

# Impact of creative & cultural activity during the pandemic on loneliness, isolation & wellbeing

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## 1. Introduction

This report summarises the findings of a ‘light touch’ evaluation conducted by [Imogen Blood & Associates](#) (IBA), in partnership with [Thinking Practice](#). The evaluation explored the impact and implementation learning from short-term funding provided during the Covid-19 pandemic to 50 existing arts and cultural projects, with the aim of reducing loneliness and isolation, and improving wellbeing.

The *Arts Council England Strategy 2020-2030* commits to maintaining and building social ties through creative and cultural activity, with the aim of improving wellbeing and increasing social connectedness. Though the UK Government *Loneliness Strategy*<sup>1</sup> briefly alludes to art-based activities and resources committed to this end, the findings of this evaluation offer a valuable contribution by exploring, in more detail, the impact of arts and cultural activities on reducing loneliness, isolation and improving wellbeing.

### 1.1. Overview of the programme

A total of £1.5 million<sup>2</sup> was provided by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), and administered by Arts Council England (ACE) to 50<sup>3</sup> projects in January 2021. Applications for funding were invited from and limited to projects that were already being funded by ACE through their national funded programmes, Creative People & Places and Celebrating Age. Creative People and Places projects received a flat rate of £31,000 and Celebrating Age projects received a flat rate of £28,928. The funding was part of a wider £750 million charities’ package announced in May 2020 from the DCMS and the Office for Civil Society (OCS) Covid Response Funds.

The funding covered activities running between February and June 2021 and was intended to cover the delivery of new activities specifically addressing loneliness and social isolation resulting from the impact of Covid-19. The objective of the grant was to provide immediate, targeted relief to those most at risk of loneliness, with the intention that, through creative and cultural activity, participants would experience at least two of the following outcomes:

- Would feel less lonely
- Would feel less isolated
- Would feel more connected to their community
- Would have a sense of belonging
- Would have increased wellbeing

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<sup>1</sup>HM Government (2019) *Loneliness Annual Report: The First Year*. London: The Stationery Office. [Online]. Available at:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/858909/Loneliness\\_Annual\\_Report\\_-\\_The\\_First\\_Year.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/858909/Loneliness_Annual_Report_-_The_First_Year.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> NB: Additionally, a single grant of £3.5 million was made to the Reading Agency: Reading Well and Reading Friends; this is not covered in this evaluation

<sup>3</sup> Initially 50 projects were funded, however due to various Covid related issues only 48 projects delivered and completed activity 45 of these submitted data.

We have produced a timeline which summarises the changing Covid-19 restrictions which were in place during the lifespan of the funded projects. Please see [Appendix A](#).

The funded activities are described in more detail in section 2.

## 1.2. Overview of eligible funded programmes

**Creative People and Places** focuses on parts of the country where involvement in arts and culture is significantly below the national average. Developed by ACE with an initial investment of £37 million from the National Lottery, the first phase of the programme ran between 2013 and 2016. ACE supported a second phase of the programme which ran from 2016 and invested a further £17 million to deliver new activity over an additional three years, as well as investing in 6 new projects. In 2021, ACE announced that Creative People and Places had become part of the National Portfolio for the period 2022-2025. There are 30 independent Creative People and Places projects working in 33 places across England, 22 of which were awarded additional DCMS funding for this initiative.

**Celebrating Age** is a £3 million programme of funding run jointly by ACE and the Baring Foundation, originally running from March 2017 to March 2021, but with extensions granted to some projects as a result of the pandemic to early 2022. The programme aims to support cultural spaces and organisations working collaboratively, in partnership or as a consortium, to take arts and culture to places where older people find it easier to engage, and/or to support arts and cultural spaces to be open, positive and welcoming places for older people. ACE and the Baring Foundation funded 31 Celebrating Age projects over two funding rounds, the majority of which had completed their funding period at the time of the DCMS initiative which enabled 28 projects to continue or develop their programmes.

## 1.3. Evaluation methods

The activities undertaken to evaluate the DCMS funded initiative are:

### **Project-level monitoring data**

Data capturing the activities and number of engagements from each project was collected by ACE via Qualtrics and shared with IBA for analysis.

### **Participant-level data**

This information was collected in two ways: through an online Diversity and Wellbeing Survey and from follow up interviews with project participants.

### *Survey*

The survey included questions about participant engagement with projects, their protected characteristics<sup>4</sup>, and a set of questions exploring the impact of engagement on their connections, sense of belonging, wellbeing and loneliness. Standardised and validated measures used in longitudinal national population surveys were adapted to enable the measurement of perceptions of loneliness, isolation, belonging and wellbeing. Our methodological approach is described in more detail in [Appendix B](#).

Projects were asked to promote the survey amongst their participants for online completion and to provide support to complete it where necessary. Online and paper formats were provided to overcome potential digital exclusion. The survey ran from 13<sup>th</sup> April to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021, and responses were received from 48 of the funded projects, with a total of 1,444 responses received.

Over 90% of the responses came from participants and audience members, with volunteers making up 3.5%. The remainder included responses from facilitators, artists and those who were involved in planning and organising the activities.

### *Follow up interviews*

Projects were asked to (securely) supply contact details for participants who were willing to be contacted by an IBA researcher to conduct a short telephone interview. Having obtained informed consent, IBA interviewed a total of 9 people (7 individuals and one couple) with participants from 7 projects. The topic guide for these interviews can be found in [Appendix B](#).

### *Peer learning with projects*

We invited one representative from each funded project to attend one of four short online peer learning discussions, which took place in late June 2021. Each session included a mix of Celebrating Age and Creative People and Places grantees to enable sharing across the two programmes. In total, 45 professionals attended the sessions.

Through a mix of break out activities and all group discussions, these sessions enabled projects to reflect on whether and how they have been able to reach diverse people experiencing loneliness; and whether and how they believe they have been able to make an impact on their loneliness and wellbeing. The groups also shared practice learning regarding the opportunities and limitations presented by digital, socially distanced and/or blended approaches to arts and cultural practice and how these can impact on loneliness and wellbeing.

## 1.4. Structure of the findings

The findings from these activities are presented in the following sections:

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<sup>4</sup> This covers self-reported matters such as age, gender, sexuality

- **Section 2** focuses on the outputs from the programme, describing the funded activities and those engaged.
- **Section 3** considers the evidence of impact on loneliness, isolation and wellbeing gathered by the evaluation.
- **Section 4** summarises the key themes of learning from implementation, collected during the peer learning discussion groups.
- **Section 5** draws together the implications for future policy, practice and research from the findings.

## 2. Outputs from the funding: activities and participants

### 2.1. Project level data

According to monitoring data, there were a total of 179,041<sup>5</sup> engagements. The total engagement figure includes participants plus physical audience members, digital audience members and live-to-digital audience members and is not a unique count of individuals engaged. As some participants may have engaged in more than one activity, an estimated participant figure of 29,897 is a closer approximation of individuals engaged.

Of the funded projects, 45 supplied data about the primary art forms used across their activities. The table below shows the number of projects that utilised a particular art form. Although Literature, Music, Combined Arts and Visual Arts were most popular, there was a wide range of disciplines within the programme.

Primary art form	Number of projects	Number of Activities
Combined arts	20	43
Visual arts	20	57
Craft	16	39
Dance	18	18
Digital	10	15
Literature	21	33
Theatre	8	15
Music	19	30
Other	13	15
Outdoor art	5	7
Film	2	2
Public Art	2	3
Museum/Gallery	3	4

72% of projects reported conducting all of their engagements remotely (i.e., not at an arts venue or location). Online methods were commonly reported, but telephone, post and doorstep delivery and/or performances were also widely used.

<sup>5</sup> This figure is based on the final engagement figures submitted by 45 of the participating projects. Five projects did not submit data.

Projects worked with a substantial number of partner organisations. According to the ACE monitoring survey, 41 projects worked with a total of 518 partners, an average of 13 per project. Partners included: local authorities; housing, care or health providers; other arts and cultural partners; charities and community groups. Partners brought a range of resources and services, ranging from marketing and/or recruitment of participants to the provision of venues or further funding and from co-facilitation to evaluation.

## 2.2. Examples of funded activity

In this section, we give a short description of activities undertaken by a sample of the funded projects. We feature three Creative People and Places (CPP) and three Celebrating Age projects here, selected to showcase a range of methods used to engage diverse groups of people within the constraints of social distancing. It should be noted that many CPP projects have specifically targeted older people with at least some of the additional funding. Conversely, many projects which have received Celebrating Age funding worked with younger audiences, either because the host cultural organisation already worked across age groups, or due to a strong inter-generational focus within the projects.

***Creative Conversations*** run by Celebrating Age Wiltshire has provided older, socially isolated people in the county with one-to-one telephone conversations each week over a 10 week period. This included 5 sessions with a creative artist and 5 with a volunteer. The project succeeded in engaging extremely marginalised individuals, often with multiple health challenges, mostly via referrals from Community Connectors and Social Prescribers. As well as providing much needed contact for the participants, the artists also encouraged them to develop their interests, skills and creativity, sparking individual and collective creative outputs as a result of the calls.

***The Posh Club*** (former Celebrating Age grantee) is a tongue-in-cheek glamorous performance and social club for older people which, under normal circumstances, is held regularly in five locations across London and the South East. As part of its additional DCMS funded activity during the pandemic, The Posh Club hired an open deck bus and took groups of older people out for a 1.5 hour drive with cabaret entertainment (including a Dolly Parton impersonator) and tea.

Like Posh Club, ***Back to Ours*** (Creative People and Places) already had a tried and tested format with their “Shindigs”, in which (pre-COVID) groups of older people would come together for a social and cultural celebration. They also adapted their offering, to “Shindig on your Couch”: a DVD of entertainment and a package of decorations, masks, etc. was delivered by an actor to the doorsteps of 240 people. These went out to a mix of people who had previously attended the face-to-face events and were missing them, and those on a ‘vulnerable call list’, many of whom had been referred by a range of partner agencies. Back to Ours is now in discussion with a hospital about the idea of doing ward-based Shindigs.

*“People were really overwhelmed by the small act of human kindness - people who felt they had been completely forgotten - felt genuinely cared for and pleased that we wanted to involve them”.*

(Local evaluator, Back to Ours, at peer learning group).

**LeftCoast** (Creative People and Places) has produced and printed four editions of a creative community newspaper and hand-delivered it, with chats on the doorstep, to 800 older people living in Blackpool & Wyre. Some then took part in focus group discussions about the paper and its impact on loneliness and isolation.

**Super Slow Way** (a Creative People and Places project) works with communities along the Leeds & Liverpool Canal from Blackburn to Pendle. We were informed that many of the ethnically diverse communities with which they work have faced racism and community tensions as a result of media portrayal of the ‘delta variant’ and the impact of multi-generational households, in addition to the economic and social impact of lockdown. As a result of additional funding, they have been able to commission new artists and facilitators who speak community languages. Activities have included: sending out boxes of materials, garden planting and canal side walking with the aim and impact of creating networks and friendships.

*“So many times, we have heard people say to us, ‘I didn’t realise this person lived in my street’.”*

(Community Engagement Associate, Super Slow Way at peer learning group).

**Writing East Midlands** (Celebrating Age) ran three different projects to deliver writing workshops to people from a range of age groups, targeting different communities: neurodiverse people, LGBTQ+ people, and ethnically diverse communities in Leicester. The Education Manager explained at the peer learning group that they had set up online sessions to connect autistic writers, and that the group had been well-attended and had really gelled together, both socially and creatively. They are now applying for continuation funding, having discovered lots of new, talented writers and created a group which is keen to continue meeting and which will be largely self-led.

*“We’d imagined we would create a physical group at the end of it.....They love meeting together – they don’t want to move to face-to-face – they don’t have the anxiety of travelling, online suits them really well.”*

(Education Manager, Writing East Midlands)

### 2.3. Participation in the funded arts or cultural activity

68% of survey respondents classed themselves as ‘participants’; 23% as ‘audience members’; 3.5% as ‘volunteers’; and 5% as ‘other’, which included artists and organisers.

A quarter of respondents reported at least some face-to-face activities through the project, though video or videoconferencing was the most frequent media used, with a third of



respondents reporting having used that. Social media, messaging, post and telephone were all used to a significant, but lesser degree.

30% of respondents reported a one-off engagement; the majority (58%) reported between 2 and 10 engagements, but 40 respondents (3%) reported over 50 engagements. Around 1 in 5 respondents had started engaging with the arts project prior to the DCMS funding, but the vast majority had been involved for up to 3 months. 52% had not previously attended an art or culture-based activity run by this organisation.

The participant survey gave respondents 39 options of different activities to select which they had taken part in within the project. All received a share of the response, and over 300 gave details of their activities under the 'other' category. The following chart shows the activities in which respondents most commonly participated:

<b>Activity (table includes only those with &gt;10% share)</b>	<b>% of respondents participating</b>	<b>Number of participating respondents</b>
Watched a performance	28.63%	406
Crafting	23.13%	328
Drawing	21.16%	300
Painting	18.62%	264
Dancing	17.42%	247
Other	16.71%	237
Outdoor arts	14.88%	211
Creative writing	14.32%	203
Creating visual arts	13.61%	193
Took part in a performance	11.00%	156
Textiles	10.44%	148
Writing poetry	10.37%	147
Listening to music	10.30%	146

The sheer range of activities is striking. We include below a selection of some of the 'other' responses to give a sense of the diversity of activity:

*"Parcel with sunflower seeds and how to grow them."*

*"Co creating a book by contributing stories and discussions."*

*"Virtual role playing games."*

*"I watched a drag makeup workshop, as well as doing my makeup at the same time (posted it on Instagram and tagged)."*

*"Discussions with artist and tour with artist to provide inspiration for her work."*

*"Film about loneliness during coronavirus."*

*“We reimagined a space in the city centre and produced a plan which described where it was and what was its purpose. The space was a now-disused leisure centre - we turned it into a beautiful riverside piazza with a fountain, shops, cafes and an arts centre, where people can meet and relax together.”*

*“No Ticket Required: a film discussion group that has been running fortnightly on Zoom on a Monday evening....The next film to be discussed is agreed/announced during the discussion which is led by an experienced tutor in film and hosted in conjunction with the arts centre cinema director. There has been a wide variety of films, old and new, many foreign language, sometimes available on iPlayer, sometimes via BFI/Curzon/Amazon. On a number of occasions we have had a speaker with a close professional connection with the film being discussed. Discussions are lively, there is direct audience participation both speaking and voting on questions during the course of the evening.”*

*“Making cake and giving it away with Wednesfield in Bloom.”*

*“A date to share - cooking competition during Ramadan.”*

*“Doorstep duets came to Crondall with their outdoor dance performance.”*

*“Pop up picnic.”*

*“Phone performance of short stories.”*

*“Creating a unique collage about a chosen favourite local place; writing and sending to a loved one as part of a letters to loved ones in Lockdown project. My collaged postcard and me have been photographed for an exhibition/ project by Barbara Gibson.”*

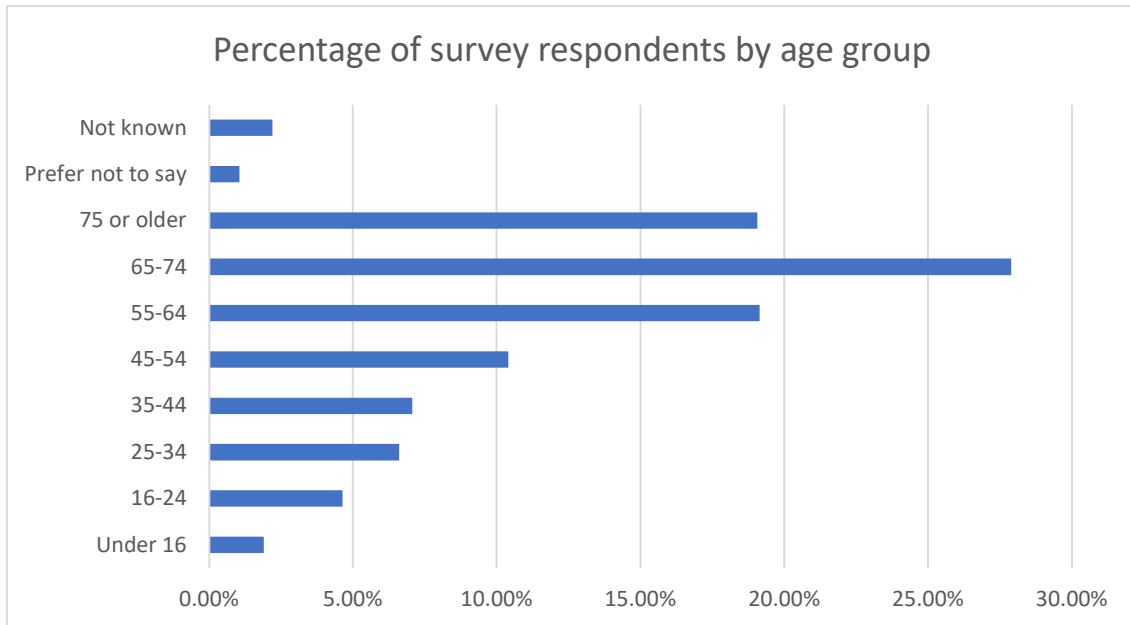
## 2.4. Diversity of survey respondents

### *Gender*

The vast majority of the 1,444 survey respondents, 79.7%, were female. 16.5% were male, 1.1% were non-binary, with the remainder either preferring not to say or noted as not known.

### *Age Group*

The largest single age group was those aged 65-74, accounting for almost 28% of total respondents. More than two-thirds of respondents were aged 55 and over. A breakdown of respondents by all age groups is shown below.



### *Disability*

Just under 30% of respondents stated that they did have a disability. Almost 62% did not. The remainder either preferred not to say or their disability status was unknown.

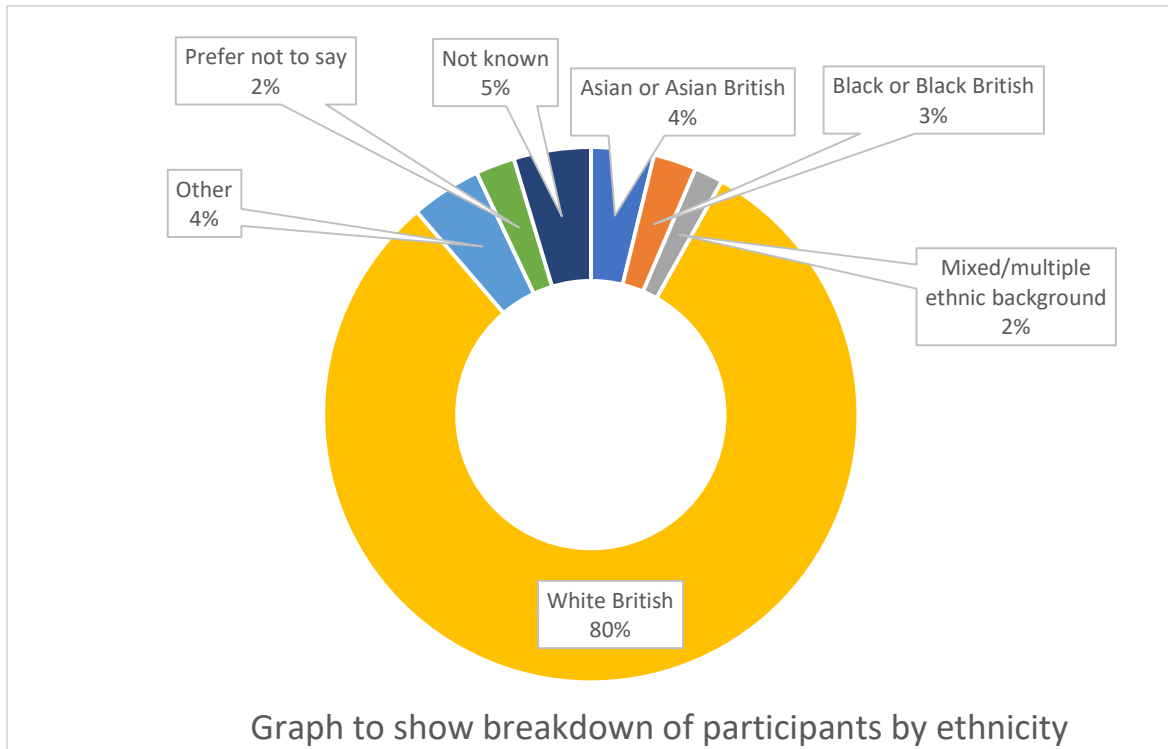
### *Sexual orientation*

Just over 73% of respondents categorised themselves as heterosexual/straight. 12% of respondents were LGBTQ+ with the largest subgroup being those who were bisexual making up over 3% of total respondents. 9.5% of respondents, preferred not to say.

### *Ethnicity*

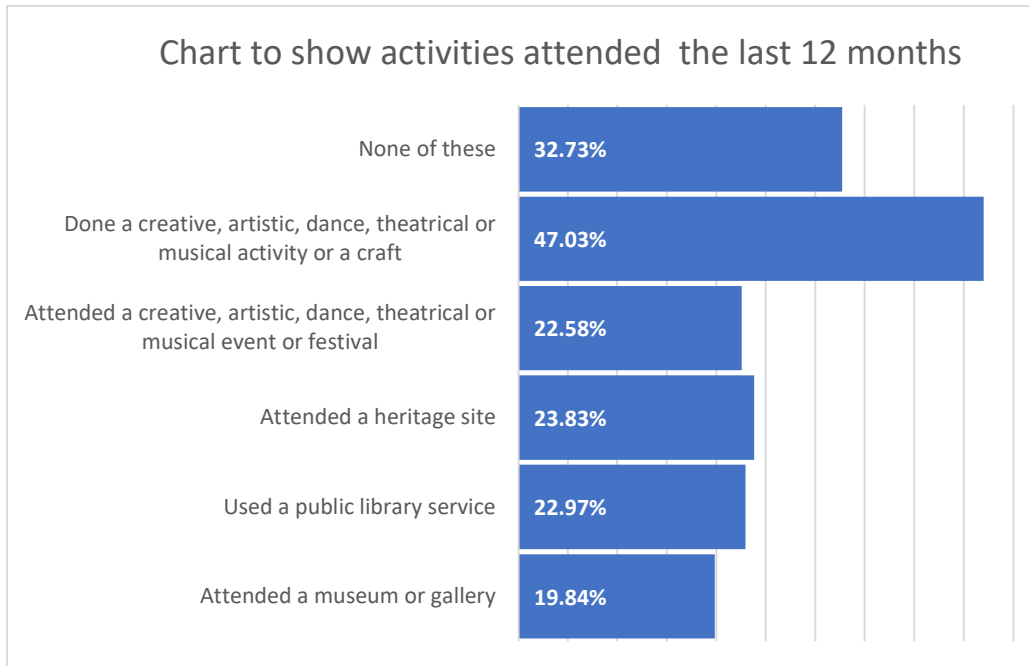
As can be seen from the chart below, the majority of respondents classified themselves as White British. The next largest group where ethnicity was known is Asian or Asian British, at 4% of respondents.

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### *Attendance at Arts/Culture activities*

Respondents were asked to select which arts/culture activities they had attended in the last 12 months. Multiple selections were allowed for this question and, as can be seen from the chart below, almost one third had not attended any of the activities noted in the last 12 months. This is not surprising given that so much cultural activity had been suspended for the preceding year due to the pandemic and we advise caution on interpreting this as evidence of reduced activity by choice or restricted access. According to the results, the most popular activity in the last 12 months was doing a creative, artistic, dance, theatrical or musical activity or a craft, with over 47% of respondents selecting that option.



More than a third of respondents had undertaken one of the activities at least once a month in the last 12 months, with almost 20% choosing at least once a week as a response. When asked whether they were likely to participate in one of these activities in the next 12 months, almost 59% of respondents said they definitely will and almost 22% saying they probably will.

Respondents were also asked whether they had previously attended any activities run by the organisation they were answering questions about; almost 52% had and almost 44% had not.

### 3. Impact on loneliness, isolation and wellbeing

#### 3.1. Quantitative findings

Quantitative findings suggest that the activities had a positive impact for many participants on key outcomes related to social interaction, loneliness and wellbeing.

We asked survey participants to select multiple options from a list of impacts regarding their involvement with the arts or cultural activity. The right-hand column shows the percentage of respondents selecting each statement.

***Since being involved in and as a result of being involved in this activity.....***

I have new ideas about things I would like to do in the future	57%
I have more confidence to try out new things	52%

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I have learnt a new skill	43%
I have made new friends (e.g. someone that you keep in touch with outside of the activity)	35%
I have taken up a new hobby or interest	27%
I have learnt how to communicate with people in new ways (e.g. video, text, digital)	26%
I have attended a new arts or culture-based activity	21%
I have joined a new group or club	16%
I have taken on a voluntary role	7%

We asked survey respondents to identify **changes in social support** as a result of their participation:

	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>
I feel a stronger sense of belonging to my immediate neighbourhood	8%	36%	56%
If I needed help, there are more people who would be there for me	7%	31%	62%
If I wanted company or to socialise, there are more people I can call on	9%	27%	65%

We asked respondents about the impact of their involvement on loneliness:

	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>
I am less likely to feel that I lack companionship	7%	31%	63%
I am less likely to feel left out	6%	25%	69%
I am less likely to feel isolated from others	6%	20%	73%
I am less likely to feel lonely	6%	25%	68%

We asked whether there had been an impact on their wellbeing from their involvement:

<b>(0 = not at all; 10 = completely)</b>	<b>Weighted average</b>
Overall, I feel more satisfied with my life	7.48
Overall, I feel that the things I do in my life are more worthwhile	7.44
Overall, I feel happier	7.66

We conducted some simple cross-tabulations to explore whether the impact varied by the intensity or method of intervention.

Overall increase in satisfaction with life (measured through those who recorded a response of 6 or more out of 10) following involvement in the project was reported by over three quarters of survey respondents (at 76.75%), which was spread fairly evenly based on how the activity was run (e.g., 78.69% face-to-face versus 75.57% non-face-to-face).

Participants who attended a higher number of activities were more likely to report increased satisfaction with life (e.g., 90.48% at 11-20 attendance and 94.59% at 21-50 attendances). As expected, reports of satisfaction with life increased over longer time periods of participation. For example, 85.21% of respondents reported high satisfaction scores when involved for over a year. This group were nearly three times more likely to record a satisfaction with life score of 10. This is compared to 61.63% of those who had been involved for less than a month.

Over three quarters (76.20%) felt that their life had become more worthwhile since becoming involved in an activity (with length of involvement increasing the proportion of positive responses, rising from 62.35% of those who had been involved for less than a month, up to 81.55% if involved for a year or more). As with results for increased satisfaction with life by length of time involved, results were similar across face-to-face and remote delivery (74.46% compared to 78.46%).

Over four fifths of respondents reported feeling happier (80.27%), which increased over time, scored at 66.86% for those involved for less than a month, rising to 86.23% of those involved for a year or more.

### 3.2. Triangulation with qualitative findings and wider research

This section draws together quantitative findings with qualitative responses to open text survey questions, follow up interviews and additionally supplied data via projects and triangulates this with the wider discourse and published evidence on loneliness, isolation and wellbeing.

#### 3.2.1. Overview

- The three main factors present across all assessed impacts are: being provided with the opportunity to be creative; learning new creative and social skills; the social aspect of the activities.
- Though this section is broken down to illustrate the main assessed outcomes, each theme is interlinked. For example, research shows that those who experience loneliness are more likely to experience poor quality social connections and/or lower levels of wellbeing (Perkins et al., 2021; [What Works for Wellbeing, 2018](#)). Conversely, instilling a sense of belonging and offering an environment through which confidence and learning could take place, which were reported by participants, are factors linked to increased wellbeing.
- There is no one size fits all, and the impact of activities on the main assessed outcomes are dependent on a number of factors, such as: type and severity of

loneliness, personal circumstances, type of activity (e.g., delivery model, number of sessions, how sessions are structured) etc.

- Some feedback suggested that while running a remote model due to Covid-19 restrictions offered a convenient way to meet new people, it offered less opportunity to develop closer friendships. Yet this is also dependent on a number of other factors, with others reporting that they had made friendships through a remote mechanism, and some reporting that this had not been a priority for them in the first place.

### 3.2.2. Impact on loneliness and social support

The findings, in support of wider evidence, demonstrates that participation in art activities can both reduce (World Health Organization, 2019) and offer a protective factor against ([Perkins et al., 2021](#)) loneliness (Poscia et al., 2018; Murrock and Graor, 2016).

Over two thirds of survey participants (68.17%) reported that they were less likely to feel lonely due to participating in the programme. Though assessed impact for face-to-face participants was higher (at 75.67%), nearly two thirds of participants who attended remote sessions reported that their experience of loneliness had decreased (at 63%). Some participants attributed reduced loneliness to the activity providing a creative outlet:

*“It’s good to talk to other people who understand how much I feel about art. I have wanted to do it all my life. I’m never lonely when I’m painting.”*

*“[it has] Been good to lose myself in the artwork, time flies when doing artwork, which is good when you are lonely.”*

*“coming together to do something creative made it easier to bond”*

Others referred to how activities had offered them a vehicle through which they could socially interact with others (considered in more detail in the following section). Open survey responses and interview data frequently referred to the activity they were involved with as fostering inclusiveness and a sense of belonging through a shared interest around art:

*“During lockdown I felt some depression and being part of these activities has brought me closer to other people, through sharing my stories and hearing theirs.”*

*“the social aspect of it, it’s like being there with a load of people”*

*“my loneliness has really been helped by being able to go to that session, what else would I have done on that Saturday?... it’s that feeling of belonging that you can’t have in lockdown”*



*“If that’s what you need, the help is good for you, to get you back into the community, to get involved.”*

This lends support to wider research that enjoying arts based activities as part of a group can address both the social and emotional aspects of loneliness through providing a shared sense of purpose ([Perkins et al., 2021](#); [UCL, 2017](#)).

Nearly two thirds of survey respondents (62.27%, N = 817) viewed that involvement in the project had directly increased their access to social support via networks, friends and family, with reports that this impact extended beyond the sessions. The open text identified three specific themes: attending sessions with family members; being inspired to reminisce using “props” such as storytelling and photographs; being supported to keep in touch through learning how to use digital means (where relevant) through the sessions. This was also apparent from the interviews:

*“What this particular group of workshops did for me...these workshops shifted my focus and took me back to other things so that I was not focusing primarily on the negative experiences. I was focusing on happier memories, from my childhood”*

*“a pleasure to remember and to recall it... And to hear other people’s stories.... it’s good, lovely.... it’s escapism in a supportive space, sharing is the vehicle”*

It is important to recognise that loneliness and/or isolation does not always imply being on one’s own. The interview data suggested that couples benefited from involvement too. Involvement gave them more time and opportunity to do things together and share their experiences between them, and with others.

*“I found that there were some really inspirational and creative activities that I could get involved with [at my wife’s workshop] even if I was the only man there!”*

*“Without [my husband’s] support in these things I don’t think I would have done as much as I have.”*

*“I’m a people person, I like mixing with people...but this has been a wonderful thing for this year when we’ve been so isolated – and we have been isolated, we’ve not mixed - so the whole thing has been fantastic.”*

*“It’s given us something else to talk about”*

#### *Impact on loneliness: assessed barriers*

A few participants did not always enjoy the group aspect of activities, and in one case, it had led to a participant feeling ‘left out’ (though this comment was specific to an online activity, so it may be that face to face could have offered a more inclusive environment).

Some survey respondents felt that the activity had either not changed or had in fact increased feelings of loneliness. In the latter case, one reported that it had drawn attention

to their own lack of connections. Another response indicated that while activities can support connections, they may not always be sufficient to reduce a person's loneliness:

*"I am lonely in general and don't think a group or socialising makes a big difference to that."*

This point is not limited to activities based on the arts, but rather, relates to the fact that loneliness is a complex and multifaceted experience, which requires a range of approaches to alleviate it ([Anderson et al., 2019](#)).

As a counterpoint, our interviews suggested that for some of the most lonely and isolated people, being able to connect to others through online art-based activity was a crucial lifeline in the absence of all other forms of contact:

*"I don't mind my own company but the poetry has been a life saver for me"*

*"February and March [lockdown] was very hard... just how important it's been to see people's faces really... for some people it's been a lifeline"*

*"Doing it together [with others] is less daunting, it was an incredible group...it's like taking medication really, it's a boost, it opens your mind to new things. It's been invaluable".*

#### *Facilitating social connections*

Evidence on what works to alleviate loneliness highlights the importance of interventions which facilitate social interaction (Hare-Duke et al., 2019; Perkins et al., 2021; [What Works for Wellbeing, 2018](#); Wigfield and Alden, 2018). Art-based activities have been shown to provide a catalyst for social interaction, with over 80% of a large sample matched to key demographic characteristics of the UK population reporting that arts engagement had helped them feel connected to others (Perkins et al., 2021).

Nearly two thirds of survey participants (64.91%, N = 862) reported that due to involvement in the programme, there are now more people they can call on for company or to socialise with. Perhaps unsurprisingly, participants involved in larger groups were more likely to agree with this statement (at 57.72% of those involved in an activity with 6-10 members agreeing with this statement, compared to 63.16% with 21-50 members and 80% of those where the activity had over 50 members).

The open survey responses indicated myriad ways in which participants connected, including: directly through interacting with other attendees, being encouraged to get involved in other activities, and reconnecting with friends and family through applying what they had learned.

#### *Facilitating meaningful connections*

Whilst not all were not motivated by meeting new friends, a number of participants reported that they had formed friendships through the activities, which had a reported positive impact on their wellbeing:

*“Having new friends has given me a happier outlook on life. As I am at home all the time, I hardly had anyone to talk to, except my dogs. I no longer feel alone.”*

This positive social impact was also reported by participants who had close family connections:

*“I feel more connected to people with similar interests. My family and partner have different interests to me... I would feel isolated in an artistic sense.”*

In some cases, meeting through the activities had led to further collaborations – which in turn led to improved reported wellbeing:

*“I worked in a team of 3 artists...and we have continued to stay in touch and meet as artists working in different artforms. We are discussing a future collaboration which would lead directly from this project. The environment for focussing on wellbeing support for each other as artists has been immense”*

*“We’ve formed a new friendship group... we meet every week... we play silly games, we’ve done improvisation, drama, quizzes, snakes and ladders – I can’t even begin to tell you, because we wanted to engage and keep laughing and that’s what it’s done”.*

Across some activities, a shared interest in art brought together groups who shared an identity or life experience, such as new parents, carers, and those who identify as LGBT:

*“Just having this safe space to escape to once a week has transformed my perspective about being a young person who is part of the LGBTQ+ community. It has helped me realise I am not alone and even more importantly, allowed me to be myself without being judged. This has decreased my loneliness.”*

*“During this pandemic I’ve felt isolated ... As a full time carer, living with a shielding relative it’s been more important to stay home. The WhatsApp, email and social media groups have been nothing less than a lifeline. I’ve met people I probably wouldn’t have ... It’s been a relief to chat about life and art interests with like-minded people.”*

For one participant, the activity provided the catalyst for them to contact other autistic writers in their local area.

Some participants reported that linking in with others through the activity had broadened their horizons through getting to know participants of different ages and cultures:

*“It interests me to hear from different age groups and cultures and hear a varied perspective and reaction to the films we watch. It broadens my understanding of myself and others.”*

*‘It interesting to learn about people who were different from you and your friends, new people who thought differently, had different views. I liked discussing things with them, it*

*took me away from the mundane. We felt comfortable in each other's company and sharing our thoughts and feelings in a safe place'*

*"it's enlivened me... lifted my spirits... you are meeting people from all over the world and they are doing just the same thing as you... this is a bit of surprise' "I've been talking to young people in their 20s or 30s or whatever, I usually only get to speak to people my own age.... It's challenging, enlivening and they bring another point of view... I do have younger friends, but I wouldn't do activities with them. I wouldn't necessarily keep in contact with them, but you can have a good conversation with them... a good exchange"*

*"it was intergenerational, very different people but it worked - chalk and cheese but it works somehow... a positive mix...fascinating... lovely... somehow it gelled"*

*"It's the other ideas that come from being with those other people – you hear other people talk about what they've been doing, people from different backgrounds coming together and doing a project..."*

#### *Facilitating community connections*

Research links the role of art-based activities in reducing loneliness through their ability to evoke a sense of belonging across communities and cultures (Bang, 2016; Welch, 2014; Perkins et al., 2012; World Health Organization, 2019), with a review of forty-four studies concluding that participatory arts promotes positive relationships at the wider community level (Wilson et al., 2019). This was supported by the survey responses, where over half (52.83%, N = 747) felt that involvement had led to a stronger sense of belonging to their immediate neighbourhood (compared to 8.7% (N =108) who disagreed).

The surveys identified a mix of interrelated factors that contributed to participants reaching out into their local communities. Some referred to the activity itself encouraging them to connect to and learn more about their local area or get to know their neighbours. As referred to in the previous section, some had broadened their horizons and link in with a more diverse demographic:

*"It has helped me realise that there are lots of people out there that I can be friends with no matter what age, race or gender."*

It helped another person who was new to an area feel more connected to their community, with others feeling encouraged to volunteer and get more involved.

The method through which the activity was delivered had some assessed impact, with survey respondents who participated in face to face activities over 2.5 times more likely to 'strongly agree' that the activity had led to them feeling a stronger sense of belonging to their immediate neighbourhood (reported at 24.42% and 9.05% respectively).

*Facilitating social connections through remote methods*

Research evidence suggests that running remote activities can be an effective way to tackle loneliness. The British Red Cross (2020) identified that over a third of lonely adults (38%) felt that speaking to family and friends via an online platform (such as via Zoom) reduced their loneliness and Perkins et al. (2021) identified that social connection through the arts can be formed without participants being physically together.

A number of activities were offered remotely due to restrictions, and the ways in which this impacted on social connections was mixed. The main discussion points included accessibility, offering contact during the pandemic, and the ability to form meaningful relationships.

For participants who reported a disability or sensory impairment, in some cases, this meant they struggled to participate in the activities online, yet for others it removed barriers that may be present when attending a face-to-face activity:

*“Activities online are helpful for me because I have a chronic health condition and I use a wheelchair so access is challenging to physical spaces.”*

A few expressed that remote methods of communication could not lead to developing friendships:

*“The activity had been enjoyable, but it is hard to connect meaningfully with new people via Zoom.”*

Yet others reported that learning to use Zoom to participate in the activity directly supported social interaction outside of it (such as through social media and WhatsApp), as participants felt more confident using this platform to keep in touch with family and friends (including those who they had met through the activity) as well joining other remote activities:

*“I was surprised by how connected I felt to the other people in the Zoom textiles class, I really felt happier after the class and less lonely.”*

*“the courses inspired my creativity... they helped improve my wellbeing. I went on to join another Zoom network... having had such a positive experience I had [the] confidence to try more online art projects.”*

Though not all participants referred to making friends, there were reports that having the opportunity to participate in something remotely during Covid-19 restrictions reduced social isolation, with those who live alone particularly appreciating participating in something online during lockdown.

However, in one case, a participant described feeling overwhelmed by WhatsApp messages, and stopped contributing as she felt unable to connect to some of the posts.

Finally, it is important to note that some participants reported being unable to access digital, so were unable to fully participate in remote activities (though a few reported a positive experience being contacted by telephone, which tended to involve one to one discussions with facilitators and volunteers).

It is important to recognise that a sense of community is also evoked through a shared interest in artistic genres and concomitant shared experiences, which may or may not be related to the delivery of the artform. As one interviewee succinctly put it:

*“Watching cinema on your TV or online is not the same thing – I need to be in an audience... it’s community, shared understanding, it’s the moment when like in Blue Velvet when you know the audience is thinking ‘can I stay – will I have to go?!’ it’s that frisson you get or just the shudder of horror, wry laughter... all of those expressions of shared recognition, when you realise when people are picking up on the same tension or the same humour... sometimes the audience breaks into applause.”*

Two other interviewees told us about how the delivery of online theatre performance in place of their local theatre group had helped hugely in terms of connecting and interacting with their community from within theatre. Others described a sense of ‘like mindedness’ or ‘finding a society’ around the genre itself despite not feeling in anyway connected by physical locality. Another was able to reconnect with the community of her childhood, and described a strong sense of belonging and a shared understanding of local social references through the artistic genre.

### **3.2.3. Impact on wellbeing**

In support of research evidence which links participating in art activities to improved wellbeing (Mental Health Foundation, 2011), many participants reported that the activity had a positive impact on their sense of wellbeing through having fun and developing a range of skills.

As reported in Section 3.1, survey respondents reported improvement to their satisfaction with life as a result of involvement, with scores increasing over time. Over three quarters of respondents felt their life had become more worthwhile on account of arts-based activity.

Some referred to activities helping them to cope with difficult life events, particularly the lockdown, though bereavement and caring responsibilities were also mentioned:

*“by attending the classes I made new friends and improved my creativeness - this has been a great help to my mental wellbeing especially during a bereavement and lockdown.”*

*“Being involved in this project has made me feel less lonely because it has given me a reason to get up and do something out of the norm, which is cleaning, cooking and caring for others like my children and disabled partner.... It has made me think about myself and what I enjoy doing and given me ideas and hope for the future, so much so I am pursuing new learning and continuing to embrace my artistic side and even giving digital art a try.”*

*“Since taking up knitting and crochet...I feel so relaxed, calm and content when practising these crafts. It brings me a profound sense of wellbeing and I am sure that it lowers my blood pressure!”*

Some directly attributed a blend of being enabled to be creative and be part of a group as improving their wellbeing:

*“My wellbeing improves through learning new things and being stretched to do better. It has given me a real boost of confidence to perform what I’ve written for people.”*

This also extended to the community level (also see earlier):

*“Knowing I have community has been beneficial to my wellbeing.”*

*“Being involved in arts and culture is pretty much essential to my wellbeing.”*

Research from the [Campaign to End Loneliness](#) (2020) showed that initiatives which support wellbeing through more positive thinking can help tackle chronic loneliness. Several participants described activities as supporting them to feel relaxed, content, happy, uplifted, joyful and calm, others described it as fulfilling, providing a sense of “worth”, “purpose” “pride”, and leading to “more enjoyment to life.”

For some, getting involved in something creative supported them to reminisce and reconnect to their ‘real selves’ or ‘previous selves’, with a few reporting that participation had reconnected them to activities that they had loved in the past but had stopped doing:

*“I felt it let me be me cos I always wanted ballet lessons at school, but my mother wouldn’t let me. it reminded me of being at school cos I loved country dancing that we used to do. I felt happy afterwards, and fit!!-except for the knees!”*

*“I have always gone to variety shows... the open topped bus reminded me of my childhood outings. It brings back to me happiest days. It’s the best thing that’s happened to me. It’s changed my life.”*

*“I noticed the shift in my headspace – it helped me to remember that I can do new things and know things”*

For many participants, being provided with the opportunity to get creative, learn new and rekindle old skills was frequently attributed to improved wellbeing (learning new skills constitutes one of the [NHS’s](#) (2019) 5 steps to mental wellbeing). This referred to specific activities, such as playing an instrument, singing, knitting, writing, or painting, though many also referred to skills related to empathy and using digital tools.

*“doing it another way – I always did the same thing and I’ve had the confidence to try it another way”.*

*“I’m retired now so it’s an opportunity to creatively do what I couldn’t do when I was working – I hope something good will come of it, but it doesn’t matter if it doesn’t – I’m not starting a new career or anything, your work life is not your true calling, but in retirement you can do all of that”*

Communication skills can support wellbeing ([Segrin, 2014](#)), and in the case of one participant, had supported them to interact with others:

*“It showed me the importance of communication., as I am used to being on my own and being ancient!”*

Increased confidence was frequently referred to, which in turn reduced feelings of loneliness through encouraging people to participate and connect with individuals, their local community and to try out other art-based activities. Some examples included a participant with English as their second language having the confidence to join a new creative writing group. In some cases, digital approaches reportedly facilitated confidence:

*“Our Zoom choir has emboldened all of us taking part to sing solo whereas before we would not have done this.”*

*“I wouldn’t have had the confidence to go and sit with those people before – you don’t have to put anything up to the camera – so you get the chance to see if it is for you in the privacy of your own home”*

*“I would have felt overwhelmed to do this in person”*

Several survey respondents reported positively on being able to participate in an activity during lockdown, with positive impact on wellbeing and a welcome respite which supported a sense of connection:

*“I am still in lockdown, isolated and at home. the online creative courses enabled me to meet other people over our shared interest in creativity. it had a massive and positive impact on my mental health, wellness and improved my self confidence.”*

#### *Impact on mental health (MH)*

Recent evidence reviews have shown the benefits of art-based interventions for people affected by MH illness (World Health Organization, 2019), which was echoed in the survey findings, where MH was supported through being creative, meeting likeminded people, and offering respite for carers. One felt that being creative had lessened the impact their MH illness had on their life and provided them with the impetus to seek support, another that it had reduced their depression.

*“The poetry has been my mental health help”*

*“It’s broken up the monotony of the day – kept my brain working, stimulating and engaging... loneliness and depression can sneak up on you”*



A particular theme was reports on how activities contributed to lessening feelings of anxiety. 68% of survey respondents reported feeling less anxiety, this rose to 72% for those who attended face to face activities (though remote activities still reduced anxiety for 65.64% of respondents). The likelihood of reduced anxiety increased based on length of involvement (at 55.56% for those involved less than a month, compared to a range of 68.67 and 71.88% for those involved for at least a month):

*“Suffering with anxiety has meant I can often distance myself from others. This leads to feelings of isolation. Although I have a loving and supportive family it has been great to be part of a group outside of this and meet new people.”*

This is particularly positive when considered alongside recent [Office for National Statistics](#) (2020) data which identified a connection between loneliness and those experiencing high levels of anxiety.

Developing mindfulness to support health and wellbeing (another of the NHS’s (2019) 5 steps to mental wellbeing) was also referred to:

*“[the activity] has helped my health and wellbeing... fun and physical. The drawing breath one was calming and gave me techniques to be more mindful in breathing when I am nervous.”*

## 4. Learning from Implementation

### 4.1. Role of artists

The role of artists in these projects was central to the success and value of projects. The funding gave organisations new opportunities to work with artists who put listening at the centre of their practice, and who could work well with older or isolated people. For some organisations, this was an opportunity to work with artists they had not worked with previously. Some, however, worked with artists with whom they had long-term relationships, who they knew also had good relationships with people or partners. The diversity of participants and projects led some to work with new artists, in order to serve particular communities. As one person described it:

*“We needed people who could work in a really wide range of ethnically diverse communities which meant finding artists who speak the right languages and don’t alienate others. A benefit is that we have given new opportunities to engage artists that would previously have been off our radar and maybe had not run sessions before.”*

The importance of the work to artists at the particular pandemic moment was noted in peer learning discussions – where for some this was either a return to work or a new start. It was important that the project was properly resourced financially to enable artists to work well with appropriate resource and paid planning and supervision time; some felt this was rather

tight. One project reported seeing an improvement in the quality of reflection in artists' journals as a result.

The importance of pastoral care and supervision, alongside good support and training for those new to working with potentially vulnerable people was repeatedly stressed. Several organisations gave artists and staff training in MH awareness, wellbeing, and safeguarding, as well as ensuring appropriate policies were in place and understood. This also supported artists in being able to flex quickly as circumstances changed during the project, especially with regard to what was and was not possible under Covid-restrictions. In one project, a creative producer model was used which meant there were two people in each session to provide mutual support.

#### 4.2. Set up, design and infrastructure

The programme set up and design was fundamentally shaped by the decision to invite organisations already in relationships with ACE through either Creative People and Places or Celebrating Age. This meant that funding could be released relatively quickly, which was important given the short timeframe for the programme. It demonstrated trust in the organisations to deliver; and streamlined the process more than a more open application would have.

In general, those involved were very positive about this approach, welcoming the decision to build on existing infrastructure and partnerships rather than invite others to 'reinvent'. For all the projects, this was important at a time of high pressure and uncertainty, for themselves, their partnerships and their relationships with participants or communities. The enabling role of this trusting funding relationship was commonly identified. As one person put it:

*"It was a real joy to be approached by ACE and offered money as a trusted delivery partner. Could this be a model going forwards?"*

The availability of funding within a constrained timetable forced some projects to be really targeted in their approach and in their recruitment of artists. For some this also gave an urgency which helped form new partnerships with social prescribing bodies, community organisations, and the social care sector. This may partly have been due to the increased focus on issues of loneliness and isolation during lockdown. A point made during the peer sessions was the importance of not rushing projects which are - through the programme's overall aims - inevitably touching on sensitive areas of people's lives. Relationships must be built, not rushed.

However, the timeline also created challenges. The CPPs often adopt co-creative or co-production models, developing relationships with people over time. Yet there was not enough time allowed in the programme for this to be possible to the extent some would have liked. The timeframe also meant that in peer-learning discussions, the realism of the aims of the project was questioned: how much impact can you have on complex issues around loneliness and isolation in someone's life through a time-limited project? It was noted that short term work can often spark connection, from which something different

emerges over the long-term. There is, it was argued, long-term trauma in many communities in which isolated people live, which needs long-term approaches - in particular, groups such as young men under 35. One phrase summed up the ambiguity:

*"A godsend but a drop in the ocean."*

It was suggested that the timeline did not, in the end, follow that taken by Covid, or the Covid Roadmap put in place by the government. Although arguably beyond the control of anyone in the programme, this led to additional pressures on delivery and decision-making. Although in general those involved were content to work within these limitations and contingencies, for some this was an additional pressure at a difficult time for organisational planning and delivery. One person commented:

*"The timeframe was awful but the money wasn't confirmed until late, even though we knew it was in the offing. This meant there was not enough lead in time for recruitment."*

Another suggested the lack of time compromised their good practice.

#### 4.3. Delivery and methods

Influenced by the constraints of lockdown, timescale and developing relationships with participants, the projects across the programme demonstrate a wide range of approaches: digital, analogue and in-person. There was noticeably a lot of experimentation, of trying things for the first time, and of blending or hybridizing approaches. Some combined digital with in-person socially distanced visits, others with analogue or old-tech solutions including print, post and telephone. One comment summed up some of the pluses of avoiding simply turning 'in person' activity into digital equivalents or proxies:

*"The human touch - the phone call from artists/ volunteers - has been stronger than we had imagined, and really valued."*

For many people, especially older people, digital technology was a barrier to engagement - or simply not something they had access to. Whilst some organisations found ways to alleviate access issues by investing in devices such as Facebook Portal which, as recommended by Bluecoat, were more welcomed by users than tablets or laptops, other projects found different ways around barriers to connection. Artcore reported that the people they had worked with in the past did not feel comfortable using Zoom, so they tried some socially distanced park sessions.

These were facilitated by an artist who did sketching, or by a mindfulness coach: people would go and sit on a bench and do art, while chatting to people. They felt this highlighted the isolation people had been experiencing. They dropped off packs of materials on people's doorsteps and were told that just seeing someone do this massively helped some people. For some projects, there was a fusion of art and care/ support practice (e.g., creative conversations via phone, more strengths-based ways of working), and a blurring of the distinction between social or care-informed decisions versus artistic decisions (e.g., with whom to buddy). Putting people first was often important to the projects.

Lockdown and the adoption of mixed and digital methods of delivery also shone a light on previous practice, especially in terms of working with older people who might be more isolated, as it revealed many people had lacked access prior to Covid-19. This may have happened for reasons related to mobility, confidence, or connection. One project described this as a moment of realisation that would influence their approach in the future, assuming full physical access and proximity is possible again:

*“We became aware of how many people we have tended to ignore because they don’t have ‘real-world access’ - this has been a real eye opener and a challenge. It’s not enough just to get 500 people in a physical space anymore we need to be thinking about those who cannot or will not access that.”*

The varying levels of previous investment in both kit and what might be called ‘back-room staff’ influenced the extent to which projects could fully grasp the digital opportunity. Online has connected people across broader geographies and opened up access and awareness of those previously excluded.

#### 4.4. Outputs - importance of sharing something

The process of these projects was integral to any impact on loneliness and isolation: bringing people together, encouraging imaginative connection either as a group or with an artist, connecting to local places or history, building empathy, getting people online to meet others, or to get out of their houses or rooms for a change, all played a part.

Peer learning also underlined the empowering and confidence-building aspect of producing something as a result of a creative process. Examples included booklets, events and performances. The opportunity to create those outputs underlined the contribution of people taking part. As one worker put it:

*“Knowing the words that you’re writing down will feature in something beautiful that will be shared with others is very empowering.”*

The CPP projects were also able to extend their practice of enabling people to make decisions about the activity and about the outputs. Museums Northumberland *bait*, for example, involved people in curating photographic images for publication and helping with distribution. Others encouraged people to work with partners and artists to shape activities.

Making connections is at the heart of beginning to address the complex issues at stake. The sharing of outputs rooted in arts activity and shared in ways that made it less likely for people to feel isolated, encouraged connections.

#### 4.5. Support for artists, workers, volunteers

The situation of this project within the Covid pandemic meant it was easy at times to overestimate the appetite of potential participants or audiences, and of artists and project workers, to be out and about. Although some were keen, others were more cautious - or had conditions which limited their options. This uncertainty made planning complex and complicated, with projects having to be mindful of venues and their staff, of practitioners as well as participants.

This made it particularly important, we were told, for projects to be able to adapt their approaches, and switch to working remotely when needed due to new restrictions or staff shortages. It also made the support, safeguarding and supervision for artists especially important. Emotional support to all involved in projects was necessary, given the potentially sensitive issues touched upon - even where isolation was not explicitly being talked about. In the peer learning, it was apparent this was an intensified version of the issues that can be raised by any arts project or artist's residency that inspires people to consider their own lives and situations. The reflective practice of artists being supported by projects was important - e.g., the use of journals and regular supervision meetings - as was the proper investment in planning.

In peer learning, the development of a culture of care was agreed as important. The activities within projects can be seen as part of this, building both empathy with others and self-awareness of people's own experiences of the pandemic. One project worker described how working on this programme had made them realise they had been lonely too.

#### 4.6. "Loneliness": language and evaluation

Many of the peers reflected on the language of loneliness. Only a minority of projects had used the words loneliness or isolation in promoting their activities, and many were uncomfortable with that focus, feeling it raised issues of 'othering' and the changing definitions of loneliness or isolation during the pandemic. In general, the projects preferred to talk about connection rather than loneliness: making a positive offer rather than starting with what might be seen as a deficit, or even, at worst, implying situations were somehow the fault of individuals.

The evaluation attempted in part to assess impact on issues of loneliness and isolation through a questionnaire. We reflect more on that in the next section, but the requirement to do this as part of delivery raised issues of appropriateness and suitability for some people, who felt it disturbed their relationships with participants.

It was, however, clear that the focus on loneliness also had much relevance to the moment of the programme:

*"Covid has not been a leveller, but it's been a collective experience to touch people's lives. Everyone is impacted, so there is a commonality - so in terms of good practice it's an opportunity for us all to offer something rather than 'doing to'. It breaks something down and we shouldn't be afraid of that."*

It was also apparent that loneliness is not something which only affects those who are described as participants. Both artists and project workers described how this work had shone a light on their own isolation at the time; some artists described this as changing their future practice. Loneliness and isolation as ‘universals’ were revealed through the design and delivery of the project at this particular moment, although the nature of loneliness might vary between groups of people. For example, projects made the point that, for some of the most isolated and marginalised with whom they had engaged, lockdown had changed little. The Celebrating Age projects was seen by some as suggesting it particularly impacted on older people, but the projects felt that work with, for example, a single mum’s group was as relevant.

Some projects also took a geographic rather than demographic focus, with one picking six streets to focus on, on the basis that everyone may have been lonely in some way, such as missing work colleagues or customers as well as family or friends, given the way normal support structures were interrupted by lockdown. One said:

*“All those assumptions we would normally make (such as the difficulties of engaging young people) had to be thrown out of the window. All the pandemic did is exaggerate the seeds of loneliness already there.”*

## 5. Conclusions and key messages

The evaluation findings demonstrate that much has been achieved within a short timescale:

- Projects have mobilised and delivered a wide range of activities during different stages of lockdown, demonstrating the arts and cultural sector’s ability to adapt creatively to challenging circumstances.
- Diverse individuals and communities who face particular risks of isolation have been reached, many for the first time by these arts and cultural organisations, often as a result of developing partnerships with health (including social prescribing), care, and housing providers.
- The existing infrastructure, skills, relationships, and commitment of projects have been critical enablers of successful implementation within the available resources of time and funding. This is also true of the evaluation team who already had relationships with ACE, each other and many of the projects as a result of the national Celebrating Age evaluation and were able to draw some resource from that study to supplement this piece of work.
- A positive impact on loneliness, social connections, and wellbeing and mental health, was reported by many participants as a result of their engagement, even where delivery was offered through remote methods.
- Whilst the focus on ‘loneliness’ has generated useful data about the impact which arts and culture can have on different types of loneliness, concerns have been raised about the risk of reproducing stigma from using deficit-based language to describe the phenomenon.
- Although the evaluation team shared some of projects’ concerns about an online survey asking participants directly about their feelings of loneliness, we were also profoundly struck by the response received; almost all of the 1,444 people who took

the time to complete the survey chose to respond to the open text questions, many giving insights into very personal issues. Whilst we respect the projects' desire to protect participants from any distress, it is clear from the survey responses and follow up interviews that many people welcomed the opportunity to have a voice, to share their experiences, often candidly, and hopefully influence further policy, funding and delivery.

- The funding has enabled projects to further test and refine remote models of delivery, and particularly in relation to groups and individuals who might otherwise be harder to engage. This has raised awareness of the potential for a blended approach, combining both face-to-face and remote methods, and greater understanding of the potential and limitations of both.
- The quantitative data suggests that those who have received the most intervention over the longest period of time, report greater impacts on their feelings of loneliness and wellbeing. This highlights the need for and potential benefits of ongoing and long term funding for arts and cultural engagement with marginalised individuals and communities.

### Summary of key messages

We have organised key messages coming out of the evaluation as a dialogue from one set of people or organisations to another:

- *From people who took part to those who didn't* - taking part gave us new ideas about what we'd like to do in the future, and the confidence to try out new things. We felt a stronger sense of belonging in our neighbourhoods. There are more people now to socialise with or are there if we needed help. We are less likely to feel lonely, left out, or isolated from others: life has become more worthwhile. We feel happier.
- *People who took part to artists and projects* – realising not just that we hadn't been forgotten but that our time and company and input was positively being sought was hugely valued and valuable. We felt seen and heard and were included in ways that, pre-pandemic, were not always available to us, or considered. We have been astounded by the high degree of professionalism and creativity in engaging and including us, regardless of our background, identity or ability.
- *People who took part to funders/ government* – taking part in projects alongside other people – whether digitally, by post, phone, or in person – that were led by skilled artists and facilitators, actually showed us that we hadn't been forgotten. It also showed us that we had something to offer, now and in the future – to each other, to our neighbourhood and circles, to other creative people, and to organisations. But don't lose sight of the fact that we found this out through being a part of welcoming and inclusive arts projects.
- *From arts projects to funders/ evaluators* – working at high speed is possible and can produce great outcomes, but it also has its own costs. Developing projects and trying to evaluate these over such short timescales required us to adopt approaches that sometimes meant taking uncomfortable shortcuts. If we are to work swiftly, we also need firm funding decisions to be swiftly enacted. We need to feel prepared for and able to deliver evaluation tools. We often found we were at the beginning of



something very new – we want chances to further develop and explore what we have begun. But being seen as a trusted partner – and being able to demonstrate how swiftly and effectively we could call on artists, facilitators, partner organisations and others, and work well together – is a potential game changer.

- *From arts projects to social care and community projects* – our existing relationships made it possible to develop these projects. The speed and focus of delivery meant making relationships with new partners, especially in social prescribing. Let's keep finding ways to build imaginatively on all of this.
- *From arts projects to other arts projects* – openly sharing our challenges and achievements on these projects was useful and interesting. It's a network of experience we could – and perhaps should - call on again.
- *From arts projects to themselves* – keep on being innovative. Let's keep using a blend of methods, including online and remote (e.g. post, phone) approaches – and see how we might develop this in other ways in the future. We shouldn't forget about the people who don't turn up at events or projects – people who are still or newly isolated, those experiencing physical or emotional barriers, or those who are introverts; equally, we mustn't forget those who need small groups, or to work slowly. Let's remember all the unexpected people and experiences we encountered. We learned from those who took part about our practice and process – let's keep taking that into the future.
- *From evaluators to funders/ arts projects* – don't baulk from asking people difficult questions (voluntarily and anonymously) in order to try to solve difficult social issues. We're all used to research and evaluation being something that is often tacked on at the end and is sometimes seen as a distraction from the main work – but it can be as significant as the project itself. Evaluation listens to individual voices in order to share collective experiences and views. Taking it seriously means understanding that what is challenging to one is an invitation to another, giving weight to the things people wish to share and informing potential solutions.

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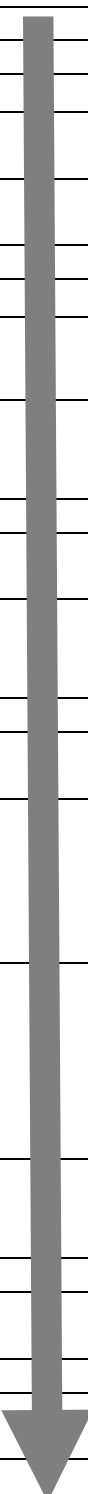
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## Appendix A: COVID restrictions timeline during funded period



4 January	PM announces 3 <sup>rd</sup> lockdown to start 5 January
5 January	Lockdown begins
16 February	Additional 1.7m people in England are advised to shield. Shielding extended to end March.
22 February	PM announces 4 step plan for ending coronavirus restrictions by 21 June
25 February	UKs Covid alert level lowered from five to four
8 March	Schools reopen. Socialising in parks and public spaces with one other person permitted.
29 March	Stay at home order comes to an end. Two households or 6 people allowed to meet up outside.
1 April	4 m people in England and Wales who were told to shield by their GPs are no longer required to do so.
12 April	Covid rules eased in all Home Nations including reopening of non-essential retail in England and Wales.
10 May	PM confirms next step in relaxing of restrictions for 17 May
17 May	Covid rules eased – pubs and restaurants allowed to reopen. Indoor mixing permitted for up to 6 people from two separate households Hugging no longer advised against in England for the first time since March 2020.
21 May	UK government updates its website advice for people living in 8 areas of England where the Delta variant is said to be spreading the fastest. No announcement made. People advised not to meet up indoors and non-essential travel to/from advised against.
25 May	UK updates advice for the 8 areas affected by the Delta variant stressing it has not imposed a local lockdown. Advice is now to minimise travel
14 June	PM announces relaxation of restrictions planned for 21 June to be delayed by 4 weeks to 19 July
12 July	Health secretary and PM confirm almost all restrictions will be removed in England on 19 July.
19 July	Final stage of Covid restrictions lifted in England. The wearing of face coverings no longer required by law.

## Appendix B: Survey Design

The survey research tool was designed through a rigorous process, which included ongoing collaboration and validation across three members of the research team. An initial 'long list' of potential questions, covering each concept to be measured, was compiled through the team's previous work on similar surveys, and a literature search. Inclusion criteria gave regard to:

- **A cross-sectional design:** the decision to administer the survey at one timepoint is influenced by 3 main factors: the inability to capture participants prior to getting involved in an activity (meaning we are unable to set a "baseline"); the likely impact of the lifting of Covid-19 related restrictions, over and above those that may occur due to the activity (meaning the measured changes are less likely to be reliable); ensuring a robust analysis within the allocated budget.
- **Ensuring that assessed change is linked to the activity:** this meant that scales designed for longitudinal analysis needed to be rephrased. Careful consideration was given to achieving this without changing the overall original meaning of individual questions. Most scales aim to collect an overall 'score' to measure levels of loneliness, wellbeing, or social isolation, but in this context, we needed to ensure that we could link responses directly to the perceived impact of activities.
- **Appropriateness of wording in light of Covid-19 restrictions:** some established questions are geared more toward face-to-face settings.
- **Ensuring the survey design maximises response rate:** with considerations to: an appropriate length, mix of close ended and optional open-ended questions. All mandatory questions are close ended, to maximise response rate and ensure we can measure assessed change robustly. Optional, open-ended questions were added to capture a more in-depth understanding of how activities have led to change.

### *Overview of questions*

- **Section 1, Starter questions:** these questions aim to capture a detailed understanding of the ways in which people have taken part in an activity and provide contextual information that can be cross referenced against the main survey responses (e.g., so we could consider if the type of activity or number of sessions attended impacts on assessed change in wellbeing).
- **Section 2, About your relationships and interests:** the first set of 8 questions have been tailored to identify a range of ways in which participation in an activity has led to people trying out new things. We have also allowed for respondents to provide more context through an open-ended response option after each question. The second set of 3 questions has been guided by those used for: the DCLG Citizenship Survey (1), What Works for Wellbeing (2,3). These questions measure belonging and social support respectively. An optional open question has been added to allow participants the opportunity to provide more information.
- **Section 3, About feelings of loneliness:** the 4 questions are based on measures recommended by the ONS and used across a variety of national surveys. An optional open question allows participants to expand, if they wish.

- **Section 4, About your life overall:** The 4 questions measure subjective wellbeing, and are based on measures used by the ONS. An optional open question has been added to allow respondents to expand on their response, if they wish.
- **Section 5, About you:** Questions covering demographics/ diversity and recent experience of accessing arts and cultural activities/ future plans to do

We include here the questions from sections 2, 3 and 4 of the survey

**Part 2 – About your relationships and interests**

Q1. Since being involved in / as a result of this arts activity, have you done any of the following?  
(Please tick all that apply)

- I have taken up a new hobby or interest
- I have learnt a new skill
- I have attended a new arts or culture-based activity
- I have joined a new group or club
- I have learnt how to communicate with people in new ways (e.g. video, text, digital)
- I have made new friends (e.g., someone that you keep in touch with outside of the activity)
- I have taken on a voluntary role
- I have more confidence to try out new things
- I have new ideas about things I would like to do in the future

Q2. The following statements ask you to consider if there have been any changes to your available social support (either face to face or remotely) as a result of being involved in this activity. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following by ticking the relevant box for each statement:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel a stronger sense of belonging to my immediate neighbourhood	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If I needed help, there are more people who would be there for me <i>(by 'help' we mean social support towards your general sense of wellbeing via networks, friends and family, not help with your arts activity)</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
If I wanted company or to socialise, there are more people I can call on	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q3. If you would like to tell us more about how being involved in this activity has led to changes in your social life, or why it has not, please provide information here (we are interested in hearing about your positive experiences, as well as any challenges or barriers that you may have encountered).

**Part 3 – Feeling connected**

The following questions are based on questions used by the Office for National Statistics.

Q1. Please tell us the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements by ticking the relevant box for each statement:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I am less likely to feel that I lack companionship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am less likely to feel left out	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am less likely to feel isolated from others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am less likely to feel lonely	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q2. If you would like to tell us more about how being involved in this activity has led to changes in how connected or lonely you may or may not feel, please provide information here. (We are interested in hearing about your positive experiences, as well as any challenges or barriers that you may have encountered).

**Part 4 – About your life overall**

Q1. The following section asks you to consider whether being involved in this activity has led to changes to your sense of wellbeing. Please respond on a scale of 0-10 ('0' not at all and '10' completely) by ticking the relevant box for each statement:

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Overall, I feel more satisfied with my life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Overall, I feel that the things I do in my life are more worthwhile	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Overall, I feel happier	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Overall, I feel less anxious	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q2. If you would like to tell us more about how being involved in an arts and culture activity has led to changes in your overall wellbeing, or why it has not, please provide information here. (We are interested in hearing about your positive experiences, as well as any challenges or barriers that you may have encountered).