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The Role of the Arts during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the complex role of the arts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Repeated lockdowns, social distancing, disease control restrictions and other guidance since March 2020 introduced a series of paradoxes and challenges in the arts and cultural sector. On the one hand, venue closures and job losses significantly disrupted the cultural industries. However, the pandemic also provided new opportunities for home-based arts engagement including digital arts activities, online arts and cultural groups, and streamed performances. As the pandemic lengthened across late 2020 into 2021, hybrid models of engagement and socially-distanced engagement emerged, and since July 2021, the reopening of society has provided more freedom for the cultural industries. However, this reopening has also highlighted that the arts and cultural sector needs to evolve and adapt if it is to be sustainable in a post-COVID world. The paradoxes and challenges extend to audiences too. Although many were unable to go to community events or cultural venues for much of the first 16 months of the pandemic, home-based arts activities became increasingly popular, with evidence suggesting that the demographic profile of people engaging with the arts evolved. However, the initial changes in audience demographics seen during the first UK lockdown have continued to change since: while the pandemic has shown that new audiences can be reached, sustaining them could be a greater challenge. A final paradox relates to health and wellbeing. Although the pandemic has caused significant economic and psychological hardship, particularly for those working in the arts and cultural sector, many people turned to the arts as a vital means of coping with the challenges of the pandemic. But whilst some of the initial stressors of the pandemic, such as people's attitudes towards the virus, have changed since COVID-19 first emerged, new longer-term stressors around healthcare, employment and supporting children and young people are growing. The role of the arts in supporting these challenges is, consequently, also changing. This report therefore uses the best available evidence to examine these issues across the first 16 months of the pandemic in the UK.

We review a range of literature to explore these paradoxes, reflecting on (i) how audiences and arts behaviours changed and whether such changes are showing signs of becoming persistent within our society, (ii) how and why the arts helped people to cope during the pandemic, and (iii) how those working within the arts and cultural sector have been affected. Findings in this report come from secondary sources and primary empirical research commissioned alongside this report and are summarised as follows:

i) Audiences and arts behaviours during the first lockdown

- The COVID-19 pandemic led to the mass closure of arts and cultural venues and the cancellation of events across the UK for the majority of the 16 months between March 2020 and July 2021.
- However, during the first lockdown between March and May in 2020, many people turned to home-based arts and cultural activities, with around 1 in 5 people increasing their arts activity engagement and 1 in 8 increasing how much they watched arts performances online above usual pre-pandemic levels.
- Whether participation in digital activities (e.g. online archives, workshops and virtual heritage activities) changed over the first months of the pandemic is harder to ascertain, with results suggesting slight decreases compared to 2019.
- Many of the usual audiences (e.g. younger adults, females and people with higher educational qualifications) were retained, with these groups being more likely to increase their engagement in the early months of the pandemic.
- Some new groups started to engage more, such as people with mental health conditions who have historically faced more barriers to participation. There was also a particular increase in engagement from parents, especially during periods of home-schooling.

Audiences and arts behaviours during subsequent lockdowns

- As the first lockdown eased and more leisure activities resumed, engagement with home-based arts activities decreased again for 1 in 3 people, but for around 1 in 20 people whose engagement had been suppressed during the first lockdown, their activity levels increased again.
- Amongst those who increased their engagement early in the pandemic, 2 in 5 adults either maintained high levels of engagement or further increased their engagement in subsequent lockdowns. However, of those who decreased their engagement in the first 3 months of the pandemic, just 7% increased it again.

- Many of the usual audiences (e.g. young adults, females and people with higher educational qualifications) were more likely to have increased their engagement in the second and third lockdowns.
- Some groups including people who were unemployed and those with a physical health condition showed initial decreases in engagement during the first lockdown, but these changes were not maintained in the subsequent lockdowns.
- Other groups such as ethnic minorities and people with higher household income were more likely to show changes in later lockdowns, both being more likely to decrease their engagement in the arts.
- Data showing how patterns of behaviour for in-person cultural events were affected by the pandemic have yet to emerge although attitudes to potential engagement are still hesitant, and many people are showing interest in digital versions of arts and cultural offerings.

ii)   Coping during the pandemic

- Arts engagement played a key role in supporting mental health in the UK and internationally during the COVID-19 pandemic. At a time when mental health deteriorated for many adults, time spent on creative hobbies was associated with increases in life satisfaction and decreases in symptoms of depression and anxiety.
- The arts were proactively adopted by many as part of supportive coping styles to help them manage the stress of the pandemic.
- The arts were found to facilitate relaxation, escapism, mood, confidence, positivity and a sense of connection, and to reduce loneliness, worries and negative emotions.
- Arts engagement helped people use certain psychological strategies for coping and emotion regulation, including distraction techniques, social connection with others, learning new skills and engaging the mind, and self-reflection or emotional connection with oneself.
- People overtly recognised the physical health, mental health and wellbeing benefits of home-based arts and cultural activities and pursued them for these reasons.
- Certain groups experiencing greater challenges particularly drew on the arts, including health and social care professionals, younger adults, older adults and parents.
- Online platforms for arts engagement provided opportunities for arts organisations and freelance cultural workers to reach audiences and support mental health and wellbeing. But there have also been many challenges, including unequal digital access, difficulties reaching certain groups such as those shielding, obstacles to co-production, safeguarding concerns and technical challenges.
- Online platforms for certain activities such as group singing may also not have provided as strong wellbeing benefits as in-person engagement, with some participants reporting sessions being less personal and involving more challenges and fewer social benefits.

iii)   The pandemic's effect on cultural workers

- The pandemic led to a major drop in revenue for the arts and cultural sector, with evidence suggesting that it was one of the sectors worst hit.
- The cancellation of live events caused many sites to close permanently due to challenges such as an inability to meet commercial rent demands.
- By March 2021, there was a decrease of 20% in employee growth across the arts, entertainment and recreation sector, and vacancies were down nearly 80% compared to the previous year. Fortunately, vacancies are now on the rise according to ONS data.
- Many cultural workers fell through gaps in the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and Self-Employment Income Support Scheme, especially those who were ineligible due to issues such as zero hours contracts, minimum earning requirements, work history, multiple income sources, and being agency workers.
- The Culture Recovery Fund did manage to reach a broad cross-section of the arts and cultural sector, including organisations most in need, with a good success rate for applicants. But there were still reported challenges and the full impact of the scheme will be assessed by the DCMS later in 2021.
- While cultural workers' experiences during the pandemic have been diverse, many workers have reported mental health challenges, with lack of employment, financial hardship, and uncertainty about future work cited as key reasons.

- Some cultural workers turned to online platforms to continue aspects of their work at home and cited key benefits such as less travel, greater convenience and more time with family and friends. However, challenges included reduced collaboration opportunities, lower audience interaction, feelings of loneliness, stifled creativity and higher stress.
- Traditional platforms for online engagement such as Zoom and Skype were not adequate for arts and cultural programmes. Not only were technical problems encountered, but many still feel that their cultural work isn't suited to online modes.
- Further psychosocial challenges experienced by cultural workers include a loss of identity, purpose and meaning due to disruptions to their working lives.
- During the pandemic, many workers have shifted their artistic focus and undertaken supplementary work or alternative employment outside of the sector, and some have left the cultural industries completely.

iv)   Implications

- Given that the pandemic has shown that new audiences can be reached, it will be important to develop and implement strategies to ensure such audiences continue to have access to arts and cultural activities.
- The widespread interest in home-based arts engagement and high levels of uptake of arts materials and resources during lockdowns indicate that parents would be receptive to increased arts opportunities for their children either at home or potentially within the community.
- It will be important to establish how audience demographics for in-person activities change as a result of the pandemic, either diversifying them as people seek to continue engaging from home or contracting them as certain audiences are hesitant about returning to in-person events. This could have important implications for the repertoires and exhibitions presented by arts venues.
- Digital platforms are offering the arts sector opportunities that should be explored further. These include helping people in remote or rural communities to access the arts, as well as those who are isolated or face psychological or physical barriers to engaging in-person. Digital platforms are also providing workers new creative opportunities.
- However, there are also major barriers that need to be addressed including ensuring all audiences have access (especially those living in digital poverty) and determining whether online engagement has the same benefits as in-person engagement, employing it appropriately to support health and wellbeing.
- Existing online platforms such as Zoom may not be adequate to meet the technical and artistic demands of online arts offerings. As many activities are delivered by freelancers or small organisations, there will be challenges in ensuring that such technology is affordable and of sufficient quality for freelancers to use as a platform. There could be a need for higher-level infrastructure investment to support the development of the arts sector as a whole in online delivery.
- There is also the issue of the financial viability of online platforms. It will be important to ensure that business models for online platforms adequately remunerate creative workers, do not duplicate or detract from in-person offerings, and do not adversely affect the funding of in-person arts activities.
- It will be important for the recovery of the arts and cultural sector to comprise a hybrid of digital-physical engagement so that it can weather potential future lockdowns or disease-related restrictions. But instead of prioritising digitised arts experiences in the wake of COVID-19, it will be important to ask which arts and cultural activities most benefit from being digitised.
- Cultural workers have faced significant financial hardship as a result of the pandemic, especially those who have been self-employed or ineligible for government support schemes. There is a clear need to improve the working conditions of cultural workers, addressing issues such as job insecurity and unpaid work and working to make the sector more sustainable and able to withstand times of crisis and their aftermath.
- Cultural workers would also benefit from support programmes to enhance mental health and wellbeing and to help them develop or maintain their professional identities and diversify their skillsets.
- Current projections suggest that mental health demand could continue to grow in coming years as the current pandemic subsides and the social and economic ramifications continue to be felt. The arts could have an important role in meeting mental health needs. The development of partnerships between the arts and cultural sector and the health sector as part of social prescribing schemes, which began prior to the pandemic, will be important to continue and develop further.

METHODS

The authors of this report took a scoping review approach, using keyword searches of the following databases: PubMed, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online search engine, Scopus and Web of Science. Although most restrictions have been lifted at the time of this report, the pandemic is still ongoing and grey literature continues to be relevant to the report. Therefore, pre-prints (preliminary reports of work that have not been certified by peer review) and reports sourced through Google and website searches were also included. We focused on results from the UK but included findings from other countries as points of comparison. This report is not a systematic literature review as it was carried out during and after lockdown periods when social and political conditions of the pandemic were rapidly changing. It is intended to provide an overview of the role of the arts during COVID-19, and future research should delve further into the topics and issues it raises.

USE OF TERMS

Arts and cultural activities

This term is used to encompass a wide variety of ways in which audiences have engaged in activities related to the arts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many in-person events were cancelled during the pandemic, so unless otherwise specified, we use the term 'arts and cultural activities' to refer to home-based engagement. They include crafts (such as painting, sculpture or knitting); performing arts (such as dance, drama, and listening to music); writing and reading (such as reading fiction or writing poetry) and cultural events (such as engaging with museums, galleries, theatres or festivals, either in-person or through digital or virtual engagement) (1).

Cultural and Creative Industries

This report follows the UNESCO definition of the cultural and creative industries as 'those sectors of organized activity that have as their main objective the production or reproduction, the promotion, distribution or commercialization of goods, services and activities of content derived from cultural, artistic or heritage origins' (2). However, we also specifically use the language of the 'cultural industries' and 'arts and cultural sector' to acknowledge that our focus is primarily on 'industries with a cultural object at the centre of the industry' (3) as set out by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) (e.g., arts, film, TV and music, radio, photography, crafts, museums and galleries, and libraries) (4), rather than broader creative industries (e.g., advertising and marketing, architecture, IT, software, and computer services)(4)(5).

Cultural workers

Identifying those who work in the arts and cultural sector is complex as there are diverse ways to engage in cultural careers, with many moving in and out of contract work, taking on unpaid work, managing periods of unemployment, and working in other industries alongside artistic occupations. We use the term 'cultural workers' to acknowledge the broad ways of engaging with cultural work and to include a wide range of literature in our review, including occupations across the arts and cultural sector as described above (5).

1. HOW HAVE AUDIENCES AND ARTS AND CULTURAL BEHAVIOURS CHANGED DURING THE PANDEMIC?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Kingdom experienced three lockdowns, with many people across the country spending more than a year mostly confined indoors. During the first lockdown of 2020, only keyworkers continued working outside of the home while the rest of working adults worked from home or were furloughed. A year later in early April 2021, a third (28%) of adults were still working exclusively from home (6). This decreased slightly to 22% by 25 July after most restrictions were lifted in the UK (7). The sudden closure of venues and cancellation of events in March 2020 effectively halted arts and cultural engagement across the UK as we knew it. Yet viral videos at the start of the first lockdown showed the public turning to home-based arts activities, such as singing and painting, to spread solidarity and hope (6, 7, 8). Factors unique to lockdown may have contributed to this engagement, such as having more leisure time and disposable income, the increased availability and promotion of free virtual resources, and individuals looking for ways to cope with the crisis. (For numerous examples, see the MARCH Network's Creative Isolation initiative (11)). These unusual circumstances may have also encouraged individuals who do not normally engage in arts activities to do so, disrupting usual predictors of engagement such as demographic backgrounds, socio-economic position, psychosocial wellbeing and health conditions. This section of the report uses available evidence to assess how levels and patterns of engagement changed during the pandemic.

1.1 ARTS AND CULTURAL ACTIVITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

In the early months of the pandemic in 2020, a study of 19,000 individuals in the UK showed that a significant proportion increased their engagement in arts activities at home. According to the survey, about 1 in 5 took part in more arts activities at home during the first lockdown, while 1 in 6 participated less. Home-based arts activities explored in the study included digital arts and writing, musical activities, crafts and reading for pleasure (12). Similarly, the DCMS Taking Part survey shows that between May, June and July last year, 14% of 3,000 respondents spent more time engaged in home-based arts activities such as painting, drawing, printmaking or sculpturing. In comparison, only 6% reported spending less time on these activities than before lockdown (13). (Differences in the percentages between these two studies likely reflect differences in the definition of arts engagement used). These initial increases in arts and cultural engagement also applied to more passive activities such as watching events online or listening to music. In late May 2020, almost 82% of survey respondents reported they had listened to music for at least a few days during lockdown, with 47% doing so most days or every day (12). Across May to July 2020, 13% of 3,000 respondents in the DCMS Taking Part Survey reported that they watched more pre-recorded arts and music or dance events online than before lockdown, which was a higher proportion than those who watched fewer arts events (5%) and music or dance events (6%) (13). These patterns identified in the UK were mirrored in other countries. For example, soon after the lockdown in Spain, a survey of almost 2,000 people (n=1,868) showed that people spent more time singing (26%), dancing (32%), playing an instrument at home (30%), listening to music (50%), discovering new musical styles (26%), and learning about new musical groups (53%) compared to before the pandemic (14).

However, patterns for digital participation in the arts are more conflicting. For example, according to the Audience Agency, the proportion of people who took part in digital arts and cultural activities fell between March and November 2020 compared to the 12 months before lockdown (15). Of 6,000 people, 15% took part in a virtual tour (compared to 21% in the 12 months before lockdown); 15% browsed an online archive (versus 20%); and 9% participated in an online workshop (versus 14%), although the difference in periods of measurement makes it difficult to determine whether these reductions are meaningful (15). Similarly, while in-person activities such as visiting a heritage site increased from 21% to 27% between May and July 2020, most likely due to the easing of lockdown restrictions, virtual heritage activities (e.g. virtual walking tours of historic sites or researching local history online) showed signs of decreasing. Only 4% of

respondents reported increasing the time they spent engaged with such activities, while 8% reported spending less time doing so (13).

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Box 1

Research under review

Longitudinal changes in home-based arts engagement during and following the first national lockdown

This study was designed to examine potential heterogeneity in longitudinal changes in home-based arts engagement during the first national lockdown and following gradual easing of restrictions in the UK. Further, it sought to explore factors that were associated with patterns of longitudinal changes in home-based arts engagement. The study analysed data from the UCL COVID-19 Social Study, with a sample 29,147 adults in the UK who were followed for 22 weeks from 21st March to 21st August 2020. Data were analysed using growth mixture models.

Five unique classes of growth trajectories were identified, with patterns of engagement showing alignment with changes in social restrictions. Two of these classes were stable, showing few changes as social restrictions were enforced and relaxed, including the consistently disengaged (57% of participants) and the consistently highly engaged (8%). Two classes (30%) showed initial increases in arts engagement during the first lockdown, followed by declines as restrictions were eased. Only one small class (6%) showed the opposite pattern of declines during lockdown followed by an increase as restrictions were lifted.

In considering who engaged, some characteristics of the audience for home-based arts activities, such as gender and education, were consistent with usual audiences for such activities. However, other groups who are usually less likely to engage in the arts, such as people with mental health conditions, engaged more during the pandemic. This is encouraging as it suggests that those who needed the arts most did indeed engage more. In addition, there was no evidence that ethnicity was associated with longitudinal patterns of home-based arts engagement. However, some findings were less consistent. For instance, whilst older adults were less likely to have increased or decreased their engagement in arts activities than younger adults, they tended to have higher and more stable levels of arts engagement. The study also shows that associations between household income and arts engagement might have been altered by the pandemic. Individuals with a lower household income were less likely to be in the 'disengaged' group and were more likely to have increased arts engagement throughout the first 22 weeks of the pandemic, which is different to pre-pandemic times when arts engagement increased with household income.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate audience diversification, with potential implications for the future of the cultural sector. If audiences who have traditionally been harder to reach can be engaged in times of crisis, it may be possible to encourage greater participation from them beyond the pandemic. However, as the majority of participants reverted to lower levels of engagement when restrictions eased, the effects of lockdown on arts engagement may be largely transient. Overall, these results show the importance of promoting arts engagement during pandemics as part of public health campaigns, especially when social restrictions are introduced. The engagement patterns identified suggest that even groups less likely to engage in usual circumstances have increased engagement in the arts during a pandemic. Given the critical role of the arts in coping strategies, this has important ramifications for supporting public mental health. However, if the cultural sector wants to sustain changes in audiences brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, more work is needed to re-engage those groups who have since reverted to lower levels of engagement.

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As the pandemic continued, initial spikes in home-based engagement were followed by gradual decreases. According to DCMS data, engagement dropped from 49% to 42% between May and July 2020 across a variety of activities including painting, performing or writing music, performing or choreographing a dance routine and other arts activities (13). Longitudinal research points to different subgroups within these trends who had different patterns of engagement and not all engaged less over time. In a new study carried out as part of this report, we analysed data from a sample of 29,147 adults across 22 weeks from March to August 2020. We identified five unique classes of longitudinal changes in home-based arts engagement: those who were consistently disengaged across lockdown and as it was lifted (57%), people who were consistently highly engaged across lockdown and beyond (8%), those who increased their engagement as social restrictions were eased (6%), and those who decreased their engagement as social restrictions were eased (2 different trends of decline were identified with a total proportion of 30%) (16). For this final class, the resumption of usual activities such as work and socialising, broadening of leisure opportunities and return to school and workplaces was likely responsible for the decline [see Box 1 for more detail on these analyses].

To explore these longer-term patterns of change during 2020 and into 2021, we undertook bespoke analyses of data from over 11,000 individuals. We found that of the 24% of respondents who increased their engagement during the first lockdown, 2 in 5 maintained or increased their engagement in the second (November/December 2020) and third (January/February 2020) lockdowns. Conversely, of those who engaged less during the first lockdown (16%), around two-thirds further reduced their engagement in the next two lockdowns and just 7% increased it again [see Box 2] (25). To further understand what may have facilitated the roughly 40% of individuals who increased their engagement to continue doing so, and what may have encouraged people to continue engaging less and less as the pandemic continued, we also conducted qualitative

Outdoor project examples

Despite the closure of indoor public arts and cultural events, many arts organisations developed innovative work that could take place outside. For example, Take A Part's open source document for non-digital activities was shared widely and reached multiple countries (17). Walking Publics/Walking Arts was established during the pandemic to explore how people have embarked on creative walking activities such as stone trails or chalked pavements (18). Coxside Cartographies, a Plymouth-based project that brings communities together through art, ran socially distanced workshops or outdoor programmes during lockdown (19). The theatre company, Good News from the Future, started producing improvised open-air performances in Cardiff (20). There were also many examples of outdoor exhibitions (21) (22), festivals (23) and music events (24).

research exploring why patterns of engagement may have changed during 2020 [see Box 3]. Thematic analysis of 138 interview transcripts has shown that the pandemic created conditions that both removed and created barriers to engagement. Many people had more time, more disposable income, reduced social lives and the flexibility of working from home to increase their engagement with the arts. Efforts by organisations to digitise arts and cultural products such as streaming services, online festivals, or discount online arts packages also enabled individuals to engage more. The collective and social aspects of engagement were also important as many shared their creations to connect, entertain or support others. Online groups in particular were useful for adapting previous in-person activities or encouraging individuals to take up new activities (26). Among those who engaged less, several barriers were identified that demonstrate the unequal impact of the pandemic across society. Many couldn't afford materials or the technology to engage or they did not have the physical space at home or the mental or physical health to do so. Many who regularly engaged in arts and cultural activities outside the home, such as visiting their local library or attending art lessons, found that engaging at home online was a poor replacement or not at all possible if digital alternatives had not been offered (26). However, moving forward, it is likely that a significant proportion of individuals will continue arts and cultural activities at home as many are interested in building on their lockdown experiences [see Box 3] (26). Indeed, Creative Scotland's most recent wave of data collection in May 2021 found that 3 in 10 respondents (n=1,071) would like to maintain their increased home-based engagement (27).

Box 2

Research under review

Comparisons of home-based arts engagement across three national lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic in England

While evidence suggests new audience profiles may have emerged during the pandemic, most research was conducted during the first lockdown when the situation was changing quickly and drastically. It is unclear whether groups who were frequently engaged in arts activities both outside of the pandemic and during the first lockdown maintained this high level of engagement, or whether groups who had started to engage more in the arts during the pandemic continued to engage at a high level.

This study was designed to explore the predictors of home-based arts engagement across three national lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic in England. It compares (i) respondents' arts engagement levels during the first lockdown in April/May 2020 with pre-pandemic levels (n=23,086), (ii) their engagement levels during the second lockdown in November/December 2020 with levels during the first lockdown (n=11,481), and (iii) their engagement levels during the third lockdown in January/February 2021 with levels during the first lockdown (n=13,270).

Overall, of 24% respondents who engaged more with arts activities during the first lockdown in April/May 2020 than before the COVID-19 pandemic. Around two-fifths continued to maintain or even further increase this engagement during the second lockdown in November/December 2020 and the third lockdown in January/February 2021. Conversely, for those who engaged less during the first lockdown (16%), around two-thirds further reduced their engagement in the next two lockdowns and just 7% increased it again.

These changes in engagement levels were found to be related to people's demographic, socio-economic and health profiles. Some groups showed patterns of initial change during the first lockdown. For instance, younger adults (aged 18-29) showed initial increases in the first lockdown, whilst people who were unemployed and those with a physical health condition showed decreases during the first lockdown, and people with a mental health condition showed changes during the first lockdown (both increases and decreases).

Other groups showed continuous changes across the three lockdowns, with women showing patterns of increase across lockdowns, people with higher educational qualifications and white ethnicity being less likely to decrease their engagement in later lockdowns, but people with higher income being more likely to decrease their engagement in the third lockdown. A range of other factors were not shown to be related to change over the three lockdowns including older adults, partnership status, household overcrowding and people living with children.

Our findings suggest that the pandemic may have affected long-term cultural behaviours for some groups, so the results have important implications for the future work of cultural organisations focused on delivering home-based arts activities whether through online provision or the sale of resources such as crafts. Particularly, for groups who showed decreases in engagement in-between lockdowns, continued monitoring of the experiences of these groups as the pandemic continues is needed as there is the potential that this audience demographic could contract further as the pandemic continues and revert to pre-pandemic levels. Further, more research to understand how changes in barriers to participation have shifted will be important. This work will need to consider not just individual motivations but also the wider societal context created by the pandemic including changes to cultural organisations.

It is difficult to know whether this interest in home-based engagement is likely to have an effect on in-person engagement at arts and cultural venues as they re-open, including on engagement with new types of outdoor activities that have emerged during the pandemic. (See outdoor project examples above.) So far, our findings suggest that many are reluctant to travel and are concerned that events might be cancelled [see Box 3] (26). Results from the Cultural Participation monitor survey indicate that as of June 2021 audiences were still hesitant to return to cultural events, as the proportion of respondents eager to attend an event was only 2% greater than in February (29% versus 27%). At the time of the survey, as many as two thirds of those who had attended a live event the year prior to COVID-19 had no immediate plans to do in the next two months (28).

When comparing digital to in-person events, between 23% and 28% of respondents may opt for online activities instead of in-person visits even after the pandemic subsides (28). Forty percent were interested in attending events both in-person and digitally, and about the same proportion were interested in how digital experiences during an in-person visit could enhance the in-person activity (28). Data from Creative Scotland's survey in May 2021 (n=1,071) suggest that the initial increases in digital arts engagement during the first part of the pandemic, reported above, have been sustained. Twenty-eight percent reported that they had watched more arts performances online since the start of the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic levels, and 14% percent felt that their participation in online arts or cultural activities for their children had increased (27). However, these increases are still small compared to that of non-arts digital leisure activities such as watching drama and documentaries or streaming services for films, which 49% and 54% of respondents did more of respectively (27). Therefore, whilst digital arts engagement is still showing promise in terms of engaging audiences more than before the pandemic, it is not competing with other non-arts digital activities and only a minority are proposing that this will become their preferred method of arts engagement.

Box 3

New research in progress

Barriers and enablers of engaging with arts and cultural activities during the COVID-19 pandemic for adults in the UK: A qualitative study

The research in this report highlights that certain groups engaged more with the arts following the introduction of the first UK lockdown (e.g., parents, those with mental health conditions), whilst others engaged less or had similar levels of engagement to pre-pandemic times (e.g., older adults). Whilst we know that engagement levels have been changing during the pandemic, little is known about *why* patterns of arts engagement have changed and what the *barriers and enablers* to arts engagement have been. This study sought to fill these gaps.

Thematic analysis was carried out on 138 qualitative interview transcripts conducted between May 2020 and January 2021 with participants who identified with one or more of the following groups: keyworkers, adults with long-term health conditions, adults with mental health conditions, older adults, parents of young children, and younger adults aged 18-24. NVivo version 12 software was used to carry out reflexive thematic analysis to code mentions of arts and culture in the transcripts, look for patterns, and create themes and subthemes.

We found that there were five patterns for how arts engagement changed: taking up new home-based arts activities (e.g., crafts, textiles, visual arts, literature, digital arts); continuing to engage via adapted arts activities (e.g., adapting pre-existing arts and cultural groups to online platforms and watching streamed performances); continuing pre-pandemic engagement (e.g., individual engagement such as reading, playing musical instruments, and watching films); revisiting or increasing arts engagement (e.g., returning to arts

activities done earlier in life, such as from childhood, and increasing literature engagement); and stopping arts activities (e.g., halting in-person activities such as going to arts and cultural events or groups).

We also found that there were four key enablers to arts engagement: *change in circumstances*, relating to having more free time and changed routines; *organisational schemes* such as arts organisations providing resources online; being motivated to provide *inspiration for others*, such as spreading messages of hope and solidarity using the arts; and *format*, whereby the digitisation of arts engagements made them more accessible for some.

Further, we found three key barriers to arts engagement: *personal circumstances*, whereby some did not have the economic resources to engage or the physical or psychological capacity; *restrictions* relating to the closure of venues and social distancing which meant some could not or did not want to engage; and *online format*, such as digital challenges.

The study concludes that the changing social conditions of the pandemic meant that some barriers were broken down, such as providing more time for certain groups to engage during lockdowns and encouraging arts and cultural organisations to broaden streaming services so that those with digital access could easily engage from home. However, for many, engaging with the arts in-person is at the heart of why the arts are important and meaningful, and time away from these experiences created gaps in some participants' cultural lives that could not be filled.

1.2 WHO TOOK PART IN ARTS AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES?

Typically, before the pandemic, younger people, females, and those with higher education levels were more likely to engage in arts activities (29), and these groups have been most receptive to arts engagement during the pandemic too. During the first UK lockdown, younger people were more likely to increase their arts engagement than older adults. This included engaging in both active in-person and online arts activities and receptive activities such as watching a performance online (12) (30). Recent research has shown that the rate of change was maintained throughout the pandemic, suggesting that many young people continued to maintain this high level of engagement [see Box 2] (25). Regarding other groups, those with a degree or higher educational qualifications also had a 1.5-3 times greater odds of engaging in arts activities than those with up to post-16 education qualifications during the first lockdown (12), and they were less likely to decrease their engagement in later lockdowns (25). Females also had more than double the odds of engaging in arts activities than males in the first lockdown (12), and as the pandemic progressed, gender continued to play a strong role in predicting arts engagement. Females were nearly three times as likely to increase their engagement levels during the second and third lockdowns compared to their male counterparts (25). An exception to this pattern was seen in the proportion of men (44%) who watched live arts events or music performances online which was higher than the proportion of women (33%) early in the pandemic (13). Another factor that aligns with previous research is physical health. Those with physical conditions were more likely to decrease their engagement from the start, although this rate of change in engagement levels seemed to have disappeared in later lockdowns [see Box 2] (25).

These findings are further supported by the longitudinal analysis undertaken for this report of audience subgroups who engaged to different degrees over the course of the first lockdown [see Box 1]. As might be expected, females were more likely to be in any of the identified groups except the "disengaged group," as were people with higher education levels. Data from this study also suggest that women, younger adults aged 18-29, those with a lower household income, people with higher educational levels and those who were living with others were more likely to have increased arts engagement even after the first lockdown ended. A person's employment status also predicted arts and cultural engagement. People who were unemployed or economically inactive at the start of lockdown or who became unemployed during the follow-up period were among the engaged groups (16). As might be expected, employed

individuals seemed to have a constantly lower level of engagement during and post the first lockdown period [see Box 1] (16). They were less likely to reduce their engagement in the arts compared to unemployed peers during the first lockdown. However, such rate of change was not maintained in the subsequent lockdowns (25). Older adults had higher and more stable levels of arts engagement (16), showing neither increases nor decreases during the first lockdown [see Box 2] (25) and were more likely than other age groups to mention engaging in creative activities (31). As this age group included people who were retired it is possible that the lockdowns did not alter their day-to-day lives as much as for other age groups and thus did not alter their behaviours as much (32).

Evidence also points to new groups who started to engage more in arts activities during the pandemic. A cross-sectional analysis of a large longitudinal study in the UK, undertaken for this report [see Box 1], found that married individuals were more likely to engage than people who were not married. This is different to normal trends, as non-married individuals are normally more likely to take part in the arts (12). People with mental health diagnoses were also more likely to participate than those without a diagnosis [see Box 1]. This group was one of the most engaged compared to other groups (33). The pandemic may have provided opportunities for this group—which has traditionally faced more barriers to participation in the arts (34) (35)—to engage more in arts activities, for example through online participation (12).

There are, however, mixed results between studies that require further investigation. While people from white ethnic backgrounds typically had a higher engagement rate in the arts in pre-pandemic times, no ethnic differences were found in rates of arts engagement during the first lockdown (12) (25). In fact, in another study, people from Black, Asian and Mixed ethnic backgrounds were 80-90% more likely to engage in digital arts activities, particularly in participatory activities such as taking part in a virtual tour, than those from white backgrounds (30). However, ethnic differences did appear during the third lockdown when people from ethnic minorities were more likely to decrease their engagement [see Box 2] (25). Such association was independent of demographic background, socio-economic position and health conditions. This suggests that the engagement experience amongst people of ethnic minorities might have reverted to the pre-pandemic levels, and that there is the potential that this group could contract further as the pandemic continues. However, ethnic minority groups were also among those in Scotland (n=1,071) who were more likely to feel that arts and cultural activities were more important than before the pandemic, suggesting that such activities were still perceived as valuable by these groups (27).

Finally, one particular group that stands out in their engagement is parents, who relied on arts activities to engage their children. A large arts and crafts retailer in the United Kingdom reported a 200% increase in online sales during the first lockdown (36). This was mirrored in other countries. Consumer reports showed that parents in the United States bought considerably more merchandise related to arts and crafts in the first quarter of 2020 than in the same period in the previous year (37). These included sales of building sets (76% higher), arts and crafts kits (70%), and colouring and art supplies (86%) (NPD, 2020). In the first few months of lockdown in the USA and Canada, parents (n=177) of young children engaged more with music than before, taking part in activities such as singing, playing instruments, playing with musical toys, dancing, listening to music, and watching musical videos (38). Similar results were found in Brazil, where caregivers including parents (n=188) of children between the ages of 3 and 6 considerably increased musical activities at home. Between July and August 2020, 73% of parents reported an increase in singing or taking part in music, while 82% said they were watching music videos more than before (39). Like other arts activities, the level of education of caregivers influenced this engagement. Those with a postgraduate degree sang more with their children and were more likely to expose their children to different music styles. Wellbeing also played an important role. Caregivers who reported higher levels of wellbeing tended to sing more with their children and teach them new songs. And caregivers who themselves engaged in visual arts, dance, theatre and music were also more likely to encourage musical activity with their children (39). However, a UK study with data following respondents from March to August 2020 shows that while adults living with children maintained high levels of engagement, they were also likely to start with high levels of engagement that declined [see Box 1]. This suggests that families might have struggled to continue with arts engagement as the pandemic became longer due to burnout and difficulties sustaining a balance between work,

childcare, schooling and other responsibilities. Or they may have reduced their engagement with their children as children returned to schools (34-35).

1.3 IMPLICATIONS

These findings have implications for the arts and cultural sector. Perhaps most significantly, while demographic patterns of engagement were largely consistent with pre-pandemic data, showing that young people, females, and individuals with higher education levels remained highly engaged, there are also signs that new audiences were reached during the first lockdown. Married individuals, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, families and those with diagnosed mental health conditions increased interest and engagement. As the pandemic continued, females and those with higher education levels stand out as groups that maintained their levels of engagement, suggesting that some of the usual audience demographics will be maintained in spite of disruptions from this pandemic [see Box 2] (25). Meanwhile, there were initial decreases in engagement amongst people with physical health conditions and those who were unemployed, but these changes were not maintained in the second and third lockdowns. However, some groups did not show much change in behaviours in the first lockdown but did in a subsequent lockdown, including people with lower educational qualifications. These findings confirm that access to and participation in the arts has shifted across the pandemic and the situation has evolved, and that it is vitally important to understand how changes in enablers and barriers to participation have shifted. Further, it is slightly worrying that those who were considered as vulnerable groups (e.g. ethnic minorities) were more likely to reduce their engagement as the pandemic continued. It is not clear at present whether the reduction was due to decreases in interest or incentives or whether it was due to the social, economic and psychological hardship they were statistically more likely to experience than white ethnic groups, but data do show that personal circumstances such as financial hardship have acted as a barrier to some people being able to engage. Audience diversification has been a key goal for the cultural sector in recent years, and the pandemic has shown that audiences can be broadened if circumstances change. However, it is retaining those audiences over time that appears the greater challenge at present. The findings presented here will be important to the cultural sector to identify strategies that would support sustained audience diversification in the future.

Digitisation of arts and cultural activities has received much audience interest with increases in viewers and 1 in 4 saying they may opt for online activities instead of in-person visits even after the pandemic subsides. But it does not appear set to take over from in-person activities, with either in-person or hybrid engagement still receiving greater interest. Further, streaming of arts events and performances is still substantially lower than for other non-arts streaming such as Netflix and digital arts activities may have not yet broadened the existing audience base (42). Another challenge with online and digital arts programmes is that they require good digital access, which is not readily available to all demographic groups. As such, the rapid increase in digitisation of arts and cultural activities (43) may further exclude those already unable to access digital resources. Even before the pandemic, there existed significant inequalities in digital access in the UK, especially among those who are older or from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as shown by ONS data (44). In 2018, 10% of the adult UK population did not use the internet (44), and according to the 2021 UK Consumer Digital Index, in 2021 2.6 million people were still offline with a further 20.5 million adults having low or very low digital engagement (45). Arts organisations have already raised challenges that they have faced in delivering online work in reaching those affected by digital poverty. This issue may require intervention at a national level from other sectors to ensure, for example, fast and reliable broadband access. But it also has implications for the arts sector in ensuring that digital content does not exceed the broadband capabilities of certain demographic groups or rely on specific types of devices.

Despite the closure of arts and cultural venues over the first year and half of the pandemic, there has been little research to date focusing on engagement with these venues when social restrictions have allowed many of them to open. Nor has there been research into outdoor, socially distanced, and hybrid arts and cultural activities. With the lifting of most restrictions in July, this research will be more possible as venues reopen allowing testing of different modes of delivery. Notably, although there are examples of efforts by arts organisations to engage communities in outdoor arts activities,

more research is needed to determine how many people engaged in such activities and whether such engagement was a passing trend or indicative of an increased interest in these types of cultural activities even as indoor cultural events become more available. Similarly, it will be important to establish whether audience demographics for in-person activities have changed as a result of the pandemic. Evidence so far suggests that audiences diversified mostly during the first lockdown. However, as cultural activities resume it will be important to examine whether people engaging from home continue to do so and whether audiences contract as individuals choose not to return to in-person events, especially those at greater risk from COVID-19. If audience profiles for in-person events do change, for example to young healthy people, this could have important implications for the repertoires and exhibitions that arts and cultural venues present.

2. HOW HAVE ARTS AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES HELPED PEOPLE TO COPE DURING THE PANDEMIC?

The health and wellbeing benefits of the arts are well evidenced outside of pandemic situations (1). Arts participation can trigger psychological, physiological, behavioural and social responses that are causally linked to a range of health outcomes, such as better mental health and wellbeing, reduced stress levels, reduced levels of loneliness, and greater engagement in other health-promoting activities (46). The importance of the arts in supporting health and wellbeing has emerged particularly strongly during the pandemic, as mental health has been so adversely affected, and as other coping strategies such as social support, social interactions and healthcare services have been disrupted (47). This section of the report brings together evidence regarding how individuals have engaged with arts activities as a way of coping, thereby protecting or improving mental health and wellbeing.

2.1 EFFECTS ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

In general, people during the pandemic have recognised the wellbeing benefits of arts and cultural activities. Sixty-eight percent of a UK representative sample of respondents (n=2,002) believed the arts affected them positively and 79% thought the same of heritage activities (28). Several studies conducted during the pandemic have found associations between engagement in arts activities and mental health and wellbeing. Research examining 55,000 adults in the UK has shown that time spent on hobbies such as painting, creative writing, woodwork and other creative activities was associated with greater levels of life satisfaction and decreases in depression and anxiety during the first lockdown (48). These benefits also appear to have extended to particular patient populations as well. For example, a US study has found that a drawing intervention for people with chronic pain led to improvements in pain, depression and anxiety before and during the first three months of the pandemic. Both online and in-person formats were effective, indicating the potential for the intervention to reach larger audiences (49). Small charities and cultural organisations have also encouraged people to take part in arts activities online or in person to protect their health and wellbeing during the pandemic (50). While lockdown conditions made it difficult to evaluate these programmes, particularly as many were launched as emergency responses, anecdotal evidence suggests that participants (n=1,000+) believed the activities had a positive effect on their wellbeing (50).

2.2 USING THE ARTS TO COPE AND MANAGE EMOTIONS

In considering how the arts have affected mental health and wellbeing outcomes, research has suggested specific effects on individuals' abilities to manage circumstances and regulate their emotions. Arts engagement during the first lockdown was found to be related to people's own coping styles. For example, those who adopted emotion-focused coping styles (e.g. accepting the circumstances or positively reframing them in their own minds), supportive coping styles (such as seeking sympathy or advice from others), or problem-focused coping styles (such as making plans to minimise the impact of the circumstances) were more likely to engage in activities including digital arts and writing and musical and crafts activities than people who adopted less healthy avoidant strategies (such as drinking alcohol to cope) (12). In fact, people who proactively adopted coping strategies during the first lockdown were also more likely to have increased their engagement in arts activities compared to pre-pandemic periods. This suggests that these individuals may have drawn on the arts to help minimise the stress of the circumstances. People with an avoidant coping style, on the other hand, were more likely to have decreased their arts engagement during lockdown (12).

New qualitative research conducted for this report has provided further detail on how arts and cultural activities have been utilised as coping strategies by individuals (n=138) to support mental health and wellbeing during COVID-19 [Box

4]. The arts specifically helped provide distraction, self-reflection, exercise for the mind, and helped individuals gain skills and connect with others. Participants reported benefits not only for mental health but also for physical health. For example, participants recognised the health effects of dancing, singing online, and having the social support of others through group activities, and they proactively engaged to achieve these benefits (51). At the same time, the loss of arts and cultural activities outside the home had a detrimental effect on some people's mental health. Many missed going to the cinema, galleries and museums, for example, and felt they had lost the enjoyment that came with in-person activities [see Box 4] (51). The findings from this qualitative study have been echoed by quantitative surveys from the UK and other countries. For example, a recent UK study on how individuals (n= 11,000) coped with the pandemic showed that those who engaged in creative activities or DIY had the most positive lockdown experiences (31). Women, those in self-isolation, and older adults were more likely to use creative activities as coping strategies (31). Over a six-month period of isolation in Argentina, people who engaged in creative activities experienced a positive impact on their wellbeing, emotions, and resilience (n=305) (52). In Spain, a study with nearly 2,000 respondents found that listening to music helped people to feel more relaxed (53%), escape from the real world (56%), cheer up (63%), improve their mood (22%), cope with confinement (52%), develop greater levels of confidence or a sense of positivity (77%), and feel more connected to others (47%) (14). In another study in Israel (n=200), people intentionally listened to music to improve their mood during the country's first lockdown, with emotion regulation being individuals' predominant strategy for doing so (53). Similarly, another Spanish study (n=500) reported that 88% of its respondents used music to divert themselves from their worries, 90% used it to release negative emotions, 87% to maintain a good mood, and 75% to reduce loneliness and create a sense of togetherness (54). The nostalgic qualities of music also helped individuals (n=570) avoid thinking about the crisis, to approach it with perspective, to feel more comfortable with the present by reflecting on the past, and to use it as a self-development strategy to enhance self-esteem and meaning in life (55).

As well as data showing the benefits of the arts for coping and for emotion regulation in the general population, benefits have been reported amongst specific groups facing new challenges brought on by the pandemic both in the UK and abroad. Research has shown that frontline health and social care professionals proactively used arts activities to cope with the uncertainty and challenges of the pandemic (56). Clinical staff also experienced significant decreases in tiredness, sadness, fear and worry after listening to customised music playlists (57). Younger adults whose habits and routines were heavily disrupted by lockdown were the age group most likely to consider music as effective for managing their wellbeing (54). Music reportedly helped them experience feelings of enjoyment, maintain good mood and distract themselves from the pandemic (54). Young adults (n=127) who spent increased time listening to music early in the pandemic also had higher life satisfaction than those who spent time on playing video games, watching TV and using social media (58). Research suggests that the effects of the arts on stress were strongest if people actively used them as an effective stress management strategy (59). At the other end of the age spectrum, older adults—who were initially thought to be especially vulnerable to the mental health consequences of lockdown—also reported experiencing mental health benefits from having extra time for pursuing hobbies, including arts activities (32). Further, families used arts activities to manage negative emotions and cope with the challenges of merging their professional, personal and family lives during lockdown. One study found that more than two-third of parents (69% of 188 caregivers) used musical activities such as playing instruments more often than prior to the pandemic to support their children, noting benefits including the regulation of their children's mood (39). Parents also reported listening to music to regulate their own moods or to feel relaxed or excited while socially distanced from others (39).

Box 4

New research in progress

How have arts and cultural activities been utilised as coping strategies to support mental health and wellbeing during COVID-19? A qualitative study

The arts can activate psychological processes such as coping and emotional regulation which are linked with the management and treatment of a range of different mental and physical health conditions. As shown in the literature in this report, many people have been turning to the arts as a way to support mental health and cope with the psychosocial adversities of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there is a lack of in-depth research on why people may have used the arts to cope and few studies exploring the perceived impact of these experiences on health and wellbeing. This study was conducted to meet this gap.

138 interviews were carried out between May 2020 and January 2021. Participants identified with one or more of the following groups: keyworkers, adults with long-term health conditions, adults with mental health conditions, older adults, parents of young children, and younger adults aged 18-24. NVivo version 12 software was used to thematically analyse the transcripts and code references to arts and culture, as well as look for patterns and create themes and subthemes.

We found that individuals used the arts to: distract themselves from the pandemic; connect with themselves emotionally and on a deeper level; engage creatively and learn new skills; and connect with others. The study also shows how these engagements with the arts improved mental health, wellbeing and aspects of physical health, and provided opportunities to build social capital in the form of social support. Further, the study reflects on the detrimental health and wellbeing effects of being unable to engage with arts and cultural activities in-person due to lockdown and social distancing restrictions. Many people missed arts engagements and the support that these assets ordinarily provided.

The study concludes that the arts have played a role in providing psychological and social support during the pandemic. This is critical as many healthcare and other support services have been disrupted during COVID-19. Many were able to turn to the arts when potentially they could not access support as easily as they could in pre-pandemic times. However, whilst home-based arts activities can be utilised for coping strategies, much is lost from in-person arts and cultural engagement and such assets should be viewed as important to mental health and wellbeing.

2.3 SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES IN DIFFERENT MODES OF DELIVERY

Modes of delivery of home-based arts and cultural programmes during the pandemic involved both offline and online options, and it is important to ascertain whether mode of delivery affected the ability of the arts to support mental health and wellbeing. Evaluations of offline programmes have shown broadly positive results, with programmes operating often as an extension of usual activities that could not take place face-to-face. For example, the "Art at the Start" project in Dundee delivered art materials to families (n=10) with infants aged 0-3 years to replace cancelled in-person art sessions. Their evaluation showed the activities helped parents feel

> ### Offline project examples
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> Entelechy Arts (60), Artfelt Anywhere (61), Art by Post (62), the Fitzwilliam Museum (63), Culture Box (64), Edinburgh Children's Hospital Charity (65), and GOSH Arts (66) are examples of other organisations and projects that launched offline activities during the pandemic for health and wellbeing purposes. Many health-focused arts organisations adopted hybrid approaches. Examples include Key Changes's "Studio Connect" programme (67), Ludus Dance's online dance sessions and educational packs (68), and the Garden Museum's "Clay for Dementia" events.

greater positive emotions and less boredom, with parents reporting that their infants were happier, livelier, showing more agency and were more connected to their parents through increased eye contact and joint activity (69) (38). ENO Breathe, a breathing, singing and wellbeing programme delivered by English National Opera for people suffering from breathlessness and anxiety after contracting COVID-19, has enrolled 1000 patients across the UK. Evaluations of the programme are ongoing but so far 90% of participants self-report that the programme has helped with breathlessness and 91% report that it has positively impacted their anxiety (70) (71). Numerous other organisations and programmes also provided individuals with offline arts activities often with a specific aim of protecting or improving the wellbeing of audiences, but not many have evaluated their wellbeing effects. For example, a review of museums that work specifically with older adults shows that a third developed offline activities including delivering paper activity packs and newsletters with guidelines for home-based activities, and distributing educational postcards (72). Creativity packs were used by a handful of organisations to help communities be creative (43) [see other project examples above].

In some cases, online approaches have been reported as having mental health and wellbeing benefits. For example, dance therapists reported successfully continuing dance movement therapy for patients with depression by using both virtual and in-person, socially-distanced adaptations (73). Some organisations have even embraced a wellbeing role in providing innovative digital alternatives. Museums in Singapore, for example, offered an array of virtual experiences with an emphasis on access, inclusivity and social connectedness (74). In an Austrian study, participants (n=84) were exposed to art or cultural exhibitions online and found that this lowered anxiety, negative mood and loneliness and increased subjective wellbeing (75).

However, online platforms have also introduced specific challenges. For example, those with particular health conditions (such as visual impairments and dementia) have found it more difficult to access digital creative content during the pandemic (76), and identifying and engaging people who were shielding in online creative sessions was also problematic (77). Facilitating online co-production meetings for place-based arts projects has been challenging as well, with online meetings being less familiar for some, and different skills and energy levels can mean some participants are more willing to engage online than others (78). Online theatre activities have raised questions over safeguarding and protecting the privacy of participants too (79)—an issue also raised in the context of online art therapy delivery (80). Research has shown that these concerns have prevented some facilitators from delivering online arts activities and has also highlighted the technical challenges that have arisen for facilitators, such as issues with equipment and broadband connectivity (80).

The emotional and wellbeing consequences of online challenges have been reported in the research exploring online group singing. Choir case studies during the pandemic indicate the significant commitment and desire of members to continue singing online to help support health and wellbeing and create a sense of community (81). However, a

randomised controlled trial on the effects of remote singing for patients with respiratory diseases (n=120) carried out during the pandemic found that the sessions were considered technically challenging and attendance was lower than in-person versions of the intervention. Participants also noted that sessions were less personal than face-to-face singing (82). Similar observations were made for the treatment of dementia through online singing (83). Despite these perceived challenges, improvements were found in depression and balance confidence (82). Similarly, a cross-sectional survey of almost 4,000 choir members showed that the loss of in-person choirs was detrimental to mental health, causing despair, anxiety and loneliness for regular singers. Many felt that in-person gatherings were key to their mental health and wellbeing (84). Social connectedness is a key aspect of these benefits, as shown by a study with 5,044 participants in Sweden and Norway; the social aspect of singing in a choir was the component singers missed most during the pandemic (85). These results echo those from research carried out prior to pandemic, which found that the success of virtual choirs depended on how 'present' an individual felt whilst engaging and how real the experience felt, with varying levels of psychological benefits (86). Therefore, online engagement might have the potential to improve mental health and wellbeing, but replicability of in-person group sessions is difficult and online experiences are not always enjoyed by participants.

2.4 IMPLICATIONS

Research conducted during the pandemic has established clear associations between home-based arts and cultural activities and mental health and wellbeing. Home-based arts engagement helped people manage mental health symptoms and led to improvements in life satisfaction. These studies support wider literature on the health and wellbeing benefits of arts activities (1), and they also highlight the importance of such activities in helping people to cope and protect their mental health during times of crisis.

However, the research presented also raises the question of how home-based engagement and its positive influence on mental health compares to in-person activities at venues and outside the home. Data so far suggest that many offline programmes managed to maintain strong psychological benefits for participants during the pandemic. This was particularly the case for activities where the mode of delivery was unaffected compared to outside of pandemic times (such as listening to music and home-based crafts). However, results were mixed for activities that were adapted to involve an online component for lockdowns. Some perceived the benefits of activities such as virtual choirs as inferior to in-person group gatherings and social contact. This has clear implications for the arts sector moving forward. Efforts to pursue online engagement in the arts need to explore how to maximise its positive effects on health and minimise negative aspects. Improved technology could help to reduce some of the technical difficulties that frustrated some users, but as many activities are delivered by freelancers or small organisations, there will be challenges in ensuring that such technology is still affordable. There could be a need for higher-level infrastructure investment to support the development of the arts sector as a whole in online delivery. The effectiveness of online sessions in improving wellbeing will also need to be explored as aspects of in-person experiences (e.g. social connectedness) are hard to replicate online. Finding ways to maintain individual support within online group sessions will also be important, both to encourage regular participation and prevent participants feeling that levels of challenge exceed their abilities. Given the more consistent positive evaluations of offline remote programmes such as those that involved resource packs, arts organisations could also explore hybrid combinations of offline and online activities or in-person and virtual programmes. The DCMS's recent Boundless Creativity Report has recommended the launch of a research programme focusing on the link between health and cultural access. This may be an opportunity to examine any differences in online and in-person engagement and their wellbeing effects so that health interventions can be designed for particular audiences, patients and contexts (87).

It is also notable that parents were one of the groups who reported psychological benefits from engaging in the arts during lockdowns, both for them but also for their children. As the pandemic has continued, there have been increasing reports of negative psychological effects on children. Consequently, given the well evidenced role of the arts in

supporting child mental health and given the efficacy reported by parents in using the arts to support their children's emotions during the pandemic at home, the arts could be an important tool in schools to continue providing vital psychosocial support. The widespread interest in home-based arts engagement and high levels of uptake of arts materials and resources during lockdowns also indicate that parents would be receptive to increased arts opportunities for their children either at home or potentially within the community.

The implications are also significant for the health sector. During the pandemic, rising levels of mental health problems have placed additional strain on the NHS. This has led to a rise in social prescribing, connecting individuals to community organisations to provide support to improve mental health and wellbeing (88). Current projections suggest that mental health demand could continue to grow as the current pandemic subsides and in the years immediately following as the social and economic ramifications continue to be felt (89). Therefore, there could be a role for the arts sector in providing suitable programmes to meet this demand. Further, the arts may have an important role to play in supporting health communication around mental health, destigmatising experiences and encouraging people to recognise symptoms and seek appropriate help. For example, a recent animation campaign aimed at teens and young adults during the pandemic has already shown signs of improving young people's knowledge and attitudes towards mental health and their willingness to seek help (90).

As shown, particular groups may require different forms of support. Parents, young people, and individuals with health conditions have emerged as particularly reliant on arts activities for helping them to cope. They have also been more likely than other groups to struggle with the social and psychological consequences of the pandemic (91) (92) (93) (94). Targeted arts activities may be a cost-effective, consistent, and accessible way to improve wellbeing and to manage mental health conditions. Consequently, it will be important to continue the roll-out and development of social prescribing schemes through partnerships between the arts and cultural sector and the health sector. If online delivery is a part of this, it will be vital that high-quality research is planned into the design and delivery of arts programmes to quantify the potential impact and compare this to hybrid and face-to-face delivery. Outcomes and findings would further guide investment decisions for arts and cultural activities as health promoting resources for public health.

3. How have cultural workers been affected by the pandemic?

With the closure of arts and cultural venues for most of 2020 and much of 2021, it is expected that many people who work in the cultural industries will have left, or may leave, the sector. Financial strain, loss of work or income, or home-based employment have significantly impacted the wellbeing of cultural workers. Some workers may not be able to remain in their roles, or many will have to adapt how they produce content or redefine their professions. This section of the report examines the impact of the pandemic on cultural workers and considers how the arts and cultural sector may need to adapt moving forward and how it can be supported to do so.

3.1 The financial impact of the pandemic

As soon as the pandemic started, the arts and cultural sector experienced a sharp drop in revenues and reductions in public and private funding. For instance, over 15,000 theatrical performances were cancelled in March and April 2020 alone which caused a loss of over £303 million in box office revenue (95). The Music Venue Trust estimated that 93% of grassroots live music venues would face permanent closure with 86% of venues reporting an inability to meet commercial rent demands (95). Further, ONS data showed that only 1 in 5 arts, entertainment and recreation respondents were confident of having the financial resources to continue operating through the pandemic, compared to 2 in 5 for all industries (96).

Cultural workers were adversely affected as a result. In March 2020 as the first UK lockdown began, around 60% of 4,000 artists and arts managers across the UK anticipated a 50% or more reduction in income during 2020 (97). Figures subsequently showed that these concerns were apt. For example, 60% of 237 respondents in Wales reported that their work had dried up by early April 2020 (98). By the end of April 2020, 44% of visual arts workers (n=1,038) had permanently lost work (99). ONS data shows that employee growth across the arts, entertainment and recreation sector declined after the introduction of the first lockdown, decreasing by 6% in April 2020 and then by 20% by March 2021 (100). Further, vacancies in arts, entertainment and recreation were down by 78.9% (18,000) in March 2021, compared to the year before, with the ratio of vacancies to employee jobs lowest in this sector compared to others (101). It is estimated that in the first six months of the pandemic alone, 55,000 jobs were lost in the music and performing and visual arts (102). And by the end of 2020, the number of freelancers working in creative occupations (including the arts and cultural industries and all sectors apart from information technology) was around 156,000; much lower than the c.176,000 at the beginning of 2018, showing major unemployment challenges (103).

This impact on employment naturally translated into individual financial loss for cultural workers. By June 2020, over half of performing arts professionals surveyed (n=385) were reporting financial hardship (104). By early July, individual income loss in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly totalled £4.07 million, indicating the likely staggering financial effects across the UK (84). By the end of 2020, total individual losses for those working in the arts and cultural sector in Scotland were estimated at £5.5 million and organisational losses amounted to £58 million (106). From a survey conducted between November 2020 and March 2021, researchers found that less than 20% of theatre freelancers (n=397) relied on theatre or other arts for 100% of their income, a drop from nearly 60% since before March 2020 (107).

It has been suggested that some of the financial challenges faced by the sector have been connected to 'patchy' government support (108). While the UK government launched two major income support schemes—the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS)—these were not specific to the arts and cultural sector and eligibility requirements were uniquely challenging for cultural workers. Sixty-one percent of performing arts professionals sought support for their financial situation (104), but many were unsuccessful. Some discovered they could not access funding through the Job Retention Scheme (which paid 80% of an employee's salary) as it did not apply to workers on PAYE zero hours contracts nor agency workers who form a large proportion of the cultural workforce. Meanwhile SEISS required individuals to earn at least half of their income through self-employment,

which did not take into account the financial reality of most cultural workers who rely on both self-employment and short-term contracts (109). Individuals also had to be working in the 2018-2019 tax year, which excluded newcomers to the arts and cultural sector, many of whom would have been from younger age groups (110). Recent estimates state that 39% of freelancers working in the performing arts were ineligible for SEISS (111).

The eligibility requirements for the two major income support schemes were also perceived as confusing. For example, in a May 2020 survey about half (47%) of visual artists (n=1,038) were uncertain about the support relevant to them, and 20% reported they were not eligible for support because of complex income sources (99). By May 2020, residencies had been cancelled or modified for 54% of artists (n=611), and as many as 32% were not able to access emergency funding (112). In Wales, 18% of Welsh creative freelancers (n=237), with over half of the responses coming from film, TV, video, radio, photography, music, performing and visual arts) reported they were ineligible, while 36% were simply unsure what they qualified for. Furthermore, financial support was calculated according to individuals' profits which is usually very small for freelancers in the sector (98).

To understand the impact of socio-economic adversities on cultural freelancers during the pandemic, new research was undertaken for this report involving interviews from May to July 2021 [see Box 5]. Workers reported having to rely on multiple income streams to survive, both within and outside of the arts and cultural sector. Some were able to access small grants from Arts Council England, Creative Scotland and small charities, and others took up other types of work such as supermarket or administrative roles. But some left the sector entirely to take up alternative employment (113). Financial difficulties have, however, not affected all freelancers. More recently it has become obvious that the financial implications of the pandemic have been diverse. Some freelancers continue to report that not much has changed since the first UK lockdown and work opportunities are still thin. Others report major changes and fluctuations in their work and income since last year, with some finding that their income is now similar to pre-pandemic times [see Box 5] (113). Other qualitative studies demonstrated the same. Researchers have found that the disparity or "polarisation" among freelancers in the screen sector depends on each individual's situation; while some have been able to find work and access grants, others were out of work for over a year and unable to access grants (114). An international study of young musicians (n=77) had similar findings. While the pandemic did have some positive impact such as more time to write and record music, for others, it caused an immediate loss of income and completely halted their professions (115).

Arts-specific support from the government emerged in July 2020 with the Culture Recovery Fund (CRF): a £1.57 billion commitment to culture and heritage. In contrast to the Job Retention Scheme and SEISS, it was specifically intended for the survival and reopening of venues and organisations rather than as income support for individuals (116). Funding was distributed directly to organisations, or as loans, as capital for construction for cultural infrastructure, and to "arm's-length bodies"—which included Arts Council England, Historic England, the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the British Film Institute—to award and administer themselves (116). It is difficult to determine the impact of the CRF on the arts and cultural sector, especially as the fund was aimed at helping organisations to survive, which is predicted to translate into impact in 2021 and beyond (117). Despite this, there have been some encouraging results. The National Audit Office shows that the majority of organisations that applied for revenue and capital grants were successful, with approval rates reaching 79% in the North East of England (116). Museums in particular seem to have benefitted from emergency funding as few have closed permanently. However, small museums have struggled to access small grants, some were ineligible if they had never received funding before, and many were held back by bureaucratic application processes (118). In October 2020, the Centre for Economics and Business Research predicted that the funding managed by Arts Council England would help to return gross value added of the arts and cultural sector to pre-pandemic levels by 2022. This reaches a growth of £13,890 million, which is estimated to be £370 million more than what would have been achieved without funding (117). With some social distancing measures in place until at least 21 June 2021, the DCMS announced the release of an additional £400 million in early April 2021 for arts, culture, heritage organisations and independent cinemas (119).

However, the funding has not come without question or criticism, especially for those who were not awarded grants (120). Challenges that were reported include that the CRF comprised loans, was developed with the expectation that demand in the sector would remain at 40% of pre-pandemic levels which remains to be seen, and was rushed in planning, leading to confusion and duplication (116) (121). Whether it has helped to 'level-up' arts and cultural resources in poorer areas needs to be explored further as, according to the National Audit Office, local authorities based in deprived communities were more successful in receiving funding but applied for less funding and received a smaller proportion of total funding than those least in need (116). Freelancers have lamented the design of the scheme and its focus on cultural organisations and venues rather than individual workers (111), and a number of people also reported that they cannot sacrifice paid work for the time needed to complete funding applications (106).

Box 5

New research in progress

Understanding experiences of changing socioeconomic and psychosocial adversities during COVID-19 for freelancers working in the UK cultural sector

There was a flurry of new research exploring the impact of the pandemic on cultural workers in response to the first UK lockdown in March 2020, alongside predictions of long-term socioeconomic consequences for the sector. However, there is a dearth of research exploring processes of change across 2020-2021, and how these changes have been experienced by those working in the cultural industries. This study built on qualitative interview research exploring the impact of the pandemic for self-employed cultural workers in July-November 2020 (n=20), following up with 16 of these participants in May-July 2021 to explore their changing experiences.

We found that ongoing adversities manifested as changes to work life, with some experiencing small changes (e.g., to the kind of work carried out) and others experiencing major changes (e.g., leaving the sector to pursue alternative employment), as well as changes to social life, such as changing social networks. Many also experienced a shift in perspective, with work taking less priority than home life, family, and friendships.

We also found that some participants experienced ongoing or increased psychological and physical symptoms, including increased anxiety, depression, stress, and reduced wellbeing, as well as stomach pains, migraines, and lethargy. Some noted feeling positive about the future as work opportunities were returning for them. Participants also perceived that there are, and will continue to be, implications of the pandemic for the cultural sector and individual life. This included a perception that structural problems will worsen in the future (e.g., inequalities and job precarity) and a fear that their lives may not return to 'normal'.

The study discusses the significance of the diversity of experiences encountered in these follow-up interviews, suggesting that freelancers are experiencing inequalities based on economic, social, and psychological factors. The pandemic may have exacerbated socioeconomic inequalities in particular. It also explores how the insecurity of a freelancer cultural career varies considerably, suggesting that industries have been affected differently (e.g., Film & TV less affected than the performing arts). It recommends that funding structures acknowledge this in order to provide bespoke support in the future. Further, it examines the complexities of online modes of working, noting that this does not suit all artforms, and that finding new offline or 'blended' ways of working may be vital to ensure a motivated and healthy freelance workforce in the future.

Overall, the complex factors that combine together to lead some to continue their freelance careers, or shift their artistic focus, or leave the sector entirely are worthy of following in greater detail in future research. As the pandemic continues, the inequality of experience could be unpacked further so that appropriate measures to reduce this inequality can be put in place.

3.2 THE PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON CULTURAL WORKERS

Growing research is highlighting the negative impact of the pandemic on the mental health of cultural workers. A survey of performing arts professionals (n=385) found that 63% reportedly felt lonelier during the first lockdown, 85% were more anxious, and 69% had three or more symptoms of depression (104). By December 2020, a survey of Scotland's creative sector, including those working within the arts and screen industries, found that 64% of individuals (n=606) had experienced health and wellbeing challenges during the pandemic (106). An interview study carried out between July and November 2020 (n=20) also found mental health challenges including low mood, depression, anxiety and psychosomatic symptoms amongst many cultural workers (122). Follow-up interviews with these workers specifically undertaken for this report between May and July 2021 found that many were still experiencing mental health difficulties that manifested as psychological symptoms (e.g. anxiety, depression or stress) or physical symptoms (e.g. stomach pains, migraines, lethargy) [see Box 5] (113).

For many, the financial impact of the pandemic was a trigger for poor mental health. This was reported both from interview studies (where a perceived relationship between lack of employment and psychological distress was cited (122)(113)) and surveys (where perceived financial hardship was associated with lower wellbeing and higher depression and loneliness scores during the first lockdown (n=385) (104)). Loss of work and uncertainty about future employment were the most common challenges reported by performing artists (104). The quick onset of the lockdown also gave freelance cultural workers little time to prepare financially, and this may have had consequences for mental health and wellbeing (122). As might be expected, mental health improvements have been more common among those whose work opportunities are returning since restrictions have eased in the UK [see Box 5] (113). Nonetheless, ongoing job insecurity is likely to sustain the emotional and psychological burden among many cultural workers, particularly those who are self-employed (122).

The pandemic has also had wider psychological and social effects for cultural workers. For example, prior to the pandemic, social networks were a vital source of securing work in the cultural industries (123) (124). However, new work with new contacts has been limited since 2020, and many have relied on contacts they made prior to the pandemic, tending to work on postponed projects rather than new ones [see Box 5] (113). Many have also had to face the challenges of adapting their work to online modes. Some freelance cultural workers continued auditioning, rehearsing, recording and performing online (122), livestreaming practices and performances on social media (84), and teaching and coaching students through virtual lessons (125). Similarly, many virtual musical groups took advantage of conference calling technologies such as Zoom (126) (127). Some noted positive experiences from these new ways of working such as no travel time, greater convenience and flexibility, fewer expenses, increased feelings of loyalty and opportunities to grow their memberships (84). Qualitative (n=27) and quantitative (n=127) studies of music teachers (secondary and tertiary education) in Portugal and Germany found that while some face-to-face interaction was essential, there have been many positive aspects of remote learning that teachers would like to incorporate into their teaching in the future. Digital technologies allowed work to be adjusted to the needs of each student, led to higher student attendance, more opportunities for connection and feedback and easier access to students' work (128). Online working also provided opportunities for cultural workers to maintain and develop their communities, with online

orchestral rehearsals for professional musicians (for example) helping to maintain the "tribal" aspects of group music and providing an opportunity for members to connect with and support one another (127).

However, platforms for online engagement such as Zoom and Skype were often not adequate for arts and cultural work, with technical difficulties such as bandwidth issues for participants and poor sound transference. Adjusting work to online platforms was not possible for some (e.g. the difficulties of rehearsing online) or not financially viable (e.g. unpaid online performances) (122). Musicians in Belgium and the Netherlands (n=234) were generally resistant to using digital tools to making music together, with only 17% using online platforms early in the pandemic. However, there was a quicker uptake of online methods among those who relied on music making as their main source of income (129). Amongst other challenges of working from home, some freelancers found they simply could not achieve the same output from home without opportunities to collaborate with colleagues or interact with audiences (122). Working from home also made many people busier than normal as they took on the additional tasks of adjusting to online work and caring for family members. This included helping children with schooling, providing meals, and looking after sick individuals or elderly family members (104). Overall, from a mental health perspective, cultural workers felt that little contact with others and their working conditions led them to feel stressed, uneasy, lonely and isolated (122). Many also reported that working from home stifled creativity (104) and removed opportunities to promote work and maintain visibility with audiences (130). Since restrictions have eased during summer 2021, a number of freelancers have started to explore hybrid approaches, working both online and in-person, but many still report few in-person opportunities, and digital challenges are still prevalent [see Box 5] (113).

Further psychosocial challenges had an impact on individuals' sense of identity. Many working in the arts and cultural sector report that their wellbeing depends on being able to create and produce artworks, acknowledging that their identity is connected to a sense of purpose derived from their cultural work (84). In new research undertaken for this report, some freelancers explained that loss of work as a result of the pandemic prompted questioning regarding where and how they constructed their sense of self, due to their most salient (and valued) identity coming from their working lives which intersected with their meaningful social relationships before the pandemic [see Box 6] (131). As such, the disruption caused by the pandemic had serious psychological consequences for cultural workers. A loss of identity, purpose and meaning were reported during the pandemic by arts professionals (104). Some creative groups, such as virtual choirs, endeavoured to maintain their sense of community identity during the pandemic through ritual and preserving aspects of in-person gatherings (126). However, this was not possible for all. As a result, some cultural workers had to diversify their practice and redefine their identity (127) (122) (131). On the other hand, some freelancers who were able to continue working in new ways had opportunities to increase the value they placed in their occupations and deepen their identities [see Box 6] (131).

Throughout these psychosocial challenges, it is possible that some groups have been more affected than others. During the first lockdown, younger performing arts professionals also had worse mental wellbeing than older arts professionals (132), which aligns with broader research related to COVID-19 and mental health (133). Additionally, one study reported that professional singers reportedly suffered greater anxiety and stress than people who were not voice artists, and were also more prone to mental health symptoms than the general population (134). However, more work is needed to confirm if this was indeed a result of their specific profession or whether demographic, socio-economic factors or other broader differential experiences may have contributed to these differences.

Box 6

New research findings

The impact of COVID-19 on the identity and mental health of freelancers working in the UK cultural industries: A qualitative study

The majority of research exploring the impact of the pandemic on those working in the cultural industries has explored its financial impact, with a smaller selection of studies exploring psychosocial impact. In particular, very little research has examined how the pandemic may have affected the identities of cultural workers. Understanding identity changes for this workforce is particularly important because many people working in the cultural industries report that they derive a sense of enjoyment and purpose from their artistic practice, with their career choice deeply connected to 'who they are'. This suggests that major disruptions to this practice may shift perceptions of self, which are crucial to psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction. As shown in this report, freelance cultural workers are one group within the sector who have experienced heightened adverse effects, making them vulnerable to identity changes that could be linked with adverse mental health effects. Thus, this new research carried out thematic analyses on qualitative data from 20 freelance cultural workers across a diverse range of jobs to unpack changes to identity brought on by the pandemic.

The study found that the first UK lockdown prompted freelancers working in the cultural industries to question where and how they engage in ongoing constructions of their sense of self, as their most prominent and valued identity pre-pandemic came from their working lives and their passion for the arts. The lockdown disrupted dimensions of occupational, social, and personal identity, causing individuals to question their sense of purpose in the world. However, not everyone was affected and many were able to continue their freelance work in new ways, enabling them to build and deepen their identity as grounded in certain values and being passionate about 'the arts'. This means that those who questioned their sense of self during the lockdown may need to consider finding new ways to define themselves. This could have an impact on who decides to continue to pursue a freelance cultural career in the future and who decides to seek employment elsewhere.

Future research should consider what changing sociological factors may prompt further disruptions to aspects of identity throughout later stages of the pandemic. This would increase our understanding of who is able to build on previous pre-pandemic aspects of the self as connected to 'the arts' and who seeks or finds new ways to develop their identities. As disruptions also led to adverse mental health impact for some, it is also vital to provide support for freelancers in the cultural industries to help them navigate these changes.

3.3 THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE FUTURE OF THE SECTOR

In terms of the workforce itself, COVID-19 has made the "structural precariousness" of the arts and cultural sector more obvious (104). While such working conditions are not new to cultural workers, the pandemic has reportedly led some to question whether they will find employment again or even if the sector will continue to exist as they know it (104). Among those who have not lost their jobs, there have been some substantial changes. Many have faced a considerable

reduction in work hours, reflected in an increase in the number of people working zero hours (102). Particular groups have also been more likely to leave the cultural industries. For example, turnover among young people has been higher than average, with 27% of those under 25 leaving their occupations after the first lockdown (135). Compared to other industries, very few jobs are available in the arts, entertainment and recreation industry, suggesting that unemployed workers could continue to face difficulties in finding work (101).

It's difficult to know whether these adversities will translate into long-term loss of cultural workers in the arts and cultural sector. Research shows the situation differs amongst individuals. Some have reprioritised their values, appreciating home life, family, friendships, and a slower pace of life more than before the pandemic [see Box 5] (113). Meanwhile many have developed their skillsets, suggesting a commitment to the sector, but there is question over how useful these skills will be in relation to future career prospects. For example, only half of freelancers working in theatre (n=397) intend to use their new skills and 72% are not hopeful about their future work (107). This was especially true for vulnerable groups of cultural workers. For example, forty-two percent of d/deaf and disabled workers report that they are likely to leave the theatre industry, alongside young early career workers and people from ethnic minority groups (136).

Nevertheless, there are recent signs that the arts and cultural sector may start to recover. April 2021 showed the first gradual increase in employee growth within the sector, going up to -15% (from -20%) and rising to -6% (from -11%) by June 2021 (100)(137). Similarly, in June 2021, the annual growth in median pay for employees was highest in the arts and entertainment sector (up by 19%) compared to other sectors (137) and the arts entertainment and recreation industry had the largest percentage growth in vacancies between April and June (138). Thus, while growth is still negative, there are encouraging signs that employment may rise if restrictions continue to ease and the sector continues to open up. This will need to be monitored as other factors come into play such as patterns of audience demand and remaining COVID-19 restrictions. The cultural economy may face a "triple bind" as it tries to recover: organisations' financial savings will have been used up during lockdowns; costs of production will increase with required COVID-19 safety measures; and audience cultural consumerism and public funding will most likely wait for the UK economy to recover (139).

3.4 IMPLICATIONS

Cultural workers have faced significant financial hardship as a result of the pandemic, especially those who have been self-employed or ineligible for government support schemes. They have also suffered psychosocial setbacks caused not only by loss of work but by the unique challenges of adapting their work for a digital world. While online platforms have been used by teachers, choirs, orchestras and others to varying levels of success, this was often not feasible or financially lucrative for many in the cultural industries. Many have also experienced a loss or change in identity, and some groups within the sector have been particularly vulnerable, such as young people starting their careers. Research on the effects of the second and third lockdowns is still emerging, and it is too early to determine what the long-term impact on the size and structure of the arts and cultural sector will be. The repercussions of a prolonged lockdown period will need to be examined throughout 2021 and beyond. What is becoming clearer in ongoing research [see Box 5] (122) is that there is significant diversity in the psychosocial and socio-economic adversities faced by workers, particularly freelancers, in the arts and cultural sector. Those who were in insecure financial positions before the pandemic continued to struggle both financially and mentally. Cultural workers will need to be supported in a variety of ways, with particular attention given to those who have been most negatively impacted [see Box 5] (113).

Evidence from studies in this report supports the view that the pandemic has exacerbated inherent weaknesses in the arts and cultural sector. In particular, the pandemic has worsened structural problems across the cultural industries and it has been proposed that a long-term approach is needed to strengthen and improve working environments for practitioners (110). Zero-hours contracts, job insecurity, and unpaid opportunities have been exposed as having even

greater problems than previously acknowledged within the arts and cultural sector. More than half (55% n=397) of theatre freelancers, for example, feel unsupported by previous employers and ranked lack of support from organisations, public bodies or government as their main professional barriers (107). There have been calls for immediate and long-term reparations for freelancers, such as compensating those who have not received financial support during the pandemic, improving the government response to freelancer hardship, prioritising the retention of cultural workers in the sector, protecting workers from COVID-related income loss in the future, and improving sector opportunities for training and upskilling (111). Therefore, there is a clear need to improve the working conditions of cultural workers throughout the sector and to make the sector more sustainable and able to withstand times of crisis and their aftermath.

Given that the pandemic introduced an unprecedented interest in home-based and online arts engagement, the question of how to sustain and increase the scope of digital arts and cultural activities in the face of challenges has been highlighted (140). A post-pandemic, digitally focused world will require an infrastructure that can enable cultural workers to be flexible in approach and nimble with challenges, as well as provide opportunities for creative experimentation to create innovative and diverse forms of content. Research groups have already started analysing how to study and enable digitisation and hybridisation of arts and culture (141) (142), and the DCMS has emphasised supporting technological and cultural research and development (87). These initiatives should be explored in tandem with questions of what types of artforms can be re-created online and whether they should be. Such decisions will be unique to each industry and to cultural workers themselves.

While digital interaction may be feasible for some and may come with other benefits such as greater accessibility and affordability for audiences, others may find that the inherently social aspects of in-person engagement are essential to the artform. Online social connectivity is different to the shared experiences and interpretations of in-person activities, whether at festivals, galleries, museums, workshops, classes or performances (143). Instead of prioritising digitised arts experiences in the wake of COVID-19, it will be important to ask which arts and cultural activities most benefit from being digitised. Cultural workers should be allowed the freedom to make digital experiences an intentional part of their creative goals, taking into account constraints and benefits such as financial implications, audience reach, and the quality of online production.

Relatedly, there is the issue of the financial viability of online platforms. Much of the online content delivered during the pandemic was delivered free of charge or at very low cost (substantially lower than seeing the work in person). Offering previously filmed pieces (e.g. plays or concerts) was largely done with no reimbursement to the artists involved in the original productions. Moving forwards, this raises a number of issues. First, such business models could cause even more financial problems for freelancers working in the sector. Second, if audiences can watch the same production at substantially lower cost at home, this could reduce the incentive to go to live performances and thereby reduce the revenue for covering the cost of mounting and filming a production in the first place. Third, there are also potential issues around funding: arts organisations could find it harder to attract local funding (e.g. from local authorities) for one-off productions or tours at multiple venues if the production they intend to stage is already available on the internet. Arguments for the importance of providing local access to the arts could be weakened. This could further reduce local offerings in remote or rural locations, making online access the only possibility for those outside of urban areas. Further, if large entertainment enterprises begin developing platforms and delivering arts productions online, there will be questions around whether creators and performers are fairly remunerated and retain appropriate rights. Finally, there are implications for arts venues. Many have already been forced to close during the pandemic, but more could face challenges in attracting audiences if online delivery increases. This will further reduce jobs within the sector.

All these considerations will require collaboration between policymakers, funders, arts and cultural organisations, public and academic institutions, and cultural workers themselves. This is an opportunity for these groups to come together to consider how cultural workers can be best supported. Especially regarding funding support, it will be important to track how the Job Retention Scheme, SEISS, and the CRF reached and benefitted cultural workers as these schemes

come to an end and full data on them become available. Other forms of support could be tested. For example, a three-year trial of a basic income scheme for artists in Ireland might be implemented in January 2022 and could inform other similar initiatives (144). As established in this report, the funding provided for cultural workers has not always reached those who have needed it, with many facing eligibility issues that have led to consequential financial and psychological strain. Further, the impact of the CRF on cultural workers has yet to emerge, particularly as it was aimed at helping organisations and venues to survive rather than individuals. Analyses on how this funding resulted in indirect benefits for this workforce are needed. In the aftermath of the pandemic, cultural workers would also benefit from support programmes that focus on enhancing mental health and wellbeing, help them to develop or maintain their professional identities, and provide training to diversify skillsets to ensure they can successfully return to in-person arts production and delivery or adapt to 'blended' or hybrid ways of working. The pandemic will continue to have reverberating effects on cultural workers' professional and personal lives, and prioritising their needs is crucial to the survival of the arts and cultural sector.

4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the arts and cultural sector, its audiences and its cultural workers will materialise in the months and years to come. Fortunately multiple ongoing research projects in the UK are tracking these emerging effects across a range of arts and cultural disciplines (see examples below).

But already strong themes are emerging for future research where gaps remain. Questions include:

- **What factors facilitated or prevented persistent engagement in the arts during the pandemic?** Research in this report has shown that certain groups of people were more likely to maintain an increase or reduction in engagement, whereas others reverted to behaviours akin to those before the pandemic within a few short months. This highlights that work to broaden audiences needs to focus not just on changing behaviours but also on sustaining them. Further explorations of the barriers and facilitators brought on by the pandemic environment could help us to further understand how individuals can be supported to change and maintain arts behaviours.

- **How will people choose to engage in arts and cultural activities at home now that social distancing is no longer required?** Research on patterns across the second half of 2020 and into 2021 is outlined in this report and has shown changes in the patterns of arts engagement by audience demographics [see Box 2]. But other research exploring longer term patterns will also be needed, especially as

> ## Examples of ongoing research projects
>
> The Centre for Cultural Value, The Audience Agency, the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre and a consortium of academic researchers are leading a national research project on the impacts of COVID-19 on the cultural sector (145).
>
> 'Community COVID' is a collaborative research project examining how creative and cultural activities can benefit people, especially those living alone or isolated from others (146).
>
> 'Digital Access to Arts and Culture Beyond Covid-19' is a research project exploring how digital initiatives can widen access to arts and culture (147).
>
> 'The New Real' is another research project devoted to understanding how new online and hybrid cultural experiences can support the sector's recovery after the pandemic (148).
>
> Researchers of the 'Museums, Crisis and Covid-19' project are examining the impact of the pandemic on museums and how they may need to adapt to meet the new needs of audiences and communities (149).
>
> The research project 'Freelancers in the Dark' is investigating the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on independent theatre workers, documenting their experiences and helping to build a more resilient sector in the future (150).

the country adjusts to the lifting of almost all restrictions. Future research as the pandemic abates will also be needed to understand how lasting anxieties about possible future pandemics, fears of close social contact, and geographical availability of arts opportunities may have more lasting effects on people's engagement.

- **Has the broader financial impact of the pandemic widened social inequalities in access to the arts?** It is promising that lower-income and lower-educational groups have been reached more during the pandemic. But some of these changes in audience demographics have already started to revert to more usual patterns. So research on how and why their barriers to engagement in home-based arts activities were altered and what can be learnt from this will be important for engaging these groups again as we move beyond COVID-19 [see Box 3].

- **Does online engagement have the potential to be used as a tool to support mental health and wellbeing beyond the pandemic?** Research is ongoing exploring the mechanisms by which digital arts can affect coping strategies [see Box 4], but more research will be needed to compare the efficacy of online and in-person arts activities. There are also implications for the delivery of social prescribing schemes, with potential for hybrid or online offerings being implemented alongside community programmes.

- **Can online engagement be used to broaden audiences, especially reaching those who face more barriers to current engagement?** It will be important to explore whether online engagement can be used to reach people

who are vulnerable or isolated or otherwise unable to access in-person activities. To date there is also very little research into how the pandemic affected arts engagement for people with disabilities and whether online offerings could help to remove some barriers to access.

- **How can online platforms be effectively designed?** It will be important to understand how to deliver digital programmes that enable more diverse audiences to access them whilst also providing necessary financial remuneration to those workers involved in the production of such work, all while not detracting from in-person arts offerings.

- **What will the role of the arts within education be beyond this pandemic?** Young people's education has been severely disrupted by the pandemic, and as schools work to catch up, time previously provided for arts engagement may be diverted to core academic subjects. However, young people's mental health and social engagement have also been substantially affected and the arts could be an important part of rebuilding psychological and social wellbeing. It will be key to identify what role the arts can play and work to ensure that young people have sufficient opportunities to engage with the arts.

- **What will be the impact of changes in the arts sector over the coming few years on the cultural workforce?** Young people and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and minority groups may find it harder to enter the sector if there are ongoing concerns about the financial precariousness of cultural careers. It will be important to identify how to provide adequate financial support to such groups to continue to encourage them to engage as workers.

- **What will be the ongoing impact of pandemic-related changes on cultural workers' wellbeing and mental health?** Research in this report has examined the psychological and social effects of the pandemic across 2020-2021 [see Boxes 5 and 6], but long-term studies will also be needed.

- **What ongoing financial and psychological support is needed for cultural workers?** Research in this report has shown that many people working in the sector have been unable to secure adequate funding to support them during the turbulence of the pandemic, which has also resulted in adverse psychological effects. Financial hardship and poor mental health among workers may continue even as restrictions ease, as not everyone will return to work at the same time. It will be important to investigate who needs ongoing support and to create funding schemes that are accessible for those who have limited time and resources.

- **Finally, if the arts and cultural sector faces a substantial loss of workers and a contraction of in-person opportunities, what will be the impact for mental health and wellbeing within society?** It is well recognised that arts engagement supports physical and mental health at a population level, both playing a role in preventing ill-health and supporting people in the management of and recovery from illness. However, if opportunities for arts and cultural engagement are threatened, this could translate into an impact on public health.

5. CONCLUSION

The pandemic has had substantial effects on the arts and cultural sector. In the first year of the pandemic, a number of paradoxes emerged relating to people's engagement with the arts and the consequences on the arts and cultural sector. As the pandemic has continued, experiences and effects have become even more complex and heterogeneous. This report has reviewed literature relating to people's engagement with the arts, the impact of this engagement on individuals' mental health and wellbeing, and the effects of the pandemic on the arts and cultural sector as a whole. It has highlighted the importance of continuously monitoring these effects and experiences as the pandemic continues and abates so that appropriate nuanced strategies can be implemented to support individuals and the arts and cultural sector as a whole.

Overall, the pandemic has also highlighted a critical issue around the importance of the arts and the value that we assign to them. Across history, it has repeatedly been demonstrated that in times of crisis and emergency, the arts have a key role to play in supporting social cohesion, mental health and individual and group identity. The most notable, often cited example of this is the proliferation of the arts in countries internationally during the Second World War where, far from being an ornament or luxury within society, the arts were shown to be essential. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this intrinsic value society places in the arts has been demonstrated again by the instinctive way people have engaged as a means of coping—both through traditional modes (e.g. home-based arts and crafts) and through new methods (e.g. with the rapid expansion of digital offerings) when traditional modes were thwarted. This highlights how vital it is that the arts are supported and nurtured within society moving forwards. Yet this report raises grave issues about the precariousness of the arts and cultural sector as we emerge from the pandemic. If unaddressed, the challenges facing the sector could lead to a permanent loss of cultural venues, workers and ultimately audiences.

In concluding, as we look ahead, we need to remember that the events of the pandemic are not occurring in a vacuum but alongside other major events that will also play a role in shaping the future of the sector, including (but not limited to) Brexit and the likely privatisation of the BBC (which remains a major employer and commissioner). Any plans to address challenges raised by and during the pandemic need to consider the broader societal context in which these challenges have emerged.

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