

“Creativity can help us in times of instability”

Getting creative to support wellbeing during COVID-19 in Barnsley, South Kirklees, and Wakefield

COVID-19 has greatly impacted on the wellbeing of communities in South and West Yorkshire. This project looks at health inequalities with a particular focus on the disproportionate impact that coronavirus is having on our BAME communities. This work may include other priorities and look at how children and young people, the homeless, those in contact with the criminal justice system, the LGBT community, and those suffering domestic abuse have been affected, depending on local information. To explore this further and see how creativity can support people in these communities, People's Voice Media and Creative Minds have partnered on a collaborative project, with funding from the Association of Mental Health Providers, using digital storytelling to listen to the voices of people in Barnsley, South Kirklees and Wakefield. We trained people from the area as Community Reporters in order to gather stories from others about their wellbeing throughout the pandemic, and how creativity has helped them. [These stories](#) of lived experience were then examined by the Community Reporters in a series of sense-making sessions in order to pull out common themes, which have been used to make recommendations for developing creative mental health interventions with local communities. This insight report focuses on the insights from the stories and what can be done with the learnings from them.

“You're just at home crying by yourself” Isolation and the importance of community

Driven home in many of the stories is the point that **lockdown has forced people to struggle alone, in many cases unable to access help or unsure of where to seek it.** [One lady](#) who lost her dad and her brother during the pandemic found not being able to say goodbye due to hospital restrictions particularly difficult to cope with: “You're just crying at home by yourself.” [Another storyteller](#), who lost her best friend since childhood in June 2020, found she could not attend the funeral due to restrictions on numbers. Instead, she had to ‘attend’ by sitting in her car outside. “That was one of the toughest things I've had to go through. ... It was just awful, not even being able to console her family.” Visibly emotional, she tells how she occasionally talks on the phone with her friend's mum, but that is all. “It's just gone by like a dream, like it never happened, because we're still not able to see each other.” Stories like these suggest there is a lot of pent-up grief that has not been able to be ‘properly’ expressed due to isolation which is, of course, going to have an impact on mental health.

[A mental health practitioner](#) tells how he is concerned by the lack of support in particular areas of the community. "It's unfortunate to see that referrals from the BAME community has still been low. ... I know this taboo, I know this stigma, I know this difficulty for that community to access services as well, and I guess it's just that notion of suffering alone, you know?" He says how a lack of BAME practitioners and a lack of cultural sensitivity have compounded the problem which has left many people isolated both physically and mentally. This is supported by [the storyteller who lost her friend](#), who says she was unable to find support from organisations or charities that were relevant to her or the wider BAME community during the pandemic.

There are, however, signs of communities pulling together and people finding support within those communities during lockdown. [A mum studying for her PhD](#) tells how she found a great deal of benefit in joining online wellbeing sessions provided by her university and her local community: "[I felt] like I'm not in this alone." [A tutor at a local centre for the community](#) says how she began worrying about the people she'd normally work with in the community and how they'd cope: "I spoke to one of my managers and we set up a foodbank [that's still running]." She has found that working within her community has protected her own mental health during lockdown, as well as helping her get to know her neighbours. These stories demonstrate that isolation has been one of the biggest mental health challenges of COVID-19, and that finding ways to be part of a community is one of the ways to help that. This report will now look at ways in which that might be able to happen.

“Use all the technologies that are out there” Finding new ways to stay in touch

Technology is a recurring theme throughout the stories, with several storytellers saying that they specifically learned to use platforms such as Zoom *because* of the pandemic, with **digital platforms providing a means of communication and a way out of isolation**. [The tutor who set up the foodbank](#) describes technology as “great” and says how she also set up group chats for her students and other people who use the community centre “just to keep in touch with them so they felt that there's somebody there to give them updates. And we used that group and started doing things like healthy eating, so every week I was doing, like, a hot topic” including things such as internet safety and protecting yourself from scams. [The PhD student](#), meanwhile, says, "One of the most positive things that happened were the online things." She says how she had *more* access to learning and events than she normally would, which has helped her feel part of a community.

[A support worker](#), who has been working with a group of older people throughout lockdown talks about helping them learn how to use Zoom to stay in touch with people, a process which she describes as “difficult” due to both her and their limited experience. However, she enlisted someone who was “internet savvy” to make the learning easier and this really helped.

Technology has even provided some people with creative outlets. [An artist](#) who uses painting to help her mental health recounts a friend’s tale of enjoying a Zoom-based poetry workshop. However, she’s quick to add that it’s not something that appeals to her: “Maybe it would have been helpful, but maybe it would have felt like pressure to be creative at a certain time.” She adds, “to be fair, I don't think I've been invited to anything like that, or seen anything like that advertised. But I probably wouldn't have joined in, to be honest with you.” Technology certainly has its benefits – as seen by many throughout the pandemic – but it’s not a one-stop solution, and for some can actually place further barriers to wellbeing, so while it should be considered in creative interventions, it should not be the basis of every commission.

“Where I find joy is when I’m creating things” Supporting mental health through creativity

It is apparent from the stories gathered that **creativity can be hugely important when it comes to people’s mental health and wellbeing**. Not only, is it a positive outlet, but people *recognise* the effect it can have on their wellbeing. [One lady](#) who upcycles furniture and homeware, as well as creating arts and crafts, says, “Where I find joy is when I’m creating things.” She goes on to talk about her anxiety and depression, and says, “I know that if I don't have these projects in place, it has a negative effect on my mental health. So, I need those to keep me going. ... No matter how big or small, I have something to look forward to, I have a purpose. It's definitely helped maintain my mental health.”

This sentiment is echoed throughout the stories. Whether it’s [the lady](#) suggesting socially distanced cooking groups, [the storyteller](#) discussing letter-writing and adult colouring books, or [the mum](#) who says, “me and my son, we have art sessions sometimes,” the pull of creativity as a positive outlet is clear.

[The person who talks most extensively on this is](#), understandably, an artist who paints specifically to boost her mental health. Already a prolific artist, she says that at the start of lockdown she wasn’t painting that much.

Then, one day, it must've been nice weather again, I was in the garden and picked a palette of about 12 colours, well, exactly 12 colours. I know because I've used the same colours for most of lockdown. And I just really enjoyed what I created with that, using loads of colours and using that palette. So, from then on I got a bit more into it and really enjoyed it. ... I stuck with the same 12 colours because I wanted to, I wanted it to represent the fact that we still had some freedoms, as in there's 12 colours to choose from, but we were still quite limited.

At the time of her interview, she believes she had created around 200 pieces of art because "[I've] been fortunate enough to be part of an organisation that, when it started, that really helped us to know how much our creativity can help us in times of instability. ... There's been times [during the year of the pandemic] that I'll get quite down and I'll just be stuck on the sofa for four days, not really doing much, and it's, like, 'come on, do a bit of artwork, it'll make you feel better.'" This recognition of the benefits of creativity [lead her to suggest](#) that it might be beneficial "for people who've never been into art, you know, to have some really basic, kind of, skills given and maybe some material ... because that can be really daunting [not knowing what materials to buy for what purposes]." While some people describe themselves as 'not creative', creativity isn't just restricted to painting or music. It can encompass crafts, cooking, sport, performance, digital technology and a whole host of activities, so these suggestions of making creativity accessible are vital when it comes to commissioning interventions.

"It forced us to really slow down" (Not) getting back to busy-ness

One topic that came up in several stories is that lockdown has had some positive effects, with the main one being that it has **forced us to take a step-back from the busy-ness of our lives**. [One mum](#) says our culture is too focussed on being busy: "I think in some ways it was a blessing as well because it forced us to really slow down." [Another lady](#) says how lockdown was a chance to do the things we don't normally do, while [another](#) describes it as a "pause" to stop and reflect: "My husband works mostly at night time, I go to university in the morning, my son goes to school. So, we were busy in our own worlds but now we have more time for each other. ... It has given us, as a family, more time to spend together."

While this is, perhaps, not as prominent as some of the other topics discussed, it's important to note that returning to 'normal' should not mean swapping one set of

barriers to wellbeing for another, and this is possibly something to be embedded in any creative interventions.

Recommendations

Based on the insights gleaned from stories, the following recommendations for commissioning creative interventions for mental health are being put forward:

- 1. Boosting existing community work:** On the one hand, more awareness needs to be raised of *existing* support and services in the community. In some cases, there's no need to reinvent the wheel when great services are already out there, such as the [community centres](#), [art groups with studio space](#), and food banks mentioned in the stories. However, it is essential that people who could benefit from them need to be made aware of them and services need to make a better effort to connect with communities. One way to address these types of issues is to look at what communication tools or methods the community uses and use these to reach them, for instance, [WhatsApp groups](#). As part of this, more funding and resources should be allocated to voluntary, community, grassroots groups and individuals who have *already* been successfully delivering creative projects to enable them to expand to their full potential.
- 2. Balance the use of technology:** It's clear from the stories gathered that technology has provided a lifeline to some throughout the pandemic, but for others it has created an additional pressure. Initiatives should use technology, therefore, only for improving accessibility, and only while embedding digital literacy in the delivery. Digital knowledge and experience should never be assumed, as it is then that it creates a barrier. We can see from [the story of the lady working with elderly people](#), for example, what a key difference proper, focussed skills training can make to people embracing technology, but that prior to this training being in place it was a struggle. Programmes might consider using technology, then, as a way of enhancing and sharing creativity, for instance showing people how to create digital art and then share it online, or using Zoom for poetry readings and workshops.
- 3. Make creativity inclusive:** While many people recognise the benefits of creativity for their mental health and wellbeing, for some the idea of creativity is alien and daunting, associated with particular skills and, sometimes, expense. When commissioning creative interventions, then, the full scope of what can be deemed creativity should be considered, to ensure inclusivity and 'something for everyone'. Where particular materials are necessary, it should not be assumed that participants will have the means to provide their own so

as not to create financial barriers. As an example, the creation of 'kits' could be useful, that provide people with the basic materials they need to get started on a creative pursuit. So, [as the artist suggests](#), a supply of art materials given alongside basic skills training, would be useful. Another possibility might be knitting kits that include a pattern and instructions alongside the yarn, needles and any other tools required.

4. **Support a slower life:** Where possible, creative interventions should explore how they can help people continue the slower, less busy lifestyle they have experience during the pandemic, and not simply move back to a chaotic lifestyle because it is considered 'normal'. Creativity can be a great tool for reflection, mindfulness, relaxation, and self-expression, and this should be embedded in potential projects. The idea of taking the time to do something you enjoy can be seen as an indulgence, so projects that normalise taking that time for oneself can help make that positive shift. Projects might look at ways they can encourage people to set aside time for baking, making music, painting, doing yoga, sewing, knitting, crochet, dancing or any other creative activity that promotes 'slowing down'.

Project ideas

During the sense-making sessions, the Community Reporters had some ideas and inspiration for specific creative projects, based on the experiences of the storytellers, and linked to the four recommendations. These were thoughts that emerged from conversations about specific ways of using creativity to process the experiences of the pandemic, and support people as we begin our return to pre-pandemic life, in so much as that is possible.

1. **Loss, grief, isolation, and dealing with change:** Invite groups and communities to bid for projects that allow a creative expression of what people have been through individually and collectively. This could be specific to BAME groups, children, young people, as well as community wide.
2. **Localised art exhibitions, art trails, or art kits:** Invite groups to bid for funding for materials to make art kits that could be distributed to people who are still isolated, or for whom re-engaging with the wider community – or, indeed, engaging in any kind of creative activity – is daunting.
3. **Creating creative spaces for BAME communities:** Invite bids for projects that create space for people from BAME groups to communicate creatively some of



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the messages that have been difficult to communicate, or not communicated at all, around safety and the impact of the pandemic.

4. **Celebrating and sharing experiences:** Invite bids for projects that focus on celebrating and sharing in our experiences of humanity, for example, the impact of Mutual Aid. This could also be an opportunity for communities to say 'thank you' for the support people have received from local organisations.

Conclusion

The recommendations in this report accept that there have been both positives and negatives to emerge from lockdown, but that the impact on mental health and wellbeing has been severe. The approaches suggested seek to help people deal with the negatives while maintaining the positives, and providing them with tools to benefit their mental health in the long-term. The approaches recommended rely on *true* co-production techniques and are underpinned by *real* equity, *pro-active* inclusion and a commitment to addressing inequalities in our society.

