CULTURE DURING COVID

Examining the Impact of the Pandemic on the Voluntary Arts Sector

Edited by
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REPORT CHAPTERS

Amy McTurk is a PhD student at the University of St Andrews. She worked with Creative Lives between February-September 2021 on an internship funded by the Scottish Graduate School of Arts & Humanities.

During that time, she created the 'Culture During Covid' project, examining the impact of the pandemic on the voluntary arts sector. This report is the result of months of research and conversations, capturing a very specific moment in time and exploring how we might build a more inclusive future for everyday creativity.

Find out more about the work of Creative Lives at www.creative-lives.org and join in the conversation at @CreativeLivesCL.

INTRODUCTION

Culture During Covid is a research project that aims to assess how voluntary and community-led creative groups responded to Covid-19, as well as to understand the consequences of the pandemic for the future activity of these groups.

Covid-19 and its ongoing impact on the professional arts and culture sector has been well documented and discussed in the media, creative industries, government, and civic society circles[1]. In addition, during the national lockdowns, there was an unparalleled outpouring of everyday creativity, which was particularly evident on social media[2]. However, at the outset of this research project, the impact of the pandemic on new and established voluntary arts groups (involved in creative cultural activities such as crafts, dance, drama, literature, media, music, visual arts, applied arts and others) appeared to be less well understood.

In order to examine how creative groups adapted to the pandemic and overcame the challenges of lockdown, and how they planned to move forward from these experiences, I interviewed representatives of seven creative groups from across Scotland, the UK, and Europe between February and July 2021. This was followed by a special #CreativeNetwork event, 'Learning from Lockdown', in September 2021, during which groups reported on how their plans were progressing.

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1   See, for example, Mark Banks and Justin O'Connor, "A Plague upon your Howling': Art and Culture in the Viral Emergency', Cultural Trends, 30:1, (2021), 3-18. DOI: 10.1080/09548963.2020.1827931. [Accessed 23rd September]; OECD, 'Culture Shock: Covid-19 and the Cultural and Creative Sectors', OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19), 2020. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/culture-shock-covid-19-and-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors-08da9e0e/. [Accessed 23rd September 2021]; James Tobin, 'Covid-19: Impact on the UK Cultural Sector', House of Lords Library: In Focus, 2020. Available at: https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/covid-19-impact-on-the-uk-cultural-sector/. [Accessed 23rd September 2021]

2   Hansika Kapoor and James C. Kaufman, 'Meaning-Making Through Creativity During COVID-19', Frontiers in Psychology, 11:595990, (2020). DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.595990 [Accessed: 25th May 2021].

During the interviews, each person was asked the following questions:

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How did your creative group adapt to the pandemic and its associated lockdowns?

What challenges (if any) did your group face and how were these tackled?

What benefits (if any) did new approaches introduced in response to lockdown offer your group?

How does your group plan to move forward from the pandemic and will your experiences during lockdown inform future plans?

This report explores the responses to these questions in two sections:

Research Report

This section discusses the key themes and commonalities arising from the interviews undertaken as part of the Culture During Covid project, while incorporating pertinent findings from other publications concerning the impact of Covid-19 and its associated lockdowns on everyday creative cultural activity and on opportunities for voluntary creative participation.

Case Studies

This section tells the stories of seven creative groups or initiatives. The case studies highlight the innovative ways in which groups adapted to lockdown and how this experience has reshaped their plans for the future.

**The main themes identified in the research report are:**

1 | THE IMPACT OF CREATIVE CULTURAL ACTIVITY ON WELLBEING DURING COVID-19

Groups reported that continuing to participate in creative cultural activity with others during the pandemic provided a sense of enjoyment and stability in a difficult and anxious time. Engaging with voluntary and community-led creative groups was seen by those interviewed as a way to combat loneliness and to help those at risk of isolation connect with their communities during and after lockdown.

2 | THE CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF EXPERIMENTING WITH DIGITAL PARTICIPATION IN CREATIVE CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

Moving their activities online became a chance for groups to try out new ways of working. This opportunity for experimentation was facilitated by a sense of community and trust that enabled members to learn together as a group. While groups acknowledged that there were downsides to the move online, they emphasised the benefits of digital participation.
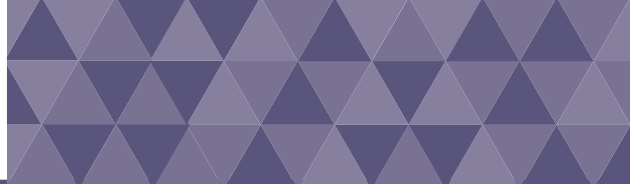
3 | THE IMPACT OF THE DIGITAL ON EXISTING INEQUALITIES IN CREATIVE CULTURAL PARTICIPATION

Groups' experiences of being able to open up digitally to people who had previously been unable to participate in person indicates opportunities for increased accessibility and inclusivity. The digital provision of creative activities was presented as a new option for those who were previously excluded from participating in creative cultural activities with others for a multitude of reasons, including (but not limited to): being unable to leave home due to physical or mental health, problems with transport including low quality or expensive public transport, time commitments, childcare, economic reasons, or geographical distance.

For some groups, meeting online provided new ways of interacting with others, which allowed for more flexibility and which are potentially more welcoming to people who previously felt uncomfortable with, or unable to join, an in-person group.

4   THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCREASED INCLUSIVITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OFFERED BY BLENDED APPROACHES TO CREATIVE CULTURAL PARTICIPATION

Incorporating both digital and in-person elements offers a way to avoid the loss of the benefits of digital engagement, while regaining those of in-person participation.

Groups who had experienced how the move online allowed previously excluded individuals to participate were conscious that returning to fully in-person delivery would re-exclude certain participants. Groups also recognised that people would have very different feelings about returning to in-person meetings and activities. For most interviewees, the digital was not seen as a "back-up plan" if in-person meetings were restricted again, but as a way for the group to expand or improve their activities. Constant communication with key stakeholders was seen as an essential part of successfully implementing a blended approach, as it enabled groups to incorporate questions of inclusivity and accessibility from the outset.

THE IMPACT OF CREATIVE CULTURAL ACTIVITY ON WELLBEING DURING COVID-19

Many voluntary and community-led creative groups have proven to be extremely resilient during the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated lockdowns. Groups have inventively adapted their activities in order to continue creating together remotely and in-person, where government restrictions have allowed[1]. This resilience and adaptability, demonstrated by the efforts made to maintain creative groups during the pandemic, illustrates the importance of these groups to the individuals involved.

Creative Lives' *Big Conversation 2020*, a survey of creative participation across the UK and Ireland, found that groups sustained high levels of positivity in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. When asked how optimistic they felt about the future of their groups or activities, respondents provided an average score of 4.2 out of 5 (which is only slightly below the scores in 2017 (4.5) and 2018 (4.35))[2].

The results of the Big Conversation survey also revealed that words such as "happiness", "enjoyment", "uplifting", and "escapism" were frequently associated with participating in a creative activity, which was seen as playing a central role in developing "friendship, connectedness, belonging and sense of community"[3]. The feelings of enjoyment and satisfaction generated by taking part in a creative activity with others have, therefore, largely withstood the challenges of the pandemic.

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1   Alongside the case studies included in this report, see Creative Lives, Get Creative & Make a Difference: Micro-Commissions Case Studies England, 2021. Available at: https://issuu.com/creativelives/docs/get_creative_and_make_a_difference_-_england_micro. [Accessed 23rd September 2021] and Making Music, Case Studies: Group Activity during Covid-19, 2021. Available at: https://www.makingmusic.org.uk/resource/case-studies-group-activity-covid. [Accessed 23rd September 2021].

2   Gareth Coles, 'Big Conversation 2020 Results', Voluntary Arts, 2021. Available at: https://www.creative-lives.org/news/big-conversation-2020-results. [Accessed 3rd June 2021].

3   Ibd.

Furthermore, the positive effect of creative activity on wellbeing has become increasingly salient in the wake of the harmful impact of Covid-19 on mental health. This is demonstrated in Hansika Kapoor and James C. Kaufman's article, *Meaning-Making Through Creativity During COVID-19* which argues that people engaged more with creative activity during the pandemic, in order "to cope with current uncertainties and insecurities, [by] enabling one to seek and find significance in the mundane"[1]. Similarly to the findings of the Big Conservation survey, Kapoor and Kaufman link everyday creativity to fun and enjoyment, which "became a scarce experience when lockdowns were enforced"[2]. Consequently, Kapoor and Kaufman suggest that "engaging in creative expression can be used to guard against the adverse consequences of this outbreak"[3].

Participating in creative cultural activity with others during the pandemic helped to provide a sense of enjoyment and of stability in a situation where daily routines and usual sources of pleasure had been removed. This idea was echoed in the Culture During Covid interviews.

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1   Kapoor and Kaufman, p.3.

2   Ibid., p.3.

3   Ibid., p.1.

> **"A parent said 'some days you were the only reason my daughter ever got out of bed during lockdown'. I think that giving the kids something to do, especially during the first part of the pandemic, was very important for them in terms of their mental wellbeing. We were an anchor point for them." (Gavin Woods, Lewis and Harris Youth Concert Band)**

This feedback reflects recent findings from the University of Sussex, where researchers reported that during the pandemic, "virtual music groups represented a meaningful psychological resource for the participating children and young people [...] Through their participation with virtual group music-making activities, young people used music as a tool for self-expression and emotion management, restored lost musical identities and confidence, and preserved treasured social connections"[1].

The well-established link between creative cultural participation and wellbeing thus indicates a key role for voluntary and community-led creative groups in combating the negative impact of the Covid-19 crisis on mental health[2].

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1   Maruša Levstek, Rubie Mai Barnby, Katherine L. Pocock, and Robin Banerjee, "'It All Makes Us Feel Together": Young People's Experiences of Virtual Group Music-Making During the COVID-19 Pandemic', Front. Psychol, 12:703892, (2021). DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.703892. [Accessed 23rd September 2021].

2   Kapoor and Kaufman acknowledge that "research has identified how participatory arts projects can foster well-being in the community" (p.5).

For each of the groups interviewed as part of the Culture During Covid research project, the uplifting effect of participating in creative cultural activity with others was a key reason why they felt it was important to continue to engage with their creative groups during lockdown.

For example, Vicky Mohieddeen from Amina Muslim Women's Resource Centre (MWRC) in Glasgow describes the emotional impact of the centre's 'Life in the Time of a Pandemic' project, which brought together audio, visual, and written art to allow Muslim and BME women to explore and express their experiences of the pandemic:

> "At first, people were saying that they were nervous, scared, lonely, depressed. Immediately it became obvious that this project was absolutely what was needed for these women, because at the end of every single workshop, they were saying that they felt that they were heard, that they were embarrassed but then they saw that other people are having the same sort of issues as them." [Vicky Mohieddeen, Amina Muslim Women's Resource Centre]

Amina MWRC - which has offices in Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow - recognised that the pandemic was exacerbating existing social inequalities. The harmful effects of Covid-19 on the women's wellbeing, mental health and ability to connect were being compounded by domestic and financial issues caused by lockdown and by the heightened visibility of systemic racism in the wake of the George Floyd murder and the Black Lives Matter movement. Meeting up as a group and participating in a creative activity online provided a space for emotional expression during the pandemic.

The creative project also acted as a vehicle for women to share their stories with a wider audience and to highlight the issues of discrimination and inequality that they faced[1]. In Amina's case, participating creatively with others also promoted a sense of connectedness, allowing individuals to see that others were having similar experiences to them and thus alleviating feelings of loneliness and alienation.

Indeed, one of the key challenges facing public wellbeing during the pandemic was the issue of isolation. The Scottish Community Alliance's (SCA) report, *Community Response to Covid-19*, observes that following the initial urgency of addressing physical needs, such as access to food and shelter, "concern rose about the impact of the pandemic on loneliness and wellbeing."[2]

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1   The exacerbation of existing social inequalities during the Covid-19 pandemic has rendered them more visible. As the Centre for Cultural Value reports "Covid-19 has "turned up the dial" on existing race, gender, class, health, and geographic inequalities" leading, in some cases, "to increased attention to inclusion and access among cultural organisations, and a sense of campaigning" (Ben Walmsley, Abigail Gilmore and Dave O'Brien, "Recovery isn't a black and white picture", Centre for Cultural Value, 2021. Available at: https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/recovery-isnt-a-black-and-white-picture/ [Accessed: 24th May 2021]).

2   Emma Cooper, 'Research into Community response to COVID-19', Scottish Community Alliance, 2020. Available at: https://scottishcommunityalliance.org.uk/2020/06/30/lessons-learned/ [Accessed 3rd June 2021].

The SCA cites the continued provision of "activities such as choirs and art classes online" as a vital part of efforts to tackle loneliness and isolation.[1]

Similarly, in *Creative People and Places: Lockdown Learning Case Studies*, Kathryn Welch reports that "despite the very real problems people were facing – with jobs, housing and food, as well as with health – the community absolutely recognised the need to find alternative ways to build a sense of connection to one another, and the role that creativity can play in overcoming physical distance."[2] For several of the groups interviewed as part of the Culture During Covid project, members' anxieties about becoming disconnected socially drove the group's transition to digital delivery. This was exemplified by Rashmi Becker from Step Change Studios in London, as she recounted that the dance initiative's transition to digital dance sessions was prompted by members' requests:

> "There was a demand for the group to continue online. I think initially that came from concerns about being isolated in lockdown and missing the community that we had built through dance. Because we are about more than dance – people value the connections that dance helps you make and the community that you create."

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1   Alongside signposting to "professional support services, providing befriending and youth work services remotely, [and] conducting welfare calls" (Ibid).

2   Kathryn Welch, 'Creative People and Places: Lockdown Learning Case Studies', Creative People and Places, 2020. Available at: https://www.artshealthresources.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2020-Creative-People-and-Places-Lockdown-_Responses_Learning.pdf. [Accessed: 25th May 2021]. Case Study 3, p.2.

The pandemic has, therefore, foregrounded the value of existing creative community networks, groups, and activities. Additionally, as restrictions began to ease, participation in creative cultural activity appeared an effective way to help those most isolated during lockdown to reconnect socially.

This can be seen in the series of creative photography walking workshops created by Albatross Arts in partnership with Jean's Bothy in Helensburgh. Their 'Walking Workshops' project aimed to help individuals who lived alone and who were less likely to be engaged digitally to overcome the anxiety and uncertainty of meeting up in person.

The group photography project helped individuals to connect with their environment in a new way and created a sense of belonging, exemplified as the group grew in confidence and moved from talking about "I" to talking about "we". At a time when issues of loneliness and social isolation are a key concern for communities, the walking photography workshops showed how a sense of social cohesion and connectedness can be cultivated through creative cultural participation with others. While the positive effects of participation in creative activity – especially as part of group – on wellbeing were undeniable before the pandemic[1], the role of creativity in helping people to navigate their experiences during the crisis and its associated lockdowns proves the effectiveness of creative activity as a way of finding joy and connection.[2]

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1   Marie J. C. Forgeard, Anne C. Mecklenburg, Justin J. Lacasse and Eranda Jayawickreme, 'Bringing the whole universe to order: Creativity, healing, and posttraumatic growth', in Creativity and mental illness, ed. J. C. Kaufman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 321–342. DOI: 10.1017/cbo9781139128902.021

2   Similarly, the message that creative activity, particularly as part of a group, is beneficial for wellbeing is reflected in the Craft Club Annual Report, which found that "55% of active craft club leaders reported that their members would otherwise be socially isolated" and "53% of craft club leaders reported that their members attended for therapeutic purposes". The report reveals the strong sense of community described by craft clubs, even in the face of difficulties such as the loneliness experienced by some of the members, especially older people, those without mobile phones or internet access, and those who live alone (Craft Council, Craft Club Annual Report, 2020. Available at: https://media.craftscouncil.org.uk/documents/Craft_Club_Annual_Report_2020.pdf [Accessed 4th June 2021]

THE CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF EXPERIMENTING WITH DIGITAL PARTICIPATION

The majority of voluntary and community-led creative groups who remained active during the pandemic adapted their activities for digital delivery. The increasing focus on digital engagement in all areas of society has not, however, been experienced equally by everyone. Older age groups, people with disabilities, and those from households in lower income bands are more likely to be digitally excluded.[1]

All of the groups interviewed were aware of the problem of digital exclusion. One group was able to tackle this directly, through access to funding that enabled them to loan out tablets and provide SIMs. This was not, however, a feasible option for most groups, with some relying on local authorities to provide equipment to those in need. Nevertheless, where the accessibility of technology (as opposed to access to technology) caused problems, one group reported that this created the opportunity to raise the issue with providers who, because of increased demand for their products and services, were quicker to rectify it.

Nevertheless, the digital divide is not only caused by lack of access to devices or to the Internet. As Kathryn Welch observes, digital exclusion "encompass[es] issues around digital literacy [...], concerns around personal safety, confidence to show what your home looks like, and access issues for people who struggle with their speech or have English as a second language."[2]

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1   Carl Baker et al., 'Covid-19 and the Digital Divide', The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. 2020. Available at: https://post.parliament.uk/covid-19-and-the-digital-divide/. [Accessed 7th September 2021].

2   Welch, Case Study 2, p.4. For an additional explanation of the multidimensionality of the digital divide, see Alexander Seifert, 'The Digital Exclusion of Older Adults during the COVID-19 Pandemic', Journal of Gerontological Social Work, 63:6-7, (2020), 674-676, DOI: 10.1080/01634372.2020.1764687.

Given the many social factors that may cause digital exclusion, Rachel Coldicutt proposes that "technology can highlight and deepen social and economic divides if it is not accompanied by thoughtful community building."[1] The question of community and community building recurred throughout the Culture During Covid interviews. In the case of groups who were coming together for the first time during the pandemic, this careful community-building was integrated from the beginning of the group's interactions.

Initial meetings were centred around getting to know one another and creating a bond as a group. This included, for one group, the creation of a WhatsApp chat to facilitate friendship and connectedness between members.[2] For the majority of the groups interviewed however, their sense of community pre-dated the pandemic. This pre-existing familiarity and trust created an atmosphere in which participants felt comfortable to express their concerns about using technology and to make mistakes, with groups feeling like they were able to experiment and to learn together. Most of the interviewees stressed the importance of constant consultation with all members of the group while experimenting with digital participation, in order to shape the group's use of digital tools effectively.

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1   Rachel Coldicutt and Gill Wildman, 'Report 1: Findings: Social Capital and Serendipity', Glimmers, 2020. Available at: https://glimmersreport.net/report/findings. [Accessed 18th May 2021].

2   This experience is similar to Creative People and Places: Lockdown Learning Case Studies's description of how increased forms of communication, such as a group WhatsApp chat, facilitated the creation of "a trusting, intimate and supportive space that the group could actively shape to meet their needs […] and enabled group members to support each other in ways – such as throughout the night – that would have been difficult to realise without a digital element" (Welch, Case Study 2, p.2).

When asked to look back to the start of the pandemic and to consider how they had adapted their group's activities in response to Covid-19 restrictions, the individuals interviewed recounted predominantly positive experiences. While several groups reported that they had doubts about their ability to transition to online delivery (including lack of familiarity with platforms like Zoom, concerns about how delays in internet speed would affect the group's activities, as well as questions about how moving online would affect GDPR and child protection policies), groups persevered.

Consequently, there was a general sense in which groups were pleasantly surprised by, firstly, their own ability to implement and manage this change and, secondly, by other members' positive – even enthusiastic – reactions to digital delivery as a way to continue the activities of the group. When questioned about the challenges of digitalisation, most groups acknowledged that there had been downsides (such as digital fatigue and the loss of connection with members who did not want to or could not connect online). Yet, having acknowledged these disadvantages, the majority of the interviewees then quickly insisted upon the many benefits of online delivery that had been experienced by their group.

Groups' increasing experience with using digital platforms to facilitate their creative cultural participation enabled them to get creative and to tailor their use of technology to meet their needs. For example, Lewis and Harris Youth Concert Band began using video recordings as a way to rehearse, after having decided that rehearsing live on Zoom did not feel right for the band.

Loud & Proud Choir in Edinburgh developed multi-part backing tracks to support singers who were struggling with the transition from singing as part of a group to singing alone in their homes. Fife Youth Jazz Orchestra (FYJO) used Zoom's breakout rooms to split musicians into smaller groups, depending on the type of instrument played, which allowed for more one-to-one practical advice and more specific learning. Claire Martindale from FYJO described this new way of rehearsing: "It was a big draw for a lot of people. There's no way that we could have managed to do the same thing in the Lochgelly Centre in person. We wouldn't have had enough room".

In some cases, groups found that digital platforms offered opportunities for socialising that had not been available previously or that they had not considered when meeting in person. Several of the groups interviewed reported intentionally scheduling time to catch up with one another during online rehearsals and most indicated that this was a practice that they would continue in future, when in-person meetings resumed. Breakout rooms also emerged as a good way to encourage new friendships and connections within some groups.

For example, when Zoom could only assign people to breakout rooms randomly, Loud & Proud found that this created new opportunities for the group to mingle, particularly with people from other sections of the choir who, in a physical rehearsal space, would be positioned at the opposite side of the room. Kathleen Cronie, musical director of Loud & Proud, reported that the time spent chatting gradually increased from ten minutes to half an hour and that it was such an enjoyable experience that the group decided to continue using the random assortment feature even after Zoom introduced the possibility to assign people to specific rooms.

Another benefit of adapting to a digital format was that groups found this offered them more opportunities to collaborate with others. Groups such as Lewis and Harris Youth Concert Band and Loud & Proud Choir were involved in national and international collaborations with other music initiatives, resulting in the production of shared online performances. Kathleen, Loud & Proud's musical director, explained the benefits of the choir's involvement in an international three choir project, with partners in Munich and Kiev: "Every choir shared a song, so we got to share new material with other singers and to see new ways of working. That was really exciting."

A further example is that of Amina MWRC, who connected with arts and culture venues across Scotland to digitally host the 'Life in the Time of a Pandemic' exhibition. Many of the groups also reported that the move online during the Covid-19 pandemic opened up abundant opportunities to share resources and knowledge with other groups and individuals involved in similar activities. Fife Youth Jazz Orchestra was able to invite music teachers interested in the group's alternative methods for teaching jazz through improvisation to observe their Zoom rehearsals. Meanwhile, Natasa Chanta-Martin from Social Circus Athens explained:

"We realised that by offering more things online – which we were not a huge fan of at first – we could approach more people, including educators who have access to more kids or social workers who have access to more shelters. It creates a domino effect [...] People connected with us from different parts of Greece, especially since they also have refugee populations there and they didn't have access to all the things that usually go on in Athens. So we saw this world opening up, especially as we are a grassroots organisation working in the field all the time. Now we have this extra level, where we can open up to a larger scale within the country and the continent."

Alongside the increased ability to connect with other groups involved in similar activities, one of the most commonly cited benefits of using digital was that the increase in online provision of activities meant individuals who could not participate in person have been able to access opportunities for creative cultural activity. Groups were able to open up to new members and, in some cases, the group's reach expanded exponentially. For example, Claire from Fife Youth Jazz Orchestra explains:

> "We had kids from all over Scotland, from all over England, right down to the South and Southeast, Pembrokeshire in Wales, we had a family from Northern Ireland, and we had a guy who came in from Romania every week. Obviously, you can't do that with in-person rehearsals. So, we were able to open up to a huge number of people who knew about what we were doing, but it was just never practical for them to join in before."

While it is important to recognise that the move online did not suit everyone, with several groups reporting that some members preferred to wait until in-person activity resumed, for other people engaging digitally in creative cultural activity represented an opportunity to overcome previous barriers to participation.

THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL ON EXISTING INEQUALITIES IN CREATIVE CULTURAL PARTICIPATION

Recent data on 'cultural consumption' during the pandemic reveals that the demographics of those engaging digitally are similar to the demographics of those who engaged most in person before the pandemic, thus suggesting that the move to digital did not disrupt existing inequalities in this context.[1] The question of the impact of digital on cultural participation, however, potentially indicates opportunities for increased accessibility and inclusivity.

In several of the conversations with groups as part of Culture During Covid, digital provision of creative activities was presented as a new option for those who were previously excluded from these activities for a multitude of reasons, including (but not limited to): being unable to leave home due to physical or mental health, problems with transport including low quality or expensive public transport, time commitments, childcare, economic reasons, or geographical distance. For example, Rashmi from Step Change Studios and Vicky from Amina MWRC discussed how moving online during the pandemic helped their groups to overcome these barriers:

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[1]   A recent article, "Cultural Consumption and Covid-19: Evidence from the Taking Part and COVID-19 Cultural Participation Monitor surveys" argues that "where cultural consumption did increase, this was among the small minority of people who were already highly engaged, with their engagement becoming even higher" (p.2) and that "the pandemic has, based on our analysis, not disrupted the arts audience, whether in terms of bringing in new engagement or in terms of key demographics of existing consumers. 'Digital' will not be enough to change the arts; rather, the core lesson of the pandemic is the need for real vision as to what a representative and fair cultural sector would look like in order to reach a truly representative, and thus diverse, audience" (p.15) (Tal Feder et al., "Cultural Consumption and Covid-19: Evidence from the Taking Part and COVID-19 Cultural Participation Monitor surveys", SocArXiv, 2021. DOI: 10.31235/osf.io/x9dbv. [Accessed 23rd September 2021]).

"What has been fantastic is a lot of people who couldn't access dance, who couldn't necessarily physically get to a place or a space, or who live in more rural areas have now been able to join in. We've had care providers, care homes with their support workers, joining in groups - whereas they may not have been able to organise travel to a venue if it was in person. So, we have been able to reach more people who had not been able to engage previously." [Rashmi, Step Change Studios]

"We're aware that there are women with whom we have lost contact a little bit or we're in less contact with them because we've only been able to work in a certain way, but perhaps what we've also been shown is that there are women who would never have had a chance to come work with us. Apart from a baby and toddler group, I've never been a part of a project that's had people who've just given birth because they're at home looking after their baby.

But we had a lot of new mothers in this project, and to be able to work on poetry writing and self-resilience building with people who had their first baby as a single mum in lockdown, after having moved to the UK six months before or with unstable immigration status, is a wonderful thing to be able to say." [Vicky, Amina MWRC]

These examples show how a community-led approach to online cultural activity can generate increased levels of accessibility and inclusivity through the flexibility that digital engagement offers.

Meeting online also provides new ways of interacting with others, which might seem more welcoming to people who previously felt uncomfortable with, or unable to join, an in-person group. This is demonstrated in the Creative People and Places: Lockdown Learning Case Studies report, which describes how "one participant with anxiety found it easier to join online classes than to make it out of the house for in-person events."[1]

Similarly, one of the groups interviewed for the Culture During Covid project explained how the online format of rehearsals gave members more choice over the level of interaction they had with the group during any particular meeting. For example, participants could choose to simply listen to the rehearsal or to switch their camera off. This meant that if there was ever a time when a participant did not feel able to fully engage with the group, for any reason, it was possible to still maintain a form of involvement. This gave members more flexibility and control over how they chose to participate in the group.

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1   Welch, Case Study 4, p.6.

THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCREASED INCLUSIVITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OFFERED BY BLENDED APPROACHES TO CREATIVE CULTURAL PARTICIPATION

As government restrictions eased and in-person events became possible once again, the question of a 'hybrid' or 'blended' approach (combining in-person and digital activities or events) has appeared to groups as a way to 'build back better' after the pandemic. Taking a blended approach to creative cultural activity potentially offers a way to avoid losing the benefits that digital engagement has brought (such as greater flexibility and accessibility, and the ability to reach more people), while regaining those of in-person participation (such as greater spontaneity and including those who are digitally excluded). During the Culture During Covid interviews, groups who had experienced how the move online allowed previously excluded individuals to participate were conscious that returning to fully in-person delivery would re-exclude certain participants.

The potential loss of accessibility that a return to pre-Covid behaviours could represent is reflected in the Audience Agency's survey on *Covid Safety and Willingness to Attend*, which concluded that in terms of returning audiences for cultural events, there will be higher engagement for individuals and events that fall into the categories of 'vaccinated, younger, with higher previous [pre-pandemic] engagement, more affluent, urban, families, contemporary, outdoor'.[1]

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1   Oliver Mantell, 'What Are Audiences Thinking? Findings from the COVID Cultural Participation Monitor', The Audience Agency, 2021. Available at: https://www.theaudienceagency.org/asset/2705 [Accessed: 1st June 2021], p.40.

Conversely, those who fall into the categories of 'unvaccinated, older, less previous engagement, less affluent, rural, no children in household, traditional, indoor' are predicted to have lower engagement.[1] This disparity in engagement is also suggested by the UK Disability Arts Alliance 2021 Survey Report, which found that 82% of respondents "expressed concern about the continued provision of access for disabled audiences through reopening."[2] In terms of post-pandemic cultural engagement, the UK Disability Arts Alliance 2021 Survey Report revealed the main concerns of those surveyed to be "continued access for disabled people in general (82%), health and safety issues (69%) and one's own personal access requirements (42%)."[3]

In the Culture During Covid interviews, several interviewees acknowledged the importance of recognising that people would have very different feelings about returning to in-person meetings and activities. Some groups reported a split in members between those who were keen to return in-person and those who were not. In one case, the vast majority of members preferred to continue online at the time of survey.

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1   Ibid., p.40.

2   Alistair Gentry, UK Disability Arts Alliance 2021 Survey Report: The Impact of the Pandemic on Disabled People and organisations in Arts & Culture, ed. by Andrew Miller, 2021. Available at: https://www.weshallnotberemoved.com/2021survey/ [Accessed: 1st June 2021], p.2.

3   Ibid., p.21.

"We'll definitely be using a hybrid approach. What's interesting is that, when restrictions started to lift, I asked our groups if they were happy to switch back to real life dance or if they wanted to continue online. With the exception of one person, they all wanted to continue online. It makes you ask, are people in different places when it comes to returning back to in-person interactions?

We've been conditioned over this last year to be very careful and I think that caution will continue for a while, certainly if you're amongst those groups that have been affected the worst. But, also, we've reached new people and different audiences and different participants. That's really important, so we wouldn't want to stop that." (Rashmi Becker, Step Change Studios)

Even when interviewees reported that their group was very keen to return to in-person meetings, they acknowledged that they would incorporate digital elements if any member did not want to return to in-person activity. Incorporating digital and in-person activities thus appears to be an important way of enabling all group members to continue to participate and to make creative groups as accessible as possible.

For most of the groups interviewed however, a 'blended approach' was not imagined as an approach in which the digital would be a 'back-up plan' if in-person meetings were restricted again. Rather, incorporating both digital and in-person elements into the group was seen as a way for the group to expand or improve their activities. For several of the groups interviewed, taking a blended approach to creative participation was about maintaining the ability to reach as many people as possible and to maximise participation in an inclusive way, by providing more choice and more flexibility to suit individuals' needs.

A blended approach does not necessarily mean providing in-person and online engagement simultaneously (although it can). This idea is important because the assumption that 'blended' means simultaneously facilitating an activity both in-person and online can be off-putting to some, as this can seem complicated and expensive, and facilitating an activity online versus in person can demand very different styles of communication.

There are many other ways of combining the in-person and the digital, including (but not limited to):[1]

Alternating weeks of meeting in person and online or one online meeting per month

Providing digital content that complements in-person activity (for example, recordings of rehearsals to allow people to catch up with anything missed)

Using digital for events where you want to reach as many people as possible, and using in-person for smaller, place-based events

Continuing digital collaborations with groups in other areas

Using video calls for administrative meetings

Meeting digitally with other groups to share resources and knowledge

Using digital for special events – such as one-off creative activity masterclasses, taster sessions, or reunion events with friends made online during the pandemic

The many possible ways of combining the in-person and the digital means that groups can proceed with the exploratory, experimental spirit that was demonstrated when first moving online at the start of the pandemic, which encouraged groups to experiment with how they participated in a particular creative cultural activity. Blended approaches to cultural participation thus represent an opportunity for groups to get creative about their practice and to find tools and solutions that work best for them.

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1   See the case studies at the end of this report for detailed examples of how groups are taking a blended approach to their creative cultural activities.

A key point for the implementation of a blended approach that recurred throughout the Culture During Covid interviews is the importance of establishing a process of constant communication and feedback with key stakeholders (such as, the members of the group or the target demographic). For example, when describing how Step Change Studios partnered with Metro Blind Sport and the Vision Foundation to undertake a blended project, Dance Dosti (which involved the creation of a digital platform, followed by live programmes piloted in areas with higher South Asian populations, specifically targeting people with sight loss), Rashmi explained:

> "The most important thing is to understand who your stakeholders are and who your key audience is. At the moment, I'm looking at South Asian community groups, faith groups and disability groups. I'm building a network of people who have links to the audiences that we're trying to target, in order to test out material and to have conversations to understand what they like, what they don't like, what works, and what doesn't."

Blended approaches appear to work best when they are tailored to the needs and goals of a group or a community. Community-led or voluntary creative groups are therefore in a good place to do this successfully, as they are already embedded in communities, especially where these communities might be overlooked by more centralised forms of cultural consumption and participation.

This idea is reinforced by The Culture and Communities Mapping Project's report, 'Art in and out of Lockdown', which found that "the community hubs interviewed know their audiences well and were able to identify quickly where digital programming would be effective and where it would not work."[1] Vicky, from Amina MWRC, also elaborated on the importance of building strong relationships with communities when thinking about inclusion, as she explains:

> "One of the reasons this project has reached so many women, and why so many women have wanted to take part in it, is because of the work that Amina have been doing for decades. There's a trust, we're not coming into your community because we think you've got some interesting stories for us to take. For the majority of white organisations, there seems to be this perception that it's really hard to engage with BME communities and I think hopefully what we're learning now is that there are lots of things to consider, but that this kind of amazing work is possible if it's done in the right way.
>
> I think the advice that I would give is to start the conversation about being inclusive first and let that lead the direction of whatever work is being proposed rather than taking an existing template and then trying to just put it on top of something."

Creating more accessible, inclusive groups therefore means centring these goals from the outset, with communication and feedback coming in straight away, rather than being an add-on at the end. Groups who are embedded in their local community are well placed to continue to utilise digital innovations in a sensitive way that is, importantly, tailored to the needs of their members.

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1   The Culture and Communities Mapping Project, Art in and out of Lockdown, 2020. Available at: https://www.edinburghculturalmap.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Art-in-and-out-lockdown.pdf [Accessed 2nd June 2021], p.14.

CONCLUSION

The Covid-19 pandemic and its associated lockdowns saw many groups obliged to find creative solutions in order to stay connected. Groups demonstrated resilience and inventiveness, as they adapted their activities for a digital format or found creative ways to use outdoor spaces. Participating in creative cultural activity with others during the pandemic was a source of pleasure and fun for many individuals, which encouraged groups in their endeavours to carry on during the pandemic.

The pandemic and its associated lockdowns also accelerated the pace of digital innovation and prompted many to try out the opportunities for creative cultural participation that online delivery can offer. Increased digitalisation has improved access to creative cultural activity in some circumstances; for example, for those who through disability, cost, time commitments, or other factors, could not attend in-person activities. As restrictions ease, a blended approach that incorporates both in-person and digital activity has offered some groups a chance to move forward from the pandemic in a more inclusive and accessible format.

As groups learn from their experiences and 'build back better' from the pandemic, key advice emerging from the Creative Network 'Learning from Lockdown' event, is prepared to be flexible and adaptable, to communicate as much and as widely as possible, and to seek out opportunities for collaboration.

> **"We're all learning together - that element of collaboration is really important." (Rashmi, Step Change Studios)**

CASE STUDIES

1 | STEP CHANGE STUDIOS

Step Change Studios is a **DANCE** organisation committed to making **accessible for everyone** with dancers of **all ages and abilities.**

Prior to the pandemic, Step Change Studios facilitated dance in a wide variety of styles in lots of different locations, such as care homes and health care settings, schools (including SEN schools), libraries, venues dedicated to arts and culture, sport and leisure and outdoor spaces.

Responding to and learning from the Covid-19 Pandemic

At the start of the pandemic, Step Change Studios moved online and offered weekly dance sessions. These included 'Sense Saturdays: Dance for Exercise for disabled adults' and 'Sunday Session: Dance for Disabled People 16+' on Zoom, and 'Seated Dance for Over 50s' on MeetUpCall.

Rashmi Becker, Step Change Studios' Founder, explained that the move online was prompted by a request from one of the participants of their sight loss dance programme, who reached out to ask about remote delivery. This participant-driven demand was key for Rashmi, with Step Change Studios' transition online being guided by conversations with group members.

> **"We were very upfront with our participants that this should be a two-way process. We wanted to hear what was working and what was not." (Rashmi)**

Step Change Studios' first digital programme was, therefore, for blind and partially sighted people. Moving online not only involved learning to master the necessary technology, it also completely transformed the group's understanding of communication, in terms of how dance is taught during the sessions. Before the pandemic, physical contact was central to Step Change Studios' dance classes; however, having led sessions online, dancers began to think more about the language that they used and how they were communicating.

"It completely transformed and challenged the way we communicate, the way we teach dance, and the language that we use. Previously, we were reliant on physical contact and, often with other types of dancing, on people being able to copy. It was a fantastic learning experience and what was brilliant about it is it worked.

Once we had everyone on screen, we had to help guide them so that we could see them at the other end, in order to be able to coach them. But people were actually following, and they were dancing. They were doing the moves correctly and having fun and being creative." (Rashmi)

The participants' eagerness for Step Change Studios to continue dancing together during the pandemic reflects how important the group is as a space for social connections, with members seeing the group's online presence as one way to combat the risk of feeling isolated during lockdown. The members of Step Change Studios fostered this sense of community by building in time at the beginning or end of each session to chat with each other. Setting aside time specifically for catching-up with other dancers has proven so valuable and enjoyable that the group are keen to continue this element of the digital dance sessions in the future, whether in-person or online.

During the pandemic, Step Change Studios also teamed up with the London Youth Games to run a virtual dance challenge. While this dance challenge took place online, it offered an opportunity to foster a sense of local pride. A team, made up of disabled and non-disabled dancers, created a series of dance routines. They came up with a different dance move each day for six weeks and they encouraged people to have a go and try out the routines, as well as to send in audition videos or competition entries to the London Youth Games team. Participants had a chance to win points for their local borough and, at the end of the six weeks, the top three boroughs were announced.

This gave people a chance to represent their local community: "It wasn't just about the individual, it was about winning points for your local borough, about being a proud Londoner" (Rashmi). As well as giving people the opportunity to move, get active, and experiment with a range of dance styles, this project was a physically integrated dance opportunity, with disabled and non-disabled people participating together.

Overcoming the Challenges and Finding the Benefits

While unequal access to technology and to the Internet often negatively impacts those from lower socioeconomic groups,[1] another aspect of the 'digital divide' is the lack of accessible design, which can exclude people with certain disabilities. For example, Rashmi observed that screen readers are not always entirely reliable and, more generally, that many providers of digital commercial products had not sufficiently considered accessibility when designing their product or service. Nevertheless, the increased use of many digital platforms over the past year has encouraged change. Rashmi reports having conversations with tech companies to discuss issues that they may not have previously considered.

> "People are more aware of what the barriers are and there are more conversations about trying to overcome them, which we wouldn't have had if we weren't all forced online in such a short space of time." (Rashmi)

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1   Hannah Holmes and Gemma Burgess, '"Pay the wi-fi or feed the children": Coronavirus has intensified the UK's digital divide', University of Cambridge. Available at https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/digitaldivide. [Accessed 7th September 2021]; Carl Baker et al (2020), 'Covid-19 and the Digital Divide', The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. Available at: https://post.parliament.uk/covid-19-and-the-digital-divide/. [Accessed 7th September 2021].

Furthermore, while there have been challenges, meeting online has offered numerous benefits to Step Change Studios. While they were already working to bring dance to communities in spaces that suited them, remote delivery has greatly increased accessibility. Digital dance sessions have created the opportunity to reach a lot of people who may not have otherwise been able to attend in-person for a variety of reasons, such as being unable to leave home or travel, living far away from a real-life class, or having existing time constraints. Moving online has also created opportunities for new types of dance sessions, especially group sessions with care homes.

Moving forward

Step Change Studios plans to combine both online and in-person dance activities in the future.

This is because the advantages of running Step Change Studios online would be lost if the group were to return to face-to-face delivery alone. Additionally, having asked members whether they were happy to switch back to dancing in-person or whether they wanted to continue online as lockdown restrictions began to ease in March and April 2021, Rashmi found that the overwhelming majority of the group chose the latter.

This demand for a continued digital offering, despite potential feelings of 'online fatigue'[1] or 'Zoom fatigue', demonstrates that it is important to recognise that individuals have very different feelings about returning to in-person sessions.

Step Change Studios is moving forward using a blended approach that incorporates both in-person and digital activity. This blended approach has opened up lots of opportunities for new collaborations and new ideas. For example, having recently obtained funding to work in partnership with Metro Blind Sport and the Vision Foundation, Step Change Studios has created a digital platform aimed towards people from a South Asian background who are blind or partially sighted. This blended project, Dance Dosti, aims to use dance to get people moving.

The project has involved the creation of a digital platform, followed by live programmes piloted in areas with higher South Asian populations, specifically targeting people with sight loss. Digital content was produced in different languages (English, Bengali, Gujarati and Hindi). To inform and develop this work, Rashmi has engaged with people who are blind or partially sighted, and the dance sessions have been created by a South Asian team of dance professionals.

1   Kathryn Welch (2020) Creative People and Places: Lockdown Learning Case Studies, Creative People and Places, p.3. Available at: https://www.artshealthresources.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2020-Creative-People-and-Places-Lockdown-_Responses_Learning.pdf. [Accessed: 25th May 2021];
Michelle Wright (2021), 'Fighting Online Fatigue', Arts Professional. Available at https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/fighting-online-fatigue?utm_source=subscriber_features&utm_medium=email&utm_content=nid-215870&utm_campaign=4th-March-2021. [Accessed 18th May 2021].

"The most important thing is to understand who your stakeholders are and who your key audience is. At the moment, I'm looking at South Asian Community groups, faith groups, disability groups. I'm building a network of people who have links to the audiences that we're trying to target, in order to test out material and to have conversations to understand what they like, what they don't like, what works and what doesn't." (Rashmi)

The dance instructions included in the online platform have been created with the intention of enabling blind and partially sighted people to follow movement based on verbal prompts, thereby building on the lessons learned about language and communication during lockdown. This project exemplifies how Step Change Studios' experiences during the pandemic has allowed them to gain new skills (both in terms of technology and communication) that can enhance the work that the organisation was doing in-person prior to the pandemic, in a way that further increases its commitment to inclusivity and accessibility.

www.stepchangestudios.com

2 | AMINA MUSLIM WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTRE

Amina Muslim Women's Resource Centre (MWRC) is an inclusive organisation that empowers and supports Muslim and BME self-identifying women.

'Life in the Time of a Pandemic' is a project that responded to the negative impact of Covid-19 on wellbeing through creative activity. Over 100 Muslim and BME women and girls from all over Scotland created audio, visual and written art pieces to express their experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

'Life in the Time of a Pandemic' included both online and offline elements, as participants connected via Zoom but also received art materials by post.

The virtual, interactive exhibition of artworks produced during this creative project is now touring digitally across Scotland, through the websites of organisations like the Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA), An Lanntair, Aberdeen Arts Centre, Dundee Contemporary Arts (DCA), Horsecross Arts, MacArts, Tramway, and Traverse Theatre.

Image credit: Amina Women's Resource Centre (Life In The Time exhibition)

Responding to and learning from the Covid-19 Pandemic

'Life in the Time of a Pandemic' was a response to the Covid-19 Impact Assessment that Amina carried out at the beginning of the pandemic. The Impact Assessment revealed the harmful effects of Covid-19 on the women's wellbeing, mental health, and ability to connect, which was also compounded by domestic and financial issues caused by lockdown, and the heightened visibility of systemic racism in the wake of the George Floyd murder and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Through this creative project, the women involved found a space to express themselves, to be creative, and to process what was happening to them during lockdown. It was also important as a way to share their stories and to highlight the issues of discrimination and inequality that they faced.

A positive effect of the Covid-19 pandemic was that it generated greater opportunities to share this message. Firstly, Amina MWRC found that they had increased access to organisations whose entire live programmes had been cancelled. This helped Amina to secure multiple platforms for the showcase of the online exhibition. Secondly, the global significance of the Black Lives Matter movement meant that racism and exclusion in the creative spheres could no longer be ignored.

> **"We were not voiceless, it's just no one was listening." (A quote from 'Life in the Time of a Pandemic', arising from one of the creative workshops)**

'Life in the Time of a Pandemic' was structured around three key words: narrate, create, elevate. 'Narrate' meant the opportunity to come together and meet people. 'Create' meant the production of poetry, videos, and visual art by groups of women, with the support of artists Annie George, Katherine MacKinnon and Raman Mundair. This also included postcard art, where blank postcards with a stamp and Amina's address were sent out to participants alongside art materials. Women were then able to produce drawings or poems and then send their postcard back. 'Elevate' meant taking these women's stories into the mainstream, through the travelling exhibition.

Overcoming the Challenges and Finding the Benefits

The themes that emerged in the creative work of the women involved in 'Life in the Time of a Pandemic' included loss, isolation, lack of connection and anxiety. More specifically, the art produced often highlighted the experiences of women who had arrived in the UK just before lockdown and who had not yet had the chance to connect socially and form friendships.

Participants' mental health was, therefore, crucial to the design of the 'Life in a Time' project. The workshops began and ended with people saying a few words about how they were feeling. This allowed Amina to witness a positive change in participants' moods throughout the project, as they shifted from feeling nervous, scared and isolated to feeling heard and supported.

Through its connections to qualified therapists (especially Muslim integrative therapists), Amina was also able to offer mental health support. There was a lot of engagement with this element of the project, which was facilitated by the trusting relationship that Amina has carefully built within communities of BME women.

Another key benefit of this online creative project was that it was open to women who would not have been able to attend and participate in-person (for a multitude of reasons, for example, issues around accessibility, caring commitments, busy schedules or geographical distance).

"We had a lot of new mothers in this project, and to be able to work on poetry writing and self-resilience building with people who had their first baby as a single mum in lockdown, after having moved to the UK six months before or with unstable immigration status, is a wonderful thing to be able to say. It doesn't have to just be about survival, we can do more." (Vicky Mohieddeen, Project Development Officer)

Moving forward

As 'Life in the Time of a Pandemic' brought together women from all over Scotland, the question of maintaining and developing the sense of community created has been an important consideration for Amina.

The organisation is keen to create connections among the women on a local level and to foster their creativity in-person as well as online. Additionally, many of the organisations whose websites hosted 'Life in the Time of a Pandemic' were eager to continue to engage with the women involved in the project who live near to their venues. Maintaining this connection and thus bringing a fully digital project to a local, in-person level was at the forefront of Amina's plans for the future. Amina worked towards obtaining a funding extension of six months for 'Life in the Time' and as a result, the exhibition will be a starting point for future projects. This continuity will allow Amina to build on the positive effects produced through using art as a form of expression and a way of highlighting social injustice.

Another key question was that of capitalising on Amina's newfound digital reach. Vicky highlighted the importance of tailoring the digital tools used to the purpose of the project or event. For example, Amina often disseminates information and hosts events through Facebook Live. As this kind of platform allows for a wide geographical reach, it works well for events that are designed to draw in a large audience.

> **"It's about asking 'what is the project and what's the best path?' If it's local, then in-person is great because you're in that place and it's about that community. But, for example, during Ramadan we have a series of seminars that we're doing through Facebook Live with Mind, Body and Soul and we want to reach all the Muslim women in Scotland. So, of course, we're going to do those online. I think it's given us another few tools that we can use to ensure that we're connecting in the best way." (Vicky)**

To utilise all of the tools available in the most effective way possible, future projects will include blended approaches to creative activity. In particular, Amina is looking at ways to continue online interaction with the exhibition website and with Amina's own website during future events. The 'Life in the Time' exhibition is displayed on a purpose-built website, to which cultural venues such as CCA, An Lanntair, Aberdeen Arts Centre, DCA, Horsecross Arts, MacArts, Tramway, and Traverse Theatre provide a link.

The format of the interactive online exhibition could act as an alternative to physically travelling from community centre to community centre, from exhibition space to exhibition space. Online exhibitions might also be used alongside in-person events, in order to exponentially increase the exhibition's target audience, both in terms of greater geographical distance and greater accessibility.

3 | FIFE YOUTH JAZZ ORCHESTRA

Fife Youth Jazz Orchestra (FYJO) is a MUSIC initiative for young people aged 8 to 24.

FYJO prides itself on offering a different way to play musical instruments, through learning to improvise, to play by ear and, most importantly, to play enthusiastically.

Since FYJO's inception over 45 years ago, young musicians have been meeting on Thursday evenings in the Lochgelly Centre in Fife to play together - until March 2020 when everything ground to a halt.

Responding to and learning from the Covid-19 Pandemic

Following lockdown, FYJO's co-founder and leader, Richard Michael, suggested running the orchestra online. Initially, the band's committee members were unsure how this would work, due to concerns about delays in internet speed affecting how the group played together, as well as issues around GDPR and child protection.

Nevertheless, like many other creative groups, FYJO persevered and was pleased with the results of its transition to digital delivery:

> **"It took quite a bit of effort but it's safe to say it turned out better than we thought it would."**
> **(Claire Martindale, Secretary).**

FYJO decided to use Zoom to rehearse and Dropbox to distribute music. Claire carried out introductory Zoom calls with the parents of any child who wanted to join, in order to explain how the rehearsals worked and the orchestra's rules around child safety. This initial Zoom call also offered the opportunity for Claire to ensure that new members were comfortable using Zoom.

The Orchestra responded to the limitations of playing music on Zoom by adapting the type of music they played. While improvisation was already an important part of FYJO's practice, they decided to increase their focus on simple tunes and on improvising, as these do not require full orchestral backing. This meant that players were less reliant on hearing what the other orchestra members were doing.

The band members would listen to a tune played by the Musical Director, before practicing it (with their mics off!). While the majority of learning and practicing was done with the band on mute, band members also got the chance to unmute and play for the group.

Playing on mute meant that the ability to read body language became paramount for FYJO, as Claire explained:

> **"Do they look like they're enjoying the music? Do they look like they feel it's going well? You're just reading body language; you can't hear it. But you've got to react as though you can hear all of that because you have to respond and give feedback."**

Overcoming the Challenges and Finding the Benefits

A key positive of the 'mute function' on Zoom, was that playing in this way felt less intimidating for some members, especially when it came to improvising. This approach to musical rehearsals encouraged creative freedom in members who are usually too shy or anxious to freely experiment musically in front of others. Another unexpected benefit of using Zoom was the chat function, which allowed band members to give each other feedback when an individual improvised aloud for the group. This meant that, even though the band was not together physically, there was a lot of immediate feedback, and the children were able to interact with each other without disturbing the session.

Nevertheless, playing 'on mute' meant that the Orchestra missed out on hearing themselves play as a collective. As a solution, the members of FYJO created a video compiling individual performances. This provided the opportunity to hear the band play together for the first time, as many new members had joined after the band moved online.

The influx of new members occurred as moving online opened the group up to people who were unable to participate previously. FYJO attracted new members from all over Scotland, the rest of the UK and even abroad, as a Romanian family joined every week.

Membership increased from eight members to a full complement of at least 40 musicians.[1] FYJO was also able to set up a 'Jazz Teenies' session for children under 8, which started half an hour before the main band's rehearsal session

Alongside the increased accessibility for many individuals who had been unable to join FYJO in person, another possible reason for the increase in FYJO membership during lockdown is the new methods of teaching they were able to introduce, having gotten familiar with the specific features of online platforms. After several weeks of running rehearsals online, the Orchestra noticed that the 'breakout room' function on Zoom would allow them to split the orchestra up into smaller groups, based on the type of instrument played.

Using the breakout room function allowed them to vary the structure of their rehearsals, with the band playing together before breaking up into smaller, more musically specific groups. This facilitated greater opportunities for one-to-one practical advice and more specific learning. Claire observed that the chance to work in small, specialised groups was a "big draw for a lot of people" and that this was something that the group would not be able to do at their usual, in-person venue.

The activities of FYJO also attracted the attention of many music teachers who were interested in how the group managed to successfully take its activities online. FYJO was able to invite several of these music teachers to sit in on its rehearsals, thus expanding its network as a music initiative.

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1   Allan Hastie quoted by Debbie Clarke, 'Musical Youngster in Fife Invited to Join Virtual Jazz Session', Fife Today, 26th January 2021. Available at: https://www.fifetoday.co.uk/news/people/musical-youngsters-fife-invited-join-virtual-jazz-music-sessions-3113588?fbclid=IwAR2e8RIBOg_8UWv-5poxDMHvBD7yhcN1pOCYRCOF6cOp3kevjdu_d7OlXD8 [Accessed 7th September 2021].

Image credit: FIFE Youth Jazz Orchestra

Movin' Down the APR
Richard Michael

> **"They've been really enthused about how you can teach music very educationally and very enjoyably without people having to set foot outside the house." (Claire)**

As well as the music teachers who have been invited, FYJO has also seen some unexpected guests in its Zoom rehearsals, as the parents of band members joined in with their children. This spontaneous involvement of family members, enabled by the digital format, shows how FYJO's online presence was an outlet for creativity and a source of joy and connection for families during lockdown.

Moving forward

As restrictions around meeting in-person eased, FYJO began to consider how to merge the group's online success with returning to in-person rehearsals when possible.

When FYJO surveyed members regarding the return of face-to-face rehearsals, some musicians announced that they would be unable to continue in-person, either because they had other pre-existing activities to which they were now able to return or because they joined the online rehearsals from further afield and lived too far away to attend the Lochgelly-based rehearsals.

As a result, FYJO had to think about how to continue to engage with the new members it gained during lockdown. When rehearsals restarted in September 2021, FYJO offered an online edition of rehearsals on the last Thursday of each month (with the other weeks being in-person rehearsals). The 'Jazz Teenies' section of the band will continue entirely digitally. FYJO also plans to host special online events, for example occasional whole-day courses or weekend courses, that will allow them to maintain contact with the large network that it has established. This blended approach will allow FYJO to retain the benefits of remote rehearsals in a way that most suits their future plans.

www.fyjo.uk

4 | LEWIS AND HARRIS YOUTH CONCERT BAND
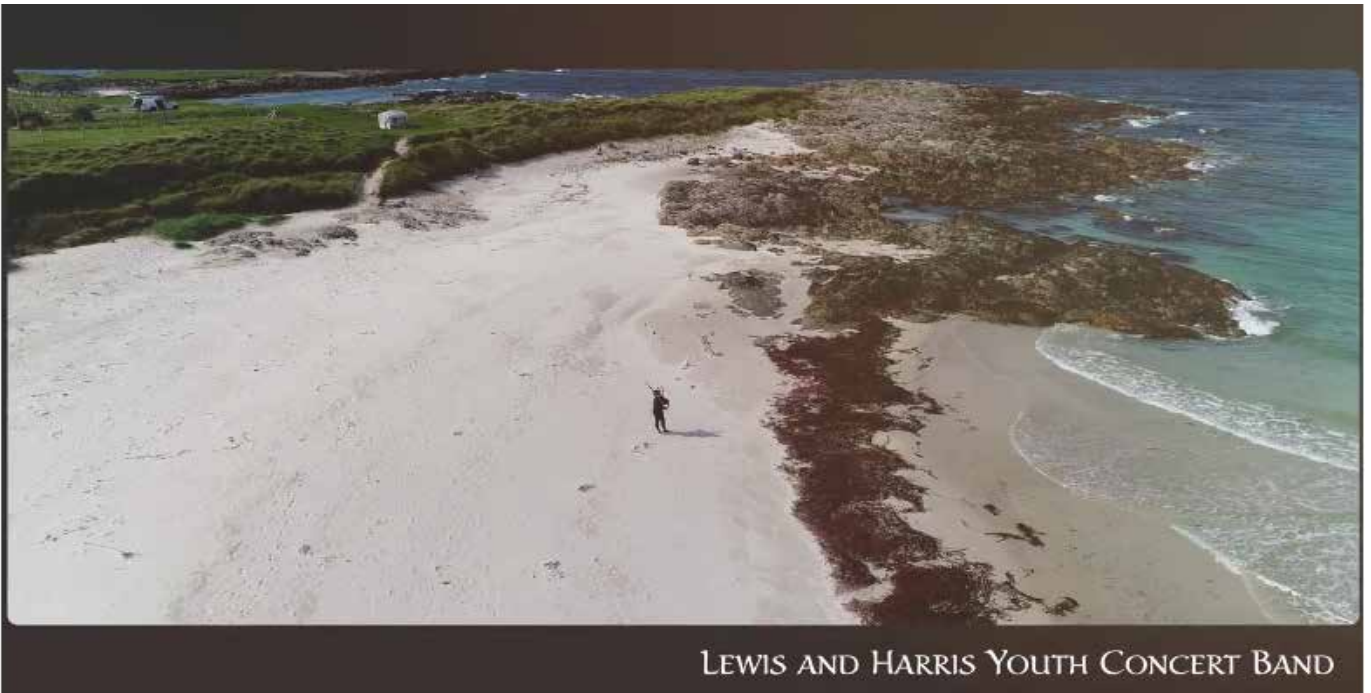
LEWIS AND HARRIS YOUTH CONCERT BAND

Lewis and Harris Youth Concert Band

is a youth band made up mainly of school pupils from the Nicolson Institute in Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis.

Prior to the pandemic, the band would meet up every Tuesday to rehearse. A major event in the band's calendar is the Scottish Concert Band Festival because, each year, those qualifying for the finals of the festival travel to Perth in mainland Scotland to perform.

Responding to and learning from the Covid-19 Pandemic

When the first national lockdown was announced, Lewis and Harris Youth Concert Band was able to move online quickly, thanks to support from the Western Isles Education Department, who acted swiftly to ensure that all school children had access to electronic devices.

Having tried rehearsing on Zoom, the band felt this approach was not working for them. Instead, members began playing pieces individually with band leader and music teacher, Gavin Woods. Each musician would record their own part, and these recordings would then be put together as a whole piece.

This move away from the widely adopted Zoom format was inspired by the band's take on the Thursday night tributes to the NHS, during which the individual band members recorded themselves playing in their gardens or on their doorsteps.

> **"I got so many videos of the kids out in their gardens or on patios or decking playing to anybody who was walking past or to their neighbours. Or, in the case of one child, just to an open sea front because there was nobody else around her, so she played to the Minch every week. That was amazing, and the children's families really enjoyed seeing those videos when we posted them on the band's Facebook page."**
> **(Gavin)**

The band set a 'challenge tune' each week through its Facebook page. Members would practice this and then perform it on Thursday nights. The challenge tune would normally be a fairly easy Scottish tune, to be played from memory.

Lewis and Harris Youth Concert Band also submitted a video entry to the virtual Scottish Concert Band Festival and was awarded Gold. This digital entry was a video compilation of Neil Johnstone's march 'Colin Scott Mackenzie of Stornoway', and their virtual performance had a special connection to the local community, as it was a tribute to the first military Brass Band in Scotland, who came from Stornoway (Ross and Cromarty Mountain Battery band). The video produced highlights this historical aspect and conveys a sense of pride in the local area, using drone footage of the island and photographs from local archives. The video premiered on the Western Isles local authority Facebook page and has garnered over 5,500 views, with positive reactions in the comments section from individuals listening from as far away as Australia.

LEWIS AND HARRIS YOUTH CONCERT BAND

Opportunities for Innovation

Lewis and Harris Youth Concert Band was able to expand its connections through this new method of creating videos when it collaborated with Eccleshall Band from Shropshire, more than 500 miles away. The bands' rendition of Camptown Races brought together around 60 musicians, again through the creation of a video in which individual sections were edited together to create a performance.

Gavin recounts that after this first collaboration, exciting and innovative opportunities to connect with other musicians from all over the UK and abroad became easier and more abundant. Band members got involved with large national and international projects like The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music's virtual concert performance of Disney's 'How Far I'll Go'[1] and the Music Education Partnership Group's 'Hey Jude'.[2]

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1   https://us.abrsm.org/en/inspire/abrsm-unites-nations-for-make-music-day-2020/

2   https://wemakemusicscotland.org/projects-events/

Moving forward

Gavin noted that the band members responded extremely positively to making videos. He hopes that Lewis and Harris Youth Concert Band will continue to incorporate this way of working in the future.

> "The kids really enjoyed making solo videos and it was something I would never have thought of pre-pandemic. I can't believe how enthusiastic they are about doing that and how many videos I get on a weekly basis. The improvement, not only in their performance but also in their confidence, is amazing." (Gavin)

As well as retaining the benefits of using video recordings to learn and share music, Lewis and Harris Youth Band will continue to use technology to maintain its connections across the country. A great example of this is the band's second collaboration with the Eccleshall band, which brings together the in-person and the digital.

> "The Eccleshall Band got back in touch and we collaborated with them again towards the end of June, to celebrate lockdown coming to an end. Martin Jones, their musical director, arranged a piece of music and their band played it outside and we played it outside here on the same day - both were filmed and then we amalgamated the two." (Gavin)

By incorporating digital technology into their musical practice as a band, the youth band will have the opportunity to collaborate well beyond the Isle of Lewis, while representing the local community on a national, if not global scale.

5 | WALKING WORKSHOPS BY ALBATROSS ARTS CIC

In April and May 2021, Alex McEwan from Albatross Arts produced a series of walking photography workshops in partnership with Katrina Sayer from Jean's Bothy in Helensburgh.

Funded by Creative Lives' 'Get Creative' micro-commissions, this five-week project was designed to help individuals – especially older people – who were at risk of loneliness, isolation or poor mental health, to reconnect socially and in-person after lockdown.

Each older participant was paired with a peer from Jean's Bothy. The pairs then set off on a pre-planned walk at staggered start times to ensure appropriate social distancing.

At the end of the project, the photographs taken during the walks were displayed in places with lots of foot traffic, such as local cafés, the library and in Jean's Bothy itself.

Responding to and learning from the Covid-19 Pandemic

As restrictions began to ease in the spring of 2021 and small groups were allowed to meet outside, Alex recognised a need to help people regain their confidence when socialising in-person. Alex understood that the re-opening of society might pose several challenges for those who had been most isolated during lockdown, particularly older individuals who live alone and who were less likely to engage digitally with Jean's Bothy or with other cultural providers.

Re-engaging socially after a long period of isolation could feel quite intimidating, especially when combined with the uncertainty caused by changing regulations. Another potential difficulty was not knowing what to talk about upon meeting up, often due to a feeling of life having been on-hold during lockdown.

In response, the Walking Workshops provided a predetermined route and the ability to meet up with others, while being assured that this meeting abided by current government regulations. Through the photography element of the workshop, creative activity provided a source of conversation and connection. By bringing a camera and documenting the walks, members of Jean's Bothy were able to reconnect with their environment and even engage with it in a new way, as taking photographs caused them to notice elements of their surroundings that they would have otherwise overlooked. Having a goal in common with the other participants (for example, to document the man-made objects spotted on the walk) also helped to facilitate the group's social connections.

> "Rather than trying to make conversation, which might not necessarily have happened very easily, suddenly there was a common goal, a common theme to the walk. Everybody's in it together, everybody is sharing stories of their local environment or of their cameras when they were younger. The younger people in the group were showing the older people how to take photos using their smartphones. It was a really positive experience." (Alex)

Given that the workshops were negotiating issues of uncertainty and nervousness, building trust with group members was essential for Alex. A key factor of the Walking Workshops' success was that the walking group environment was already familiar to participants, as these types of activities had been run in the past by Jean's Bothy, which is already well-known and well-trusted in the local community.

Image credit: Albatross Arts

The importance of mutual trust between the participants was heightened by the atmosphere of anxiety caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. With a group of individuals out in a public setting, it was vital to be aware not only of the feelings of the group but also those of the general public, some of whom were understandably anxious or at least curious about seeing groups of people together, even when these groups were abiding by the rules.

Opportunities for innovation

While Jean's Bothy already had a well-established walking group, adding a creative element (in this case, photography) to this existing group worked well because it built on an activity with which people were already comfortable. Bringing in an additional dimension was beneficial because it allowed participants to learn new skills and have new experiences. This approach is, therefore, an effective way for a group to expand its activities while maximising existing resources and knowledge.

Incorporating a new element into an existing activity was so successful that Katrina was keen to consider how else this model could be used in future to open up new opportunities and experiences to people who might initially be hesitant to step outside of their comfort zone:

> "It made us think about our programme. Joining some of the activities up actually works and it can introduce new things to people. In this instance, people who were comfortable going out in the walking group were suddenly presented with something quite new. It's made us think about how we can possibly do that in other areas as well.
>
> When people are already joining a certain group, how could we bring another element to it that would either stretch people a little bit and make them think about new things or would simply introduce them to something new in a more comfortable way?" (Katrina)

Another advantage of the project was the small size of the group involved, partly prompted by the legal restrictions in place for outdoor meetings. As Alex and Katrina observed, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, activities planned for a small number of people were often harder to justify to funding partners, who wanted to see the biggest impact possible. However, during the Walking Workshops, the small group size was essential for the participants when learning a new skill and for the group to be able to connect interpersonally. This can be seen from the Walking Workshops' outcomes.

Outcomes

Alex noted the transformation in participants' confidence and sense of community during their engagement with the Walking Workshops photography project. In the beginning, participants were somewhat doubtful of their creative abilities, as well as being wary of using the cameras, for fear of damaging something expensive. To counter this, disposable cameras were used first. Once people became comfortable with these, they began to experiment with different shots and angles. This emergence of creativity prompted conversation, as participants started discussing what they were doing and exploring new ideas for their photographs.

With a new level of confidence achieved, Polaroid cameras were introduced. This created further excitement as people could instantly see the physical photograph taken, which then encouraged creative collaboration and feedback among group members. Having the photographs in front of them immediately meant that some participants started arranging the images, producing a form of photo-essay or exhibition.

Image credit: Albatross Arts

Alex explained that the individuals gradually became a cohesive group. They began evaluating each other's progress and moved from talking about "I" to talking about "we". In this case, creative activity encouraged social (re-) connection and cohesion, and so produced a positive impact on isolated individuals following the Covid-19 pandemic.

> "I'm really proud of our wee group. We're all so different. But we all get along well and we're all having a go. I think, as time goes on, we'll all get better at trying new things." (A quote from a Walking Workshop participant, provided by Alex)

Moving forward

The pandemic highlighted the importance of individuals' connections to their local environment.

However, many of the Walking Workshop participants displayed reticence about visiting certain public spaces – for example, their local park – as they did not feel that they belonged there. By incorporating these spaces into the photography project, the Walking Workshops enabled group members to investigate places on their doorstep that had previously seemed off-limits.

Introducing a creative activity through a trusted provider (Jean's Bothy) allowed the members of the group to feel a sense of belonging and enjoyment in the spaces around them, potentially allowing them to have a more fruitful connection with their local environment in future.

For example, when the group planned to visit The Hill House in Helensburgh, some individuals were concerned about the trip. However, once the participants were there as part of a supportive group, with their camera in hand, they demonstrated a new level of confidence and curiosity.

"In the last week, the group got to choose where they went, and somebody suggested Mackintosh's Hill House. And the general reaction was: "It's not for me. I've never been. Is it not very expensive to get into? Is it shut?" There were all these reasons why they should not go or why they had not been to Hill House before. But when we got there, it gave everyone a bit of a buzz.

One person who had been quite quiet suddenly took on a leadership role because he felt more confident around, for example, climbing stairs and going very high because at the moment you can walk over the top of Hill House. He had suddenly grown in confidence, and everyone was very impressed with him, and he was very impressed with himself. So, he took the camera and the problem at the end of the day was getting it back off him.

It happens again and again in projects: you take people to a space like a gallery or a museum, and they don't feel it's for them. They feel that it's for other people, for more educated people or for people from a certain section of society. It's about breaking down those barriers." (Alex)

Walking Workshops demonstrate how creative activity can be used to present public spaces as welcoming to all. This is especially important as we reconnect with each other outdoors after long periods of isolation.

This photography project has also provided an opportunity to consider the impact that creative community groups can have on mental health and wellbeing. At a time when issues of loneliness and social isolation are key concerns for communities, Walking Workshops demonstrate how a sense of social cohesion and connectedness can be created and cultivated through arts-based community initiatives.

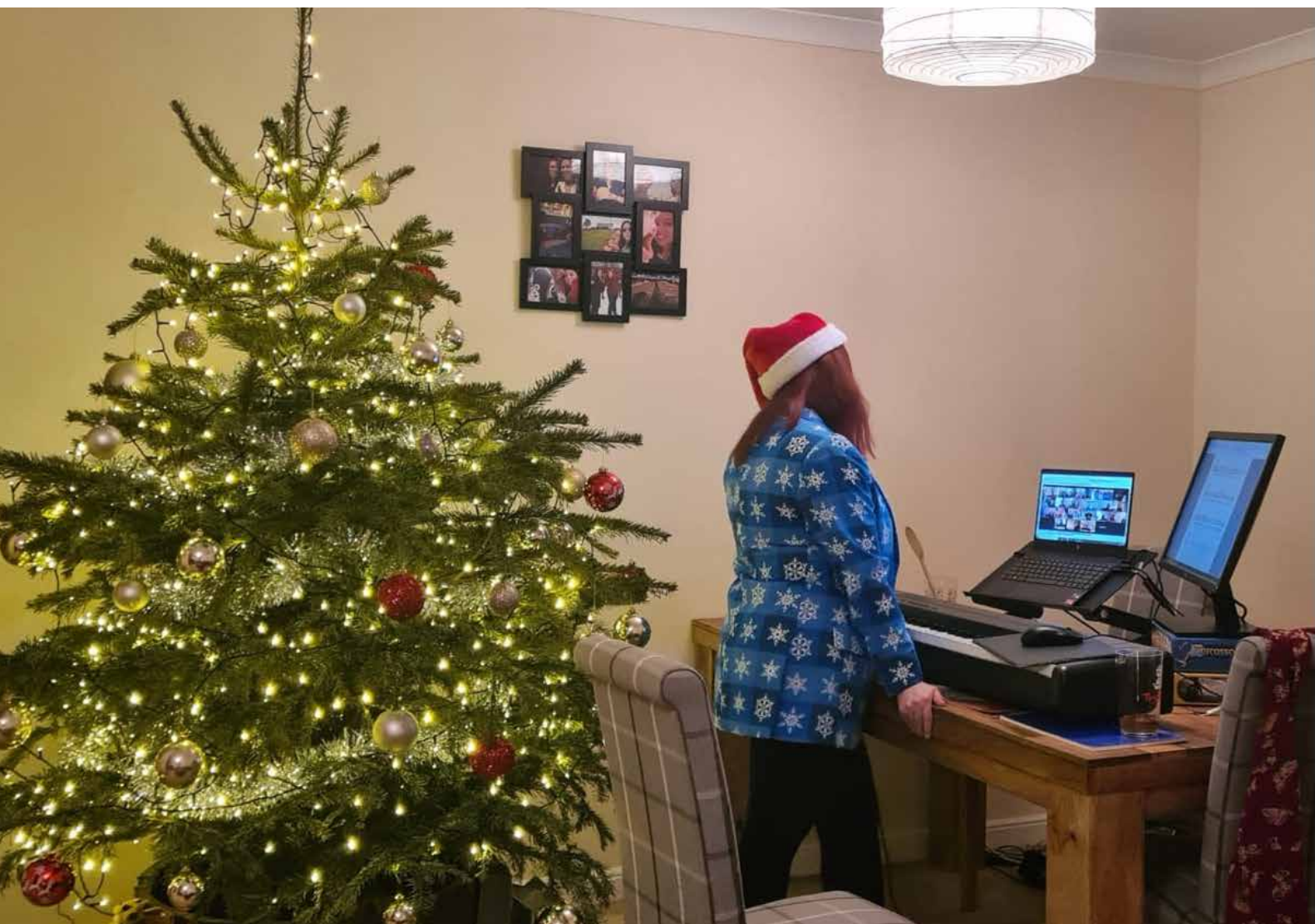**www.facebook.com/jeansbothy**

6 | LOUD & PROUD CHOIR

Image credit: Loud & Proud Choir

Loud & Proud is an **LGBT+** choir in Edinburgh. This non-auditioned group sings a wide range of songs from different genres.

Prior to the pandemic, Loud & Proud would meet weekly and organise three major concerts per year, as well as performing special outreach gigs in schools, at pride events and even at the Scottish Parliament.

Responding to and learning from the Covid-19 Pandemic

Loud & Proud decided to continue its rehearsals on Zoom during the Covid-19 pandemic. Like many other musical groups, the choir was faced with the problem of latency, which makes it difficult for musicians to stay in time with each other when singing or playing music on a digital platform like Zoom.

As a solution, Loud & Proud decided to rehearse with all singers on mute, apart from the musical director. The choir began by concentrating on simple two- or three-part arrangements, before moving on to more complicated four-part arrangements once they felt confident and comfortable. Singing alone is, however, a rather different experience from singing as part of a choir. As Ken from Loud & Proud explains, singing as part of a group provides a sense of support that is hard to replicate when everyone is singing on mute.

"There's definitely a kind of coherence that happens when you're singing with other people who are singing the same thing, you may not all get all the right notes at the right time, but between you all, you mash it up and make it work." [Ken]

Kathleen Cronie, Musical Director of Loud and Proud, responded to this challenge by moving from playing the piano and singing for the group to developing multi-part backing tracks. As a result, Kathleen was able to offer more support to each section of the choir.

"If the altos needed some support, I could turn up the alto parts so they could hear what their part sounded like in the mix and then go back to a balanced three- or four-parts mix." (Kathleen)

Kathleen stressed that "community solutions" were just as important as "musical solutions". Loud & Proud experimented with different ways of meeting up and participating creatively in an effort to keep a sense of community alive for everyone. This meant finding ways to ensure that the members of the choir continued to feel connected and that they had the opportunity to socialize.

While members were getting used to the Zoom rehearsals, the choir started a musical version of a book club. This entailed watching videos available online – such as Ted talks – that were about singing, and then having a chat about the video. This provided a basis for conversation, avoiding the awkwardness that can sometimes be experienced on an unstructured Zoom call.

For those who didn't want to continue rehearsing with the choir in a virtual format, Loud & Proud endeavoured to find alternative ways to stay in contact. The choir held social events, such as music sharing events that were closed to the public. For example, when the choir met up to sing through the term's repertoire, there were also opportunities to get involved that did not require singing, such as reciting a poem or acting as the MC for part of the event.

Loud & Proud also experimented with non-digital ways of connecting with members. Towards the beginning of the pandemic, the choir sent out postcards that had photographs of the group at previous events. The photos had been edited so that they contained speech bubbles where members could write funny captions. Members were able to share what they wrote and compete in a caption competition.

Overcoming the Challenges and Finding the Benefits

A positive outcome of Loud & Proud's approach to rehearsing on Zoom was that, as all the singers were on mute, "the sense of having to have a balance throughout the parts for something to work has been less important" (Kathleen). This allowed for greater flexibility, meaning that if an individual could not commit to rehearsing every week, they could choose their own level of engagement. Additionally, the ability to rehearse remotely from home and the option to turn off the camera or to simply listen to the music also provided members with more choice over how they wanted to participate.

While rehearsing on Zoom didn't work for some people, for others it proved to be a surprisingly social space. Breakout rooms in particular emerged as a great tool for encouraging new friendships among the choir. This became clear when Loud & Proud developed a new format for the online sessions: after singing together for most of the rehearsal, they would spend the end of the session chatting with each other in breakout rooms. Initially, Zoom could only assign people to breakout rooms randomly - this created a new opportunity for the group to mingle, particularly with people from other sections of the choir with whom they might not have had the chance to speak to previously.

Kathleen reports that the time spent chatting gradually increased from ten minutes to half an hour. When Zoom updated its platform and the possibility to assign people to specific rooms became available, the group continued to use the random assortment feature. In this case, the digital format of the rehearsals created an unforeseen benefit for the choir.

Opportunities for Collaboration and Innovation

During the pandemic, Loud & Proud was part of an international three choir project, with partners in Munich and Kiev. Singers met online once a month to rehearse. The project involved three musical directors – one from each choir – who took responsibility for a part of the rehearsal. This allowed choirs to experience different ways of working. Moreover, every choir provided a song, enabling the sharing of new material among singers from across Europe.

Image credit: Loud & Proud Choir

"At the end of the project, a 'making of' video was put together for the LEGATO choir festival online. In it, you get to see the three MD working in different ways.

During the project, we asked singers to unmute and to sing the first line of a round so that we could hear some live singing across all three countries. Then they went back on to mute as the backing track played for everyone to sing into. After that, once we learned all three of the songs from the three countries, a virtual choir project was made." [Kathleen]

Moving forward

At the time of interview, Loud & Proud had had its first in-person, outdoor rehearsal. The choir took a cautious, thorough approach to this meeting.

The choir took a cautious, thorough approach to this meeting. This was important not only from a safety perspective but also a musical one, as it was crucial to think about how singers would still be able to hear each other, while standing at a distance, and to make sure that the choir was singing something that worked with a reduced number of attendees. These in-person rehearsals were optional, and the choir carried out a risk assessment and produced a document detailing the requirements, such as masks and temperature checks, so that singers would know what to expect.

Loud & Proud planned to review how members felt about the in-person rehearsal and to ask if they would like to continue in this way, reverting to online sessions if people were not comfortable.

While Loud & Proud's primary focus is on returning to in-person rehearsals when safe to do so, certain elements of their online experience during the pandemic brought unexpected benefits to the choir. These included the opportunities for all sections of the choir to get to know each other and the increased flexibility offered by the muted Zoom format.

7 | SOCIAL CIRCUS ATHENS

Social Circus Athens teaches CIRCUS skills to young people at risk, particularly unaccompanied minors arriving in Greece as refugees.

It is a voluntary initiative that uses circus techniques to bring together creativity, teamwork and self-discipline. In the long term, it aims to create the first refugee-led circus academy.

Before the pandemic, Social Circus was meeting weekly for three-hour training sessions. The group also organised one-off events to increase the public's awareness of their initiative, as well as visiting asylum services and refugee camps to entertain and engage the children waiting in line.

Responding to and learning from the Covid-19 Pandemic

When the pandemic struck, Social Circus began to consider moving online. One of the first challenges they faced was the need to raise money to support the venue (Anasa Cultural Centre) that had been hosting them and collaborating with them.

It was at this point that Social Circus came across the Amateo awards. Amateo is the European Network for Active Participation in Cultural Activities. Social Circus Athens won the 2020 Amateo Award for its work with young refugees. Upon winning the award, Social Circus received a 1000€ prize. However, the award also provided the group with a sense of recognition and prestige, which gave them the momentum needed to continue during the pandemic.

Initially, the team of volunteers found it difficult to imagine how the Social Circus might continue online, as it's a hands-on artform that often requires close supervision.

> "Giving a class that you're used to offering so interactively makes you realise how much people learn by looking and by copying from you. You immediately get ideas about how to continue from how they react. When working with youth at risk, depending on their mood and how they work as a team, you really have to change on the spot. An additional issue was that we usually have acrobatics, but we needed these to be done safely. The problem was we didn't know what surfaces everyone was practicing on or what level of ability they had." [Natasa Chanta-Martin]

However, in the face of lockdown, Social Circus Athens got creative and found fun, easy ways to move their art online, by working on preparatory exercises and the basics of key techniques, as well as having additional tutorials on how to make juggling balls from kitchen supplies (with materials being sent out to people who did not have the resources to do this).

Social Circus Athens sent video tutorials out every week and asked participants to submit a video of their own practice in return. The group reverted back to in-person, outdoor classes for the last six weeks of their summer programme.

Alongside the video tutorials, Social Circus promoted social connections between group members through Zoom meetings and the creation of a WhatsApp group, where participants could post photos and videos and get feedback from their peers. Individuals were particularly keen to showcase the juggling balls they had made.

Overcoming the Challenges and Finding the Benefits

Accessing the Social Circus online proved difficult for some of the initiative's target demographic, with fewer young refugees joining than would normally be expected. Natasa from Social Circus explained that this was likely to be due to a lack of Internet access or a lack of confidence with filling out a Google form in order to receive an email with a link to the next tutorial. It is, therefore, important for Social Circus Athens to reconnect with these young people as they begin to meet up outdoors again.

Nevertheless, as a grassroots organisation working 'in the field', Social Circus Athens found that increasing their presence online allowed them to widen their network to include more educators, social workers and other social circuses, especially those in rural parts of Greece, who do not have access to the same level of cultural programmes and resources as a city like Athens.

> **"We realised that by offering more things online – which we were not a huge fan of at first – we could approach more people, including educators who have access to more kids or social workers who have access to more shelters. It creates a domino effect." [Natasa]**

Social Circus' online experience also opened up new avenues for fundraising, as the group launched its first crowdfunding campaign.

"It's quite uncommon in Greece to ask for money like this. But we have really thought about our perks and what we offer. We really want to show that we're in need to continue and survive this hard summer. We've been really putting it out there on a digital media platform and using campaign tools and getting endorsements from people, including celebrities." (Natasa)

Moving forward

For Social Circus Athens, in-person activity is essential to connecting with youth at risk.

However, technology will play a key role in the future development of the initiative. Moving online opened up many new opportunities for Social Circus Athens to expand its network and to have a wider impact. This prompted the team to develop their digital skills, recognising that there was a gap in their knowledge around important questions such as "how do you ensure personal data is protected when sharing resources with a larger community" and "how do you measure the impact that you are having?" Having a greater online presence will allow the Social Circus to gather more data about, for example, the number of people who view their newsletter or who are interested in coming to an event. Developing their online presence during the pandemic has thus equipped Social Circus with more tools for measuring and maximising the reach of their work.

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(*Life In The Time* exhibition)

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