

Open Arms News

Creative Age Update, June 2021

Earlier this year, Open Arms took a decision to stop, pause, take stock of the previous months since the pandemic started, and devote time to thinking more deeply about how to move forwards. In our much changed and continually changing world, we felt we couldn't go on simply 'reacting' in crisis mode. A different response was needed.

We were full of questions: how were others working in a similar field to us faring? How to address the needs of the dementia community who had become even more isolated during the pandemic, and especially those with least access to arts provision? How to reach the hundreds of people living with dementia in Cheltenham who we knew weren't being reached? How to share our information better to make more people aware of what we do? How to help people 'emerge', want to reconnect and engage again in 3D, after this protracted, challenging time? How to ensure *quality* of arts provision with confidence through new media? How to sustain the huge increase in necessary, bespoke 1-2-1 work caused by the pandemic?.....The list went on.

So we applied for funding for a period of Research and Development and were successful in receiving it from Gloucestershire Funders. Here's an update on what's been happening.

We have been listening, sharing and exchanging – with old friends and new - locally, regionally and nationally; nourishing ourselves by joining creative sessions, webinars and reading about others' work; meeting new community champions in Cheltenham who are helping signpost us to people we want to meet and work with who are harder to reach; making a film about Creative Age; and finally, at long last, we are building a website!

During this time, Rachel, Bernard, Liz and Tina have continued to make regular phone calls to people from CA, sometimes also meeting up with them in person. We had a catch-up as a team at the Pump Rooms recently. It was so nice we decided to suggest to CA participants that we all meet for tea there in August. So far there's been quite good uptake for that.

We continue to learn about the impact of the pandemic on older people, as more comes to light. For people living with dementia and their partners/supporters it has been particularly challenging. Those we know tell us how it has accelerated their deterioration, fundamentally changed daily behaviours and what they can and can no longer do. With couples, that applies to both partners - the needs of many carers have rocketed.

We've also learned that many artists working with older people have had to stop their work as artists. With incomes drying up, they've had to look elsewhere for a more secure financial existence. Surviving artists we've met seem pretty exhausted and many of them too are re-orientating, re-assessing, re-defining who they are, what they do, how they go forwards.

So there has been a mix of sobering and difficult, as well as reassuring, inspiring and hope-generating conversations. We've particularly valued the opportunity to share candidly with

other artists - nationally with the Elders Theatre Network, as well as locally and regionally, including at a Peer Exchange event Open Arms set up and hosted online. Reaching out to others facing similar challenges and the sense of solidarity and connection that has generated has been bolstering. So easily we work in our own small bubbles and forget how much support

and help we can give each other, simply through our shared understanding born out of common experiences.

Nationwide some truly amazing, life-giving, arts-based work has been happening, encouraging everyday creativity amongst older people. The beneficial impact of this work has been undeniable – referred to often by participants as offering a ‘lifeline’ to them, keeping them going, connected, motivated.

These conversations have reinvigorated us as artists, made us want to be more bold, look outward and cross new thresholds. We now want to go out again and keep discovering meaningful, creative and above all FUN ways of engaging with our community of older people – and don’t we all need bucket-loads of FUN right now?!

So that’s what we are now planning: in partnership with Cheltenham Borough Homes and along with our associate artists, we’re going to visit some sheltered housing venues in Cheltenham to have some fun with residents outdoors, hoping there may be some recruits for our new programme when it starts again in the Autumn at Bethesda, all being well.

Through this time we’ve felt very fortunate to be able to have a dialogue with our funders. They have been great listeners and supporters during this period of reflection, research and development. We are very grateful to them.

Lisa Harrison
June 2021

