Connect and Create (Bubble Wrap) Evaluation
Final Report

April 2021

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Connect and Create ('Bubble Wrap') Evaluation
Executive summary

- Bubble Wrap is a collaboration between the Wardens Trust and Wonderful Beast to address and reduce loneliness and social isolation in East Suffolk through an innovation arts programme. This evaluation was produced following the main, four week workshop programme - but before the follow-up/engagement activities due to take place as Covid-19 restrictions ease. It is likely that the full impact of the programme will only be realised after these follow-up/engagement activities have happened.
- 19 participants engaged throughout the whole programme. All but one were aged 65 or over.
- In terms of overall satisfaction, Bubble Wrap was clearly successful. At the end of the programme, participants were asked to rate it out of 5 stars, where 5 stars was best. All participants rated it as 4 or 5 stars.
- Almost three quarters of the participants felt that taking part of Bubble Wrap had helped make it easier to take part in future activities with other people.
- The evaluation found that the Covid-19 lockdowns have had a significant impact in terms of increasing feelings of loneliness. At least two of the participants experiencing profound loneliness, reported feeling less lonely after the programme.
- The evaluation suggests that there were some particularly successful elements of the programme design - in terms of addressing loneliness and social isolation - which would be important to maintain in future iterations of Bubble Wrap:
  - ★ The technique of using and blending individual participants' concepts (words and wishes) into a collective, shared creative endeavour
  - ★ Working with small groups, to enable spontaneity and reduced anxiety
  - ★ Skilled facilitation to 'gently' ensure group cohesion and inclusiveness.

- The evaluation also suggested some areas for development in future programmes:
  - ★ A stronger focus on mediating contact between participants outside of the programme;
  - ★ Maximising the potential of the programme as a vehicle for enhancing participants' connectedness with their local communities;
  - ★ Reviewing possibilities for using other functions of Zoom (e.g. breakout rooms) to support activities which increase small group interaction and confidence-building.

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'Bubble Wrap'
Bubble Wrap is a collaboration between the Wardens Trust and Wonderful Beast to address and reduce loneliness and social isolation in East Suffolk through an innovation arts programme.

This initiative comprised a 5 week programme. The main body of the programme included 4 small group sessions on Zoom, once a week over 4 consecutive weeks. Each session was jointly facilitated by the Artistic Director of Wonderful Beast along with a different professional artist each week. Each artist specialised, respectively, in poetry, music, acting/story-telling and dance:
  ● Dean Parkin: poetry
  ● Hilary Greatorex: acting
  ● Anusha Subramanyam: dance
  ● Martina Schwarz: music
  In terms of participants, a total of 22 older people were enrolled on the programme, divided into 4 small groups. In the 5th week, the groups came together for two final events in which each group gave performances to the other groups.

Bubble Wrap schedule				
Week commencing	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
15/02/2021	Poetry	Poetry	Poetry	Poetry
22/02/2021	Acting	Dance	Music	Music
01/03/2021	Music	Acting	Dance	Dance
08/03/2021	Dance	Music	Acting	Acting
15/03/2021	2 x Final Events			

Follow-up activities are planned. These include:
  ● re-engaging participants through an on-line exhibition: a 'Gallery' featuring the creative work produced by participants in the programme can be accessed on the Wonderful Beast website;
  ● an edited film of the recorded sessions, to be used to re-engage participants and for recruitment for future projects;

- holding an in-person event for all participants on the Warden's Trust premises, pending the lifting of Covid-19 lockdown restrictions.

The impact of Covid-19
An initial design for the programme was conceived following the first Covid-19 lockdown, with the design focused on including in-person recruitment and delivery. This design was revised in response to the subsequent lockdown, with the focus shifting to remote delivery.

This shift raised a number of challenges for Wonderful Beast and the Wardens Trust, not least in terms of identifying and recruiting isolated people, and those with the interest, confidence/skills and means to engage in a programme delivered via Zoom. The main effect of this was to move the focus of recruitment away from more vulnerable older people, those with dementia and those in care, and towards older people living in the community.

The evaluation
The aim of the evaluation was to assess the impact of Bubble Wrap in terms of participant satisfaction and potential effects on loneliness and social isolation. Moreover, the Wardens Trust and Wonderful Beast view Bubble Wrap as representing a pilot programme for future arts-based initiatives in Suffolk. As such, a focus of the evaluation was to capture learning to inform the design of future initiatives. To meet these aims, the evaluation set out to:
1. To record and monitor the participant profile
2. To record changes in the rate of participants' self-reported loneliness
3. To test and explore the design elements of Bubble Wrap

The evaluation is informed by before/after surveys of programme participants and in-depth interviews with 4 participants. In terms of the survey, a good response rate was achieved:
- the 'before' survey was completed by 18 of the 22 participants who enrolled in the programme;
- the 'after' survey was completed by 15 out of the 19 participants who finished the full programme.

It is important to note that this evaluation has been produced after the end of the Zoom group work sessions but before the follow-up/engagement activities. As such, the evaluation can only provide partial insight. It is likely that the full impact of the programme will only be realised after the planned follow-up/engagement activities and any subsequent, spin-off activities.

Overarching satisfaction

At the end of the programme, participants were asked to rate it out of 5 stars, where 5 stars was best. All of the 14 participants who answered this question rated it as 4 or 5 stars (7 x 5 stars; 7 x 4 stars). **Almost three quarters of the participants felt that taking part of Bubble Wrap had helped make it easier to take part in future activities with other people.**

Participants valued the programme for a number of reasons. It provided an opportunity for fun and laughter in a 'safe environment':

> *"We were granted a sort of licensed foolery."*
>
> *"It allowed me to be myself."*
>
> *"We were made to feel trusting to jump in, to risk not being perfect, keeping the spontaneity."*
>
> *"The group leaders were always positive about what we were doing."*
>
> *"It was great to do creative things and to be listened to."*

It offered opportunities to meet and spend time with people during the lockdown:

> *"The best thing was having contact with the outside world during lockdown."*
>
> *"I looked forward to Bubble Wrap each week. It made me feel connected to real life and made me feel hopeful."*
>
> *"It was a relief to find a fun way out of lockdown, which is sometimes so mundane."*

Participants highlighted the stimulation and inspiration they gained through Bubble Wrap - *"feeling sparked by other creative people":*

> *"[The programme was] engaging and I enjoyed working together with people I would never have been in a situation to engage with. It was a way of broadening my horizon*

> *by stepping out of my bubble of familiarity and predictability. The program was 'unexpected', being taken 'by the hand' and exploring new territory."*

Participants also valued the opportunity to work with skilled, professional artists:

> *"I enjoyed the out-of-the-ordinary activities, working with real artists."*
>
> *"The best thing was [the Wonderful Beast's Artistic Director] and the four artists' skills and experience in facilitating and encouraging."*

Who took part and why?

Participants were recruited to the programme through a number of means:
- Via posts on local, art-related mailing lists;
- Contacted through community-based groups;
- Through parish magazines;
- Referred by friends and word-of-mouth;
- Direct contact with residential care homes.

Recruitment made extensive use of social media and the circulation of an introductory video about the programme. Recruitment activities were supported by advice from the Warden's Trust and Wonderful Beast's existing networks developed through previous outreach activities. Wonderful Beast also joined arts and community groups in order to facilitate targeted promotion of the programme.

Keeping people engaged and retained over a sustained period is a fundamental requirement of initiatives to address isolation. Although 22 people initially enrolled in the programme, 3 participants dropped out at an early stage for various reasons. Unlike other participants, these three participants had not been recruited directly by Wonderful Beast but via an intermediary. It is likely that participants who had been recruited directly and in person by Wonderful Beast had clearer expectations and a more active commitment to the programme from the outset. Indeed, in interviews and survey responses, participants praised the quality and encouraging tone of the information and organisation leading up to the workshops.

> *"I was almost too late to join but [the Wonderful Beast Artistic Director] made it terribly easy to join. She gave lots of detail and I joined because I liked the sound of the multidisciplinary practice."*
>
> *"The administration was perfect 10 out of 10. The communication and reminders*

Of the remaining 19 participants, all remained engaged throughout the whole programme.

The profile of the participant group can be summarised as follows:

<u>Age</u>: over two-thirds of the participants were aged 65-74 years. One participant was aged under 65 (between 55-64); the rest were 75 or older.

<u>Gender</u>: most participants were women, with a 5:1 ratio of women to men.

<u>Health</u>: around a quarter of participants reported having long-term illnesses, health problems or disabilities which limited their daily activities.

<u>Living circumstances</u>: a third of participants lived alone. One participant lived with two or more people; most participants lived with one other person. For comparison, about a third of people aged 65 and over in the UK live alone, so the Bubble Wrap cohort reflects this closely.
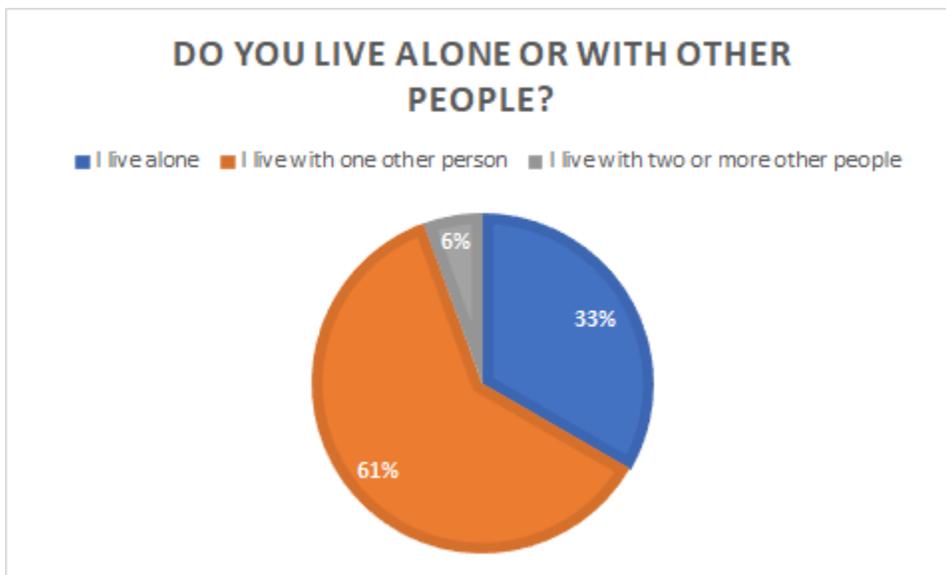
Prior to Covid-19, most participants - four-fifths - took part in activities with other people two or more days per week. Only two participants engaged in activities less than once a week. Since the Covid-19 lockdowns, participants engaged in fewer activities:

two-thirds did activities two or more days a week, and five participants had activities less than once a week. The *type* of activities changed too: before the lockdowns, participants were involved in a richer array of activities, spanning: holidays; eating-out; visiting friends and family; voluntary work and church-based groups; swimming; dancing; walking; keep-fit; art groups; amateur dramatic groups; etc. During lockdown, participants were generally limited to church-based and Zoom-based activities.
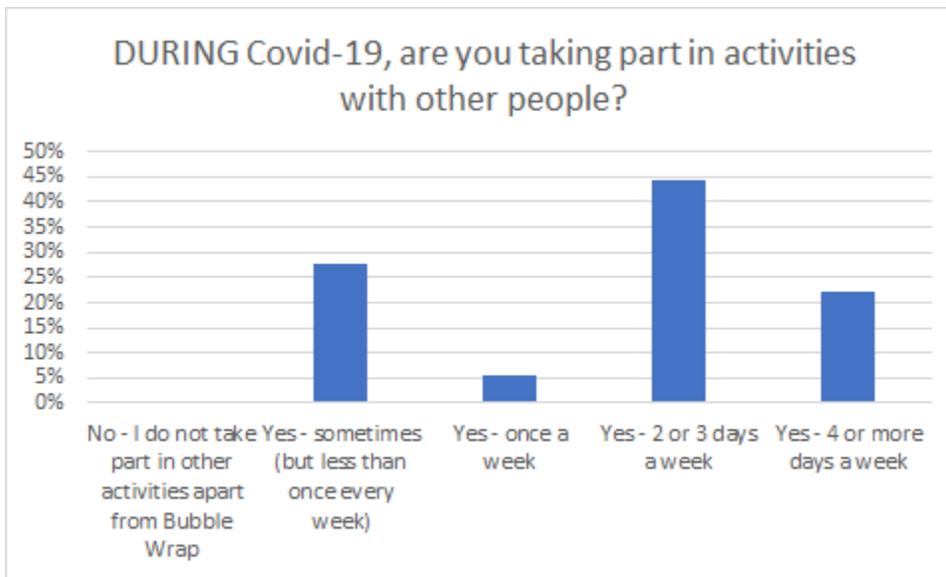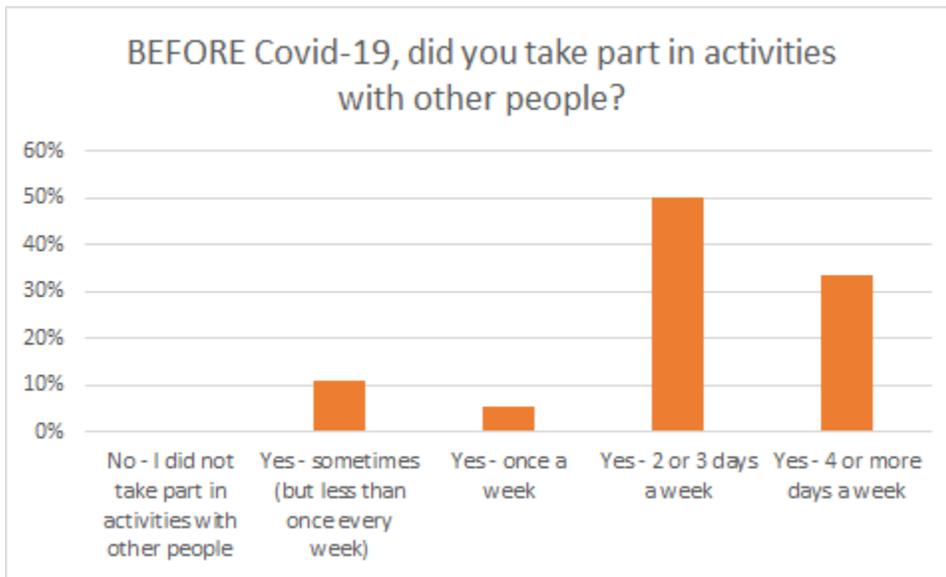
Prior to Bubble Wrap, over three quarters of the participants had taken part in other creative workshops or arts-based projects.

Five participants specified that their primary motivation for joining Bubble Wrap was to meet new people, to have company and social interaction. For most participants, however, their primary motivation for enrolling was expressed in terms of wanting mental stimulation, inspiration, the opportunity to try new things and help foster their creativity. As one participant put it, they looked to Bubble Wrap to be a 'stimulus for the brain and a boost to my morale'. In interviews, this need for stimulation was particularly associated with the experience of the Covid-19 lockdowns:

> *"I was busy involved in the local school and then everything suddenly stopped. It was a bit of a shock. We felt locked in… A friend told me about [Bubble Wrap] because she was concerned that I was suddenly 'stuck'...it was a life saver."*
>
> *"The thing that makes me happy is the doing of something. With lockdown I missed the stimulus to be creative. We all needed something - to meet people, to do things together - to cheer us up in the glum winter months."*

Impact on feelings of loneliness

The before/after surveys measured changes in self-reported loneliness using the standard UCLA 3-item indicator recommended by the Office for National Statistics. This asks three questions:
- How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
- How often do you feel left out?
- How often do you feel isolated from others?

Responses to each question can be scored to provide a single loneliness score.

A number of factors must be taken into account when attempting to measure changes in self-reported levels of loneliness. Generally, given the relative brevity of the programme, we need to be realistic about its likely impact on people experiencing long-term social isolation. There are also methodological obstacles: participants completed the before/after surveys anonymously. This means that changes in reported loneliness cannot be assessed on an individual basis but only for the whole sample and for selected sub-samples. Even then, not everyone who completed the 'before' survey went to complete the 'after' survey. In small surveys like this, differences between the 'before' and 'after' sample groups can have a large effect on the results.

In the 'before' survey, participants were asked about their feelings of isolation/social connectedness both at the time of the survey (during lockdown) and how they had felt prior to the lockdowns. The 'after survey' asked about how participants felt at the point at which the Bubble Wrap programme had just finished (with the lockdown still

continuing). To provide a reference point, these scores are compared with scores for all adults in England aged 50+ in 2016/17[1].

Participants feelings of loneliness, with comparison to loneliness in England for adults aged 50+				
	Adults aged 50+ in England pre-Covid (2016/17)	Bubble Wrap participants		
		Pre-Covid-19 lockdowns	Before the programme/ during lockdown	After the programme (during lockdown)
Hardly ever or never lonely	**69%**	**67%**	**22%**	**13%**
	-	n. 12	n.4	n.2
Lonely some of the time	**24%**	**33%**	**61%**	**80%**
	-	n.6	n.11	n.12
Often lonely	**7%**	**0%**	**17%**	**7%**
	-	n.0	n.3	n.1

This table highlights a number of things:
- It shows that the profile of the participants pre-Covid is broadly comparable to that of older people in England. This might suggest that, overall, the Bubble Wrap were not a particularly lonely group pre-Covid.
- Lockdown had a significant impact in terms of increasing feelings of loneliness. Comparing pre-Covid results with results for before the programme/during lockdown, we see that the proportion of participants feeling lonely for at least some of the time has more than doubled.
- Care is required when interpreting the impact of the programme on self-reported loneliness. For the reasons noted above, we cannot generally identify change on an individual basis among participants (although we can examine some changes within sub-groups, e.g. participants living alone, participants with a disability, etc). In the table above, the apparent reduction in the proportion of participants feeling hardly or never lonely is <u>unlikely</u> to mean that the participant group experienced greater loneliness after the programme than before it. Instead, this change is

[1] Age UK (2018):
https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/loneliness/loneliness-report_final_2409.pdf

more likely to reflect a change in the sample group: simply, participants who completed the 'before' survey did not complete the 'after survey'. At the same time, the increase in the group of participants feeling lonely some of the time has increased because, post-programme, it includes one or more participants who, pre-programme, had felt lonely often.

- Where we can best identify change among individual participants is among those with more profound experiences of loneliness. That is, our sub-group analysis of the survey responses can identify that **at least two of the participants who said that they often felt lonely before the programme, reported feeling less lonely after the programme.**
- Given the significant impact of the lockdown on participants prior to the programme, it is important to recognise that lockdown was still continuing when the programme finished. This means that participants left the programme into an environment in which the 'normal' opportunities for social engagement and connectedness remained restricted. This is likely to have mediated the impact of the programme.

The design (Theory of Change) of Bubble Wrap
The hypothesis underlying the design of Bubble Wrap can be described in two ways.

First, Bubble Wrap can be described in terms of the objectives of the Arts Council's 'Let's Create' Strategy. In these terms, the programme…

supports and uses the local, professional cultural sector, in order to…
⬇
foster a cultural community in East Suffolk, improving lives and bring people together, in which...
⬇
people can be creative, think, experiment, and better understand their lives and their opportunities to engage meaningfully with others

Second, Bubble Wrap can be described in terms of the outcomes it aims to achieve. That is, to address related isolation and loneliness among the older people, by providing a safe, friendly and creatively-fluid environment to:
- Engender self-worth and build social confidence
- Liberate creativity
- Promote personal interaction
- Find new paths to connecting with others
- Encourage social inclusivity
- Reveal hidden talents

These descriptions highlight a number of design elements which are supported by the evidence-base on best practice (see e.g. the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/10-tips-to-help-your-project-reduce-loneliness_NPC.pdf). In these terms, the hypothesis driving Bubble Wrap can be articulated as follows:

To address loneliness and social isolation:

a) By providing a safe, supported environment to overcome any perceived **stigma** participant's feel associated with loneliness, and to build **confidence** and skills in making and developing relationships

b) To facilitate the development of **genuine relationships** by facilitating group sessions which use art 'as a key for encouraging conversation, developing relationships, connecting with each other, reminiscing, discovering hidden talents and creating opportunity for mutual participation, enjoyment and sense of achievement'.

c) To promote participants' sustained engagement and connection beyond the initiative by including a focus on **local community** and building on **local assets** and strengths - both using local artists, and building on participants' creativity

d) To recognise the **value of technology** and videoconferencing for facilitating and supporting social contact but also to promote the development of participants' strategies for face-to-face contacts beyond the initiative.

Stigma and confidence

The group started with a high degree of confidence in meeting new people. Asked to rank how comfortable they felt about meeting new people on a scale of 1-10 (with 10 being 'very confident'), all of the group ranked themselves 6 or higher - with an average rank of 8. There was no clear indication from the evaluation of whether or not the programme had any impact on participants' confidence in this respect.

Similarly, even before the programme, the group started with a strong interest in taking part in other arts-based projects after Bubble Wrap (average score of 8 on a scale of 1-10 where 10 was most interested). This was matched - again, at the outset of the programme - with high confidence within the group in their ability to actually take part in such future groups (average score of 8). The evaluation could not detect whether or not the programme went on to influence these confidence levels. Where participants felt that they faced obstacles to participation in future projects, these were described in terms of: health and mobility; anxiety and restrictions associated with Covid-19; accessibility; and lack of time because of other commitments.

Nevertheless, there was also evidence that the design of Bubble Wrap enabled participants to feel and build self-confidence. The evaluation highlighted a number of important and successful design features of Bubble Wrap in this regard. These were: a) the design of the programme of activities, together with b) the style in which the programme was facilitated.

a) The design of the programme of activities was successful in building individual confidence and group-bonding because it involved blending participants' individual contributions into a common, shared creative endeavour. One participant explained how this worked:

> *"We started with each of us coming up with words. These words fuelled what we did over the weeks and drove things through. …[Even people who did not initially seem comfortable in the group soon became more confident because] everybody was given tasks by the facilitator - to come up with words or wishes. And we listened to each others' words and they were woven into a story. So everyone was working individually and together."*

The size of groups was also vital for achieving this experience. A number of participants highlighted the importance of having small groups for allowing fluid interaction:

> *"It was a small group so nobody had to mute. It was very interactive. It felt like we were almost in the room with one another."*

Participants contrasted this with other Zoom meetings they had experienced, with bigger groups, in which spontaneous interaction was difficult, where people had needed to put their hands up before they could speak, and where attendees had felt anxious about interrupting each.

b) In terms of the style in which the programme was facilitated, participants highlighted the quality of engagement and inclusion. In the follow-up survey, for example, participants were asked how welcome they had been made to feel at the start of the programme. On a scale of 1-10, where 10 was extremely welcome, all participants gave a score of 8-10, with an average score of 9. Participants commented on amusing ice breaker activities which ensured that the groups "really, really gelled". The participants went on to explain how the facilitators had made sure that everyone was included, engaged and felt comfortable about joining in:

> *"They gently encouraged everyone to partake. I'm a bit slow coming forward, but they had a way of bringing you in. That was a very vital factor."*
>
> *"There was no sense of, 'Oh, I wonder who's listening, I wonder if I sound stupid.'"*
>
> *"Every time, if somebody wasn't saying anything, [The Wonderful Beast Artistic Director] would turn the conversation around to include them. Everyone's contribution was valued."*
>
> *"All the facilitators were consistently very enthusiastic, dedicated, inclusive and appreciative of every one taking part in the session. When something did not go to plan they remained relaxed, positive and upbeat."*

Relationships and local connectedness

In the survey, **all of the participants said that they had met new people on the Bubble Wrap programme.** When asked what they had got most out of the programme, nearly all participants mentioned their interaction with other participants:

> *"What I liked most was engaging and working together with people I would never have been in a situation to engage with."*
>
> *"The best thing was feeling sparked by other creative people."*
>
> *"Being able to laugh with others."*

However, at the time of the 'after survey', participants were uncertain about whether the programme would lead to new relationships. **Asked if they thought that they would meet and spend time with people they had met on the programme, more than two-thirds of the participants said that they did not know.** (Three participants said that they probably would; one participant said that they probably would not).

> *"We were not really put in touch with each other. That wasn't particularly encouraged. I'm not sure that that was the point of it. I know that Wonderful Beast will stay in touch with us."*

Wonderful Beast reported that they had invited participants to share their email addresses in order to make contact with each other outside of and following the programme. However, it is apparent that not all participants picked up on this:

> *"It would be nice to meet people afterwards, but it was not planned. I think it was mentioned, like, if you meet each other afterwards it would be a good thing…"*
>
> *"We didn't share emails and that's sad in a way. I'd love to make contact with the others but I didn't like to ask, I didn't know what their situations were. ...There's a potential for people to make contact with each other if it was organised by Wonderful Beast."*

The follow-up activities will be a further opportunity for participants to forge such connections with one another. Certainly, some participants were aware of these future opportunities:

> "No, there's probably no social follow-up, but we may be getting together in the summer at the Warden's Trust".

The interviews did not suggest that the programme had a marked impact on enhancing participants' knowledge of and access to local community and local assets.

> *"It was local in the sense that when we bump into each other at the same events, the fact that we were on Bubble Wrap together will be a talking point and deepen our friendship. ... It did widen my knowledge about Wonderful Beast and the Warden's trust but not really any more than that…. I'm involved in [other local creative groups] anyway."*
>
> *"People could have come from anywhere - all over the place - we didn't share where we lived. It would have been nice to share but I don't know if that would have been appropriate."*

Again, these findings are likely to reflect that the evaluation has been produced prior to the follow-up events. It might also reflect that - as discussed above - most participants started the programme with a level of engagement with other people locally and confidence in being able to access activities in the future. In this sense, their needs and appetite for new local connectedness may not have been as pronounced as for other older people experiencing loneliness. Nevertheless, this may be an aspect of the programme design to strengthen in future iterations. Indeed, Wonderful Beast have reflected that although they did encourage participants to talk about where they lived (in

a general sense) - and to exchange email addresses - they will consider a more structured approach to this in future projects.

Technology
The group started with a high degree of confidence in using Zoom. Asked to rank how comfortable they felt using Zoom on a scale of 1-10 (with 10 being 'very confident'), two thirds of the group ranked themselves 7 or higher.

> *"I am a regular user of Zoom meetings since the lockdown, participating in different kinds of groups. Doing that has become the new normal."*

Only 2 participants ranked themselves lower than 5 on this scale. Among participants who were less comfortable on Zoom, there is some suggestion that their confidence had increased during the course of the programme. For example, one participant felt that becoming more comfortable using Zoom through the course of Bubble Wrap would help make it easier for them to take part in future activities with people.

There was a general sense that the group valued the use of Zoom, particularly in the context of the Covid-19 lockdown. One participant, for example, described how it had made the programme 'wonderfully accessible' during lockdown. Others appreciated the access it gave the group to professional artists from across the country.

There was some consideration in interviews and the survey as to the extent to which Zoom had been used to its full potential in the programme. For example, some participants suggested using virtual 'breakout' rooms before or during sessions to allow more one-to-one or small group interaction and time for unstructured socialising. Others suggested additional, small group 'rehearsal sessions'.

> *"Practising some paired tasks in a 'rehearsal room' might help warm up confidence for those who need it."*

As the Bubble Wrap follow-up activities are yet to happen, the evaluation cannot assess how the use of Zoom has helped the development of participants' strategies for face-to-face interaction beyond the programme.

Observations for future design

The evaluation suggests that there were some particularly successful elements of the programme design - in terms of addressing loneliness and social isolation - which would be important to maintain in future iterations of Bubble Wrap:

- ★ The technique of using and blending individual participants' concepts (words and wishes) into a collective, shared creative endeavour
- ★ Working with small groups, to enable spontaneity and reduced anxiety
- ★ Skilled facilitation to 'gently' ensure group cohesion and inclusiveness.

The evaluation also suggested some areas for development in future programmes:

- ★ A stronger focus on mediating contact between participants outside of the programme;
- ★ Maximising the potential of the programme as a vehicle for enhancing participants' connectedness with their local communities;
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