

# Case Study

## Using art to facilitate discussions with young people during the COVID-19 pandemic

Eleanor Davis, Arts and Health Project Officer with the Iceberg Transformation Programme, Aneurin Bevan University Health Board

### BACKGROUND



Eleanor Davis is the Arts and Health Project Officer with the Iceberg Transformation Programme. The goal of the Iceberg Transformation programme is to make mental health services embedded within all places where children and young people live.

Eleanor's role is to explore how creativity and the arts can help support the delivery of mental health services to children and she works with individuals and teams who are regularly in contact with young people.

being of families, offer connection and comfort during lockdown and address social isolation and loneliness.

Through this project, Eleanor worked with local, Wales-based artists, to highlight the five ways of well-being via art.

Eleanor also aimed to show the community the power of having faith in the fact that ideas can grow and develop amidst uncertainty and of exploring new "territories" – the way Eleanor worked on this project which was radically different from the traditional "best practice" approaches of working with young people – and that there were different means of engaging or participating, as well as means of support available should they need them.

### AIMS



Having only begun her role six weeks before the first lockdown started, Eleanor was planning to work closely with the Transformation Programme's ten partners to directly weave the art of creativity into the delivery of children's mental health services. When the pandemic hit, contact with young people dropped significantly and Eleanor notes that there was substantial uncertainty around how professionals would be able to interact with children and young people virtually.

Because of the difficulties in maintaining contact with young people and those working directly with them, Eleanor changed tactics and developed an initial concept for a "postcard" which rapidly evolved into a "virtual postcard".

The project was supported by Arts Council Wales; this allowed her to develop the concept into a project with the larger scope: "I'm thinking of you" was born as a project.

The aim of the project was to explore how artists' interventions could help support mental health and well-

### CHALLENGES



The main challenge Eleanor faced during the pandemic was finding project partners that were able to keep in contact with young people during lockdown. In many cases, Eleanor found her partners and the community were providing their contributions with interventions such as information packs but weren't directly working with young people, which was a core area for the Arts programme.

Eleanor also noted a main challenge was getting young people to engage when they were struggling to adapt to a new way of life. Not being able to meet them face-to-face, or speak to them on a personal, physical level, was highly challenging and Eleanor struggled at the beginning with finding ways to reach out. The programme however started quickly to develop organically, initially through word of mouth among group working with young people and artists. Subsequently, the programme grew and was formalised as a 12-week programme.



Anthony Shapland – “Unearthed” © 2020 Anthony Shapland

## OUTCOMES

One achievement Eleanor noted was that young artists self-selected themselves and came forward to participate in the programme of their own accord. Every artist was paid the same. The artists worked independently and collaboratively with young people to produce 61 artworks. This engagement from young people that developed so organically felt really positive – given that it had started without their engagement.

Eleanor also highlighted the benefits of being able to showcase so many different types and ways of expression, and to do so in an egalitarian fashion, enabled by social media. Having given the artists full creative freedom, the project resulted in numerous different perspectives and types of artwork being created that spoke to many different types of people.

Additionally, Eleanor was very pleased to highlight the depth of discussions that came from the artwork each artist produced. Hard hitting themes such as Black Lives Matter and other topics were discussed in depth due to the need to respond to the artworks being created and led to them having difficult and meaningful discussions quite quickly.

This project shows that when exploring ways of making an impact, sometimes being able to pursue *“a new level of freedom, like a permission to be able to respond to people’s needs”*, as Eleanor puts it, may open up new and exciting avenues to help society and especially those most vulnerable.

## NEXT STEPS

While Eleanor would love to recommission 50+ artists over the coming months, she notes that people are now a lot less hesitant about engaging and youth professionals are now delivering services online.

If this project were to be replicated and taken forward, it will be important to avoid putting too constraining frameworks in place, but to allow the creative expression within a loose framework of the theme of exploration, and to trust that creativity and genuine interest in the value of the art will lead to something interesting.

Eleanor’s next steps will likely be focused on supporting low-income families and may have a lack of resources to express themselves creatively. This could start by using the artworks produced during the 12 week programme as a provocative trigger to stimulate a deeper engagement with people.

Additionally, Eleanor is considering looking at projects that make use of billboards and public spaces to create a public gallery that allows youths to express themselves, as well as finding effective ways to use social media by NHS teams to help spread the positive messages coming from such projects.



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“We had some really hard hitting topics being raised in the artworks, like BLM, how police were responsible to young people adhering to COVID-19 rules and how the virus was portrayed as having a potentially racial dimension. It was great to be able to work with a group of young people as curators to navigate how to share these artworks, what the message is, and how do we make the project inclusive. Often you’d have to work with young people for a long time to get that sort of depth of discussion.” *Eleanor Davis*



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