

Case studies: How can the arts and creativity support people who are shielding or vulnerable during Covid-19?

Project: Necklace of Stars

Organisation: Arts Derbyshire

Region: East Midlands

Introduction

arthur+martha are working with housebound, isolated older people at home through remote engagements (post, email and phone) and we hope in person in 2021. Together, artists and participants will make an embroidered quilt with a poem & song soundtrack inspired by lullabies. Lullabies bring calm & comfort, & also tell insightful stories that pass on the depth of human experience from generation to generation.

“I think it’s help me deal with lockdown. It’s helped me sound out what I’m thinking ... Trying to think and digest and let it filter in. Or else you drown in your own thoughts, don’t you? If you’re left alone with them too long.”



Artwork, creative writing & song pass between tellers, each building on previous contributions to add to the whole, a technique arthur+martha used successfully in hospitals: combating isolation, constructing group narratives, reflecting many voices.

The project will build confidence & wellbeing, reduce loneliness, forge connections, re-ignite creativity. We will celebrate the work with community/participant events, alongside a 12-month exhibition tour, including Derbyshire Libraries & Museums & Sudbury Hall.

Funders

Arts Council England
Derbyshire County Council Public Health
Arts Derbyshire

Who is it for?

Necklace of Stars was originally

conceived to engage with isolated housebound people aged 65+ in rural Derbyshire. We redesigned the project in response to Covid-19 and expanded it to include anyone aged 65+ living in Derbyshire and experiencing isolation.

We advertised for participants on Facebook, through Derbyshire Community Response Unit, on the Arts Derbyshire and Derbyshire Voluntary Action newsletters and had advocates working directly with our intended participants at Derbyshire County Council's Home Library Service and through Social Prescribers in the Chesterfield area.

What outcomes were/are you aiming for?

- Combatting loneliness
- Increased access to a rich cultural life for isolated individuals
- Support for artists to expand their practice in this field
- Explore ways for the Home Library Service to build on the strengths of Necklace of Stars beyond the life of the project (eg. Loaning embroidery kits)
- Develop links with befriending schemes and community groups to signpost participants at the end of their engagement with the project

This project continues and expands the work of Arts Derbyshire & Derbyshire Libraries to engage with hidden members of the community through art and creativity. It builds on 10 years of Arts & Health work, including inputting into the Age Friendly Standards for Arts Projects.

We aim to explore new models of artistic practice with very isolated older people. Loneliness is a huge problem for older people, especially when housebound, & it is harmful for health. Isolation/loneliness/lack of creative opportunity are a significant problem for housebound older people in Derbyshire, a group we will access by working closely with the Home Library Service.

Where is it happening?

Across Derbyshire

Are you working in partnership?

This project represents a partnership between Arts Derbyshire, Derbyshire County Council Arts Service, Public Health & Derbyshire Home Library Service working with artists Lois Blackburn and Philip Davenport of arts organisation arthur+martha.

The Home Library Service is a key delivery partner. They offer a free, personal, 1-1 service, providing access to books & reading for people of all ages who are unable to access Derbyshire Library services, either on a temporary or permanent basis. The HLS serves around 2200 people across Derbyshire who cannot get to a static or mobile library themselves. Most Home Library Service users are elderly & often disabled or in poor health with complex physical/mental health conditions & needs. Some are younger & need the service for other reasons, such as mental ill health, or because they have caring responsibilities in the home. Many people in rural Derbyshire face a reduced public transport service, closures of libraries, local shops, pubs. Perceptions of danger & fear of crime are further limitations.

How many people took/are taking part?

Our initial target was to engage 100 people over an 18month period. We still think this is achievable and aim to reach 55 people by phone and post by the end of 2020. From January 2021, we hope to offer a further 40-45 places to those who continue to be housebound as face-to-face engagements in their own home.

We are also exploring ways to work with Care Homes and community support groups (church groups and craft groups who are meeting remotely) using online videos with advice for facilitators, tutorials and materials.

In the first three weeks we attracted 29 participants, 7 doing Creative Writing and 22 doing Embroidery, which brings the artists to capacity. 28 are female and 1 is male and many of them live on their own but may not be housebound ordinarily. Eleven participants are housebound (even before Covid-19) and were referred by Home Library Service.

We will introduce more participants as others leave, which will be mutually decided between the artists and participants. Two current participants will be moving over to the other artform when they have completed their first artform of choice.

For how long has it been happening?

The project planning started in January 2020, but the first engagement activities started in May 2020 and will continue in this format until December 2020. Creative activities will continue with participants until May 2021 and the exhibition tour will end December 2022.

What were/are the main outputs?

- 5 Creative events in libraries
- 10-minute documentary film, connecting words/artworks, showing making process & participants' experiences.
- A year long tour of final artworks/soundtrack in a minimum of 8 venues across the county (eg. libraries, museums, Sudbury Hall, Buxton Museum and Art Gallery, Derby Museums). 2022
- Permanent display of the quilt and other project materials archived at Derbyshire Record Office. 2022
- Legacy – a model where libraries / social prescribers can engage people in embroidery / creative writing beyond the project

Evaluation & Feedback:

We are working with an independent evaluation partner, the Institute of Mental Health. It is too early to share any evaluation findings. However early review meetings have revealed that the project is being very well received by participants. Home Library Service see it as a really valuable piece of work, both in terms of developing their service and meeting the needs of their service users.

“I was feeling fragmented, fragile. I was working through that and trying to find strength and determination. So I grabbed onto the writing. I wasn't aware of it at first, just playing with words and rhymes. And then it became clear to me, I'm speaking to myself and for myself... The writing has changed for me week to week, with my variable moods. Some days I thought: what's the point? I'm stuck inside, I'm not seeing anyone or going anywhere, I've got nothing to say. But when I do get into it, it's the best game there is. I've been swerving between those two states of mind... “

“I think it’s help me deal with lockdown. It’s helped me sound out what I’m thinking. I’ve been chasing a little flicker of understanding. Trying to think and digest and let it filter in. Or else you drown in your own thoughts, don’t you? If you’re left alone with them too long.”

<https://arthur-martha.com/blog/>

There are more blog entries on the arthur+martha site with lots and lots of other quotes.

<https://arthur-martha.com/category/necklace-of-stars/>

Also this 2-minute video: <https://vimeo.com/432080153>

What have been the challenges and successes for you?

Examples of challenges:

- **Capacity of freelance staff to revise and redevelop the project in response to Covid-19:** The project was due to begin when we moved into lockdown and everyone had to put in extra hours, despite very little flexibility in the budget for staff fees.
- **Lack of information about Covid-19:** debate about whether we would send materials out in the post, or whether we should ask people to use materials they had in their own homes. We were afraid of virus transmission on materials – there still wasn’t a huge amount of information regarding how the virus lives on fabric at this time. The project coordinator consulted a friend who worked in the medical profession to inform the Risk Assessment which she then ran past our partner in Public Health for approval. The recommendations have since been shared with other arts and health organisations across Derbyshire as a guideline.
- **Data protection:** establishing appropriate mechanisms for safe storing and sharing data between artists and project coordinator
- **Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults:** Project Coordinator facilitated conversations with artists about how to address any safeguarding concerns, appropriate procedures, dealing with disclosures. Artists were provided with new mobile phones for this project. Advice sought regarding safe working practices on zoom/phone. Up to date information about local services during lockdown for sign posting.
- **Managing workload and mental health of artists / project coordinator:** Each person is in a unique position in their personal life with various caring responsibilities. The artists are undertaking emotional labour with sometimes long and intensive phone conversations with participants.

As the commissioning organisation it has been a great luxury to work with such experienced artists. We have been able to support them to take risks to work in new ways. There is inherent risk in artists who are living in a more isolated world themselves being asked to work 1-1 with people who are vulnerable and isolated. Both artists really understand their practice and their boundaries, and we worked hard to put support around them so they can do their job well.

- We established a weekly phone check-in (artists with project coordinator, project coordinator with Arts and Health Coordinator) and attempted to support each other by sharing workloads or adjusting the number of participants for a period of time.
- Strive to have open and honest conversations, to ensure that everyone understands that their emotional wellbeing is important and will be taken seriously

- Artists bcc project coordinator into all emails with participants so there is a paper trail of communication in case of safeguarding concerns.
- Artists document phone conversations with participants and keep diaries of conversations for personal reflection, evaluation and safeguarding records
- **Communication within the team:** since lockdown we have had one online meeting with all partners involved. This was successful although it took a bit of time to find an online platform that everyone could access.

Examples of Successes:

Participants: Margaret described to Phil how she enjoyed the process of talking to him and how it helped her work out what she wanted to say. She was supported to explore ideas about her life and use her voice to express something to the world, sharing her poem online. She also had the important experience of sharing it with her daughter. In a period of enforced isolation, when communication has been more difficult for many, through this project, she found a way to express something very important to a loved one, bringing them closer together.

Artists: Phil and Lois (arthur+martha) have been working together on another project alongside Necklace of Stars, working with people who have experienced homelessness. Phil is clear that the two projects have informed each other and given him a sense of pride as he has witnessed participants gain strength from their creative experiences during a period of immense challenge as they live through a global pandemic.

Project Coordinator: Sally Roberts, project coordinator feels very satisfied that the team managed to adapt the project to meet current need, whilst staying true to the aims of the project, providing meaningful engagements for people in isolation when other services have had to stop.

Arts Derbyshire: One of our stated aims in our ACE funding bid is: *to achieve a new model of excellent artistic practice with very isolated older people.* The project has only been running a few weeks and it already feels that the project is testing new approaches and achieving excellent and impactful artistic results.

Further information

<https://arthur-martha.com/portfolio/a-necklace-of-stars/>

<https://arthur-martha.com/blog/>

Arts Derbyshire is the strategic development partnership (100+ membership organisations) for the arts in Derbyshire, aiming to maximise participation, including a specific focus on those who experience barriers to accessing the arts. The Arts and Health programme has been running since 2008 running a range of projects and providing support for arts and health practitioners/ organisations across the county.

Arts Derbyshire is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation supported by Derbyshire County Council Art Service as the Executive arm and Treasurer of Arts Derbyshire.

Arts Derbyshire has no employees but a small team of freelancers is contracted by Derbyshire County Council on behalf of Arts Derbyshire.