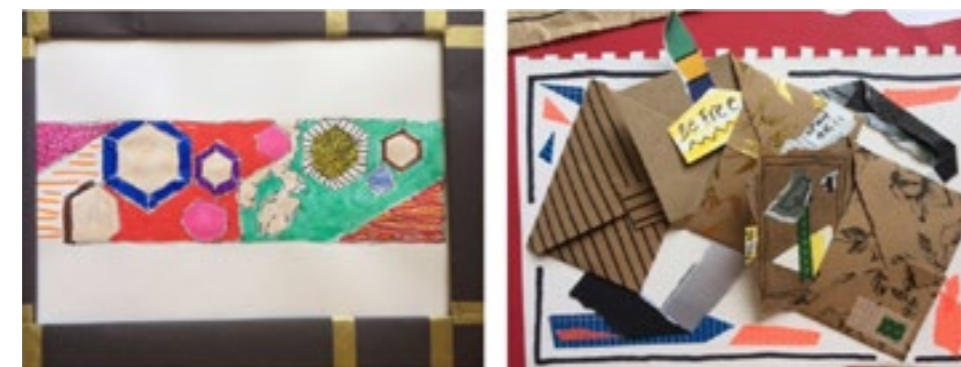
Each of the providers adapted their services through sharing practice, addressing boundaries, safeguarding and protecting the privacy of individuals (for both facilitators working from home, and participants engaging from home). We had discussions with participants and funders, and worked together to address community need. We looked to strike a delicate balance between planning and learning for staff* (utilising new platforms such as Zoom), looking after staff wellbeing and safety, cost-effectiveness, and supporting people whose medical or care providers were now running on a much reduced, or at times non-existent, capacity.

This meant that within just two weeks of the lockdown being imposed, creative and clinical provision was up and running, minimising the effects on those who access our services. **Mindsong** gained permission from the NHS Dementia Commissioner and the local Police to allow their therapists to travel and deliver **Music Therapy** via doorsteps, gardens (including a poly tunnel) and through windows.

All providers offered blended methods of delivery including online provisions, postal and telephone interface, or outdoor activities when permitted within lockdown rules. This included Padlet galleries, individual telephone creative coaching sessions, doorstep drops of arts resource packages, encouraging mindfulness, using what people had around them (e.g. in the garden, in the kitchen) creatively, and integrating gentle movement to support physical wellbeing where feasible.

Lockdown rules allowed people to take one form of exercise a day, but to 'stay local and use open spaces near to your home where possible' (UK Government guidance issued during the lockdown), therefore arts facilitators were encouraging individuals who could get outside to collect natural materials, to film / photograph things, to take woodland adventures, or sing outdoors.

**this includes volunteers*



Padlet gallery pages – From Object to Art course [Artlift 2020](#)

As mentioned previously we found many people were struggling to access technology or obtain art materials, whilst others grappled with having the mental, or physical, resilience to engage or indeed the space to be creative.

Providers were also able to raise additional emergency grants to address this, sourcing IT support to help individuals to access online technology, production of accessible online resources, purchase of creative materials to post or drop on doorsteps, and PPE equipment.

*It was not perfect. Those who didn't have a computer, smart phone or tablet were not initially able to join in (we sourced equipment where we could and took time to increase digital literacy. Not having broadband was the major stumbling block), but it became a community...a lifeline to many over the weeks and months, particularly to those who became house-bound over the lockdown. **Mindsong***



Mindsong – socially distanced outdoor music session

Working with very vulnerable adults, whether through dementia or chronic lung disease (particularly at risk during Covid-19) meant keeping provision going in whatever way possible. Whilst it was thought impossible to deliver music therapy sessions online, **Mindsong** found it was not only possible but for many as effective as in-person. All services were running online within two weeks of the first stay-at-home order. Additional services were support calls for carers and Befriending Pods.

The Sing 2 Remember community singing group went online and regularly saw 40 attenders weekly. Family and friends joined from other parts of the country, and indeed other countries: a son from Amsterdam came weekly and sometimes played his violin; a brother joined us at 5.30 am his time from Canada each week; a sister who lived in France.

It became a lifeline to many over the weeks and months, particularly to those who became house bound over the lockdown. **Mindsong**

Art Shape kept their Create and Connect art group (for participants with dementia and their carers) running via a mixture of individual phone calls, postal projects and Zoom sessions, depending on the individual's access needs. Sending out art materials and devising participant-led tailored projects with each person. Artists gave feedback on individuals' artworks and even had art history discussions on Zoom with a group of participants who initiated this idea.

The Music Works adapted their service delivery. Continuing to offer whatever they could to help young people across Gloucestershire fulfil their potential by making the music they want to make, but also expanding into new communities and new areas of work. Knowing that music has always been an amazing way for young people to express themselves, share experiences with each other and the wider world whilst improving mental health, happiness and general wellbeing. All of that became even more important in 2020.

INCFest is **The Music Works** annual inclusive music festival for young disabled people. During lockdowns, rather than one concert, they delivered five online events, led by their music leaders from their own homes, broadcasting into schools and homes via YouTube. This approach allowed more families to engage with the work providing wider and more regular access for a community that is so often left behind when it comes to music. Across the year INCFest reached 70 young people directly but many hundreds more through the content on their YouTube channel.

"WOW! WOW!! The songs, the signing, the sensitivity...what an afternoon. We signed (and sang quietly) along for hours. It made our day and made us feel that we were part of something again."
- **Parent of a disabled young person (The Music Works)**

TMW Radio was launched during the pandemic, aimed at the disabled community, and it was an instant success. It built an online community, especially for those that found it difficult to interact with Music Works physically on a regular basis. The weekly radio show engaged with over 100 regular audience members and was an important part of the studio hub.

For **Cinderford Artspace**, as with other partners, Covid-19 meant cancelling group/face-to-face sessions, however the mindSCAPE team continued to support participants during lockdowns, over the phone, on Facebook or over digital platforms. As lockdown rules adjusted **Artspace** was able to explore running face-to-face courses and workshops both in-house and as outreach, as well as online courses and a trial hybrid delivery course, giving participants the all-important choice of how they engage.

Art Shape and **Cinderford Artspace** offered a virtual circus project early in 2020 at the beginning of lockdown for young people with long term health conditions (specifically diabetes and epilepsy - the CCG commissioned AoP programme). A whole programme of different workshops, circus, dance, mask making, animation and singing were offered on Zoom between April and June 2020.

Each young person was allocated their own artist mentor to help them develop their interests and creative goals towards creating their own act. Videos, demonstrations and activities were uploaded onto Facebook and Padlet to support the programme. Both organisations did some one-to-one sessions and in addition **Artspace** lent out circus equipment to children and young people.

At the end of the programme on June 26th there was an online performance for all the family.

*"We would like to thank you and **Art Shape** / **ArtSpace** too. X cannot believe she was brave enough to do the performance. What a difference you've made to our little girl."* - **Feedback from parent from a one-to-one session as part of the Virtual Circus**

"X thoroughly enjoyed the online sessions. Initially she was very shy and not confident but got to look forward to being with her friends and the Artspace/Art Shape team."
- **Parent of participating young person**

"The camaraderie of the children in the group (particularly on the day when she had a confidence wobble) was very warming and instilled her with confidence."

"Just want to say thank you so much for arranging tonight's performance, he had a fab time and it has really given him a boost!" - **Grandparent of participating young person**



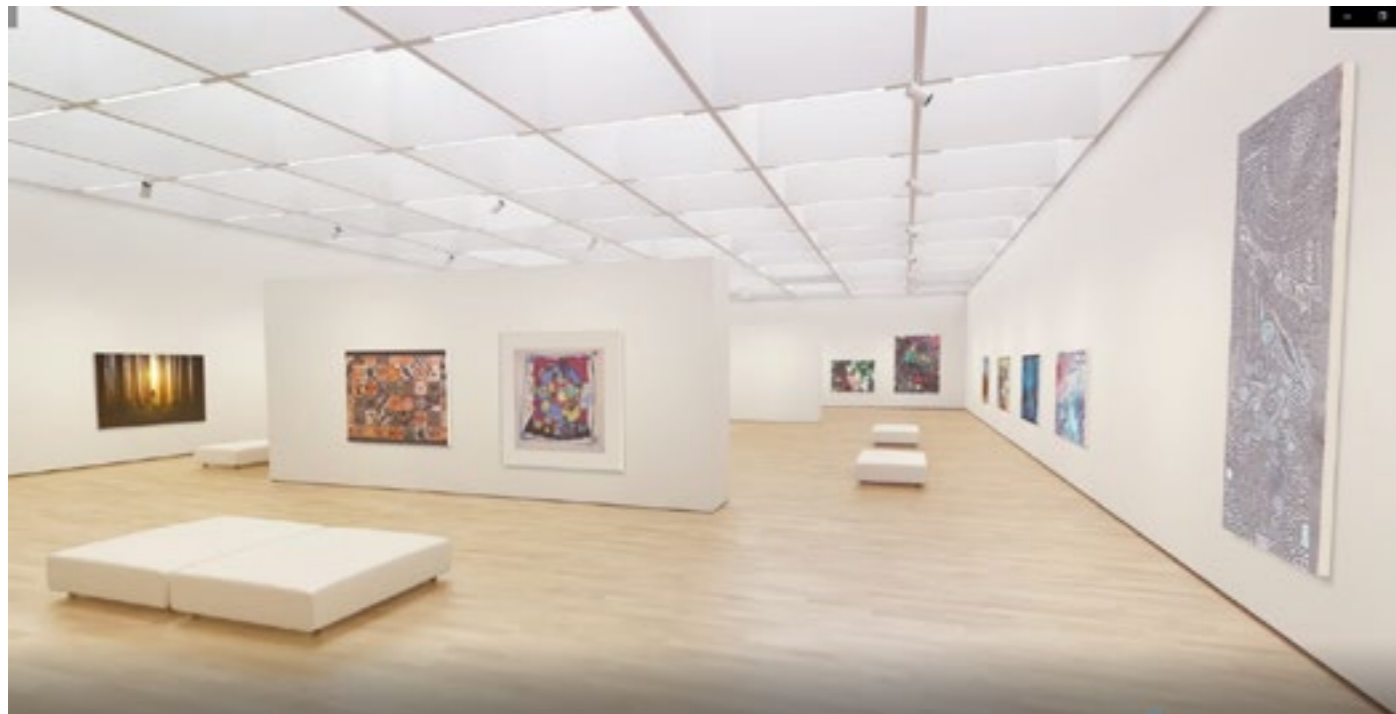
Circus summer camps young people with and without long term health conditions

Home is where the ART is: Cinderford Artspace, Creativity in Lockdown, Project and Exhibition

Artspace's *Home is Where the ART is* project was funded by Arts Council England as part of their national *Celebrating Age* programme. The project, which engaged 231 people, was designed to boost well-being, reduce isolation and promote and celebrate all forms of creative expression during the Covid-19 pandemic, by people over the age of 50 living in the Forest of Dean. The project enabled 5 'Arts Mentors' to empower 180 older people to participate in creative activity and produce artwork for a digital exhibition and online celebration event. **Artspace** ran 18 community Zoom workshops (textiles, mixed media, print-making, creative writing and dance) and engaged people living with dementia and learning difficulties in partnership with local care homes and day centres. They also delivered some socially distanced aerial hammock workshops, performances from which would feature as part of the exhibition.

The artwork created by participants was digitised and made into a 'virtual gallery' and was made accessible via a celebratory Zoom event on 28th May 2021. The online audience experienced the sensation of 'walking through' the exhibition - as if in a real gallery space. The event also showcased commissioned performances by older artists (poetry, aerial, guitar playing and singing) and short films about the creative practices of the Arts Mentors. The event was so popular that they filled their virtual 'Zoom room' to the rafters! 140 people attended throughout the evening.

(the above is an excerpt from Cinderford Artspace's Annual Report 2021)



Home is Where the Art Is virtual gallery images



Benefits and challenges of the online/remote experience

Most people that struggle with travel/transport or who have health conditions which mean in-person experiences present more barriers to overcome, found the effectiveness and accessibility of online sessions enhanced their experience. They were able to engage regularly without added stressors of getting to sessions, or having to manage their conditions whilst away from home.

We collected feedback from individuals who had previously found face-to-face difficult to attend:

"...it has had many advantages, for people like me in pain, it made it easier to leave a session and return without embarrassment or explanation. There is no issue regarding the time and effort involving travel, it is more relaxing." - **Artlift Chronic Pain participant**

"As I live alone, I sometimes panic because I have no family near me in Gloucester. I have been in isolation since 7 March and it looks as if we will all be fastened in for the foreseeable future. The one highlight is our Wednesday BISO Zoom session where we exercise and sing. It is lovely to learn new songs which also help my breathing and being in a group lessens the feeling of isolation."

- **BISO participant**

Some participants valued feeling safe as well as the flexibility:

"I can come now even though I'm tired" **Creative Health participant**

"I find it easier to engage and feel safer being in my own home. I enjoy being able to see and talk to everyone rather than just those next to me in a room"

- **Creative Health participant**

"As someone who suffers with Agoraphobia/Social anxiety the accessibility of Zoom was paramount. Yes, sometimes there were technical issues, no internet connection on my end for example, sound problems or video problems, but without this platform I would never have been able to join the Art course, so I accepted the challenges and continued with it."

- **Creative Health participant**

"My home is on the other side of the county and there is no way I could have travelled to and from the venue for all of the courses. I have to take two buses each way and a travelling time of four hours is another reason for non-attendance with my physical and mental health conditions. Therefore, I have benefited greatly with the Zoom courses."

- **Creative Health participant**

"I think continuing with the option of having it virtual would benefit a lot of people who would struggle to get to the venue/feel uncomfortable around lots of people/be creative in a space with others."

- **Creative Health participant**

"It's a very good way of learning, sometimes I'm not always well, so on occasions I haven't been able to attend classes. This way I can." - **Artspace participant**

"The weekly phone call is good, anything techie is a challenge but I learned a lot so big plus for me"

- **Artspace participant**

"I downloaded Zoom at the start of the lockdown, but didn't really want to use it, as I just didn't feel comfortable. The thought of trying to learn something, and speak over an internet connection scared me! But I have to say that, once I eventually got up and running with Zoom, I really enjoyed the course."

- **Artspace participant**

"Zoom worked a treat for us, it was easy for X to use and good to see all of the other participants"

- **Parent of participating young person**

Two individuals had been isolated for a long time before Covid, however they had found the online provision a game changer:

"I'd really like to give some feedback as this course has made the world of difference to me. It's the first thing I have been able to be part of in the last 8 years whilst being mainly housebound and with cognitive and communication difficulties. I have looked for art courses or programmes that would be possible for me to join either locally or online, but with little success. This has been the best of both

- local and online"

- **Art Bridge participant**

"I have been bed-bound for 15 years and I have had very little social interaction with anybody. This has allowed me to interact with the outside world again and would not have been possible if it had not been offered through Zoom. There has been no way that I can physically get to an art class so this course of giving me the opportunity to learn art again, at a pace that suits me."

- **Artspace participant**

The accessibility of online delivery was also noted by Creative health practitioners delivering the sessions:

"Personally, I have really enjoyed running Zoom Artlift sessions. I've had to modify my practice a little, and it has taken up more time because of phone calls to participants and extra assistance, but this has been more than justified by the possibilities for learning and for interacting with people who may not normally have joined Artlift sessions."

- **Artlift Creative Health Artist**

For some the face-to-face experiences proved harder to replicate online, however they still found them beneficial for staying connected, feeling less isolated and nurturing wellbeing.

"It has worked online even though it would have been better to be able to do this in person but having being able to still participate during the pandemic has been really helpful."

- **Creative Health participant**

For others digital inequalities and anxieties were a disabling barrier. Some individuals struggled with being on screen, voicing anxieties around their face or body being seen, sometimes this could be alleviated by using voice-only technology. We designed ways around this to ensure those unable, or not wishing to access online sessions, could engage remotely, in a meaningful way that was easy, and worked for them.

Artlift for example consulted with individuals referred to their courses, offering them choices whether to take part via telephone/post, to attend safely socially distanced outdoor activities, or to wait until in-person sessions resumed. **Mindsong** gained permission for socially distanced practice early on, also making DVD's and offering telephone support. Other providers were able to safely offer socially distanced in-person sessions outside over the summer when the rule of six came in.

"When able, we provided opportunities for young people to re-meet, chat, just be kids, sit on logs together and get muddy." **Cinderford Artspace**



Artspace summer camp & **Art Shape** / **Artspace** circus skills

The Music Works were working with many disabled young people who were having to have shield throughout the pandemic and were cut off from their normal communication channels, with digital modes such as Zoom not always being possible for them due to the nature of their disabilities.

Alongside this they noticed young people living in low-income families were being prevented from taking part because of lack of access to laptops. As we've seen, to combat some of these barriers **The Music Works** launched a lockdown website, offered free online music mentoring sessions for young people in challenging circumstances, produced online resources, started a radio station, ran online festivals and gigs, created a mass ensemble choir to write and perform a song to say thank you to frontline workers:

Every Rainbow Drawn was a song written by 12 young people and performed virtually by 77 young people who wanted to thank the front-line workers. With over 20,000 views, it raised over £500 for the local hospital charity. [Click here to view.](#)

"No-one else would come in... [the therapist] came and sat in the doorway"
- **Family carer, Music Therapy at Home**

"By September 2020 we were able to go into peoples' homes in PPE, following strict guidelines to reduce risk of transmission. We continued to provide Music Therapy in these three formats (indoors, outdoors and online) throughout the lockdowns, and during this time worked with 81 different families in this way." **Mindsong**



Staff in PPE and **Mindsong** outdoor music session

"We wanted to say a huge thank you for the art packs you delivered today. The kids were SO EXCITED to receive them (and I think their classmates were quite jealous!)"
- **Teacher of Children & Young People St Whites School**

Combatting isolation and lifting low mood and anxiety

"With increased isolation and loneliness experienced by our clients, it was particularly important to ensure this service continued." **Mindsong**



Artist: Carole Goodhall Communities Together (watercolour and ink submitted to **Artspace's** gallery)

'During that first month, the equivalent of 7.4 million people said their wellbeing was affected through feeling lonely.' (1)

Office of National Statistics figures can tell us that 2.6 million adults (5%) of the British population experienced loneliness during the first months of isolation. Human contact, or lack of it, during lockdowns and shielding was a key driver in keeping our services easily accessible.

To Support mental health during/due to Covid-19 became one of the primary reasons people were being referred to creative health services alongside:

Reduction of stress/anxiety/depression and Improving overall wellbeing.

The Government's key messaging around **stay home - protect the NHS - save lives** meant many people were not contacting their GP practice in the way they may have done pre Covid-19. Combined with no face-to-face appointments, and many hospital staff being redeployed to support the ongoing pandemic response, this directly impacted upon our referral numbers at the start of the first lockdown. Referrals did pick up again as lockdown became embedded, largely through Social Prescribers.

Artlift monitored the impact around the reduction in referrals and found:

Although we had far fewer referrals to all programmes (a decrease of 62.5% from the previous year), we actually only experienced 13.2% fewer sessions being taken up overall compared to the previous year. Over half (55.4%) of individuals attended 75% or more of their course which is a much higher completion rate overall, in comparison to completion rates in previous years.

- **2020-21 Artlift Mental Health Evaluation report**

Across the providers we have amassed many rich quotes from individuals attending our courses, their collective voice tells us the important difference taking part in the arts made in combatting isolation, and lifting low mood and anxiety during lockdown. The following quotes are all from individuals that accessed Creative Health services in Gloucestershire during the lockdown periods:

"I have enjoyed the group session in extremely difficult times. My loneliness is no longer such an issue." - **Creative Health participant**

"To have others to talk to in the same situation has been such a help as it was a lonely journey to start with." - **Long Covid Support Group Participant**

"It was the first positive response from an organisation – others withdrew due to Covid".
- **Family carer, Music Therapy at Home**

"It's helped me to feel like I've achieved something, instead of feeling so worthless all the time."
- **Artlift participant**

"I've explored new things and gained in confidence. It was a creative outlet for stress especially regarding lockdown." - **Creative Health participant**

"The course is really helping me. It gives me something to look forward to, it's giving me confidence to step out of my comfort zone and try something new"
- **Shielding Creative Health participant**

"The courses offered through Art Shape and the time spent at Westonbirt have been a lifeline for me. I wonder if my sanity would have remained as intact as it was without it."
- **Art Shape participant**

"I have loved the weekly contact with (the artist) and others on the course - so important during lockdown and self-isolation" - **Artlift participant**

"If we hadn't had the support from The Music Works, I think we would have been in exactly the same positions with X's anxiety, in fact it would have got worse and she wouldn't have been going to school still. As it is she now is feeling more confident and not feeling sick before going into school." - **Parent whose child was referred to The Music Works**

"Really nice seeing other people's work, very thought provoking and inspiring."
Artspace participant

"It has improved my mental health. I feel lucky to have been given the opportunity during the pandemic" - **Creative Health participant**

"I found that having Artlift to do even though it is online did help mentally especially during this pandemic." - **Artlift participant**



"It has been easy to be isolated doubly, once because of cancer and again due to the pandemic, having a regular social date in the calendar broke that isolation positively. Positively because, it is a positive space with positive creative outcomes." - **Creative Health participant**

"The Zoom courses have helped me feel less alone and isolated during these difficult times."
- **Artspace / Art shape participant**

"Seeing everyone's work, and how they coped with the 'homework' really helped. And the instructions were very clear and easy to follow. It helped to be able to ask questions too."
- **Artspace participant**

"Just wanted to thank you for the Easter card and recording which as usual we are playing and enjoying time and time over. Each time is a fresh experience for mum. Music and particularly Mindsong is becoming ever more important to her now as the only activity she seems to enjoy and is responding to as everything else is becoming too difficult. Can't thank you enough!"
- **Mindsong Testimonial from a relative**

Again drawing upon **Artlift** data collected from Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) during 2020-2021 we saw that 82% of participants reported a significant improvement in their mental wellbeing upon completing a course.

Alongside this, reviews of 2020-21 WEMWBS, Generalised Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD) and Personal Health Questionnaires (PHQ) data did show a decline in the severity of anxiety and depression, however unsurprisingly people reported having these feelings more frequently.

"It gives me social contact and focus". - **Creative Health participant**

"The feeling that 'I mattered' for the first time - that meant so much – it really carried me through those difficult times." - **Family carer, Music Therapy at Home (Mindsong)**

"As I live alone, I sometimes panic because I have no family near me in Gloucester. I have been in isolation since 7 March and it looks as if we will all be fastened in for the foreseeable future. The one highlight is our Wednesday BISO session where we exercise and sing."
- **Mindsong BISO participant**

The qualitative and quantitative data the providers collected serves to highlight the importance of engaging in accessible creative activities during times of crisis. In their own words, individuals have told us the regular creative sessions offered a *lifeline* and *focus*, a sense of *achievement*, improved *confidence* and *inclusion*.

Providing opportunities to connect socially with others through the arts at a time of significant isolation for many individuals, helped them to feel *less alone and isolated*, *lessened stress*, and gave a true sense of belonging. Creativity and social contact helped people to manage and protect their mental health, crucially it made them feel cared for and that they *mattered*.



Artist experience

"You, the rest of the staff there and in many other charities are the unsung heroes of this pandemic, keeping people's mental, emotional and spiritual health going despite social isolation.

Thank you all so much." **Art Shape participant**

"I can't begin to express my gratitude to you all. You are all doing a fantastic job despite the difficult circumstances you are all in..." **Creative Health participant**

Pre-pandemic all of the consortium partners' **Creative Health** sessions were delivered in face-to-face settings. Meaning that for all of our artist practitioners this was the first time they had delivered a session virtually online/remotely. Delivery was either over Zoom, Microsoft Teams, telephone, postal or doorstep drops, or email. For some (such as **Mindsong's** experience described in the Benefits and challenges of the online/remote experience section), with careful planning and gaining appropriate permissions they were eventually able to offer socially distanced, safe, face-to-face sessions.

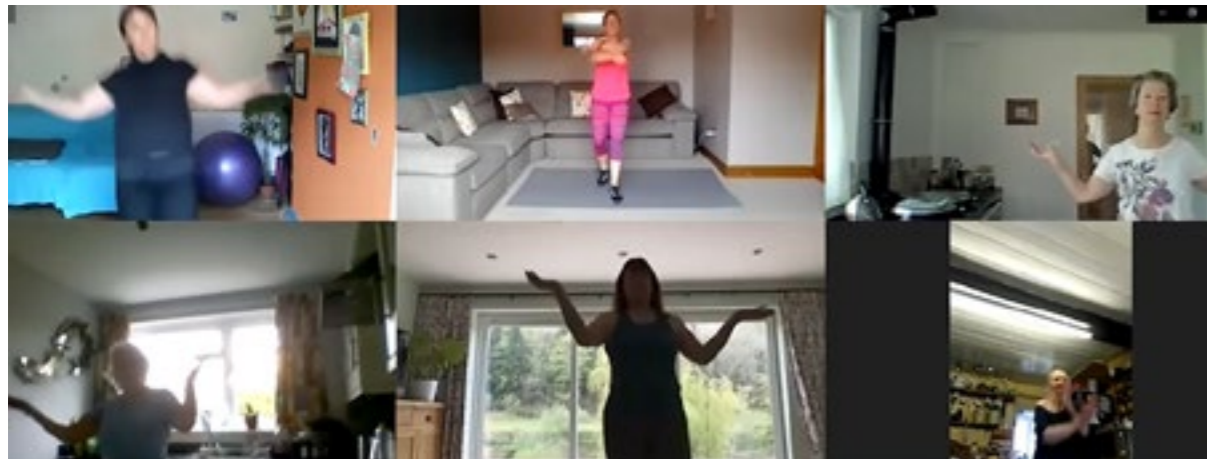
The following excerpts are reflections from our delivering artists regarding their lockdown delivery experiences. Some kept reflective diaries as to how this was unfolding, and documented their observations during these remote delivery sessions.

Taken from **Artlift** artist's weekly reflections:

About participants engaging in postal / telephone support

"Generally things are going well, with a core of people regularly sending stuff in are enjoying it, it is giving them some defined creative space and something specific to look forward to each week; the combination of the regular phone chat and feedback, and the actual making work/writing is a real support.

Some have not written before and are enjoying finding what they can do and it is giving them a focus."



Artspace Zoom session 2020

"One has decided to write about their life in a chapter each week. It has given them a real focus; this came out of a chat when they mentioned an escapade from childhood and I suggested it would make a good story...we are two chapters in now."

"There is one person who is too anxious to produce any art as yet, but values the phone contact and will stay open to creating something when she has some better days."

About participants engaging in online group sessions

"Session went well and the structure seemed to flow. Was good to do the warm ups. They found these fun and led to interesting chat about Cubist approach/Picasso etc."

"Nothing felt tricky. I did mention that we can chat during the art making, re-advised that they can choose to mute themselves or silence their audio."

"The group is gelling really nicely. We all have a check in which everybody has been happy to participate in so far. An option to check out after the session is open to all. This opportunity for people to share highlights or headlines from their week is a good chance for people to get to know each other, despite being online."

"Some individuals were happy to share and show techniques during the session – it was great to let them take the lead in this new way of working!"

"Positive confirmations about what people had been making, new discoveries and skills being shared...a sense of collective learning, even though some may have seemed further on than others in terms of what they'd 'achieved', I ensured that working at your own pace (due to other commitments, be it work or family) is absolutely fine".

"Allow flexibility in terms of when to move on to the next task by tailoring support and ideas to each individual so they each may have a slightly different objective..."

"A lot of focus and people told me it was very relaxing. People talked a little about finding it difficult to let others see them, for different reasons, shared a lot about their drawings and how they found it, some were having trouble with their hands/bodies".

Learning from artist's diaries/reflective logs

"My first online delivery experience. I felt it went well, and due to having all relevant materials and examples ready and to hand, plus an itinerary for the Zoom session, this helped it to run smoothly. I know from experience that the first session of a term can be very nerve wracking for many participants.

A familiar look of reservation and shyness was present in some. Others appeared more relaxed and jovial. I think the balance of practical artist led activity and group sharing is working really well. Although we are working remotely from one another, the equality and unification that Zoom engenders is working as a real positive for group dynamics."

"The practical element is less hands on than we would achieve in a face to face setting, with less opportunity for me to give individual tuition, but it is as good as we can get during this restricted access time. The balance of home led individual work against that done within the session, is far greater, which helps build independence and resilience in being able to work self-sufficiently in move on."

"I felt it was challenging to pitch my session to a screen, where the feedback relies on my ability to look at 12 little boxes and try to keep everyone feeling included. My ability to use body language and movement was far more restricted than in a normal face to face situation."

"Participants now show a sense of looking forward to the session, pleasure in being together, support for each other, friendliness, welcoming, kindness. Calm and peace as they make alongside each other, a contentment at being there."

"Everyone was happy and able to introduce themselves to the group, individuals shared artwork, were engaged and did offer comments and questions. All liked having positive feedback, it spurred them on."

"It can be a bit tricky in that participants are so engrossed at times that they are not really engaging with each other much still. I am trying to invite them to talk more, asking a few questions."

Reflective diary from **Artlift** artist facilitator

Creative writing is probably the easiest art form for online sessions, because participants need only pen and paper, and no close up physical demonstrations. I'm quite comfortable with technology, so I wasn't particularly worried about using a new platform. After a bit of reading and a quick trial session I felt reasonably confident that it would be ok – as long as the participants understood that it was a bit of an experiment for all of us! I was more concerned that the technology might appear to be an obstacle for the participants. In the event, most participants had little or no difficulty in using Zoom. Some struggled with connectivity or broadband issues, and one or two had to have an hour or two of individual coaching. Occasionally I lost all sound, but I found out how to fix this and it was never a significant problem.

When it came to the first Zoom session, we all took to it very readily – within half an hour, it felt as if we were all in a room together. Online sessions have a number of advantages, including:



- Some participants would find it challenging and in some cases impossible to attend real-life sessions, either because of physical problems or because their anxiety would not allow them to enter a room full of strangers.
- Some participants find the journey to real-life sessions very stressful, and arrive with heightened anxiety. Although everyone was nervous to start with, as is always the case with first sessions, it didn't take long before everyone was more relaxed. We were at home, and we could all wear our slippers!
- Participants can choose whether to be visible and/or audible.
- Participants who are hard of hearing can see everyone and use facial cues to help; this often isn't possible when sitting round a table.

Of course, there are some disadvantages:

- Technical difficulties.
- Interruptions – we had children, dogs that needed to be taken out, phone calls, partners, building works and a very noisy parrot. (But having a dog or cat to stroke during a session can be very soothing.)
- Lack of nuance. It's not so easy to deal with particular needs or difficult situations.
- The absence of the comfort of physical proximity.
- Distraction caused by people having conversations while others are working quietly – it seems much easier to do this in a less distracting way in real life.
- Sometimes people leave in the middle of a session, and this can be a concern for the facilitator. Now we ask participants to let us know as soon as possible that they are ok, when they have to leave for any reason, and they all understand the reason for this.
- When screen sharing, e.g. for a group activity when I'm recording comments on a document, it's not possible to see who is contributing. This makes it more difficult to ensure that everyone is included.
- Zoom moves people around on the screen!
- Some people don't have the infrastructure or confidence with technology to join online sessions.
- Zoom sessions can be tiring, and especially difficult for people who need to move regularly. Although I said it was fine to move around, people are reluctant to do this, so I've started having two short official breaks in a 2-hour session.

Overall, I think the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, and the fact is that at the moment it's a choice between online sessions or none at all.

The increased accessibility for many people means that online sessions work, the catchment area can be so much greater, and it's simpler for people with chronic pain or with mobility issues, because it takes away the difficulties in getting to venues. The pandemic is always in the background of the sessions, but rarely comes to the surface during them. Most participants are glad of a couple of hours' escape from what's going on around them. On the few occasions when group activities have led to writing about the pandemic, several participants said that it had been helpful to look at it in a different way.

As we've seen in previous sections in this paper (*Benefits and challenges of the online/remote experience section*) the online experience provided far greater accessibility for some of our participants, but we know it didn't come without its challenges. For our artists we knew it was paramount to ensure they had sufficient support in place, their wellbeing was also being affected by the instability of living in the midst of a pandemic and lockdown situation.

Delivering remotely during a lockdown situation is tiring, a new way of working comes with a new framework regarding learning and challenges, such as being aware of confidentiality, lone working and boundaries in a home setting. We found sharing experiences, resources and practicalities across our organisations invaluable, offering regular supervision, peer support sessions, mentoring and buddying was vital in supporting our artists and other staff members. **Artlift** funded wellbeing opportunities for their artists to encourage and support their mental wellbeing.

Mindsong sum up how important team support was during this time:

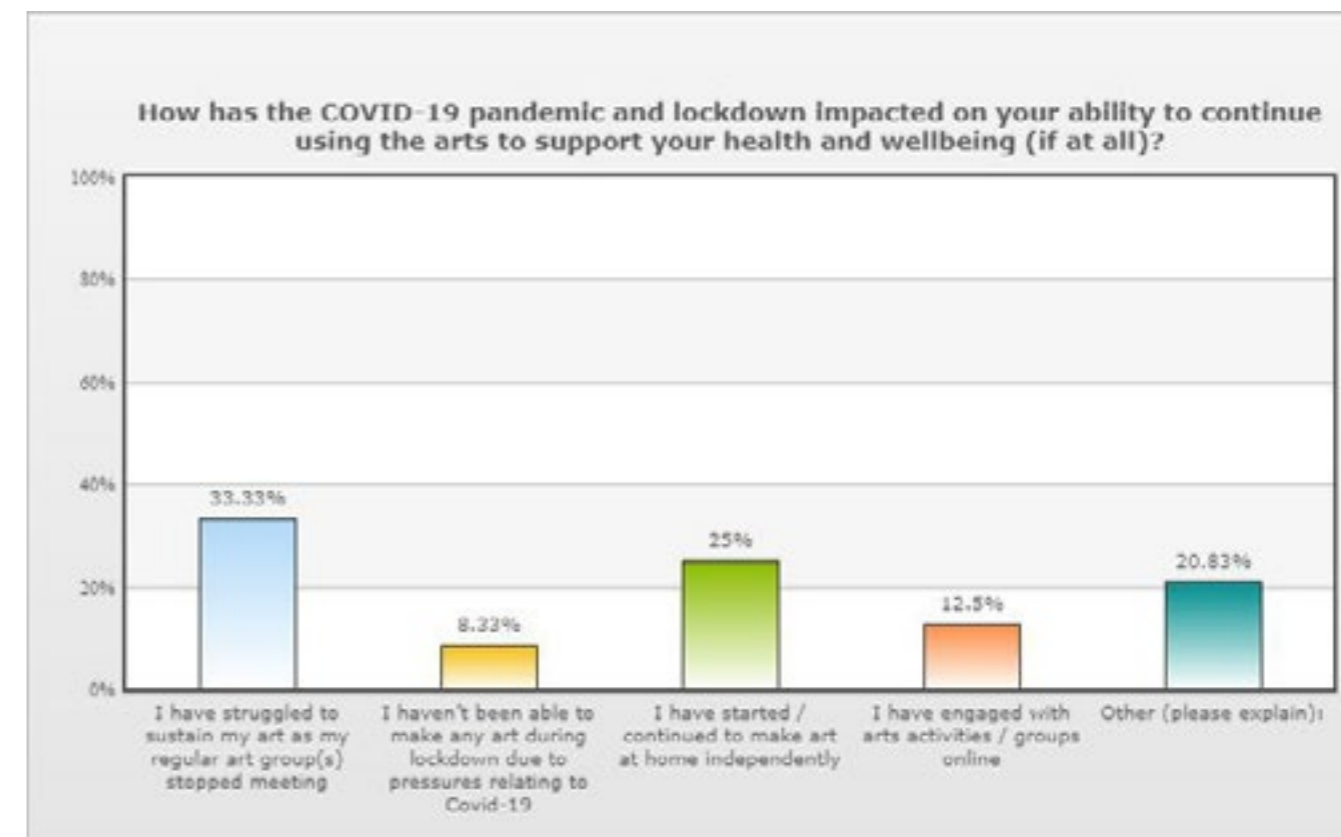
"We took great pains to support each other as a team, to take the time to discuss what we were going through personally as well as professionally. We believe that it would be a mistake to underestimate the effects of the pandemic not only on ourselves but on our clients and participants."



The Creative Process

"Because people are doing the arts activities in their own homes, they are more likely to see them as part of normal life, and to continue outside the sessions; arts activities are not something only done at a particular venue." – **Creative Health Artist**

"During lockdown it's been good socially, emotionally and psychologically to engage with others particularly in the creative process." – **Creative Health participant**



Artlift Covid 19 impact graph

As soon as the first lockdown was announced, many of our participant's regular community activities, classes and groups stopped, we became some of the sole creative health resources out there.

The variety of creative processes the Consortium partners provide are the all-important vehicles for promoting wellbeing and social connectedness, whilst supporting individuals to learn to manage their own health needs.

By maintaining access to these creative opportunities, individuals could still cultivate social relationships, learn new skills, have access to resources and feel part of the community they live in. We were able to nurture and sustain many of the improved health outcomes access to the arts provides, assisting people in having a better quality of life during lockdown or shielding.

"I have found the creative activities great in terms of mindful focus and positively achieving a creative outcome. The action of choosing/creating a design, transposing it onto lino then marking and cutting the shape/design, and finally printing has been absorbing, satisfying and really positive in terms of my health and wellbeing." - **Artlift participant**

"It's lovely to have the time to create art and connect my body, creativity and spirituality. It helps with my depression, it's something to look forward to as it's satisfying and something I enjoy". - **Creative Health participant**

"I was delighted that my husband actually picked up a paint brush and involved himself in the activity. He settled to paint for a good hour. I know it is very simple but to see him involved and doing something for himself without my help is greatly rewarding" - **Partner of Art Shape Create and Connect participant.**

"It's a fulfilling part of my life, it gets my mind on something else and takes it off other stuff that's going on. It really makes a difference to me". **Creative Health participant**

"It helps me engage with other people" **Creative Health participant**

"I find it relaxing and I'm becoming more confident" **Creative Health participant**

"*Art Shape* has been a blessing for me. An access to my creative being, even when times are hard." **Art Shape participant**

"For some of our clients, we were the only service providing in-person visits for quite some time." **Mindsong**



The Music Works supported the children and young people they were working with in schools to create a series of videos. To access them follow the YouTube links below:

Trailbazer transitions, Schools:

St Whites: [Click to view](#)

Drybrook: [Click to view](#)

Yorkley: [Click to view](#)

Belmont: [Click to view](#)

Lydbrook: [Click to view](#)

Long term conditions:

Llahnie case study: [Click to view](#)

Harry's song: [Click to view](#)

Trailbazer transitions 'Key Changes' 1:1

Nihia's case study: [Click to view](#)

Mindsong worked closely with their volunteer team on 'Operation Lovebomb' where they connected with residents and staff in Care Homes. Tailor-made videos were created for individual homes with favourite songs and personal messages for residents such as '*Christine, I know you love Catch a Falling Star*' meaning residents could hear their names and know they were remembered.

Their volunteer team sent out seasonal and monthly videos to over 50 of the care homes they work with, containing specially crafted sing together sessions, sung low and slow, with a little bit of chat, to try and emulate an in-person session, and also to bring something of what was going on in the outside world, into the care home community.

[Here is an example of an Easter/Spring video sent out in 2021](#)

Mindsong also [filmed a Music Therapy at Home Case Study which you can view here](#)

Artlift: [Flourish course short film](#)

Reach of our Creative Health provision

We know we had a wide reach during the lockdown periods. Whilst it isn't possible to put an exact figure on the number of people as families were getting involved, friends were meeting online and splinter Zoom, Facebook and WhatsApp groups were formed, all doing creative activities together, and spreading much wider than Gloucestershire including overseas.

The Music Works engaged with 1,724 young people (1,296 young people as participants and 428 through events), with a particular focus on those most impacted by Covid-19.

Their cohort included:

- *Young offenders – most of whom have chaotic home lives, therefore lockdown was very challenging for them.*
- *Young people with mental health difficulties – feedback from them revealed how Covid-19 triggered or exacerbated mental health problems.*
- *Young people with respiratory illness including pneumonia, asthma, acute bronchitis and cystic fibrosis– as well as being a vulnerable group for Covid-19, this group of young people also felt particularly anxious and limited.*

As a consortium we are able to track 5,196 individual participants over all our Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and wider funded programmes. **This equates to our 5 organisations reaching 0.82% of Gloucestershire's entire population through creative health (2).** To date 3,169 CCG funded **Creative Health** sessions alone were attended within the time period. Other funded programmes also yielded equally high attendance and retention of places.

Cinderford Artspace moved all of their provision to distance learning during their summer 2020 term, and found that 36% of their participants were completely new to arts courses.

Gloucestershire's outcomes chime with national findings.

"...in the first UK lockdown, the online sales of a large arts and crafts retailer increased by 200%.⁶ Additionally, 22% of people reported spending more time on home-based arts activities during the first UK lockdown, and 52% of these people maintained or increased these levels of arts engagement 3 months later."⁽³⁾

Who was missing?

Taken from Artliff's evaluation figures - we experienced some changes in who was accessing/level of uptake to our courses.

- *People identifying as having a disability dropped by 8.1% from the previous year*
- *Gender figures held fast this year with 0.1% more women than the previous year, again just over 5 times more women were referred than men, so we are still seeing fewer male referrals*
- *Those who considered themselves to have caring responsibilities dropped by nearly half (8.4%) and we saw less people with children engaging, however anecdotally we worked with more single parents.*
- *1 in 7 participants identified as LGBTQIA this year compared to 1 in 3 last year*
- *We saw fewer younger participants (19 and under), only making up 3.7%, the age brackets of 20-29 (19.8%), 30-39 (18.2%) and 40-49 (19.8%) were all evenly split. Individuals aged 50-59 (23%) dropped slightly by approximately 3%. For the first time in five years we saw a sharp decline in the over 60s age bracket (from 28% in 2019 to 15% in 2020-21), this is significant as this is usually our largest cohort of individuals.*
- *Crucially we saw some big changes in participant's employment status this year, those referred in full-time employment doubled, those that are unemployed fell by 5%, and those that were retired dropped by 22.1%.*
- *Whilst 7.1% of participants identified as mixed, white other, and Chinese, no individuals identified as black this is a big drop from the previous year when 1 in 6 of our participants identified as black or Asian.*

Our findings are in line with inequalities experienced by both older and ethnic minority groups during the pandemic:

Age UK's February 2021 study: Impact of Covid-19 on older people's mental and physical health: one year on

"43% of older people (around 6.9 million) said they were feeling less motivated do the things they enjoy since the start of the pandemic".⁽⁴⁾

"...negative experiences within a culturally insensitive healthcare service may create barriers, inhibit access to healthcare, and influence healthcare seeking behaviours among ethnic minority groups."⁽⁵⁾

Cinderford Artspace reviewed who they didn't manage to reach or who experienced limited access to creative engagement during lockdown and the possible barriers to this:

Digital Exclusion of Adults

- Artspace worked online with adults with learning difficulties living in supporting living.

However, some care settings did not have the staffing abilities or capacity to enable residents to participate.

- Working online with older people living in residential care homes (in 2 care homes).

However, the majority of care homes were simply unable to participate during the pandemic - due to their lack of staff/resources and the extreme pressures they were under. In addition, some activity co-ordinators were simply not used to using tech/zoom - or had no access to laptops/tablets at that time.

- **Working with older people living independently in the community.** The Forest of Dean is extremely rural in some areas meaning there were many individuals that Artspace was unable to reach, those who had no internet connection, no experience with technology, no equipment. Some of the older people they were working with who did have access to IT, struggled to engage because of hearing, vision or cognitive problems.

In terms of other individuals Artspace faced challenges to reach, their 'open/regular' visual youth arts classes that went online only ran for 1 term as uptake was very low across both the primary school age groups and secondary school age groups, with uptake being particularly low with secondary aged children, they found they didn't have enough individuals signed up to enable them to run.

It may well be the reason for the low uptake was that the children were fed up with being online for their school work all day and didn't want to do more online activity after school. Another possible reason may be that some families may also have lacked access to ICT (schools reported that they lent out a lot of laptops through lockdown to enable children to access online learning, but were unable to provide for all children).

As we can see, there are some similarities in both Artlift and Artspace's experiences of barriers to engagement regarding both younger and older individuals engaging less.

Initially we were working in a more reactionary way to keep services running and facilitate engagement quickly. As lockdown progressed consortium partners were able to address access to engagement in a more resourceful way, addressing barriers such as digital inequalities.

Digital platforms such as Zoom became more commonplace (Artlift had volunteers who could offer user friendly set up and navigation sessions to participants who were anxious about using Zoom, prior to them joining a session).

As discussed in previous sections of this paper outdoors socially distanced face-to-face opportunities increased and all partners were able facilitate engagement in a more proactive way.

Conclusion

"...it really helps 1 million%" Creative Health participant

"It's absolutely mind-blowing – I've never seen such a turnaround in a person before. From being really down when [the therapist] arrives, Mum will start to hum along with the song then gradually sing a word or two. By the end of the first song she'll have a massive grin." - Family carer, Music Therapy at Home

"When mental and physical health come together in the middle of a pandemic, it is hard to have courage to see what you need and what you don't. I have been able to take steps to improve my life because I attend the course, I simply cannot say enough good things about it" - Artlift participant.

A blog posting published on 18/06/2020 on The Health Foundation website stated:

"More than two-thirds of adults in the UK (69%) report feeling somewhat or very worried about the effect COVID-19 is having on their life."(6)

The pandemic not only highlighted existing inequalities, but spotlighted the even greater stress experienced by the already marginalised communities we work with. Our consortium gathered considerable evidence demonstrating the benefits and value of individual, and shared, creative experiences. Through the services we provided, people developed coping and self-management skills and opportunities to find purpose. People discovered that engaging in creative activities decreased their stress and countered the profound social isolation and fragmentation so many people experienced, by increasing connectivity with others.

The University College London paper 'The Role of the Arts during the COVID-19 Pandemic' asserts:

"The importance of the arts in supporting health and wellbeing has emerged particularly strongly during the pandemic, as mental health has been so adversely affected, and as other coping strategies such as social support, social interactions and healthcare services have been disrupted" (7).

The many examples consortium partners collected illustrate without a doubt that engaging in Creative Health activities substantially improved individuals and communities' overall quality of life during lockdowns. Gloucestershire Creative Health Consortium partners have worked in the Arts for Health arena for many years - whilst the pandemic and successive lockdowns presented new challenges and ways of working for us, our experience reinforced how powerful the arts are in maintaining, or recovering, the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities in 'normal' times but also in times of crisis.



Use of Terms

Arts on Prescription (AoP) - prescribed arts interventions to encourage people to self-manage their health and wellbeing, and increase social engagement.

Creative Health – a broad term used for creative opportunities for individuals and communities to improve health and well-being

CCG – Clinical Commissioning Group (now known as Integrated Care Board)

BISO – Breathe in Sing Out (Mindsong course)

Screening tools:

WEMWEBS - Warwick & Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale

GAD-7 - Generalised Anxiety Disorder questionnaire consisting of 7 questions

PHQ-9 - Patient Health Questionnaire consisting of 9 questions used for screening/measuring the severity of depression

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