

University of Brighton, School of Art and Media

The impact of COVID-19 on arts and health charities: Case study HERA Brighton

Research Report, April 2022

Dr Aristeia Fotopoulou, Helen Shearn & Claire Warrington

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Executive Summary

This report was funded UK Research and Innovation QR Strategic Priorities Fund, University of Brighton, to produce evidence based recommendations regarding the impact of COVID-19 on arts and health charities. Arts and wellbeing charities have played a major role in supporting people during the pandemic. Using case study approach, evidence was collected from staff, volunteers and service users of the Brighton-based organisation HERA (Healing Expressive and Recovery Arts Project), the first programme in the UK to deliver multi-arts engagement for patients within NHS primary care settings. Findings from this case study help understand the wider conditions introduced by the pandemic, which may apply to other charities in the arts and health sector.

Aims

The study had three aims:

1. To examine the shift to online service provision shift, what it meant for organisational routines and structures, and how the organisation was able to adapt to the changes.
2. To analyse the perceptions of benefits and expectations of adopting blended modes of working in the post-lockdown era, as well as the difficulties due to lack of digital skills.
3. To explore the effect of lockdown restrictions specifically for freelance artists and other professionals delivering arts and health workshops, including the impact on their wellbeing and professional development.

Summary of findings

1. The pandemic brought a number of considerable changes in organisational routines and structures for HERA. These comprise of working remotely, and especially for art facilitators, altering creative facilitation practices in order to accommodate the changing needs of patients and other workshop participants. The rate and efficacy of these changes manifest a high degree of organisational resilience and adaptability. However, many of the unavoidable changes, such as holding meetings online, had an adverse effect to working culture as they led to heightened feelings of isolation from staff, and deteriorated communication efficiency with NHS partners due to the apparent differences in priorities and workplace rhythms during the pandemic.
2. HERA incorporated a number of essential IT solutions to support ongoing patient care, and to enable remote working. Facilitators came up with ad hoc solutions suitable to their art form, and adjusted their practices to respond to the needs of participants. However, two key limitations affected the delivery of and participation in the creative workshops: ongoing technical issues that affected connectivity for both participants and facilitators; and lack of digital skills.
3. Lockdown restrictions had substantial and concrete effects on how freelance artists (and other professionals delivering creative workshops) managed their time and space, and how they connected with service users and patients. The impact on their wellbeing was considerable too, although the reported to have developed the capacity to reflect, and find tangible solutions to redeem these impacts. Nonetheless, these rely largely on the individual and are unsustainable in the long term.

4. Despite technical problems, respondents vastly valued their participation in the creative workshops as these offered a space for contemplation, a safe space that aided healing, and provided a much-needed structure to their week during lockdown. These benefits were however not received by those excluded because they lacked the skills and resources to connect and participate.

General recommendations

In light of the evidence presented here and based on insights from the specific case study, we make some general recommendations for the work of art charities, which may be relevant to other charities:

1. Invest in team wellbeing and team building: Moving to online or hybrid work impacts negatively on the working culture of health and arts charities. This research indicates that there is need to invest in team wellbeing in order to mitigate against the adverse effects that the transition to an online environments has had to the working culture, such as heightened feelings of isolation. Additionally, prioritising team building and effective cross-sector communication can help better understand the working priorities of different partners during a crisis situation. These activities could include: team supervision, regular check-ins and therapeutic support.
2. Provide up-skilling training: Employees and creative workers need the resources to access professional development. This study shows that they benefit from training courses, such as: project management, career coaching, team supervision, group mediation, monthly meetings, Balint groups, and mentoring by NHS practitioners. Up-skilling is particularly important for freelance creative workers whose job security is at stake if they do not adapt to new ways of working, and who have been disadvantaged during the pandemic.
3. Revise the suitability of digital skills provision for patients: Shortage of financial resources dovetails with limitations of online access in participants' everyday life environments and resources. These contexts need to be taken into consideration when planning and implementing one-to-one digital support to gain confidence and trust in digital technologies, especially for older people and people financially disadvantaged communities. In the case examined here, and for many other arts charities, the implementation of digital support was determined by a global pandemic rather than best practice. However, under non-crisis circumstances other actors should implement digital skills and training for digital engagement. For these actors, listening to these people's experiences, and taking their limitations seriously should reflect on the initiatives that are being implemented, instead of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.
4. Evaluate and review creative offerings to prioritise mental health and wellbeing: Because the clear benefits of meeting face-to-face, working with tactile materials, and social interaction do not transfer well into the online environment, creative workshops in the arts and health realm may lose some of their impact, while feelings of loneliness and isolation can be noticeable for many patients. The planning of programmes need to be systematically evaluated so that support for the

mental health and wellbeing of all involved (employees, creative freelancers and participants) is proactively built in.

D) Introduction

1. About this project

This project aimed to examine the impact of COVID-19 on arts and health charities using a case study approach. Between January and March 2021, almost a year after the first UK pandemic lockdown began, we collaborated with the Brighton-based organisation HERA (Healing Expressive and Recovery Arts Project)¹, to produce evidence about the impact that the various changes introduced during the pandemic had on staff, volunteers and service users. The HERA Project has been the first programme in the UK to deliver multi-arts engagement for patients within NHS primary care settings, and is now a leading part of the arts, health and wellbeing infrastructure. Operating in a city with higher than average levels of challenges in the areas of mental health, substance misuse, homelessness and frailty, HERA responded rapidly to the challenges of COVID-19 by creating dual delivery (digital online and in person). Choosing HERA as a case study hence gave us an opportunity to reflect on the wider conditions introduced by the pandemic, which may apply to other charities in the arts and health sector.

The value of the arts as social infrastructure is indisputable during the pandemic (Macfarland et al 2020). Arts and wellbeing charities have played a major role in supporting people at this time. As the HARP Covid-19 Sprint Challenge report (2020, p.22) notes, funding for “high-quality, guided forms of creative expression and activity for people during extraordinary events” is crucial “for helping them navigate challenges, reflect and process their experiences”. Meanwhile, several reports have been published recently on the impact of Covid-19 in the cultural industries, and the support that arts and health professionals need during this time, with a prominent study by the Y Lab² (2020), indicating that online delivery could become an important lifeline for connection and creativity for isolated people. For the purposes of this study, our focus was on the impact of adopting dual delivery modes for the organisation, and for the participants. During the preceding year, Brighton had remained at Tier 2 between national lockdowns, with groups of up to six people allowed to meet during summer 2020. HERA held a very small number of visual arts groups for adults and teenagers outdoors in parks or at the Brighton beach in this time, but at that time, both patients and artists reported feeling safer working remotely and so the majority of contact, including internal meetings, moved online. Therefore for this study, it was important to gauge what this shift to online provision meant for the organisational routines and structures, and how the organisation was able to adapt to the changes.

¹ The programme links arts and health work with patients across the life course to arts venues, training for arts and health professionals, and accessibility tools for both participants and colleagues. HERA is the largest programme of the Robin Hood Health Foundation, a registered charity set up by GPs in 2016 to promote creative and other non-clinical forms of support to address the social determinants of health. The programme is funded by Arts Council England, Brighton & Hove City Council and the NHS through the employment of social prescribing Link Workers.

² A collaboration between Cardiff University and NESTA in Wales. For the HARP programme (Health, Arts, Research People with Arts Council of Wales and the Welsh NHS Confederation) they quickly adapted their 100 Day challenge at the beginning of the COVID -19 Pandemic, bringing together arts and health professionals, via online meetings to innovate at pace to creatively support groups of people identified as particularly hard hit by lockdown.

2. Organisational resilience in arts and health

A key concept that guided the focus of the study is that of “organisational resilience” (Suarez & Montez 2020), defined as the ability to “cope—and thrive—in uncertain times, to develop scripted routines, simple rules, and the ability to improvise”. For Suarez and Montez (2020), in highly changeable environments and challenging conditions organizational routines (which are efficient when work is predictable), or simple rules of thumb (that help you speed up processes and decision-making and prioritize the use of resources in less-predictable contexts) may not work. In these situations improvisation, meaning the spontaneous, creative efforts to address an opportunity or a problem, may be more appropriate. Improvisation has also historically been a key method used by artists. As practice-led researcher Chris Fremantle (2020) writes in ‘Improvising as a method in the time of Covid-19, “improvising new ways of working has also been a refusal to lose contact with ill and vulnerable groups and a willingness to ‘move to a new place’”. Therefore looking for these indications of improvisation for HERA, both in artistic practice and within the organisational structures and practices under a period of constraint is a way to comprehend the impact of Covid-19 in the sector.

3. Leadership

Another aspect that the study focused on is leadership in the arts and health sector. Good governance and leadership have been perceived to be critical in inspiring positive change and growing teams that are happy, inclusive and able to draw on the widest possible range of ideas and experiences in order to build successful businesses over the next decade by the Arts Council England (ACE) *Let's Create* strategy (2020). Before the pandemic, in 2017 the All-Parliamentary Party Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (APPG) *Creative Health Report* (2017), set out to establish a national strategic centre to coordinate leadership and collaboration across the arts and health field. As a result, the UK National Centre for Creative Health (NCCH) was set up in March 2021. The NCCH (2021) have also made a call for a network of *Creative Health Champions* (senior leaders in clinical commissioning groups, NHS trusts, local authorities and health and wellbeing boards) to be responsible for policy on arts, health and wellbeing. In regards to how arts and culture organisations have responded to the challenges for leadership in the Covid-19 crisis, Macfarland and colleagues (2020) suggest a model of dispersed leadership, which is in line with a wider cultural democracy framework. Moreover, research shows that often the success of arts programmes is shaped by meso-level organisational structures and by micro-level interactions and relationships (Daykin 2020). The surveys and interviews therefore aimed to understand how decisions were made within HERA, and how the priorities concerning planning, resources, and workloads were agreed. From this, it is important to understand how far a dispersed model, whereby more people were involved in decision making reflected greater resilience during the pandemic. This is particularly relevant because of the uncertainty in the budgets of organisations during this time.

4. Skills

Leadership moreover links tightly with support made available to artists in general, and specifically the support to gain additional skills in order to thrive within an online environment. The HARP Covid-19 Sprint Challenge report (2020) recognises the importance of regular safe space coaching support for artists. As also recognised by ACE (2020), health and arts charities are under significant funding pressures and need more training opportunities in new technologies to aid career adaptability and cross fertilisation of knowledge and skills across the sectors. For instance, ACE expects cultural organisations to invest in their workforces to: develop the skills required to respond as quickly and effectively as possible to a rapidly changing external environment. The professional development of visual artists dovetails with quality of working lives, and their aptitude to sustain and grow a practice in

testing times (Naismith 2019). Against the official governmental lines urging creative workers to reskill, ONS data for the first quarter of 2021 showed a continuation of the *upskilling* trends seen in 2020 (Feder et al, 2021). However, Covid-19 has had a disproportionate impact on the ability of freelancers to afford and prioritise professional development, as is shown in a market research survey report produced by Clore Leadership published in September 2020, which can lead to greater inequalities within the creative sector.

Another key area of examination for this study though relates to the skills and capacities necessary for benefiting from this shift to online provision during the pandemic, for everyone involved in arts and health programmes: facilitators, patient and other participants, and staff of the organisation. As the recent report by the Select Committee on COVID of the House of Lords reports (2021) this past year has highlighted the huge inequalities that exist in relation to digital skills and resources, at a time of marked hybridity, and confirmed how most disadvantaged and marginalised people in society have become “further marginalised and disadvantaged because they did not have the money to pay for an internet connection and a computer, did not have the appropriate space at home, or did not have the skills and confidence to fully participate in the online world” (2021: 4).

5. Support

When it comes to artists, beyond the development of skills and capacities within the context of the Covid-19 crisis, challenges relate to wellbeing and mental health. Although some issues may have existed before the pandemic, the economic instability and adversity of the crisis meant that creative freelancers have been in particular need of tailored wellbeing and peer support (May et al 2020). To mitigate against burnout in the health sector during the pandemic Teoh and Kinman (2020) suggest adopting the ABC’s of self-determination theory: autonomy, belonging and competence, whereby autonomy refers to control over working lives; belonging refers to a sense of caring relationships where we feel respected and supported; and competence refers to feeling confident that we are able to deliver. These are central considerations for staff in HERA and for artists in particular, and the study focused on the kinds of support necessary for them, especially because research shows that art facilitators benefit from the creation of a “therapeutic alliance” including clinical supervision and affective support (Holt et al 2020). Often artists act as “boundary spanners” (Daykin 2019) within health and care settings, which adds to why they may need such additional affective support. As Daykin (2019) notes, they build bridges and forge relationships while they navigate power relationships with “a complex web of stakeholders”, e.g. participants, staff, managers, researchers, funders and the public. However, the landscape of affective support for creative practitioners is mixed and not everyone receives the support they need (Naismith 2019). This may be particularly relevant during the pandemic crisis, which the study tried to find out. The Arts and Health Hub, with funding from Arts Council England and reporting on the impact of Covid-19 in 2020, developed 3 strands of support: mental health support for artists with lived experience; supervision and mentoring. One of the models proposed by Breathe Arts Health Research’s report *Compassionate care in a year of change* (Gray, K. and Senior, T. 2021) is that of compassionate care³ (The Circle of Care): The Circle of Care framework and courses were co-created by Performing Medicine (Clod Ensemble) and Guy’s and St. Thomas’ Trust to “support compassionate, safe patient care through building resilient

³ This was developed at Guys & St Thomas’ NHS Foundation Trust (GSTT) in collaboration with Clod Ensemble and to continue with hybrid programmes (online and in-person).

healthcare professionals equipped with the tools to communicate effectively in chaotic, busy environments, and to better look after themselves and each other.⁴”

II) Methods

In January 2021 we created an online survey with 23 questions, which was distributed to trustees, referrers, service users (patients) and HERA staff as well as allied health and volunteers who work with the project, and received 14 responses⁵. Following on from the survey, we held online interviews with 14 research participants lasting for approximately 20 minutes each, in order to further explore the themes that emerged from the survey. The interviews with six (6) artists focussed on how the individual felt they were managing the pandemic-related stresses, what adaptations they had made in light of the pandemic and how they felt these were going. The interviews with eight (8) service users explored what role involvement in HERA had played for them during the pandemic, and how they had found the online experience. After review and transcription, the project team conducted thematic analysis, and emergent themes were discussed and revised.

⁴ The Circle of Care framework and courses were co-created by Performing Medicine (Clod Ensemble) and Guy’s and St. Thomas’ Trust to “support compassionate, safe patient care through building resilient healthcare professionals equipped with the tools to communicate effectively in chaotic, busy environments, and to better look after themselves and each other.

⁵ These were: 4 from charity employees, 7 from artists, 1 from trustees, 2 from patients, 1 from volunteer advisor, 2 from link workers, 3 from NHS employees.

III) Findings

1. Changes in organisational routines and structures: Resilience and adaptability

Once the UK-wide lockdown was announced in March 2020, HERA transitioned promptly from working together in the same physical space to holding groups and meetings online. A key and immediate change was that HERA's programme, previously planned for a location-based rollout to 9 GP practices, was opened out to the whole city online. This section discusses findings in relation to that shift to online provision, what it meant for organisational routines and structures, and how the organisation was able to adapt to the changes.

Adaptations to new ways of working

The organisation took a number of special measures to enable staff to work from home. They offered home working risk assessments for all staff; new kit for some members of staff; advice and training for staff and freelancers to support safe and effective online working; offered wellbeing days for staff to ensure they could take time for self-care. Staff were also required to work one day a week at practice office (in rotation), to ensure social distancing. Importantly, the organization also made sure to communicate clearly with staff and be supportive. They messaged staff recognising the exceptional nature of the situation, and to reassure them that allowances would be made to mitigate for the challenges of the new working conditions. The adaptations and special measures that the organisation took were necessary for the continuation of service provision, but the way it was dealt with was innovative. As a member of staff noted:

Well, I think the way that we all mobilised our whole arts programme online and allowed for our Link Workers to continue supporting clients was extremely innovative.

Attendance in meetings

Broadly, it seemed that technology assisted options were embraced for the greater flexibility they offered. This included greater ease of meeting online, which substantially improved attendance at meetings. As one respondent put it:

We had a Hera meeting the other day and we were just saying that how good it is actually to meet online, because it was very difficult to get all of us in a particular place (Artist 5)

These changes resulted to increased contact with colleagues compared to prior to the pandemic, and they enabled "some of the workforce to work remotely" (Survey Respondent). Online meetings took place across the board, to support ongoing patient care (Survey Respondent), both between principal workers and trustees, and between trustees.

Working relationships

Team building has been central for HERA. "We are a strong team, collectively we support each other to deliver our service. We take confidence from each other" (Online Survey Respondent). However, working remotely caused feelings of isolation for staff, especially as they had been used to working as a closely-knit group. As one research participant commented, there was: "much less team work/building/contact, so I feel alone and isolated and not part of a team". (Online Survey Respondent), while another said "I miss interacting with colleagues while making tea or break time and feel distantly disconnected from fellow workers even though I know that they are there and are more than able to help if

needed” (Online Survey Respondent). Beyond feelings of isolation, and team building for staff members, working remotely had an adverse impact on maintaining good levels of communication and effective relationships with NHS partners, due to the differences in priorities and workplace rhythms. As one respondent commented: “The thing I would plead for is to be able to have more structured and regular communication with our fantastic NHS colleagues - we find that our different practices have very different approaches and systems” (Online Survey Respondent).

Altering art practice to accommodate changing needs

For art workshop facilitators, the transition to working online necessitated several adaptations in practice, such as re-designing the content and process of their workshop from the ground up for online provision. For some, this meant a whole-scale change in the types of art groups they offered. As one artists mentioned:

I used to have like a stay after school clubs as well with kids, and of course parents don't necessarily want the same thing in lockdown, they're sick of educating during the day, they don't want their kids to necessarily do a little club afterwards so that took a lot of time and effort and it took me a while to cotton on to the fact that there was no longer effectively such a need for it. (Artist 3)

The scale of adapting practice depended on the format of the creative workshop. For example, running online dance classes presented particular issues due to the size of the group and the inevitable limitations in terms of instructing physical movement. One instructor explained:

Particularly the dance classes they are far more directional ... because we cannot, you know, yeah you can freestyle, or we normally we freestyle, but it's really difficult to create with a group this big... the most specific adaptations, is to make it [what is being taught] much, much easier, because you just can't get into that level of detail with dance that you could if you're in situ also, it's I think, a slight safety issue. We've got to be able to see if people are doing things wrong, that could potentially, you know be dangerous. (Artist 4)

Some artists had already begun to prepare in advance of the UK lockdown, because they were in contact with colleagues or friends and family in other parts of the world that were now impacted by the pandemic. However, most participants described the transition to online provision as a rapid adaptation that had been driven by necessity.

Within my small team, we also had to change the ways that we work and hold meetings, which all became virtual. Due to everyone working mostly from home, it became quite challenging to engage participants sometimes, but also allowed for those that might not have engaged before. The feedback that we have had is that the online workshops has allowed for more flexibility and some clients feel more comfortable with attending these virtually as opposed to face to face (Survey Respondent).

Despite the various difficulties that facilitators had been overcome, both the measures that organisation took, and individual initiatives showed considerable resourcefulness and innovative thinking. As a member of staff from HERA noted:

Some of our artists showed ingeniousness and resourcefulness to make online activity groups more engaging - e.g. a daily creative task instead of just a single group meeting each week, and creating an augmented reality app for mobile instead of building a virtual reality platform that needed in-person engagement.

2. Digital skills and transition online

HERA embraced new IT solutions to support ongoing patient care, and to enable remote working. Respondents talked about the affordances of the digital and the benefits of the online transition, but also the difficulties they met due to lack of digital skills. This section notes perceptions of benefits and complications, as well as the expectations of adopting blended modes of working in the post-lockdown era.

Transitioning online

Because people could not be admitted in the building other than patients with an appointment, for HERA's annual exhibition the artwork was mounted in the windows facing outwards, including a screen with a video of images that was displayed 24/7, so that it could be viewed from the street at any time.

However, many artists viewed the transition to working online as very much necessity to be discarded as soon as possible:

I have moved all my workshops online. This brought huge challenges and stresses to myself and participants initially and has continued to exclude some people. Face to face work [is] far better than online for peer-to-peer support, connection and development. And I look forward to returning to those as soon as possible. (Online Survey Respondent)

For many artist interviewees, the difficulties in altering their mode of practice was confined to the initial transition:

I think I found a lot more stressful at the beginning, for example, and having to make all the adjustments that was when the majority of the stress came around, I would say things are generally kind of ticking on now so it doesn't feel as stressful (Artist 4)

Nonetheless, many participants also acknowledged the presence of some on-going technical issues. Connection and bandwidth problems seemed to be the major cause of concern. These issues affected attendance to online workshops, and had an impact on facilitators' confidence. As one participant put it:

I have felt confident, but as tech is so unreliable, participant's attendance is pretty spasmodic.... and I have no way of finding out, if this is as they are sick or if my class hasn't been so good! (Online Survey Respondent)

The transition to online provision enabled some facilitators to continue offering workshops to participants who had moved out of Brighton and Hove during lockdown. This gave service users the time they needed in order to settle and forge new links in their new neighbourhood. In addition to the benefit of being able to continue groups, working online also introduced other advantages, such as having greater access to view art in detail on the screen. For example, in a workshop where group members share with the group photographs they have taken, a participant noted how working through a screen has helped with looking at the work closely and made participation more accessible.

Modifications and adjustments

Participants talked about the use of a mixture of platforms to support and engage participants. For example an artist set up a WhatsApp group to complement the official use of MS Teams, and to overcome some of the limitations of the MS platform, such as sharing pictures. Another facilitator echoed this mode of using a combination of digital platforms and tools⁶:

I can have multiple participants with varied needs of communication during a class. I may have to WhatsApp one while chatting to others online and ask that they send me pics so I have some understanding for how they are getting on. (Online Survey Respondent)

For their singing group, the facilitator changed the format and started sending music to group members prior to the online meeting. They played music and sang so that participants could also sing along at home with their microphones muted. This reduced participants' sense of exposure. As the artist noted, interaction still takes place after and before singing:

I mean I still we still spend about 10-15 minutes at the beginning, doing exercises like breathing. Many breathing and posture exercises because that's so important also for daily life, to integrate this into your daily life as much as possible. Yeah, especially in this time of COVID (Artist 6)

Similarly, the format of the photography group had to significantly change. As one facilitator explained, the naturally occurring conversations that take place while showing a photograph during face-to-face meetings could not happen in an unforced manner during online group meetings.

Because in the actual workshops, it's very hard to generate chat what I've found is I've become a lot more of a teacher in a way, just sort of passing the buck around and sort of controlling it (Artist 2).

Other artists found ways to address the lack of connectivity and digital skills in older participant groups. For example, one artist mentioned how they were able to integrate into Zoom and allow people to phone in, as well as use mobile phones to send participant materials for the workshops such as songbooks. Another, working with visual arts, noted that moving online required an element of inventiveness:

You have to think on your feet, as with visual art it's not always predictable what will translate well online. I taught a group today and my plans to share images didn't work as it prevented the class from seeing me and what I was drawing - which they need to see. (Online Survey Respondent)

It was important that peer-to-peer conversation was less easy in online groups, which was a major impediment since such informal discussions have enormous significance for participants, as many facilitators noted. In some occasions, the recognition of the problems in facilitating such dialogues, and the ensuing efforts to collaborate between participants and facilitators established a valued sense of camaraderie within the group. This closer connection between participants and facilitators was supported by the use of mobile phone apps such as *WhatsApp*, and email. As one facilitator described:

⁶ The use of Whatsup was done according to GDPR provisions and only where participants gave explicit consent to communicate in this way.

Since going online with my workshops, I have been in email contact with all the participants, something I was very reluctant to do when running them face-to-face. However, although it has certainly increased the amount of work it has also been beneficial for understanding, smooth running of the workshops, reminding/encouraging participants, and in the long run making things easier for me. Going forward this could make putting on shows of work and events with participant work much easier and traceable. (Online Survey Respondent)

Therefore some of the adaptations seemed to be suitable for the future beyond the COVID-19 lockdown conditions. Many artists felt that the benefits that had been gained through moving online needed to be retained into the future. As one facilitator said:

I'm not saying that everything needs to be online but some sessions are completely fine online... they have said it will be nice to meet now and again, but ... if you want to carry on online, it will work well. (Artist 5)

When thinking about the future, there was considerable variation between individuals and whether they envisioned retaining online platforms in their work after restrictions had been lifted. Many felt that the online workshops could not substitute the personal and social elements of in person-contact:

I find ...I feel watched. The challenge is that the online stuff still really, really valuable. But it's not as good as being there, that I'd say, yeah. (Participant 5).

Certain aspects of the transition online were also perceived beneficial for participants:

For me during this period, the most important thing is the sense of communion between a group of people in a safe space, all flexing their creativity together.

Permission to be creative is extremely powerful.

Hence looking forward to the future, there seemed to be some inclination for combined contact modalities:

Maybe not complete course online maybe a final project, where we go for a walk. Or maybe it's a 12-week course maybe the mix of the two would be the ultimate course.

Because then you're getting the best of both worlds. (Participant 4)

Digital literacies and digital divide

Respondents gave a range of views about the transition to working online, which appeared to have been navigated with varying levels of enthusiasm and differing senses of mastery. As one survey respondent astutely observed: "For every person who feels liberated by digital, another feels oppressed."

Many people seemed to be able to keep track of very basic digital actions. One participant explained:

I'm just busking it through in [Microsoft] Teams and I do find it very, very difficult, and I just really wish I could just speak to the people, so I can see in their eyes they definitely want some sort of personal contact. (Artist 1)

As facilitators explained, often it has been difficult to engage people for whom online participation was a completely new experience. Being online allowed facilitators to gauge who needed extra support.

Obviously when, when you're, when you can see an entire class you can see when someone is struggling, you can you can pick out when someone isn't getting something right, much easier. (Artist 4)

But often less tech-savvy participants, especially older people, needed technical support to connect in the first place. HERA was acutely alert to this fact and acted fast to provide the assets for this age group and demographic of participants.

We responded to an offer from *AbilityNet*⁷ to provide one-to-one support in these cases, which has been conspicuously successful. (Online Survey Respondent).

Despite these efforts however, many participants lacked the self-confidence to learn and try out online workshops, even when one-to-one support was made available. This revealed a wider and deeper mistrust of new technologies. For example, one participant had been the victim of a social media account hack and was consequently very cautious of any online activity. So despite having engaged previously with the HERA group, which they perceived as a positive experience, the absence of technical know-how not only held them back from participating in online HERA groups, but also kept them in a place of fear of all online communication and connectivity. The participant emphatically said:

I found online very, very difficult. I'm not I've only really just being able to use the smartphone, and Ben I think it was helped me set up Microsoft Teams, I wouldn't have been able to do it otherwise. ...I actually hate technology... That's sort of terrifying. I don't understand technology, I don't understand how it can be hacked, so easily. All you need to do is press something or do something, and, you know, get into a real mess. So, it's not because of the art class, I enjoyed it. But I'm not any more pro technology, because there's so many villains around (Participant 2)

Additionally, sometimes providing this kind of additional technical and psychological support became practically unsustainable for facilitators, as one respondent described:

I have found it difficult to engage those that will just not do it. For some people, it increases their anxiety and for others it has opened their whole worlds.... but capacity has meant that I just simply do not have time to spend a lot of time checking in with people (Online Survey Respondent).

In addition to lack of confidence, which limited people's inclination to gain new skills and participate, the interviews and survey showed that absence of skills was linked to lack of financial resources. The gap in digital skills was directly related to coming from a disadvantaged background, and many people who before the pandemic could access social prescribing services and programmes, were now excluded from them because of their lack of resources. For example, many people had to share one laptop or other device with others in their household, who might need it for school or work. As one facilitator noted:

I know from the social prescribing side of things I've also found people are having real major problems accessing a lot of technology, there's a massive gap financially and in terms of people's backgrounds... I'm very conscious that there's a lot of

⁷ *AbilityNet* is a charity and company that supports people living with disability or impairment to use technology to achieve their goals at home, at work and in education.

success... on the online stuff but then there's also a lot of just missing people out, that are just off the radar (Artist 2)

This shortage of financial resources dovetailed with limitations of online access in participants' everyday life environments and resources. People living at home with others sometimes did not have the quiet space nor the privacy often required to participate in creative workshops and other HERA groups.

3. Professional development and wellbeing

For freelance artists and other professionals delivering workshops and organising groups in HERA, the lockdown restrictions had substantial and concrete effects on how they managed their time and space, and how they connected with the service users. We also found that the impact on their wellbeing was considerable too, but importantly, they all had the capacity to reflect and think of tangible solutions to redeem these impacts.

Time management

Many artists felt freed from the logistical burden of travelling to different sites for work and all the associated practical issues, such as parking, moving equipment, setting up spaces and so on. Changing to running groups remotely meant that they could save time and money. As one facilitator put it:

It's really convenient. Before I used to have, you know, two or three big bags in my boot and then have to prep it all and then when it's finished, I have to tidy it all up so there was some aspect of convenience and more efficiency, to just not worrying about the materials just turning up and teaching that, that is definitely that's quite a cool side... I guess it gives me more time. (Artist 3)

Another participant echoed:

Funnily enough, the fact that we are online now gives me much more free time. [before the pandemic, teaching in the community] a lot of driving, a lot of time spent on looking for parking, a lot of time spent on a sort of setting up and doing the group and then getting everything together then driving back...

Consequently this meant a better life-work balance for them, with more time to spend with family members, which in turn supported their wellbeing. One artist said: “[...] Much more time to relax in between, which is a joy. And so I'm actually less stressed now than I was before” (Artist 6).

But the pandemic brought about a new type of stress that facilitators had to tackle, which was not related to work – stress about the COVID-19 virus itself and getting sick. Many artists mentioned feeling overwhelmed because they also had to deal with the COVID-related anxiety of participants, and the rise of numbers referred to the HERA groups because of their anxiety. In this context, it was important for facilitators to acquire self-care strategies. Some of the artists interviewed referred to how they were already conscious of how important such strategies are before the pandemic. Some talked about practising good sleep hygiene. There was mention about dealing with difficult matters rather than bottle them up. One artists suggested that they kept a strict routine to keep on top of things. Others drew on their

professional project management background to use a step-by-step systematic approach to anything presenting as an additional challenge. As a result of consciously maintaining these stress-coping strategies, these freelancers felt more able to manage the stress of the last year. As one artist put it:

Not give myself such a hard time because I think you have to just constantly remind yourself that everyone's in the same boat. Everyone's finding it challenging. It's unusual. It's exceptional, but I do take time I suppose to rest when I need to. (Artist 4)

Beyond self-care however, artists felt that teams supervision helped them maintain their wellbeing during this time, and expressed the need for a more official form of this type of supervision and everyday check-ins. "I think teams supervision, much like we were having but I think more based around some therapy or integration therapy" (Artist 1).

Learning Opportunities and Professional Development

The lockdown was an opportunity for both participants and professionals who organised workshops to gain new skills. It was a chance for some facilitators to learn new communication skills. One facilitator noted how they changed their attitude to the use of social media, despite their reluctance to use them prior to the pandemic. Another artist realised how during conversation they need to allow time for the other person to think and articulate their thoughts. Another commented:

Yeah, I think, you know, in a classroom is so different... I think this whole year has made me appreciate that. Simple things, like communicating through your whole body being there, you know, gesticulating, saying to someone you want to cover so that they can feel relaxed, you know, all those things do make a difference and also a difference to me because I realise how much I rely on that as a way of making people feel comfortable and friendly. And sometimes that can be a little tricky. (Artist 3)

In regards to practical skills and professional development, HERA provided training in enterprise skills for artists to help them adapt their business and practice to the new environment, and help make it sustainable. Many artists expressed wish to take part in peer-to-peer learning and support, and stay connected with other artists. For example as someone said: *I would like much more contact with other facilitators to share our teaching experience!*" (Online Survey Respondent). Another facilitator also seconded this and wanted to attend "more of the freelancers workshops to understand how participants interact and how it's delivered (Online Survey Respondent)". Indeed during the course of 2020, arts facilitators and link workers were offered extended training in peer coaching and mutual support, and took part in a consultation about establishing a new arts and health network for freelancers in the city, which was launched after this research was completed, in March 2021.

Others wanted to learn from prominent artists in their sector. As someone observed:

A key area for me to develop is how we stay in tune with arts & health developments nationally and internationally. I want to learn from people who are really outstanding in their field. (Online Survey Respondent)

Many professionals mentioned the benefits of clinical supervision, monthly meetings, and group mediation that bring facilitators together, as well as training courses, like focusing on project management, career coaching, and Balint groups⁸.

Beyond new skills for artists, facilitators of creative workshops, and other people working in the organisation, interviewees and survey respondents also highlighted the need to train NHS staff about the availability of complementary forms of treatment that can be offered from within social prescribing initiatives. An interesting suggestion was made by a respondent to “engage with doctor training days, so they experience and understand what they are prescribing when ticking Social Prescribing/ HERA”.

4. Value of the workshops for participants: creating safe space, sense of purpose and transformation

When we asked research participants about the value of attending groups online with HERA during the pandemic, they all talked very favourably about engaging in creative activities. For most people attending groups provided structure or an anchor point to their week during a year when many people found it became harder to delineate time. Remarkably, for many joining these workshops was the only social interaction they had during the week, which made the activity particularly cherished.

Amazing! It’s been the highlight of my week... have a bit of structure in my day as well to do ... things I’m grateful for. (Participant 3)

I’ve been going out mostly daily... it gives me inspiration and kind of keep something on my calendar if that makes sense something to look forward to. (Participant 1)

Another participant echoed:

Well, because of COVID you haven’t got any regularity in your life, time seems to kind of go weird. So, the fact that it was an awareness day gave me some sort of anchor to focus on so from that point of view, also something to kind of do so. Yes, I was very grateful to it, because of that. (Participant 2)

Engaging in workshops and in the creative activities often became part of a process of self-acceptance that enabled participants to let go of harmful patterns of self-criticism, and therefore to give themselves permission to meet their own needs for care. In many ways, the workshops were a prospect for artists to create safe spaces that helped healing. People engaged in activities that were beneficial for their wellbeing and mental health, in ways that they would not have done if it were not for the workshops. For example, a photography assignment became the impetus for someone to leave the house and take photos outside. Participating in the workshops provided a sense of perspective and helped people feel comforted:

⁸ A Balint group is a purposeful, regular meeting among family physicians, with a trained facilitator or leader, to allow discussion of any topic that occupies a physician's mind outside of his or her usual clinical encounters.

And I'm trusting myself and I don't feel like I can get things wrong, allows me to be in touch with myself and allows me to let go of the ways in which I [indistinct] myself in the past, thinking, critical thinking or ruminating all those sorts of things, know to let go of those in that space. (Participant 5)

For some individuals who had already been largely housebound or restricted before the pandemic, for example due to physical health conditions, the increased use of online meetings had facilitated increased contact and reduced their sense of isolation:

Yeah, it's been amazing, because I've got, I've got ME, so I'm house bound anyway. So, the lockdown hasn't affected me at all, because I've been in lockdown for over 12 years now (Participant 3)

Artists were aware of this value to their participants:

People have sort of said, I don't know how I could have done this like without having this, this group, and how do I know how, I mean so many people talk about being the highlight of the week. That makes all the difference and how they enjoy it and how it gives them joy in this time and especially sort of we're in a time when nobody could go out, like in the first weeks, many of them have been shielding. (Artist 6)

Some of the participants spoke about the way working with HERA had reawakened their love of art and encouraged them to engage with other forms of art beyond the group they were attending. For some, HERA had provided a transformative experience, such as writing a gratitude list on a daily basis, or giving them hope and a sense of possibility:

It's very beneficial to be doing something different than being creative and do something new and to be outside of myself, and so it really helped release me from being stuck in the place was really, really good... also that kind of like paralleled almost in general genuine experience so it's like, it's like kind of possibilities. I could feel that other things are possible... I find that really good and I really look at the creative space that I can reach the emotional creative space is such a lovely place. It really feels like somewhere where I can go where I can just be myself. But what I've been able to do is trust myself in the same way that I do what I'm doing. I can be me.... like I've been practising being me. It's really, really good. Isn't it because fundamental, very powerful? I had a really amazing experience in the second week there's just a transformational experience creating new feelings, new ability to relax. Relax. (Participant 5)

The element of learning new skills, or returning to and developing dormant skills, was also an aspect of the transformational experience of the workshops, felt by some interviewees:

It's very good because everyone sees the good bits and everyone sees bad bits you may not have thought of. So, it's backing up your knowledge of photography. (Participant 4)

Next Steps

This case study addressed the impact of the changes introduced during pandemic, on a single organisation active in the city of Brighton and Hove, and as such is limited in terms of how far the recommendations can be generalised. More research is needed to include a wider sample of charities that are active in the social prescribing domain in the South East of England, and the UK. We anticipate that other organisations would report similar experiences and have met comparable challenges around the key areas identified in this case study, namely digital inclusivity, mental health and wellbeing, team building and cross-sector communication, and upskilling of creative professionals.

Afterword

We are grateful to Aristeia, Helen and Claire for leading this study, and to our many colleagues and patients who spared precious time to contribute. Prior to the pandemic, we already had a strong sense of value of creativity to individuals in our communities, especially those who are not the 'usual suspects' and whose health is impacted by social, environmental and economic conditions.

This report brings into focus the extraordinary skill and resilience that people have shown in response to circumstances none of us has experienced before. It highlights imaginative ways forward to ensure that, in the words of our business plan, 'creativity is a basic right, regardless of health status, and a healthy life includes creativity'. The evidence that arts activity contributes to health and wellbeing, and can help recovery and prevent avoidable decline, is now unarguable. Our next task is to make sure that more people who would benefit can take part.

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Thank you.

Emma Drew

Hera Programme Director

The Robin Hood Health Foundation

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