

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

Project: Emerge

Organisation: Theatre for Life

Region: South East

Designed for: Young people with long-term illness, including NHS outpatients

Introduction

Since June 2017 we have worked extensively as a community-led theatre company with young people aged 14 to 25 years old. We work collectively with young people and professionals to create life-changing projects, with a strong focus on supporting mental health and wellbeing management through the arts. We have just run a six-month Creativity & Wellbeing online programme (ACE emergency funded) with 14 to 25 year-olds to support mental health throughout the current lockdown period. We are currently working with the NHS and have an official partnership with the mental health charity, Solent Mind.

Emerge is a community theatre project with the NHS, Southampton Children's Hospital and Solent Mind. Our project will be improving access to the arts for young patients with long-term health conditions, some are still shielding and at risk from COVID 19. We will be keeping our in-person youth company to a minimum of 6 (including director). They will collaborate remotely with young people currently shielding, whilst in the rehearsal space and online, working with professional artists to devise Emerge. We will be creating a final film to be screened with Southampton Cultural Services & online.

“As a high-risk person living with a life-limiting disability (CHD and Heart Failure), these times are genuinely terrifying. During this experience I have realised how important it is to band together as a community and help the vulnerable and high-risk. No community can overcome any issue with a ‘each for their own’ mentality. It is so important that we don’t revert back to forcing the disabled and vulnerable back into isolation while the rest of the world carries on; but take the steps to come together and work with each other to create a safe and equal environment. Creative outlets and charities like Theatre for Life are giving young people the chance to be heard during this pandemic, to establish that we believe in your worth as a member of society.” (Theatre for Life Youth Theatre member, 21 years old)

Funders

[Arts Council England](#)

Baring Foundation

[Mayflower400](#) and Heritage Community Grant

Hampshire Isle of Wight Community Foundation (I WILL campaign)

This was only made possible thanks to public funding from the National Lottery through Arts Council England.

Partners

We are working with the NHS, PEEER Youth group at Southampton Children's Hospital, Solent Mind, Southampton City Council Cultural Services and as part of the Southampton City Wide Mayflower400 initiative.

Who is it for?

The collaboration will involve our youth company working with other young people with long term illness, some who are currently shielding. We will be working with clinically vulnerable individuals, who are at higher risk of severe illness from COVID 19 (for example, people with some pre-existing

conditions). Our young people have hidden disabilities and long-term health conditions such as chronic heart failure, congenital heart disease, cystic fibrosis and autoimmune conditions.

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

Both

How many people took/are taking part?

12 young people aged 14-25 years old are taking part in the creative project. We hope to reach audiences of up to 2,000 with our online film and public screenings in Spring, 2021. We have begun formulating connections within the community – working with local cultural, health and educational organisations to support our outreach and engagement programme.

Where is it happening?

Southampton

For how long has it been happening?

5 October 2020 to 5 April 2021

What were/are the main outputs?

We are working towards both an online film and a public screening once COVID 19 restrictions begin to ease. We are looking to engage with the wider community through some outreach workshops, including intergenerational work with older people also isolated at home through remote work. We are currently working with Southampton City Council Cultural Services and are looking to support the Southampton COVID19- Stories exhibition.

What outcomes were/are you aiming for?

We want to help combat social isolation, loneliness, whilst improving accessibility to the arts and providing a youth voice around hidden disabilities and mental health. Our overall outcome is to create a film with coping strategies and mindfulness to support audiences with wellbeing management. The project is also funded by a Mayflower 400 Community Heritage Grant as part of the city- wide Mayflower 400 programme. The anniversary year seeks to celebrate Southampton, a city and a community, built on journeys and migration, whilst increasing access to and engagement in culture. The youth company will be exploring both their own journeys, alongside hidden stories of disadvantaged communities dealing with mental health in the aftermath of the Titanic disaster. The piece will be informed and empowered through historical research and community dialogue to celebrate the resilience of our youth company and the Southampton communities following the infamous tragedy.

What will it provide?

- *Youth leadership roles*
- *Open platform for creative exploration and voicing ideas*
- *Youth mentorship scheme between Theatre for Life and PEEER groups, creating a strong and collaborative community partnership*
- *Engaging and fun weekly creative workshops, building invaluable skills across diverse art forms to support future education choices and career development*
- *Professional guidance from established artists working within the creative sector*
- *A supportive and positive working environment with trained professionals both in the cultural and health sector*

What can young people expect?

- *An inclusive, welcoming and safe creative process that places you and your voice at the forefront of the process. We encourage open dialogue and co-creation, working together to create powerful and meaningful theatre with the guidance of professional artists. All our work is centred around empowering both our youth company and the audiences we reach, with positive and supportive messages that support wellbeing management.*

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

Emerge is building on our recent six-month community outreach lockdown programme, working more specifically with the NHS and young patients at Southampton Children's Hospital. In a R&D lockdown survey, a young person with a life limiting disability (Heart Failure) said

"It is so important that we don't revert back to forcing the disabled and vulnerable back into isolation while the rest of the world carries on."

We want Emerge will celebrate our youth company as individual and resilient creatives, rather than 'Vulnerable' young adults impacted by COVID-19. Working with diverse creative practitioners in verbatim theatre, scriptwriting, poetry and devising, our youth company will have the opportunity to explore stories respectfully and with authenticity. Emerge is a devised performance, humanising stories of communities dealing with disability and mental health, connecting with audiences through stories of hope and resilience. With support from the NHS, we will be working across 12 different inpatient wards. Sarah Shameti (youth leader at Southampton Children's Hospital) said,

"Emerge is a unique opportunity, a place to have a voice and platform and to be valued and heard through theatre".

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

We are committed to tackling disability discrimination, we take positive action to encourage or develop people with a particular disability. With 'Emerge' we are exploring hidden disabilities such as long term & critical health conditions through empowering & creative activities which encourage a youth voice.

Protecting the world around you and the space that you physically and mentally inhabit is at the heart of wellbeing. We encourage community solidarity, interconnecting and showing empathy for others. This was particularly evident in our six-month online Creativity and Wellbeing programme, in which young people have explored LGBTQ+ through make up and body art campaigns, alongside devising sessions around issues prominent within their communities.

Evaluation & Feedback

We will use feedback questionnaires to help us understand the value of our work and areas for improvement with all our community audiences. Following the screenings of Emerge both online and in a public setting at the MAST Mayflower Theatre Studios we will conduct audience questionnaires digitally to support our audience development, based on real evidence. Our future planning for the live tour will also use this evidence to support our audience strategy to help us understand the world from the outside in, listening to their opinions, tracking their habits and improving our efforts to engage in future work with harder to reach groups in the next phase of Emerge.

"Emerge is a unique opportunity to give these young people new skills whilst most importantly a place to have a voice, a platform to be encouraged to speak, to be valued and heard. This process will undoubtedly increase self-worth alongside evidencing that with thought and innovation. Obstacles can be overcome. We are looking forward to working with Theatre for Life to bring Emerge to the surface and actively enabling young people to do the same." (Sarah Shameti - PEEER Youth Worker - Southampton Children's Hospital)

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

“As a high-risk person living with a life-limiting disability (CHD and Heart Failure), these times are genuinely terrifying. During this experience I have realised how important it is to band together as a community and help the vulnerable and high-risk. No community can overcome any issue with a ‘each for their own’ mentality. It is so important that we don’t revert back to forcing the disabled and vulnerable back into isolation while the rest of the world carries on; but take the steps to come together and work with each other to create a safe and equal environment. Creative outlets and charities like Theatre for Life are giving young people the chance to be heard during this pandemic, to establish that we believe in your worth as a member of society.” (Theatre for Life Youth Theatre member, 21 years old)

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

We have only just started the programme, however we have received positive feedback from both the young people and their parents/guardians. Feedback has indicated that the weekly sessions are being well received: “Thank you for the sessions, I look forward to them every week” (14 year-old youth member).

We are really pleased with the youth mentoring within the group and the relationships forming between both Theatre for Life and P.E.E.E.R. The creative activities in devising, storytelling and poetry have encouraged the young people to interact through improvisation and creative writing. The work created has become an open forum for supportive conversations, allowing our group members to speak openly about their illnesses.

One of our challenges has been attendance, due to COVID 19, we have found our in-person rehearsals have been impacted with young people quarantining or not attending due to symptoms. This has required a hybrid style session, working with young people isolated at home whilst in the space. However, the online programme has enabled these members to still remain connected and engaged with the work which has been beneficial in terms of keeping on track.

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

We are reaching different people, particularly young people who have had limited access to the arts and who are restricted at this present time because of COVID 19. The online / remote programme has provided a greater accessibility to our work and has improved our reach with young people with hidden disabilities and at risk from COVID 19.

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

Due to the online nature of our work, we have had to adapt our creative delivery within the configurations of Zoom. Interaction and connectivity is vital in these sessions, focused group exercises using the breakout rooms have allowed participants to work with their peers in a safe and engaging manner.

What would you say has made this project possible?

This project has only been made possible due to the working relationships between Theatre for Life, NHS and Solent Mind. Safeguarding is at the forefront of our work and with a strong team in place we have been able to ensure all needs can be met. At all times participants have access to mental health first aid training and pastoral support with the youth team at the hospital and Solent Mind. All team members are trained in education, youth work and the health sector.

Further information

<http://www.theatreforlife.co.uk/emerge>

PEER Service - Southampton Children's Hospital

Supporting Patient Empowerment, self-Esteem, Employability and Resilience through enjoyable activities, discovering opportunities and more...

Solent Mind

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We deliver trusted, practical and recovery-focussed mental health services to over 26,000 people in Hampshire including children, young people and their families.

www.solentmind.org.uk