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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

Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis Report
May 2022

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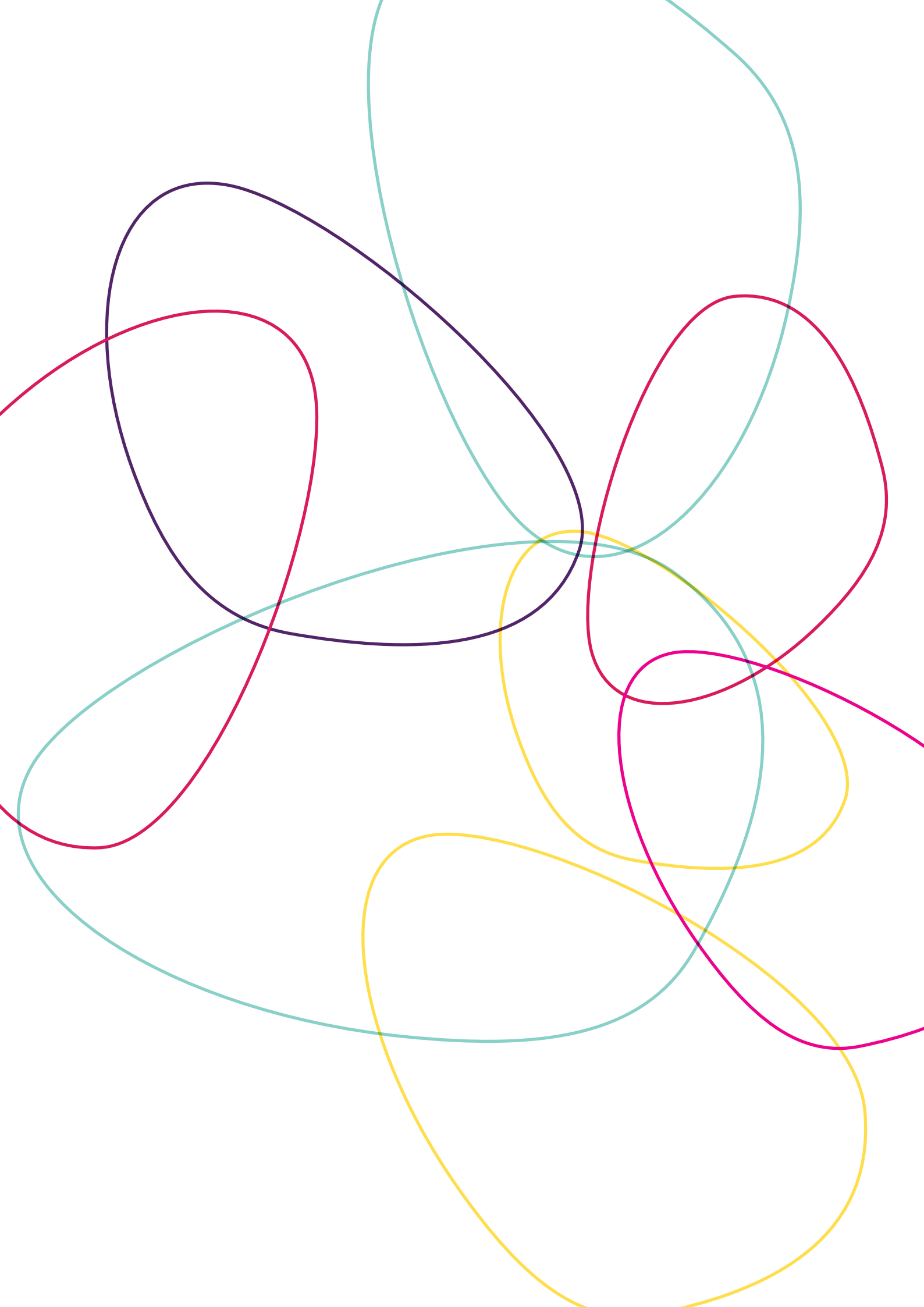
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INTRODUCTION

It is widely known that 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 the ways in which they support young people. The research project **Looking Beyond Lockdown: How UK Arts Organisations Can Continue to Support Young People's Wellbeing During COVID-19 - Far Apart but Close at Heart (UK)** examined the impact of a shift to the digital on arts workers and young people.

The study is critical as many stakeholders ask why we should go back to the physical, when the digital space has been so successful in increasing reach and reducing costs. It used mixed methods, combining a survey, arts-workshops and semi-structured interviews with young people (aged 16-29 years), staff and stakeholders. This report presents an overview of the quantitative findings – gathered in an online survey conducted with young people (141 in total) – and qualitative findings, derived from individual interviews conducted with staff, stakeholders and young people involved with five partnering arts organisations.

The research was developed in collaboration with the following five community arts organisations, based across the UK:

Contact is a leading national theatre and arts venue for young people aged 13-30 located in Manchester where young people co-create the artistic programme alongside staff, make decisions on staff appointments, and act as full board members. Contact's public programme of shows and festivals runs annually from September to July and includes professional shows produced or commissioned by Contact. Contact Young Company shows are made in collaboration with leading artists, and touring shows are selected by young people and staff. All year round, they also run more socially engaged programmes that have a strong focus on social as well as creative outcomes.

Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) is based in a historic building in the heart of Battersea, London, offering an ambitious live and digital programme of performance, heritage, events, and creative and community projects. Projects developed at BAC can also be found in the community, on tour both across the UK and overseas. BAC has around 50 permanent members of staff, who are supported through a mix of line management, in-house coaching and mentoring.

National Theatre Wales (NTW) is a theatre company known for its large-scale site-specific productions and its grassroots work with diverse Welsh communities. Working across Wales, the company works inclusively with communities and theatre-makers, connecting people and creativity within their own localities and landscapes.

Theatre Royal Stratford East or Stratford East is a producing theatre located in Newham, London. Alongside its work on stage, Stratford East runs learning and participation programmes to develop creative talent for people of every age, and a Youth Theatre programme with different offers targeted at young people aged 11 to 25.

Dirty Protest Theatre (DP) is a performing arts organisation launched in 2007. It is based in Newport and works across Wales. Alongside its full-length productions, the core of DP's activities are Dirty Protest Shorts Nights in which established and rising writers are put on the same platform, providing opportunities for writers, directors, and actors. DP works in collaboration with several organisations including the Royal Court Theatre, the Almeida Theatre, Traverse Edinburgh, Soho Theatre, Sherman, Theatre Clwyd, and National Theatre Wales.

Far Apart but Close at Heart (UK) was designed and co-ordinated by People's Palace Projects (PPP) and the Unit for Social and Community Psychiatry, both at Queen Mary University of London, and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC, project reference: AH/V015613/1). PPP receives core funding from Arts Council England as a National Portfolio Organisation.

OVERVIEW

Extensive evidence has long since confirmed the positive impact of the arts on young people's mental health, wellbeing, capacity, skills, and sense of agency. This is particularly the case for those affected by multiple stress factors such as social exclusion, racism, discrimination, and disability (Wright et al., 2006; Lipe et al., 2012). Participatory arts programmes, which have social as well as creative outcomes, have been known to promote positive mental health and, indeed, many young people rely on these arts programmes as key activities in their day-to-day lives. However, everything changed when the COVID-19 pandemic reached the UK in March 2020 and triggered a national lockdown. Research shows that extreme restrictions brought about by the pandemic caused mental distress (including depression and anxiety) for a significant number of the UK population, creating an urgent societal problem. This was particularly acute in the young adult age group, with the pandemic affecting those made more vulnerable by intersecting challenges such as poor mental health, low educational achievement, and social exclusion, including structural racism (Shim & Starks, 2021).

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). Mental health during the pandemic was one of the major issues that prompted a World Health Organisation (WHO) roadmap to prioritise assessments of the unintended consequences of COVID-related mitigation measures (Turcotte-Tremblay et al., 2021), specifically the contextual vulnerabilities around lessening the socio-economic impact (including wellbeing) created by these decisions. Recent studies of measures taken to control the spread of COVID-19 identified particular

triggers amongst young adults: lack of social contact, overload of information from social media platforms, lack of personal space, reduced autonomy, and concern about the impact on the economy and their academic studies (Kowal et al., 2020; Varma et al., 2021). It is clear that COVID-19 created an urgent problem for young people, particularly when combined with other adverse experiences that would increase the risk of poor mental health and diminish other essential capacities.

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns, as well as social-distancing measures, forced arts organisations to move their activities online, changing and challenging how they engaged with young people during this time – and perhaps for years to come. Despite many arts organisations being flexible and adapting well to the shifting circumstances, many of their staff expressed deepening concerns about how to support (particularly 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. This research study set out to fill this gap: to improve understanding not only of how exactly arts organisations helped young people during the pandemic, but also of the innovations and adaptations they came up with to deal with the challenges they faced. This study will thus offer important insights into how young people can be supported during any future difficult times.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A narrative literature review was conducted to explore other contemporary studies relevant to the subjects of this report. The topics investigated were: 1. the general benefits of arts for young people; 2. the impact of the lockdown and social distancing measures on young people living in the UK; and 3. the adaptations made by arts organisations so they could continue supporting young people through the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors conducted specific searches through scientific databases (Web of Science, PubMed, PsychInfo) and grey literature, and hand searched the references lists of relevant articles, with the ambition of identifying relevant literature around these topics. Although a significant number of publications were found that related to the first two topics, we only identified a handful of work that investigated how arts organisations had made adaptations and supported young people throughout the pandemic.

A large number of studies certainly confirmed the positive impacts of the arts on young people's wellbeing and mental health. A scoping review published in 2019 by the WHO found substantial evidence across more than 900 publications that engaging with the arts can help the prevention of mental health issues and support the treatment of ongoing mental problems (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). Other studies explored the various ways in which the arts could benefit young people by engaging them in fun and meaningful activities (Ennis & Tonkin, 2018; Coholic et al., 2020), increasing self-esteem (Millar et al., 2020), developing self-efficacy (Lai et al., 2021), reducing worries (Archambault et al., 2020), and building resilience (Scrantom & McLaughlin, 2019). Arts programmes also had a positive impact on young people facing particular stress factors. For example, for those facing mental health issues, arts programmes were helping them in 'getting things out in ways that verbal communication cannot' (Coholic et al., 2020, p. 281), reducing negative effects and increasing positive moods (Archambault et al., 2020). For young people considered to be 'disengaged, socially excluded and furthest from the employment market', these programmes were seen as supporting an increase in these young people's wellbeing and promoting social connections (Millar et al., 2020). The consequences of the pandemic and social restrictions on mental health

is still a growing area of research, but current evidence already indicates alarming impacts, especially for young people - UK statistics show that this age group has suffered the most from mental health and wellbeing issues (Leavey et al., 2020; Office for National Statistics, 2020) and has suffered the most significant decline in employment rates since the start of the pandemic (Resolution Foundation, 2020). The data also showed that young people from ethnic minority groups or from poorer households felt double the impact on their employment compared with their peers (Leavey et al., 2020). Other common themes impacting young people during this period include the lack of access to community support services and supportive social networks (Samaritans, 2021), loss of routine, and increased levels of distress and worry (Davies et al., 2020; Samaritans, 2021). Even when restrictions eased in the UK and levels of wellbeing consequently began to increase, young people still had the lowest levels of wellbeing and life satisfaction (Office for National Statistics, 2021).

While the impacts of the pandemic are still being discovered, some studies have explored how young people coped with their most challenging moments. Participating in peer support and advocacy groups helped to enhance the wellbeing of many young people, as participants developed a sense of purpose by implementing positive changes for their communities (Davies et al., 2020). In fact, young people in general were motivated to create a positive change for their future and for their community during the pandemic, despite being the age group hardest hit by mental health issues over this period (Prince's Trust, 2021). Engaging in general artistic activities was identified as a coping mechanism used by many to relieve stress, maintain social connections, and get through everyday challenges (Davies et al., 2020). Arts organisations, therefore, could potentially be unique supportive spaces for young people to engage in these meaningful and creative activities.

Inevitably, lockdowns and social distancing requirements significantly affected how arts organisations could deliver their activities. In many cases, activities simply had to be cancelled but, as studies have noted, organisations made the innovative leap from the physical to the digital (Silva, 2021; Peterson, 2021; Levstek et al., 2021; Guerrero, 2022). Two studies noted how rapidly these organisations adapted their programmes to online technologies (Roels et al., 2022, Worsley et al., 2022), with some arts teams even creating new digital spaces where participants could access essential materials and work with peers in creative projects (Silva, 2021; Guerrero, 2022). Others noted adaptations included the creation of digital events to reproduce elements of in-person events by bringing young people together and reflecting on 'what art and art-making could offer them as means of communication, connection or play' (Silva, 2021, p. 499).

Several studies have highlighted how arts organisations honed in on supporting mental health during the pandemic through programmes such as workshops to help young people organise their routines (Peterson, 2021), and the creation of spaces where young people could share their ideas and general concerns (Silva, 2021; Peterson, 2021; Guerrero, 2022). Additionally, a common theme discussed by scholars was how laudably arts organisations refocused their aims to support immediate issues faced by young participants, their families and their community. For example, these organisations connected vulnerable populations to social care services, distributed food and clothes, and provided access to arts materials (Peterson, 2021; Guerrero, 2022; Worsley et al., 2022). Some studies also promoted an increased visibility of young people's voices within arts organisations (Roels et al., 2022; Worsley et al., 2022) and developed more programmes with a youth-led approach (Levstek et al., 2021). In short, the swift appropriation of digital resources, the close ties with the local community, the strong connection with young people and the platform given to their voices have all been recognised by researchers as not only positive but of fundamental importance during the pandemic. The innovative adaptations made by arts organisations were also perceived as lessons learnt to guide any future post-pandemic projects (Guerrero, 2022; Silva, 2021).

However, it is important to note that studies also uncovered some of the challenges related to these adaptations. At the start of the pandemic, some organisations expressed concerns about the efficacy of online platforms to continue their activities and sustain their relationships with participants (Guerrero, 2022). These concerns were aggravated for young people who had insufficient access to social connections and to private spaces (Peterson, 2021; Guerrero, 2022; Roels et al., 2022). One study pointed out that the lack of opportunities to socialise more organically was a limiting factor in developing artistic programmes during the pandemic (Levstek et al., 2021). Other challenges that were highlighted included the online fatigue felt by the public due to an excessive use of digital resources (Worsley et al., 2022), and problems relating to reduced and furloughed staff (Peterson, 2021).

It is clear from the above-mentioned literature that there are plentiful studies exploring how arts organisations have reinvented their programmes to support young people. However, research about the effects of these changes remains limited. The current evidence indicates that arts organisations kept fostering positive impacts as they did before the pandemic. These programmes continued developing a sense of community and belonging (Levstek et al., 2021; Worsley et al., 2022), further creating more ways in which young participants could socialise and connect with others (Worsley et al., 2022). Engagement with these organisations also promoted a distraction from the 'difficult reality' young people were living in (Levstek et al., 2021), and helped to develop confidence and resilience during the pandemic (Peterson, 2021; Levstek et al., 2021; Guerrero, 2022). However, the current evidence remains limited, indicating that more systematic analysis is needed to identify the impact of arts organisations' adaptations on different groups of young people during the pandemic.

RESEARCH
CONTEXT

Far Apart but Close at Heart (UK) was designed and co-ordinated by People's Palace Projects (PPP) and the Unit for Social and Community Psychiatry (two research centres based at Queen Mary University of London). The research methodology was already being used to run a similar project in collaboration with five arts organisations in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Peru. In March 2021, five UK arts organisations were invited to take part in a collaborative process to obtain robust data across similar, yet vastly differing, local contexts: Contact (Manchester); Battersea Arts Centre (London); National Theatre of Wales; Theatre Royal Stratford East (London), and Dirty Protest (Wales). The arts organisations worked alongside an academic research team led by Paul Heritage (Principal Investigator) and Victoria Bird (Co-Investigator) to generate consistent, coherent, and replicable data to measure the effectiveness of creative initiatives for young people during the pandemic. This research provided a comparative analysis using qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews with young people, staff members, and stakeholders (such as parents, board members, and partner organisations) at each organisation. The unique shared circumstances of COVID-19 offered an opportunity for rapid learning from measures taken by five collaborating arts organisations and how they worked with young people.

The research questions which guided *Far Apart but Close at Heart (UK)* were as follows:

1. What are the consequences of lockdown and social distancing measures on how arts organisations support the development of young people (18-25)?

2. What are the critical challenges arts organisations face in transitioning from physical to digital and other social distancing measures? What can they learn from this experience?

3. How are young people coping with the emergency situation and what role can the arts play in building resilience?

This study builds upon previous relationships between People's Palace Projects and the five aforementioned arts organisations. Contact and PPP have been regular collaborators since 2005 across a series of international projects focusing on methodologies for creative engagement and collaboration with young people: Contact and Stratford East were both part of *Cultural Warriors* (2009-12) working with PPP and AfroReggae.[1] National Theatre of Wales and Contact were part of *Points of Contact* (2010-12), a knowledge-exchange programme on arts and social development produced by PPP.[2] Since 2014, BAC, Contact, and PPP have collaboratively built an effective network of arts organisations that work with young people from some of the most deprived areas across the UK to create social change projects – based on the needs identified by young people in their own communities. This network, known as *The Agency UK*, includes several organisations, including NTW, that were selected because of their long-standing commitment to working with young people who are subject to multiple stress factors, their commitment to youth leadership and advocacy, and their experience in engaging young people as protagonists in participatory research.[3] Finally, Dirty Protest and PPP have been collaborating since 2019 on the production of arts-based research projects linked to mental health and young people's resilience.[4]

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[1] http://ppparchive.org.uk/en/projects/cultural-warriors/

[2] https://peoplespalaceprojects.org.uk/en/projects/points-of-contact-2012/

[3] https://bac.org.uk/create-with-us/the-agency/

[4] https://peoplespalaceprojects.org.uk/en/projects/creative-climate-connections-xingu-wales-ccc/

METHODOLOGY

Far Apart but Close at Heart (UK) developed an innovative, multidisciplinary methodological framework, using research instruments previously used in the fields of arts, economics, and psychiatry. The design of this study built upon the methodologies used in a similar study conducted by the same researchers in Latin America, *Far Apart but Close at Heart (Latin America),* which worked with organisations in Argentina (*Crear Vale la Pena*), Brazil (*Redes da Maré*), Colombia (*Fundación Nacional Batuta, La Familia Ayara*), and Peru (*Teatro La Plaza*). Adapted in consultation with the UK-based arts organisations, the methodological approaches had already been tested in the field with a range of beneficiaries. Specifically, *Far Apart but Close at Heart (UK)* uses mixed methods – qualitative interviews and an online survey - to explore how arts organisations are delivering activities online during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact of these changes on young people and arts workers. Each method is detailed in its corresponding section below.

QUANTITATIVE
ANALYSIS

Data collection
and analysis

Quantitative methods aimed to explore the consequences of lockdown and social distancing measures on how arts organisations support the mental health and wellbeing of young people (aged 16-29 years).

The survey design was based on responses obtained from the semi-structured interviews. The information collected was organised in closed-ended questions that covered young people's participation in online activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. An initial version of the questionnaire was discussed with the research team and the arts coordinators, who agreed the final design of the survey.

The online survey used a convenience sample and was applied to participants from each arts organisation. To optimise responses and engage young people, each arts organisation recruited young ambassadors to promote the survey amongst their peers.

The survey was applied between July and August 2021, approximately eighteen months after the start of the pandemic in the UK. These months saw the final stages, in both England and Wales, of a phased relaxation of the measures from the third lockdown in each country and the offer of a first vaccination to young people aged 18 and over.

The survey questionnaires were approved by the Queen Mary University of London Research Ethics Committee (approval reference: QMERC20.144).
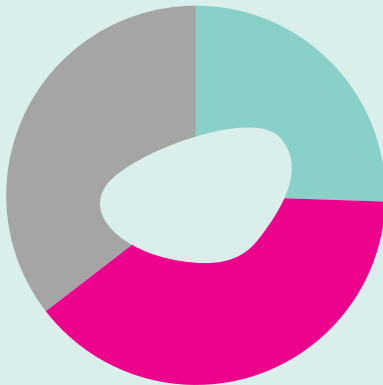
Data from online surveys was analysed using descriptive statistics.
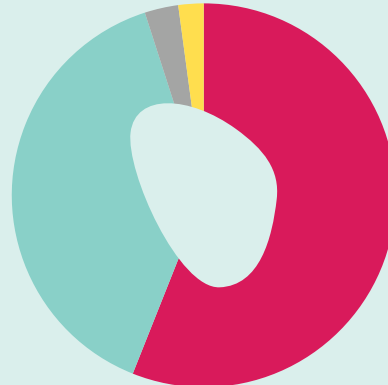
Findings

PROFILE

A total of 141 young people who participated in activities hosted by the arts organisations were interviewed:

Age (%)

19 - 24 years	39
25 - 29 years	35
5 - 18 years	26

Gender (%)

Female	56
Male	39
Non-binary	3
Other	2

Educational level (%)
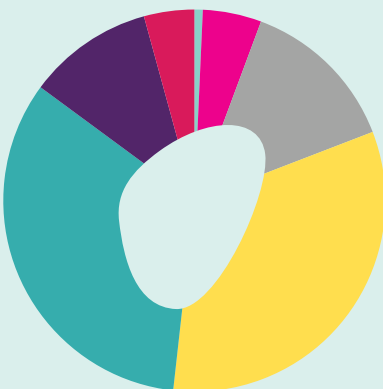
Graduate degree	33,3
College / technical education	32,6
Secondary education	13,5
Postgraduate degree	10,6
Primary education or lower	5,0
Other	4,3
Non-formal education	0,7

Occupation (%)
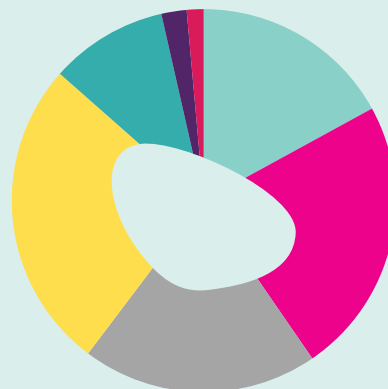
Student	26,2
Working Part-time	23,4
Freelance	19,9
Working full-time	17,0
Unemployed	9,9
Others	2,1
NA	1,4

Mental health

Participants self-reported their mental health during the pandemic and at the time of the survey:

- 46% had experienced low mood during the pandemic;

- 42% had experienced anxiety during the pandemic;

- At the time of the survey, July-August 2021, 21.3% were still experiencing low mood and 26.2% were experiencing anxiety.

Internet access

82% accessed the internet daily and considered themselves to be almost always connected. The internet was used on their phones (97%) and computers (72%). 43% of respondents indicated that their internet usage and participation in online activities increased during the pandemic.

PARTICIPATING IN ACTIVITIES DURING THE PANDEMIC

With the arts organisations

- 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, and their participation was higher when the survey was undertaken than it had been previously.

Other activities

During lockdown, chatting with friends (32%), watching TV shows (31%), and going through social networks and browsing the internet (31%) were the main activities young during lockdown. Participating in online arts activities with other arts organisations or with peers was not common amongst respondents (8%).

Main reasons for young people to not join online activities:

42 respondents stated that they did not join in online activities offered by the arts organisations, for the following reasons (respondents could select multiple options):

	%	n
Lack of time	55	23
Lack of contact with staff from arts organisations	33	24
Already participating in other online activities	24	10
Lack of financial means to participate	21%	9

ONLINE ARTS ACTIVITIES

Data in this section refers to respondents that took part in online activities (44 young people, 31% of the total sample).

Online arts activities attended by young people:

	%	n
Weekly classes/workshops	39	17
Community engagement actions/projects	16	7
Workshops over a limited period of time	14	6
Shows and/or performances	11	5

Young people's experiences with transitioning to online activities:

	%	n
All activities worked great online	21	9
Some activities worked well online, but others did not work or were not offered	14	6
Online activities worked to some extent, but are not the same as in person	9	4

Reasons that young people joined online arts activities (respondents could select multiple responses):

	%	n
To feel better emotionally	40	18
To improve skills and develop talents	40	18
Because they enjoy these activities	38	17
To pursue a dream or a career	29	13
To do something 'normal' during the pandemic	18	8

Online activities support young people in coping with the pandemic:

The 44 young people interviewed said that online arts activities helped to deal with the pandemic by providing:

	%	n
Opportunities to learn	34	15
Activities outside of routine	30	13
Space to do enjoyable activities	25	11
Fun moments	21	9
Feelings of relaxation and happiness	16	7
Distraction from the sanitary emergency	16	7

Interaction with colleagues and organisations' staff changed significantly in online activities:

Although some young people viewed online activities to be an opportunity to socialise (20%), they reported that it was not the same as meeting people face-to-face:

	%	n
Thought connecting online was not the same as meeting face-to-face	36	16
Found it more difficult to self-express through a screen	30	13
Missed the physical contact with peers	30	13
Missed contact with staff	25	11
Felt they couldn't get to know their peers well enough	25	11
Were not able to focus on the activity as well as they would have wanted to	20	9
Felt embarrassed to ask direct questions to facilitators	16	7
Found it difficult to find one-to-one time in online activities	14	6

In future online arts activities, young people would like:

	%	n
An increase in offer of activities	18	8
Change or improvement in methodologies	14	6
More spaces for free interaction between participants	11	5

Young people suggested that they would be interested in activities focused on mental health and on self-development, paid opportunities, and outside activities such as walking and cycling.

QUALITATIVE
ANALYSIS

Interview Design
and Data Collection

The primary data for the qualitative analysis described in this report was collected via semi-structured interviews, using an interview framework designed in collaboration with the five arts organisations and young people.

The interview schedule for *Far Apart but Close at Heart (UK)* was initially designed by PPP with input from youth workers, young people and staff to ensure the interview guides were as accessible as possible. Semi-structured interviews are not bound by a rigid questionnaire structure but allow interviewees to speak freely and permit interviewers to change tack and ask different questions should new ideas emerge. Overall, semi-structured interviews contribute by providing good-quality information for process-tracing investigations (Tansey, 2009) and delivering more in-depth information from the interviewee's perspective (Keats, 1999).

The final topic guide, developed in collaboration with the five arts partners and young people, focused on how interviewees experienced the move of activities to online platforms, what training or support has been helpful, how the new way of delivery can stimulate creative activities, and what has been lost and/or gained. The research team members conducting the interviews were trained in data collection, and also contributed to the design of the topic guides.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 46 young people, 28 staff members, and 16 stakeholders across the five arts organisations over a four-month period. This research used purposive sampling to ensure diversity across gender, age, and ethnicity, allowing the research team to seek out participants with specific characteristics to address the needs of the research project (Lewis-Beck, Bryman and Liao, 2004). These interviews provided a deeper and more reflective account of young people's perceptions of the pandemic.

All interviews were conducted online via the video conferencing platform Zoom, meaning the most important resources for the participants were a stable internet connection and a suitable device such as a computer, smartphone or tablet. Zoom partially mitigated the negative effects of remote interviewing, as the video function acted as a middle ground

between an on-site and a telephone interview. Within the study, video recording was crucial as it captured the content and the way people express themselves, both of which are relevant within the analysis (Bryman, 2016). Nevertheless, video-recorded interviews did create some challenges for the research team, for example, the connection quality was not the best and, since interviews were conducted in people's homes, there were often interruptions.

The interview framework was approved by the Queen Mary University of London Research Ethics Committee (approval reference: QMERC20.144).

At the time of qualitative data collection (March-June 2021), the UK was following a "roadmap" that gradually eased the restrictions of the third lockdown, including socially distanced youth work with up to 15 participants from April 2021, subject to organisational risk assessments.

Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was chosen as a methodology to guide the analysis. This entails researchers familiarising themselves with the textual data, using an iterative coding process based simultaneously on the data and on the research questions, and then categorising the data based on themes. Thematic content analysis is a technique used frequently in policy studies and helps to identify patterns and common themes of the textual data (Rapley, 2011; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Anderson, 2007). This methodology takes an objectivist epistemological stance – where researchers remain as neutral as possible – and serves as a 'descriptive presentation of qualitative data', distilling 'from the texts a list of common themes in order to give expression to the communality of voices across participants' (Anderson, 2007, p. 1).

Subsequently, the coding frame was constructed using NVivo to identify trends and themes in the data, and later to classify those codes into overarching themes. This methodology produced a comparison and contrast of testimonies through different themes or subtopics, using the verbatim data from the interviews to guide the generation of the codes as well as the questions from the topic guide.

A large amount of data was collected from the five institutions involved in the study. Gathering this large dataset from different kinds of arts organisations enabled the identification of similarities and differences between them, which can produce beneficial insights for the research (Remenyi, 2013). The findings of this research will make a unique contribution to understanding the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on the cultural sector in the UK.

Findings

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent lockdowns on our physical and mental health has been well documented. For young people, this was particularly profound, with a formative part of their lives completely disrupted by the ripple effects of the pandemic. Most of the young people who took part in this study already had a powerful relationship with the arts, including some who have chosen to work in the sector. Their relationship with arts activities was also disrupted during this time, shifting an important aspect of their lives and forcing them to adapt. The arts organisations that supported these young people also had to radically change their practices and methods of engagement to cater for the increased needs of those around them.

These findings are grouped according to four themes or topic areas: **impact of lockdown and social distancing; strategies for coping and engagement; key learning and challenges; and general recommendations**. These themes were determined by the codes drawn directly from the interviews, described in the section to follow.

IMPACT OF LOCKDOWN AND SOCIAL DISTANCING

The pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns and socially distanced methods of engagement had a profound effect on arts organisations and young people in this study. The following highlights the extent of the impact in greater detail, outlining the nuanced perspectives that has emerged through the data.

1. **Range of mental health issues:** This study builds on evidence of the impact of the lockdowns and isolation on young people's mental health, leading not only to feelings of anxiety and depression but also to frustration, anger, lower levels of motivation, and even feeling misunderstood.

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

2. **Informal conversation that builds creativity and connection diminished or was lost:** Both inside and outside of the organisation, the informal conversation or connection was lost during the lockdowns, and it was difficult for some staff members to build and maintain new relationships during the pandemic. For projects, such as theatre groups that require a great deal of interaction amongst young people, informal conversations were eliminated and breakout rooms did not fill this space, decreasing the potential for collaboration in some programmes.

It's been so hard for everyone, and I think there are days when you just feel completely low and unmotivated. It's so important that we don't get harsh on ourselves because of that.

Young Person

3. **Spectrum of impact:** Although the lockdowns for some young people impacted heavily on their mental health and their relationship with a creative practice, others found solace in slowing down in a way that they were not able to achieve in normal times. For example, some discovered/ rediscovered painting or poetry, which they may not have had the time or energy to do beforehand, with many continuing these practices after the lockdowns have been lifted.

You don't get the liberty of walking through the door, and like I said earlier, of bumping into people or meeting someone at the café. Or yes, going to shows and chilling together.

Young Person

4. **Arts engagement as a coping mechanism:** Continuing a prior engagement with creativity or an artistic practice 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, whether it was music, painting or poetry that helped them to get through the difficult times.

Instead of running beatbox sessions, we did check ins. Doing joint Zooms and that worked well for a while, but we felt there was a natural drop off after a while where young people weren't logging in and were dealing with their own issues and not being so present.

Staff Member

5. **Young people lost a key outlet:** Regardless of young people's previous experience engaging with a creative process, following the lockdowns when everything went online, many young people did not have that same sense of escape they were reliant on. Particularly with young people who had difficult home lives, they were now forced to engage with art activities online at home. This was challenging for many as they did not have the same emotional, physical or creative outlet, but there was also a sense from some that they were self-conscious of their living situations or the home environment, forming another barrier to engagement. This led to many not turning on their cameras, which limited engagement, or not participating with online activities at all.

I think in terms of all this time, and I know for some of the other people that I've spoken to, that the sessions are one place that you can still be creative because right now it's very hard and especially when you're in your own house. I don't work well at home either, and especially not to be in a room with people, I can't really focus. So, actually joining an online session with other people doing some kind of artistic, creative thing, has been really important.

Young Person

6. **Loss of connection with creativity and arts organisations:** While many young people were able to continue engagement with the arts organisation online, for most the level 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.

If I'm emotional and I can't have a hug or whatever, it's just very...it's not ideal at all. It's just not nice really.

Young Person

7.

Safety was found in digital engagement for more shy or reserved young people: For some young people, especially those who are shy and reluctant to connect, they found online spaces safer to engage in some ways. They were able to stay in the comfort of their own homes and were in control of the level of engagement they felt comfortable with. Using the chat function was a much more comfortable way to communicate for some. Additionally, the digital space is one that young people were already familiar with, so arts organisations were having to adapt to a space that young people were already inhabiting, and in ways that were more profound than organisations had previously thought. That notion was empowering for young people.

I feel like in real life when you're meeting new people you build more of a connection there, and then a potential friendship or what not. Online it's difficult when you're first meeting someone, because, like I said, you can only talk at a certain time.

Young Person

8.

Highlighted digital poverty: 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. Hence, many organisations sourced laptops or phones for young people to engage, but there is still work that needs to be done in this space.

It's interesting because some people's personalities come out a little bit more online. They actually feel safer online, and that's been really lovely.

Staff Member

9. **Staff redundancies and the furlough scheme diminished morale:** Many organisations were forced to make staff cuts, and often the most significantly affected jobs were mid-level to junior positions, or front of house. These jobs are usually carried out by the more locally based, culturally diverse, and lower-income workers, and so it was these people – the relatively most in need – who were most significantly affected by the cuts. Organisations that had decided to furlough staff or make redundancies also experienced a significant shift in staff morale, which then had an impact on how they could support young people during the pandemic.

Not everyone can afford the equipment that they need for a good wi-fi connection, good camera, or good sound. I know there were some laptops organised for the people, which was fab, and we've had people pop back in that now can come. There is a barrier to it which is tricky.

Staff Member

10. **Difficulties in creating performances online:** While many arts organisations adapted quickly to creating with young people online, there was a sense that the inability to be in a room together could not be filled by digital presence, especially in the cases of performance events. Staff in arts organisations also found it difficult to gauge young people's interests and what inspired them to create work in the digital space.

I felt very disconnected from [the organisation] for the whole of my furlough. I literally forgot what my job was. Seriously I was like, 'What do I do again and why do I do it?' [The impact of Covid...] completely changed the structure as well. So, when I came back, I actually wasn't going to work on many young people's projects any more.

Staff Member

CHALLENGES, KEY LEARNINGS AND OUTCOMES

As mentioned in the previous section, there were extreme challenges faced by arts organisations during the pandemic, particularly in supporting young people. The following further delves into the challenges that were faced while also pulling out key learning and outcomes from the pandemic, based on the analysis of the data.

1.

Staff consistency: Those organisations that were able to retain staff, not make any redundancies or furlough the least number of staff managed to meet the needs of young people better. The consistency of having the same members of staff to rely on helped to support these young people. In contrast, when staff turnover was too high, a young person's sense of connection to the arts organisation diminished.

I think it works better with things that were developed for the digital sphere, so there were lots of games that were developed, for example, and that worked really well. The learning from us is that it can be really accessible. You can get to people and places you've never gotten to before, but it has to be bespoke instead of transferring things across which doesn't work as well.

Staff Member

2. **Difficulty of sustaining engagement online:** Adapting to delivering participation programmes such as music or theatre took time, and the experience was not the same for many young people. It was agreed that some aspects of engagement just could not be translated into an online space. 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 with the arts organisation. This was also the case for staff members, who found it more difficult to engage with young people online as time went on. Subsequently, many young people felt disengaged, and some stopped participating altogether.

3. **Equity of art form:** During the pandemic, there was not as much of a focus on artistic excellence or high-quality work but on the power of creativity in any form. It was important that creativity was being used as a tool for young adults to express themselves or to cope with their current situation, but the form that this creative expression took was not as relevant as the intrinsic power of creating. As a result, to maximise impact, arts organisations experimented with new forms that were outside of their comfort zones to find new ways to engage with young people.

4. **More access to high-quality performance in remote places:** It was reported by many in the study that for those in remote places, watching performances online was a way they could engage with high-quality art forms they would have found difficult to engage with in normal times. This was a key motivator for some to continue their practice.

I think it helps me, not only with finding new ways to explore or gather ideas, but also hone structure in my writing as well as inspiration and ideas from people that I've met there and forming closer bonds with people I've never met before.

Young Person

5. **International connections:** During the pandemic, those who were in remote places or had access needs were able to engage with arts organisations more readily. It was also an opportunity to forge greater connections with other artists and young people internationally. 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.

6. **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.

People who might have known each other briefly on social media now have a much stronger bond – people connecting and creating smaller collaborations.

Staff Member

7. **Doing less better:** Some programmes had to be cut and projects had to be cancelled because of the pandemic. 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.

Having strong networks, locally, regionally, nationally, inside the art form, outside the art form, with the local authority...the sort of togetherness has been really important.

Stakeholder

8. **More time for strategic thinking:** Organisations also took the time to take a step back in some cases to see what was working and what was not within the structure of their organisation. 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 to think more about the future and what they would like to achieve in the years to come.

9. **Increased opportunities for experimentation:** The pandemic-related postponement of performances inadvertently granted young people more time to explore their art activities while rehearsing on Zoom, without the pressure of committing to challenging deadlines.

We've been calling for it, and I feel like now we have options. COVID, sadly, as awful as it has been, has given us options for new ways of thinking, which is hugely important and probably wouldn't have happened otherwise, or would have taken much, much longer.

Staff Member

10. **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. Organisations with smaller teams and fewer overheads were able to make swifter decisions and did not have to spend as much time figuring out how to keep the organisation afloat. In general, staff from smaller organisations felt a higher level of satisfaction with their work during the pandemic, as they were still able to make an impact. In larger organisations, on the other hand, staff reported feelings of frustration and depleted motivation due to pandemic-related uncertainties as well as a lack of leadership focus. In general, larger organisations were busy with maintaining themselves while smaller organisations were able to concentrate on innovating.

The organisation was good at supporting artists, facilitators, and staff to go with their instincts. Saying that, if half an hour of check-in is what's needed today, and then people can get on with what else they've got, that's great.

Staff Member

STRATEGIES FOR COPING AND ENGAGEMENT

The following section outlines strategies that were used by arts organisation staff and young people to engage with one another and to cope with pandemic-related challenges:

1. **Utilising technology to increase numbers of young people:** An online space eradicates any geographical limitations of an in-person venue, and so 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 could, so many arts organisations also leapt at the chance to work with larger numbers of young people. The digital space is also one that many young people feel more comfortable with because it has been such an essential part of them growing up.

I feel that when it's online, if there's something in Manchester that you wanted to do, but obviously you can't travel there, you can still work with that company in Manchester now. At times with online you get to meet more people because sometimes in youth theatres you only have a certain amount of people in one session, but if you do online, they could have up to 30 people in the same Zoom.

Young Person

2. **Implementing new projects and methodologies:** Lockdown challenges inspired some arts organisations, particularly smaller ones, to not only maintain existing projects but also to dream up new ways of being creative with new projects. For example, using the benefits of technology to produce creative ways to connect young people in

different parts of town or different countries. Staff within the organisations felt that engaging young people online often required a different skillset to engaging them in person, this prompted the creation of new techniques and methodologies of 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

3. **Breaking 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. So, many organisations were able to increase their participation numbers by reaching out to groups of young people who previously found it impossible to engage with the arts.

I feel that now online working provides the opportunity to work with a lot of people that don't need to live, or be, in Battersea and Wandsworth. We can run sessions with people in Streatham or Hackney…. so, I think that's a learning that we are going to take with us in the future.

Staff Member

4. **Finding 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 was a development that shifted the focus away from simply creating to that of a structure to champion young people's mental health during the pandemic.

We've learnt a lot about what we need to be as an arts organisation. It's equally about support than it is about creativity or about social change.

Staff Member

5. **Staff going above and beyond:** As a result of the growing need for more pastoral support, many staff members surpassed the responsibilities of their roles to further assist young people in this time, despite many arts organisations facing incredible hardships in terms of resources and delivery. This often meant staff working outside of their office hours and setting up additional support for young people who were struggling. While this was helpful during the most challenging moments of the pandemic, staff sometimes felt that the boundaries between work and home or social life were disrupted.

6. **Resilience, flexibility, and responsive to needs, including giving space:** With a significant number of young people facing difficulties with home life, education and loss of work during the pandemic, 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. This demonstrated the high level of staff insight and experience that enabled them to be responsive to young people's needs, detecting whether there needed to be less engagement or even a break in engagement, while simultaneously making it clear they are available to offer support to young people at any time.

It gave us fresh creativity, greater resilience and just I think more open to change or doing things differently.

Staff Member

7. **Social media as an art form:** Social media was a key platform for young people to express how they were coping with lockdown life and pandemic-related hardships or losses. 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 platforms like Instagram and TikTok to engage with young people using a method to which they could relate.

We have a WhatsApp group as well which is pretty much ticking over all the time, and they continued their performances on Instagram so actually it worked very well. They adapted very well.

Stakeholder

8. **New partnerships emerged and were fostered:** As aforementioned, engaging with a greater number of young people from different areas and backgrounds within a digital space also offered arts organisations a means of providing mental health support. This prompted arts organisations to form partnerships with other bodies such as, for example, a counselling service to offer more in-depth therapy sessions for young people alongside creative programmes.

9. **Tapping into pre-pandemic networks:** Arts organisations that could successfully adapt to provide holistic support for young people – so going beyond solely offering support with creative expression – could do so by tapping into pre-existing networks of key leaders, both within and, perhaps most importantly, outside the arts, to provide mental health services, turn into food banks and NHS testing centres, amongst other services.

10. **Encouraging empathy:** Pandemic mitigation measures such as lockdowns helped to encourage more 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 in the way they engaged with young people and the time many spent supporting young people's situations and mental health, which in turn helped young people to be more empathetic towards both each other and arts organisation staff.

So, the part of what's really working right now, kind of ironically, is the community aspect of the academy. They come just to hang out. We do beatboxing and other activities, but you can tell that they're only there to see each other, and just mess around and have fun.

Staff Member

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings outlined above have clear implications for arts organisations but also highlight the need for policymakers to make crucial shifts in the post-pandemic support of young people's mental health. The following recommendations are drawn from the analysis of all interview responses:

1. **Build on arts organisations' potential to offer young people mental health support:** Though many arts organisations stepped up to provide more support for young people during the pandemic, many felt incapable of dealing with many of the difficult situations their young attendees faced. Some organisations turned to mental health charities, social workers and therapists, which proved impactful. However, these services were invariably already stretched during the pandemic, leaving arts organisations ill-equipped to handle some more extreme cases. Therefore, 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. These roles in supporting young people to cope should be acknowledged by the government, and there is a need to explore the possibility of expanding support and training for staff working directly with young people moving forward.

The other thing is, we now recognise that we need much closer links with social services and social care. It needs to be more proactive and involved.

Staff Member

2. **Building digital literacy and tackling digital poverty:** Digital check-in strategies (regular phone calls, texting, using social media, and weekly meetings) have been used successfully by almost all of the organisations in the study. While many arts organisations were able to supply devices for young people to engage with virtual activities during the pandemic, it is clear there is still a digital divide in many communities. This is due to a lack of access to Wi-Fi, digital devices and even an awareness of how best to engage with these technologies. Therefore, this study recommends further

government investment into both supporting young people's literacy and expanding the digital infrastructure. Interviews conducted for this study highlighted how the pandemic uncovered an inequality of access to technology and connectivity, especially within the cultural sector. And while it may be possible for arts organisations to source workable devices and stable internet connections, the UK government could and should acknowledge that certain arts organisations, especially those based in remote communities, are still lacking the means to connect with young people in need. Policymakers and organisations certainly need to be made aware of the importance of providing better access to technology and other digital resources, and the need to educate communities on the use of these new tools.

3. **Experimenting with hybrid models of delivery:** Based on the value of digital engagement for some young people, especially those in remote areas or with access needs, 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. The interviewees not only highlighted the importance of the greater accessibility of activities but also how the online modality levelled the playing field and allowed the incorporation of different members of the community, such as parents, in decision-making about the activities. It is worth considering policies that encourage all arts organisations to employ hybrid models and ways of working to reach those who are most vulnerable and most in need.

I would add that we will still, pandemic or no pandemic, lockdown or no lockdown, social distancing or not, definitely continue doing things online, because I've really seen the benefits to that.

Staff Member

4. **Continuing to push digital innovation:** There were many instances of innovative methods being employed by arts organisations to maintain engagement with young people and to make the most of their experience online. For example, designing new theatre games especially for an online space, or finding ways that young people could connect differently with their living spaces during the pandemic. There should continue

to be investment in this innovation, finding ways to maximise the potential of these digital technologies, perhaps even tapping into Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) possibilities. While the means of connecting online are evolving at a rapid rate, there remains a shortage of software solutions aimed at running interactive activities such as workshops and/or rehearsals for plays. While conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, WhatsApp and Slack met the needs of most types of organisations, many cultural organisations that rely on physical connections (stage rehearsals, live music etc.) were significantly limited in these environments. It is therefore recommended governments look at offering grants and other resources to specifically support digital innovations for the arts.

I would also like the arts to be much more – I want us to use what we've learned, what we've learned technologically and to use that to reach new people and to collaborate in different ways. Let's just freshen things up a little bit and make it easier.

Staff Member

5.

More staff training: Many organisations, in trying to cope with financial worries and employee stress, were unable to provide any training or sufficient support for staff who were working directly with young people. This study recommends training is offered for arts organisation staff to make the most of digital technologies, to help them improve the well-being of young people, and also to educate themselves to deal with stress and anxiety so that they are more able to support young people in the right ways.

We haven't had any use of wellbeing training. We've set up a wellbeing working group within the staff that organises some socials and basically sends out reminders to set your desk up properly and take sensible breaks, but it's not enough.

Staff Member

6. **Incentives for more training and toolkits:** The pandemic restrictions highlighted how many arts organisations were ill-prepared to cope in difficult times, often working in a reactive rather than a proactive manner. Not having a proper set of crisis management skills to make use of different digital tools, employ techniques to keep up the engagement, create new forms of interactions, and carry on the activities through a rapidly changing process, has revealed the need for more development in this area. Staff in managerial and other key positions within each organisation should be trained to cope with conflict resolution, mindfulness, and staying on top of their mental health to perform optimally in these situations. While it can be argued that the provision of these skills is the sole responsibility of organisations, the government could approach this issue from a central planning position. This study recommends centrally funded training, as the analysis highlights that, in critical moments, arts organisations play a crucial role in supporting the mental health of young people. More structured training in human resources, managing finances efficiently, and project management, for example, could help these organisations to cope with stressful situations and will improve the survival rate of arts centres.

7. **Encouraging staff consistency:** This results show that organisations handled their resources differently during pandemic restrictions. For example, not all resolved to make use of the government scheme to furlough their staff. Organisations that were able to retain staff generally managed to meet the needs of young people better, and more effectively supported the mental health of their workers by, for example, keeping them active in different roles. Therefore, exploring further options that incorporate a better understanding of finances and the mental health of the members would be valuable, as it would encourage staff consistency and help to avoid policies that promote furloughing or ceasing activities altogether.

Ninety-four per cent of theatre and performance freelancers in Wales lost work due to Covid-19 and the restrictions involved …. A lot of their productions involve freelancers – your producers, and your directors, and all the people who work for [the organisation] fulltime. For a lot of the projects, the work is created on the ground by freelancers.

Stakeholder

8. **Development for youth leadership:** 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. There were strong examples of this working well throughout the pandemic. A key challenge for many organisations is that including young people in decision-making often takes more time, which is already limited in resource-constrained arts organisations. Therefore, it is recommended that funders lead the way by providing finance and training to enable organisations to implement more young-person involvement.

9. **Better understand the social impact of the arts through more investment in evaluation and innovation in research:** It is clear from this study's outcomes that there needs to be more investment in further research about how best to continue supporting young people post-pandemic. Additionally, as many of the programmes have developed more of a social change focus than perhaps they had initially, there needs to be more evaluation of the impact of these arts-based interventions on helping young people to achieve various social and professional outcomes.

Art is a space which enables people to share stories and experiences and to imagine something different, to imagine that they could be different. We then support people through the arts to be able to do what they want to do. I think what happens is that the arts create experiences that then allow people to make change, and I am really wary that we go, 'oh the arts is the answer, let's put on a play, and suddenly things will be great!' It's like, they won't be great if you are still ill and can't pay your rent.

Staff Member

10. **Take cross-sector, collaborative approach to supporting young people:** While some arts organisations do this well, others fail to connect in meaningful ways with other youth provision that supports young people in ways more targeted at improving their mental health. As previously mentioned, arts organisations and their staff members have widely played the role of care workers during the pandemic, providing pastoral support to young people and other members during the lockdowns. This could be offered in more robust ways through stronger partnerships between arts organisations and charities or mental health services, which are already experts in these areas. This will allow more knowledge-sharing between organisations from different sectors, thereby improving outcomes for young people overall. Public bodies, especially at the local level, can also enhance the collaboration between different arts organisations as well as organisations outside the arts by providing incentives. Networking during the pandemic increased the scope of organisations and allowed the sharing of different resources. In difficult times, connections can facilitate funding possibilities, resource management, and creativity by sharing ideas and experiences. Finding ways to design more interconnected methods of addressing young people's needs will ensure a more holistic and sustainable outcome.

I think that the people within the arts, people like Contact Theatre, like Z-Arts and the M-Set, they're really dedicated to reaching out to people who might not have engaged. I think there's a shift definitely where young people are coming from and getting that engagement and trying to reach out. I do think it starts with young people and their exposure to the arts in school and in the community.

Stakeholder

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

The arts sector underwent a temporary transformation during the pandemic, changing the positioning of the arts and its role in society, with many implications for future policy and for the strategies of arts organisations if we are to retain and learn from beneficial impacts of these changes. Drawing on the findings of these study, the following topics discuss potential new roles for arts organisations in the future:

1. **Using art as a tool for resilience and recovery:** Art provided a sense of belonging during the pandemic. Being part of an organisation's youth provision helped young people be less caught up in their minds and be more mentally positive. It can also be a way to help young people re-open their lives again post-pandemic. Building upon the role of the arts in a wider societal context, programmes and projects particularly aimed at building resilience and healing from the pandemic have a unique opportunity to use the benefits of creativity to help young people and organisations build skills to be more resilient in the future.

2. **Focusing on social outcomes and process over form and product:** Those organisations who were most successful in offering pastoral support to young people, during the difficult time of the pandemic, avoided taking the art form they used or the precedents of what had been done before as their starting point, and focused more on the outcomes they wanted to achieve, letting the desired change inspire the creative process.

3. **Little 'c' in creativity taking centre stage:** 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 be equally accessible to everyone. In this sense, creativity is conceptualized as a process rather than as a tool to design a creative product. In the future, this shift in thinking could be applied more readily to enable arts organisations to engage in more meaningful ways with young people, particularly those who are not as inclined towards or are trained in a creative practice. This was already done well by many of the organisations who took part in the study but has immense potential to be further augmented through further support from funders and governmental agencies.

4. **Leaning into art's wider, societal purpose in how spaces are used – with care**: Building on the notion of creativity as a process, this approach as well as the positioning of arts organisations to address societal issues has the potential to further evidence the role of the arts within society. For example, during the pandemic, online rehearsal rooms were a space of creativity and performance as well as an area of gathering, sharing and support, where performers could also build a network in a safe and fun space. Other arts buildings opened their doors as food banks or vaccination centres, building on the shared commonality of creativity as a tool for connection and tapping into wider societal needs to counter the negative effects of the pandemic. This strengthened these organisations' social roles, but the needs of a transitory programme working for an urgent social mission could displace the existing arts community of participants and staff. Government and public bodies as well as arts organisations should consider the needs of these existing communities, finding ways to ensure the workforce keeps motivated and preventing communities from totally losing their connection with the venues.

5. **Arts organisations need to see themselves as a tool in a big toolbox:** It was clear that, at times, arts organisations became too siloed in their thinking that art is the catch-all solution to many of the issues young people – or even societies – face, without realising that it may not be something that works for everyone. 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 incentivise arts and other social and community organisations to connect in ways that are more fruitful, strategic, and long-term.

6. **Forward-thinking funding models:** The importance of public funding during the pandemic was highlighted by several respondents during the study, especially those whose income was lost from ticket sales and other earned income. Public funding 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. Future funding models should include funding targetted at those most in need but also fund innovation.

The outcomes from this investigation are intended to help arts 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. Online engagement will likely continue when the pandemic subsides, potentially facilitating an evolution of how arts organisations connect with and support young participants in the future. The five arts organisations in this study have a strong focus on the engagement of young people, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, so this study also contributes to a knowledge base about the issues faced by young people and arts workers in England and Wales who are disabled or from the Global Majority[5], as well as the strategies to better fulfil their needs. It also provides data for government and non-governmental agencies to inform evidence-based policy as well as paving the way for future research.

This research project enabled young people to share their experiences and raise the visibility of their stories, supporting arts organisations' ability to strengthen the survival strategies of young people, even at a time of extreme crisis. Exploring young people's narratives has offered a deeper understanding of their experiences and the complexity of these during a pandemic, including implications for mental wellbeing. This data was collected during an intense period of the pandemic in the UK, capturing a moment in time that offers a unique insight into its effects on young people and their mental health as well as the work of the arts organisations that supported them during this time.

As the data was collected at such a sensitive time for young people and arts organisations, it was difficult for many to imagine what life would be like after the pandemic, still in a state of insecurity and struggle. Future research may seek to understand the long-term impact of social restrictions more deeply and to gain a more in-depth insight into how young people and arts organisations have shifted and grown during this time, as well as the way they have adopted strategies, methodologies, and tools for innovation now that the limitations enforced by the pandemic have subsided.

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[5]   People who are Black, Asian, of dual or mixed heritage

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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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