

## Case studies: How have culture and creativity been supporting people in health, care and other institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Project: Clown Doctors and Elderflowers

Organisation: Hearts and Minds

Region: Throughout Scotland

Designed for: Schools, care homes, hospitals, hospices

“They make me laugh when I am in hospital when I am not well. They make me forget I’m in hospital so much I want to be a Clowndoctor”  
(participant, aged 9)

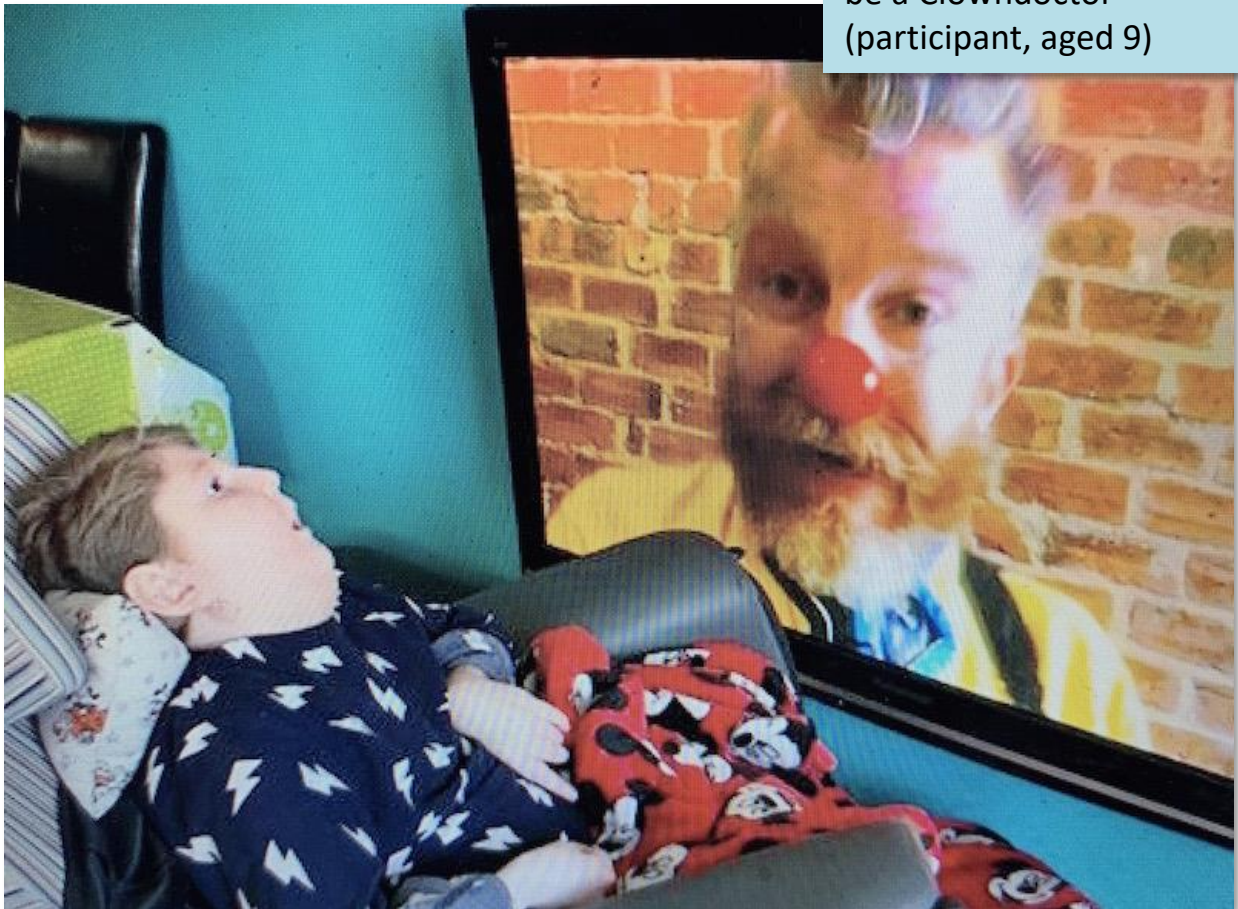


Image credit: Hearts and Minds (Logan and Dr Cous Cous)

### Introduction

Hearts and Minds is an arts and health charity that uses the art of therapeutic Clowning to work with children and young people in hospices, hospitals and special educational schools and adults living with dementia. Playfulness, empathy and kindness are at the heart of everything that we do. We deliver two main programmes, The Clowndoctors for children and families and The Elderflowers for adults living with dementia and carers. We use professional artists who are specifically trained to use the art of clowning in the environments we work in and with those that we engage with. We believe that meaningful human connection is vital for wellbeing and that this is especially important when we are at our most vulnerable. Through the art of therapeutic clowning we connect to people’s humanity and transform experiences of adversity to ones filled with lightness and joy.

We have developed a whole new digital strand to our work:

Clowning Around: This is a schools-based programme that includes virtual visits to individuals and classrooms and also personalised pre-recorded videos and staff training.

Clowning S'cool: This is a virtual Clowndoctor camp, teaching skills of clowning and play.

Two for Tea: Elderflower tea parties for adults living with dementia and their carers in both care homes and personal homes.

Story time with the Clowndoctors: The clowndoctors bringing well know children's stories to life through the art of therapeutic clowning.

Clowndoctor in the cupboard: pre-recorded content to be shared with hospitals, hospices and schools. We also aim to work virtually with hospices and hospitals.

## Funders

List available on request

## Partners

Hearts and Minds developed the virtual programme. Through partnerships we have been able to reach families, children and adults living with dementia. Our partnerships have included CHAS, The Yard, Nourish, the Stand International, Children's Health Scotland, Edinburgh's Children's Hospital Charity, Kinnections and others.

## Who is it for?

We worked with children that were in long term hospital care and hospice care. We also worked with children from special educational schools, who had a range of complex needs and were unable to go to school due to the restrictions put in place.

Through our virtual programme we have reached children and families who were isolated and shielding due to their medical conditions and adults living with dementia in care homes, who were no longer able to receive visitors. We worked in partnership with organisations that enabled us to reach those that were isolated, unable to access their normal practical and emotional support services.

## Are these people you have worked with before, or new participants?

Our project was designed to continue working with the people we would normally reach in the units that we visited. Due to lockdown we had to stop all live visits in hospitals, care homes, hospices and special educational schools and therefore had to develop new ways to connect through therapeutic clowning. We developed our new virtual programme in response to COVID-19.

Our virtual programme was also designed as a means to reach new people and to work with new partners enabling us to grow and diversify our reach. As a result of COVID-19 we soon realised that more people than ever would be isolated and not able to access their normal services, and more in need of human connection, play and lightness than ever before.

## How many people took/are taking part?

Between April and October we delivered approx. 120 Elderflower care home visits, reached 1,200 children and families through our virtual CD visits, 30 Clowndoctor personalised videos, 40 children through our School programme and 19 children through our Clowning S'cool.

## Where is it happening?

Hearts and Minds works across the whole of Scotland. Prior to lock down we visited 17 locations weekly. Now as a result of our virtual programme we are visiting children and families in their homes,

adults living with dementia in care homes/homes with their carers and we have launched a school's programme for special educational schools. We are reaching people from the Borders to the Highlands.

### For how long has it been happening?

Our virtual programme launched in April and although to start with it was created as a way to engage with people while we were in lockdown, it will now become a main strand of our work. We have since launched Clowning Around, our schools-based programme, Clowning S'cool, our new virtual clowning school, Clowndoctor on Call, our virtual visits to hospitals, hospices and personal homes and Two for Tea, our Elderflower visits into homes and care homes and Story time with the Clowndoctors (all virtual programmes using the art of therapeutic clowning).

### What were/are the main outputs?

- Virtual visits to children in hospitals, virtual visits to children and families that access hospice care, virtual visits to children from special educational schools, virtual visits to adults living with dementia.
- Personalised videos for children, tailored to suit their needs.
- Two storybooks brought to life by the Clowndoctors
- Pre-recorded content to be shared in hospitals, care homes, hospices and schools.

### What outcomes were/are you aiming for?

- Reduce feelings of isolation
- Create a safe space to play
- Create a feeling of connection
- Provide opportunities for fun
- Provide space and time centred on the individual/family

### Have you adapted existing work to make this happen? If so, how?

Making people smile, spreading joy and creating a safe space to play is still at the heart of our work. The main principle of our work has not changed but has been adapted to work virtually. Human connection and play remain fundamental to our engagements and our interactions remain person lead, enabling a sense of agency to form.

Our artists (Clowndoctors and Elderflowers) continue to work in pairs but are now in separate spaces instead of being in the same room as the person they are engaging with. Props and play resources are no longer shared but responded to and interacted with via the screen.

Hearts and Minds believe play is at the heart of what it is to be human and to be a clown, we believe in the power of play to help us face adversity with openness, creativity, and humour. We create invitation to play and to connect with whoever we work with and this has stayed true to our work as we progress through the crisis and beyond.

Through our virtual delivery we are able to bring the wonder and magic of the Clowning experience into the spaces and places where people are, this way of working has not been limited by the restrictions brought on by the virus, but instead opened up endless opportunities.

## Does your work support people who identify with one or more of the protected characteristics<sup>1</sup>?

Our programme works with children that are disabled and with complex additional support needs and behavioural needs. We also work with adults living with dementia.

All of our artists have been specifically trained to work with those that we visit and adapt their delivery to suit different needs. The art of therapeutic clowning uses open-ended play and allows the participant to take in new information at their own pace and to lead the interaction. All our work is person-led and involves a range of art forms including art, music, improvisation, puppetry, mime and play.

### Evaluation & Feedback

We have been gathering qualitative data from all of our visits- from caregivers and partner organisations. We have gathered quantitative data in regards to number of visits etc, number of families, number of children. We are currently reviewing the information that we gather to make it more suitable to our virtual programme.

Parents send in videos/photos of their children interacting with the Clowndoctors on screen and tell us about their reactions. The care home staff that we engage with provide feedback on the Elderflower visits. Our Clowndoctors and Elderflowers provide feedback on the visits and also review and evaluate each visit. Fundamentally if we know that the child/family/adult living with dementia has smiled or laughed, engaged, felt involved in the visit then we know that it has been a success.

“They make me laugh when I am in hospital when I am not well. They make me forget I’m in hospital so much I want to be a Clowndoctor” (young participant, aged 9)

“The Clowndoctors interacting with [name] at home gives me as a parent some me time and helps [name] when we are isolating at home. It has taken it to a different level and it is great for [name]” (young participant’s father)

“Through the wonders of modern technology we have been able to work together with Hearts and Minds and Elderflowers to make sure we don’t lose touch with them here in Melburn Lodge during these extremely difficult times. We have successfully connected through online video chats, with the patients and staff have responded really positively to and we are delighted that we can continue to them here on Melburn as they brighten up everyone’s day with their smiles and cheery faces...they really do make a positive difference to all our general well-being this includes relatives too as they cannot visit as the moment so when feedback the response their loved ones have had it hopefully makes a difference to them also. A massive thank you to the wonderful Elderflowers.” (Senior Charge Nurse)

“The value of these videos have exceeded (our already high) expectations. Pupils have engaged with the online experience better than we had anticipated. Parents have been excited (and emotional) at the responses from their children... ‘WOW that was fantastic! He was full of smiles, moving his hand to the beat and it has perked him right up’. These are a great shared activity for family time during lockdown- sharing the joy with siblings” (Eileen McDonnell, Deputy Head Teacher, Mavisbank School)

“We are thrilled to still get our weekly fix with the Clowndoctors. It is great to see the smiles and enjoyment from our pupils when they are engaging with the Clowndoctors on the ipads. Things are so different with COVID restrictions, so our weekly visits are one of the best parts of the week now. All

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<sup>1</sup> Protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation (Equalities Act 2010).

our staff are learning from the Clowndoctors too. We couldn't ask for a better start to the week!"  
(Leigh Verdot, HT, Fairview School on Clowning Around virtual visits)

"Thank you so very much for the amazing video! Charlotte was so excited with it can cannot stop talking about it. You left a very, very positive mark on her. Thank you for what you do- it made us smile as well as her" (Parent)

### What is your own impression of how it has worked? What have been the challenges and successes for you?

Our virtual programme has received overwhelmingly positive feedback from our partners, the families, children and from our artists. We have had to adapt our approach and delivery very quickly and work out ways to reach people.

One of the biggest challenges has been taking the art of therapeutic clowning which is all about human connection and transferring this to the screen, ensuring that the children, families and adults still get the best experience from our visits.

Finding ways to reach the children, families and adults living with dementia was also a challenge as we could no longer do this in person, instead we had to rely on external partners to support us to do this.

Another challenge has been on IT accessibility as not all families have access to the technology that is required and this can never been assumed, we as a charity do not want this to be a barrier to human connection.

The successes have been in the responses from the children, families and adults living with dementia, knowing that we are bringing moments of joy and play is enough to know that we are doing it right. Being able to reach those that have been isolating and shielding and to provide them with a short break filled with joy is a success for our charity.

### Are you reaching more people/fewer people/different people?

As a result of this work we are now working with more people. We are working with children, siblings and their families, we are no longer reliant on people being at certain units when we visit but we can now visit people in their homes. The virtual visits have made this element of the work more accessible.

### What new skills have you or your colleagues had to develop to deliver this work?

We have had to develop new ways of working, new ways of delivering clowning virtually and new ways of visiting people. Our artists have had to learn how to work with the camera and interact live through a screen as opposed to face to face. They have mastered working in pairs without being side by side and have learned how to interact with props through the screen.

### What would you say has made this project possible?

Families that opened their doors and let us into their homes (virtually). The team of artists being adaptable, innovative and bold with their practice. A charity that kept the 'why' at the heart of the work. A strong team that knew more than ever there was a need for our service and wanted to reach those that were isolated and shielding. Belief in the power of therapeutic clowning to bring joy and light at a time of adversity and to provide that much needed human connection. Funders that were adaptable and new funders that supported our work. Partner organisations that were open and willing to try new ways of working and a supportive Board of Trustees who enabled us to take a chance on the way we deliver our programmes.

## What would have made it easier?

There was no time to prepare for what was coming, therefore it forced us into making decisions quickly, go with gut and to be brave and bold. I do not think there is anything that could have made it easier.

## Further information

<https://www.childrenshealthscotland.org/clowndoctors-and-elderflowers-win-health-related-play-award/>

[https://youtu.be/E5w\\_ui2ryP4](https://youtu.be/E5w_ui2ryP4)

[https://youtu.be/flPn\\_xSD3q0](https://youtu.be/flPn_xSD3q0)

[https://youtu.be/uF8U\\_Q-Tag0](https://youtu.be/uF8U_Q-Tag0)

<https://www.heartsminds.org.uk/ryan-his-special-message/>

<https://www.heartsminds.org.uk/the-elderflowers-creating-a-sense-of-community-in-care-homes/>

<https://tfn.scot/news/clowning-around-in-schools>

<https://www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com/news/people/edinburgh-practitioners-clown-around-help-children-smile-2959937>

<https://youtu.be/r9SOr8vlpWw>

<https://youtu.be/GPcowCpJwvQ>

<https://youtu.be/zMhulZu36uc>

<https://youtu.be/HyOtskAXnC8>