

Case studies: How have culture and creativity been supporting people in health, care and other institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Project: A Future I Can Love

Organisation: Novus

Region: North East, Yorkshire, North West, Midlands, London and Wales

Designed for: People in the criminal justice system

Introduction

Novus delivers education, training and employment opportunities to men, women and young people in custody in England and Wales.

In 2020 Novus secured residency at Tate Modern for October 2020, as part of their work with Tate Exchange programme, using art as a platform for positive engagement, supporting rehabilitation. The project launch in March coincided with nationwide lockdown. Plans were adjusted to enable engagement despite restrictions, with Novus education teams supporting their learners remotely through in-cell learning packs.

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Titled ‘A Future I Can Love’, the cross-curriculum project has provided a point of focus and engagement for participants throughout the pandemic. Teams took the project forward dependent on local arrangements using approaches unique to their establishment and the learners they work with, to find innovative ways to engage them. Their personal responses to the theme have been varied including drawing, painting, poetry, short stories, models. The project supports self-development, wellbeing and retaining family ties – all elements that are integral to positive change and contribute to a rehabilitative agenda.

The project culminates in a weeklong digital showcase with Tate, in November, with an additional strand in 2021 at Tate Modern. The showcase celebrates achievement, engaging and challenging the public’s understanding of how the criminal justice system helps to rehabilitate, reduce stigma and support community cohesion.

Funders

This opportunity has been aligned to existing Education contracts, the project compliments delivery and brings a new dynamic in which to engage participants.

Partners

The project is aligned to the Tate Galleries Exchange programme, which is an open experiment; a space for an on-going programme of events developed by artists, practitioners, and associates from Tate and beyond. It is a place where everyone is invited to collaborate, test ideas and discover new perspectives on life, through art. A space, which allows society the opportunity to interact with, as well as feedback on, the work that they see, and engage in conversation.

Who is it for?

People in the criminal justice system – Novus operates across the adult male and female, and young people's estates, so the project was devised to enable all groups to engage. Within each establishment there are many different groups to reach, those with complex needs, mental health and medical issues, older population, younger population, different ethnicities etc. The project invited all to respond to the theme, giving their own personal response to the title – 'A Future I Can Love'.

HMPPS have supported us to reach individuals, signposting people for various reasons but the most common has been to support with wellbeing.

Are these people you have worked with before, or new participants?

The project was originally designed to continue to work with people engaged in Education, as this is how all of the previous projects have been set up – to complement existing curriculum areas. However, in response to the pandemic the reach was extended to all the population in the corresponding prison sites where the project runs – reaching and engaging people in purposeful activity. This has meant that we have reached a much wider audience and engaged with prisoners who might not have ordinarily got involved with education.

How many people took/are taking part?

An estimated number at this stage is 350 learners & 130 staff members

Where is it happening?

The project is running across all regions where Novus operates: North East, Yorkshire, Midlands, North West, London and Wales.

For how long has it been happening?

The project was launched and rolled out to sites in March 2020. The first strand of the project, the digital showcase and experience, will run from 30 November–7 December.

Work will then continue towards the second strand of the project, which culminates in a physical showcase at Tate Modern hoped to go live in June 2021.

What outcomes were/are you aiming for?

This adaptive project, aimed to 'hook' people to engage in purposeful activities, encourage imagination and creativity - to support wellbeing, provide an opportunity to consolidate learning, develop transferrable skills and to be a positive conversation point to share with family members.

What were/are the main outputs?

An external showcase – to take the outcomes to a public audience, to share achievement with family members and also to support conversations around rehabilitative cultures which aligns to supporting community cohesion.

When the brief was first rolled out, this was planned as a physical showcase at Tate Modern. However, with current restrictions across the country still being faced, this has been adapted to a week-long digital showcase in December 2020, which spans a range of digital platforms, websites, VC, social media. An animation using learner and tutor voices talking about the experience and how it responds to the key themes of the project, is being produced to use during the digital showcase to highlight the project and encourage conversations over the digital channels. There will also be an online event on the 1st December – to launch the showcase, provide an opportunity for conversation and celebration of the artwork, and to facilitate further debate around the value of arts as a rehabilitative tool.

The physical showcase will now take place in Spring 2021, a further opportunity to support the longevity of the work.

Have you adapted existing work to make this happen? If so, how?

How the project was going to be realised

The initial intention was to run the project as a complement to existing education delivery – so learners would have the opportunity to consolidate the skills they have learnt within their curriculum areas and apply them to a live brief. Having the time to devise group responses to release outcomes.

The whole project had to be adapted to realise the intended outcome. With prisons operating a restricted regime and Novus staff working remotely, taking the opportunity to the prisoners was challenging. Distance learning was the only viable option.

How each site approached the brief had to be worked through a local site level, considering how to publish the opportunity, the mechanism for getting things to and from learners, consideration of materials that can be used etc. Every site's approach has been completely different – but the multidisciplinary partnership and goodwill has ensured that engagement has taken place!

The external displaying of the work

A physical residency at Tate Modern was planned for 2020, but with the continued restrictions, a decision was taken in July to move the exhibition to a virtual event and create a digital showcase, which spanned a number of digital platforms, which enable the project's objectives to still be achieved.

The new digital showcase has meant we are able to directly share the showcase with learners, through Virtual Campus (VC), a secure prison intranet for learners, meaning that for the first time learners can engage with, and experience, the final display of all work in the same way all external stakeholders will. It is also hoped that the content in the VC will be accessed as a teaching aid, to inspire future learners to engage in similar project, introducing people to what is achievable within a prison context – raising aspirations.

Does your work support people who identify with one or more of the protected characteristics¹?

The project has been designed to be inclusive and open to all individuals within the prison establishments. It is about personal interpretation and what the theme means to them. We have used a number of ways to promote the project to individuals and engage them – a written brief specifically designed to reach learners of all abilities; prison officers directly speaking to individuals on wings; prison radio, in-cell TV, telephony - to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to take part.

Evaluation & Feedback

Due to the current restrictions, formal evaluation with an external academic has not taken place throughout the duration of the project as initially hoped.

Questionnaires will be given to participants to capture feedback and interviews undertaken to provide a focused study of participants' and colleagues' experiences.

¹Protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation (Equalities Act 2010).

Upon completion of the digital showcase, the intention is do a project evaluation and identify key data and emerging themes from the project delivery and engagement, as well as the showcase.

We are also able to implement some things into the digital components of the showcase to help provide an understanding of engaging. We will be using polls to encourage user comment, Google analytics to capture quantitative data and understanding. We will also be evaluating engagement and conversation through our social media channels, using their specific analytics.

Engagement is key, if people are engaging it is being taken that they see a value in being part of it. The fact that so many prisoners have submitted the work for exhibition demonstrates this engagement.

Feedback has been positive – there is an intrigue in the external showcase, so we are pleased that the added component of a digital showcase means we are able to take the work across multiple platforms to reach a range of audiences including the participants of the project.

Learners were asked to provide responses to a number of questions focused on the projects key themes. Feedback included:

When asked about what a future he could love was:

“A positive future for me would be peace and quiet, no more drama caused by myself, to spend happy years with my family. To travel and gain more wisdom. To move on from the past, but not forget what I have learnt from it.”

When asked about the value of the arts and the project for him:

“Creative arts and music project are relatively new to me, they have put me in the deep end and stretched me! I have not done anything like it (Creative) in the past, so they are not part of who I am, but they are certainly helping me to define me now-allowing me to Express.”

Thoughts on the value of the arts and project:

“Art has helped me come out of my shell. I feel life makes you put up barriers and tighten your emotion, art allows you to express. Art is new to me, but it certainly something I am enjoying doing and finding worthwhile doing.”

“Art helped me with my mental well-being. I’ve found in the past the darker my mind, the better the art I produce. Expressing myself through art helps use the demons within in a productive way.”

“Art can bring people together even at the toughest of times. A well thought piece of art can reach people no matter how far away they are.”

What is your own impression of how it has worked? What have been the challenges and successes for you?

Successes

- The creative ways colleagues have enabled opportunities to align to the project brief, despite all of the restrictions across the sites.
- Engagement, having so many prison sites/people taking up the opportunity.
- The feedback on the value of the project – being a positive opportunity to be a part of.
- Support from colleagues, having the time and space to collaboratively work to enable the project to move forward.
- Working to realise an external showcase through an alternative output across digital platforms.

Challenges

- Having to respond to so many variables to make the project achievable – reaching people, mechanisms for getting things to and from people, lack of communication, restriction in material and facilities available.
- Planning for an external showcase at a time when there are so many restrictions in society.

Are you reaching more people/fewer people/different people?

The reach among our current learners is currently not confirmed, but it seems that it is less than if we were undertaking the project as intended in a physical format. I think this is because due to current circumstances of lockdown and restrictions to engaging with learners, there hasn't been the same opportunities to communicate project information and share ideas. Lockdown has also impacted on our ability to reach learners – methods of engaging people have been deployed, but it is unknown which were the effective approaches.

However, on the flipside, because we have had to send out information onto the wings, I think the project has reached a wider number of people beyond those usually engaged in education – so reaching new audiences and the hope of hooking them into the wider education provision on offer.

What new skills have you or your colleagues had to develop to deliver this work?

Adaptability, thinking about new ways of reaching people, in the most appropriate way given the restrictions within a prison setting generally, but also presented through the remote access to people. Digital skills to take the work from a physical showcase into a digital showcase.

What would you say has made this project possible?

Working in partnership with HMPPS colleagues and wider stakeholders, perseverance and commitment to realising the outcomes. There has not be one approach across all of the sites participating, colleagues supporting this opportunity have had to 'think outside the box' to identify mechanisms, to enable things to happen and keep momentum.

What would have made it easier?

Standardised approach – however, I am not sure during the Covid pandemic there was anything that could have been done to make things any easier. The situation has brought about disruption and in the prison establishments it has been a challenging time to start a new initiative. Given all the variables, we have navigated difficult things that have been presented – but this has been done at local level- what quickly transpired is what works in one place wouldn't at another given other things being presented.

Further information