

Evaluation of Creative Directions in the Community and We Create

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Document structure

The report is structured as follows:

- Introduction
- Context to the delivery of the projects including the global pandemic that has accompanied their delivery
- Delivery
- Case studies on adaptability and co-production
- Case studies in participants from darts.

With the projects described took place against the backdrop of the pandemic there is more process description than usually be founded in a report like this.

Introduction

The WHO Arts and Health report ¹ and the APPG Creative Health report² clearly demonstrate a link between better mental health for those most vulnerable and engagement in creative arts. Evidence includes:

- 'Studies of specific arts interventions (including singing, group drumming, arts and crafts, dancing, daily photography and visiting cultural heritage sites) have shown increases in all types of individual and social well-being'³
- Arts activities can build self-esteem, self-acceptance, confidence, and self-worth⁴
- In adults with a mental illness, activities such as choir singing, art-making, expressive writing and group drumming reduces mental distress, depression and anxiety while simultaneously enhancing individual and social well-being.⁵

This evidence is supported for people with specific needs such as dementia⁶, autism⁷, and mental health⁸. This is the context in which darts work as an art-based project, where people are referred into it by an outside organisation for health improvement reasons or where people can self-refer in because they wish to engage to improve mental health and wellbeing. darts have been providing this type of activity in their centre, The Point for some time, the challenge of the projects discussed here was to transfer that good practice into community settings.

Creative Directions

Creative Directions in the community is a Spirit 2012 funded community-based project run by darts. It involves weekly music making sessions in the community. Its original intention was to provide:

¹WHO HEALTH EVIDENCE NETWORK SYNTHESIS REPORT 67

²[Creative Health Inquiry Report 2017 - Second Edition.pdf](#)

³ Fancourt, D. and Finn, S., 2019. What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being?

⁴ Ascenso, S., Perkins, R., Atkins, L., Fancourt, D. and Williamon, A., 2018. Promoting well-being through group drumming with mental health service users and their carers. *International journal of qualitative studies on health and well-being*, 13(1), p.1484219.

⁵ Fancourt, D. and Finn, S., 2019. What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being?

⁶ [Social-Workers-Guide-A4.pdf](#)

⁷Sharda, M., Tuerk, C., Chowdhury, R., Jamey, K., Foster, N., Custo-Blanch, M., Tan, M., Nadig, A., & Hyde, K. (2018). Music improves social communication and auditory-motor connectivity in children with autism. *Translational psychiatry*, 8(1), 231. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41398-018-0287-3>

⁸[Creative Health Inquiry Report 2017 - Second Edition.pdf](#)

'Weekly music making sessions in the community that draw on local knowledge and individual stories, chances to socialise around and outside of the sessions, support from the Participation co-ordinator and volunteers and progression pathways including live music event planning and performance opportunities.' (Spirit 2012 Theory of Change)

The project aimed to impact on the following outcomes:

- Doncaster residents who experience mental health issues will feel an increased sense of personal wellbeing.
- Doncaster beneficiaries will have developed strategies and life skills needed to feel confident to take part in more activities locally and across the borough.
- There is a positive change in the perception of disabled people in the community, including how disabled people perceive themselves.
- Health professionals in Doncaster will have a better understanding of how the arts can benefit wellbeing, reduce social isolation and be a vital aspect of the recovery pathway.

The project was to be delivered in two areas of Doncaster: Askern and Edlington.

We Create

A companion project funded by Doncaster Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) started in September 2019. We Create, an Arts on prescription partnership project with darts, Heritage Doncaster and CAST. The project aimed to:

- Improve wellbeing and life satisfaction.
- Increase social networks and feelings of connectedness.
- For people with mental ill health and feelings of social isolation to feel better connected to their community and have more opportunities to participate in local life.

Both projects were to be based in the community engaging with Doncaster residents with mental health issues or social isolation.

Community spirit has been identified as key aspiration for people from these areas in work undertaken by the local Public Health facilitated project Well Doncaster⁹ which links well with the aims of the projects.

The impact of the pandemic on project delivery

The Creative Directions in the Community project has been running since April 2019. This has been a period of profound change in the UK. In January 2020 the Covid 19 virus was identified. By March 2020 the UK was experiencing its first lockdown.

The impact on the projects was significant.

⁹<https://welldoncaster.uk/>

We Create was due to hold its first session in Mexborough as the pandemic hit. This session did not happen. This meant that the project had no existing base of users to switch online or to offer alternative provision too. The subsequent months of lockdown involved the Project Manager in several local events to encourage this engagement.

For Creative Directions in the Community having a base of participants allowed the project to focus on continuing engagement, initially through Activity Packs and then into online sessions. These sessions were delivered across the Creative Directions community rather than to area-based groups.

The end of lockdown and move back to face-to-face delivery has created its own challenges with numbers initially much lower than pre-pandemic as participants adjust to new circumstances.

Methodology

This evaluation was delivered by the blended evaluation team from Arc Research and Consultancy Ltd and Sheffield Hallam University. The project was managed by Dr Sharon Tabberer of Arc and Pete Nelson of SHU. Additional specialist input was provided by Richard Martin (SHU) on ethnographies and Tom Chrisp (Arc) on quantitative data analysis.

The methodologies used to evaluate the project are as follows:

- Focus groups with participants at We Create online and Creative Directions in the Community sessions.
- Ethnographies of We Create and Creative Directions in the Community sessions, online and face to face. Some written by darts staff or project partners after training on ethnographies, some by the Evaluation team. Ten ethnographies were analysed.
- Stakeholder interviews at two points of the projects, in its early stages and as the project moved out of lockdown.
- Interviews with internal staff from the projects including freelancers, participant co-ordinators, project managers and the senior team at darts.
- Interviews with partners from CAST and Heritage Doncaster for the We Create project.
- Facilitator diaries from all sessions completed by the staff in attendance. Diaries were kept after each session by the group facilitators and work was undertaken to identify a consistent recording of experience. Headings were identified for facilitators to record their thoughts including:
 - How did the session go - what did you do? What worked and what didn't?
 - What was the one thing that stood out for you in the session this week?
 - How did participants feel about themselves?

- Can you comment about life outside the project – are participants now going to other groups or accessing other community resources?

This report will put the participants' voices front and central.

Limitations: Limitations should recognise a critique of similar types of projects and associated evaluations:

*Most were small scale and limited by poor design and reporting. All were rated as a having a high risk of bias. Common design issues included a lack of comparative controls, short follow-up durations, a lack of standardised and validated measuring tools, missing data, and a failure to consider potential confounding factors. Despite clear methodological shortcomings, most evaluations presented positive conclusions.*¹⁰

We acknowledge that despite the best laid plans these criticisms could at least in part be levelled at this report. The evaluation and project team adapted the ONS question to capture the essence of the project. Unfortunately, this method of data collection was not rolled out consistently in the projects due to the pandemic and resistance from project participants. This represents a gap in our understanding of the projects. Consequently, this evaluation focusses on the experiences of those attending the sessions, arts and health, rather than the systemic integration of arts into health.

This represents a gap in our understanding of the projects. This is consistent with difficulties experienced by previous evaluations in this sector¹¹.

Delivery of the projects

In this section we will look in detail at the different routes for delivery. These are divided into sections looking at provision in phases:

- pre-pandemic: including set up.
- During the pandemic: including the different forms of engagement tried.
- Preparing for the return to face to face.
- Post-pandemic: including the return to face-to-face sessions and the continuation of online sessions.

¹⁰ Bickerdike L, Booth A, Wilson PM, et al. Social prescribing: less rhetoric and more reality. A systematic review of the evidence. *BMJ Open* 2017;7:e013384. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2016-013384

¹¹ Hacking, S. et al. (2006) 'Mental health and arts participation: the state of the art in England', *Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health*, 126(3), pp. 121–127. doi: [10.1177/1466424006064301](https://doi.org/10.1177/1466424006064301).

Pre-pandemic: setting up in the communities

Creative Directions in the Community started in April 2019. We Create in September 2019. Both projects work on a model of darts core and freelance artists leading a session with the community aided by a Participant Coordinator to offer people support to the attendees. Both projects also involve a Project Manager, who was recruited for the project. For We Create this role also involved partnership working and co-production with Heritage Doncaster and CAST, and with the Social Prescribing team. (See social prescribing case study for more detail).

Creative Directions in the community

The project's aim was to replicate the original Creative Directions delivered at The Point in Doncaster town centre in two outlying communities, Askern and Edlington, offering weekly opportunities for residents to take part in group music making sessions.

The Creative Directions projects were set up in the local areas.

- The Askern project was mostly attended by attendees at a local day centre including those living with dementia.
- The Edlington group was more diverse with people attending with a mixture of mental health difficulties including autism and learning difficulties.

The Project Manager was aware of the different characters of the sessions in each location and was considering ways to make the Askern group more diverse whilst continuing to engage the day centre. This was very much a starting phase with the projects getting set up and establishing ways of working before the pandemic hit.

Stakeholder interviews

At this early stage of the project stakeholders were keen to see the project progress. There was a lot of goodwill towards Arts and Health with support from the Director of Public Health and strong representation from darts at the Arts and Health Board. Hopes for the project included:

- A decrease in GP and hospital admissions
- An increase in wellbeing and happiness
- A decrease in loneliness
- An increase in engagement more widely including into employment.

Concerns or barriers associated with the project were:

- Overlap or duplication with other projects
- Knowledge of the project and engagement by those in most need
- Cost and reliance on the project by users

- Sustainability and consistency of provision including integration into the bigger picture.

The impact of the pandemic

In March 2020 the global Covid pandemic led to sessions in each of the areas stopping, followed by a period of regrouping, and looking at new ways of for people to stay connected and stay creative. These included:

- Activity packs
- Soundscapes
- Telephone calls
- Doorstep delivery
- Zoom sessions

Activity packs and telephone calls

The immediate response was to produce creative activity packs for attendees which were delivered face to face by the Participant Coordinator. These were backed up by phone calls. The priorities at the time were for darts to carry on supporting people to be creative and to stay connected. (See adaptability case study).

The importance of this type of small-scale contact to the most vulnerable was reported by the Participant Coordinator:

F was very pleased to see me. He has only been out for shopping. He is missing his Mum who he saw for a few times a week but hasn't seen since March because his brother is caring for her while shielding. F asked about the reopening of the groups and asked if he could be part of the planning of the music groups, not as a volunteer in the groups but helping to set them up. He asked about the artists. F has been practising music theory and has bought a new guitar. He is keeping in contact with some people from Creative Directions via Messenger. We talked about the creative pack and activities online. (Reported by the worker)

Zoom sessions

The move to Zoom session was preceded by a period of preparation including:

- The team received training on using Zoom and developed a method that took account of the timing limitations of Zoom.
- The Project manager rang people to get them prepared for Zoom as many are worried about the technology or their appearance on screen.
- Musicians were thinking about how to work with the time delay and encourage engagement when people are playing on their own, and without any of his instruments.

These preparations prepared the way for the transfer to zoom sessions which allowed the members of the groups to meet and to participate in music making.

From the ethnographies we can see that the Zoom sessions brought positives and challenges to the interaction.

Positives:

- They allowed people to carry on meeting, to be checked in on and to share an experience, to share worries about the pandemic, about the flooding that was experienced in Doncaster and about their own health issues and difficulties with access over the pandemic.
- They allowed people to see each other and the artists. Interactions changed as more of the individual's attending lives were revealed. There were conversations about the art on people's walls, pets and other family members. People got to know each other within their homes.
- Engagement of people of different ages and abilities in a mutually supportive environment who may not have been able to engage in activities face-to-face even before lockdown. There is a growing literature for example of how online spaces can be safer for some groups to engage with and may act as a way marker to other groups.^{12 13}

Challenges:

- The technology became an actor in the sessions. People spent considerable time logging on and connections would fail, including the freelancers, prompting ad hoc solutions using phones and laptops during one memorable session punctuated by a power cut.
- There is a danger in an energetic session that some of the quieter voices may be lost. The musicians spent time making sure that everyone was engaged, bringing in people individually, asking questions about preferences and their lives to counter this.
- It was often harder to join in singing together. This led to a change in the session to a focus on delivering a product, people sending in their own contributions to be put together into a CD. This was a constructive response to the timing problem.

These challenges were integrated into the new ways of working under the pandemic and were an opportunity for people to help each other.

In the ethnographies we can see participants working through with the session leaders the challenges and vice versa.

¹² <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.metip.2021.100059>

¹³ Milton, D.E., 2014. Autistic expertise: A critical reflection on the production of knowledge in autism studies. *Autism*, 18(7), pp.794-802.

Ethnography of Creative Directions 2/12/20

H joins the group. He is having problems with the sound. N talks him through how to increase the volume, to look at the bottom of the screen and hover with the mouse. C laughs.

H cracks a joke about going out and coming back in again – I haven't got my coat on.

N talks H through the camera settings. H continues his theme of going out the discussion includes snooker, red wine and bringing a bloke back in again who might be drunk. H successfully increases the volume.

The challenge of working in this way was experienced by everyone including the staff and freelancers. New skills and ways of working were learnt by all. This was appreciated and understood by the participants. The ethnographies completed on the Zoom sessions are a window into how this occurs.

Themes from the ethnographies

Ethnographies and diaries from this time show themes of:

- Sharing news
- Personal reflection
- Humour
- Connectedness
- Creativity.

Sharing news: was important and supported the engagement of participants, this included 'checking in' and updating each other on how their week had been. Changes were validated by others e.g., having a haircut, showing of some new boots, or experiencing some bad weather. This contributed to the congenial atmosphere and provided an opportunity for participants to connect with each other, at a time when social opportunities were very limited. This theme indicated that the sessions contributed to improving the health and well-being of participants as well as addressing social isolation.

Personal reflection: was also important and this was prompted by the creative activities. These reflections were validated by others and indicated a deeper engagement with the creative activity. Reflections included reminiscing e.g., *'that was when I had more hair'* and reflecting on feelings that could be captured in the songs and video e.g., an early morning walk that made them feel peaceful. Participants also reflected on how the creative process affected them. e.g. *"Some of the deciding on lines and words was tricky but I enjoyed using my brain"*. This theme indicates that the sessions supported participants to become more confident and develop new skills.

Humour: was used frequently in the creative process and shaped what was being produced, the songs and video being created and edited were humorous

and frequently prompted laughter in the participants. The creative process could have been a much more serious process and may have produced very different outputs. However, the frequent use of humour indicated that participants were central to the co-production process and they were making their own links between their ideas and the aims of the activities. e.g. a participant suggested that a picture of the museum should include Patrick (an inflatable flamingo) going in with Teddy "Having a day out at the museum".

Connectedness: for some these sessions were an oasis in the wasteland of the pandemic.

J met with X again before our Zoom session and she said that she had blocked all creativity from her life when she got ill again during lockdown and didn't want to be contacted but it was my emails checking in that gave her the courage to begin to try things again and she's in a much better place and looking forward to more. (Facilitator diary)

Supporting creativity: which included prompting and encouraging participants to contribute to the creative process, was frequently evident throughout the sessions; these were very productive. The facilitators' style was reflected by participants and promoted co-production in a congenial atmosphere. There were numerous examples of mutual support and encouragement alongside prompting participants to come up with song lyrics and images for the video. This is particularly evident in the chorus of the song accompanying the video

this museum of ours in our living room

telling stories of life lived before

Information on other aspects of delivery over lockdown can be found in the adaptability case study.

In comparing these themes with the project aims, it is evident that the sessions addressed these aims well; of particular significance was the social opportunity, at a time when these were very limited. darts concentrated its focus at this time on keeping participants connected and keeping them creative. In terms of the outcomes this spoke to increasing connectedness and reducing social isolation, as well as supporting health and wellbeing. The impact of the pandemic made these priorities for darts as they recognised the impact on their participants through one-to-one engagement on the doorstep and via telephone calls.

Preparing for face-to-face delivery

As lockdown started to ease there was a recognition from the team that before returning to face to face delivery people needed to be re-introduced to the concept of being together and developing a communal output. This was

especially important for the We Create team who had to set up a new group. To ease this the team tried several activities:

- Allotment (We Create)
- Rambles (We Create)
- Mini-concerts (Creative Directions)

These activities were to be delivered face to face outside, offering people the opportunity to be together in a covid safe environment.

Rambles

The ethnographies from the rambles demonstrate a connection between the place and the people in it, as they walk around a local area, looking at objects and writing poetry. These are examples from the ethnographies of people helping each other, engaging with passers-by and history. The work of the freelance artist in building from the objects to the writing of poetry to encourage internal and external connection¹⁴ is clearly visible.

Ethnography of a ramble in Mexborough Park 22/7/21

One woman said, 'oh I'm no good at this' and Ian replied, 'oh no, we're brilliant at this (writing poems)'. The group sat quietly for a few minutes working on their own, then J asked everyone in turn for their ideas, words, and lines that they had written down. J put all these together as he went through, and then read out the finished poem.

*That piece of wood
has come from that time
I think it should
Be there for all time*

*And then we saw
An object from the past
It could be a broken jaw
Not a plaster cast*

(A Saxon man did cast)

*It could have been hidden
To be found at last*

¹⁴Hilse C, Griffiths S, Corr S. The Impact of Participating in a Poetry Workshop. British Journal of Occupational Therapy. 2007;70(10):431-438.
doi:10.1177/030802260707001004

*Wherever they lay
Their treasure trove was hidden
In the ground til this day
For us to wonder with 'em*

The rambles used a mixture of stimuli to provide a focus for the poems, exhibits from Heritage Doncaster who are a partner in the project and stories from the local history group or library. The building of these relationships in Mexborough were an important activity of the Project manager over lockdown and helped to make the rambles a success with up to 20 people attending – many of them from the local history group.

Allotment

Another relationship developed over lockdown was with Rotherham Flourish who offered use of part of their allotment for sessions. Few people attended. This is possibly as the sessions were in mid-summer. However, the relationship with Flourish, a mental health charity, has potential.

Mini-concerts

During this period of re-engagement Creative Directions held a series of mini-concerts at darts town centre arts centre The Point and in Askern to re-engage people who had previously been to the sessions. These sessions were held at the day centre with residents many of whom had attended the sessions, some of whom have dementia.

Ethnography of the mini-concert at Askern 31/8/21

M introduces the next song: 'Momma don't allow'. It is participative. He encourages F to join in and bang her cup. F shouts out and joins in.

M invites everyone to sing: she will be coming round the mountain.

Everyone except K joins in, K gets more emotional as the song progresses.

He is crying.

Everyone claps.

L says: it has been lovely.

The relationship between music and dementia is well researched¹⁵. For the day centre staff at the sessions this was the value of the sessions:

¹⁵<https://practicalneurology.com/articles/2017-june/music-and-dementia-an-overview>

Music is a big thing. It makes you feel better and makes them feel better. With the garden gigs they were thrilled to bits. They all took part. They all sang, some had instruments. They get a good feel factor. Music does that. People are so good with them, kind, and patient. (Day centre stakeholder).

For her, this was more beneficial than the previous sessions where the weekly delivery was a bit too 'monotonous' for some. Something special to look forward to being seen as preferable.

Post-pandemic

From August 2021 darts moved to face to face sessions, initially at The Point and then in the community. Recognising that people may still have concerns about meeting face-to-face and that some of the online sessions were established, online sessions on Zoom also continued.

The diaries provide a picture of the challenges and successes of delivery during the return to face-to-face contact.

We were allowed a proper tea break, with cups of tea and everything. Jamie has to make all drinks to comply with regulations, so it takes some time, but it was worth it - the tea break is such an important factor of the sessions. It also allows for group bonding. One participant had an issue with drinking out of a cardboard mug, but there wasn't much we could do about that - it is in the rules that we are to use disposable mugs).

Everyone seemed in good spirits, though C confessed to having high anxiety levels due to the easing of lockdown and returning to activities that no longer felt familiar.

It is worth noting that this return to delivery was itself challenging in its initial phases as people adjusted to the limitations of engagement.

Creative Directions in the community

Creative Directions in the community restarted face to face sessions in Edlington in July 2021. Numbers have been lower than before. This is attributed to people being nervous about meeting face to face. There is also some anecdotal evidence of people attending other services, with one previous attendee now leading a music-based session at Sober Social, it is also thought that some of the previous attendees are still wary of being out with others.

We lost all of our other participants today to various community activities that were obviously more tempting! (Facilitator diary)

J used to volunteer in charity shops and has now had the training and starting to volunteer in support and recovery groups with Sober Social. (Facilitator diary)

As such there is perhaps evidence of an increase in confidence by participants that at least in some part can be attributed to participation in the project.

For the two sessions observed for the ethnographies (the first had 5 people, the second no-one attended), a strong feature of was the laughter. At one with the participants and at the other the staff and freelancers reflecting on the sessions. The freelance artist summed up the sessions are:

Laughter, love, and creativity.

There was also reflection on the sessions that helped the freelance artists to develop from being musicians to session leaders and how the different freelancers had learnt from each other. Diaries support this presenting a picture of engaged, skilled and committed facilitators working with often low numbers to the benefit of all.

Ethnography of Edlington Creative Directions 7/9/21

There is talk about the Spice Girls and who is which spice. D suggests they take part in the competition at the Legion. K starts to sing 2 becomes 1.

N says there is no end to what the group inspires.

This relaxed and forgiving atmosphere allows each of the people to relax and have a laugh.

It is supportive, fun. Writing silly songs. There is laughter. It gets sillier as the song goes on, more and more Yorkshire. Everybody has a go. They encourage everyone. (Focus group with Creative Directions in Edlington 15/3/22)

A key theme from the analysis of the ethnographies is how humour plays a role in building the group and how the attendees are as much a part of those humour as the artists and the Project Coordinators: it is something they create together.

We Create online

In February 2021 We Create took over the online sessions from Creative Directions. The idea being that these would move to a Mexborough focus as Creative Directions made the move back into face-to-face provision. These sessions follow the pattern of the earlier sessions with freelance artists leading the sessions with the additional resources offered by the We Create project partners from CAST and Heritage. Participants talk about the uplift they get from the sessions:

I love it on here. I come on and cheer up. If I have a bad day I get on and see my friends and move from 3 to an 8. It sets me up for the day. Having it in the middle of week brings you up. (Online focus group)

You don't need medicines – just need this hour. (Online focus group)

The value of the participant coordinator in supporting them to engage:

I was terrified the first time I went to The Point. I didn't go in. I was a recluse. Then I was introduced to the Participant Coordinator. He liked punk like me and I came out of my shell. (Online focus group)

Their love for each other:

We do worry if we don't see each other. We love each other. (Online focus group)

How they support each other:

Everyone looks after everyone else. Able bodied look after those in a wheelchair. (Online focus group)

And what they have gone onto do with the mutual support:

Prior to going to The Point, I was in the bungalow 24/7. I wouldn't go to the dustbin. Now I am out and about I have got a buggy. I have got anxiety. I would never have gone to CAST. We all have got problems. We gel together so well. (Online focus group)

For this group the support they got from each other and from the Participation Coordinator meant that they could engage in the sessions and more widely, planning to meet in person and attending other activities in the safe knowledge that they would know others there. Increasing their wellbeing and confidence to enable them to take part in other activities and increasing connections. This impact on motivation is supported by the literature on Arts and Health which noted that:

There was substantial evidence that engaging in creative activities increased participants' motivation. This gave hope, inspiration and meaning, as well as reducing inactivity. Regaining hope is often seen as a crucial aspect of an individual's recovery journey.¹⁶

Whilst the numbers involved here are small the impact of these individuals is clear with people feeling more connected, less socially isolated with increases in their self-reported feelings of wellbeing.

¹⁶ Secker, J., Spandler, H., Hacking, S., Kent, L. and Shenton, J., 2007. Art for mental health's sake. *Mental Health Today*, 34, p.36.

We Create in the community

In Autumn 2021 We Create started face to face sessions in Mexborough. The hope was that some of the success of the rambles would lead to these sessions taking off however numbers were initially small. Working on the same format as the online sessions with Heritage Doncaster and CAST involvement the weekly sessions were badged as for people experiencing mental health difficulty with music, drama, history, creative writing and more.

The sessions observed for the ethnography involved three men. The session focussed on a local train robber gang from Mexborough with historic objects from the time, with the creative focus on writing a radio play of the robbery. This was supported by CAST freelancers, Brave Words, for the writing and Heritage Doncaster with the original story and objects. A darts Participant Co-ordinator was also in attendance.

A group of men writing a group of men. (BW)

The session made links across time with crime and the transhistorical pattern of young men engaging in crime and people trying to protect themselves from outsiders.

Ethnography of We Create with Brave Words at Mexborough 9/11/21

Butch's gang lived in the Mexborough area.

G – 'we had razor gangs travelling from Sheffield to Mexborough.'

BW looks on the computer to see if the addresses of the criminals are still there.

R says he lives on one of the streets mentioned.

For those attending the sessions, this link between their current place and the one lived by the characters of the historical stories they are hearing about, and developing, helps to bring history to life. They are learning about *their* local history, building *their* connection to place. A key potential benefit of this type of engagement for people with mental health difficulties.¹⁷ The potential of this to further empower the group with links to their lived experience of the local area is also present.

To some extent the size of the group is perhaps a limiting factor on how far this empowerment can be actioned currently.

¹⁷ Secker, J., Heydinrych, K., Kent, L. and Keay, J., 2018. Why art? Exploring the contribution to mental well-being of the creative aspects and processes of visual art-making in an arts and mental health course. *Arts & Health*, 10(1), pp.72-84.

Looking at increasing numbers, the inclusion of mental health difficulties as a group descriptor on the posters has been debated by the staff, it is thought that this may be limiting attendance. There are different schools of thought on this with the suggestion that whilst wider inclusion could help the group become part of wider social change, individual empowerment may be what matters most.¹⁸ This balancing between meeting the needs of individuals with mental health needs, supporting them to start engaging, and wider inclusion, enabling those individuals to become animators in their communities is a challenge.

Numbers attending

It is not possible to ignore the continual comments of low numbers of participants in some sessions (not all) post pandemic and that it could be *hard work with only one participant*.

Yet for those participants who did attend low numbers could be a positive gain:

C has always been very shy and slow to contribute, today she was the only attendee at the beginning of the session and took a lead role in composing a lyric, showing developing confidence and assertiveness.

Group discussion where numbers are low could also provide depth that might be more difficult to achieve in a larger group. For example, a session with only two participants led to them sharing personal thoughts '*which made me feel that what we are doing is very worthwhile*'. Within the music groups where achieving an objective - a song - took centre stage, the tea break had particular importance for facilitators and participants alike

There were some lovely chats between J and C about how much they'd struggled through their lives, how they'd both attempted suicide in the past but they're doing better now. They both said how nice it was to have a tea break and a chat between writing the song. It was a reminder just how much our participants are dealing with. They both have chronic physical health conditions to deal with too.

There are a range of themes which emerge from the diaries that suggest participation was positive for participants or was certainly seen that way by facilitators. Laughter is a continual theme and is ever present in the diaries particularly as an effective counter to the experience of loneliness that faced many participants during lock down.

Everyone was positive and said the session had left them feeling good.

Lots of smiles and laughs so I hope good.

¹⁸ Secker, J., Spandler, H., Hacking, S., Kent, L. and Shenton, J., 2007. Empowerment and arts participation for people with mental health needs. *Journal of Public Mental Health*.

There is an interesting correlation here with the stakeholder interviews where 'things you can't count' were identified as a sign of success and 'smiles on faces shows things are going well'. Furthermore, loneliness and isolation were seen as key targets for the project overall.

Stakeholder interviews

In November 2021 the original stakeholders and some new partners were interviewed again to gain insight into their perception of the project and to explore likely future funding sources. The pandemic had had a large effect not only on their engagement with the project but also with Arts and Health more broadly as the board has stopped meeting over lockdown.

For one stakeholder there are too many factors to evaluate why things have not worked out and that rather we are getting to the stage when we might be able to reinvigorate.... In effect they have not had a fair go at it. (GP stakeholder)

For others there was still commitment to the idea of the project but little if any idea of what has occurred over the previous 2 years, including over lockdown.

I have not had any information. How many people attend? I didn't know it was ongoing in the pandemic. (GP stakeholder)

For others who were more involved in the project the engagement was important and they became cheerleaders for the project more generally.

I am fully aware of what they did over covid. We have had an update on the sessions that have now started – this led to an interesting discussion on digital exclusion. The fact that they offered a mixture is commendable.

Others are not as creative. Others offer a service. darts recognise difficulties and respond to need... They spend a lot of time making people feel comfortable. It is a huge step to do. (PH stakeholder)

This recognition by a key council ally is important in terms of traction for the wider Arts and Health agenda in Doncaster and for future support for these sorts of projects.

Discussion

Creative Directions and We Create set out with specific aims related to mental health and wellbeing and social isolation. Both projects have delivered sessions in a variety of ways both before, during and post pandemic.

This delivery has been appreciated by those that have attended. The Project Manager has case studies from individuals and focus groups which show a collective regard for each other (see Appendix 3 and 4). The pandemic meant that the projects were disrupted with We Create taking longer to get off the

ground despite the Project Manager trying different, innovative, engagement routes. Some of the difficulties of the project will lead to learning for the future. For example, zoom sessions and paper-based resources have offered different ways to engage and highlighted digital exclusion; whilst the challenges of co-production in a pandemic have formed the basis for future relationships.

Whilst some of the original objectives have been hard to achieve or evidence there is evidence that darts work in arts and health is impacting deeply on those that attend on:

- getting motivated: inspired hope and reduced inactivity, and so improved mental wellbeing and decreased mental distress.
- focussing on art and the intense concentration involved increases relaxation and distraction, which again resulted in improved mental wellbeing and decreased mental distress
- connecting with others in a supportive environment decreased social isolation and increased confidence to relate to others, thus combating social exclusion and mental distress.¹⁹

These impacts can be found in the ethnographies, focus groups and the facilitator diaries. The linking of connectivity and creativity in the groups is at the core of the Creative Directions in the Community and We Create model. Further we can see that humour and laughter are an important part of the darts recipe. Participants report the impact of this on their health and wellbeing.

The numbers involved can often be very small but the sessions can be impactful. People talked in focus groups about their experiences of mental and physical health including bipolar disorder, depression, and anxiety.

We are the walking wounded. (Edlington focus group)

Whether the numbers attending the online and face to face groups would have been larger if the pandemic hadn't occurred is hard to know, but this is likely bearing in mind the good numbers that were attending Edlington pre-lockdown.

What is perhaps more important is the wider offer that the project developed during this period that was very much geared to the vulnerabilities of those attending the sessions.

These are small but significant wins.

To some extent the project over-promised with many of the proposed outcomes difficult to achieve over the timescale and, subsequently, during a pandemic. Going forward those that attend the sessions are keen for them to continue, key stakeholders indicate that the reasons for setting up the project are still

¹⁹ Secker, J. (2011) Mental Health and Art. *Mental Health Insight*, May 2011. pp 21-22.

supported and there is talk amongst the groups of changes to venues to increase numbers.

Conclusion

Returning to the original objectives from the project we can say:

Objective 1: There is good evidence from the diaries, ethnographies that those who experience mental health issues feel an increased sense of personal wellbeing. Participants talk about the impact on their mental health and how the sessions punctuate their week. What we don't know is the sustainability of this change beyond the session. For the facilitators this was a matter of curiosity.

Objective 2: There is some evidence of participants going onto other activities both within darts and other partners such as CAST. There are also reports of participants going onto run music making sessions for other organisations such as Sober Social. At Edlington it was reported that some original participants were now attending another session run by a local group at the same time. This is a positive outcome in terms of further engagement; however, it does underline the importance of continued recruitment.

Objective 3: Whilst there is evidence of project participants taking account of each other's needs, including disabilities, and being included in sessions we have no further evidence to support a change in perceptions of people with disabilities in the community, including how people see themselves.

Objective 4: Health professionals who have engaged with the project over the pandemic and beyond have good knowledge on how arts and health can impact. This is not the case for all and wider engagement is sort by the darts lead in the future as the Arts and Health Board is reinvigorated.

There have also been some unanticipated outcomes from the projects, for example:

- increased connections at the organisational level in Mexborough including with the library and the local history club.
- skills development of the freelance artists as they developed expertise in zoom sessions and other forms of engagement such as soundscapes for We Create.
- research skills across the project with training by the external evaluation team in quantitative methodologies, qualitative methodologies, and ethnographies.
- expertise in partnership working including the difficulties of co-production in a pandemic.

Future evaluations of this type of intervention will need to consider:

- best ways to gather more quantitative data on the impact to allow comparisons with other likeminded projects.
- the cost/benefit of this sort of project which is heavily staffed with few participants.
- where the greatest impact might lie. The role of the Participant Coordinator is a core part of the darts model - what is the impact of this role; some sessions are delivered by poets, others by actors or musicians, whilst attendees have preferences are outcomes different?

As with all projects that exist in the realm of short-term project funding the benefits will be felt long after the funding ceases, whether in the learning that will be taken forward or in the relationships that have been built and sustained by participants, partners, and project deliverers.

Appendix 1: Co-production case study

In this case study we will look at the different levels of co-production found in the We Create project as follows:

Level 1 - Strategic

Level 2 - Partnering and collaboration

Level 3 - Co-production with one key partner

Level 4 - Co-production with communities

Methodology

Interviews with the partners: representatives from CAST, darts and Heritage Doncaster were interviewed in October 2021 to look at the co-production journey and plans. The interview schedule used was based on the NEF Co-production self-assessment framework²⁰.

Observations of meetings: The partners meet quarterly to plan delivery. These sessions have been observed by researchers.

Ethnography of We Create sessions in the Community and online.

Interviews with stakeholders including the Social Prescribing team.

Focus group with We Create online.

Level 1: co-production at a strategic level

We Create is an Arts on Prescription project funded by Doncaster CCG, it came out of an Arts and Health Action plan in 2018 that sought to pilot arts on

²⁰ <https://www.seemescotland.org/media/7287/co-production-self-assessment-framework.pdf>

prescription delivery in Doncaster in response to the 2017 APPG²¹ on Creative Health messages that:

- The arts can help keep us well, aid recovery and support longer lives better lived
- The arts can help meet major challenges facing health and social care: ageing, long term health conditions, loneliness, and mental health
- The arts can help save money in the health service and social care

We Create is a collaborative project involving darts, CAST and Doncaster Heritage in delivering activities to support wellbeing, connectedness and reduce isolation in one area of Doncaster, offering a blueprint for how the organisations might work together that could be offered to other commissioners.

Mexborough was selected as an area of Doncaster with a strong local identity, and high levels of deprivation particularly in relation to crime and education. Whilst Heritage Doncaster were doing work there already, the area is thought of as 'a tough nut to crack'. The pilot was funded through Doncaster CCG.

Beyond the current project, funding for this sort of collaborative Arts and Health project is unsecure, the CCG no longer exists and has been replaced by the Integrated Care System. The Arts and Health Board has not been sitting. The landscape of commissioning has changed in Doncaster, the project needs to 'find out who the players are' if funding is to continue.

Level 2 - co-production with partners

A key part of this pilot delivery was the relationship between the partners and working in collaboration on co-producing and co-delivering an Arts and Health project.

How can we work with each other and communities? How can we leave a legacy, not just a flash in the pan? Partnerships that work and upskill volunteers and give a meaningful and beneficial experience. (CAST)

Partners: the partners for the project were CAST, darts, and Heritage Doncaster. Each of these organisations brings different arts-based skills and delivery. Whilst knowing each other and working in the same geographical area all the partners worked for different sorts of organisations, with different structures, payment systems and staffing.

darts – 3rd sector arts organisation. Creates art for people in Doncaster to improve life, learning and health. Make high-quality, inclusive, creative experiences across the borough of Doncaster. programmes are open to everyone, particularly those who have the least access to the arts. Mission is for

²¹ [Creative Health Inquiry Report 2017 - Second Edition.pdf](#)

everyone to feel an accepted and valued part of the community creating a healthier and more connected society.

CAST – Cast, Doncaster’s theatre, opened in 2013 and welcomes audiences and participants of all ages from across the borough of Doncaster and beyond.

Heritage Doncaster – Council based organisation with access to objects. Experience of delivery of objects-based sessions in communities for people with MH difficulties. Employed staff delivering sessions with the community. Long-term relationships with partners in communities.

There was a mutual appreciation of what each brought and a recognition that the project offered the opportunity to be more than the sum of its parts.

Different roots can take you to different places with opportunities for doing things. As a PM gives you a more objective view and can bounce off one another and broaden creativity. Work in ways you might not with the support of others. (darts PM)

The project lead is employed by darts, to allow more flexibility in terms of approach and funding. In terms of engagement, it was also hoped that participants might be able to move between groups offered by the different organisations leading to change in perception from going to activities, to taking part in cultural activities.

Individual interviews and observation of the meetings indicated that the partners had different views of the projects from the beginning. The challenge has been to harness the clear creative energy of participants collectively generated in meetings into shared activities and common goals.

Whilst all the partners had been involved in partnership working previously and had known each other before this pilot, the pilot and the pandemic has led to new ways of approaching this, for example Heritage talked about new thinking on:

how we use our objects and stories. In our sessions we have more control over the story – in theatre there is a difference between telling a story and being in it. The participant engagement is different; there is more invested rather than just watching. Bringing it to life. We do the same to some extent with stories and activities, but it is different when they have a relationship with a character. (HD)

The pandemic

Much of the journey has been influenced by the pandemic. For example, whilst planning work was completed in the period November to March 2020, delivery had to be re-thought as the pandemic hit.

These adaptations have included:

- o July First online resources (2 x Soundscapes), designed to lead to future in-person projects. Projects focus on music, words, and history in different ways. <https://wearedarts.org.uk/wecreate/>
- o Mexborough: Town centre recces took place, to judge the mood of the town and to speak with local businesses and community connectors.
- o 2 days of outreach activity around town talking with residents about the project.
- o Trial of socially distanced 6-person 'Creative Ramble'. There was no uptake, which whilst disappointing (and potentially due to bad weather and a new COVID announcement), was a useful learning experience on what people felt comfortable doing.
- o A pop-up slot at Well Doncaster's peer support groups was trialled in September: and met with a positive response.
- o 200 packs including CDs and guides of the Soundscape resources sent out to local organisations and food banks. (From We Create timeline)

The pandemic has created barriers to working together in the way originally planned as relationships have been hard to maintain across partners. Whilst the project has continued to run and has effectively adapted, this has largely been under the guidance of darts with other partners less involved.

We Create became Creative Directions. (CAST)

The sessions felt like a darts session with special guests. (Heritage Doncaster)

The pandemic created problems in terms of communication. Whilst meetings continued, there was not as much communication between meetings creating challenges of engagement in decision making. One partner noted that they would have liked to be more involved in the creative thinking around how to deliver during an epidemic, 'to look at the alternatives and see where they might go'.

This negotiation of boundaries is very much a feature of good partnership working. During the pandemic communication became more fragmented with people working from home and on furlough preventing this. In these circumstances it is not surprising that the Project Manager sought ways to continue provision from within her home organisation.

The Project Manager summed up the co-production journey as:

I know already but I need to remind myself that it is a constant ongoing process – how are things evolving artistically, bringing people in, finding ways. We know that you need a formal and informal structure – artistic planning conversations. (PM)

Funding has been extended to allow for the pandemic. This time was used to test out the ways of working together that were disrupted by the pandemic. For example, a 6-week session with freelance actors (Brave words) sourced through CAST, working alongside community members, to develop a radio play using some of the objects and historical research from Heritage, with a darts co-ordinator.

Online sessions were a good pilot. We ran some sessions with Brave Words on witches and everyone got involved. Everyone brought their skills to table – it was a session we couldn't do individually – we couldn't do on our own. (Heritage Doncaster)

Level 3: co-production with social prescribing

As an Arts on prescription project links with Social Prescribing were always important for the project. Much of the early planning work for the project was spent in developing links with the team and with local GPs to co-produce provision and establish a referral route. There was clear initial commitment from all sides to both the idea and the practice of arts on prescription.

Unfortunately, this did not lead to shared activity as referrals did not arrive. A range of reasons have been put forward by stakeholders as to whether this was:

- *a lack of trust between the various parties at an individual or professional level.*
- *a failure in systems with Social Prescribing services going through a period of transition; or of*
- *participants not wishing to engage.*

There was also the significant impact of the pandemic.

Once the pandemic took hold processes needed to be rethought and other options and routes were developed, for example in October–December 2020:

Co-design and pilot of a bespoke creativity and wellbeing zoom session for Doncaster Social Prescribing (DSP) clients. Initial planning with the DSP team took place in October and the trial, for DSP team only, ran successfully with 12 staff in November. The aim is that this becomes a regular offer, co-designed with the DSP team and their clients, exclusively for them. One to one digital support for clients is built into the offer. Once numbers grow a group for Mexborough and closely surrounding areas can be formed from this original group. (We Create timeline).

Whilst there was early potential this was not realised in numbers of people coming to the sessions. The pandemic contributed here by both increasing the firefighting engaged in by social prescribing staff and thereby reducing the priority of cultural engagement; The difficulties were summed up by the Social Prescribing link as:

People don't have access to online. They are doing it on the phone. With a lack of confidence: They have not done it before. What will it be like in my room? You need a motivation to engage: getting people to get up and get on the computer. There is a fear of the unknown. C did a list of bullet points and would phone – there is still a barrier: the cost/use data; phone charging; to sit on it for an hour; being confident to sing to a phone. In a group it is easier to hide and choose how to participate. (SP)

The pandemic also meant that the visibility of the project was reduced, with the Arts and Health board no longer meeting and reduced opportunities for incidental conversations. Relationships were also impacted with new ones needing to be created after the pandemic phase.

It is hoped by both the Project Manager and Social Prescribing that the face-to-face sessions offered another opportunity to engage, although fear of engagement and residual pandemic concerns were still very much a barrier.

I hope that 2/3 clients will go and take me with them. I only work 21 hours a week so it is hard to do at the minute. With a client I can do this as a visit.

For one stakeholder there are too many factors to evaluate why things have not worked out (DC) and that rather we are getting to the stage when we might be able to reinvigorate in effect, they have not had a fair go at it.

Level 4: co-production with communities in sessions

The We Create sessions that were set up in Mexborough with Brave Words and Heritage specialists and darts co-ordinator were seen as positive model to develop from going forward, whilst numbers were low, the interactions between the organisations to produce a session were positive. An ethnography from a session observed by an evaluator noted:

- The positive impact of historical stories and object on participants
- the engagement with the Brave Words facilitator in developing a radio play
- The co-ordination and contribution of the darts Participant Coordinator in holding the session together and meeting the needs of those present.
- The importance of place, especially Mexborough in everything that went on and the enjoyment of the people attending in sharing their knowledge and using this in the play.

Instances in the session displayed co-production between the partners in the delivery of the session and between the partners and the community within the session as individuals shared their own knowledge and built the story of the play.

A focus group with the We Create online group emphasised the satisfaction that the group get from producing something together:

One of us will run with an idea, then someone else takes over...

*We get on with it. Make the most of the activity.
It always buoys you up. (We Create focus group)*

And the role of the staff in facilitating this by creating an atmosphere in which ideas are welcome and people encouraged to follow them to see where they might go.

I noticed with the staff, instead of some groups where you are pushed to do something – here you are encouraged by the people around you rather than not. In the Viking one – we did a sketch; everyone went with it... People hosting are nice and don't hush you. (We Create focus group)

The work of the darts staff is particularly appreciated in creating the circumstances in which the freelance artists can work with the attendees to create something.

Conclusion

The pandemic has presented a challenging backdrop to the We Create project. It has impacted on:

- delivery, what, when and how sessions are delivered; who attends; who delivers.
- communication across the partners with staff on furlough, reduced capacity.
- prioritisation of other forms of support rather than Arts on prescription.
- ongoing processes and anxieties about keeping people safe.

Under these circumstances the Project Manager has managed to continue to provide sessions and to engage in creative new developments to help recruitment and future engagement. The initial vision of a co-produced project was somewhat compromised as more simple, tried, and tested methods of engagement and delivery were relied upon.

This was however recognised by all involved with a rebooting of the project as it moves back to face-to-face delivery and early positive evidence of co-production and co-delivery. Whilst the numbers attending remain low there are encouraging signs of co-production within the sessions as people develop confidence to bring their knowledge.

This interaction within groups and between participants in the live co-production of a specific session can be seen as one of the most explicit and interesting examples of successful co-production with the flexibility to go where the collective leads.

This group they all want to tell us things ... we are looking for alternative stories it's interesting (IM)

For those attending the sessions this being a part of something which is creative and, in each session unique, is an important part of their experience. It also speaks to good co-production.

*Co-production starts from the idea that **no one group or person is more important than any other group or person**. So, everyone is equal and everyone has assets to bring to the process. Assets refer to skills, abilities, time, and other qualities that people have.²²*

Going forward the project will need to build upon this good practice whilst being mindful to use all its assets across the three organisations to better create the co-production environment that was the original aim of the project.

Appendix 2: Adaptability Case Study

Creative Directions is a Spirit 2012 funded community-based project run by darts. It involves weekly music making sessions in the community. Its original intention was to provide:

'Weekly music making sessions in the Community that draw on local knowledge and individual stories, chances to socialise around and outside of the sessions, support from the Participation co-ordinator and volunteers and progression pathways including live music event planning and performance opportunities.' (Spirit 2012 Theory of Change)

The project aimed to impact on the following outcomes:

- Doncaster residents who experience mental health issues will feel an increased sense of personal wellbeing.
- Doncaster beneficiaries will have developed strategies and life skills needed to feel confident to take part in more activities locally and across the borough.
- There is a positive change in the perception of disabled people in the community, including how disabled people perceive themselves.
- Health professionals in Doncaster will have a better understanding of how the arts can benefit wellbeing, reduce social isolation and be a vital aspect of the recovery pathway.

²² <https://www.scie.org.uk/publications/guides/guide51/what-is-coproduction/principles-of-coproduction.asp#:~:text=Equality%20%E2%80%93%20everyone%20has%20assets,other%20qualities%20that%20people%20have>.

A companion project funded by Doncaster CCG started in September 2019. We Create, an Arts on prescription partnership project including Heritage Doncaster and CAST. The project aimed to:

- Improve wellbeing and life satisfaction.
- Increase social networks and feelings of connectedness.
- For people with mental ill health and feelings of social isolation to feel better connected to their community and have more opportunities to participate in local life.

Both projects were to be based in the community using creative freelancer and darts project support to engage with Doncaster residents with mental health issues or social isolation.

The Creative Directions project has been running since April 2019. This has been a period of profound change in the UK. In January 2020 the Covid 19 virus was identified. By March 2020 the UK was experiencing its first lockdown. In this case study we demonstrate the response of the projects to the pandemic by looking at adaptations made to the projects.

In the next sections we will look at how the projects have adapted over the pandemic and what has been learnt for the future of this type of project.

Overview

dart's aim during the period of the pandemic was twofold: to keep people connected and to keep them creative. Six weekly meetings of the Project Managers and coordinators took place throughout to look at ways to achieve this. Two surveys were undertaken over the period of the pandemic to look at responses to the pandemic and to darts offer. The findings from these were used to inform planning. For example, an early technical audit led to the realisation that internet access was a big issue with people using the internet on their phone, access to mobile data, no access or fear of the internet. In response to this, darts looked to engage in different ways.

Engagement

Wellbeing calls to wellbeing visits

In July 2020 the team behind Creative Directions started a series of wellbeing calls to participants who had been at the groups in Askern, Edlington and the original Creative Directions at The Point. The calls came about through a recognition amongst the team that there were some people who relied upon Creative Directions for their social interaction and a desire to maintain a creative focus: it was possible that these people had communicated with no-one over lockdown. The aim was to check in and let people know that darts was still there and that they hadn't been forgotten about.

'Sometimes people were scared, saying what is going on, what is it all going to be. Not asking for answers but being able to share that with us.'
(Project coordinator)

These individual calls built connections and created challenges in terms of the limits of the staff role and what they were there to provide in terms of mental health support. Some people needed more calls, whilst others were happy with an occasional contact. People were texted before the call to ensure that participants knew who was calling and the purpose of the call. Having had contact with the participants face to face before the lock down, made this sort of engagement easier.

Once packs were produced these calls were largely replaced by wellbeing visits from the Participation coordinator, who visited all the participants from the sessions who wanted contact, until January 2021. Spending a short amount of time on doorsteps he contacted people who had been isolated and shared stories with them.

'It was nice with all the hectic things happening in the world that they could meet someone they knew; someone to talk to without it being official.' (Participant coordinator).

These visits and calls connected people to darts and the wider world. They also gave darts staff more insight into the lives of their participants and the barriers they might face to digital engagement. These included:

- Lack of access to the internet
- Lack of access to data
- Lack of technical expertise to use their Smartphone to access online sessions
- Being uncomfortable with phones
- Changing phone numbers often
- Moving often
- Fear of who might be calling.

This insight helped to tailor the engagement to the individual whether that be to talk on the doorstep, call, or just drop a pack through the letterbox. It was also a recognition of the way the lockdown exacerbated the disadvantages and barriers already faced by Creative Directions participants.

In April, May calls were re-initiated to get people ready for re-engagement with face-to-face activities.

This engagement hasn't worked for everyone and some have not responded to the calls or packs. The hope is that these people will re-engage with the face-to-face projects once they restart. A letter has been sent to all previous participants advising them of sessions re-opening to help prompt this.

learning

Individual contact has led to a deeper understanding of the barriers faced by people with mental health barriers to engagement. Future bids for funding will

include considerations to reach these people including looking at ways of delivery that work for different groups.

It is recognised by darts that the complexities of people' lives need a more nuanced approach going further, particularly with the continuing pandemic.

Rambles

We Create Mexborough was due to launch the week of the first lockdown, having spent considerable time planning and building up contact with the Social Prescribing team the project had to rethink how to engage. The thinking was to develop soundscapes and podcasts that would introduce the community to the artists involved and the variety of creative input offered by the project.

These were distributed online and through Heritage links such as the food bank in Mexborough.

The next step being to engage people in person in September 2020 in outdoor activities such as the Rambles. This proved unsuccessful. Having learnt from this the Rambles were re-imagined and launched in 2021 as an outdoor introduction to the project before going back to indoor face to face delivery. This time successfully. This was attributed to the local links that were made in the intervening period, allowing knowledge to spread through local history groups and local patient networks and for trust to be built.

A key partner to the We Create project was the Social Prescribing team at Doncaster Council. The pandemic made their engagement with the project more difficult as they were helping people in crisis. As restrictions are lifted it is hoped by the Social Prescribing team that they will be able to refer into the sessions and accompany clients and that this relationship will be more fruitful.

learning

Engagement of participants has been a key challenge for the We Create project. Having no previous participants and being required to create a project in an area away from darts central provision, during a pandemic meant that a lot of time and energy was spent in trying new means of engagement. These attempts brought valuable knowledge into the project including the amount of time needed for early engagement, and the need to use pre-existing networks to gather momentum.

Early on the project was very reliant on the Social Prescribing team who were quickly absorbed by responding to the pandemic. The wider links that have been developed since may lead to better ongoing engagement which the Social Prescribing teams can link into when capacity allows.

Delivery

Postal packs

The Project Co-ordinator for the Creative Directions project was recruited in September 2019. Sessions were set up as planned with musicians in both Edlington and Askern. Recruitment was slow to recruit in Askern with only 4 to 5

in a session. The local day centre was approached and became engaged this led to changes in how the sessions worked as people had more additional needs. Engagement was slower within the group and the artists responded with a gentler approach.

During lock down darts sought to maintain engagement with people who had attended through the calls and then the visits which were to deliver packs to previous attendees. Over the period of lockdown these packs changed in response to feedback and perceived need of participants.

In recognition of the need to continue to engage participants and to show that darts was still there for them the artist team came together to look at what might be provided. The musicians came up with proposals that were sense checked with darts staff. Initially the creative freelancers developed online content that allowed participants to self-facilitate sessions. Findings from engagement with these was that participants engaged better with packs produced by familiar artists with their own input. This led to the 'On Yer Doorstep' packs. Each pack includes a CD and a songbook that links to the sessions. These were distributed by the Participation Coordinator.

Packs are continuing in recognition that not everyone feels comfortable face to face and additional money has been accessed from Covid recovery funds to do a wider distribution.

learning

Meeting every 6 weeks the project has been able to respond to feedback and to adapt when needed. This flexible approach was part of the project before the pandemic and has been a key strength. Using data from videos online, surveys and reported feedback from the wellbeing calls, packs have changed to the present format which speaks to the engagement of participants in creating content and their relationships with artists.

The artists themselves have been key to this in creating content and being engaged in looking at new ways of working. This has led to their continued employment at darts when other projects have stopped, building relationships with each other and darts further.

Zoom sessions

darts projects did not leap into Zoom sessions early but took time to get to know the technology and to make sure that everyone was comfortable with sessions starting in June 2020.

Creative Directions moved to Zoom first and there was an early recognition that music production worked well online, whilst other aspects such as singing together were more difficult because of time delays. There was recognition from within the project that time and thought had to be put into this transition and that it was not always easy.

We had to learn how to use it. It was hard, the time lag, when someone joins in singing it cuts out the 1st person. Musicians had to work backwards from what zoom does well. (Musician)

Other difficulties were ensuring that everyone was comfortable with the technology, both participants and their helpers with early sessions needing technical support before everyone felt confident and the format not working for all.

In terms of participation zoom mixed bag, for some a lifeline, for some saw confidence plummeting. Didn't like engaging on zoom but needed something in their day. Had to adapt to the energy levels expected from participants. Norm wouldn't be what we saw. Some wanted the camera off and listened... As a delivery artist it was so difficult. You can't read the room, you have to learn to communicate, you can't do body language etc. (Musician)

The Zoom sessions changed the nature of the interactions between the artists and the participants to some degree. In some senses it helped to bind the group as everyone adjusted to the technology together and were sat in each other's home, albeit on a screen. In other ways the nature of communication is filtered through a central point, with no opportunity for side conversations which meant some of the spontaneity of the face-to-face sessions was lost.

Zoom offered some positives in terms of looking at different opportunities and means for engagement. For example, using video and photos taken by participants to form an accompaniment to a song developed together. Ethnographies of these sessions have identified that the twin aims of keeping connected and keeping creative were evident in the session with participants sharing news and 'checking in' on the week. Supporting creativity, prompting, and encouraging participants to contribute to the creative process with the facilitators' style reflected by participants promoting co-production in a congenial atmosphere. There were numerous examples of mutual support and encouragement alongside prompting participants to come up with song lyrics and images for the video. This is particularly evident in the chorus of the song accompanying the video

this museum of ours in our living room

telling stories of life lived before

It was recognised by the musicians involved that the Zoom sessions opened up ways of engaging that had not been tried before and this learning shouldn't be forgotten.

These early Creative Directions Zoom sessions were taken over by We Create as both projects adapted to moving face-to-face. There is recognition within the team that whilst the sessions aren't the same as face-to-face sessions, they provide a different sort of output with a recorded song or play professionally

produced at the end; that having this production element as part of the process works well on Zoom and has been a key adaptation.

For the We Create project the involvement of CAST and Heritage mean that some of the outcomes can be different, for example a radio play was developed. This was then sent off to be professionally produced giving the participants something that they have contributed to and that is high quality. Some of the participants have gone on to take part in the National Theatre Public Acts production at CAST.

learning

It is worth noting that the involvement of professionals in developing a high-quality output is different to the co-production that occurs at a face-to-face session, where the output is created in the moment. This, like the packs, is a change in Creative Directions practice occasioned by the pandemic.

Going forward it is recognised that Zoom sessions are a means of engagement that some people find easier than face-to-face sessions. Considerations are now being given to how these and the 'On yer doorstep' packs might be continued.

Back to face to face

After some false starts where workshops were scheduled and subsequently cancelled, the more recent adaptation has been with the return to face-to-face sessions in the community from July 2021 within ongoing covid restrictions. The need to book into sessions; restricted numbers; shorter sessions; restricted singing; social distancing; mask wearing; no tea; and the ongoing hygiene requirements of working in a continuing pandemic have not always been appreciated by participants who desire a return to normal.

This also changes the relationship between darts and the participants to a more authoritarian one, a role that darts have been careful to avoid.

As restrictions have lifted, and refreshments have been allowed the sessions have started to return to normal.

learning

There is a further adaptation as lockdown eases and people adjust to new ways of working. The tension here is that people want to return to pre-pandemic ways of working and that is not yet possible.

One of the challenges that darts have faced is managing this change in relationship with participants.

Conclusion

The last two years of darts delivery have been against the backdrop of the pandemic. This has introduced a degree of uncertainty and disquiet into what was already an activity for vulnerable people with mental health difficulties or social isolation. For Creative Directions building on the relationships that were

already in existence meant that there was opportunity to engage using the means that were most available to the participants; hence visits, packs and then zoom. For the new project We Create these links were in place so new, innovative ways of engagement, such as the Rambles were trialled, including some piggy backing on Creative Direction delivery.

For both projects, the musicians and participants engaged in them have challenged ways and rhythms of working, changing types and modes of engagement, resulting in different outcomes including tangible outputs such as videos, songs, and plays. The less tangible outputs have also been important. Whilst not everyone was able or willing to continue to take part over the pandemic, the new types of engagement and the regularity of connect means that darts has continued to be there for some of the most vulnerable. As one of the musicians describes it:

Part and parcel of what darts does is connecting. ...taking time and building friendships, no sense of rushing. (musician)

This approach has served the projects described here well over lockdown, providing consistency to the most vulnerable whilst steadily overcoming challenges, whilst the checking in and surveys have ensured that darts has remained attuned to the needs of the community.

Whilst not everyone has been engaged over lockdown darts have tried a myriad of different ways to bridge this gap. Not rushing, considering, and making choices involving musicians and project delivery staff has enabled adaptations to happen as needed. This has helped to strengthen the darts team and create new skills and ways of working for the future where it is likely that hybrid ways of working and engagement will continue to be needed. The experience of the staff and longevity of some of the relationships has been an important enabler.

Appendix 3: darts case study 1

I first heard about darts from a lady I met at church, [volunteer]. I saw her in her darts t-shirt and asked her all about it. I've suffered mental health problems since a child and suffered with social anxiety too. But [volunteer] kept encouraging me to give it a go, promising she would stay close by and I could leave if it was all too much. I started to go on Wednesday mornings, everyone was so friendly, Jamie straight away put me at ease and found me a seat so there was no one could get behind me. These people understood my fears, they had been where I was and were so welcoming. I quickly made friends with several of the ladies, it felt so good to be with people who understood.

I came back the following week and had a sandwich in the cafe and stayed over for the afternoon art session, I think we were making birds out of cane!

It wasn't plain sailing, sometimes my fears got the better of me but [volunteer] or Jamie took me to a quiet place and chatted till I felt better.

After a while I started going instead to Creative Directions at Edlington on Tuesday mornings. Jamie was there so it felt safe

Then came Covid: and isolation and fear

Then zoom!

The church had been using zoom for a few weeks, so I wasn't fazed when Jamie said Creative Direction was going to be zoom. I was thrilled, it was so good to see some of my friends again. Jamie brought us creative packs every month in gorgeous, coloured envelopes, and one week he bought a bag of musical instruments so I could play along with the musicians! The musicians were brilliant, so very patient and interested in each one of us and helped us make videos and other stuff! So were the other artists and singers who met with us on zoom.

Last May Jamie invited me back to the first face to face session at the Point since Covid, there weren't many of us but it was so so good, and to able to meet Gary in person and we talked and put a few words to the music Gary, Ian and Luke played about things we had missed during Covid lockdown

Creative Directions has been such a huge part of my life recent years, and in lockdown was the only reason to get up some mornings. Through the lockdown sessions I met Nicola who worked at Cast, she mentioned a Public Acts play they were planning to put on and was anyone interested in joining. I don't know what made me offer, I was so shy and nervous, but I did with several others.

And that opened up a whole new group of wonderful people. One of the first ones to welcome me was [participant] who I'd met on zoom. He was also in a wheelchair. I was so doubtful if I could play a part but he soon rubbished that idea!! He is an excellent advocate for the disabled having the same rights as others to do what they wanted to do!

We gelled so quickly and became a family, my husband said I looked twenty years younger when I came home from these rehearsals!

The last day of the play was so emotional, we are all so open and supportive of each other, and there were so many tears and hugs.

We are meeting again this week and we are all really looking forward to it

Creative Directions has turned my life round and I am so grateful to the funders who make our sessions possible.

Appendix 4: darts case study 2

Like anything it's overwhelming, if you don't know people, don't know the building. I was a bit fragile When I started and it was difficult. I was ill at the time, I found it hard to keep a structure, do certain things at certain times.

As time went on, I got to know people, and people who work here. I sense it with people, if they're having a bad day and I try to get em laughing and that.

The group breaks down barriers, my barriers. Letting people in, cos where I live it's rough. So, you have to stand up for yourself as a woman, put a different... you know what I'm saying. I've had to do a lot of group work, and personal stuff. People acknowledge you and you know they mean it and that can go a long way when you've got bad mental health. Someone texting me, (participant) texted me the other day and it cheered me right up, encouraged me. And that's how it works, I encourage other people too.

Growing up, I didn't have the structure... that parental structure. So, if you don't get praise growing up and I couldn't trust people. That has a detrimental effect. The more I've been around people and I talk about certain things. It makes you realise that there's a lot of people out there that when the doors are shut... do you know what I mean. It's like today, I want to be here for the music. People have time for me, trying to help my confidence, because I've been in some right states when I've been in there.

People's kindness and acceptance, cos I haven't had that in life. It means a lot.

[I started with] Gary and Mooney's sessions, they were music orientated and group work and I needed to work on being in a group. The more that you do group stuff and you interact with people it helps you open your wings. You need to want to do it, want to change. I've seen people being quiet, not want to talk. Then they start to come out of themselves and get more confident, believe in themselves more.

Thinking about Edlo, we have a laugh and a joke. It's more laid back. Structured to a point but you don't feel like it's a lesson at school.

I wonder if people thought that they'd get music lessons or that music wasn't for them and that put them off. Cos I'd like to learn more and I can't do it on my own at home, I get distracted.

[About song writing at home] I surprised myself, I just sat at home and I thought I've got music tomorrow and I'm just going write some songs and I wrote 3 in 48 minutes. It brings me out of my comfort zone but it's a good thing. To work on the group aspect.

[During lockdown] I got those books and CDs and the drawing stuff and that, and we had the zooms. It took me a bit to get used to but it was better than nothing, I don't know how I got through it. It strengthened me. I thought the recording of my song was nice. But it would be nice to do more of an upbeat disco type version.

I've started doing more [volunteering at charity shop and now a mental health support group], more group work which I couldn't have done when I first came. I hadn't written songs before and I haven't got a clue what inspired me that day. I'd picked up skills to think about how things sound together so I felt more confident to write it. I was saying to a lady that she could write a song because she'd written a poem.

It's given me a kick up the arse sometimes to think that I can do all these things because I'm able bodied. I think people need that sometimes.

[If Creative Directions stopped] It would have a detrimental effect on my mental health. I know it's there. It's nice to know that it's there. Especially if you haven't got family and close-knit friends. It's nice to know that you can get ready and you've got somewhere to go among people.

It's helped my confidence and being able to interlink with other types of people and having the opportunities. Some people haven't got that or are unaware of that and it's not good.

Maybe I could volunteer here.