

Key Messages



Keeping the Conversation Going: Loneliness and Social Isolation

An online event in collaboration with members of Arts Culture Health and Wellbeing Scotland (ACHWS) 1 July 2020

Background

This online Zoom discussion continued to build on work being led by VHS to identify creative responses to loneliness and social isolation by the voluntary health sector.

In this event, the discussion focussed on the strong links between the arts and culture sector and health and wellbeing within the context of the Scottish Government's loneliness and social isolation strategy [A Connected Scotland](#) (Dec 2018) and the Scottish Government's [A Culture Strategy for Scotland](#) (Feb 2020). The discussion drew too on the ACHWS event held in partnership with VHS in June 2019, [Keeping the Conversation Going, A Collective Voice](#)

The interest in today's event was such that it was hugely over-subscribed. 75 participants took part in a lively, engaging and often moving discussion. Participants came from a wide range of arts, culture, health and voluntary sector backgrounds. They were invited to look through the lens of the current COVID 19 pandemic at the essential role arts and health organisations and practitioners have been playing during lockdown; and to reflect on the opportunities and challenges in an uncertain future.

Summary

Participants agreed that the COVID 19 crisis had allowed the arts, culture and voluntary health sectors to demonstrate how they can work collectively to provide flexible, imaginative, and creative solutions to support the health and wellbeing of vulnerable people, including by reducing loneliness and social isolation. It was suggested that, as the foundation of the arts and culture sector lies in its ability to reach out to the common humanity of individuals, it offers a unique way to reshape future health and social care services. Yet, looking to the future, all agreed the challenges are real. COVID 19 has allowed more of us to experience a little of isolation but it has not been a 'leveller'. If anything, for many vulnerable groups, COVID 19 has exacerbated inequalities and that gap could continue to widen.

The challenge for the sector is to get Scottish Government, Creative Scotland and others to recognise that support for arts and culture offers a real and sustainable way forward to improve the health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities. Before it is too late.

Claire Stevens, Chief Executive, VHS: as Chair opened the meeting and firstly welcomed participants, including many from arts and culture organisations new to VHS. Claire gave a brief outline of the work being done by VHS and ACHWS to identify how practitioners and organisations in the arts and culture sector contribute directly to health and wellbeing and impact on health inequalities, loneliness and social isolation.

Robbie McGhee Chair of ACHWS Associate Director, Art in Hospital gave more background to the ACHWS network. Robbie explained that, in line with the commitment made in the Scottish Government's Culture Strategy, ACHWS was awarded funding to advocate for cultural approaches to prevent poor health and promote cultural intervention to tackle health inequality and support rehabilitation. The strategy states that ACHWS will work with the Scottish Government and [Public Health Scotland](#) to bring forward thinking in Autumn 2020 on the role of the arts and culture sector in delivering Scotland's six [national public health priorities](#)

Robbie invited participants to make use of the resources available on the [ACHWS website](#) to help those in arts and culture organisations and practitioners share ideas and best practice around working in new ways during COVID 19 and in the future. He mentioned the sharing of learning with other UK networks including artists across the UK.

Catriona MacIntyre, Arts Activities Coordinator, [Edinburgh Children's Hospital Charity](#) (ECHC) gave a presentation showing just how great the impact of COVID 19 has been on the work of the charity. Their work with children and young people individually or in groups stopped completely. Only now is 1 to 1 work being slowly reinstated.

Catriona highlighted the problems of a lack of WiFi, or conversely families overwhelmed by online content. She spoke of the lack of direct access to the young people, including some who were shielding at home. She talked of the need to give young people back some element of control in their lives – so studio art boxes had been created – allowing young people to have 'shared' non-contact, creative experiences with family or the practitioner. In response to a question about evaluation, Catriona explained that quantitative and qualitative data were being collected and evaluated despite the challenges. The confidence of the young person was a particular measure highlighted. Catriona pointed out that, for many of these young people, isolation may continue for longer than most of the population.

Christina Liddell, Choreographer, Dance Base and Edinburgh Children's Hospital Charity gave a very moving account of the impact of COVID 19 on isolation, not just on the children and young people she works with, but also on herself. The loss of daily engagement with children and young people, without warning, had a profound effect on the way both organisations worked.

Christina explained the different ways ECHC and Dance Base were reaching out to children and young people – and indeed other groups like those with Parkinson's. These included pre-recorded videos and live online classes. Christina also talked of the benefit of Artists Support groups on Zoom and of her joy at being able to 'speak'

with the members of the Parkinson’s ‘family’. The future was uncertain of course and online classes may have to continue for some time. When asked if their ability to react to COVID 19 drew on their skills to improvise, both Catriona and Christina said it did. They talked of having tools to draw on and plans – but of being child-led and working ‘in the moment’. Christina invited participants to watch [Glimpsing Air Pockets](#) – a film by Tao-Anas Le Thanh with music by Dan Musselman which demonstrates the poignant impact of the children and young people in the hospital on her life.

Open Discussion

Jan-Bert van den Berg, Director, Artlink Edinburgh and Lothians, led participants into the discussion session by sharing his own experiences of the loneliness of COVID-19 whilst acknowledging that his own situation was very much better than for many. Jan-Bert felt that communities have stepped up during the crisis – including artistic communities. People looking out for each other, making sure that those who have not, do not go without. He described it as inspiring to see. He talked of the importance first and foremost of human contact, a friendly voice at the end of the phone. Jan-Bert spoke of common humanity as the foundation of the creative process and the need to keep hold of that idea. He posed some questions of the group:

- What have your (organisation’s) experiences been?
- What has it taught you?
- Where do you see new possibilities emerge?
- How could these new possibilities best be supported?
- How do we make sure the ‘new new’ does not become the ‘same old same old’?

The following bullet points are not exhaustive but seek to illustrate a range of spoken and written comments made by members of the group:

Tayside Healthcare Arts Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many of those supported had spoken of COVID-19 as ‘levelling up’ experiences • ‘Welcome to my world’ was a frequent comment • Those with long-term health conditions have a constant battle to participate (pre COVID-19) • Genuine empathy must not be lost
Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital divide highlighted – social media, online etc simply not available to all
Mayfield and Easterhouses Community Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group is now being asked by funders how they will step back from COVID 19 support • Volunteers are now going back to work • Accommodation will no longer be available • Yet the need in the community continues

Grampian Hospital Arts Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small organisations are fighting for survival • Budgets are disappearing • How does the sector ensure the importance of the work it has done is retained? • How are Creative Scotland and Scottish Government to be convinced that the sector needs to be supported?
Generation Arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moving forward, issue of resources • Most vulnerable individuals - £charging seems wrong • Infrastructure needed to give access to artists – with national standards ensuring high quality,
Rowan Alba	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funders were flexible which allowed art packs to be an alternative to planned external visits to galleries etc • For clients, COVID-19 has opened up their lives a little more – getting post (i.e. Royal Mail) gives a new sense of belonging • Not being able to afford to travel no longer an issue as no one is travelling
Royal Voluntary Service (Shetland)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shetland's poor internet connection has limited those options. Also online is not first choice for many who enjoy the camaraderie of meeting others. • Off line ideas would be very welcomed
Gray's School of Art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work being done on arts and health research • Recent blog shared
Generation Arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing lot of off-line work and happy to share with others
Belsma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online and offline activities have been popular. Group chats, seated yoga, cooking demos, talks from guest speakers, baking competition, model making, stone painting, book club and photography groups etc. Will continue to provide an element of online support going forwards as some of our members are unable to attend events in person. Friendships developing within our groups and seeing people get involved who wouldn't otherwise have done so.
Age Scotland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age Scotland has a Community Connections service. They are envisaging a future which will be much more of a mix of online and offline opportunities • Age Scotland has increased its phone offer to highlight friendship chats in addition to information and advice
Befriending Caithness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital divide limits online offer
Scottish Ballet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have created a resource for care workers during crisis

Highland Hospice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aiming to work outside building but difficulties of digital divide
Culture and Wellbeing Community Network Scotland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have collated offline activities, many which can be printed as PDFs, to support connection with one of our partner organisations Fun Palaces as “Tiny Revolutions of Connections”
Capital Theatres	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contactless afternoon tea parties as part of our dementia programme. Offer the performance element online and send out DVD copies to groups.
Artlink	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing lot of work off-line and happy to share thinking

Jan-Bert summarised some of the main points that had emerged:

- Crisis has increased inequalities rather than reduced and resolved them.
- We got a taste of what some people experience in their everyday lives but whilst it has made us more aware, it is a complete myth that it's a leveller.
- Flexibility, creative thinking and improvising are really important.
- Collective action and collective articulation of what we have learned are important and necessary.
- When thinking about resourcing, flexibility and inventiveness continue to be important - perhaps looking at different practices might help.
- Other types of ideas around urban commons, circular economy and participative planning/democracy might be worth exploring further. These are very much at the heart of Scottish Government thinking/planning.

Claire Stevens highlighted that Creative Scotland has commissioned Rocket Science to carry out a mapping exercise of arts and health across Scotland and encouraged people to respond to the survey once it is underway. VHS is a consultant to the project.

The digital divide had been highlighted a number of times and Claire pointed participants to the VHS website for information on work being done around this key topic. See Key Messages from previous events: [Digitally Healthy, Health Literacy and Health Inequalities 23rd June](#) and [Digitally Healthy Members Zoom Meeting 9th April](#). Claire, in closing the meeting, thanked the presenters and all participants and looked forward to future discussions.

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