



**FAR
APART**

but close at heart
UK#América Latina

**LOOKING BEYOND
LOCKDOWN: HOW UK
ARTS ORGANISATIONS
CAN CONTINUE TO
SUPPORT YOUNG
PEOPLE'S WELLBEING
DURING AND BEYOND
COVID-19**

**Research Summary
May 2022**

SCAN THE QR FOR THE FULL
REPORT WITH FINDINGS



INTRODUCTION

Young people's participation in the arts has a positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing. COVID-19 forced arts organisations to move their activities online, radically changing how they support young people. Art provided a sense of belonging during the pandemic and being part of an organisation's youth provision helped young people to be more mentally positive. *Far Apart but Close at Heart (UK)* examined the impact of a shift to the digital on arts workers and young people, raising essential contemporary questions about the nature of creativity, the role of arts organisations in young people's lives and with regard to their mental health and the shape of policy as we look toward the future. The study is critical as many stakeholders question a return to the physical, when the digital space has been so successful in increasing reach and reducing costs.

Far Apart but Close at Heart (UK) used mixed methods, combining a survey, arts workshops and semi-structured interviews with young people (aged 16-29 years), staff from arts organisations and stakeholders. The main report presents an overview of quantitative findings – gathered in an online survey conducted with young people (141 in total) – and qualitative findings, derived from individual interviews. These interviews were conducted with staff, stakeholders and young people involved with five partnering arts organisations: **Contact**, a leading national theatre and arts venue for young people aged 13-30 located in Manchester; **Battersea Arts Centre (BAC)** based in the heart of Battersea, London; **National Theatre Wales (NTW)**; **Theatre Royal Stratford East (TRSE)** and **Dirty Protest Theatre (DP)** based in Cardiff, Wales. *Far Apart but Close at Heart (UK)* was conducted by People's Palace Projects and the Unit for Social and Community Psychiatry, Queen Mary University of London.

BACKGROUND

Participatory arts programmes, with social as well as creative outcomes, are known to promote positive mental health. Many young people rely on these arts programmes as key activities in their day-to-day lives. When the COVID-19 pandemic reached the UK in March 2020, research shows that restrictions brought about by the pandemic caused mental distress (including depression and anxiety). This was particularly acute in the young adult age group. In April 2020, there was a significant spike in calls to helplines, with 84% of young people reporting their mental health had worsened (National Youth Agency, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns, as well as social-distancing measures, forced arts organisations to move their activities online, changing how they engaged with young people during this time – and perhaps for years to come. Despite many arts organisations adapting well to the shifting circumstances, staff often expressed concerns about how to support vulnerable young people in the transition to digital and other socially distanced methods of working. Despite these concerns, there has been no systematic analysis of the effects of moving activities online. *Far Apart but Close at Heart (UK)* sets out to fill this gap to not only better understand how exactly arts organisations helped young people during the pandemic, but also the innovations and adaptations they came up with to deal with the challenges they faced.

SUMMARY OF QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

141 young people were surveyed between July and August 2021. When asked to self report on their mental health, 46% of participants indicated they experience low mood and anxiety during the pandemic. At the time of the survey, numbers were slightly lower: 21.3% of them were still experiencing low mood and 26.2% were still experiencing anxiety. 82% accessed the internet daily and considered themselves almost always connected. The respondents used internet on their phones (97%) and computers (72%). 31% were involved in online arts activities. 21% were involved in socially distanced in-person arts activities. For 52% of the young people interviewed, their contact with the arts organisations improved during the pandemic.

Out of 44 young people who took part in online activities, 39% participated in weekly classes, 16% in community engagement actions, 14% in workshops and 11% in shows and performances. 21% thought all activities worked great online while 9% said that they were not the same as in person. Young people cited a variety of reasons for joining online activities, including to feel better emotionally, to enjoy themselves and to pursue life goals. Although 20% viewed online activities as an opportunity to socialise, they also reported that it was not the same as meeting people face-to-face. 30% found it more difficult to self-express through a screen.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Summary of Qualitative Analysis

For young people, the impact of COVID-19 was particularly profound, with a formative part of their lives completely disrupted by the pandemic. Most young people who took part in this study already had a powerful relationship with the arts. That relationship was disrupted during this difficult time, shifting an important aspect of their lives, forcing them to adapt. The arts organisations that supported these young people also had to radically change their practices and methods to cater for the increased needs of those around them. Findings are grouped according to four themes or topic areas: **impact of lockdown and social distancing**; **key learning and challenges**; **strategies for coping and engagement**; and **general recommendations**.

Impact of Lockdown and Social Distancing

Especially in the arts and especially with young people, you know, if I wanted to do stuff online, I would have become a banker. Something I could do online. Or an accountant, no shame to any of those professions, but you know it's just different when you're in the cultural industry, and harder I guess, to replicate the whole... The magic in the room, whatever it is.

Young Person



Interviews identified a range of **mental health issues**. Not only feelings of anxiety and depression but also frustration, anger, lower levels of motivation, and even feeling misunderstood. The **informal conversation** that builds creativity and connection diminished or was lost. For projects such as theatre groups, that require a great deal of interaction amongst young people, informal conversations were eliminated. However, although the lockdowns impacted heavily on mental health and creative practice, **some young people found solace in slowing down**. Some discovered/rediscovered painting or poetry, which they may not have had the time or energy to do beforehand. Prior engagement with an artistic practice or creativity helped young people to build a sense of **resilience**. It gave them tools to express what they were feeling or helped them to find a release.

However, following the lockdowns when everything went online, **many young people lost a key outlet**. Particularly young people who had difficult home lives, now forced to engage with art activities online at home. Levels of connection with other people and their art form decreased over time. The power of all being in one room together was not the same in an online space. But online spaces also had positive benefits. **Some shy or reserved young people found safety** in digital engagement.

Digital poverty was a big issue. Even though the digital world is a familiar and comfortable one for the younger generations, many of those interviewed still did not have access to the technology or devices to engage properly with online arts provision (as seen above, 28% of survey respondents did not have internet access on a computer).

Staff redundancies and the furlough scheme diminished morale. Many organisations were forced to make staff cuts to jobs usually carried out by the more locally based, culturally diverse, and lower-income workers.

There were also **difficulties in creating performances**. While many arts organisations adapted quickly to creating with young people online, there was a sense that what was lost due to the inability to be in a room together could not be replaced through digital presence, especially in the cases of performance events.

CHALLENGES, KEY LEARNINGS AND OUTCOMES

During the pandemic, there was a shift of focus from artistic excellence or high-quality work to **the power of creativity in any form**. Arts organisations experimented with new forms that were outside of their comfort zones to find new ways to engage with young people.

For those in **remote places**, watching performances online was a way they could engage with high-quality art forms difficult to access in normal times. Even though a digital space could never replace the power of a face-to-face connection, it can still be a successful platform for sparking or **strengthening relationships between young people and arts organisations in different countries**, as it is a means of establishing common ground.

Building new audiences takes more time and resources. While many organisations were able to forge new relationships both locally and internationally to engage new audiences online, they soon discovered that nurturing these relationships takes more time and resources to build and maintain.

Organisations able to retain **staff consistency**, avoid redundancies or furlough the smallest number of staff managed to better meet the needs of young people.

There were **difficulties in sustaining engagement online**. Over time, young people felt less excited about engaging in a digital environment, leading to burnout and a desire to spend less time staring at a screen, which, in turn, led to less engagement. Subsequently, many young people felt disengaged. Some stopped participating altogether.

Doing less better: some programmes had to be cut and projects cancelled. While this was a challenge at first,

organisations took this as an opportunity to scale back and do less, but in a more considered, thoughtful way. As many arts organisations are very delivery-focused and do not have enough time to focus on future planning and strategy, some took the pandemic as an **opportunity for strategic thinking** and what they would like to achieve in the years to come.

The pandemic-related postponement of performances inadvertently **increased opportunities for experimentation**, granting young people more time to explore their art activities, without the pressure of committing to challenging deadlines.


There were **more barriers to innovation for larger, venue-based organisations**. Generally speaking, smaller organisations, particularly those without a venue, were able to transition to an online space more quickly than larger organisations. In general, larger organisations were busy with maintaining themselves while smaller organisations were able to concentrate on innovating.

STRATEGIES FOR COPING AND ENGAGEMENT

A lot of support was given to grass-roots projects, and I feel like we worked more in the community. So, obviously, we had our projects that we'd run and had been running, but a lot of things were born. It was like spur of the moment: this is what's happening.

Staff Member





Utilising technology to increase numbers: an online space eradicates the geographical limitations of an in-person venue. Young people were able to engage more readily with others based in different parts of the city and even the country - something arts organisations reported taking advantage of. Online sessions could also cater for more participants than some in-person sessions. Many arts organisations leapt at the chance to work with larger numbers of young people.

Lockdown challenges inspired some arts to dream up **new ways of being creative** with new projects. Staff felt that engaging young people online often required a different skillset, prompting creation of new techniques and methodologies. There was a reduction in **geographical and access barriers within the UK**. Many arts organisations took the move to a digital platform as an opportunity to engage with new groups of young people, particularly those with disabilities or who lived in areas too remote for an active arts organisation community.

Organisations found **new ways to increase pastoral support**. Many arts organisations utilised methods of connecting with young people such as phone calls, weekly check-ins, and meetings to ask about their wellbeing. This development shifted the focus from simply creating, to that of a structure to champion young people's mental health during the pandemic. However, as a result of the growing need for more pastoral support, many staff members surpassed the responsibilities of their roles, sometimes feeling that the boundaries between work and home or social life were disrupted. There was increased awareness of the importance of **resilience, flexibility, and response to needs, including giving space**. Staff working with young people also had to know when to step back and offer them the space to engage with other aspects of their lives.

Social media emerged as an art form. Some arts organisations utilised this platform as a means of encouraging creative expression amongst young people.

Examples of this included social media takeovers and creative prompts that were used solely on social media.

New partnerships were fostered. Arts organisations formed partnerships with other bodies such as, for example, a counselling service to offer therapy sessions for young people alongside creative programmes. To provide holistic support for young people – so going beyond solely offering support with creative expression – organisations tapped into **pre-existing networks** of key leaders, both within and, perhaps most importantly, outside the arts. Pandemic mitigation measures also encouraged **empathy** amongst young people, as many understood they were all experiencing similar difficulties, and all had to learn and adapt to the situation at hand. This feeling of ‘all being in the same boat’ was fostered by arts organisations.

SOME KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To continue to improve and increase mental health support, it is recommended that improved connections are forged between arts organisations and more experienced mental health professionals, or that staff in arts organisations are, at the very least, given the **appropriate training** to deal with difficult situations.

There is still a **digital divide** in many communities. This study recommends further government investment into both supporting young people’s literacy and expanding the digital infrastructure.

Arts organisations should continue to experiment with **hybrid models of engagement**. This might include a mix of in-person and online sessions, or having some programmes that are solely online to achieve a more sustained engagement with more vulnerable groups.

There should be continued investment in **digital innovation**, finding ways to maximise the potential of these technologies, perhaps even tapping into Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) possibilities.

More structured training in human resources, managing finances efficiently, and project management, for example, could help arts organisations to cope with stressful situations and will improve the survival rate of arts centres.

Whether it is a youth board or finding ways for young people to take more ownership over decisions the arts organisation makes, there needs to be more **integration of young people's ideas into how arts organisations move forward post-pandemic.**

Take a cross-sector, collaborative approach to supporting young people. Arts organisations and their staff have widely played the role of care workers during the pandemic, providing pastoral support to young people and other members during the lockdowns. The government should acknowledge the importance of this caring activity in helping young people to cope..

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE ROLE OF THE ARTS IN SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE

The pandemic transformed the arts sector, changing the positioning of the arts and its role in society, with many implications for future policy and strategies of arts organisations. Over coming years, **forward-thinking funding models** will be crucial. Respondents highlighted the importance of public funding during the pandemic, especially those whose income was lost from ticket sales and other earned income. Funding possibilities allowed organisations to keep engagement up by hiring freelancers, buying materials for activities, and tackling the lack of digital resources such as laptops and data for young people.

Rather than such a strong focus on using creativity to make artistic products like theatre shows or art pieces, **creativity was valued more as a tool** for connection and expression that should have equal access for everyone. In this sense, creativity is used as a process rather than as a tool to design a creative product.

Creative, solution-focused approaches are a helpful way to go about solving social problems, using **art as just one tool in a larger toolbox** of a joined-up approach to addressing the needs of young people. In the future, governmental policy can help to offer incentives to bridge these connections that are more fruitful, strategic, and long-term. The most successful organisations focused less on the art form used or the precedents (what had been done before) and more on the **social outcomes** they wanted to achieve, letting the desired change inspire the creative process. The pandemic strengthened **other roles for arts organisations in the communities** where they are based, beyond their core purposes of making art work and supporting creativity. Government and public bodies should consider the human factor that is also part of these arts organisations.

Online engagement will likely continue when the pandemic subsides, potentially facilitating an evolution in the way arts organisations connect with and support young participants in the future. The outcomes from this investigation are intended to help such organisations identify methods of engaging and supporting young people during a difficult moment in history, while also offering ways forward as the world emerges from the pandemic.

FAR APART BUT CLOSE AT HEART (UK)

Looking Beyond Lockdown: How UK Arts Organisations Can Continue to Support Young People's Wellbeing During COVID-19

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