

<b>Publication:</b>	Care Management Matters
<b>Date:</b>	July 2021
<b>Circulation:</b>	25,070
<b>Periodicity:</b>	10 times per year



# Creative thinking:

How creative and cultural projects have supported social care during COVID-19

There has been so much loss, trauma and sadness during the pandemic, but there has been some hope and positivity. Victoria Hume, director of the Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance (CHWA), shares how culture and creativity have helped people in care settings during COVID-19.



In recent years, there has been a growing understanding of the impact that creative or cultural activity can have on our health and wellbeing. The arts, creativity and what we sometimes call 'cultural assets', like our museums and heritage sites, are all agents of wellness; through supporting us to use our imaginations and develop our sense of agency, they help build our resilience, aid recovery and foster community.

Despite the strain the cultural and creative sector has faced during the pandemic, organisations and freelancers have made a huge collective effort to focus on supporting those around them and turn towards partnerships with health and social care, to reach both the workforce and those most vulnerable. As we all know, COVID-19 exacerbated the loneliness and isolation already at crisis point in the UK and has affected mental health and wellbeing. Frontline health and care staff have been particularly vulnerable, both physically and psychologically, and as early research indicates, other keyworkers have had the least opportunity to access creative practice to support their own health.

### THE ROLE OF CULTURE

The Culture of Health and Wellbeing Alliance (CHWA) is a free-to-join membership organisation that supports everyone invested in the relationship between creativity, culture, health and wellbeing. It also works to build partnerships across culture, creative practice, health, social care and local Government. Our latest report reveals the pivotal role that culture and creativity have played in supporting health and social care organisations throughout the pandemic, produced in partnership with seven national organisations, including Live Music Now, Music for Dementia, Music in Hospitals and Care, The National Criminal Justice Arts Alliance, The National Performance Advisory Group for Arts, Design and Heritage in Healthcare, Paintings in Hospitals and Performing Medicine.

A collection of more than 40 innovative projects from across the UK are illustrated, which in total reached around 50,000 people. The largest proportion were designed for older adults in residential care. Other key groups included people living with dementia, adults in mental health institutions, NHS

staff, adults and young people in hospitals, people serving sentences and care home staff.

Many of the projects adopted digital approaches using online workshops, attracting high levels of engagement and reaching thousands of individuals. At a time when face-to-face work was not an option, a wonderful and wide selection of approaches emerged from pre-recorded, live online and outdoor performances to activity packs, exhibitions, artworks, phone-based workshops and radio programmes.

### FIVE STEPS TO WELLBEING

The common outcome was to improve participant wellbeing, tackle loneliness and isolation, and support social connections. The projects can be universally related to the Five Steps to Wellbeing: connect with other people, be physically active, learn new skills, give to others, and pay attention to the present moment (mindfulness).

Much of this could be described as early intervention to prevent the onset of apathy and depression – to build a sense of feeling able >

> to contribute actively to one's own life and community.

Here is a snapshot of some of the fantastic projects that have taken place:

- **Key Changes** works with musicians facing inequalities and barriers as a result of their racial background or mental health disability. Weekly online sessions were designed for people living in high-risk settings, such as care homes and hospitals, throughout the pandemic. In an independent survey by MIND/ DoH, 85% of artists reported increased wellbeing and 100% would recommend Key Changes to a friend.
- **Oxford Playhouse's Tea Talks** project worked with socially isolated participants aged 60+ who were living independently or in a care home. Participants were encouraged to share stories about their lives via phone calls, in which the creative interests of each participant were identified and nurtured through conversations and memories. A radio play was subsequently created using the stories and talents shared by participants.
- **Dance and Time with the Museum** by University of Cambridge Museums provided support for older adults in residential homes. Copies of museum paintings were distributed with written information for care home staff to share with residents, describing the artwork and inviting participants to travel through the painting, and to share their ideas, thoughts, memories and feelings. Art boxes were provided containing good-quality art materials and activities relating to the museum's collection to extend engagement. Postcards of the collections were included, so residents could correspond with family and friends who could no longer visit. This contributed to the psychosocial wellbeing of older people, particularly those affected by loneliness and social isolation.
- **Love Through Double Glazing** by Vamos Theatre in the West

Midlands was staged entirely outside, but viewed by people in care homes inside where it's warm and safe. Love Through Double Glazing is funny, cheeky and unashamedly silly. It brings clowning, music, food fights, bubbles and ballet – even a real-life dog. The benefits included: encouraging a re-engagement with culture; encouraging participation to improve mental and physical health; encouraging attention and communication, wellbeing and contentment; and giving people living with dementia the opportunity to connect in alternative ways. A care home resident said, 'Love Through Double Glazing made me realise how long it's been since we laughed so much.'

- **The Box on the Box**, run by The Box, a museum, art gallery and archive for Plymouth and the South West, screened archive film and images to residents in care homes across the region. Drawing on 10,000 hours of footage available in the archive film collection, a series of collaborative episodes were designed to cover interest areas including: Blitz and Reconstruction; Dockyard Traditions; Plymouth After Dark; and Seaside and Holidays. This enabled residents to reminisce together and learn about the area. Participants Annie and Nick said, 'This is a godsend. We are trapped at home and now we have something wonderful to look forward to each week and talk about. The films are wonderful. More please!'
- **The History of Ashford in 100 Buildings**, run by Funder Films CIC, reached out to care homes. Photographs were taken of buildings in the Ashford area and organised sequentially in films. Activities were provided based on watching the films, poetry and writing associated with the buildings, and more. This created a sense of one big community with an amazing local history in common.

- **Arts Together for Care Homes** by Arts Together/Opera North took place across Leeds to make art accessible to all. It ran outside performances by a range of artists, from opera singers to jazz, to classical guitar, to poets, for care homes to entertain staff and residents. The outcomes included improvements in mental health, wellbeing, happiness, togetherness, relief from boredom, a break for staff, and an opportunity for staff and residents to enjoy something together.

## HOPE FOR MORE TO COME

We not only want to ensure this level of work can continue in the future, but that these examples can be built on to create a more level playing field.

Jo McLean, Executive Director at Performing Medicine, which worked in partnership on the report and is one of the projects that released a suite of resources to support health and social care professionals when wearing PPE, said, 'CHWA's report showcases the huge variety of innovative cultural and creative projects that have taken place over the past year. It is fantastic to be involved in such a vital report and to share best practice to encourage a better understanding of how and where this type of work is happening.'

To ensure we have continued support from organisations in the future, we have made a series of recommendations, directed primarily at funders, commissioners and policymakers. These include the importance of investing not just in projects like these, but in the longer work of building the partnerships that underpin it, and supporting the huge numbers of freelancers who provide this critical work. It is clear from the case studies that partnerships across culture, health and social care, along with the skills, experience and dedication of creative practitioners, were two key enablers allowing

organisations to rapidly pivot to support communities in entirely new circumstances. The flexibility and trust demonstrated by funders (mostly Trusts and Foundations) in the early days of the pandemic was also critically important, but there remains a gap between statutory sector's willingness to partner with community arts organisations and its willingness to invest at a higher level. Filling this gap and supporting local and regional infrastructure across culture that better matches Integrated Care Systems will also help support the cultural sector to better address health inequalities, and to align itself with local health priorities and the need to level up.

## CELEBRATING, ACKNOWLEDGING AND LEARNING FROM THE PROJECTS

Our recommendation is to celebrate, acknowledge and learn from this work. Lockdown has increased our appreciation of cultural and creative work. The 'moral commitment', as one organisation described it, has brought meaning and hope to people dealing with the harshest impacts of the pandemic – whether residents, staff or creative professionals.

At the moment, this work is happening in pockets around the country, often thanks to the energy and commitment of small organisations and freelancers deeply rooted in their communities. Our work as an alliance is to join these dots on the map together and help spread the ideas and innovation they represent.

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The reference in this article is available at [www.caremanagementmatters.co.uk](http://www.caremanagementmatters.co.uk)

Read the full report, and more case studies, at: [www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/how-creativity-and-culture-are-supporting-people-institutions-during-covid-19](http://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/how-creativity-and-culture-are-supporting-people-institutions-during-covid-19)

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In what ways has your organisation incorporated culture and creativity to help support the people you care for? Which of these case studies could you adapt and run in the future? Share your opinion on the website, visit [www.caremanagementmatters.co.uk](http://www.caremanagementmatters.co.uk)