

Exploring how arts and cultural activities conducted as part of Hertfordshire's Year of Culture impact on the wellbeing of individuals who are lonely or social isolated

Evaluation Report

Summary

Background: There have been shown to be a number of beneficial effects of taking part in arts activities for health and wellbeing. However, few studies have explored arts processes and there is limited evidence on the impact on loneliness and social isolation.

Aim: The aim of this evaluation was to understand how taking part in arts and cultural activities carried out as part of Hertfordshire's Year of Culture has impacted on the wellbeing of those who are lonely or socially isolated, in order to provide evidence-based rationale for the importance of social prescribing.

Key findings: Taking part in arts activities helped people to feel better amidst the difficulties of the past year. The activities provided individuals with a safe space to express themselves freely, allowing them to be in a world of their own and to forget about everything else. Connections were made with others, which helped individuals to not feel alone in how they were feeling and the activities gave people a purpose, through enabling them to further a passion, which led to a focus and enjoyment that went beyond the class. The evaluation also highlighted the importance of us thinking about how we explore how people are feeling and the benefits of arts-based evaluation and qualitative methods.

Author

Dr Jordana Natalie Peake, Senior Public Health Evaluation Officer

Acknowledgements

Special thanks much first go to all adults, young people and children who completed surveys and took part in interviews and focus group discussions. For the time that they gave and for being a true inspiration.

The evaluation also wouldn't have been possible without the involvement of everyone below:

Susan Jessop, Creating Connections; Carrie Washington and Kirsten Hutton, BEEE Creative; Annie Smith and Louise White, Dacorum Community Dance; Wendy Nurse, HAFLS; Helen Barnett and Karene Horner-Hughes, Trestle Theatre Company; Amy Lazzerini, The Dan Tien; Michael Davidson, Christina Luchies and all the Nurture group tutors, Hertfordshire Music Service; Caroline Stevens and Ellie Short, Herts Inclusive Theatre and everyone from the Hertfordshire Year of Culture Project team - Jo Mackenzie, Nick Denham, Suzanne Rider (Hertfordshire County Council), Liz Gore and Zhane Alexander (Hertsmere Borough Council).

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Introduction

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a complex phenomenon, with concepts of wellbeing changing over time and both between and within different groups of individuals (1). Champion and Nurse developed a model for wellbeing in 2007, which recognises its complexity and emphasises the interaction between mental, physical and social health and wellbeing. Wellbeing is so defined as, “being at ease with oneself, having meaning and fulfilment, experiencing positive emotions, being resilient and belonging to a respectful community” (1). In 2008, The New Economic Foundation (NEF) came up with five evidence-based actions to improve personal wellbeing: Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Give (2). It is described how these five actions are reflected in participants behaviours in participatory arts projects that are well designed (3). The Children’s Society and NEF conducted a research study exploring activities that children can do to improve wellbeing and a similar five categories of action were identified: Friendships, Leisure Activities, Being Aware, Learning and Helping (4). In focus group discussions, children identified, unprompted, the benefits of play, creativity and imagination (4).

Arts in healthcare

In a review by Staricoff of the impact of the arts in healthcare, where most of the art forms were music with some visual arts, there was shown to be a number of beneficial effects (5). This included, reducing anxiety and depression during cancer care and improvements in clinical and behavioural states in the neonatal intensive care unit. There were also reported to be behavioural changes in users of mental health services and some benefits of the arts on health practitioners (5). In an update of the review in 2011, there was shown to be additional evidence of music-based interventions reducing anxiety in women accessing maternity services and improving behavioural and clinical outcomes in children (6). In line with findings by Staricoff (5), Daykin and Byrne, in their systematic review of the literature on arts in mental healthcare, found evidence suggesting that the arts can reduce anxiety and depression and result in positive changes in physiological indicators in those using mental health services. However, it was also indicated that few of the studies actually address the impact of the arts on mental health, including exploring arts processes (7).

Community-based arts and health initiatives and loneliness

There has been a surge in community-based arts and health initiatives in recent years, largely due to an arts on prescription programme (8), a form of social prescribing. Social prescribing is defined as, “the referral of patients to social activities, instead of or in addition to more conventional forms of medicine” (9) and is a term often used in relation to general practitioners (GPs). Social prescribing is advocated as means to improve the mental health and wellbeing of the whole population (8) and one of the key challenges to wellbeing is loneliness (10). A review of reviews exploring the impact of interventions on loneliness, concluded that there is not strong evidence yet of the impact of arts activities on loneliness, with the concept of loneliness often not being clearly defined and loneliness rarely being reported as a primary outcome (10). However, in their review of studies looking at the impact of the arts on health and wellbeing, Fancourt and colleagues found some evidence that arts-based social prescribing can improve aspects of social cohesion such as loneliness, social isolation and social connectedness (11).

Wellbeing evaluation during COVID-19

We are currently living in a very unique time in history. Because of the coronavirus crisis, the UK went in to lockdown on the 23rd March 2020 in order to control the spread of the virus (12). It was found that during the lockdown both life satisfaction and the feeling that we do is worthwhile, were subdued (13) and more than a third of children and young people surveyed by YouGov reported that they had experienced mental health difficulties during this period (14). There has since been two further lockdowns, with indications that life satisfaction and feelings that life is worthwhile have remained subdued, particularly among those who are lonely (15). Despite arts innovation and participation increasing during the pandemic, with a surge in community-based arts, it is argued that in many ways the participation gap has widened due to the ‘digital divide’ (16).

In the current evaluation, the impact of arts and cultural activities being carried as part of Hertfordshire’s Year of Culture on the wellbeing of individuals who are lonely or socially isolated, was explored. The evaluation involved close collaborative working between Hertfordshire County Council (HCC), members of the Hertfordshire Year of Culture Programme Board and individuals working in local third sector organisations and their service users.

Project descriptions

Eight activities were included in the evaluation (please see Table 1). The first of these, the Connecting Conversations group, are not an arts organisation but work with those with lived experience of loneliness and isolation and were therefore instrumental in informing the evaluation. The other activities covered a wide range of art forms; dance, drama, music and visual arts. There was also a mixture of online, face-to-face and blended activities (Table 1).

ASCEND - Connecting Conversations (<https://www.ascend.org.uk/our-services/connecting-conversations/>)



The aim of the Connecting Conversations Group has been to work with those with lived experience of loneliness and isolation, “Leaders by experience,” in order to offer support to others and improve services to tackle loneliness throughout Hertfordshire. 33 Leaders by experience have been recruited throughout the programme and champions from 12 community organisation are still active from the original 18. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, and the need to transition from face-to-face to digital, only a third of the initial Leaders by experience could be retained. However, it has been possible to stay in touch with some individuals who don’t have access to IT, with newsletters being sent out and contact via phone.

BEEE Creative - #TAG Seek and Hide (<http://beee-creative.co.uk/wp/>)



The overarching #TAG project, an intergenerational dance project, covered a number of different activity strands, which was in line with BEEE Creative’s mission: To connect people to opportunities and challenge barriers to access to dance by promoting a sense of belonging through dance and storytelling. All BEEE Creative’s activities are based on findings from evaluation and data collection of previous and on-going activities. The #TAG Seek and Hide project consisted of two strands; KAN Collective charcoal animation sessions held throughout July, exploring the concept of Seek and Hide through sign language and animation and the contemporary dance workshops held by the KAN Collective in October, to bring the animations to life, working towards a recorded performance. All activities were held on zoom.

Dacorum Community Dance – Let’s Dance at Home

(<https://www.dacorumdance.co.uk/>)



The Let’s Dance at Home project was originally the Let’s Dance at the Old Town Hall but transitioned to online during the pandemic. The weekly dance classes are for those aged 55+ and in line with the ethos of Dacorum Community Dance, offer creative and caring dance sessions that are one hour long and combine classical, contemporary and a range of different dance styles. Participants learn and perform simple dance routines and sequences and there is also room to create and improvise.

Hertfordshire Adult and Family Learning Service (HAFLS) – Drawing and Painting course (<https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/microsites/adult-learning/adult-learning.aspx>)



HAFLS offers a variety of quality and approved courses, which aim to improve people’s lives, and these are largely targeted at those aged 19+. The Drawing and Painting course was 12 sessions long and was split in to two halves: the drawing component, using pencils, pens, charcoal and chalks and then the painting component with the use of colour to enhance drawings and then further techniques that went beyond the paintbrush. As the course came under education, it was able to be offered face-to-face throughout its duration.

Trestle Theatre Company – M-mask project (<https://www.trestle.org.uk/>)



Trestle is a mask and physical theatre company. The M-mask project that was held during October half term 2020 (26th-29th) was targeted at teenagers suffering from conditions affecting mental wellbeing and was able to take place face-to-face as social distancing measures had been put in to place at the Trestle Arts Base and the second national lockdown wasn’t implemented until November. The project using the masks worked towards a film that was made on the last two days, with each of the four days interspersed with lots of games and fun.



The Dan Tien – Classes for senior school pupils (<https://thedantien.co.uk/>)

The Dan Tien studios in Watford offer high quality singing, acting, dancing and music training. All classes were able to take place face-to-face between September and December 2020, apart from during the November lockdown when they had to move online for a short period. Senior school pupils were able to take part in a range of classes during this period, including Musical Theatre classes.

Herts Inclusive Theatre (HIT) – Children’s Theatre and Youth Theatre workshops (<https://hit-theatre.org.uk/>)



HIT offers theatre activities, creative projects and performance opportunities for children, young people and adults. Their workshops are open to everyone but are particularly welcoming to those with special needs. HIT’s Watford Children’s Theatre and Youth Theatre 12 week workshops were able to go back to being offered face-to-face at the Pump House in September 2020 but again needed to move online during the national lockdown in November. These workshops enable children and young people to explore a range of arts activities, including music, drama, movement and dance.

Hertfordshire Music Service – Nurture Groups (<http://www.hertsmusicservice.org.uk/>)



Hertfordshire Music Service has been delivering music tuition in Hertfordshire for decades and their vision for 2020-2030 is to “Enable all young people in Hertfordshire to discover or develop their own unique **musical voice** and express themselves through the language of music.” Music Nurture Groups, which broadly target children at risk of school exclusion and involve creating music with the tutor in order to increase agency and ownership of the work, were able to go back face-to-face in September 2020 and remained that way until the Christmas holidays.

Table 1: Details of activities that were included in the Hertfordshire Year of Culture Wellbeing Evaluation

| Organisation | Name of activity | Type of arts activity | Target population | Number of participants | Activity timescale |
|---|---|-----------------------|--|------------------------|-------------------------|
| ASCEND | Connecting Conversations | N/A | Older people with lived experience of loneliness | 30 | March 2019-March 2021 |
| BEEE Creative | #TAG Seek and Hide | Visual Arts/Dance | Family groups | 18 | July-November 2020 |
| Dacorum Community Dance | Let's Dance at Home | Dance | Active, older adults | 17 | September-December 2020 |
| Hertfordshire Adult and Family Learning Service | Drawing and Painting course | Visual Arts | Adults – 19+ | 6 | September-December 2020 |
| Trestle Theatre Company | M-ask project | Drama | Teenagers | 4 | October half term 2020 |
| The Dan Tien | All classes with senior school children | Drama/Music/ Dance | Teenagers | 50 | September-December 2020 |
| Herts Inclusive Theatre | Children and Youth Theatre Workshops | Drama | 5-12 and 12+ | 12 | September-December 2020 |
| Hertfordshire Music Service | Nurture Groups | Music | Primary school children | 13 | September-March 2020 |

Evaluation Aim and Objectives

Aim:

To understand the mechanisms by which arts and cultural interventions (both online and face-to-face) conducted as part of Hertfordshire's Year of Culture, impact on the well-being of individuals who are lonely or socially isolated. This will provide evidence-based rationale for the importance of social prescribing.

Primary Objectives:

- To explore whether participation in an arts or cultural project improves well-being among participants.
- To investigate specifically whether interventions reduce isolation and loneliness among participants.

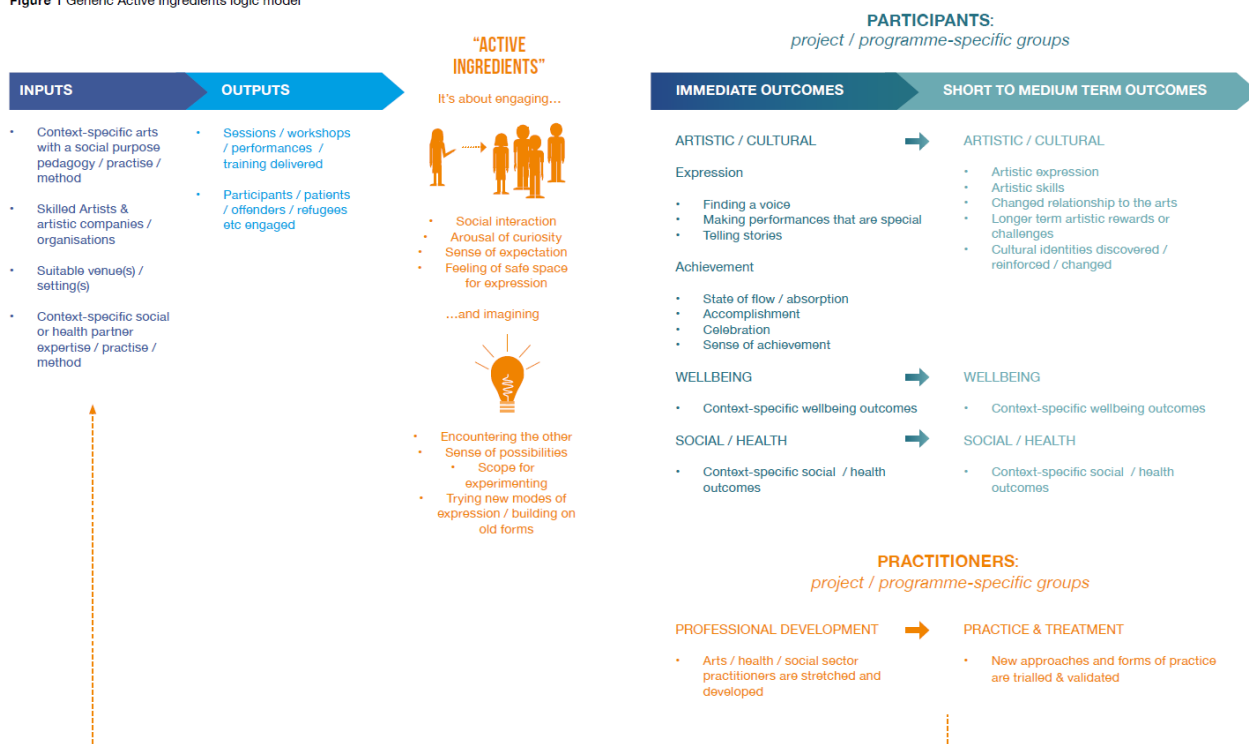
Secondary Objectives:

- To explore whether interventions offer participants meaningful activities with which they can engage, including enabling expression and a sense of achievement and increasing connection with others.
- To examine the particular “active ingredients” (critical features) of the arts-based project that are associated with changes in well-being outcomes.
- To consider how these active ingredients are resulting in changes in well-being and loneliness.
- To explore how the involvement of Arts instructors trained in health needs impacts on well-being outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

Aesop’s Active Ingredients model for Arts with a Social Purpose, underlines that we need to understand an arts intervention’s “mechanism of action.” The Active Ingredients logic model does not just look at which activities result in a set of outcomes but also how they bring about these changes (17). It is, however, acknowledged that the Active Ingredients model is something that needs to be empirically tested more systematically (17). Aesop’s generic active ingredients logic model is included below:

Figure 1 Generic Active Ingredients logic model



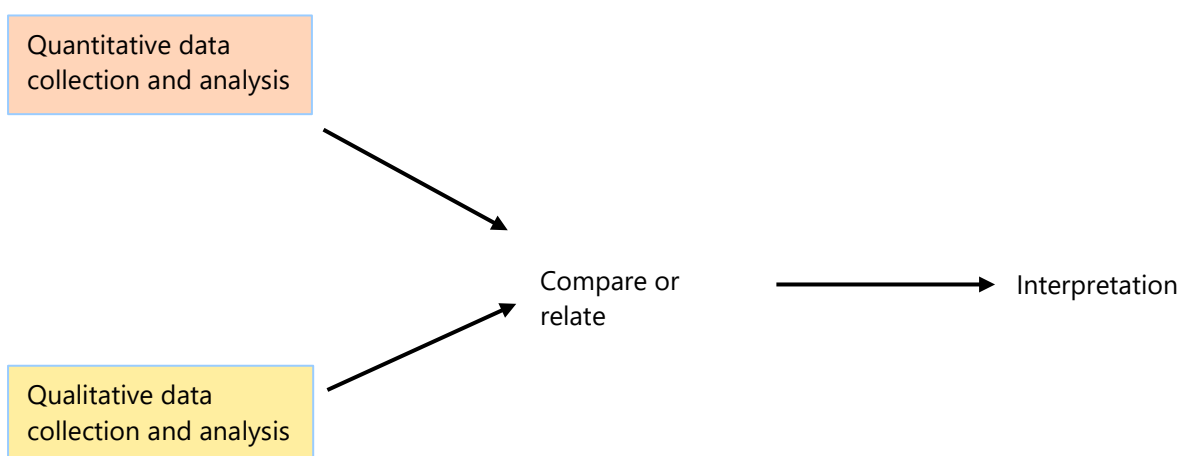
(17).

This framework was referred to but was by no means prescriptive when determining the direction of interviews etc. in the evaluation.

Evaluation method

A participatory action-based research approach was taken, with evaluation methods adapted in response to feedback from key stakeholders, such as the Connecting Conversations Group, discussions with Nurture group tutors and individuals taking part in the activities. Mixed methodology was utilised with quantitative methodology used for monitoring project delivery and capturing measurable outcomes (Well-being and Loneliness) and qualitative methodology to gain more in-depth information about how taking part in arts activities impacts on wellbeing and loneliness. Observation, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and arts-based evaluation methods were used, where appropriate. Qualitative tools were also used to evaluate project delivery. A convergent, parallel mixed methods design was adopted (Figure 2 below):

Figure 2. Stages for convergent, parallel mixed methods study



(18).

Data collection procedures

Online surveys

Where appropriate, participants were asked to complete a short online survey before and after taking part in the arts activity, which included questions relating to wellbeing and loneliness. For wellbeing, the ONS National Personal Wellbeing Measures (ONS4) were used (19) and for loneliness, ONS questions which are based on the UCLA 3-item loneliness scale plus a fourth question which asks directly about loneliness, were asked (20).

Wellbeing questions:

1. Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?
2. Overall, to what extent do you think the things you do in your life are worthwhile?
3. Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?
4. Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?

Loneliness questions:

1. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
2. How often do you feel left out?
3. How often do you feel isolated from others?
4. How often do you feel lonely?

Wellbeing and loneliness measures have also been developed for children. These are the Good Childhood Index (21), developed by The Children's Society to measure wellbeing in children aged 8+ and The Loneliness Measure for Children, based on testing by ONS and The Children's Society (20).

Loneliness questions for children:

1. How often do you feel that you have no-one to talk to?
2. How often do you feel left out?
3. How often do you feel alone?
4. How often do you feel lonely?

Due to the population groups under study, out of the four activities conducted with children, it was only deemed appropriate to send the survey to the seniors who were attending classes at The Dan Tien.

Demographic information was also collected in the survey, including age and ethnicity, and open-ended questions, such as information about level and type of current and past arts engagement and views around this.

Wellbeing check-in and check-out procedures for children and young people

Different activities adopted different methods to monitor children's wellbeing over time, such as playing children a piece of music and asking them how they feel about it; asking young people what type of animal they would be and why and simply asking children and

young people to rate how they are feeling on a scale of 1 to 5 at the beginning and end of each session.

Observation, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews

Some of the sessions were observed by a researcher in order to explore both verbal and non-verbal reactions during the activities. This was mainly done for online activities but one face-to-face activity was also observed. Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were again mainly carried out via zoom, MS teams or over the phone, with two focus group discussions being held face-to-face. Interviews and focus groups were carried out with both participants and tutors to explore their views about the activities and purposive sampling was used for recruitment.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics as there were insufficient numbers to carry out statistical analyses. Qualitative data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which explores how individuals' make sense of their personal and social world. What certain experiences, events, states mean to the individual, looking at both the content and complexity of those meanings, is central to the analysis (22).

Ethics and Consent

Ethical approval was obtained for the evaluation from the Public Health Ethics Committee at Hertfordshire County Council. All participants completing a survey were informed about how their data would be used in a Privacy Notice and were asked to give consent at the beginning of the survey. Prior to taking part in an interview or focus group discussion, individuals were given an information sheet providing details of the study and gave consent for it to be carried out (Please see Appendix A for Information sheet and consent form for children aged 6-11).

It was clearly stated that individuals were under absolutely no obligation to take part, that participation was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the evaluation at any time, without giving a reason for doing so.

All data was treated with the utmost confidentiality and was stored in a secure area of the network, which only those in the direct evaluation team were able to access.

Results

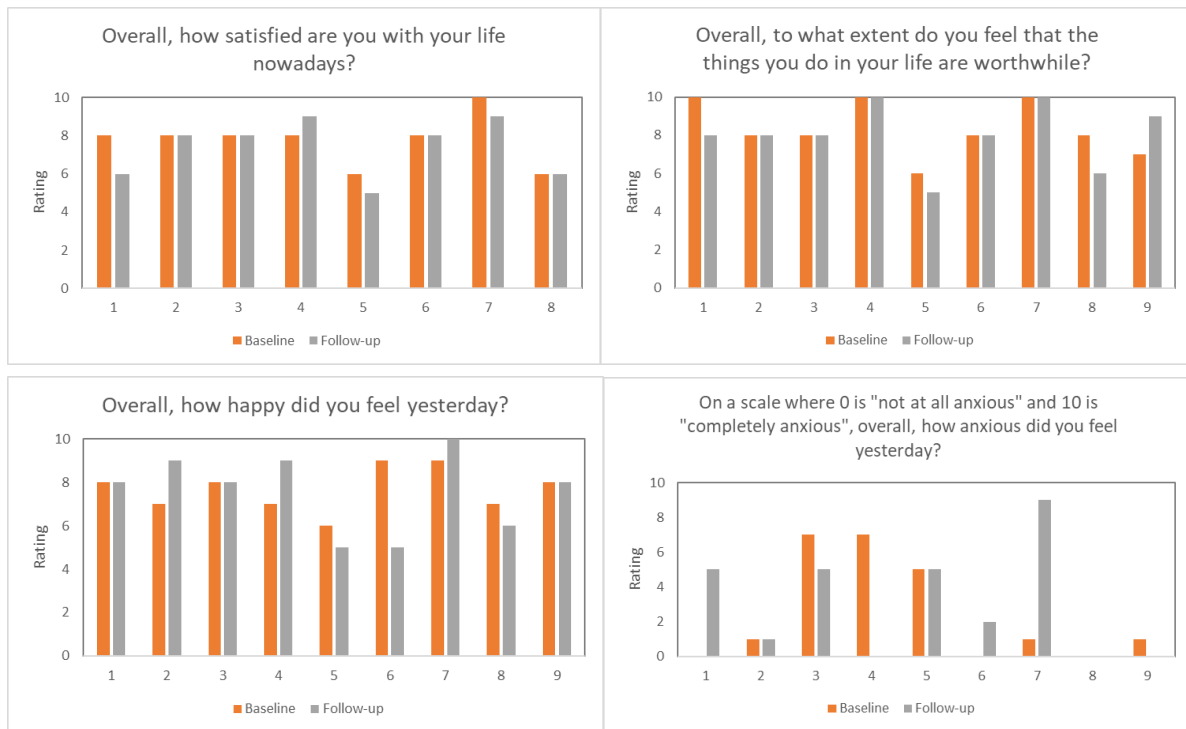
Arts activities carried out with adults

Wellbeing and loneliness measures

Across the three arts activities conducted with adults (the #TAG Seek and Hide project, the Let's Dance at Home project and the Drawing and Painting course), three individuals from each of the activities completed both baseline and follow-up surveys. It is likely that the low response rate for surveys was affected by peoples' increasing fatigue with being asked to complete things online over the past year and it not being possible to print out and provide the questionnaires in person for online activities. Results for wellbeing and loneliness measures were therefore combined for all three activities in analyses. As shown in figure 3 below, for the questions on life satisfaction and on how worthwhile individuals think their lives are, there was little change between baseline and follow-up. For the question about happiness there was a bit of a fluctuation for a few participants but, again, not huge changes. However, for the question on anxiety where the scale is flipped and 0 indicates that an individual is "not at all anxious" and 10 that they are "completely" anxious, there was marked variability for some participants, notably participant 1, 4 and 7. In some cases anxiety levels increased and in others they decreased between baseline and follow-up.

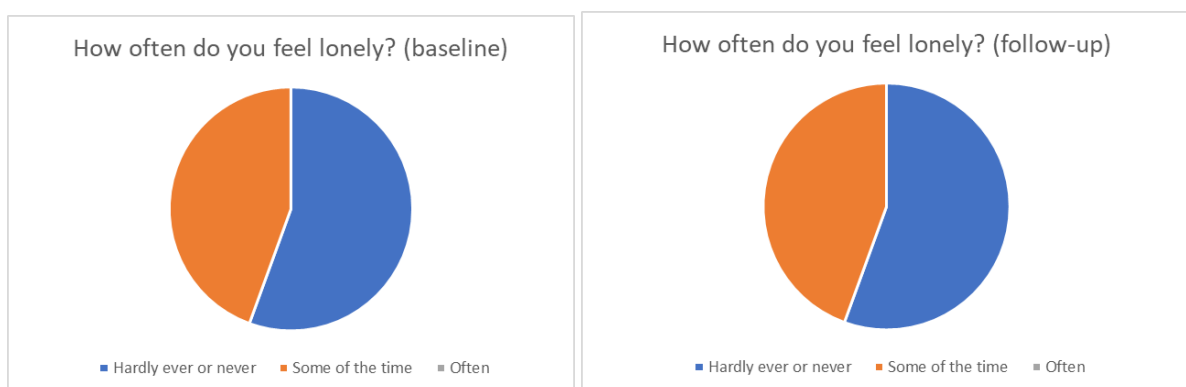
Despite the limited available data, this raises the question of the appropriateness of comparing wellbeing measures at a time of great instability and uncertainty. The arts activities took place between July and December 2020 and during this period we entered a tier system, another national lockdown and then had a time of increasing worry going up to Christmas. It would be impossible to disentangle whether any changes in wellbeing scores were due to the impact of taking part in the arts activity or the challenges of the pandemic. The inclusion of a control group would have been ideal but this is something that is very difficult to recruit to in practice.

Figure 3: Individual ratings for ONS wellbeing measures, where 0 is “not at all” and 10 is “completely,” before and after taking part in arts activities



For the four questions on loneliness (How often do you feel that you lack companionship/left out/isolated from others/lonely) there was very little change between baseline and follow-up. The results for the direct question about loneliness are shown in figure 4 below.

Figure 4: Individual ratings for direct question about loneliness as “hardly ever or never,” “some of the time” or “often.”



Qualitative data

It was in the open text responses included in the survey after each question about loneliness that some very interesting responses started to emerge, underlining the very challenging situation everyone has found themselves in over the past year. Individuals emphasised the constraints of the pandemic; how the lockdowns have reduced social contacts and the importance of staying in contact online or over the telephone; the importance of having a spouse or partner and the difficulty of having experienced a recent bereavement. The beneficial effects of taking part in arts activities during this period also started to emerge from open text responses in the survey and were taken even further with the interviews and focus groups. There was a strong sense that taking part in the activities had been like a lifeline during the pandemic.

As described above, the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) method was used to carry out and analyse the interviews and focus group discussions and it is typical using this method to develop superordinate themes and sub themes from the data (Smith and Osborn, 2007). However, what emerged from the focus group discussion with the Connecting Conversations Group and was developed further through the eight interviews with participants from arts activities, was a super superordinate theme: a sense of Arts/Culture being who we are:

Hmm, for me, arts and culture is about who you are and how you... How can I even put it into words? You know, for me, music allows me – let's say, music allows me to be myself (Connecting Conversations Group)

Someone else in the Connecting Conversations group spoke about how, "whatever artwork you do has a deeper meaning." There was a strong sense of the arts breaking down barriers and enabling us to connect with others and the world around us, without explanation. It was found that all the superordinate themes identified: Being in a world of our own; being in a safe space; providing connection and giving purpose, fed back into this overarching theme (Figure 5) and they are considered in turn below. Key sub themes are also included in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Chart showing overarching theme, superordinate themes and sub themes for interviews and focus groups conducted with adults



Being in a world of your own

Participants said that there is something particular about taking part in arts activities, when compared to other activities, in that they enable you to be in a world of your own. There’s a sense that you become so absorbed in what you are doing that you forget everything else:

Because you’re so absorbed in what you’re doing, you forget the time, I have to say [laughter], which is excellent because, you know, nothing else gets in the way. You’re in a world of your own, so to speak, a different world altogether (Participant 2, Drawing and Painting Course).

The arts being an emotional thing and the importance of music, was also emphasised:

Yeah, I just think you forget other things and just enjoy what you’re doing... the arts can be quite an emotional thing I think as well with the music (Participant 2, "Let’s Dance at Home.").

It is weird, because even when I’m there, you’d think you’d feel self-conscious about just launching into a dance, but I don’t really feel like that when I’m there, well whenever, when I’m listening to music, because you just sort of get lost in the music, so it doesn’t really matter (Participant 1, Let’s Dance at Home).

Being able to express yourself freely was also seen as a crucial feature of arts activities and there being the scope to go beyond any set structure:

The difference is the freedom of expression which comes with the arts. With other activities you work to specified course. With the arts you always go beyond this (Participant 3, Drawing and Painting Course).

The importance of there being an improvisational component and expression not being constrained by what is right or wrong, was underlined:

There's no right, there's no wrong, you just do your interpretation, which is how it should be really to gain the maximum benefit from it and enjoyment as well (Participant 3, Let's Dance at Home).

We are all improvising so that helps me to feel more relieved (Participant 2, #TAG Seek and Hide).

There was a sense with taking part in activities, such as dance, that the physical benefits felt, such as helping with arthritis, eclipse your whole self and have emotional and psychological benefits as well:

I was able to feel and dance when I was feeling (Participant 1, #TAG Seek and Hide)

And also when you dance it's a physical wellbeing of movement in your body and then in your mind and in your heart as well isn't it (Participant 2, #TAG Seek and Hide)?

You know, the arts is not just dancing, is it, you know, it helps our wellbeing, I think, our class (Participant 3, "Let's Dance at Home.").

Being in a safe space

It was clear from participants that in order for them to feel comfortable to express themselves freely, the arts activity had to take place in a secure environment, both in terms of the physical and psychological space, with there not being any pressure:

It was very nice to be let in gently but also to be affirmed in what skills one had... In terms of wellbeing, for me it was about sort of finding something that enabled me to develop an interest in a way that wasn't too threatening (Participant 1, Drawing and Painting course).

Confidence and comfortable, feeling comfortable, and show your movement. Once you remove that psychological block, then you're able to just do it (Participant 1, #TAG Seek and Hide).

So we all know how much our bodies can do and we know our limitations. And I think all the ladies in my class are exactly the same, you do as much or as little as you want to and enjoy it and that's the main thing (Participant 3, Let's Dance at Home).

As shown from the responses above, the teacher was seen as vital in establishing this safe space, particularly in terms of their ability to respond to the needs of the group. Across the three activities, the teachers couldn't be praised highly enough and one participant from the Let's Dance at Home activity said that the teacher "makes the class" and that the "dance is

nice itself but I think the person that takes it makes all that difference to how they project their dance routines" (Participant 3). The ability of the teachers to get the best from everyone so their contribution is unique was also emphasised:

She's a very competent teacher and she facilitates the group from her observation of the dancers, of the knowledge, and there is opportunity for individual improvisation and sharing to the group (Participant 1, #TAG Seek and Hide).

Being with like-minded individuals also served to create a nurturing environment and someone in the Connecting Conversations group spoke about how taking part in arts activities is about "coming together and sharing each other's tastes," and someone from the Drawing and Painting course how "wherever you go, you will find that at all these courses, people are all the same" (Participant 2, Drawing and Painting course).

In terms of the physical space, online was viewed as a best alternative in most cases and a "God save" under the circumstances, with an individual from the Connecting Conversations group describing zoom as "a step away from loneliness." However, being in the same physical space was missed and one participant described how taking part in arts activities online didn't feel the same:

Doing it online is not the same. We might see everybody else but it doesn't feel the same...Yes, there's quite a few that would work better online rather than being in the classroom. But regarding doing art, it's not the same. It's not the same feeling there (Participant 2, Drawing and Painting course).

Providing connection

In addition to being with like-minded people aiding in providing a safe space for expression, it also enabled friendships to be forged and a sense of togetherness to be developed:

The benefits of like-minded individuals, full of enthusiasm and generating new friendships...Like other classes you're in a team, sharing time and experiences. You're not alone (Participant 3, Drawing and Painting course).

Yes, there's a group identity, isn't it? And you feel that you are connected to some of the people (Participant 1, #TAG Seek and Hide).

There was a sense that simply having others acknowledge us, gives us a sense of self:

Yes, and I think having people to acknowledge that they know you gives us a sense of self, who I am, I have friends, people know me, I know them, you know?. (Participant 1, #TAG Seek and Hide).

A few participants also spoke about how taking part in activities as part of a group can challenge our sense of self in a positive way and help to increase our confidence in our abilities and reduce self-doubt.

Individuals had different experiences of the pandemic, and for some the social isolation was felt more keenly than others, particularly during the Autumn and Winter months. One participant described how the impact of the enforced separations are something that would be felt beyond her lifetime. All participants valued the opportunity that the arts activity provided for them to interact with others during this period and to not feel alone in how they were feeling:

Being part of a group, I'm a gregarious person and it was very important to see people and to communicate with people when we couldn't as part of lockdown. It was particularly helpful to me during this Covid time (Participant 1, Drawing and Painting course).

Socially and emotionally and psychologically because you are meeting other people, you feel that, okay, they are at home, I'm at home too, I'm not the only one, you know?...So I think when we are in touch with other people, it gives us a different point of reference of how we feel (Participant 1, #TAG Seek and Hide).

So I feel that sort of connection that I'm being supported by other people that I know (Participant 2, #TAG Seek and Hide).

Yeah, and you appreciate that it's not easy for anybody at the moment, you know? (Participant 2, Let's Dance at Home)

Giving purpose

Although it was important for the arts activity to provide a safe space for expression for participants, a crucial feature was also that it provided them with a challenge; in furthering their interest they were doing something outside of their comfort zone:

That's the thing is to look at something entirely different to what I'm used to. I would say it's getting out of your comfort zone (Participant 2, Drawing and Painting Course).

I'm quite proud that I could do certain things out of my comfort zone or out of my creativity scope of vision (Participant 2, #TAG Seek and Hide).

Rising to the challenge, lead to a feeling of accomplishment for participants:

for me achieving something through my own sheer willpower because I don't have some of the natural abilities like some people to move or dance or do things (Participant 2, #TAG Seek and Hide).

I think it makes you feel a different person in a way, something that you've achieved. You think, "Oh yes, I've done that," and you feel better within yourself (Participant 2, Drawing and Painting Course).

Well that's it, it takes you like to another level really. I think if you do something that you really enjoy doing, you know, carry on doing it and the more you put in the more you get out, I think anyway, especially the dance...I always feel when I've done my class I have achieved something, I've enjoyed it and I've achieved something (Participant 3, Let's Dance at Home).

The importance of keeping your mind active, keeping yourself busy and having something to look forward to, particularly over the past year where individuals described how each day just rolls in to the next, was emphasised:

You know, it keeps the interest in life going doesn't it, when you've got something to do every day, rather than every day being the same, you've got a highlight of the day I suppose (Participant 1, Let's Dance at Home).

Well, there's a clear routine, isn't there, when you do things (Participant 1, #TAG Seek and Hide).

For one of the activities, there was a performance at the end and one of the participants described how "to be able to participate and perform makes it more meaningful in the way that you have a goal to perform, to showcase to the community" (Participant 1, #TAG Seek and Hide). However, having a performance to work towards was not seen as essential, and individuals described how they would go away and continue to dance routines they liked or continue with artwork outside the class and it seemed to be that the enjoyment and focus that comes with pursuing something you have a passion for, continues beyond the class:

Yes, I mean it's nice to work towards something, but yes it wouldn't really matter, it's just nice to be able to learn something and then dance all the way through it (Participant 1, Let's Dance at Home).

I think it enriches my personal learning, I do my own dance learning on my own. I dance and I move and I do my floor work and all this. So it enhances what I have been doing (Participant 1, #TAG Seek and Hide).

Arts activities carried out with children and young people

Wellbeing and loneliness measures

As described, it was only appropriate to send surveys to seniors at The Dan Tien and not to children/young people taking part in other arts activities. For the Children and Youth Theatre Workshops at Herts Inclusive Theatre, children and young people were asked to rate how they were feeling using a number between 0 (not happy at all) and 5 (very happy) before and after each session. However, the results for this are not presented as there was very little difference between before and after responses and all were consistently high. Different arts-based methods were used to check in with teenagers taking part in the M-ask project with the Trestle Theatre company and so are commented on in the qualitative section below. For the Music Nurture Groups, it was not possible to obtain tutor and SENCO notes and end of term reports in time to be included in this evaluation report but findings from focus groups with children and Nurture Group tutors are discussed in the qualitative section below.

There was only two seniors from The Dan Tien who completed both baseline and follow-up surveys, however, as detailed when looking at wellbeing and loneliness measures for adults, there is limited worth in comparing baseline and follow-up scores during a time period when it is impossible to disentangle whether any changes are due to the impact of taking part in the arts activity or the challenges of the pandemic. Therefore, looking at measures at any time point for seniors, with the two individuals who completed baseline and follow-up removed from the analysis, findings from some of the questions which ask children/young people to rate how happy they are about certain aspects of their lives using The Good Childhood Index (21), are included in Figure 6 below. As shown, although levels of happiness are quite high for most individuals when thinking about their life as a whole, when it comes to aspects such as appearance and what may happen in the future, there is greater variability.

Looking at loneliness measures, although only a quarter of participants said they felt they had no-one to talk to or they felt alone some of the time, this increased when asked about feeling left out or lonely (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Teenagers’ ratings of wellbeing using The Good Childhood Index where 0 indicates an individual is very unhappy and 10 that they are very happy



Figure 7: Teenagers’ ratings for questions about loneliness as “hardly ever or never,” “some of the time” or “often.”



Qualitative data

As for the adults, it was the free text responses in the survey that were the most revealing and when asked how they felt during the first lockdown, the respondents from The Dan Tien said lonely, bored, anxious, confused, tired, stressed. It was very interesting as when asked the more direct questions about how taking part in the arts activities made them feel, responses were very sparse, however, when asked what they remembered most about the activities, individuals detailed how they were fun, enabled you to be who you want to be, they were a challenge and were sociable.

Similarly, early on in the four day M-ask project at the Trestle Theatre Company, participants were asked what they liked about drama and the responses were: Exaggeration, being noisy, makes you think, being in different characters, creating drama and expressions. The M-ask project was targeted at teenagers who were struggling with their mental health and for various reasons, only one of the teenagers could stay to the very end of the week. However, when asked to describe the week in four words, they said fun, interesting, noisy and short.

Focus group discussion with Artist, Counsellor and Intern for Trestle Theatre Company M-ask project

Only one out of the four young people stayed until the end of the M-ask project, however, that was not reflective of its clearly very important impact, as the artist said, "I think it's definitely a project that was needed. I think there is a continuing need for it." The difficulty of committing to something you have signed up for when you have mental health struggles was detailed:

There's not really much chance to play around with that when it's just four days in a row. I think that will always tie-in with young people, with anxiety and with mental health struggles. Signing up to something and you're having that commitment is always quite a tricky one...I think the first to drop out of the courses, one due to group size and one due to their own personal mental health, and then we had one member, B, who dropped in and out (Artist, M-ask project).

It was described how previous M-ask projects had been run over a much longer period and due to the COVID restrictions, it was only possible to have a certain number of participants in the room. There was also the challenge of the need to be in that one space and having the project during the first half term after the young people were back at school after lockdown. However, for the individual who dropped out due to their own personal mental health they struggle to attend a whole day at school and so by staying at the project for the entire first day, they overcome a huge hurdle. It was detailed how the participant who dropped in and

out was a bit older but was always “very present in the room” (Artist, M-ask project) when they were there. It was described how the final participant was very happy to stay on his own as he had been struggling to get on with peers in his new school and so it was nice for him to be in a space with three adults where there was no drama. It was detailed how he had a quiet confidence that increased throughout the week:

There were loads of interceptions. It was very independent interceptions by that person as well. It was a brilliant level of quiet confidence (Counsellor, M-ask project).

From the responses of the Artist, Counsellor and Intern it seemed that the experience the M-ask project provided for the young people reflected back all the things that they said they liked about drama at the beginning of the week, whether they attended full time or part time (Exaggeration, being noisy, makes you think, being in different characters, creating drama and expressions). There was strong recognition that people are tired of explaining how they are feeling at the moment and the need to provide that space for expression in a non-threatening way:

Each day we did a check-in of if you were an animal today, what would you be? I think that was a really nice moment to take a pause and go how are you feeling today without being that heavy. I think there is such a conversation around mental health at the moment and I definitely think through COVID it's amped it up. I think in the same way people are tired of explaining how they're feeling. It's finding different ways to find that energy and response (Artist, M-ask project).

I learned a lot about running workshops and conducting it. Every day we had structures. In the beginning we do warm-up exercises that not only focused on physicality but also our minds. The beginning of days were coming back to that creative space that's safe and you could really express ideas. It was really nice to see how you can create that safe environment for young people (Intern, M-ask project).

That establishing of a safe space from day 1 meant that even though none of the participants knew each other, they started to make connections and respected what each other had to say:

At lunchtime, there was a really lovely moment where they just started to play and start making up their own games and enjoy that... I think there was definitely, even in that day, more of an understanding of listening to each other and taking time to hear other people's voices, which can be quite hard (Artist, M-ask project).

They were given the challenge of working towards producing a film, which was introduced on the first day and their suggestions for projects could be as off the wall or mundane as they liked, there was no judgement or hierarchy. The focus of the film, the different experiences people have had of lockdown, came from the young people and enabled them to explore issues which had been very real for everyone over the preceding months. The introduction of the masks and the use of the masks in the film to portray different characters, also meant that individuals were able to sink in to whatever emotion the mask was portraying, whether it was sadness, anger etc, even if they wouldn't have felt comfortable to show how they felt ordinarily:

The other thing that's amazing about the mask which I think enables all of them to do is engage and to explore and express emotions that they may otherwise have not felt able to do. I know there might have been the really sad face, but actually a lot of young people might think and feel sad, but they don't know how to really express it. In this case with the sad face, they're able to have the whole body expression, the whole demeanour, and almost really embrace the emotion and allow it, to live through it (Counsellor, M-ask project).

Again, seeing some of the young people on the first day really thrive in the mask. Like D, for example, didn't want to perform. Didn't want to share any of it back to the group, but when they had their little moment you could really see the mask come to life and the characteristics and physicality worked really well (Artist, M-ask project).

It was described how the young person who stayed until the end, was effectively provided with an in-depth study on masks and film making, as he was also able to make his own mask during the week, and the importance of him taking part in a project such as this at such a critical time point:

I think it's been really nice for this young person to have such interaction all day. I think their half-term would have looked very different if they weren't here (Artist, M-ask project).

Focus group discussions with Nurture Group tutors and children attending Nurture Groups

Nurture Group tutors, who were instrumental in informing evaluation design, such as how to speak to children about wellbeing, similarly emphasised the need to establish a safe space in Nurture groups and a sense of belonging for children at risk of school exclusion. It was detailed how children with behavioural problems can isolate themselves from their peers and slowing down a bit and thinking about other people in the group can potentially help with those social skills:

I can't say that it was definitely because of music or what we were doing but I do think that sometimes when we're just slowing down a little bit and we're thinking about other people in the group and what they want and how we work together and how, you know, how we kind of work as a group I think potentially that could help with those kind of social, those social skills, I guess, you know, of being able to play with other children a bit better in the playground and that kind of thing potentially (Nurture Group tutor).

The tutors also spoke about the difficulties of the lockdowns and the challenges of coming back to school for some of the children.

Observing two Nurture Groups and then speaking with the children afterwards, it was very interesting to see the different types of group dynamics with the first group of children knowing each better, being much livelier and there being real camaraderie there and willingness to help each other out with the chords. Their ukulele playing was very impressive and they seemed to really enjoy the process of creating their own song. In the second group, the children hadn't been part of a group for as long and were much quieter but still really listened to each other and produced some lovely sounds on the ukulele. When speaking to the children afterwards about the sessions, we chatted a bit about the ukulele and they said, "I like the sound of it (the ukulele)," and "what I like about the ukulele is making our own chords and our own songs." A few of the children said they enjoyed it so much that they have one at home as well to practise on. When asked what they enjoy most about the sessions they said "We have lots of fun," "I like playing it," "I love music," "I like putting random chords together." "I like playing them cos' I'm not allowed music at home," "we play games" and when they have to go back to class afterwards, "I always want to do more."

Discussion

This evaluation explored how taking part in arts activities being carried out as part of Hertfordshire's Year of Culture has impacted on individuals' wellbeing over the past year, when social isolation has effectively become the norm. From in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with adults, it was shown how taking part in these activities has been like a lifeline over the past year, allowing individuals to be themselves, to forget about everything else and be in a world of their own by providing a safe space for expression, connection and a focus and an enjoyment that goes beyond the class. This is mirrored in the responses from children and young people, with participation in such activities still enabling them to have fun at such a challenging time; to be expressive, noisy and exaggerate, to simply be children for a bit away from gloom of coronavirus and the more hierarchical structures of school. The evaluation has also highlighted the complexity of comparing measures for wellbeing and loneliness over a time period characterised by great instability and uncertainty and the value of using qualitative methods to explore arts processes.

The findings for adults engaging with community based arts activities in the evaluation are in-line with the findings of a number of studies conducted in Scandinavian countries, which have shown a positive association between participation in cultural activities and health outcomes, including improved mental health and resilience towards life stresses for those with a high level of engagement (23). It is also described how voluntary engagement in creative arts, including choral singing; other musical activities and dance can contribute greatly to physical health and psychological and social wellbeing (23). The findings of increased feelings of social connectedness described by participants in the evaluation is also in line with the findings of Fancourt and colleagues (11).

The sense of arts enabling us to be who we really are and to not only connect with others but also the world around us, with participants often specifically referring to music, is also described by Born (24) who demonstrated that art, particularly music, can provide connections between the past, present and future; between people; subjects and their objects and across space (24).

Indications of the benefits of taking part in arts activities for the confidence and self-esteem of young people (25) are in line with the findings from this Evaluation. Findings from focus group discussions carried out with children as part of a research study exploring activities that children can do to improve wellbeing, of the benefits of play, creativity and imagination (4), are similarly reflective of the qualitative data obtained for children and young people as part of the Evaluation. When asked what they liked or remembered most about an activity, several children said that it was fun, which was very revealing. It was also shown to be very important the way in which children were asked how they were feeling and being asked

more directly didn't elicit the same response. As one artist pointed out, people are tired of explaining how they are feeling and this seems to be particularly the case for children and young people where increased focus has been given to their mental health in schools etc. because of COVID. Working with artists to develop more arts-based methods for evaluation with children meant they were able to express how they were feeling in a less threatening way. There is a growing recognition of the importance of arts-based methods for evaluation such as the use of a visual arts workshop to explore participants' experiences of dance performances, which underlined the potential for visual thinking to encapsulate aspects of our experience that it is difficult to put in to words (26).

Evaluation Limitations

If the Hertfordshire Year of Culture had taken place in any other year, it is likely that only face-to-face arts activities would have been evaluated. Therefore, the mixture of face-to-face, online and blended activities, provided unique insight in to the benefits and challenges of each under such a context. Online as a best alternative and sometimes preferred as a "step away from loneliness" was something that was emphasised. However, it was not possible to provide comment on whether the participation gap has widened due to the 'digital divide' (16), as those who took part in the specific online activities couldn't be compared with those who weren't able to.

The sparsity of available quantitative data also meant that it was not possible to take in to account demographic factors. However, as detailed, it would have been almost impossible anyway to disentangle whether any changes in wellbeing or loneliness scores during such a time period were due to the arts activities or the context.

Interviews and focus group discussions with adults provided a rich source of analysis using the IPA method. However, there was less available qualitative data for children and only indications rather than firm conclusions around this can be made.

Conclusions

Taking part in arts activities, whether they are drama, dance, music or art, offers individuals meaningful activities with which they can engage as they allow people to be themselves. Taken one step further, as described by young people, they allow you to be who you want to be. Critical features of arts activities that enable this are that they provide a safe space for expression; they enable expression that goes beyond specified parameters, including improvisation; a sense of absorption; provide a challenge; an opportunity to create with like-minded individuals and to have fun. This results in a sense of accomplishment; increased

confidence; a feeling of being supported by others, particularly a sense of not feeling alone in how you are feeling, and an enjoyment and focus that goes beyond the class. This ultimately leads to improvements in feelings of physical, social, emotional and psychological wellness. These findings are mainly based on data from adults although the available data for activities that were carried out with children and young people, indicate a similar pattern.

It was not possible to specifically explore when an art activity's impact varies depending on whether an Arts instructor trained in health needs is involved but it was shown that having a good teacher who responds to the needs of the group is critical for establishing a safe space for expression and engagement with the activity.

Recommendations

It is recommended that further work is undertaken exploring how taking part in arts activities impacts on the wellbeing of children and young people in order to substantiate the findings from this evaluation.

It is recommended that social prescribing schemes in Hertfordshire consider giving greater focus to the benefits of arts for wellbeing, as appropriate.

Based on the findings on the differences between face-to-face when compared with online activities, it is recommended that a blended approach is taken as we start to emerge from the pandemic.

The demonstrated value of arts-based methods and qualitative methods for exploring arts processes and wellbeing, with particular consideration given to how children and young people are asked about how they are feeling, should be taken in to account for further evaluation projects in this area.

Finally, it is recommended that the model for the Art of Wellbeing group for Hertfordshire that has come out of Hertfordshire Year of Culture 2020, which will consist of a consortium of arts, social, health and education organisations and individuals, is also considered for other counties.

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Appendix A

Understanding how taking part in dance, drama, music and art activities affects how people feel

Information Sheet for Children



What is an evaluation?

An evaluation is a way of understanding if and how an activity has resulted in a change that we want.

Why are we doing this evaluation?

We know that both adults and children enjoy taking part in dance, drama, music and art activities. We would like to understand a bit more about how these activities can improve how we are feeling and whether they can help us feel less alone. This is a very important thing to look at as we have all been spending much more time in our houses because of the lockdown.



Why me?

We are inviting you to take part because you are taking part in one of the activities we are including in our evaluation. We would also like to know how the lockdown has been affecting you as a child.

Do I have to take part?

No, you don't have to take part if you don't want to. Please read this sheet and talk to your mum, dad or carer before you decide. If you don't want to take part, just say no. You don't have to give us a reason for not taking part and you will still be able to take part in the dance, drama, music or art activity as usual.

What will happen if I take part?

1. We will ask you and your mum, dad or carer to write your names on a form to say you'd like to take part or to say this is ok over the phone. We will please ask to record anything that is said over the phone.
2. Before and after you take part in the dance, drama, music or art activity, we will ask you to fill in a short questionnaire to tell us a little bit about yourself and how you are feeling. You can complete this questionnaire using your computer or we can call you and ask you the questions over the phone, if you would prefer.
3. At the end of questionnaire, we will ask you whether you would be happy to spend some time chatting with us about the activity you have been doing and how it has made you feel. We will have this chat with you over the phone, if that's ok.
4. If you would like, you could also write down or even draw your thoughts and feelings after each dance, drama, music or art session and then send these to us.



How long will it take?

Talking with the researcher will take the most time – this will take between 30 and 45 minutes. The questionnaire will only take about 10 minutes to do. You can take breaks any time.

Will anyone know what I say in the evaluation?

We won't tell anyone what you say unless we are worried about your safety or the safety of another person. If this happens, we'll ask you if it's ok for us to talk to your mum, dad or carer so that we can help.

Will anyone else know I'm taking part in the evaluation?

Only those running the activity and the people in our research team will know you're taking part.

What if I don't want to take part in the evaluation anymore?

Just tell your mum, dad, carer or the researcher at any time. Even if you've started the questionnaire or started talking to the researcher, you can still stop at any time.

What happens to what the researchers find out?



We will put the information in reports and medical magazines and will also give talks about the results. We will also write a summary of the results for you to read if you would like.

How can I find out more about the study?

Your mum, dad or carer may be able to answer your questions for you. You can also ask the researcher to answer your questions.



For more information, please contact the primary researcher, Dr Jordana Peake.

Email: Jordana.peake@hertfordshire.gov.uk or

ph.evaluation@hertfordshire.gov.uk

[Phone: 01992 588922.](tel:01992588922)

If after reading this information sheet, you would like to take part in the evaluation, please write your name below. We will also ask your mum, dad or carer to write their name too.

Name of Participant _____

(To be written by child/adolescent)

Name of mum/dad/carers _____

Signature of mum/dad/carers _____

Date

Time