



Interim report on activity: February 2019 - September 2020

Arts Alive and MediaActive Projects first began collaborating in 2017 to develop new partnerships and new arts provision for older people across the rural county of Shropshire. In 2018, with Arts Council England's and Barings Foundation's *Celebrating Age* funding, we embarked on a new programme of artists' workshops and residencies in a range of settings and contexts, both community based, and in care settings, and supported by training for both artists and partners organisations.

The programme has worked in partnership with a range of social and health care, and community and cultural organisations, and has attracted investment from Shropshire Council, Garfield Weston, Connexus, Eveson Trust, Millichope Foundation, The Community Foundation for Staffordshire & the NET Coronavirus Appeal and The National Lottery Community Fund.

The Creative Conversations offer has included performing and visual, creative media and digital artforms, and the programme has benefitted from the involvement of experienced creative practitioners including: musician and storyteller, musicologist and curator, dance artist, poet, visual artists, animator, and MediaActive's digital arts associates.

The programme is open to people aged 55 years and over although the majority of participants are in their 70's and 80's plus.



There have been many highlights, including:

- Storyteller Sal Tonge and Dance Artist Rachel Liggit working with residents of a care home to explore spontaneous storytelling, song and movement, inspired by everyday objects.
- Poet Jean Atkin co-creating poems with elders living in care, reflecting the richness of their lived experiences.
- AGE UK choir members working with Musicologist Adrian Plant to create and pilot a Vodcast (audio and visuals) that celebrates the benefits of singing and their experiences of joining a choir.
- Artist Jill Impey upskilling older volunteers in digital arts so that they can adopt new creative approaches when supporting elders living both independently and in care settings.
- Artist Dea Paradisos collaborating with members of LGBTQ+ activist group SAND to create a short film that considers what advice they would each give to their younger selves.
- Animator Samantha Moore and The Merry Makers crafting group swapping skills and exploring the relationship between knitting and wellbeing.

Summary

The Creative Conversations (CC) project has grown in ways we could not have predicted when we initially set off on this conversations journey. We have learned so much and our assumptions from the outset have frequently been disrupted.

We have involved more practitioners and artforms than we initially planned to, and this has strengthened the project, extending the breadth of the creative offer, and providing more opportunities for collaboration between practitioners and artforms and partner organisations. The project has invested time and budget to ensure the quality of participatory activity is informed by best practice, and this has been achieved by supporting the practitioners through professional development opportunities: guidance provided our Creative Producers, sharing of expertise and knowledge between project partners and artists, and providing access to external training and *go and see* opportunities.



the creative team sharing experiences of working on the project

In addition, Arts Alive and MediaActive Projects, have undertaken research and attended, and taken inspiration from, local and national seminars, and have cascaded learning and ideas to the artists and partner organisations involved.

As expected, the project has involved a wide range of partners and host organisations, working with participants in a wide variety of settings and contexts, with and in: community groups, care homes, day centres, libraries and museum, arts venues and community centres, and since the pandemic some of the participatory activity has been pivoted to online platforms. Participants aged 55+ to 100+, have been involved as part of an established group, and as individuals recruited through open invitation.

Activity Overview

Phase 1, April 2018 to February 2019, saw research and development, artists and partners training, and a series of artist-led creative taster sessions take place in a variety of settings across the county, all of which informed the main participatory and production programme in **Phase 2** (due to finish in July 2020).

Phase 2 was interrupted by the pandemic, and has subsequently developed an additional Virtual strand, which will continue through to March 2021.

Phase 2 has seen artists working in multiple settings with both individuals and groups of older people harnessing their creativity during workshops and residencies. For **Phase 3** artworks created through the programme will be showcased in online and gallery-based exhibitions, whilst a touring performance piece has been devised (and filmed), informed by some of the artworks made during the creative workshops. As a result of the recent disruptions the exhibition and tour have been rescheduled from October 2020 to February 2021, to coincide with the final Creative Conversations Sharing Event that will feature case studies and highlights from the project.

Training, Professional Development, Go and See visits.

Throughout the project artists and partners have been offered training and opportunity to develop their professional practice.

Activity has included:

Skill sharing between artists through creative collaboration

Creative use of iPads - We Engage

Creative Evaluation - Sue Challis

Working creatively with archive film – MediaActive Projects

Dementia Awareness – Magdelana Schamberger

Devising Story – Ruth Cockburn



training days - for artists and partners

An additional bespoke performance piece Curious Shoes, devised and directed by Magdelana Schamberger, toured across Shropshire providing opportunities for people living with Dementia and their loved ones to access this work. The feedback from audiences was extraordinary. The show toured to Wem, Ludlow, Quatt and Church Stretton, and the CC artists had opportunity to attend the show and attend training with Magdelena.



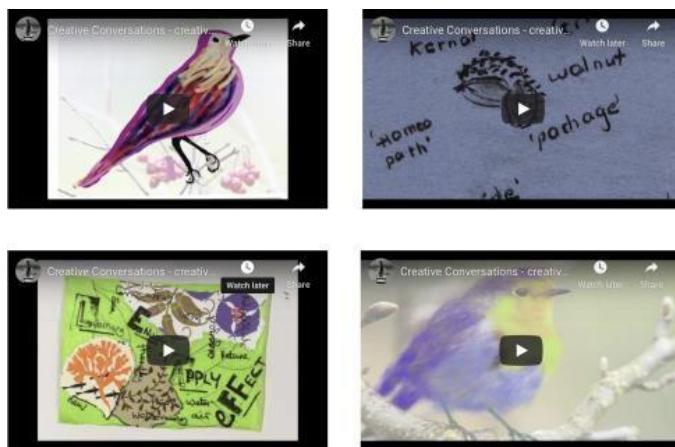
Bespoke training delivered by Curious Shoes director and performers

The Creative Conversations Artistic Team.

Our team of artists, who have worked both independently, and through new collaborations with each other, have brought such an extraordinary wealth of artform and participatory expertise to the project and their versatility and inclusive arts practice has meant the project has been fully accessible and relevant to all those who have engaged with it.

Visual Artist Jill Impey has worked with groups in Shrewsbury at The Redwood Centre, at Shropshire Wildlife Trust (SWT), and in care settings: Millingtons Almshouse, Montgomery House, Stiperstones Court, and in Bishops Castle at The Grange, Sheltered housing complex.

Jill's approach focused on bringing nature indoors, exploring through sensory experiences of smell, touch, sound and vision, whilst using iPad technology to capture and create drawings, animations, photography, poetry and reflections. A series of short films have been created, encompassing the work made by the participants, and designed to be installed in a gallery context.



Jill's work with volunteers of SWT's Feed the Birds project both equipped the group with new skills to support their ongoing older people focused project, but also enabled the group to facilitate creative sessions alongside Jill in several care homes, and this was a particularly positive experience for the volunteers, participants and artist.



Jill working with Shropshire Wildlife Trust's volunteers and with care home residents

"Unfamiliar approach in an unfamiliar setting: Working with mainly older people and in particular working in residential care homes was a new experience for me. Especially working in a very loosely structured sharing way with mixed media and plenty of natural stimuli; people sharing skills and learning together; Residents, carers and workshop participants, it was joyful. Also the discovery of how many older people have iPads that they can't use, and their joy of discovery when they find they can open up a world of connectivity and creativity, with just a little help" Jill Impey

"Its been a new experience for us and it's worked really well. Particularly for our volunteers going into care homes...I'd like to explore more of this sort of thing. It's brought new people into our programme. I've really enjoyed the multimedia aspects....some people are quite resistant to technology but it's been really fun, exciting, and lots of fun and laughter. It would be really interesting to do more of this with other people who are more wary of nature. It's been lovely to respond to nature, using the senses, the sounds and smells, and touch...." Diane Monether, SWT

During lockdown, with support from CC, Jill trialled an online interactive drawing workshop that maintained a focus on nature and the outdoors, and we expect to continue working with Jill through the new Virtual strand.



Poet Jean Atkin has worked at the Mayfair Centre, Church Stretton, in Church Stretton Library, at The Grange, Sheltered housing complex, Bishops Castle, and, alongside Adrian Plant, with members of the Orchard Singers AGE UK choir in Shrewsbury. Jean's approach has included using objects as stimulus for conversation and group poetry making and lyric writing. She has also worked one to one, helping individuals to create poetic and moving retellings of their life experiences, which they have then shared with families and caregivers.



"My involvement in Creative Conversations has enabled me to both hone existing skills – such as listening, recording and creating poems from people's stories – and to try out new and different approaches in the familiar settings of care homes, day centres and sheltered housing schemes. As a result I've had people making tiny books, and experimenting with group choral speaking.

I've also had the opportunity to work in collaboration with another artist, a musician. This was a rich experience, where we turned stories into poems and then into songs, and performed and recorded them, creating satisfying new work with an enthusiastic group of older people.

The project has also provided me with fascinating personal development opportunities, performances and training days with working artists, all of which serve to inform my own practice and ideas and contacts for future projects." Jean Atkin



Responding to BFI's Love is All on Valentines Day.



Jean performing a bespoke poem to archive film

Just prior to lockdown, Jean worked with MediaActive Projects to develop a new creative approach to working and performing with archive film, and we hope to further develop this collaboration through future online sessions as part of the new Virtual programme.

Musician and Storyteller Sal Tonge has been delivering sessions in Stone House Care Home, Bishops Castle, and Cliffdale Care Home Pontesbury, as well as some sessions at Whitefriars in Ludlow. Sal also worked with a **Dancer, Rachel Liggitt**, at Cliffdale over 6 weeks and they created some fabulous spontaneous songs, stories and movement in direct response to the conversations with the residents. Through CC Sal benefited from training and go and see activity in relation to extending her performance and clowning skills, and this immediately informed Sal's approach when faced with transferring her approach to online interactive sessions.



Sal and Rachel - spontaneous storytelling and improvised dance shaped by the residents conversations and responses



"To work with a dancer was a revelation for me. There was the chance here to explore beyond words which are often my stock in trade and to hold silences longer.

To investigate the patterns in dance and then pick them up into music phrases was like having music given form and made visible in front of my eyes. It was a very profound experience for me." Sal Tonge

"The work at Clifffdale, although short, felt like a fresh, new approach in a setting I was familiar with. Usually I work alone, and this can be, I feel, quite a complex process, with many areas to manage, navigating the general nuance in the room, people's safety, engagement and my desire that people are enjoying the approach and work I am delivering.

Two sets of eyes made such a difference and live music with movement, dance, song enabled us to create a little bit of magical escapism and impromptu 'performance'." Rachel Liggit

Musician and Musicologist Adrian Plant collaborated with Poet Jean Atkin and worked with groups at The Mayfair Centre, Church Stretton, and The Orchard Singers, Shrewsbury. Working with the participants they created new songs based on the groups conversations and ideas. Subsequently, Adrian has continued to work with the Orchard Singers, with the support of MediaActive Projects, on developing a new podcast initiative. The podcast/vodcast (video format) will share songs performed by the choir, alongside the groups thoughts on the joy of a sing-along, favourite songs and singers.

When lockdown happened, Adrian had been running a weekly choir session with the Orchard Singers, whilst also working with the group on the podcast/vodcast pilot. Working around the technical challenges of the Vodcast project had not been easy, so it was wonderful to see how readily some of the group adopted new technology to move their singing sessions online. The group are continuing to meet online for a social on Mondays and singing on Tuesdays.



The Orchard Singers recording songs for the podcast

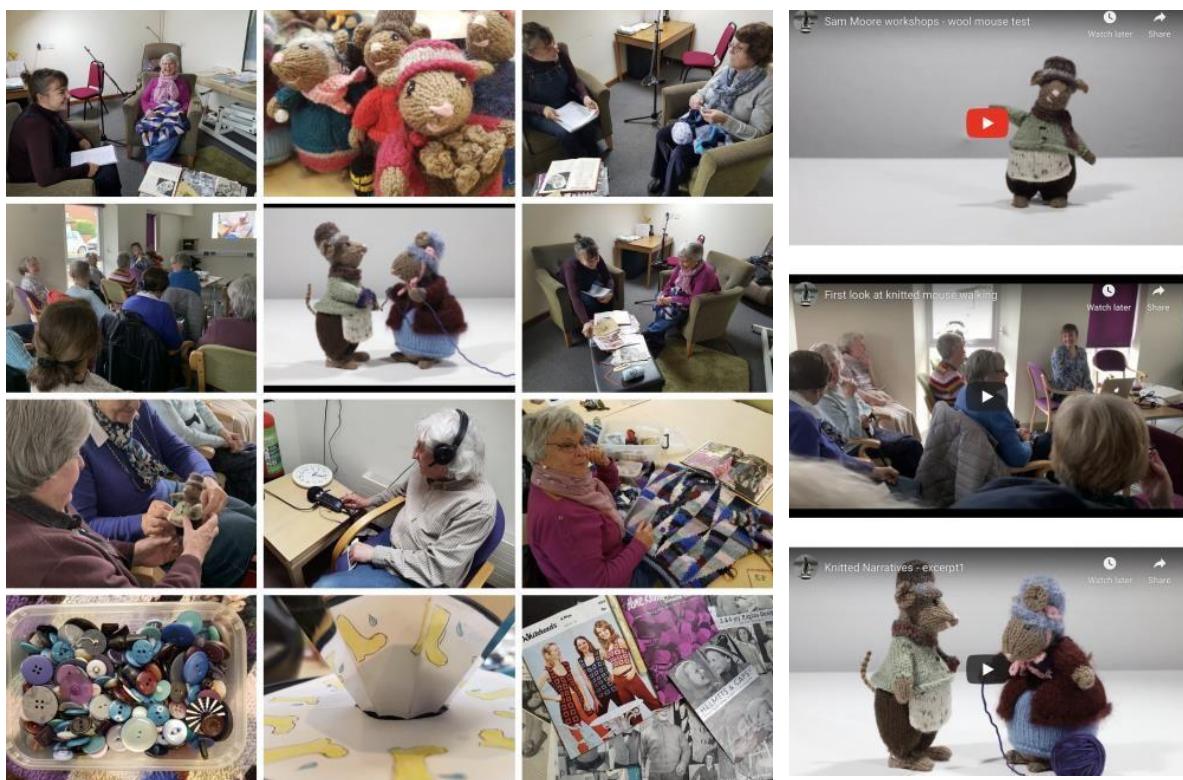


singing solo over Zoom

“Due to the limitations of the tech (for online live music making), so many of the group, through having to sing solo and accapella for each other, are also and increasingly beginning to realise just how beautiful their own unique voice can be, and it's really going to change the way we work when we eventually meet again as a group!” Adrian Plant

Animated Documentary maker (and keen knitter) **Samantha Moore** has focused on working with knitting groups, taking time to explore and celebrate the everyday creativity that is so often under-valued. She ran creative workshops with a variety of Knit and Natter groups in libraries across the county, and subsequently focused on working with the Merry Makers, a crafting group who have been meeting in South Shropshire for over 25 years. The groups have been talking about how knitting is a vehicle for socialising, skill sharing, helping others....and how it has been a route to helping the knitters themselves in times of personal distress. Sam worked with the Merry Makers, sharing examples of contemporary animation with them, and facilitating hands on animation activity. In return, they shared examples of their creative crafting with Sam, and gifted her a selection of knitted mice that had been made by a dear departed friend. With the help of a retired radio engineer, Sam captured individual reflections from the knitters on their relationship to knitting. She also

researched and met with scientists who have an interest in knitting as a tool for improving mental health. The resulting audio interviews have been transcribed, and a selection serve as the soundtrack for the tender and beautiful knitted mice animations.



Merry Makers, Pete Ashton and Samantha Moore sharing skills

Animating Thelma's mice

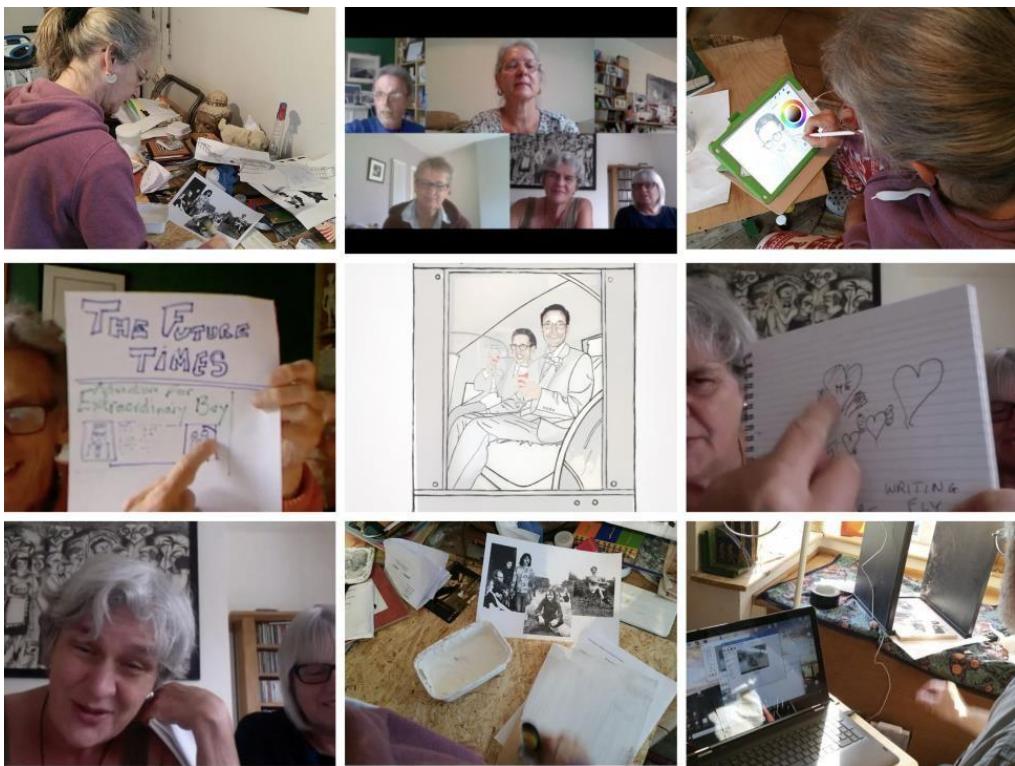
"We trialled using pre-cinematic animation techniques and screening animated films as a way of initiating a different way of thinking about their crafting lives and histories. It has opened up potential collaborative links with elder technicians, both textile and media specialists.

By using mice knitted by a friend of the group who died a few years ago we re-opened a connection with the woman's family and made it clear to the participants that the legacy they leave in the objects they make has a meaningful impact beyond their own life span.

We have developed a bond through the CC events that we hope will endure, and have plans to meet and catch up with project news after the CC project has finished.

My ambition was that the CC events would make the women feel that their creative outputs were more than ways of passing the time and were actually consequential artistic / craft objects, as well as a way of chronicling of meaningful life events. I am really thrilled at the way this project has gone and feel grateful to have had the opportunity to participate." Samantha Moore

More recently MediaActive Projects had started some supported artist development, working with **Visual Artist Dea Paradisos** and the organisation SAND (Safer Ageing No Discrimination) on digital artwork that responds to the life experiences of local LGBTQ+ people. Face to face sessions were just about to start when the pandemic hit, and so Dea, with the support of Richard Benjamin, moved the sessions online. Meeting regularly with LGBTQ+ participants over Zoom, Dea facilitated group sessions that generated a variety of creative content. Dea then worked with this content, in response to the conversations, and with regular input from the group. The resulting artwork "A Message To My Younger Self" is a short film that reflects the intimacy and positivity of the shared conversations.



Zoom sessions, Dea and Richard working with the groups content, and developing new digital skills

MediaActive Projects have led on developing the digital elements of the programme, liaising with artists, partners and embedding creative digital practise within the project. Prior to lockdown, in direct response to feedback from Creative Conversations' participants and partners, we had begun to consider how we might better support people unable to travel to take part in the programme of activities.

We simply sought to create new routes to taking part in the arts for those most at risk of isolation and loneliness, by utilising available technology, providing one to one support in using the tech, and by working with artists, performers and cultural organisations to develop "virtual friendly" models of participatory activity. Connexus (social housing) joined us as a partner and funder. Creative Conversations-Virtual pilot got underway. When Covid-19 struck, the relevance of developing a virtual model became all too apparent! We moved quickly to support a number of the artists in their development of a virtual approach that related to their artform practice. We provided advice and guidance, and facilitated a number of test runs, trialling new arts participatory approaches using video conferencing, bringing together focus groups who have provided feedback from a range of societal and artform perspectives.

We are now having to find new ways to offer tech support whilst face to face home visits are not appropriate so we hope to recruit volunteers who will help provide tech support and encouragement, where needed. We have established new partnerships for the new "virtual" development and we have achieved new investment. Whilst this development enables us to continue delivering artist-led activity with older people during the pandemic, our commitment to this way of working remains long-term, post pandemic.

Arts Alive have led on producing the performing arts tour that will now take place next year. In September 2020 Shropshire based Hannah Prior, director, and Sue Hall, designer, have been working with actor John Cobb, to devise a 45 minute touring show, in response to work created by the wider project. Hannah, who specialises in inclusive practice and performance work, looked at all the written, audio, video and visual material created by project participants, and shaped the piece entitled *On Your Doorstep* which will be touring in 2021, across Shropshire, and beyond. The designer, producer and actor are all 55+ and the piece is being created to be as inclusive as possible with audience participation during the show. Post-performance workshops, delivered by the CC artists, will invite conversations with the audience in response to having seen the show. A film of the production supported by a sensory pack, will be available, providing legacy beyond the tour.



Creative Conversations' artists helping to devise the show

Filming the performance for online sharing

MediaActive Projects are currently producing the final online and gallery-based exhibitions, which will open from February 2021, to coincide with the final Sharing Event and the Touring Show. The exhibition will showcase artworks created, and share insight into the creative experiences of the participants and the artists.