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

Project: Tea Talks
Organisation: Oxford Playhouse
Region: South East
Designed for: Care homes (and people living in isolation)

Introduction

Oxford Playhouse presents and produces a wide range of live performances, including the best of drama, family shows, dance and music, student and amateur shows, comedy, lectures and much more. The Playhouse produces and tours its own shows, hosts Artists in Residence and presents Playhouse Plays Out, off-site events which happen at locations across the county.

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At the heart of the theatre's programme, the Participation team work with over 15,000 people each year through projects in communities and schools, youth theatre groups, holiday schemes, work experience, post-show discussions, year-round opportunities to connect with artists, and much more.

Our 'Tea Talks' project worked with sixteen otherwise socially-isolated participants aged 60+ for a weekly thirty-minute phone call with Beth Sedgwick, Oxford Playhouse Community Officer, across a period of 4 weeks. Participants were recruited via a call out from Age UK and Age of Creativity, with additional referrals from Oxfordshire Association for the Blind and social prescribers at local surgeries. Conversations encouraged participants to share stories about their lives, and to find commonalities with Beth. Through this interaction, Beth sought to uncover creative interests of each participant, and to nurture these interests through conversations and memories.

This was the first of a two-phase initiative. The second optional phase involves continuing the nurture of each participant's creative interest, by creating a radio play using the stories and talents that have been shared by the participants. This will further the challenge to social isolation, by widening each participant's involvement in a project with all other participants.

Funders
Phase 1 & 2 are funded solely by Oxford Playhouse, as a pilot project.

Partners
Age UK Oxfordshire and Age of Creativity (part of Age UK). Additional referrals were made through contacts at Oxfordshire Association for the Blind.

Who is it for?
We aimed to reached elderly and isolated individuals that have been sheltering because of the COVID 19 pandemic and living independently or in a care home. The project was specially designed to reach

individuals that may not use online technologies and therefore may be further isolated during this period.

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

We had a pre-existing relationship with Age UK but had not collaborated on a project of this sort with them. Participants were recruited following a call-out by Age UK and Age of Creativity, as well as additional referrals from local surgeries and Oxfordshire Association for the Blind. We were not specifically working with people who had visited our theatre previously, although some participants referenced that they had indeed visited our theatre previously.

How many people took/are taking part?

Sixteen people took part in phone calls over the four weeks. We were at full capacity for this pilot project and would have taken on more participants if able.

Where is it happening?

Oxfordshire

For how long has it been happening?

The first phase of the project (phone calls) began in June and run until the end of July 2020. The second phase of the project commenced in September 2020 and will run until December 2020.

What were/are the main outputs?

At the end of phase two, a short radio piece featuring the stories and creative talents of the participants will be released in December 2020 and will be developed and recorded through phone calls with the participants. We hope to run the project again to a wider cohort in 2021.

What outcomes were/are you aiming for?

- Combat loneliness and enhance social wellbeing in isolated elderly people
- Provide a connection for people that may not have access to or use digital technology
- Cement OP's commitment to the later in life community in Oxford and the surrounding county
- Provide a chance for people to feel a part of the OP network during the theatre's closure due to COVID 19.

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

N/A – New pilot project

Does your work support people who identify with one or more of the protected characteristics[1]?

The mean age of the participants was 82 and 1/3 of participants were in their nineties. The sixteen participants included:

- One participant who was specifically referred to help improve their mental health
- Two who were registered blind or partially sighted
- One which identified as hard of hearing
- Of the sixteen participants, three were male
- Four lived outside of Oxford city

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

Evaluation & Feedback

We have used phone / verbal questionnaires about experience, and feedback from Age UK about the process of working with Oxford Playhouse as community partners.

Some anonymous participant quotes include:

"Happy Times"

"Fabulous!"

"Buzzing with memories"

"Interesting"

"Nice to have someone listen"

"Useful to talk"

"Jolly nice to have a chat & talk about things I'm interested in"

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

Phase 1 itself was a successful pilot. The success was certainly the participant feedback and the fact that the engagement was overwhelmingly positive. Our aim of reaching older people in uncertain times in a meaningful way was successful. It was a challenge to create a comfortable environment for the elderly people taking part given that we couldn't see each other face-to-face and had not met before.

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

As the majority of participatory work delivered by Oxford Playhouse is currently digital, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been able to shape this project specifically for those who cannot or would prefer not to engage online. In many cases, participants are unable to visit our theatre (in normal, pre-pandemic circumstances) due to isolation and mobility issues. We are reaching an older group of people that we have worked with before, with many of our participants in their nineties.

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

Building rapport over the telephone. It has been a challenge not to see our participants.

What would you say has made this project possible?

A noticeable need to connect with people who may not experience the benefits of being a part of the online world. Also, a focus on memories - nostalgia in the face of present-day adversities.

What would have made it easier?

More volunteers to reach a wider net of people that may be living rurally or in care homes in the county and beyond.

Further information

https://www.oxfordplayhouse.com/playhouse-at-home/community-projects/