

Case studies: How can the arts and creativity support people who are shielding or vulnerable during Covid-19?

Project: Art by Post

Organisation: Southbank Centre

Region: Greater London

‘I felt inspired by the ... I'm looking forward immensely to the next booklet coming and think it's a brilliant project’

Introduction

The Southbank Centre’s Art by Post scheme delivers a series of free drawing, poetry and craft activity booklets through the post to adults who are living with dementia, or with other long-term health conditions which mean they are isolating for long periods of time. The project is available across the UK and is particularly aimed at people who don’t have access to digital technologies.



The activity booklets are inspired by the Southbank Centre’s visual art, literature, poetry and archive collections, and are designed to keep minds active, helping individuals feel connected to others and improving their mental health and wellbeing.

People can choose to sign up to Art by Post themselves, or to refer someone they know and take part alongside them in a

supportive role, and we have seen referrals from family members, friends, neighbours, carers and health professionals as well as our network of partner organisations and Link Workers.

Participants are invited to share their artworks with us via freepost envelopes and these will form a special exhibition when the Southbank Centre reopens.

Image credit: Southbank Centre

Funders

Art by Post is supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

Who is it for?

Art by Post is designed for adults living with dementia and other chronic health conditions which mean they are likely to be isolated and social shielding for a long period of time. Many of the participants have memory loss and are living alone, and there are people taking part from a range of settings including care homes, supported living facilities, brain injury rehabilitation units and mental health support settings.

What outcomes were/are you aiming for? We hope that taking part in the poetry, drawing and craft activities will help to keep participants’ minds active, provide something to look

forward to and talk about with friends, family and carers, and boost their mental health and wellbeing. We also hope that taking part in the activities, perhaps supported by the person who referred them onto the scheme, and creating artworks alongside others will help participants feel more connected to the outside world, and reduce feelings of social isolation.

Our Creative Learning team is also supporting participants via phone calls and email, to listen to their poems, hear about their artworks and talk about how the activities have made them feel. We hope that these conversations, as well as the opportunity to share their artworks with us, help participants to feel a part of a wider community as well as closer to us at the Southbank Centre.

In the second phase of the project beginning in August/ September, our aim is to expand our understanding of mental health and wellbeing in relation to isolation and to raise awareness across arts organisations, health and social care professionals, and the creative community. We want to reflect and amplify creative expression from our participants and ensure their voices are heard, and explore how initiatives like Art by Post can bring connection, a sense of purpose and reduce isolation for communities as we adapt to coming out of lockdown and finding our place in a changed world.

Where is it happening?

People are taking part in Art by Post from across Britain, with participants from Aberdeen to Plymouth, and Anglesey to London, including many in our local community of Lambeth.

Are you working in partnership?

For the initial phase of Art by Post (the first four creative booklets) we worked with a network of local partners including Age UK Camden, Age UK Lambeth, Resonate Arts, Nightingale Hammerson and Coin Street Community Builders.

The National Academy of Social Prescribing, with whom the Southbank Centre has an existing partnership and who were due to move into our offices in March this year, have supported the project via their network of Link Workers, who have been working to identify people in their communities who could benefit from the scheme and making referrals.

During Phase 1, we received 125 applications from organisations across the UK to receive booklets on behalf of their service users/ patients/ participants, reaching over 1177 through the post and hundreds more through email.

We are currently working to establish further regional partnerships with both arts and charity sector organisations across the UK. These partners will assist with referrals and with distributing the booklets to their communities, and they will also support their local participants to engage more in the project, encouraging them to complete activities and send work back to us, as well as helping build their confidence.

We will also be working with some of the regional partner organisations to identify artists from their local areas that we could commission to design and curate the booklets, and we are exploring a potential collaboration with a partner to work with participants to co-create a booklet.

How many people took/are taking part?

Over 1,700 people are currently taking part in the first phase of Art by Post (four booklets over three months, from May - July). These are referrals made by organisations, self referrals, and referrals made by professionals, friends and family members. The current participants range from ages 14 to 103 with up to 80% of participants experiencing some memory loss. Participants can continue to sign up and referrals are continuing to be made for the project's second phase (beginning in August/September).

For how long has it been happening?

Art by Post was launched in April 2020, building on the Southbank Centre's existing (B)old programme of singing and creative writing workshops for people with dementia, which we ensured could continue remotely during lockdown.

Art by Post is an ongoing project, and we are currently planning future phases of the programme beginning this autumn.

What were/are the main outputs?

- Art by Post participants are provided with freepost envelopes and invited to share their poetry and artworks with us. These creations will form an exhibition when the Southbank Centre reopens, which we hope will give a platform and voice to a hidden community, inviting our audiences to reflect on the experience of social isolation that many people in society will be continuing to live with.
- Our ambition is for this exhibition to tour to other arts venues and community partners involved in the project, from HOME in Manchester to Age UK Camden's charity shop, as a way to bring the artworks to the communities who have created them, and hopefully create a sense of being part of a nationwide community for all the participants, supporters and referrers who have taken part.

Evaluation

We are in the process of developing a two-pronged evaluation of Phase 1, working closely with our partners to collect qualitative data through guided conversation phone calls and quantitative data through surveys, using wellbeing evaluation scales such as the PERMA model. In Phase 2 we aim to partner with a research team to monitor and evaluate the impact of the project on participants.

Feedback

We have had lots of poems and drawings returned to us by participants, and some have told us they have repeated the activities again and again, showing how much they have enjoyed them. Other participants have used the booklets as a prompt and have gone on to write more poems, beyond the activities we provided. We have also heard from people who are rediscovering their creativity, having not taken part in creative activities for many years.

One dementia charity has told us that the resources have provided a great opportunity to touch base physically with some of their most isolated people with dementia and their carers. We also heard that the booklets have given their participants a real sense of purpose and

excitement at the thought of possibly having their work displayed in an exhibition at the Southbank Centre.

We are also hearing that the act of receiving a creative provocation through the post causes ripples of positive effects for the rest of the day. One participant, aged 71, said 'I thought, shall I clean the bathroom or shall I write a poem?' before going on to share her poem with us as well as her daughter living abroad, who was encouraged to share a poem of her own. This was the first time she has written a poem in her adult life and she 'really enjoyed taking the time to do it'.

After taking part in Booklet 1, a participant said: "I really enjoyed reading the poem in the booklet and thought it was very good. The exercises were helpful although I must admit I struggled at first with writing poems with a given criteria, as my poetry is very subconsciously created. But once I had relaxed a creative flow emerged. I felt inspired by the subject as I love trees and live in the countryside, so trees are a big part of my day to day life, whether I'm admiring them, cutting grass around them or just simply walking underneath them. I'm looking forward immensely to the next booklet coming and think it's a brilliant project, take care."

If required, we could seek permission from a selection of our participants to see if they are interested in sharing their work to CHWA and more widely - currently we only have permission to share at the Southbank Centre as part of our exhibition.

What have been the challenges and successes for you?

- We have been successful in reaching our target audience of people who are vulnerable and isolated. For example, 20 care homes are taking part, up to 80% of participants are living with memory loss, and up to 89% are currently unable to leave their home due to social shielding or ongoing health conditions. We have also succeeded in our goal of reaching people that don't have access to the many of the digital arts programmes that are now on offer, as 77% of participants have chosen to receive the booklets via the post, rather than email.
- Through this project we have expanded our network of health and social care connections in a way that we wouldn't have done under normal circumstances, and we hope that building a network of regional arts and charity partners will help us to expand the reach of Art by Post in future phases.
- As Art by Post is a postal project, there are no geographical barriers to the artists we engage to design the booklets and activities, so we are able to commission artists who we would not normally have the opportunity to work with. Launching this project also allowed us to honour existing contracts with artists from before lockdown.
- Another positive outcome for our team has been developing our thorough and sensitive referral process, with three entry routes and the option to nominate a 'Supporter' to share their experiences with. This is a new process for accessing our Community and Wellbeing programmes and has provided a much deeper understanding of isolation and additional factors that impact our communities' wellbeing.
- In terms of challenges, having the Art by Post booklets printed and distributed has been an additional logistical challenge during lockdown.

Further information

The webpage can be found [here](#).

A blog on Art by Post is on the Arts Council England website [here](#).

A press release announcing the initial launch of the project can be found [here](#).

The Southbank Centre is a registered charity and the UK's largest arts centre, situated in the heart of London. It comprises the Royal Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room and Hayward Art Gallery as well as being home to the National Poetry Library, the Arts Council Collection of visual artwork, and eight Resident and Associate Orchestras.

We offer over 40% of our arts activities free of charge, and we deliver a year-round free public programme for our communities including for schools, families, the socially isolated, and for those affected by dementia, homelessness and addiction.

The Southbank Centre is a registered charity (No. 298909). The Southbank Centre directly employs over 450 people across a range of front of house, technical, administrative and curatorial/artistic roles.