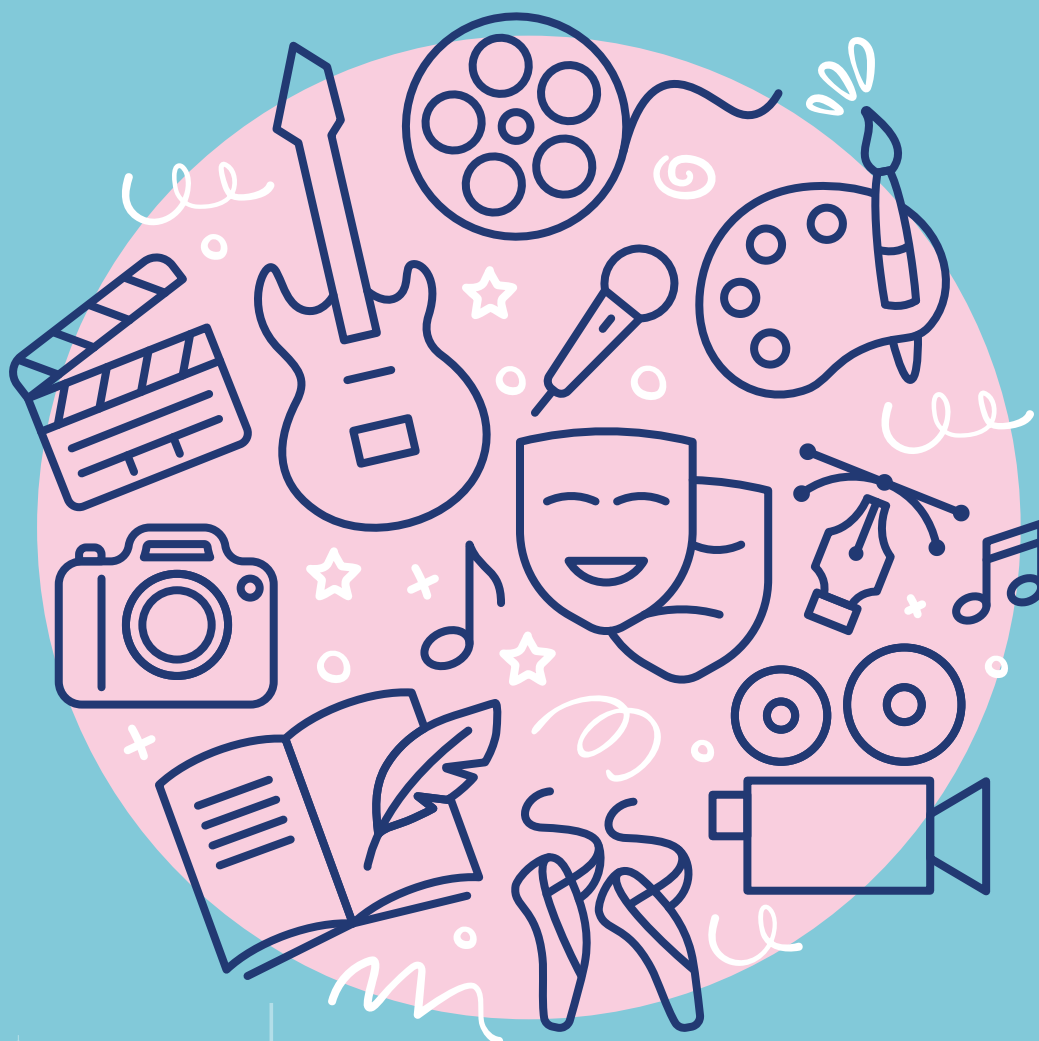


COVID-19 CARE

Culture and the Arts, from Restriction to Enhancement:
Protecting Mental Health in the Liverpool City Region.





This report presents the findings of the project ‘COVID-19 CARE: Culture and the Arts, from Restriction to Enhancement: Protecting Mental Health in the Liverpool City Region’ (‘COVID-19 CARE’), funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) as part of the UK Research and Innovation rapid response to COVID-19.



liverpool.ac.uk/english/research/featured-research/covid-19-care/

livcare.org.uk



[@COVID_19CARE](https://twitter.com/COVID_19CARE)

The project has been led and conducted by researchers at the University of Liverpool (UK) in collaboration with 15 arts and cultural organisations in Liverpool City Region and three health partners.

ARTS AND CULTURAL ORGANISATIONS

Bluecoat, Choir with No Name, Collective Encounters, DaDa, FACT, Liverpool Everyman & Playhouse, METAL, Movema, Open Eye Gallery, National Museums Liverpool, The Reader, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Tate Liverpool, Together, Writing on the Wall

HEALTH ORGANISATIONS

Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust, Liverpool Clinical Commissioning Group, Royal Liverpool Hospital

AUTHORS

Dr Antonina Anisimovich, Postdoctoral Research Associate
Professor Ekaterina Balabanova, Project Co-Investigator
Professor Josie Billington, Project Principal Investigator
Melissa Chapple, Research Associate
Dr Megan Watkins, Postdoctoral Research Associate
Dr Joanne Worsley, Postdoctoral Research Associate

COVID-19 CARE

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DESIGN

[Blush Design Agency](#)

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1 Executive Summary

Key Findings

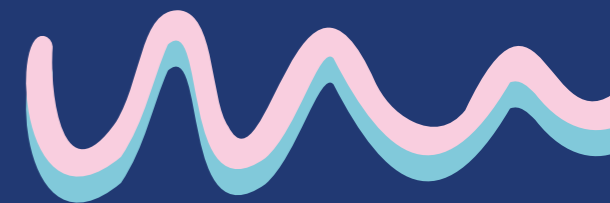
This report presents the findings of 'COVID-19 CARE: Culture and the Arts, from Restriction to Enhancement: Protecting Mental Health in the Liverpool City Region', an 18-month research project that explored the impact on mental health of restricted access to arts and culture during the pandemic in Liverpool City Region (LCR). We conducted a series of interviews and surveys with representatives from the arts and cultural organisations in LCR and arts' audiences and beneficiaries. Our key findings, highlighted in this executive summary, are supported with participant voice throughout.

PANDEMIC RESPONSE: CLOSURES, ADAPTATIONS, AND NEW DIRECTIONS

- ▶ Arts and cultural organisations responded rapidly and creatively to the pandemic, offering new, online programmes as a lifeline for vulnerable and isolated people and adding an innovative dimension to their own services for the future.
- ▶ Arts and cultural organisations have been most effective in reaching vulnerable, isolated and disadvantaged populations at risk of mental health issues when they have worked in close collaboration with social and mental health care providers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ARTS AND CULTURE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

- ▶ Our survey showed that those who engaged in arts and culture frequently during lockdown had significantly higher wellbeing scores than those who engaged in arts and culture 'never' or 'rarely'.
- ▶ The work of arts and cultural organisations operating in LCR is hugely valuable in reaching vulnerable people, especially those experiencing or at risk of mental ill health. As one of LCR's most important economic and social assets, the arts and culture sector can play a major role in improving mental health outcomes across the city region, if properly integrated into public health strategy.



CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF ONLINE PROVISION

- ▶ Arts beneficiaries experienced barriers to access, such as internet connectivity difficulties (e.g., 'bad' or 'fluctuating internet connections'), inaccessible content, limited technological literacy, or Zoom/screen fatigue. As a result, certain populations became out of reach or hard to reach, exacerbating the digital divide.
- ▶ Online provision offered flexibility, allowing arts organisations to reach new audiences, including those people previously unable to attend in person due to health, social anxiety, location or caring responsibilities.

THE 'NEW NORMAL' AND ADJUSTING TO IT

- ▶ While some individuals were keen to return to in-person events, the feeling of risk was experienced strongly by others.
- ▶ Online provision remained vital for those with health conditions or vulnerable family members.
- ▶ Arts and cultural organisations explored creative means of integrating online and in-person provisions.

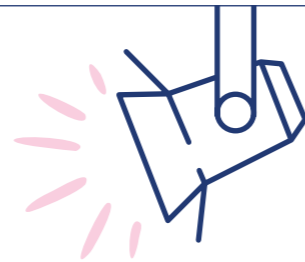
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

- ▶ The existence of different views and preferences about face-to-face and online provision suggest that a 'one size fits all' strategy will not be appropriate following the pandemic.
- ▶ Given the benefits of digital provision, particularly in terms of inclusivity and accessibility, arts and cultural organisations see it as an advantageous addition to service as usual.
- ▶ Arts and cultural organisations need expert support on platforms and products, safeguarding procedures, and effective staff training.
- ▶ Sustaining and building on partnerships between arts and cultural organisations and social and mental health care providers is imperative to ensure that arts and culture are effectively mobilised to address unprecedented mental health and wellbeing challenges.





2 Introduction



The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on the value and importance of arts and culture in everyday life. This report presents new evidence on this, and on the effectiveness of changes to provision made by arts and cultural organisations to maintain links with vulnerable and isolated communities.

It summarises the findings from COVID-19 CARE: Culture and the Arts from Restriction to Enhancement: Protecting Mental Health in the Liverpool City Region (LCR) – a project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of the UK Research and Innovation's COVID-19 funding.

This report summarises the background, aims, objectives and methods of the research and then highlights the main findings under five themes:

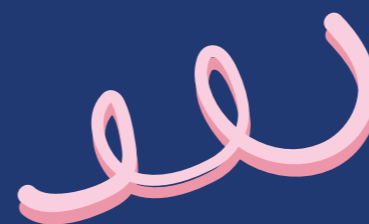
- 1 PANDEMIC RESPONSE: CLOSURES, ADAPTATIONS, AND NEW DIRECTIONS
- 2 THE IMPORTANCE OF ARTS AND CULTURE FOR MENTAL HEALTH
- 3 CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF ONLINE PROVISION
- 4 THE 'NEW NORMAL' AND ADJUSTING TO IT
- 5 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

It is the first study to assess the impact on mental health of restricted access to arts and culture within a specific city region, and to map the innovation in provision in the arts and cultural sector which the COVID-19 crisis has generated, as well as the success of these changes in making the arts accessible during lockdown. The project built on the University of Liverpool's strong alliance with organisations across the cultural and health sectors and brought together an interdisciplinary team of arts and mental health researchers at the University of Liverpool, 15 arts and cultural organisations and three health partners.

2.1. WHY ARTS AND MENTAL HEALTH?

A growing body of research has shown that participation in arts and cultural activity can support mental health and wellbeing (Fancourt and Finn 2019). Studies have consistently identified associations between arts participation (e.g., actively engaging in arts activities such as singing or dancing) or cultural engagement (e.g., visiting museums, galleries or theatres) and the prevention, or reduced severity, of mental health conditions (Daykin et al 2018, Fancourt et al 2019, Fancourt and Tymoszuk 2019). Acknowledging this, Arts Council England's 10-year strategy 'Let's Create', setting out objectives and investment principles for 2020–2030, included a pledge to develop deeper partnerships with the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England for the prescription of creative and cultural activities for mental health (ACE 2020). Following the Creative Health report (Gordon-Nesbitt 2017), the National Centre for Creative Health (NCCH) was launched in March 2021 - a new national centre for creativity and wellbeing.

The immediate closure of public spaces, galleries, museums, arts venues, and other cultural assets once the COVID-19 pandemic started had a significant impact on mental health and wellbeing (Yamamoto et al 2020; Niedzwiedz et al 2021; Daly et al 2020). Emerging evidence suggests that the risks were more pronounced for vulnerable groups in society, such as individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions (Burton et al 2021; Di Gessa et al 2021); young adults (Niedzwiedz et al 2021; O'Connor et al 2021); women (Iob et al 2020; Wetherall et al 2022); and individuals from racialised minorities (Katikireddi et al 2021). Hobbies such as listening to music, reading, and engaging in arts activities were associated with reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety, and increased life satisfaction (Bu et al 2021). Higher levels of engagement in arts and culture also had a positive impact on people's resilience and ability to cope with adverse situations (Keisari 2021).



2.2. WHY LIVERPOOL CITY REGION?

This research was carried out in LCR, which has one of the richest concentrations of culture in the UK with the largest clustering of museums and galleries outside of the capital. Culture and creativity, including (popular and classical, grassroots and elite) performing arts, music, theatre, dance, museums, visual arts, events, and festivals, are central to the city's identity (Belchem 2006). Cultural capital is also critical to the city region's economy, contributing circa 10% (Culture Liverpool 2019).

LCR also has a pioneering history of harnessing arts for mental health care through partnerships between culture and health providers (Billington et al 2013, Burns 2017). Alder Hey Children's NHS Foundation Trust, Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust, and the Royal Liverpool and Broadgreen University Hospitals NHS Trust are examples of health care providers in LCR that work in partnership with arts providers.

The region had some of the poorest mental health outcomes in the UK prior to the start of the global pandemic. The number of adults seeking mental health services in England has increased since the beginning of the first lockdown in 2020, with the North West region seeing the highest concentrations nationally. In May 2020, the LCR Mayor's 'Case for the Liverpool City Region' (LCRCA 2020) cited 'a high prevalence of mental health disorders' as one of the complex health and wellbeing challenges the region faces as a result of coronavirus.

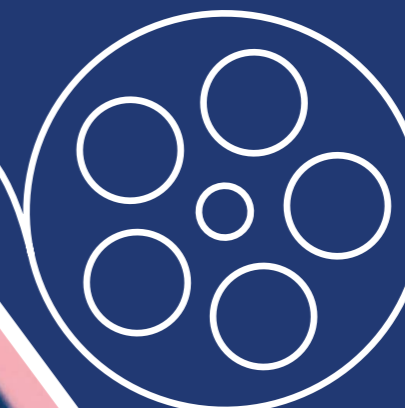
2.3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

COVID-19 CARE aimed to assess:

- ▶ the impact of COVID-19 on arts and cultural provision in LCR and on organisations and people providing these services
- ▶ the impact on mental health of restricted access to arts and culture
- ▶ the successes and challenges of alternative modes of provision by arts organisations in reaching and communicating with established and/or new audiences
- ▶ the perceived value and accessibility of alternative arts provision and the latter's impact on mental health/wellbeing

The project objectives were to:

- ▶ capture changes in access to arts and culture as a consequence of COVID-19, especially for those experiencing or at risk of mental health problems
- ▶ gather evidence and examples of innovation in methods and communication strategies in respect of arts provision as a result of COVID-19
- ▶ investigate the (short/long-term) effect on the psychological wellbeing of public beneficiaries due to restricted access to arts and culture
- ▶ assess the accessibility of alternative modes of arts provision, the role of different communication approaches and their impact on public mental health/wellbeing
- ▶ capture the impact of renewed accessibility to 'new normal' arts and cultural provision on public take-up and on mental health/wellbeing

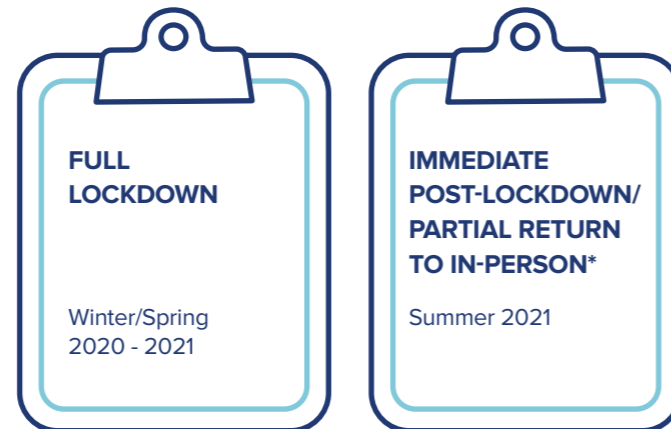




2.4. METHODOLOGY

Two complementary surveys were carried out collecting data covering two time periods.

*NHS settings did not return to in-person provision straight after the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions



SURVEY 1

Interviews with LCR arts and cultural organisations

Interviews Wave 1 (Sept 20 – May 21)

- National, local restrictions: questions about impacts of COVID-19 on usual provision and beneficiaries, alternative measures, and successes and challenges

Interviews Wave 2 (Aug – Oct 21)

- Restrictions lifted: questions about renewed access to in-person, continued online provision, impact of renewed accessibility, role of arts and culture during future recovery period

SURVEY 2

1. Questionnaire with beneficiaries

Feb, April & July 2021 - start, mid-point and conclusion of lockdown

Part 1 – access to arts/culture

Part 2 – mental health and wellbeing

Part 3 – demographics

2. Follow-up interviews with 10% of questionnaire respondents: Wave 1 (W1) (Jan - Feb 21), Wave 2 (W2) (April-May 21) and Wave 3 (W3) (July – Aug 21)

Questions about impact of first UK lockdown, easing of restrictions, winter 20 lockdown (Wave 1), impact of previous lockdowns and immediate and future plans for engagement (Wave 2), recent engagement and experiences of hybrid engagement (Wave 3)

Interview data were analysed through framework analysis (Gale et al 2013), using the qualitative software NVivo. Survey data were analysed using the quantitative software SPSS.

2.5. PARTICIPANTS

SURVEY 1

Survey 1, Wave 1 (W1)

▶ **24 representatives** (22 female, 2 male) including service providers and creative practitioners from 15 arts and cultural organisations: museums (1), theatres (3), galleries (8), concert halls (3), community and participatory arts organisations (9)

Survey 1, Wave 2 (W2)

▶ **14 representatives** (13 female, 1 male) including service providers and creative practitioners from 12 arts and cultural organisations: museums (1), theatres (2), galleries (5), concert halls (2), community and participatory arts organisations (4)

The majority of the organisations that we spoke to run participatory programmes for customary beneficiaries who are experiencing, or at risk of, mental health difficulties, often in collaboration with health and/or social care providers. Six of these fifteen deliver provision in partnership with the Life Rooms¹ - a community service supporting the health and wellbeing of service users, carers, and local communities, and a further two of these organisations have delivered provision with the Life Rooms in the past.

SURVEY 2

Participants were recruited via social media advertisement and through partner organisations' publicity and communication channels (newsletter, webpages, social media).

Survey 2, Wave 1 (W1)

▶ **83 participants** provided consent to participate in W1

- ▶ **45-54 (28%)** most frequent age bracket
- ▶ **81%** identified as Female
- ▶ **88%** identified as White British
- ▶ **42%** Bachelor's degree as highest level of qualification
- ▶ **65%** worked full-time
- ▶ **37%** described as never using mental health services
- ▶ **34%** considered themselves to have a disability

12 (2 male, 10 female) took part in follow-up qualitative interviews. Most of them (9) were aged 45 years or older. 11 were White British. Eight had used mental health services in the past or were using them at the time of participation. 4 participants disclosed having a disability or multiple disabilities.

Survey 2, Wave 2 (W2)

- ▶ **27 participants** provided consent to participate in W2
- ▶ **45-54 & 55-64 (31.7% each)** most frequent age brackets
- ▶ **84%** identified as Female
- ▶ **84%** identified as White British
- ▶ **42%** Bachelor's degree as highest level of qualification
- ▶ **38%** Masters degree as highest level of qualification
- ▶ **65%** worked full-time
- ▶ **30%** described as using mental health services
- ▶ **55%** described as never using mental health services
- ▶ **30%** considered themselves to have a disability

8 of these participants (1 male, 7 female) also took part in the follow-up qualitative interviews. As in W1, most of the participants (5) were aged 45 years or older. 7 were White British and 6 had used mental health services in the past or were using them at the time of participation. 2 participants disclosed having a disability or multiple disabilities.

Survey 2, Wave 3 (W3)

- ▶ **20 participants** provided consent to participate in W3
- ▶ **45-54 (35%) & 55-64 (30%)** most frequent age brackets
- ▶ **85%** identified as Female
- ▶ **90%** identified as White British
- ▶ **35%** Bachelor's degree as highest level of qualification
- ▶ **45%** Masters degree as highest level of qualification
- ▶ **70%** worked full-time
- ▶ **60%** described as using mental health services
- ▶ **30%** considered themselves to have a disability

8 qualitative follow-up interviews (7 female, 1 male) were conducted with the same participants as in W2.

¹ The Life Rooms was introduced in 2016 by Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust to support the prevention and population health agendas through a three-pillar model: social prescribing, community, and learning. Working in partnership with arts and cultural providers in LCR (including a theatre and a concert hall), the Life Rooms offers a range of creative courses, such as storytelling, creative writing, and music making. In the face of COVID-19, the Life Rooms service was restructured to provide a full suite of online and telephone support services, and a number of civic and community organisations delivered weekly arts courses as part of the Life Rooms online offer.



3 Findings

The main findings are presented below organised around the key themes that emerged from the data.

3.1. PANDEMIC RESPONSE: CLOSURES, ADAPTATIONS, AND NEW DIRECTIONS

Arts and cultural organisations in LCR highlighted how the closure of theatres, galleries, museums, arts venues and other cultural assets - reported to be 'a lifeline' for some people - had negative consequences on their beneficiaries' wellbeing, increasing social isolation and loneliness.

“ *Our Dance for Parkinson's programme stopped... Some of the people in that group told us that their conditions had even worsened through not coming in regularly to the class, which was really sad* [P22, Dance organisation, W1]

In these circumstances, the arts and cultural sector innovated rapidly, creating new or adapting existing programmes. Although many organisations were already considering and/or planning to implement a digital element to their offer, COVID-19 became a catalyst in the growth and evolution of digital provision.

“ *We've all had a crash course in the feasibility and practicality of online delivery of arts* [P24, Creative writer, W1]

Training both staff and beneficiaries in technical knowledge and digital know-how became a key priority. Although arts organisations received funding to purchase hardware and data for beneficiaries, it was evident that this approach needed to be supplemented with personalized, one-to-one support as some of the beneficiaries

“ *have never had a tablet before and we've had to do a lot of training and work with people to improve their digital skills.* [P15, Choir, W1]

Artists, too, who were often delivering online for the first time, required digital training.

“ *Many of the artists we work with as part of that programme have never done a live sharing on Instagram before, so we've had to make resources such as 'how to' guides* [P19, Cultural and creative hub, W1]

Arts organisations also proactively reached vulnerable populations as usual support became unavailable. Some arts providers felt as though they were the social glue, stepping in when social services were not operating.



“ *It was the arts provision and the social enterprises that picked up the pieces where statutory services failed people completely... I spent a lot of time in those first couple of months sorting food out for people, making sure people had electricity* [P15, Choir, W1]

Our findings suggest that arts organisations were most effective in reaching vulnerable, isolated, and disadvantaged populations when they worked in close collaboration with health and social care providers. These partnerships made it possible for non-digital provision - in the form of creativity packs - to reach people in care homes, prisons, and inpatient mental health settings.

“ *We can email them (creativity packs) out to a range of partner organisations. So, particularly useful in care homes, mental health inpatient units where people are stuck there. But we know that if we can get something into the hands of somebody who works on these premises, they can print them and distribute them* [P3, Shared reading organisation, W1]

Partnership working was also beneficial for health and social care staff as many utilised arts and culture to support their own mental health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CASE STUDY

PICKING UP THE PIECES

What was striking about the response of grass-roots arts organisations to the crisis was its immediate, practical and hands-on quality.

As statutory services were shutting down or struggling to adapt, arts providers were literally going the extra mile, pro-actively seeking out those whom they knew to be lonely or in need, and offering the very basics for survival where usual care was falling short. A Liverpool choir serving the homeless found itself 'picking up the pieces and picking them up quickly' especially for those in the 'middle ground' of need, who were largely left to fend for themselves. [P15, Choir, W1]

'There were so many people who lost the ability to get food from anywhere. Members relied on different services to go and have a hot meal every day. And they didn't have any cooking skills, any food buying skills, and were living in a bedsit with a microwave, not even knowing how to use it. People who were street homeless (and given hotel rooms), and those in hostels (where there are support staff) had better provision of care than people who were now in a bedsit, where you were just abandoned. We spent a lot of time in those first couple of months sorting food out for people, as well as making sure people had electricity. One of our members' housing provider had left them with no water for four days because they didn't understand how to communicate with somebody who was vulnerable, so we had to step in.' [P15, Choir, W1]

The choir manager and volunteers recognised that there was something unique about arts charities which enabled them to step in and fill the gap. *'An organisation like ours works in unofficial way. We're not the social worker or housing association. We're left with a lot more freedom to support people in the way they actually need to be supported, instead of ticking the boxes that these statutory services have to tick.'* [P15, Choir, W1]





3.2. THE IMPORTANCE OF ARTS AND CULTURE FOR MENTAL HEALTH

The participants in our study highlighted the importance of arts and culture for their wellbeing, overall quality of life, building confidence and resilience and connecting with others.

Nature of arts and cultural engagement

The responses to our questionnaire told the story of arts and cultural engagement in LCR during the pandemic. By collecting this data in three waves we were able to track how engagement changed in relation to important shifts in provision due to the pandemic. The results showed that many of the most common reasons for engaging with arts and cultural activities were similar across the three waves: 'to learn' and because 'it makes me feel good', with 'connecting to others' rising higher in W2, and most engagement 'planned' rather than 'spontaneous'. The main barriers across all 3 waves were also similar: not having the time due to other demands and costs of engagement, but unsurprisingly in W1 COVID-19 restrictions were cited as important. In terms of frequency of engagement, we asked about change over time (and since the previous wave). The majority of participants in W1 reported engaging in arts and cultural activity 'often' before lockdown, 'never' during the lockdown and 'rarely' since the initial relaxation of restrictions in the summer of 2020 (see Figure 1).

This continued in W2, with the majority of the participants describing current arts and cultural activity as happening 'never' or 'rarely'. Only in W3 the majority of the participants reported engaging in arts and cultural activity 'sometimes' (40%) or 'rarely' (35%) in the time since W2.

Reduced engagement correlated with negative impacts of COVID-19 such as increased anxiety and feelings of isolation. In W1, the majority (61%) reported some difficulty with undertaking work, taking care of things at home and getting along with other people. This percentage increased slightly in W2 to 62% and then dropped to 50% in W3, when the level of restrictions had decreased and in-person access to some arts and culture became possible again.

Our results highlight the benefits of regular engagement in arts in culture with the data showing that those who engaged in arts and culture frequently during lockdown had significantly higher wellbeing scores than those who engaged in arts and culture 'never' (p=0.002) or 'rarely' (p=0.004) (see Figure 2).

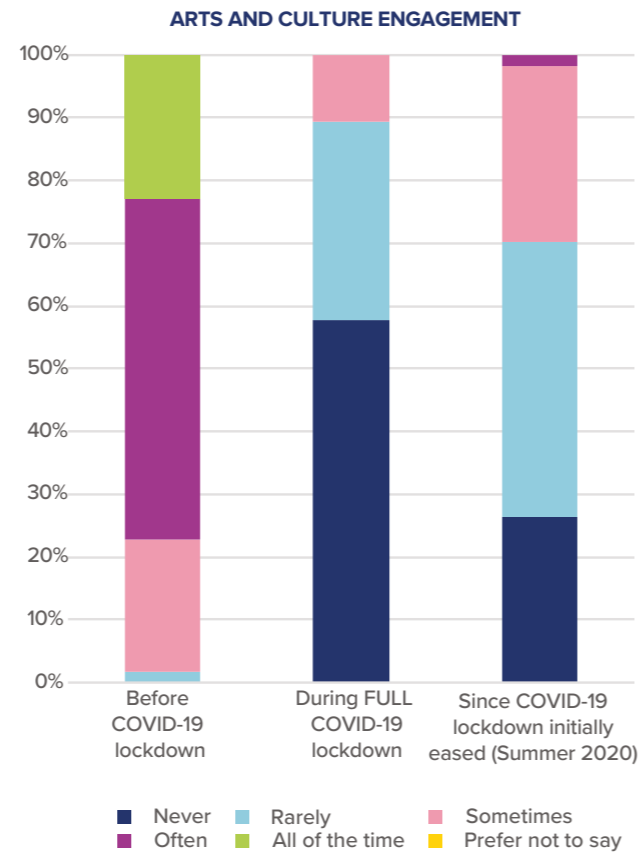


Figure 1: Frequency of engagement during W1

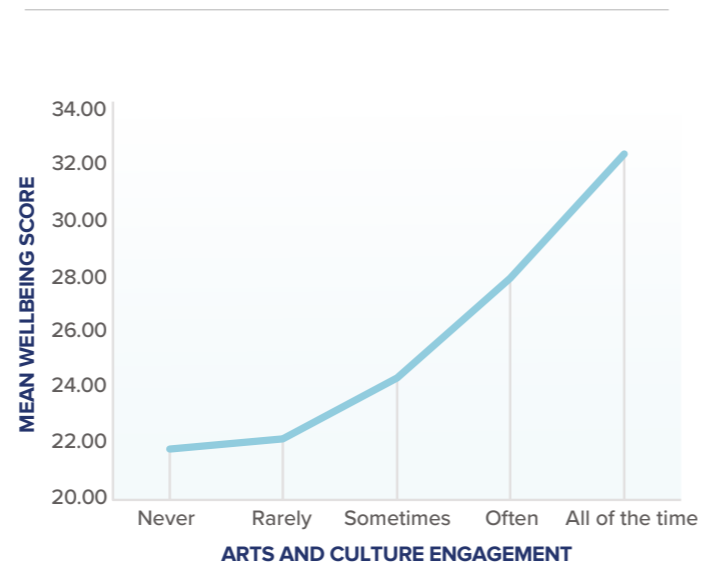


Figure 2: How often have you taken part in arts and cultural activities? (During FULL COVID-19 lockdown)



Value of arts and cultural engagement

These results from the questionnaires were supported by follow-up phone interviews where participants emphasised the value of engaging with arts and culture over time – from helping to maintain general wellbeing and positive mental health to being part of one's sense of personal narrative and identity.

I've just felt sort of half the person I am because of this whole sort of area of me where I'm not finding any expression and just seems to have gone quiet [P10, Arts beneficiary, W1]

There was a sense that the life-long value of arts and culture had led to resilience in the face of adversity, especially for those who continued engaging remotely. This resilience helped during times of particular difficulty with one participant saying:

I'm reaping the benefits now, years later, of things that happened to me in school, things that my family did...those things stayed with them, and they passed them on. So, I'm really, really pleased that I've had that experience that's been there to fall back on [P1, Arts beneficiary, W1]

The observations of the arts providers and practitioners echoed these views. They emphasised how engagement with arts and culture helped beneficiaries maintain positive mental health and wellbeing, provided them with a sense of routine and proved a valuable way to resist some of the pessimistic emotions spawned by COVID-19.

They were using photography as a way to document what was going on for them, and it became quite a cathartic process for quite a lot of them... a therapeutic process to counteract those negative feelings of the lockdown experience [P14, Photography gallery, W1]

Arts providers and practitioners thought that alternative provision of arts and culture had been vital for those who were vulnerable, isolated, or disadvantaged, providing "a lifeline for a lot of people who are stuck at home" [P16, Creative arts organisation supporting writing, W1].

The extent of isolation felt by some beneficiaries illustrated the importance of ongoing provision in people's social life, with online arts providing a buffer against loneliness, especially for those who lived alone with limited opportunities to interact with others, by reducing isolation and providing meaningful activity.

One of the women said to me... that she realised that the week before she hadn't spoken to anybody for a whole week... She found herself talking to the wheelie bin [P21, Photographer, W1]

Customary beneficiaries were explicitly appreciative of the opportunity to interact with others whilst participating in arts activities via digital means and online groups provided a support network and sense of community and togetherness.

Different service users began to really support each other... people were writing about and processing the emotions that were coming up over the course of the pandemic year, whether that was grief or anger at the government or feelings of loneliness... Through talking about each other's work, there was often quite a lot of concern and discussion about shared feelings and shared affects and shared experiences. I think a lot of people value that perhaps more than the actual nature of the writing exercises themselves [P24, Creative writer, W1]

At times when national restrictions were eased, participants reported an increased desire to re-engage with arts and culture in person, as a means to facilitate a heightened need for escapism.

When it was allowed, I thought 'right I'm going down, and I'm going to go to some museums or exhibitions I haven't seen.' I got cheap tickets and a cheap hotel room and I just thought 'just do it' [P4, Arts beneficiary, W1]

The personal gains that participants experienced from engagement with arts and culture throughout life were found to enrich their social connections in similar ways. Before the pandemic, participants had relied upon arts and cultural activities as catalysts for forming deeper connections with close friends and family. These deeper connections followed from a sense that the imaginative creativity required by arts and cultural engagements led to more meaningful shared experiences. The impact of the pandemic meant that participants largely had to emulate these shared cultural experiences through online means.

I enjoy going with people as well, it's a part of who you are to share that experience with someone else...I think that's become more and more clear that I love doing that, I love to be part of an experience with someone else [P3, Arts beneficiary, W1]

Cultural identity

Amongst participants there was a strong sense of pride in belonging to the culture of the LCR due to the strong sense of community that was felt within the region. As one participant noted,

It's been fab talking to people from other cities and from all over the world about how brilliant Liverpool is [laughs]...they're surprised sometimes that Liverpool has so much to offer in terms of so many different aspects of culture [P1, Arts beneficiary, W1]





During the lockdown periods, participants often felt unable to engage with this sense of local culture and community. Instead, they broadly showed a tendency to shift towards a collective feeling which crossed communities, and which was generated by a sense that the difficulties experienced throughout the pandemic transcended cultural identities. This shift towards a wider sense of community was enhanced by participants often finding it easier to engage with arts and cultural events outside of LCR through remote provisions.

“ **The National Theatre live stuff was fabulous but that’s obviously London based. I don’t think I did anything else in Liverpool during the first lockdown** [P6, Arts beneficiary, W1]

However, as local arts and cultural activities began to move online, participants expressed a keenness to re-engage with local services. Due to the sense of familiarity and identity evoked when engaging with local events remotely, it seemed that these opportunities were felt as more enriching.

“ **The Liverpool Phil(harmonic) then started doing their video on-demand concerts, some of those managed to have socially distanced audiences...I could deal with that because they all played on that stage, I know a lot of people in the orchestra anyway quite well. I know the hall, I know what it’s like to sit there, so it didn’t feel as foreign** [P10, Arts beneficiary, W1]

This keenness to re-immers in LCR culture was particularly prominent during times when lockdown restrictions were eased. At those times, participants were keen to re-visit local venues in person and engage with events that held a sense of personal and community relevance within the culture of the region. Simultaneously, they were worried about the impact of the pandemic on local artists and venues.

“ **How many venues, how many bands will still be going? How many theatre companies, how many theatres? How many art galleries? Are they going to be unable now to afford to put on the big hitting exhibitions? There’s so many unknown[s], even your favourite restaurant, is that still going to be there when all of this ends?** [P9, Arts beneficiary, W1]

3.3. CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF ONLINE PROVISION

Challenges

With the majority of engagement opportunities being delivered online during periods of the pandemic, arts beneficiaries reported experiencing access barriers, such as internet connectivity difficulties (e.g., ‘bad’ or ‘fluctuating internet connections’), inaccessible content, limited technological literacy, or Zoom/screen fatigue.

“ **Not everyone has a computer, not everyone has Wi-Fi, they may have data on their phone, but it’s limited in relation to being able to attend an hour or 45-min class that might take up their whole data for the month** [P10, Dance organisation, W1]

When challenges arose during remote engagement, some often chose to drop out of the activity altogether which subsequently hindered their motivation for wider engagement during the pandemic.

“ **I’ve struggled to do workshops and if you’re watching a piece of online theatre it freezes [laughs] and stuff like this, ah it is really irritating** [P3, Arts beneficiary, W1]

Although many arts organisations pivoted to platforms such as Zoom to deliver arts activities, the software’s technological and capacity limitations made its use for certain artistic pursuits, such as music making and choir singing, challenging. This had an impact on the experience of such activities with fewer customary beneficiaries engaging, some reporting emotional difficulties and others describing remote engagement opportunities as a pale imitation of what had previously been available in person, leaving them unfulfilled.

“ **Rather than it being a choir, hearing each other’s voices, singing together, singing in harmony, what we effectively have is our choir director singing, and we all have to be on mute because of the feedback issues that Zoom has** [P15, Choir, W1]

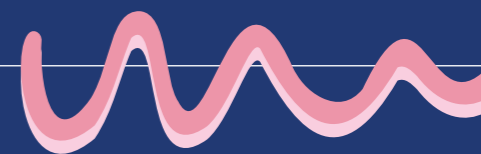
As a result, certain populations became out of reach or hard to reach. These included refugees, asylum seekers, street-based sex workers, younger and older populations.

“ **Our younger audiences... have probably struggled the most because although they may be more likely to have the physical online tools and know how to engage, there’s been a barrier in terms of... just struggling with what’s going on in general, and... if they’re young people that are also in education at the time their entire education had moved online as well. So (as) they were already spending all day online being taught, the thought of them doing something on a weekend or on an evening online probably was the last thing that they had in mind** [P14, Photography gallery, W1]

Digital exclusion affected not only access to arts provision but also the communication of information about it. The impact was two-way as it was similarly impossible to gauge how many usual beneficiaries accessed certain online services such as Facebook live streaming.

Safeguarding in digital spaces became an important issue that required a lot of urgent attention and thought, especially for sessions delivered for vulnerable populations in collaboration with health care providers. Most organisations devised a formal set of guidelines or ground rules, which were introduced to participants at the start of each Zoom session.

“ **They (the Life Rooms) have quite set rules for it and they go up on a slide at the beginning of the session. Most of them are what you might expect so please don’t come if you’re drinking or under the influence of drugs, don’t smoke or vape on the camera, be respectful. Make sure you’re the only person in the room and that people can’t be seen because obviously there’s safeguarding issues there** [P24, Creative writer, W1]



Arts providers and practitioners highlighted a sense of loss in respect of the wider experiences surrounding arts and culture. This ranged from struggling to recreate the important social aspects of in-person provision to losing the personal connection and direct intimacy of meeting, which made identifying signs of distress, or silently providing comfort or support when the right language was hard to find or say, problematic.

“ **I think we are getting better at creating (social time) within interventions and workshops and performances but that’s been the biggest hurdle I think to overcome, the cup-of-tea time, the let’s have a biscuit together and find out how everybody is, because time feels a little bit more under pressure online** [P11, Theatre, W1]

Similarly, most participants reported missing the depth of connection with others in the audience and with the artists themselves that was felt when engaging together in physical creative spaces. Specifically, the liveness that resulted in physical spaces created a sense of shared emotional contagion, enhancing both the personal and social benefits of the experience.

“ **I went to see the giants in Liverpool with my mum... we just caught the end bit, and we’ve got a video of us absolutely laughing and making the best time of it, it was just so magnificent, and I think in that moment everyone just felt this sense of like elation, and joy, and celebration** [P3, Arts beneficiary, W1]

There was a sense of physical separation, which hindered the ability to feel moved together or personally within a shared experience.

“ **Say if it’s a concert, with the band themselves, when they’re talking to the audience or they’re singing a particular song, you sort of bounce off the reaction of the people on the stage as well as the people in the crowd. So, that goes then. So, it feels a little bit empty** [P8, Arts beneficiary, W1]

Benefits

Despite these challenges, participants found value in the ability to learn new skills that enabled digital creativity and networking through the distribution of creative content via social networking services. Social media platforms also provided an accessible way to re-engage with arts and culture within one’s personal social networks.

“ **About four of my friends...we all started watching national theatre [laughs] online together on a Thursday night. So, we just made a point of Thursday national theatre online, and we’d all have a little WhatsApp group, and we would just pass comments** [P4, Arts beneficiary, W1]

More generally online provision offered opportunities to take on new perspectives and experiment with forms of arts and culture which participants may not have otherwise accessed. It also helped build self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment and created the digital know-how and confidence to access other forms of support or opportunities.

“ **It’s just being exposed to it, it’s what culture does, isn’t it? It exposes you to different sounds, to different thoughts, to different experiences, to different visuals. It helps you grow, and keep adding more outlook I suppose, because you’re being open to new ideas and new ways of expression all the time** [P9, Arts beneficiary, W1]

From the point of view of arts organisations, an advantage of online provision was the flexibility it offered, allowing them to reach new audiences, including people previously unable to attend in person due to health, social anxiety, location, or caring responsibilities. ‘The Reader at Home’, for example, made it possible for first-time beneficiaries to experience shared reading online.

“ **We have seen increases in certain pockets. For example, I have quite a bit of feedback from people saying that a mobility issue or perhaps even living with anxiety or lack of confidence would have previously inhibited them from coming along to a group in a public setting** [P3, Shared reading organisation, W1]

This resulted in a greater diversity of beneficiaries, and also enabled arts organisations to draw on a wider pool of resources, such as practitioners living in different cities as well as countries. This, in turn, enhanced their offer:

“ **I think how the festival turned out online... is just a huge, huge success bringing national and international writers to a virtual stage in Liverpool was huge and the audience numbers, people obviously want that conversation and that debate... Will change the way that we work forever** [P16, Creative arts organisation supporting writing, W1]

Some participants appreciated how arts providers were finding new ways to maximise available services and methods of connecting people to arts and culture from home. In this way, remote opportunities became an interesting and unique way to connect with arts and culture.

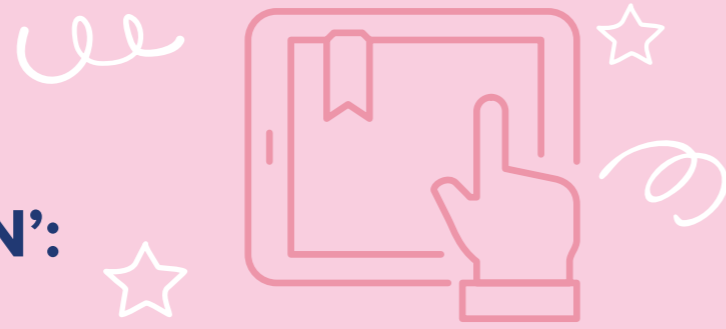
“ **So, it was our job to kind of act as investigators... we would use Google maps to sort of help unravel everything...we’d all be talking on Zoom and then there would be someone in the chat function from the company who were hosting this event saying ‘I’ve got another clue for you.’ ...they had really thought about how that platform benefited your experience. It wasn’t like, ‘just use Zoom and forget you’re on Zoom.’ It was all integrated** [P3, Arts beneficiary, W1]





CASE STUDY

‘OUT OF CRISIS COMES INNOVATION’: DIGITAL PROVISION



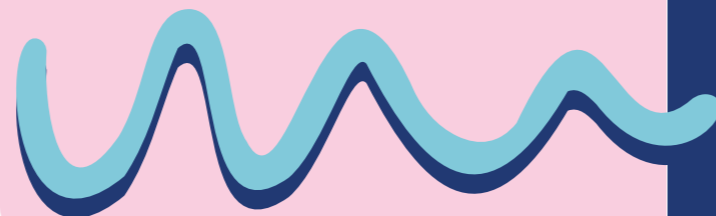
The speed of the pivot to online provision was remarkable as LCR’s arts and cultural sector rapidly created new activities or adapted existing programmes. At the onset of lockdown, organisations across the sector assiduously sought to secure funds to ensure connectivity among their members, recognising that this was as basic a requirement in overcoming social isolation as food was for survival, especially in cases of digital poverty.

The online access to arts and cultural activity was vital for those who were vulnerable, isolated or disadvantaged and at risk of psychological ill health. Time and again, beneficiaries described alternative provision as ‘a lifeline’ and as their ‘life blood’. Online arts activities ‘opened a locked door, letting in some light into what was a very dark time for me. I personally wouldn’t have made it through lockdown without this activity’ [P6, Arts beneficiary, W1]. ‘One of the women in my group said that she didn’t think that she would have survived lockdown and actually, she’s found a new passion and she’s found a way to make sense of the noise in our heads’ [P16, Creative arts organisation supporting writing, W1].

Online arts provided a sense of routine ‘When lockdown started, my life stopped, and normality stopped. The digital programme has given me structure and purpose’ [P6, Arts beneficiary, W1] as well as a crucial buffer against loneliness. ‘We found that people who were engaging in a session were literally waiting a week to be able to have live interaction with people’ [P6, Theatre, W1]. ‘I really look forward to it and when the names come up on the screen it’s just a lovely, lovely feeling. You feel like you are not alone’ [P6, Arts beneficiary, W1].

‘It gives you a focus, especially when you are alone and you know you will see people and you are not in silence’ [P6, Arts beneficiary, W1]. *‘It was a highlight of my week getting a call...it has been a salvation during this time’* (Homeless person, now isolated in a hotel room) [P9, Arts beneficiary, W1].

An initiative by a city centre museum has used the success of its virtual offer as an impetus to develop a ‘social’ digital experience through community outreach. The ‘House of Memories’ app – based on museum-based activities (memory walks, boxes, suitcases, artefacts) supporting carers and families of people with dementia - was launched even before COVID-19 struck, but the number of users increased to tens of thousands during the first lockdown. The app engaged people from a wider, culturally diverse society of elders, not only those living with dementia, and led to the development of new dual-language content, involving young people in the Yemeni community in Liverpool digitising traditional community stories from their grandparents’ cultural heritage in both English and Yemeni-Arabic. The success of the app inspired House of Memories On the Road, a mobile version of the digital experience, in the form of a 30 square metre, immersive cinema and activity exhibition space, taking digital arts, music and heritage experiences into local communities. On the Road offers immersive walks through local landmarks, a trip on Liverpool’s overhead railway, a visit to a 1950s grocery store, and a 1930s wash day, complete with smells and objects to touch, so as to stimulate elders’ sensory responses and memory. Setting out for the first time in September 2021, when COVID restrictions were still in place, On the Road, drove into residential and dementia care settings and other networks where elders meet, working with community partners to identify those neighbourhoods or groups of elders who are the most socially isolated and experiencing loneliness. ‘We can drive,’ says House of Memories’ founder, ‘into local spaces, hospital trust settings, a GP car park or a supermarket. The idea is that we bring the museum to you, where you are... We can target specific groups and that makes On the Road a really responsive and versatile resource.’ [P2, Museum, W2]



3.4. THE ‘NEW NORMAL’ AND ADJUSTING TO IT

Rebuilding confidence and resilience

The return to in-person events has proven to be both a challenging and an exciting adjustment. During the initial transitional period of returning to live events, many beneficiaries reported having not yet been able to return to their pre-pandemic levels of engagement even as the restrictions were lifted. The sense of loss of arts and culture as a vital part of their identity remained a challenge, as well as the presence of a long-term detrimental effect of the pandemic on their motivation, particularly when planning an event out.

‘I still love looking at stuff and planning stuff. I haven’t done that. Well, I stopped doing that completely, which is... A little part of my life has changed. Hopefully, it will come back? Definitely’ [P5, Arts beneficiary, W3]

Once arts beneficiaries were able to engage in arts and culture in person again, they reported that this experience, even if stressful at first, allowed them to gradually regain confidence to attend other in person events and helped them become more resilient. As one respondent put it, *‘I think it’s really been a good thing for me because it’s sort of got me into a better place, I think, to be able to handle what’s going to be a sort of unusual state of things to come, you know, and to sort of make that transition. I think it’s really helped actually’* [P6, Arts beneficiary, W3].

Participants talked about re-engaging in person with arts and culture as an opportunity to reconnect with their personal networks, highlighting the emotional aspect of being together again, as well as seeing other people enjoy arts and culture. In some cases, the social aspect was seen as even taking precedence: *‘I think being with people topped the lot’* [P3, Arts beneficiary, W3]

Resuming in-person events was also an opportunity to meet new people and make new connections with others while enjoying arts and culture together in a shared space. It was also a chance to be physically closer to other members of the audience. Some arts beneficiaries reported that this allowed them to feel more ‘normal’, closer to the usual pre-pandemic experience of a live event.

‘There was no distance in between the chairs or anything like that it was literally you were all just sitting together. And that was really nice, and more what you would expect’ [P4, Arts beneficiary, W3]

At the same time, in-person arts and cultural engagement helped *‘to build a sense of routine and a sense of purpose’* [P4, Concert hall, W2], which is an important consideration for people experiencing mental health difficulties. It provided an opportunity to interact, connect with others, and obtain social support, thereby boosting community connectedness and a sense of collective healing.

‘Nothing beats that in-person connection... One of the groups lost someone during the pandemic and had they have been coming to in-person classes, they would have been able to deal with it together, and I think it’s quite healing for them to all be together again’ [P1, Dance organisation, W2]

Reflecting on the first in-person gatherings following the conclusion of lockdown arts providers and practitioners similarly described them as ‘absolutely joyous’ and a ‘celebration’, echoing the feelings of elation and excitement related to their first live events after the easing of restrictions reported by arts beneficiaries.

‘When that live recording weekend happened, which was the last weekend of August, I can’t tell you it was just like a big party. It was just like the joy, the over joy of the young people getting back with each other was just something really, really special’ [P9, Musician, W2]

Overall, these views and perceptions attest to a greater appreciation of the humanising and connective power of arts and culture, particularly a renewed sense of their value for processing the trauma and the negative emotions spawned by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as for overall health. Both arts beneficiaries and arts and cultural organisations spoke about this:

‘It’s an opportunity to reflect on the last 18 months as well because when you’re in it, you can’t really see what it is. But when you look back on it, it has been such a massive thing in people’s lives. It’s not you open the door and go outside and suddenly it’s all better; you’ve been through quite a traumatic experience. So, there’s an element of recovery I think that’s going on at the moment, which is slow’ [P7, Theatre, W2]

‘People need the arts. It’s not a luxury or a privilege. It’s a necessity to function in life... Especially when people don’t have an outlet, they can’t go out, their normal day-to-day lives have completely changed, our lifestyle has changed and so it was found that dance was essential for their wellbeing’ [P23, Dance organisation, W1]

Arts beneficiaries also continued to express strong appreciation for local culture, particularly for the cultural scene in LCR. They reported appreciating arts and culture even more, becoming more aware of the opportunities that they used to take for granted.

‘We are blessed, because we’ve got a pretty good cultural offer in the Liverpool City Region...There’s so much on the doorstep, it is great. And it’s dead easy to access, and it’s really important’ [P1, Arts beneficiary, W3]





Re-adjusting to in-person format

Another increased awareness is in relation to the need to support local venues, as one participant put it, *“You know you don’t know how long things are going to be around and if you don’t support things, they might close down”* [P4, Arts beneficiary, W3]. Participants were prepared to travel for arts and culture after the easing of restrictions as a way of catching up on the opportunities missed during the pandemic. Many reported that the pandemic had blurred the divide between the local and the global arts and cultural providers, offering new opportunities to create connections with like-minded people globally, as well as providing access to content worldwide.

Many arts beneficiaries, however, reported that social distancing measures and larger better-ventilated spaces are preferable because of safety concerns. Some felt apprehensive, particularly the elderly and those with underlying health conditions. Amongst customary beneficiaries, there remained a sense of caution, anxiety and risk around re-engaging in person, particularly in indoor spaces:

“As we’ve gone to larger groups and restrictions have eased off a little bit where we can do that [referring to in-person provision], there is definitely still an anxiety to doing that and a mixture of energies in the room from those who are anxious about returning and those who are incredibly enthusiastic. That juxtaposition of attitudes can create sometimes not the most smoothest running session I think in these new COVID times” [P10, Music organisation, W2]



Risk assessment was reported as an important part of returning to in-person events. In July 2021 some participants continued to talk about attending live indoor events as a risk both to their health and wellbeing, as well as to their being absent from work and, as a result, struggling financially. Using public transport was seen as a stressful experience that participants would prefer to avoid. Therefore, the return to in-person engagement was cautious and often described as ‘a gradual easing back in’ with some reporting not feeling ready to return yet. Even those who had returned to in-person engagement, expressed wariness.

“And we met for a coffee in an outside cafe beforehand. And then we had coffee afterwards outside again. And I did notice that I enjoyed the second coffee much more than I enjoyed the first coffee. Because the first coffee I was... It was just a bit of kind of butterflies in my tummy. I suppose it was low-grade anxiety” [P5, Arts beneficiary, W3]

Despite these high levels of uncertainty and cautiousness for some, certain required aspects of the logistics of these first in-person events were assessed as positives. For example, the venue-related restrictions, in particular the limited audience numbers, created the intimate atmosphere usually experienced at smaller venues. As one participant noted, *“The chairs were laid out, you know, in like, little groups, but there were more people there because it’s smaller, it was more of a cosier feeling anyway”* [P1, Arts beneficiary, W3].

The overall experience was described as more relaxing and less busy. Queues and crowds were avoided because of the requirement of a timed ticket in art galleries, and the quality of the activity was enhanced because those engaged had to focus more and listen to each other due to the social distancing.

“In some ways, it’s been nicer. Like the thing about booking to go to galleries and stuff, which you have to do now, is actually sometimes it works out better, because you know, there’s not going to be great big queues in front of something, or you’re not going to be waiting for ages. And so, in some ways that’s nicer because you can plan things a little bit better” [P4, Arts beneficiary, W3]

Returning to in-person provision

Given these different attitudes, some arts organisations offered engagement opportunities in alternative spaces - outdoor areas, libraries, supermarket car parks. Some organisations viewed this as an opportunity to engage new audiences, as engagement in streets or parks may feel more accessible to those who do not feel comfortable accessing arts venues or unfamiliar arts forms.

“We’re actually [doing] the men’s group and the women’s group outdoors... We just thought it’d be a nice way to celebrate dance and celebrate being together, but just do it in an open space and see if anyone else wants to join in” [P1, Dance organisation, W2]

New collaborations, such as those between museums and local authorities, created new ways of working to support vulnerable, marginalised, or isolated members of communities. Taken together, the focus was not on returning to ‘normal’ provision, but instead on finding ways to adapt or reimagine conventional provision. This included exploring creative means of integrating online and in person provisions, which afforded beneficiaries (as well as practitioners) the option of attending a session either in person or remotely. In some cases, online provision was perceived as an enabler to people engaging in in-person provision - a ‘springboard’ or ‘steppingstone’ (P3, Theatre, W2), allowing people to engage in arts activities online before transferring to in-person provision.

“I think we have learned that a blend of both in-person and online activity is beneficial to provide a range of points of access for people to participate on their terms, so that they have choice” [P4, Concert hall, W2]

These adaptations and changes, however, presented a variety of challenges. For example, lack of funds and staff redundancies rendered some arts organisations (both civic and grass roots) unable to operate at full capacity following the easing of restrictions.

“Because we lost some staff, we don’t have enough people to meet demand. We’d love to be open as often and for as long as we could be during the week, but we’re still scaled back... just because we just don’t have the bodies to be there” [P1, Dance organisation, W2]

Returning to in-person provision also created many practical and logistical issues. Co-ordinating in-person projects in the new COVID world led to new, additional concerns for arts providers around changing COVID rules and regulations, given the different feelings and attitudes towards the restrictions and the pandemic. These complexities were further amplified as many practitioners either tested positive for COVID-19 or received notification of the need to self-isolate (in accordance with the COVID rules at the time), which led to staff shortages, venue closures, and/or cancellations.

“We had a show on at the Playhouse called Love Liverpool, which was a socially distanced rehearsal and performance, and yet still two of the members of the cast got COVID so we had to cancel the show. I think probably every show is at risk of that” [P3, Theatre, W2]

Many arts providers work in partnership with health and social care providers in LCR. The many challenges facing these providers hindered the return to in-person provision of arts interventions in health and social care settings. As these institutions have their own complexities and COVID measures to navigate and adhere to, arts provision did not commence in all health and social care settings immediately, despite the easing of restrictions.

“A lot of the delays were from partner organisations whose populations weren’t quite ready to go back to in person, or they didn’t feel ready... because of risk or logistics or a combination of both... [NHS Hospital], where the [shared reading] group is usually held, are... having some issues with the room, and the consultant who oversees the commission is very, very keen to be careful with the risk, particularly with winter coming” [P8, Shared reading organisation, W2]

Navigating the realities of hybrid work was highlighted as ‘challenging’, particularly in relation to uncertainties surrounding winter months and amid concerns of staff burnout. The financial futures of many arts organisations seemed uncertain. Much resource is squandered as creative practitioners and small organisations spend time applying for small amounts of funding when they could be using their skills to benefit local communities. Despite showing their value during the pandemic, arts organisations were concerned about future funding, highlighting that funding regimes nationally need to change.

“I think the arts and culture sector have played a huge role in supporting people’s health and wellbeing during the pandemic. It seems that that has now been recognised more widely by the public and by the government. I hope that that recognition continues and is met with increased funding for the arts and cultural sector to use its skills and resources to support the health and wellbeing of people in communities” [P4, Concert hall, W2]





CASE STUDY

‘LIVERPOOL HAS BEEN COMMENDED FOR THE WAY THAT WE COLLABORATE’: WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

The partnership working between arts organisations and health care providers during the pandemic was particularly valuable. A civic concert hall, for example, which had been working for over a decade with an NHS Trust on a music in mental health programme reached its vulnerable beneficiaries exclusively through the health care provider.

‘We ran weekly and fortnightly Zoom sessions, reaching far more wards than would usually come to the hall and reaching them more frequently. We set up “music for mums and little ones” sessions on Zoom, in collaboration with the Trust’s perinatal mental health service – and held Zoom sessions in secure hospitals for people who were sectioned under the Mental Health Act. While it took time to secure the necessary NHS approvals to run these activities, the efforts were very worthwhile. NHS staff told us how much the patients enjoyed and benefited from those activities, interacting with others, expressing their thoughts and feelings, and experiencing improved mood... The staff also reported changes in the ward environment describing a happy warm atmosphere with patients feeling calmer, more positive and having more fun.’ [P4, Concert hall, W2]

By contrast, a city centre theatre which had begun a partnership with the same NHS Trust just before the onset of the pandemic, set up a version of this model in reverse.

‘At the very start of lockdown, the NHS Trust wasn’t allowed to use Zoom because of governance issues. So, we changed our partnership so that we, the theatre, took the lead, with the NHS Trust as a supporting partner, so that they could signpost service users to us. The theatre continued work using the Trust’s inclusive and participatory ethos, though officially, we couldn’t use the NHS badge.’

The offer we had really helped people to maintain their mental health and wellbeing or prevent them from going into crisis. What’s been really wonderful about the feedback we’ve received is that people have really progressed as well - people who were isolated or shielding and not able to leave their house. We could see when people really needed support and help – suddenly losing benefits or getting ill - and identify where safeguarding was necessary.

What’s amazing is that actually when, months later, the Trust began to pilot its own digital platform, with live interactive Zoom sessions, we were able to partner them to support this process. And so it’s just flipped, the Trust is responsible for the platform and we are providing creative wellbeing sessions.’ [P6, Theatre, W1]

These two partnership models - each a ‘flipped’ version of the other - show two sectors under considerable strain imaginatively and maximally pooling their resources to address the dire needs of the local population.



3.5. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Considerations around inclusion and accessibility

Our findings suggest that patterns of engagement might change long-term, and this will have implications for arts and cultural organisations in the future. The data showed clearly that when restrictions were lifted some beneficiaries preferred face-to-face provision and sharing an experience together in a physical space. They regarded this as irreplaceable and not possible to be supplanted satisfactorily by digital engagement.

‘Nothing will replace real life. That’s something I’m a bit scared about in a way, that humanity won’t be lost with all these successes of delivering online. There are so many positives, but I hope it won’t impact on all this crucial human experience that we all need’ [P18, Musician, W1]

At the same time others favoured the digital alternative, suggesting that a ‘one size fits all’ strategy may not be appropriate following the pandemic and that online provision retains its importance and significance. This is particularly the case for vulnerable people who could participate from their home where they felt comfortable and not restrained for physical or personal reasons.

‘There is a group of people who are absolutely desperate to get back in the studio, and a group of people who love the online provision and have found it fits really well into their lifestyle’ [P22, Dance organisation, W2]

Indeed, some participants expressed concerns for vulnerable friends and family and awareness of putting them at risk when attending in-person events. The value of maintaining online and hybrid provision to ensure inclusivity, particularly in the colder months of the winter when the opportunity for outdoor events will be limited, was identified.

‘And, you know, whatever happens in September, we’re ready to go inside again, in a bigger space, but it may well be that some of those people still feel vulnerable. So, we might find ourselves continuing to do some alternatives on Zoom. I don’t know, we have to see how it goes. But what we don’t want to do is to exclude anybody, because they feel uncomfortable’ [P6, Arts beneficiary, W3]

Navigating online content

The approach to hybrid provision among participants appeared to be selective and more functional. In particular, arts beneficiaries tended to use online resources to seek information about arts and cultural events. They preferred social media for these purposes, which might be an incentive for arts and cultural organisations to use their social media platforms more:

‘Well, I did use some websites of institutions, some of them are good. But more and more I go to social media for information, so you know, on Facebook, you know, I’m more likely to see a link to whatever and then just go to websites, instead of going straight to the website and find where the thing is’ [P1, Arts beneficiary, W3]

While online provision is regarded as preferable for professional development, in terms of arts engagement, this still remains a matter of choice. Some arts and cultural activities are regarded as more suited to online provision while others are more difficult to replicate online.

‘So, the theatrical productions are good to watch online, but it can’t beat the experience of going to watch actors in the theatre. Cinema... I could take it or leave it. It’s easier watching it at home. Art, I would rather go to an art gallery to appreciate it, rather than looking at it online. So, I think online is good, in some ways. It’s filled a gap. But it’s only a small piece of it’ [P1, Arts beneficiary, W3]

The future of hybrid provision

Given the benefits of digital provision, such as inclusivity and accessibility, arts and cultural organisations see it as an advantageous addition to service as usual. They intend to provide both in-person and digital moving forward, showing that the latter is now an intrinsic part of strategic decision-making.

‘There are good reasons to do digital provision anyway as people have issues with mobility and other sorts of vulnerability that mean they can’t necessarily attend in situ sessions. But I think going forward, I think the new will be to have both in situ and digital sessions because they complement each other, and I’m not sure necessarily that it’ll be the same people using both. So, in that respect, I’d say it has maybe transformed delivery’ [P24, Creative writer, W1]

The Life Rooms online learning offer provided by an NHS Trust will also be available following the pandemic, enabling a number of creative and cultural organisations to continue to deliver their creative offer via this platform.

‘What we realised is that going forward, both organisations [arts organisation and NHS Trust] have made a commitment [to working] in this way. We need hybrid programmes. We need live and digital’ [P6, Theatre, W1]

As organisations planned for a rebalanced provision with greater online capacity, many arts providers were acutely aware of the need to evaluate ‘what is working’ for the populations they serve.

‘We’re carrying out a COVID special evaluation in October, getting some feedback from our volunteers and group members as much as we can get in touch with them about what’s worked well, what hasn’t, what they miss, what they want...I think the real review actually is once you’ve got a core temporary model’ [P3, Shared reading organisation, W1]





This more granular focus has gone hand in hand with a more strategic emphasis on using the evidence from the pandemic, which has demonstrated that solutions beyond medical interventions are essential to ensure that people lead healthy lives. Arts providers and practitioners in LCR have spoken of a new era for social prescribing:

“The hope would be that COVID has given us some really good evidence and really good understanding of how arts and culture are absolutely crucial as the social asset to sit alongside clinical intervention/ NHS provision. To live well lives, we have to have positive experiences, and the NHS is there to help us when we're unwell but to remain well in the rest of our lives that's where arts and culture can play a massive role... [P2, Museum, W2]

They highlighted the importance of adequate funding and appropriate training, stressing the need of investment:

“We could really benefit from increased funding from the government around social prescribing and around arts embedded in different NHS settings.

I fear that arts is lower on the list of funding priorities, despite its proven benefits
[P4, Concert hall, W2]

NHS systems are under increasing, unsustainable pressure. In the context of rising demand and limited resources, joined up working between the arts and health sectors and a clear policy steer is crucial.

“In terms of arts and wellbeing work, especially mental health, it's going to be just so significantly important, how we can work better with the health sector to ensure the huge beneficial effects that arts have on wellbeing. There's a lot of potential actually for developing and really prioritising that work, especially in schools and in areas of high social deprivation.... So, I think there's an exciting opportunity to think outside the box and to think more about how the arts and health sector work more closely together [P3, Theatre, W2]

4 Conclusions

4.1. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Data from semi-structured interviews and surveys with 15 civic/community arts organisations on the successes/ challenges of digital provision, and with audiences and beneficiaries on the mental health impacts of restricted/ alternative access to arts/culture, showed that

- ▶ **arts and culture have been essential - 'a lifeline' - in addressing social isolation during lockdown**
- ▶ **online provision has made the arts accessible to new populations at risk of mental health issues**
- ▶ **those who accessed arts/culture during lockdown had significantly higher levels of wellbeing**
- ▶ **there is a strong appetite among vulnerable people for continued digital provision.**

However, many at-risk people remained out of reach due to digital exclusion, and a key finding is that arts organisations which worked closely with health partners had most success in reaching vulnerable people in LCR.

4.2. LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Support sustainable partnerships between health and arts providers

Building on successful cross-sectoral co-operation between arts and cultural organisations and regional health and social care providers will facilitate wider provision and maximise the value and reach of these services, as well as producing new opportunities for training care staff to deliver interventions.

2 Co-ordinate local initiatives

Arts and cultural organisations need to co-ordinate services and share best practice, pulling together the talents, experience and good will of local initiatives in meeting essential needs so that they can be scaled up and targeted more efficiently.

3 Maintain alternative/hybrid provision of arts and cultural activity

Hybrid offerings are critical both for rebuilding capacity in the creative industries, and for the mental health of the region's population, enabling inclusive accessibility for vulnerable people alongside in-person events that boost community connectedness.

4 Train all stakeholders in digital knowhow

There is an urgent need to evaluate which online arts and cultural services are working, why and for whom they are working, and to provide skilling-up of both workforce and beneficiaries. This is just as essential as the provision of equipment and internet access.

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