

The arts and culture – building momentum beyond the pandemic?

Jane Bryant 28 June 2021

This is a guest post by Jane Bryant who recently stepped down as Chief Executive of Artsworld. Jane is currently Chair of Winchester Poetry Festival and a Trustee of Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapy (UK). She is also an active practising musician and conducts two choirs in Hampshire.

The content of this post is solely the opinion of the author and does not necessarily reflect the opinions and beliefs of the Southern Policy Centre.

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With the announcement made in February 2021 by UNESCO declaring the launch of the 2021 [International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development](#), I have been reflecting on the creative response by the cultural sector to the Covid 19 pandemic – and what this means for the future of the sector, but also for us as a society. This looks beyond a simple definition of the undoubted economic value of culture, but reflects on its social value and how this in turn may have economic benefits.

Indeed, with so much excellent, creative, and transformative work that has been taking place in the South during the pandemic, reaching communities and children and young people – particularly those experiencing disadvantage – I cannot help asking what longer term difference this might ultimately make to those responsible for education, cultural, and social policies. How can we both influence and inform their thinking? This is particularly important at a time when there is an ongoing call for the arts and culture to be an essential aspect of a ‘recovery’ curriculum/‘catch-up’ plans, which also address mental health and well-being.

During the first lockdown, we received reports from across the world describing the burgeoning of new ways of working. Artists, and cultural organisations began to explore doing things differently to reach audiences and participants, both existing and new. There was a renewed recognition of the role and value of arts and culture, with the Director-General of UNESCO, saying on [World Art Day \(15 April 2020\)](#): “Bringing people together, inspiring, soothing and sharing: these are the powers of art, the importance of which has been made emphatically obvious during the COVID-19 pandemic”.

Blogs that appeared in 2020 included the RSA’s Senior Programme Manager, Georgina Chatfield, posing the question: Is the lockdown helping us [realise the value](#)

[of art and creativity](#) (May 2020) and, also in May 2020, [NESTA running an article](#) illustrating how arts, creativity and culture were “spreading hope”.

It felt for a while as if there was a renaissance of understanding for us all about how the arts are of benefit to us socially, psychologically, philosophically, and for our health, well-being, and mental health.

But the arts and cultural sector has also been experiencing great hardship. UNESCO recognised this, describing the devastating impact of COVID-19 on the [creative economy](#). Locally, [A Space](#) (Southampton) wrote a series of [Artists Survival Guides](#) during the first lockdown to assist artists with the challenges they were experiencing.

The Government allocated emergency funds totalling £1.57bn to support the sector. Arts Council England (ACE) has committed £751m in recovery-related grants to date. The local authority areas covered by the Southern Policy Centre (SPC) fall into both ACE’s Southeast and Southwest areas. The total amount ACE has allocated to date to these two geographical areas is £168.2m. (For full details, see [Government website](#)). It is reassuring to see that in the SPC area, cultural organisations awarded grants range from the small to the very large, recognising the importance both of community organisations as well as some of the larger institutions. And, with or without recovery grants, practically all the cultural organisations based in the area – from the [John Hansard Gallery](#) to the [Historic Dockyard in Portsmouth](#), from [Chapel Arts Studios, Andover](#) to [The Lighthouse in Poole](#), from [The Story Museum](#) and [The Ashmolean](#), Oxford, to [Russell Cotes in Bournemouth](#) – have delivered an innovative offer, albeit differently, to ensure ongoing access to culture.

It would be impossible to name and list them all. My particular focus here is to provide representative examples from across the area, of where cultural organisations have undertaken formative work to reach those communities and children and young people experiencing challenges in their lives.

Early in the pandemic, Arts Council England and the Crafts Council allocated funds to ten ‘bridge’ organisations across England to get arts and crafts materials out to vulnerable children and young people. [Artswork](#) led the drive in the South, working in a range of partnerships. This resulted in the delivery of over 2000 [\[1\]](#), ‘Let’s Create’ and ‘Let’s Craft’ packs to children across the Southern Policy area, plus 460 Creative Christmas packs as a result of additional fundraising (see [film](#)).

[In Focus CIC](#) provide extra-curricular arts-based learning to at-risk and vulnerable young people, working with local authorities across the South to implement projects that support crime prevention, restorative justice, youth diversion and pro-social behaviour models. During lockdown they:

- created a number of arts challenges that young people could do with no specialist equipment, including photography, design skills, and creative writing;
- developed an online platform, supported by Southampton Violence Reduction Unit, so that young people could also complete their Bronze Arts Award online;
- ran a [creativity in youth justice symposium](#) in March 2021, supported by [NCJAA](#), Artswork, and the Hampshire Youth Offending Teams.

In West Sussex, [Chichester Festival Theatre](#) (CFT) forged a partnership with Age UK Southeast and Portsmouth University, to develop a community outreach programme linking isolated residents living in local care homes with local artists. Separately, CFT raised funds to reconnect West Sussex young carers with support, education, and the arts, through the provision of laptops. A young carer (see [video](#)), while valuing how art made her happy and calm, also raised the issue of loneliness.

Indeed, the mental health of children and young people during this period is of ongoing concern with increasing attention focused on evidence of deteriorating wellbeing for the UK's young people. This has been exacerbated by the impacts of Covid-19 with the Princes Trust Tesco [Youth Index Report 2021](#) indicating an increase in mental ill-health to 1 in 6 young people (up from 1 in 9). A [Times Education Supplement podcast](#) picks up on this (14th May 2021) and specifically talks about the how the arts can help 'boost' the mental health of children and young people.

There are several organisations in the south that have been demonstrating, practically, how the arts can help. [Arun Inspires](#) (Artswork) has:

- Commissioned mental health and resilience programmes for young people in partnership with Active Sussex and the National College of Social Prescribing.
- Launched a [small grants programme](#) tackling disadvantaged for children and young people caused by Covid 19, some in partnership with the local NHS Trust.

[ZoieLogic Dance Theatre](#) has well illustrated the difference that working with communities can make. The 'Grid Experience' landed in Southampton's Weston Shore Estate in April 2021, with 40 people ['taking to the grid'](#) to dance and connect. In May, ZoieLogic also premiered the 'We Are Holyrood' [film](#) – a dance film made with a group of young people from Southampton's Holyrood Estate. Both these were part of Southampton's [Mayflower 400 programme](#).

What these programmes have demonstrated is, as stated by UNESCO, that ["in moments of crisis, people need culture"](#). But it is important to remember too that culture makes a vital contribution to the economy of the UK. According to the [Creative Industries Federation Report \(2018\)](#), creativity accounts for 1 in 10 jobs across the UK, comprises 5.5% of the UK economy and is the fastest growing sector,

contributing £101.5 billion gross value added in 2017. This was, of course, pre-Covid. Creative and Cultural Skills ([April 2021](#)) however, have expressed concern that Covid may have worsened the inequalities in recruitment.

Looking forward therefore, this is why the [Government's Kickstart Scheme](#), which, in the South will see [Artswork delivering 25 entry-level jobs](#) working in partnership with arts and heritage organisations, is important to growing fair access to work in the sector.

Furthermore, there are increasing plans in place for the arts to act as a catalyst for community and civic renewal:

- [Arun Inspires](#) will work with Littlehampton Town Council and Arun District Council to deliver a summer community art programme to reconnect communities and revitalise the high street.
- [Winchester Poetry Festival](#) will deliver 'Poet on the High Street' – a 5-month community heritage poet-in-residence programme to act as a catalyst for civic renewal, business and community engagement. This will complement, 'Play to the Crowd's', [Hat Fair](#) weekend running in early July.
- [ZoieLogic](#) is returning to the Holyrood Estate in mid-July with a week of creative opportunities for Holyrood residents, and is hosting The Grid Experience in Poole working with [Pavilion Dance South West](#).
- [In Focus](#) have begun a creative project to reach at-risk 18 to 24-year-olds (an age bracket often overlooked by the system).

While the above examples are simply illustrative of what so many organisations are doing, they do highlight the vibrant, creative response to the challenges Covid 19 has created, particularly for disadvantaged communities. This also creates a question, however.

At a time when we are contemplating how our young people catch-up academically, emotionally, socially, and in terms of their wellbeing and mental health, how can we work increasingly effectively together to remind our local and national policy makers that now, even more than previously, we need to nurture young people who are empathetic, emotionally intelligent, and socially engaged?

The South has a story to tell about how the arts and culture do exactly this. How therefore can we work together to bring greater influence, achieving more together than we could individually? It is interesting to note how the [Southampton City of Culture 2025](#) bid is bringing cultural organisations together to reframe and shape a new vision, and that [Portsmouth Creates](#) describes its role as, "a catalyst for change, growth, improvement and to raise the aspirations and ownership of culture within the city."

How might we build from this momentum to connect across a larger Southern region to articulate the value of culture to all of our lives, demonstrating exactly how valuable engaging in and with the arts is – not just for us now, but for all our futures?

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[1] **Phase 1:** Portsmouth and Southampton (150 packs). **Phase 2:** 100 packs to Arun with Chichester Festival Theatre; 500 packs to Oxford with Oxford CEP; 150 packs to Slough with Slough CEP; 100 packs to Reading with Reading CEP/Jelly; 700 packs to Portsmouth with Portsmouth Library/CEP; 150 packs to Southampton with Solent Showcase plus cultural organisations; 30 packs Havant with Making Space/Food bank; 190 packs IOW with Aspire/New Carnival company/Pan together.